academic criticism frequently so emphasized the groundless freedom of reading that interpretation became an action without context or constraint. Once again, we stressed the situated, responsible nature of interpretation.

The Promise of Hermeneutics develops key themes of our earlier book but does so with an eye to the particular needs of the present situation in the Church and the academy. Where the earlier volume stressed the responsibility of human agents, this book shifts the emphasis to the promise that hermeneutics holds for us.

In speaking of promise, we are thinking, first, of what we might call the secular promise of hermeneutics. The work of continental philosophers, theologians, and speech-act theorists offers extraordinary resources for thinking constructively about the complex problems of human understanding. Such thinkers as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and John Searle offer compelling accounts of the act of interpretation in its many dimensions.

In more specific theological terms, this volume argues that interpretation is an activity that Christians engage in within the context of the promises of God. More important than the question of human certainty is that of divine fidelity. For the sake of human understanding and the future of the Christian church, it is more important for God to be seen as the maker and keeper of promises than it is for us to perfect the procedures we employ as we interpret texts and the world about us.

The Promise of Hermeneutics, in short, offers a sustained literary, philosophical, and theological analysis of contemporary theories of interpretation. In addition to making a critique of a number of those theories and the practices that issue from them, the book proposes models of human understanding that demonstrate the lasting promise of hermeneutics.

• I •

Interpreting Orphans: Hermeneutics in the Cartesian Tradition

ROGER LUNDIN

"Do You Play Alone?" asks the ad for the Asolo climbing boot, one of several products promoted in a recent campaign to sell the goods of the Benetton Sportsystem. "When there is nothing but you and the mountain," the ad's copy intones, "don't feel abandoned. You have something strong to believe in. Asolo — Count on it for extreme performance."

What give this ad and others in the Benetton series their highly provocative edge are the visual images that accompany the scant copy. In the Asolo ad, that means a single hiking boot depicted against a background of white on one side of the page and a picture of Christ upon the cross on the other side. As Roman centurions hoist the cross into place, they are cast in shadows, while Christ is bathed, in his agony, in sunlight.

In a press conference called to introduce the latest in a series of controversial campaigns mounted by Benetton, the company's creative director, Oliviero Toscani, marshaled the rhetoric of romantic individualism to defend his exploitation of the crucifixion of Jesus. "Creativity is not based on security," he argued. "Once you're secure, you're doing something that's already been done." According to Toscani, the problem is that modern advertising keeps producing "the same old thing" to sell products. "They spent billions and billions, and in the end there's no difference between Coke and Pepsi, Avis and Hertz, American Express and Visa. We try to go another way."

For Toscani, "going another way" means trading upon famous im-

ages of terror and suffering, including such things as pictures of refugees marooned on makeshift boats at sea, of a solitary Chinese student defying the tanks in Tiananmen Square, and of German athletes raising the Nazi salute during the 1936 Summer Olympics. He said that using the crucifixion to sell hiking boots was no more shocking than reading a daily newspaper and finding "in the same pages war, AIDS, love, hate, sport, life, death, product." After all, the goal in advertising is to tap into the values of the age to sell the goods. "Sport is very much linked with life," Toscani observed. "Survival is the name of the game."

In linking the experience of Christ upon the cross to the travails of mountain climbing, the Benetton ad trades shamelessly upon our fears of loneliness and abandonment and upon our need to "have something strong to believe in" in the face of those terrifying realities. And in depicting the anxieties of metaphysical abandonment, the Asolo advertisement confronts one of the most profound spiritual traumas of our postmodern world. At the same time, in offering a hiking boot as healing balm for that deepest of wounds, the ad exposes the spiritual poverty of our age.

Both the crucifixion ad itself and the Benetton creative director's commentary upon it reveal a web of theological and cultural influences stretching back over several centuries. The portrayal of the crucifixion and the discussion of abandonment, belief, and extreme circumstances call to mind the dread of cosmic loneliness that haunts so much of the music, art, poetry, and fiction of the modern West. Are we alone in what Pascal called "the eternal silence of these infinite spaces"? Have we been abandoned by God, as Christ was forsaken by him on the cross? Are we orphans in a world in which "survival is the *only* name of the game"?

