

And Yet It's About...

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I would like to start by expressing my gratitude to Grzegorz Pertek for his scrupulous response to my article. His essay *Prepositions: The Metaphysics of "Closeness"* prompted me to contemplate several issues, while revealing the nuances of many matters I discussed only briefly (perhaps to a fault). At the same time, it seems to me that a great deal of Pertek's laborious efforts was taken up... in vain. After reading his polemical response, I cannot help but reach the conclusion that we more or less stand in agreement.

The main intention of my article was to attempt to *displace* the commonplace conception of hermeneutics and deconstructionism as opposing discourses. I sought to complicate this relationship by revealing a certain *hermeneutic* feature of deconstruction, while simultaneously (and this is relevant for our purposes) identifying the *deconstructionist* potential of hermeneutics. To be more specific, I wanted to prove that deconstruction is merely an intrinsic condition of hermeneutics. The third part of my article, "The Derrida-Gadamer Controversy: Repetition (and Displacement)," is devoted to complicating this picture, and Pertek seems to have passed over this section. I begin the section with an *introductory* overview of the opposing trajectories of hermeneutics and deconstruction, and then turn to their *kinship*. New hermeneutics draws from precisely this kinship and not — as my polemicist has implied — from hermeneutics' alleged triumph over deconstruction. As an aside, I also address the common features of these discourses in my article *Can We Reconcile Deconstruction with Hermeneutics? A Dialogue with Derrida and Gadamer* ("Czas Kultury" 2014, issue 5). Pertek cites this article (perhaps unjustly) as if I had answered the title's question in the negative. This, at the very least, is a problematic assessment.

One aspect of *Prepositions* brings me anxiety. This the matter of excerpts, scraps of sentences and fragmentary thoughts being cited out of context. This practice misleads the reader to a point of confusion: at times, it is unclear if Pertek is citing my claims or someone else's, if I am condoning or condemning certain theses, or if I am reconstructing another distinction between hermeneutics and deconstruction *as a reference point* or perhaps already demonstrating their kinship, and so on, and so forth. My polemicist's essay is filled with such moments, and I will cite a few here by way of example. Pertek writes: "If we follow this logic, then 'to

be beyond' (or: 'be outside of') unmasks (unveils) a false 'closeness,' and its status as fact (its truthfulness) can only be confirmed by 'being within' (see: ŚŚ, p. 83)." In this case, I would like to ask: who has adopted this logic in the first place? For I certainly have not — at the moment cited in the text I am merely reconstructing a dispute between Derrida and Gadamer. Nor does Derrida adopt this logic: on the very same page as this citation, I make this explicit: "In comparison to the so-called American deconstructionists [...] Derrida emphasizes the simultaneous impossibility of not entering into a 'transcendental' reading: 'the text in itself should not resist giving in to «transcendental» reading. [...] There is no recourse for avoiding this moment of «transcendence» although it may present itself in a complex or entangled form." I am therefore indicating (although admittedly, I do so cursorily) the problematic opposition between inside and outside, proximity and distance, signifying and signified. This opposition becomes the very basis of Pertek's article (which, I'll reiterate, is extremely nuanced). At no moment in my text did embrace this binary, as my polemicist has alleged (with the notion that the deconstructionist "inside" is somehow more "true" than the hermeneutic "outside"). I was trying, rather, to use Derrida's language excerpted above to draw attention to the *complexity* of the moment of transcendence. I by no means meant to suggest that we abandon it entirely. As an aside: my reading of this passage of Derrida perhaps differs from Pertek's: I do not take away a sense of "internalized transcendence" or a sense that one might distance oneself from transcendence. Instead, I discern an admission of respect for the "externality" of the text, which *demand*s hermeneutic synthesis but simultaneously shies away from it. If the author of *Prepositions* had cited another excerpt from my article, then either I have led us astray, or his interpretation is in error.

To move on: Pertek notes that "The fragment we just reviewed precedes the following sentence: '[...] the entire hermeneutic undertaking proves to be *misconceived* due to its [...] "silent assumption" that the text indeed has sense.' [ŚŚ, p. 82, emphasis GP]. His grave (if specific) concerns with my article are premised on this very sentence, but he fails to mention that the ideas cited by no means represent my own views, but merely rehash Derrida's allegations against Gadamer while nodding to Anna Burzyńska, who coined the phrase "silent assumption." A similar thing happens when Pertek shares the quote: "The lesson new hermeneutics might learn from deconstruction primarily consists of an intensely scrupulous turn to textuality (semiosis) of the text. While this feature had already been accounted for in many movements within modern hermeneutics (by Ricoeur in particular), it is in fact missing from Heidegger and Gadamer's approaches [...]. [ŚŚ, p. 86] After an ellipsis he throws in "as Wojciech Kalaga has noted, for one." I have no desire to challenge authority (although Kalaga, who is known for the text *Nebulae of Discourse / Mgławice dyskursu* does cogently explain why Heidegger belongs in this set, which might come to Pertek's surprise). I would, however, like to point out the fact that while every sentence in *Tracking the (Traces of) Sense (Śledzenie śladów sensu)* is uttered in a uniform "modality," this does not mean that each one represents my own position.

