Interpretation develops the aspect of meaning which we have called 'reference', that is, the intentional orientation towards a world and the reflexive orientation towards a self.

—Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the Problem of Hermeneutics"

In sum, philosophy interrogates the perceptual faith—but neither expects nor receives an answer in the ordinary sense, because it is not the disclosing of a variable or of an unknown invariant that will satisfy this question, and because the existing world exists in the interrogative mode. Philosophy is the perceptual faith questioning itself about itself.

—Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible

Interpretation and interrogation are not the same. Yet they occupy the same space. The hermeneutics of Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur offer an account of interpretation that moves away from the ego-centric, subject-based, self-directed conception that is most commonly associated with Husserlian phenomenology. There is no authority here, only authenticity and authorization. Similarly Merleau-Pontean interrogation opens up a field in which questioning takes priority, where the answers are located neither in the questioner, nor in that which is questioned. In both cases, interpretation and interrogation happen in the space of
difference where the production of discursive meaning is decentered and praxical. Their task is to raise questions rather than answer them, to ask about rather than conclude for, to make a place where positions can occur rather than speak from positions.

The task here is to understand (1) this displacement of positionality, (2) the opening up of a space of difference, and (3) the reading of the truths and lies that constitute the textualities of experience. This three-fold understanding will demonstrate both the commonality and the differential marks of the hermeneutic enterprise and the interrogative practice. Although the epistemological features of the two philosophies are similar in many ways, the implications of their respective enactments are distinct albeit complementary.

I. Abdicating the Throne

The subject has been sitting on the throne. Husserl called it the “transcendental ego,” William James called it the “pure ego,” and Freud simply invoked the ego as the centerpiece of the psychical realm. In each case, this modernist conception takes the subject as the center, foundation, source, point of departure, last court of appeal, and determinate authority for all conscious life. The subject reigns supreme and, although sometimes limited by material conditions, social restraints, and unconscious desires, its rational demands cannot be questioned. In this modernist outlook, to question the subject is to compromise its groundedness, to uproot its right to assert formal conditions for the expression of any content, to undermine its absolute authority over what it knows, understands, and performs. However along with this supremacy and dominance comes the possibility of its failure and displacement.

In the literature of modernism, the authority of the ego is placed in question. Dostoevsky’s underground man, Joyce’s Ulyssen wanderer, Kafka’s castle seeker, Woolf’s ego-splitting Clarissa Dalloway, and Eliot’s wasteland inhabitants are the constructions of an ego in crisis. The subject that is given the philosophical throne is placed in doubt across a field of literary formulations. The ego’s “divine right of kings” is almost at once matched up with a revolutionary spirit in which the subject’s position calls for a reassessment and restructuring of its self-assertions. Encased within the force of the subject is the self-recognition and self-understanding in which the self does not have the power that it might have wished to claim for itself. Its position on the throne is no longer certain, no longer determinate, no longer outside of question, no longer apodictic and complete unto itself. The self shows itself to be incomplete, uncertain, and explicitly dubitable.