The ad and its creator's self-justification also point, however unwittingly, to the complex history underlying contemporary debates about the theory and practice of interpretation. They do so both through their exploitation of the orphan imagery and through their implicit but sharp critique of repetition and imitation, which are irreducible elements of the Christian faith. "Once you're secure, you're doing something that's already been done. . . . The fact they censor us is a big honor," Toscani proudly proclaimed in announcing his ad campaign. "It says we're saying something new."[1]

To understand this drive to "say something new," we can follow a

1. "Benetton's Unrepentant Adman Vows to Keep Pushing the Envelope," *The New York Times,* 21 July 1995, D4.

trail of concern for *originality* leading from the postmodern present back through the romantic poets and philosophers to its ultimate origin in the work of René Descartes. With his stress upon "first-person certainty," Descartes in good measure began the drive toward autonomy and originality that has proved to be a distinguishing characteristic of modernity.[2] His fabled *Cogito* is, after all, a parentless, autonomous thinking agent who is dependent upon nothing outside himself for the truth he has uncovered within himself. Perhaps more than any other figure at the dawn of modernity, Descartes launched the tradition of living without tradition; he became the father of all who would seek to live in a parentless world. After Descartes, in the words of Gerald Bruns, "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."[3] This was especially to be the case at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Poets and revolutionaries happily found in the parentless state an ideal of absolute first-person liberty. To be an orphan was to be free to "start history over again," and while the postmodern order may not share the revolutionaries' faith in human perfectibility and progress, the dream of radical originality lives on in its contemporary permutations.

Throughout this book, and especially in the second section, we will be making the argument that interpretation, like artistic creation, is a form of human action and is thus subject to the same vicissitudes and open to the same possibilities as all human actions. "Because the writing and reading of texts are actions that occur in the context of social and historical life," Clarence Walhout writes at the beginning of section two, "texts and the language that composes them are never autonomous and context-free." As such, the theory and practice of interpretation have much to learn from the central place assigned to the orphan in modernity. In *After Virtue,* Alasdair MacIntyre asserts that "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal." But the key question for us, he argues, is not that of "self-fathering" or "our authorship" of the stories we live. "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?'" — or "How am I to read?" it might be added —

2. Roger Scruton, *From Descartes to Wittgenstein: A Short History of Modern Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 284.

3. Gerald Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 199.

"if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"[4]

After all, MacIntyre explains, "only in fantasy do we live what story we please. In life, as both Aristotle and Engels noted, we are always under certain constraints." Employing the metaphor of the theater, he notes that "we enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making." To know how we are to act in this setting, we listen, observe, reflect, and begin to participate in the drama. We receive, in other words, imputed characters in our social world — "roles into which we have been drafted — and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed."[5] Or as Paul Ricoeur puts it at the close of one of the landmark books of modern hermeneutical reflection: "The illusion is not in looking for a point of departure, but in looking for it without presuppositions. There is no philosophy without presuppositions."[6]

If MacIntyre and Ricoeur are right about the nature of human understanding — and it will be the burden of this book's argument that they are — then we have good reason to question all theories of creation and interpretation that take the orphan as their ideal. If they are right, it is neither desirable nor possible to read as though we were beginning history anew with each interpretive act. We are always already indebted to the past and implicated in the tangled web of action and reaction that make up the course of human history. We cannot remove ourselves from that history. Nor can we transform any of our actions — including those of interpreting — into timeless activities that neither bear the stamp of history nor share its responsibilities and promise. Christian theology, after all, holds that while history may bear the signs of human bondage, it is also the scene

4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 216.

5. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 213, 216. MacIntyre's point is similar to the one made by Clarence Walhout in section two: "If the historicity of actions implies that all understanding is based on a relation of resemblance between the new and the familiar, then all understanding is also dynamic or progressive. Every moment introduces new perceptions and contexts in which the new and the familiar are continuously interacting. . . . We are constantly absorbing, evaluating, and using new experiences. And we do so by relating them, consciously or not, to the patterns of experience that we have previously developed."

6. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 348.

of God's liberating activities. As Anthony Thiselton argues at the close of the third and final section, at the heart of the Christian faith is "the biblical understanding of God as one who chooses in sovereign freedom to constrain that freedom by graciously entering into the constraints imposed upon action by undertaking covenantal promise." A contemporary hermeneutical theory informed by the Christian faith will be more concerned, that is, with questions of trustworthy fidelity than with those of absolute certainty.