Pertek's other strategy for extracting passages from my essay consists of assigning implications or meanings to them that I never (at least intentionally) expressed. I will give two examples here. Pertek begins one sentence thus: "If, in spite of everything, we must reject hermeneutic 'sense,' semiotic 'meaning,' and the transcendental signified (ŚŚ, p. 83) [...]."

With these words, he frames his reference in such a way as to identify me as the responsible party for proposing that we reject the text's "external" forms that Pertek names. Yet I have suggested no such thing, for the cited fragment in fact references a critique (and is a critique necessarily a rejection?) of the notions Derrida introduces in his article *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*. Here is a second example: "We also encounter other figures of inversion, such as the 'disjointed deconstructionist cycle' **versus** the 'hermeneutic circle,' or Gadamer's construction of the "surplus of sense" situated **against** Derrida's "surplus of signifiers." (SS, p. 85) I would go so far as to interpret this distortion of meaning as a sign of ill will, for it is Pertek who *inverts* my claim about Gadamer and Derrida, insinuating that they take antagonistic positions to one another, while at this very moment in the text I demonstrate (perhaps originally) their close kinship. I do not frame the hermeneutic and deconstructionist cycles in opposition to one another; I place them *next to* one another as two variations (two modalities) of the same ontology of text. I do not establish an antagonism between the surplus of sense and the surplus of signifiers. To the contrary, I write about them as each other's *complements*.

One might venture the claim that instead of taking up the gauntlet and offering a genuine response to the polemic, I am merely obsessing over details. However, it is my belief that these "negligible" misreadings are in fact the root cause of Pertek's fundamental failure to understand my argument. The first misreading concerns the category of "closeness" which, in truth, might very well represent a blind spot in my article. I evoked this concept as a provisional departure point for positing a radically hermeneutic relationship with the text, perhaps failing to give due weight to the concept's attendant issues. Pertek has surpassed me in this regard. And in fact, we must take responsibility for what has been written: I concede my polemicist's point when he argues that I smuggle a host of metaphysical contraband into the text through the concept of "closeness." It seems valid to claim that the category of "acuteness" would "undermine" these metaphysics (I am not so naïve as to have faith in the total triumph of metaphysics), but I will return to this matter in a moment. More importantly, I hardly assert the thesis that "deconstructionist closeness" is somehow more genuine than "hermeneutic closeness." The assertion that sense is only generated by the text does not imply a full-fledged inversion of relations in the sense of Hegelian dialectics, as perhaps Pertek would prefer. It merely *displaces* these relations. This does not mean that deconstruction "chooses [...] the 'interiority' of the text over its 'outside:' the signifier of a single word occurs 'inside' the concrete textual scenario as opposed to the signified, which leaps 'beyond' that text." Nor does it imply that "sense and text literally change places." Deconstruction can only indicate that "sense" (and with it "truth") is located not only within some "external" or "extratextual" reality, but rather in an "arche-text" that cannot be radically reduced to the interior. To the contrary, deconstruction opens up an access point to powerful cultural, ethical and political contexts. I cited Derrida's definition of an arche-text in my article, although here I might add that the words "nothing exists outside the text" simply mean that we cannot extricate ourselves from the web of discourses. For only through this web will we yield such things as hermeneutic sense. In other words, the arche-text does not invert the opposition between inside and outside; it merely *outlines* it. The logic of the trace, which I've been circling around this whole time, reveals that any binary theory of the sign is oversimplified. The signified is simply a particular signifier situated in the position of "signified," or rather, situated as the effect.

This does not mean that sense simply “does not exist.” it implies that sense is not a “pure” signified but merely a signifier giving itself over to the signified. Pertek knows this very well, for he himself took great pains to explain it to me. In this sense, his efforts were in vain, for on this point, I am in full agreement with my polemicist.

