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O N S P A N N I N G

Or Vive la Différence;

That is, Aphorisms on Love and the Hermeneutics of Life

Which May Lead to a Hegel without the Geist

By Way of Rousseau without Primitivism

(These thoughts were triggered by a friend's presentation "On Love" to a discussion group this spring. Not exactly a response to that presentation, the thoughts are..., well, I'm not exactly sure what they should be described as being, perhaps an effort to relate certain studies to my experience of life.)

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I -- The Seductions of Language,
or the Difficulty of the Easy Path

My life -- I live it; everything that exists-for-me exists within it, this life I live. Your life -- you live it; everything that exists-for-you exists within it, this life you live. Such are my premises, or rather such is the given of the living of life, but ah, discourse -- lost, found, and misbegotten! Language permits me to move, so easily, according to the paradigm, to the next variation of the sentence. Our life..., but wait, should it be, Our lives...? Here language betrays thought, obscures life; language makes the utterance far too easy: Our life -- we live it; everything that exists-for-us exists within it, this life we live. This proposition is false, absurd, for living is not a joint activity, however easily the paradigms of language may allow it to be described as if it were. Our lives -- we live them.... This way of putting it is less absurd, but not particularly precise, especially when the proposition continues -- everything that exists-for-us exists within them, these lives we live. Here what exists for whom is sorely obscured. Either way -- our life or our lives -- the proposition is problematic; hence another premise: the we-form is no simple, lucent grammatical form, but a problem in my life, in your life.

II -- The Empty Infinity of Contained Containers

My life -- I live it; everything that exists-for-me exists within it, this life I live. What exists-for-me is a durating, embodied animation in a world, a container, contained in what it contains, a paradox -- isolation in infinity and infinity in isolation. Your life, with everything that exists-for-you, is a presence in my life, but only as it exists-for-me. So too with every other presence in my life: what my life contains is an endless otherness of things contained-in-themselves -- there is nothing given in my life but the otherness, the self-containedness of everything. My life is an empty form filled with empty forms; living my life is an attempt to overcome the emptiness; it is desire, wanting presences to exist-for-me as they exist-in-themselves, amour in its broadest sense.

III -- Rousseau and Two Modes of Amour

Rousseau distinguished -- and here is his greatness -- between two modes of love, amour de soi and amour propre. His mistake may have been to perceive the latter, a calculating, possessive, proprietary love, merely as an egregious perversion of the former, a healthy, self-affirming, self-fulfilling love of being. Certainly he was right that in certain domains of desire, the displacement of amour de soi by amour propre leads to disastrous relationships, but he may have fixated excessively on such displacements, and thus somewhat muddied an essential distinction.

All desire is an attempt to overcome the empty nothingness that my life, your life, is, simply as it is given, or found, a closed container containing an infinity of closed containers. I want my life to consist, not of containers, but of contents, and to bring that about, I must somehow surmount the difference, overcome the experiential distance between these containers, presenting themselves merely as such, as containers, as they exist in my life-for-me, and the contents-in-them as they exist for themselves. I recognize two modes by which I can seek to overcome that distance between the presences contained in my life and the contents contained in those presences: spanning the distance and compressing the distance. Amour de soi manifests desire as spanning, amour propre as compressing; in spanning, I recognize the desired presence as a for-itself, interesting as such, but in compressing I deal with the desired presence as a for-me, to be manipulated according to my will.

Why should these two modes of desiring exist? I do not think that there is something inherent in the world as it exists for me that requires me to span the distance with some presences and to compress it with others; rather the two modes exist by virtue of a choice open to me, a choice I can make even if I cannot always accomplish it as I would wish. For instance, I feel myself free to choose on the one hand to span the distance I feel between myself and the apple in the bowl there -- to contemplate its rich color, its shape, to feel an esthetic value in the living still-life it helps compose, in the bowl, on the desk, set off by a familiar and pleasing backdrop -- or on the other hand, to compress the distance -- to grasp the apple; open wide the mouth; crunch, chomp, chomp; crunch, chomp, chomp; just as I did, with somewhat different sound effects, to a banana a moment ago.