In the end, this means that it would be neither necessary nor wise to accept Descartes's desire for "self-fathering" as the necessary precondition for human understanding; instead, *The Promise of Hermeneutics* questions both the Cartesian move to the first person and the modern traditions which take that move as their starting point. To trace the line of influence running from Descartes to his nineteenth-century descendants is to see the delight of autonomy gradually turn into the terror of abandonment. It was in the Romantic era that the confidence in the Cartesian project was first shaken. In the literature of the nineteenth century, we first begin to hear of the orphaned state as a terrifying sign of our cosmic loneliness. Over the course of that century, faith in autonomy gave way to anxiety over the fate of the orphaned individual.

One of the many consequences of the crisis of confidence in the modern self proved a hermeneutical division that has marked interpretive theory since the romantic era. It has surfaced in different forms as an argument between those who believe with Friedrich Schleiermacher that interpretation must recover an author's world or intention, and those who agree with G. W. F. Hegel that the creative spirit must appropriate the dead letter of text or tradition. This division runs through most contemporary hermeneutical debates and helps to explain the evident gap between contemporary evangelical Protestant hermeneutics and postmodern interpretation theory.

The poetry and fiction of the past two centuries have brilliantly taken the measure of orphaning's hermeneutical implications. Long before the slaughter of the First World War and the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust, the orphans of modern fiction opened up the darkness at the heart of modernity. Through these characters, modern men and women began to sense the starker consequences of Cartesian isolation for the modern self. The world Descartes had envisioned is a parentless one in which autonomous subjects, freed from oppressive tradition and feckless opinion, bring a bold new order into being; but the world inhabited by modern fictional or-

phans is much darker than the kingdom illuminated by Cartesian rationalism. In an orphaned world, abandoned children ask the question posed by Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick,* "Where is the foundling's father hidden?" The orphans scan the horizon for any sign of their absent parents and pose dramatic questions about the nature of interpretation. Who authored the text of this world, the orphans ask, and what does it mean? In their struggles to comprehend their own condition, modern fictional orphans bring us to the heart of the hermeneutical tensions of the present day.

Descartes: The Endless Recuperation

We begin with Descartes and with the Lutheran Reformation. Exactly one hundred years separate a founding moment of the Reformation — Luther's dispute with Johannes Eck at Leipzig in 1519 — and Descartes's fireside discovery of certainty in the winter of 1619-20. Over the course of the century separating Luther and Descartes, both contemporary hermeneutics and the literary orphans of the modern world have their origins.

It was at Leipzig that the divisive potential of Luther's critique of the Catholic Church began to become most fully evident. A reluctant reformer at first, Luther had been drawn into the debate with Eck as a result of the latter's vituperative attacks upon him. In the aftermath of their exchange, Luther published an open letter to Pope Leo X, in which he assured the pope that he "never intended to attack the Roman Curia or to raise any controversy concerning it." He claimed to have turned to "the quiet and peaceful study of the Holy Scriptures," when "Satan . . . filled his servant Johann Eck . . . with an insatiable lust for glory and thus aroused him to drag me unawares to a debate. . . ."[7] However reluctant he may have been to enter this contest with Eck, once he was embroiled in it, Luther withheld nothing. He questioned the authority of the papacy, ridiculed the infallibility of church councils, and switched from the constraints of Latin to the freedom of the German tongue in debating Eck.[8] As he hammered away at Eck, Luther allowed only the Bible to be used as an authority in their dispute, "refusing even to consider arguments from other sources."[9] Through his arguments in this and later confrontations, Luther unleashed forces that neither he nor anyone else would be able to control. He challenged established authority with his own will, just as some who followed his lead would be quick to pit their authority against Luther's. As disputes and centers of authority proliferated, Luther had to face in his own lifetime the reality that his reforming impulse had taken on a life of its own and led to consequences he had not intended. "As competing authorities multiplied and began to diverge more and more sharply," writes Jeffrey Stout, "conventional means for resolving disputes arising from such competition became less and less effective. . . . This problem, which we may name 'the problem of many authorities,' is the central social and intellectual difficulty of the Reformation."[10]

The century after Luther proved to be a divisive one. National and sectarian differences ran deep in the wake of reform, and dramatic upheavals in philosophy and cosmology went hand in hand with the tumultuous political changes. "Above all, it [the Reformation] dealt a fatal blow to the ideal of a united Christendom," writes a recent historian. "The scandal was so great, and the fragmentation so widespread, that people stopped talking about Christendom, and began to talk instead about 'Europe.'"[11] By the time that Descartes was born in 1596, both *scientia* — the medieval view of certain and demonstrable knowledge — and *opinio* — those disputed beliefs that required the testimony of authority to support them — were under assault.