I will admit, however, that I fail to grasp the logic behind Pertek’s claim that “whoever wishes to think of deconstructionist reading as a form of reading (par excellence) that gets close to the text must locate within his material a stable reference point (stable as in distanced, relative) for defining the relationship of closeness.” In my mind, closeness to the text correlates here to a sensitivity to its capacity to generate meaning. By evoking so many authoritative definitions of “closeness,” does Pertek not run the risk of immobilizing them to a fault? Does his approach actually leave enough room for us to enter into close relation with something dynamic, something that perhaps leaves behind traces as it displaces itself together with these traces wherever their trajectories may take them? Of course, this complicates the whole notion of “closeness,” while I intend to deliberately emphasize a “specific” understanding of the concept, suggesting that the “fidelity of the text” turns out to be “unfaithful,” and so on. Pertek applies a similar operation to the formulation “traces of the text” that appears in my essay. Pertek evokes syntagmatic principles to bring his rather antiquated way of thinking up to date (in the vein of Vattimo, he understands the trace as a “remnant of something”). However, I fail to comprehend why he does not concede that the “traces of the text” can also refer to those “traces that comprise the text.” I also fail to understand why he ignores the second part of my formulation, despite quoting it directly: “the act pursuing traces by following them [the traces of the text] is a game that generates meaning” — in this case, he highlights the *future-oriented* nature of the trace, simultaneously implying that the capacity to generate meaning always *precedes* the act of interpretation, and that it can never be caught in the act (or in Pertek’s words, “tracked down”). Finally, I do not see my polemicist’s motives for claiming that I identify the text with (one?) signifier (“The point is not that the text is probably something more (and altogether different) than (merely) the signifier”). To this, I would follow Barthes and retort that the text is in fact a whole galaxy of signifiers (which is to say, those signifiers that the reader is willing to locate within the field of the signified).

In brief, the trace can simultaneously be the trace of what has passed and what is to come, and is surely either both, or neither (its meaning exceeding all intentions and generating both that which is “past” and that which is “to come”). For these reasons, we can follow its tracks but not *track it down*. We might therefore posit the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of transcendental reading, with (stable) proximity transforming into a (transitive) “unfaithful fidelity.” At this point in my essay, I introduce the category (or perhaps it would be better to say “quasi-category”) of “severity” at the service of exposing the trajectories of the trace. I wanted to make the point that this figure cannot be resolved: it maintains inside itself something that *both* derives from a “hermeneutic” longing for sense *and from* a “deconstructionist” deferral of sense. Severity does not coincide with the accuracy of “hitting the point,” nor does it suggest a *telos* of interpretation. It is an attempt at a description (or even phenomenology) of the experience of reading. At the cusp of the hermeneutic code, nobody can possibly speak “from outside.” Severity constitutes the act of grazing the irresolvable border between inside and outside, signifying and signified. It originates from a mutual and porous exchange

between the text and the reader. The text cannot be decoded in full, but it does facilitate a certain level of contact. What's more, as the reader, I am not the only one who "touches" the text in my desire to access it, but the text itself (perhaps from a distance) "touches" me. By suggesting all of this, I have no intention to "collapse the separation" that Pertek has asked me to recognize. I am hinting, rather, at a concept in which my polemicist is deeply invested, if I understand him well: the (severe!) impossibility of "closeness" embraced as a static postulate of metaphysics. At this point, I would like to evoke Derrida's words, if I may: "To touch is to touch a limit, a surface, a border, an outline. Even if ones touch an inside, "inside" of anything whatsoever, one does it following the point, the line or surface, the borderline of a spatiality exposed to the outside, offered – precisely – on its running border, offered to contact."¹

In light of this, I am in full agreement with Pertek when he writes, "The postulate of "close" reading might be a mere presaging **of a reading to come that** steps back **from the act of reading**, expressing a **distance** that constantly grows (with each new letter) but also a **deferral**." I would like to propose "intensity" as a concept that sensitizes us to this aporia, bearing in mind that it is not the crowning moment of an action but simply the condition underlying all interpretations. In this case, Pertek is entirely justified when he suggests that "Szaj [...] postulates 'closeness as a model of reading that **defers** the reading itself. He constructs a 'pure' figure of this concept that can, however, only be realized on the level of meta-discourse." If we follow the logic of the trace (!), then every *reading practice* will inevitably damage or contaminate that "purity" *intensely*. I personally choose to stand behind my right to contaminate through all the interpretive gestures I enact here and elsewhere as I break away from — but simultaneously remain entangled with— my metadiscourse.

¹ J. Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, Stanford 2005, p. 103.

KEYWORDS

deconstruction

text

closeness

sense

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TRACE

ABSTRACT:

This text is a response to Grzegorz Pertek's polemical essay *Prepositions: The Metaphysics of "Closeness."* In this text, I offer a rebuttal to allegations against the metaphysical gravity of the postulate "closeness" by pointing out the category of "acuteness," which "softens" this postulate and makes it "dynamic." I also clarify that I am not concerned with inverting the relationship between hermeneutics and deconstruction, but in displacing them by asserting the fundamental kinship between the two discourses.

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