

Text messages: Gadamer, Derrida and how we read

by [Bruce Ellis Benson](#) in the [March 22, 2005](#) issue

The literary phenomenon of “deconstruction” is regarded by many as an irresponsible fad that has now become passé. Fortunately, most of the wild, irresponsible readings of texts that went under the banner of “deconstruction” *are* passé. Yet in the same way that the historical performance movement has so deeply influenced classical music that it has become virtually the norm, the work of Jacques Derrida and Hans-Georg Gadamer has so affected our ways of reading texts that we are no longer aware of it.

With the deaths of these two thinkers—Derrida in October at age 74 and Gadamer in 2002 at the remarkable age of 102—we are in a position to reflect on that influence.

My joining the two figures may strike some as odd, since Gadamer and Derrida are often portrayed as polar opposites. According to the usual account, Gadamer is the conservative upholder of the traditional way of reading and Derrida the deconstructor of all that is sacred. If you’re for Gadamer, you must be against Derrida—and vice versa.

Yet the similarities in the way they’ve changed how we read and think about texts far outweigh their differences. Both, for example, stress the role of “play” in reading texts and the way in which we are controlled by (rather than in control of) history.

Derrida’s early work is particularly marked by a kind of Nietzschean playfulness. In *Of Grammatology*, for example, he gives a playful yet exquisitely subtle reading of Rousseau that brings the complexity of writing to the fore. Derrida recognized that writing has both advantages and disadvantages, and that it cannot have the one without the other. On the one hand, writing can make an author’s thought present even without the author’s presence. On the other hand, the fact that in writing (unlike in speech) an author’s presence is unnecessary means that the author is no longer able to control interpretation. Charitable interpreters often make appeals to “what the author really meant,” but the absence of the author means that we are left with only the text. And texts can be understood in different ways.

For some early followers of Derrida, that recognition provided cover for sloppy ways of reading texts—as if a text could be read in any way. Derrida himself was an extremely careful, even scrupulous, reader of texts. That care is certainly evident in Derrida's own writing. I found it also amply demonstrated in the seminars that I was privileged to take with him and the many times I heard him speak. Although a central theme in his thought is that texts can be read in various ways and at multiple levels, the depiction of Derrida as not believing in the possibility of an author's ability to communicate by way of writing, or as giving license to readers to make texts mean whatever they want them to mean, is a caricature.

Not only did Derrida insist on the need for careful study of texts, using the appropriate "instruments of criticism," but he was annoyed with those he felt had "avoided reading me and trying to understand" and so ended up with an interpretation of his texts that he deemed "false" (*Limited Inc*).

Yet Derrida was well aware that "this indispensable guardrail has always only *protected*, it has never *opened* a reading" (*Of Grammatology*), and that even a careful commentary is already an interpretation.

The recognition that there are no "purely literal" interpretations is just as much a theme in Gadamer, who claimed that we always bring our prejudices to a text and so read it in light of our own experience. He went against the grain in thinking that prejudices are not necessarily bad; he went so far as to say that they are absolutely essential for there to be any understanding at all.

However, Gadamer never suggested that we could or should rest on our prejudices. Truly entering into a conversation with a text means that we put both ourselves and our prejudices at risk. The text may have something to say to us that overthrows our prejudices, so that we find ourselves "pulled up short by the text" (*Truth and Method*).

Like Derrida, Gadamer thought that reading a text involves entering into a kind of play between text and reader in which the text has an effect upon us and we an effect upon the text. Of course, that play requires a certain degree of humility on the part of the reader. Gadamer himself radiated that kind of humility. In my encounters with Gadamer I found him to be just as interested in asking questions about my work as I was about his. When he agreed to read some of the early portions of my dissertation, not only was his critique gracious but also it was clear that he was

interested in learning from me.

That kind of receptivity is precisely what Gadamer thought was necessary for understanding to take place. He thought of understanding as a kind of “event” that happens to us. For that event to take place, we have to be willing to listen. Given that willingness, events of understanding can take place continually. Not surprisingly, we are sometimes startled by these events of understanding, for they demonstrate to us just how little we are in control of texts.

This idea of being at the mercy not just of texts but also of history is a theme in both Gadamer and Derrida. Although Derrida is commonly read as either overthrowing or at least attempting to evade the effect of history and tradition, he made it clear just how much we are embedded in Western ways of thinking. Americans are usually amazed to discover that Derrida was often criticized in France as too conservative because of his insistence on studying classical texts. While Derrida was always trying to think beyond the bounds laid down by tradition, he realized that one can only go beyond those bounds in small ways and that, even in going beyond them, one displays a profound indebtedness to them.

Here we come to a point of difference between Gadamer and Derrida. Gadamer had a great respect for tradition and believed that being steeped in a tradition is what makes understanding possible. Derrida would no doubt have criticized Gadamer for being too positive about tradition. In turn, Gadamer would likely have criticized Derrida for not being sufficiently appreciative of the wisdom that tradition hands down to us. That difference is mostly a matter of emphasis, however, and not something fundamental.

Probably the most profound way in which Gadamer and Derrida have shaped hermeneutics is in how we think about texts. Both thinkers saw texts as constituted not by dead letters but by living words. Gadamer went so far as to claim that a text does not fully exist except in the moment in which it is read and understood. Further, the very reading and understanding of texts has an impact upon the texts themselves. Thus, rather than being static, texts are constantly in motion, since our interpretation of them affects their very being.

As living entities, texts have a history, and that history becomes so intimately connected to the texts themselves that there can be no clear distinction between text and interpretation history. Rather than their being merely an expression of an

author's thought, texts are mutually constituted by author and reader. That balance is one found in both Gadamer and Derrida, despite the fact that Derrida has often been (wrongly) read as saying that readers have the sole control of texts.

So what do these two figures mean for a pastor preparing a sermon on a biblical text? They call for rethinking the very essence of interpretation. Explicating a text requires a willingness to play with it, a willingness to hear what it has to say with open ears. While we all come to texts with our prejudices, engaging a text in a genuine dialogue means that those prejudices are put into question.

In reading a text like the Bible, one is well aware of its special authority and its peculiar way of questioning us. Yet, if we are to be truly faithful interpreters, we need just as much to question it. It is within this mutual questioning, this to-and-fro movement, that understanding takes place. Although Derrida is somewhat less sanguine about the ability of texts to communicate truth, Gadamer closes his magnum opus *Truth and Method* by saying that the "discipline of questioning and inquiring" indeed "guarantees truth." We merely need to be willing to enter into dialogue and able to listen.