Scientia had been subjected to the sharp critique of nominalism, which questioned the fundamental principles of medieval theology and philosophy. In rejecting the category of universals, William of Ockham and those who followed him posited a world in which God was all-powerful and

7. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings,* ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor, 1951), 47.

8. Heiko Oberman notes that "Luther's diatribes resemble public exorcisms and are futile as attempts to persuade persons of different opinions of the rightness of his position. Thus it is probably no coincidence, and only seemingly a consequence of rhetoric, that Luther rarely used the commonly employed scholarly qualification 'if I am not mistaken' — *ni fallor* — but made generous use of his favorite expression, 'certainly' — *immo.* Luther's certainty left its mark on German academic linguistic usage. Where Anglo-American scholars qualify their statements with an 'I am inclined to believe,' the Germans say 'it is patently obvious.'" *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil,* trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 299.

9. Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 327.

10. Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 41.

11. Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996; reprint, New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 494, 496.

arbitrary, while the created order was filled with separate entities called into being by the will of God in a dramatically contingent manner. The nominalist turn in philosophy shaped the Reformers' view of God in myriad ways and was in turn itself shaped, to some degree, by the Reformation's doctrine of Christ. Because of the nuanced complexity of the doctrine of the Trinity, the precursors of the Reformation, as well as the central Reformation theologians themselves, were able to temper the arbitrariness of God the Father with the suffering and sacrifices of God the Son. But while they sought to humanize the nominalist God, they had no desire to salvage the Aristotelian model of science as the study of formal and final causes, which had also come under nominalist attack. "The whole of Aristotle is to theology as shadow is to light," Luther complained in 1517.[12]

By demystifying the world, nominalism opened the way for the modern scientific study of nature and human experience. In rejecting formal and final causes, it left only material and efficient causality as plausible modes of explaining movement and development. According to Michael Allen Gillespie, Ockham and his descendants established the "foundation for a science that is based on experience and hypothesis, which examines the contingent relationships among extended entities to determine the efficient causes that govern their motion, and which attempts to provide a quantitative rather than a qualitative explanation of phenomena."[13] A world of predictable, efficient causes is one that can be readily manipulated for human purposes.

Yet even as it posited a means of studying nature as a predictable mechanism, nominalism also promoted, through its doctrine of God's absolute freedom, the terrifying possibility of divine deception and random intervention. How could men and women study nature with confidence and predict its movements, if they had to consider that God either could be deceiving them entirely about what they saw or could act without warning to alter the state of all they knew? If *scientia* was to proceed, it needed protection of some sort against what Emily Dickinson would call, several centuries later, Heaven's "marauding Hand."[14]

12. As cited in Oberman, *Luther,* 160.

13. Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 21.

14. See Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 18-30, and Stephen Toulmin, "Descartes in His Time," in *Discourse on the Method and Meditations on First Philosophy,* ed. David Weissman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 121-46.

Descartes wrote of his consternation with this state of affairs, and of his desire to shelter human life from the "marauding Hand," in the *Discourse on Method* (1637). He blamed the state of confusion present in his day on the residual power of antiquated bodies of knowledge and outdated methods of learning. In justifying his own embrace of mathematics and deductive reasoning, Descartes attacked the humanistic training he had received as a young man. "I have been nourished on letters since my childhood," he wrote, "and since I was given to believe that by their means a clear and certain knowledge could be obtained of all that is useful in life, I had an extreme desire to acquire instruction." But instead of gaining useful knowledge, Descartes had found himself "embarrassed with so many doubts and errors that it seemed to me that the effort to instruct myself had no effect other than the increasing discovery of my own ignorance."[15] There was precious little *science* in the literature, philosophy, and theology Descartes had read, and all too many *opinions* swirling about his early seventeenth-century world.

In the *Discourse on Method,* Descartes claimed to have coursed his way through the whole of the liberal arts curriculum and to have found nothing of real worth on the journey. Even though they provide pleasing enough stimulation for the mind, ancient languages and literatures have the power to make the student a "stranger in one's own country" and to seduce their readers into forming "projects beyond their power of performance"; rhetoric teaches skills that have nothing intrinsic to do with the ability to render our thoughts "clear and intelligible"; the truths of theology are "quite above our intelligence" and would require for their proper elaboration "some extraordinary assistance from above," something that Descartes clearly did not expect to receive; and even philosophy offered no useful guidance, for although "it has been cultivated for many centuries by the best minds that have ever lived," there is still nothing "to be found in it which is not subject to dispute, and in consequence which is not dubious." Having surveyed the fruitless discord of contemporary opinion, Descartes could only conclude that "one could have built nothing solid on foundations so far from firm." For that reason, "as soon as age permitted me to emerge from the control of my tutors, I entirely quitted the study of letters" (*Method,* 6, 7, 8).