I want to be careful, however, that my first example here of the apple does not inadvertently associate spanning excessively with passive contemplation, the esthetic, and compressing with the active -- the association is adventitious, for the only way I know how to span with an apple is contemplative. Activity, all the same, can be as integral to spanning as it is to compressing; the distinction between the two modes of desire has to do, not with action and contemplation, but with whether the distance, the difference, the otherness of the presence in my life, is to be preserved as such, essential to my desire, or is to be negated: in spanning, the distance between the presence contained in my life and what is contained in that presence is necessary to my desire -- what I want is to preserve that distance while spanning it -- whereas in compressing, the distance is an obstacle to my desire -- what I want is precisely to remove or reduce it, to incorporate the object into me. To span, I must say, Vive la différence!

IV -- Rousseau's Naturalistic Optimism versus
the Prudentiality of Spanning

Rousseau held amour de soi to be an ingenuous, natural quality; amour propre to be a calculative creature of civilization. I can agree with Rousseau this far: where spanning is appropriate and yet where a proprietary, compressing desire nevertheless displaces it, the genesis of this displacement will probably be found in an imperfect, positively corrupting, socialization and education. Be that as it may, contra Rousseau, in its genesis as a human capacity, spanning is not an ingenuous, pre-calculative capacity -- if it were, it would not be so very difficult to do in many situations where it is genuinely attempted -- nor is compressing a civilized degeneration. Surely, in its genesis, spanning is an art born of prudential calculation -- spanning is a capacity that arises with self-consciousness; it is an amour de soi in the fullest sense, a self-regarding prudence arising in a person who recognizes the presence of other self-regarding prudences in his or her life. In eating apples one does not worry about apples eating oneself. There was no fall, but an ascent into civilization: do unto others as one would have others do unto oneself. Spanning arises as a person worries that compressing a self-conscious other might lead the other to compress in return his own self-conscious self. But the genesis of a capacity does not determine its uses.

V -- Modes of Difference

Vive la différence! That is the basis of spanning. Among the multitude of presences that exist-for-me, containers contained in the container of my life, there are numerous ones that contain contents that will potentially enrich the content of my life, but not if they are compressed into my life, but only if the distance between how they first exist merely as externality for me and how they exist as contents for themselves is spanned without interferring with their integrity for themselves. Spanning requires attention to the relevant differences; the effort to span degenerates into compressing actions when the differences are not attended to with sufficient tact and respect.

Spanning thus assumes many forms according to the types of distances, the preservation of which is integral to my desire. Among persons in my life, whom I encounter as presences there for me, innumerable differences exist, differences of age, sex, personality, interests, capacities, conditions, culture, commitment -- diverse differences that form the very basis of my interest in each person. Were I able, by some aberration of self-assertion, to compress all these differences into myself, I would be left with nothing, no enrichment of my life with content, for the content of the other's life-for-itself would have disappeared. My interest in the other is premised on his or her being different, something distinct, a being-for-self; my interest is in spanning the difference without disrupting it.

VI -- Reading as Spanning and as Compressing

When a book becomes a presence in my life, when I pick it up and read it, I can do so as an act of spanning or as an act of compressing. In the latter case, I am not concerned with the integrity of the author's thought, but am pre-eminently aware of my present convictions and I seek to have these reinforced and strengthened. Should the author turn out to say things irrelevant to these, I put the book aside as not worth the time or effort. Should the author seem to say things that challenge my convictions, I get angered and feel that he must have written in bad faith or lacked the intelligence and information that an author speaking to these matters ought to have. If, on the other hand, I span with the book, the difference between the author's views and my own becomes the real ground of my interest and I seek to understand better how and why his views differ from my own, to understand better whether my views really are what I take them to be. Interpretation is integral to reading as spanning, and spanning, whether in reading or in the flesh, is a hermeneutic mode of living.

