A Hermeneutics of Discretion

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“Gently, mortals, be discreet.”
— Mamie

For reasons that are difficult to recite at the outset, I want to rescue the phrase "a hermeneutics of discretion," introduced some fifteen years ago as the conclusion to a thesis on Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche.¹ The word "discretion" had come to me through the (in)discretion of the English translator of Jean-Paul Sartre's Les mots: he had rendered Sartre's grandmother's admonition, "Glissez, mortels, n'appuyez pas," as "Gently, mortals, be discreet."

It seemed to me then—as it does now—that the outcome of Heidegger's confrontation with Nietzsche was captured in that bit of advice at once hölderlinian and homey. In the present essay I want to revive the hermeneutics of discretion (the genitive is subjective) in response to two insightful and challenging interpretations of Heidegger/Nietzsche: first, Jacques Derrida's Spurs, written in 1972-73, revised in 1978; and second, two lengthy articles, entitled "La Dissimulation" (later retitled "Nietzsche Apocryphe") and "L'Oblitération." by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.²
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Without discreet parody, without strategy of writing, without difference or divergence of quills, without style, namely, the grand—reversal comes to the same in the noisy declaration of the antithesis.

Whence the heterogeneity of the text.

— Jacques Derrida

Derrida takes hermeneutics as such to be the reduction of texts to univocal codes, that is, to an ultimately determinable vouloir-dire. In his view hermeneutics is incorrigibly discreet—affable, optimistic, embracing every exotic avatar of the tradition with a hearty nihil a me alienum. To hermeneutics Derrida contraposes his minimalist account of interpretation—in the case of the purloined umbrella. Even though Derrida’s Spurs has by now been widely read, I want to recount briefly but as carefully as I can in these few pages the trajectory of that book. For what begins as a baffling and seductive collocation of style, writing, truth, and woman ends as a sustained encounter with Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche.

Spurs consists of thirteen unnumbered sections, an epilogue that begins “One step more / Not yet” (Un pas encore), and two postscripts. The confrontation with Heidegger assumes center-stage in section seven, “The History of an Error.” Yet the Heideggerian notions of truth as disclosure and the duplicity of remoteness and proximation (or undistancing/en-distancing: Ent-fernung) govern the entire fabulation from the very outset. Derrida’s “distances,” “veils,” “truths,” “adornments,” and all the subtle arts of “simulation” lead in a surprisingly natural way to the problem of Ereignis, the mysterious granting of Time and Being, in Heidegger’s later thought. Natural, because Heidegger’s discourse was always governed by the duplicity of nearness and remoteness and the revealing/concealing clearing of truth. Surprisingly, because that discourse never confronted such duplicity in the figure of woman or revealing/concealing in the folds of style.

It is of the utmost importance to observe that Derrida’s starting-point in his confrontation with Heidegger’s Nietzsche—and it will be Lacoue-