For Descartes, then, the problem was one of weak foundations.

15. Descartes, *Discourse on the Method and Meditations on First Philosophy,* ed. David Weissman, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 5. All further references are to this edition and will be cited in parentheses within the body of the essay.

Wherever he looked, he could not find a firm footing of certainty upon which to build the scientific enterprise. He was confident that such a foundation could be unearthed somewhere, but it was buried beneath the rubble of received opinion. So, he formed the "resolution of also making myself an object of study and of employing all the strength of my mind in choosing the road I should follow" in searching for the spot where a solid foundation might be discovered (*Method*, 8).

Descartes's journey began with the realization that "there is very often less perfection in works composed of several portions" and executed by several hands, "than in those on which one individual alone has worked." Cities which were once villages, for example, seem poorly constructed "in comparison with those which are regularly laid out on a plain by a surveyor who is free to follow his own ideas." In the haphazard cities of Europe, he complained, large buildings jostled incongruously against smaller ones, and crooked streets meandered without plan or precision. These unkempt products of tradition made it appear that "chance rather than the will of men guided by reason . . . led to such an arrangement." In a similar fashion, the laws that had evolved haphazardly over the centuries, bridging the gulf between our "half-savage" past and our rational present, needed to be replaced. Such laws could not "succeed in establishing so good a system of government as those" which have been produced by a rational people, "who, from the time they first came together as communities, carried into effect the constitution laid down by some prudent legislator" (*Method*, 9).

Descartes's fruitless studies had disclosed to him the sorry state of what Paul Ricoeur has called "the conflict of interpretations."[16] No matter how carefully he guarded himself against the follies of the "ancients," Descartes feared that he would remain in danger of becoming "infected with their errors" as long as he placed them at the heart of his education. With their improvised theories and irrational prejudices, the "ancients" had hopelessly compromised the foundations of knowledge. Even when they came upon "something certain and evident," the ancient writers could not resist the temptation "to surround it with ambiguities" because they feared the "simplicity of their explanation" would bring ridicule or "because they grudge us an open view of the truth."[17]

16. Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

17. Descartes, "Rules for the Direction of the Mind," in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, vol. 1 (n.p.: Dover, 1955), 6.

Hence, as Descartes saw it, confusion reigned in the texts of the ancient world and the practices of Reformation Europe, because of "the problem of many authorities." Yet there was hope: "Supposing now that all were wholly open and candid, and never thrust upon us doubtful opinions as true, . . . yet since scarce anything has been asserted by any one man the contrary of which has not been alleged by another, we should be eternally uncertain which of the two to believe." If we were to try to resolve a dispute between conflicting truth claims, it would not do to "total up the testimonies in favour of each" and call "true" the version with the greatest support; "for if it is a question of difficulty that is in dispute, it is more likely that the truth would have been discovered by few than by many."[18]

Having rejected the conflicting opinions of "the many authorities," Descartes turned to the only two "most certain routes to knowledge," *intuition* and *deduction*.[19] He determined to "reject as absolutely false everything as to which I could imagine the least ground of doubt, in order to see if afterwards there remained anything in my belief that was entirely certain." Left with nothing but the thought "that everything that ever entered into my mind was no more true than the illusions of my dreams," Descartes immediately afterward "noticed that whilst I thus wished to think all things false, it was absolutely essential that the 'I' who thought this should be somewhat, and remarking that this truth *'I think, therefore I am'* was so certain and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions brought forward by the sceptics were incapable of shaking it" (*Method*, 21).