VII -- Orientation through Spanning

My life -- I live it; everything that exists-for-me exists whithin it, this life I live. Simply as so given my life is a spinning whirl and compressing does not help me overcome the dizziness it induces -- compressing simply makes my life into something like the vortex of a whirlpool into which the things I compress are inexorably drawn. Here I encounter the vital function of spanning, reaching out to the other, recognizing that my interest in the otherness of the other is precisely an interest in the difference, a determination to preserve the difference while bridging the distance. Such spanning creates orientation for me; it stabilizes the whirl; it dispels the dizziness. As the rapidly spinning figure-skater, arms wrapped closely round her body, her entire mass spiraled tight to her axis of rotation, slows her spin by spreading arms wide, extending her torso and leg out perpendicular to her axis, expanding her circumference of rotation, so too does spanning extend the circumference of my life, slowing its spin, allowing me to orient myself, my life.

VIII -- Modes of Spanning

Vive la différence! I experience many modes of difference and thus form many modes of spanning. I span in different modes according to the difference, the kaleidoscopic mix of differences that every other is for me. Spanning, rigorously, entails in each instance my respect for the unique integrity of the difference, the integral unity, the for-itself, of the other. Yet there are modes of spanning, an orientation of the spanning, which is not the same as the orientation arising for me through the spanning. The modes of spanning do not compress the interesting differences to a single difference; the modes of spanning orient the interesting differences around an operative difference that defines the mode. Others span with me in different modes -- to one I am child, to another, parent, to a third, lover, to a fourth, friend, to someone else, colleague, to others, teacher, and to some, acquaintance. In each case, the integral mix of all my qualities may be pertinent to the span the other builds towards me, but the mode of interpreting those qualities, of interpreting my life as a potential content in the life of the other, will vary according to the mode of spanning appropriate in each case. Are the modes of spanning limited or unlimited? My ability to conceptualize them coherently into identifiably different modes is undoubtedly limited; my capacity to experience them in unending variations is infinite within the boundaries of my life.

IX -- Negation and Spanning

Negation, Hegel suggests, is the basic activity of self-consciousness, and on this I agree with the proviso that the relation of negation to affirmation may elsewhere be explored. The self achieves its actuality through its exercise of its power of negation. Now, if spanning and compressing are fundamentally different ways of desiring content in my life, I should find that I employ my power of negation differently in the two processes. Or to put it in a slightly different way, although I easily see negation at work in compressing -- my effort is to negate the otherness of the object as fully as possible -- I do not so easily see negation employed in spanning.

In spanning, the employment of negation is far more subtle than in compressing. First of all, spanning requires me to negate the urge to negate the otherness of the subject to whom I want to span. Second, I use negation to set up a field of attention around the other to whom I wish to span, negating my interests, both spanning and compressing interests, that I might potentially feel towards other others. Thus I concentrate my desire. And then third, once my desire is so concentrated, I use negation, not of the other, but with reference to the other, in an effort to understand through interpretation the content of the life of the other. Through this mode of negation, I employ a hermeneutic of spanning. What gets negated as I employ this hermeneutic of spanning? This is a difficult question and for now I will let it suffice to answer merely that successive interpretations of the content of the life of the other are negated.

X -- The Quality and Scope of Spanning

Spanning requires me to negate the urge to negate the otherness of the presence to whom I want to span. The degree to which, in each particular case, I can effect this negation of the will to compress determines the quality of my spanning. The urge to compress is itself vastly complex, taking many forms depending on the particular differences I perceive in the other. In enduring relations, I experience an unending succession in the particular differences that I perceive in the other and each new aspect of the other renews the challenge to my capacity to negate my compressing drives. The quality of my spanning can undulate up and down according to my ability to contain my potential proprietary interest in each successive difference. Hence, the metaphor appropriate to spanning likens it, not simply to building a bridge from one set point to another, but rather to a spider's web, the spinner's spanning stretched back and forth between two points elongated in time, a web that does not ensare the other, but for which the other, by virtue of his or her differences, prolonged, embodied in time, serves as an essential anchor for the spanning web. To perfect the quality of the spanning, it might be tempting to limit it to one or another difference where the urge to compress is weak, but then the spanning web will be poor in scope. The more fully the differences perceived in another are encompassed in the endeavor of spanning, the fuller the scope of the effort. In spanning, I need to attain both quality and scope, twin imperatives that, with the pursuit of either, put a strain on the achievement of the other.

XI -- The Intensities of Spanning

In spanning, I use negation to set up a field of attention around the other to whom I wish to span, negating or muting my interests, both spanning and compressing interests, that I might potentially feel towards other others. To span at all, I must use such negation, but the degree to which I use it determines in each case the intensity of my spanning. The intensity of spanning relates to the modes of spanning: I can span intensely within different modes of spanning without the intensity within each mode interferring greatly with the spanning in the other modes, and some modes of spanning are more conducive to promiscuous intensities than other modes. Thus I can span intensely with one as parent, another as lover, and a third as friend, and I find it considerably easier to span simultaneously and intensely with several friends than with several lovers.

My ability to achieve intensity in spanning depends in part on the capacity to maintain the quality and scope of spanning. Without achieving quality, without effectively negating the urge to compress the other, I cannot truly attend to the other, and if I want latently but compellingly to possess, to incorporate, the other, I will not be able to maintain genuine attention toward the other. And without scope to the spanning, a continual renewal to the perception of difference in the presence of the other, I become bored and find it increasingly burdensome to maintain the field of attention around the other with the result that the intensity of my spanning flags. Thus the intensity of spanning between parent and child inevitably diminishes somewhat when the child matures, for the everchanging scope of the earlier spanning, driven by the ineluctable maturing of the child, gives way to a more settled, narrow pattern in which the significant differences are stabilized and limited.

XII -- The Hermeneutic Strategies of Spanning

Once my desire to span is concentrated with a certain intensity, with a certain quality and scope to it, I use negation, not of the other, but with reference to the other, in an effort to understand through interpretation certain contents of the life of the other. I return here to the different modes of spanning and can see now why the intensity of spanning relates to the mode of spanning, for a field of attention differs from the activity of attending. A strong field of attention is necessary for any intense spanning, but the actual mode of attending depends significantly on the mode of spanning in which I am engaged. The basic modes of spanning really constitute different hermeneutic strategies: each strategy puts its own demands and constraints on me -- the hermeneutic strategy deployed in spanning as a lover may be so demanding that I can span as lover intensely only with one, while the hermeneutic strategy used in spanning as a friend is less demanding and permits me to span intensely as friend simultaneously with several.

Now a hermeneutic strategy is a plan for interpreting, for understanding certain contents of the life of the other. Via a hermeneutic strategy I try to experience by interpretation the contents of that-which-exists-for-the-other that I first encounter as a presence in my life as a closed container, a mere presence among the things that exist for me. When I span with a book, I take something as a subject, as a self-conscious subject, and I seek to understand, to interpret that, and what I take as the subject is not the text, but the living thought of the author, his thinking, the thinking of others who may have thought about his thinking, and my own thinking, and I seek to span the difference between the thinking of the author, the thinking of other interpreters, and my own thinking. Such I see fairly easily to be the case with philosophical, reflective writings; with fiction, drama, poetry, the situation may be a bit more obscure, for the author may have created something that more radically has a life of its own. In spanning with fiction, I might substitute for the author's thinking, his imaging, which becomes what I seek to experience and understand; and with poetry, I substitute the author's languaging. And because all books have to a certain extent, greater or lesser, a life of their own, I find myself, in addition to spanning to them, further capable, not only of compressing them, but of being compressed by them, and thus the drama, the

film, the narrative can come to possess me, incorporating me for a time fully into the imaginary world they depict; and they can even span to me, reaching out delicately to a difference in me that is brought to light and life by their unexpected understanding of it. Be that all as it may, however, in spanning, whether by reading, observing, acting, what have you, the subject I seek to understand, to interpret, is not the inert text, the sign, the gesture, the act, but the living writer, the signer, the gesturer, the actor -- these are the others who attract my interest, these are the contents, whereas the texts, signs, gestures, acts are merely the containers, the presences among all that which exists for me, the beckoning promises of potential contents should I be able to span the difference.