By unearthing the foundational *ego cogito, ergo sum*, Descartes believed he had provided humanity with the secure foundation needed for the construction of a grand dwelling-place for knowledge. As an implacable foe of Aristotelianism and Scholastic obscurity, Descartes was looking for nothing less than a universal method for discovering truth. He sought to replace the messiness of tradition and authority with the cleanliness of method; in the search for indubitable truth, Descartes took the inner resources of the human mind to be adequate in ways that he believed institutions and traditions could not be.[20]

18. Descartes, "Rules for the Direction of the Mind," 6.

19. See Descartes, "Rules for the Direction of the Mind," 7-8.

20. "In place of a specific plurality of *human* sciences, . . . we have one single knowledge: science, Science with a capital 'S,' Science such as the modern world was to worship it; Science in the pure state, radiating from unique and unparalleled geometric clarity, and that Science is the human mind." Jacques Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944), 168.

Having established the foundational certainty of his own existence, Descartes went on to prove the existence of both God and the external world on the basis of his own self-consciousness. But the price paid for such certainty was high. Assurance about the self, God, and the world became entwined with self-awareness. Only because I think and am conscious of that fact can I be sure of my own existence and of innumerable other truths about the world and my experiences. "Descartes paves the way for making the relevance of the knowing self the center of thought," theologian Helmut Thielicke has observed. "Henceforth every object of thought, understanding, perception, and indeed will and belief, is related to the conditions contained for these acts in the subject that executes them. . . . Man, then, always stands over against when he observes; he is always himself a theme."[21]

In the modern West, Descartes was to become the authority for all who would live without authority, the founder of the tradition of spurning tradition, and the father of all who would live without the aid or imposition of their parents.[22] Paul de Man calls this modern spirit one of "ruthless forgetting." For his understanding of modernity, de Man was in turn indebted to Friedrich Nietzsche, who had radicalized the Cartesian *Cogito* by emptying it of its epistemological certainty and metaphysical pretensions, leaving it a will in the shell of the self. "As he who acts is," according

21. Helmut Thielicke, *Prolegomena: The Relation of Theology to Modern Thought Forms,* vol. 1 of *The Evangelical Faith,* trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 34-35.

22. As central as Descartes has proved to be in the formation of modernity, we should not overemphasize his role to the exclusion of other figures and forces. Walter Ong, for example, points out the "utter inadequacy of the view which regards interest in method as stemming from Bacon and Descartes. These late writers on method were great explosive forces indeed, but the reason was less the size of the bombs which they manufactured than the size of the ammunition dumps, stocked by whole centuries of scholasticism, on which the bombs were dropped." *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 230. Stephen Toulmin has also recently argued that though Descartes was enormously influential, his work was not an isolated intellectual phenomenon. "The shift within philosophy, away from practical issues to an exclusive concern with the theoretical — by which local, particular, timely, and oral issues surrendered their centrality to issues that were ubiquitous, universal, timeless, and written — was no quirk of Descartes. All the protagonists of modern philosophy promoted theory, devalued practice, and insisted equally on the need to find foundations for knowledge that were clear, distinct, and certain." *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 69-70.

to Nietzsche, "always without a conscience, so is he also always without knowledge; he forgets most things so as to do one thing, he is unjust towards what lies behind him, and he recognizes the rights only of that which is now to come into being and no other rights whatever."[23] Or, as de Man explains: "Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure."[24] In Descartes's practice and de Man's rhetoric, one can detect more than a hint of parricidal desire.

To borrow imagery from our earlier discussion of Luther, Descartes and others in the seventeenth century had witnessed the fragmentation of the Mother Church and the rejection of the papal Father's authority. Power flowed away from the aged parents and toward the warring children. With the "problem of too many authorities," even the Catholic Church became merely one more of the squabbling siblings of modernity. While some children longed to rebuild their parents' home, most were content to rummage in the rubble and start building anew. "The ancient monuments had begun to crumble," explains Jeffrey Stout. "Sacred spaces had become scenes of fragmentation and occasions for conflict. Better to begin again from scratch in circumstances of one's own choosing."[25]

In the face of such fragmentation, Descartes and others began the slow transformation of Western culture from the model of authority (from the Latin *auctor,* meaning "author" or "originator") to that of originality. Before Descartes, originality had meant the creative appropriation of the thought of one's immediate predecessors; after him, it involved the adoption of an unprecedented point of view. Descartes's break with the past had established a compelling pattern for the future; it legitimated the desire at the heart of modernity: the urge to become one's own origin, author, and *father.*

W. H. Auden notes that with the advent of "the Protestant Era" the specific question of fatherhood assumes a centrality it had never possessed

23. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations,* trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 64.

24. Paul de Man, "Literary History and Literary Modernity," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism,* 2d ed., rev. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 147, 148.

25. Stout, *The Flight from Authority,* 1.