To what degree, and how, however, is such spanning, such interpreting, such understanding of the contents contained in the life of the other, possible to achieve? To what degree, and how, can two separate subjects bridge their difference? To some degree, at any rate, I feel convinced that I have experienced understanding of another, which would suggest the possibility of attempting, in Kantian manner, a critique of interpretation, a systematic inquiry into the conditions of the possibility of interpretation. I will not attempt that now, however. I will instead, in order to return to reflect further on the hermeneutic strategies of spanning, inventory a few of the fundamental life situations in which interpretation comes naturally -- hermeneutics is no esoteric theory, but a manifold feature of everyday life.

XIII -- The Hermeneutics of Self-Understanding

A basic proposition: I can interpret another because I must interpret myself.

My life -- I live it; everything that exists-for-me exists within it, this life I live. My life is given to me, there, ineluctable, inescapable but through death; a basic presence, the basic presence, I encounter in my life is me, myself, very literally a closed container, an embodiment, animate and animating. I look at my hands, my arms, my chest, my legs; I crane and see a part of my back -- there I am, all surface, a mass, presumably with something inside. I open my mouth and look in with a mirror -- more surfaces, internal surfaces. I cannot open myself to myself, either physically or psychically; I too am a closed container contained in my life. Can I compress with myself, incorporate myself into myself? Perhaps that is the mistake of the autistic, for to myself I am that presence that is already there, fully incorporated into me, and I cannot compress myself further into myself, yet I still find myself, given as a mere presence in my life, as a closed container, and I must span with myself, interpret myself to myself. Behind my ear, I itch, I scratch it, the itch subsides -- a rudimentary interpretation, an interpretation that is not even so rudimentary, for it took much infantile experience to learn how to itch and to scratch.

Were I not closed to myself; were I not there in my life as an ever-present presence, a bundle of differences, an inner and outer, a complex system of different organs, of different states, of different conditions, locations, configurations, all continually changing; were I not an object in my life as much as any other object in my life, I would not need to interpret myself to myself, to span with myself, to say vive la différence to all the differences that I am for myself; and if I did not need to span with myself, the possibility of spanning with an other would be a very unlikely discovery. I have no privileged access to myself; I am as much a mystery to myself as the other is a mystery to me; spanning is not a reaching out from a purely transparent inner subjectivity to some opaque external other. The appearance of privileged access arises because the quality, scope, and intensity of my spanning with myself seems to be of a different order in comparison with my spanning with other presences in my life -- I am always present, the rest is transiently

there. But the appearance of privileged access confuses the matter fundamentally. In actuality, my capacity to span with myself and to span with others is one and the same capacity; to understand myself and to understand another is one and the same endeavor; interpreting myself and interpreting others is a single activity and the differences I embody are neither more nor less real presences in my life than the differences embodied by others are: through spanning I seek to understand these embodied differences, those embodied in me and those embodied in others, all present to me in my life.

XIV -- Time and Interpretation

Knowing consists of propositions, the validity of which should stand independent of time: the known truth, if attained, is true for all time. Understanding, in contrast, is achieved in time; interpretation is driven by time. Spanning takes place now, in the ever moving present; it is a making sense of the temporality, the actuality, of difference. Interpretations are sound or unsound, depending on the degree to which they can be sustained in time.

XV -- The Hermeneutics of Dependency

Parent and child -- what differences to be spanned, what imperatives to interpretation! Need I say more?

The infant struggles to form the most elementary hermeneutic strategies for interpreting both self and world; the mother deploys subtle hermeneutic strategies for interpreting the other, born of her, yet there, so different and so inarticulate. The one is there utterly dependent on the other; the situation somewhat desperate for each; time seems newly vigorated, reborn with the infant, each cry, gurgle and movement requires interpretation now -- does it mean this or does it mean that? For the parent, the whole order of life is upset with the chaotic cycle of eating and excreting, waking and sleeping; for the infant there is yet no order to life but the chaotic cycle of eating and excreting, waking and sleeping. Compressing for each is a continual danger, the mother unfeelingly forcing the infant into the patterned life of the mature, the infant seeking to prolong and deepen its dependency. Spanning here means most basically, for each, recognizing the slow work of time, the ever-changing process of maturing, the child accepting the long task of empowering its potentialities, the parent the equally long task of sustaining the child in that work.

XVI -- The Hermeneutics of Sexuality

She sits there, not too distant, close enough to touch, conversing, serious but relaxed, drink in hand, children asleep, inviting but enigmatic, desires and intents unclear. What does she want -- I know not, myriads of perplexities. I lean back in my chair, a buzz of uncertain interpretations; I lean forward instinctively, extend my hand to her arm, it recoils with a tiny jerk as if shocked by a small charge of static; I sigh and rise and pour myself another brandy and settle back to continue the conversation, still engaged in the logos of the talk and the reality of my attraction, but realizing that she and I do not yet know how to be intimate. What I try only activates her distrust; what I don't try, I don't try because I cannot yet imagine it as me, and I do not yet divine it as her.

Again, that night, I fall into bed, far too late, dizzy with brandy. Plunk, asleep. Then, how long later I know not, inebriated half-sleep -- tossing and turning, partial dreams, partial reflections. Why? Why with this woman to whom I am so attracted, why even in fantasy can I not imagine intimacy with her? Tossing and turning, dizzy perplexity, a whirl of images of the evening, of all times spent with her. That night, conversing in the midst of books, about her intellectual style -- so strong willed, so adventurous, so ready for risk -- and her expression then of being touched at ease, recognized somehow for what she wanted to be. Tossing and turning, dizzy perplexity, a whirl of images of the evening, of all times spent with her. Another night, even more drunken, a good deal before, pent-up tensions knocking against restraining barriers, a desperate attempt to construe the uncertainty -- yes, it must be, you prefer women to men, or if that is too much, I realize you want to be friends and so do I, but beyond that I want too to be lovers and I know that now that cannot be, but tell me please, is there anything fundamental that means that that cannot possibly be, and to that drunken question there was only tensed jaw muscles and a tentative silence that I took to mean no, that that could not not possibly be.

Tossing and turning, dizzy perplexity, a whirl of images of the evening, of all times spent with her. Why? Why could I not even imagine intimacy with her? Divination! Divination! Schleiermacher's divination, the beginning of interpretation -- it was not there, perhaps still it is

not there. Tossing and turning, why this failure of imagination? What attracts her? The impossible, the absolutely proscribed? Domination? Submission? All that is not me; all that is impossible, but all that too is irrelevant, not only to me, but to her as well. That static charge -- what is that static charge, that elbow pulling back as if shocked? Tossing and turning, dizzy perplexity, a whirl of images of the evening, of all times spent with her -- yes, my reaching out does shock her; it threatens; I must somehow stop reaching out, however natural it may seem; that must be part of the difference to be recognized and respected. But can I merely wait responsively to be touched without touching? I've never thought of that; it seems so strange; but not unpleasurable; no, perhaps very, very pleasurable; the tossing and turning subsides and a divinatory dream....

XVII -- The Hermeneutics of Intimacy

In spanning sexuality, my desire is not primarily for my own self-gratification -- that comes, true, as the work of the other's desire. In spanning sexuality, my primary desire is to satisfy the desire of the other, a desire different from my own. To engage in spanning sexuality, I must first divine the desire of the other, to anticipate it, to recognize it, to interpret it with a sensuous hermeneutic, to feel it there in the other, touch, caress it, arouse and gratify it. In contrast, compressing sexuality is encased in the rhetoric of possession, of proprietary desire -- I want you, take me, I'm yours. A connection exists between a desire for spanning sexuality and an openness to homosexual and lesbian love, for thus the divination is easier, the difference less different, the threat of possession rhetorically diminished. In any case, spanning sexuality is more full erotic than compressing sexuality, and -- well -- eh bien! Vive la différence!
Tous les différences, mais la différence la plus intéressante, chaque à son goût.

Spanning sexuality without intimacy, however, is an incomplete hermeneutic. I might span sexually with most anyone, should I, for some reason or another, perceive their desire and feel drawn to gratifying it. The whore must be adept at sexual spanning -- this fact perhaps has something to do with the good woman's continued stake in proprietary, compressing love, and the good man's too. Spanning intimacy, at once so demanding and so fulfilling: it puts the all-is-possible to a severe test -- after it, la différence que vive, eh bien, quelle différence!

Sexuality is perhaps the basic intimacy, or to put it another way, intimacy without sexuality is a fundamentally incomplete intimacy. But to reduce intimacy to sexuality is to leave the former fundamentally incomplete as well. I am intimate with another when I conduct the whole range of my daily life in close proximity with that other; the other is intimate with me when she conducts the whole range of her daily life in close proximity with me. Intimacy is an endless sequence of little encounters, the wondering recognition of all the varied differences, minor and great, that, in the course of days, weeks, months, and years, two persons can manifest to one another. Compressing, reducing the ways of the other to conformity to one's own, is ever possible, but intimacy is, although endlessly difficult, the great opportunity for spanning with another

-- falling asleep beside someone, watching her wake, grumpy and foul; -- being seen brushing my teeth, shitting, showering, shaving, day in, day out; -- eating a bowl of bean sprouts, half drunk, half after midnight, still writing, I'm not sure what; -- not liking her best friend while putting up with horrendous bores, well why? well because, because, I don't know, because I do; -- thinking, studying, writing, hoping, hating, sleeping, speculating, doing, idling, forgetting, yes, and farting too; -- angered at trivia, passive to the cause, whatever it may be; -- paying bills and taxes, cashing checks, going for groceries, watching films, washing dishes and then washing clothes; -- asking my daughter if she's ready for the morrow's school, taking her temperature, kidding her friend; -- stubbing my toe, fearing cancer, resolving to exercise, putting it off; -- complaining of colleagues, working at home, dropping suddenly yesterday's one-thing-needful for today's entirely different obsession, after all, consistency is.... All that and endless more is the stuff to be interpreted in spanning intimacy, and without doing that the hermeneutic of life is thoroughly incomplete.

Defensively, I ask, is intimacy subject to variations of degree?

XVIII -- Time, Negation, and Remembering

Lived time is immediate sensuousness, a continuous flow; any interpretation is a momentary fixing -- in spanning I must immediately negate the fixing in order to maintain my fluid interest in the ever-moving otherness of the other. If I do not, I will start to compress, to negate my spanning, by seeking to hold the other in conformity to my fixed interpretation. Negating the interpretative fixing relegates it to the realm of potential memory while my spanning proceeds in the fluid immediacy of now.

Remembering is the negation of the negations required by lived time. Remembering can occasion compressing, an effort to force the present to recreate the past, to renew the immediacy that had occasioned a treasured interpretation. Memory can equally aid spanning by better informing my present effort to interpret the now-here, immediate life of the other as it intersects my interest.

XIX -- The Hermeneutics of Activity

Vive la différence! I like to do things that other people like to do, but I like to do them in my own way, generally in spurts of semi-mad intensity in which I edge up to the limits of my capacity -- body-surfing, water-skiing, bicycling, who knows what next. One summer it was body-surfing, a magnificent August, day after day a big surf, the water warm, the slope of the beach gentle and right, a memorable coincidence of intent and occasion. To most people it was a bad August, at least as swimming goes -- the ocean was too rough -- but for me it was a delight. Hours were spent daily bobbing behind the surf, timing the waves, now! swimming hard to shore, catching the curl, head up to gulp air, the body flat and stiff but ready to relax into the hidden acrobatics demanded should the wave tumble it, turning over and over until the moment when feet instinctively plant on the bottom, an arching jump, bursting through the foam to needed air, falling back into the now retreating water, driving against it, as if pushing a car, to keep from being dragged back into the next breaker. Out, then back in, diving under the crashing surf to wait there bobbing behind the breakers again, timing the next ride. After a week or so, I started having the same recurrent dream, an utterly kinetic sensation of bobbing behind the breakers, up to the ridge and down to the trough, in a rhythm possessing the entire body that seemed somehow to be a rhythm of primordial well-being. But now, I stand on the shore and look out on such waves and tremble at the madness that must have possessed me in playing so carefree with them.

The hermeneutic of this activity, you ask? It is manifold. First within it, there is the hermeneutic of self-understanding. Every summer I start with a tremble on first looking out at the big surf. I have to wait to get wet with a medium surf; I have to start riding the smaller waves, to regain my sense of time, to let the confidence rebuild, to renew my strength, to rediscover the strange kinetic joy of the water, all from within, inside the process; it is all interpretation, a renewed understanding of the possible impossible -- to do any activity with real intensity demands such interpretation. But the hermeneutic of activity goes far beyond that of self-understanding. I am a presence in the lives of others mainly as I go about doing things and others are a presence in my life mainly as they go about in turn doing their things. Persons manifest many of their differences

in action; such activity is a prime occasion for both spanning and compressing. Suffice a brief example. The friend, who, I think, has most fully spanned with me, has done so, in large part, by interpreting and understanding, empathizing with these mad patterns of play that I pursue. He doesn't like the waves -- he doesn't trust them or himself in them, and he sees my play in them as a difference to be understood, as a content of my life that can enrich his life, not by his incorporating it into him, but simply by understanding fully what it is in mine. In contrast, someone else, who, I think, would rather consistently compress me, despite her intent, did so, in large part, by not interpreting my mad patterns of play, but by trying instead to rechannel them into activities that could be "shared," done together, which meant suppressing the difference.

Vive la différence!

XX -- The Hermeneutics of Conversation

Little need be said. In compressing conversation, neither you nor I are alert to possible differences of meaning that each may attach to the words being bandied back and forth -- I am intent on incorporating what you say into what I think, ignoring potential differences. In spanning conversation you and I are alert to these difficulties, trying to move behind the mere differences of expression to a comprehension of the real difference in thought that each may be experiencing. The value of what you and I have to say to one another lies in these real differences of thought.

XXI -- The Hermeneutics of Study

See for now, "Toward a Place for Study in a World of Instruction."

XXII -- Reciprocal Spanning,
or the Complementarity of Hermeneutic Strategies

So far I have assumed the possibility of reciprocity in spanning between persons. For me to span meaningfully with another, it is not necessary that there be full reciprocity, but such reciprocity facilitates the effort at spanning, and the lack of reciprocity can be a major cause of a rather subtle problem, that of compressing spanning, the effort to incorporate the spanning by another into reciprocal conformity with the hermeneutic strategy that I most desire to employ. I experience, I think, a certain dialectic between the hermeneutics of self-understanding and the other-regarding hermeneutics, those of dependency, intimacy, activity, conversation, and study. The hermeneutic of self-understanding is basically inescapable -- whatever I do, I am there as a presence in my life, demanding of me that I interpret myself to myself. I have, in contrast, a certain degree of choice with respect to the other-regarding hermeneutics, and constraints to consider. Once activated, the hermeneutic of dependency, and to a somewhat lesser degree, that of intimacy, demand much effort, involvement, and neither is easily deactivated. I may be ready to try to inch toward the hermeneutic of intimacy with someone, but she may feel that the hermeneutic of intimacy with me would be too demanding, compressing the energies she has for pursuing a hermeneutic of study, of conversation, of activity, in the ways that suit her. In such a situation reciprocity is difficult, full reciprocity, at least, but what matter -- here too is a new difference and vive la différence, span with it and see what happens -- my life, I live it.

XXIII -- Negative Spanning

By negative spanning, I mean something different from the role of negation in spanning. So far I have dealt with spanning with respect to attractions of various sorts. Spanning is a possibility not only with respect to presences that carry for me a positive valence, but with ones that carry a negative valence as well. With respect to these, compressing urges manifest themselves as repressing urges -- rather than try to incorporate the thing of negative valence into me, I want to push it away, down, suppress it, destroy it, as with the roach I just zapped. In contrast, through negative spanning, as with positive spanning, I seek to preserve the difference, to understand it as a content in the life of some container there present in my life, precisely so that I can better guard against the possibility of that content coming to characterize my life. Thus negative spanning has value to me as part of the dialectic between the hermeneutic of self-understanding and the other-regarding hermeneutics.

XXIV -- The Work of Spanning

What does spanning accomplish? The work of spanning does not manifest itself in actions upon those who are parties to the spanning -- my life, I live it; your life, you live it. The work of spanning manifests itself in third things, creations, things that have lives of their own, that in turn span and are spanned with. Interpretation never stops; it accomplishes further, fuller, richer, deeper matters for interpretation. That is enough.