TM III.1: LANGUAGE AS MEDIUM OF HERMENEUTIC EXPERIENCE

Forthcoming in *Truth and Method: A Polyphonic Commentary*

Penultimate Version – Please Do Not Cite

This section of *Truth and Method* (III.1)[1] gets relatively short shrift, and not without reason. The main thesis, announced already in its title, is that language is the medium of hermeneutic experience. By this Gadamer means above all that: (i) the objects of hermeneutics are linguistic, and (ii) the interpretive acts by which we understand those objects are also linguistic. Such a twofold thesis does not seem terribly controversial. We read and understand texts by means of language. Who would ever deny that?[2]

Given that this thesis is hardly controversial, it is not surprising to find predecessors endorsing some version of it. In fact, Gadamer himself in TM II.I.1 seems to attribute the thesis to Friedrich Schleiermacher. In that passage Gadamer praises Schleiermacher for characterizing hermeneutics as "concerned with understanding everything cast in language" (*TM*, 201).[3] This is a clear expression of (i). Gadamer also credits Schleiermacher with affirming (ii), at least insofar as he recognizes that the "pre-given totality of language" guides the interpreter in their hermeneutic

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[1] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd, rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013). Hereafter cited in text as *TM*. Where the German is cited or the translation has been altered, the page number of the original is indicated after the slash. These refer to Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode, Gesammelte Werke I* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990).

[2] As Jean Grondin puts it, "In some ways, we may feel that, in their generality, they are pushing at open doors. Doubtless this is the case in the first great thesis, according to which language represents both the object and understanding's mode of accomplishment." *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, trans. Kathyrn Plant (Bucks: Acumen, 2003), 125. Grondin then suggests that Gadamer's thesis seems less banal once we "recognize that Gadamer ventured into a still unexplored jungle when he proposed his hermeneutics of language." It is certainly true that philosophy of language in both analytic and continental traditions came to much greater prominence after the publication of *Truth and Method*. However, it seems more accurate to see Gadamer not so much as breaking philosophical ground that has since become well-trodden, but rather taking up theses about language already found in German thinkers like Schleiermacher and Herder and imbuing them with new meaning.

[3] As Schleiermacher himself puts it: hermeneutics is "the art of understanding another person's utterance correctly." *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, ed. and trans. Andrew Bowie (New York: Cambridge, 1998), 5; *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, ed. Manfred Frank (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 75.

quest for understanding (*TM*, 193). This happens in what Schleiermacher calls "grammatical" interpretation. Grammatical interpretation, along with "psychological" interpretation, are his two fundamental hermeneutical methods. Both are quite nuanced, but they can characterized roughly as follows: Grammatical interpretation seeks to understand the meaning of spoken or written speech on the basis of linguistic usage *common* to the speaker and their original audience. Psychological interpretation, by contrast, understands written or spoken speech on the basis of the *individual* thought process of the speaker. A grammatical interpretation of Sophocles' *Ajax* would accordingly involve appreciating the linguistic norms of Attic tragedy and how they work in the text to express its meaning; a psychological interpretation would involve intuiting the distinctive thought of Sophocles himself. Both methods of interpretation are necessary for understanding the meaning of the text. This is because, according to Schleiermacher, any written or spoken speech expresses the individual thoughts of the speaker by means of linguistic practices shared by the speaker and their original audience. The *Ajax* expresses Sophocles' thoughts and does so by means of the linguistic norms shared by his classical Greek readers. Therefore, at least insofar Schleiermacher regards grammatical interpretation as indispensable for interpretation, he would agree with (ii): understanding any text requires interpretive acts that are linguistic in character. Interpreters cannot simply transpose themselves into the mind of the author; they must also take into consideration the linguistic norms of the author's day.[4]

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[4] There is a debate among scholars as to whether psychological interpretation really requires that the interpreter somehow "transpose" themselves into the mind of the author. Gadamer thinks it does (see TM, 303). For contrary readings, see, for example: Andrew Bowie, "The Philosophical Significance of Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Schleiermacher*, ed. Jacqueline Mariña (New York: Cambridge, 2005), 73–90; Kristin Gjesdal, "Aesthetic and Political Humanism: Gadamer on Herder, Schleiermacher, and the Origins of Modern Hermeneutics," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (2007): 275–79; Kristin Gjesdal, *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2009), 174. Regardless of whether Gadamer is right, it is clear that Schleiermacher, by regarding grammatical interpretation as indispensable, cannot agree to any such claim that the interpreter can "get in the head" of the author and understand what they are thinking without that interpretive process being mediated by language.

The necessary role of language in the interpretive process is made even more explicit by Schleiermacher in other passages which Gadamer, oddly, does not ever seem to cite.[5] Consider, for example:

> Language is the manner in which thought is real. For there are no thoughts without speech. The speaking of words relates solely to the presence of another person, and to this extent is contingent. But no one can think without words. Without words the thought is not yet completed and clear.[6]

These words have an unmistakable Gadamerian ring, and Schleiermacher intends them to hold true generally, not just for grammatical interpretation. All interpretation involves apprehending what is meant in thought, and all thinking involves language. These are claims that Gadamer would support, despite his misgivings about psychological interpretation.[7] Moreover, they show Schleiermacher's commitment to Gadamer's thesis that language is the medium of hermeneutic experience. It is therefore rather fitting for a quote from Schleiermacher to serve as the epigram for Part III of *Truth and Method*: *Alles Vorauszusetzende in der Hermeneutik ist nur Sprache* ("Everything to be presupposed in hermeneutics is language").[8]

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[5] In the 1972 Afterword to *Truth and Method*, Gadamer does acknowledge in passing the significance of Schleiermacher's "discussion of the connection between thought and speaking" (*TM*, 589). Gadamer locates that discussion in Schleiermacher's lecture on dialectic, but one can also find many similar passages in his lectures on hermeneutics (see n.6).

[6] Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, 8; cf. 91, 144, 167; *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, 77; cf. 168, 224, 252.

[7] These misgivings have already been discussed earlier in TM I.II.2.d. For discussion of that section, see Kevin Vander Schel's contribution to this volume. Gadamer returns to his reading of Schleiermacher in "The Problem of Language in Schleiermacher's Hermeneutic," ed. Robert F. Funk, trans. David E. Linge, *Journal for Theology and the Church* 7 (1970): 68–95.

[8] Schleiermacher, 38; *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, 50 trans. amended. Joel Weinsheimer argues that Gadamer's famous slogan, "Being that can be understood is language," is a paraphrase of this statement by Schleiermacher. (See *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (New Haven: Yale, 1985), 214–16. But that does not seem right. Schleiermacher's statement is about the conditions for the possibility of hermeneutics. That is, it is a statement about how understanding is possible, and how a *theory* of understanding is possible. Gadamer's slogan, by contrast, has ontological import; it has something to say about the role of being in the process of coming to understand in language.

Why, then, should we bother reading past this epigram? What does section III.1 have to offer that we cannot learn either from Schleiermacher himself or from Gadamer's earlier discussion of him? Should we just concede that III.1 is "of a rudimentary character," providing, if anything, limited reflections on language that would be further developed by Gadamer over the next several decades?[9] This chapter will address these questions by showing how section III.1 presents a coherent line of inquiry that not only builds upon the prior conclusions of II.3, but also motivates the subsequent conceptual history of language in III.2. Gadamer certainly returns in later writings to some of the concepts presented here, but that does not diminish their significance. As we will see, of particular importance are his notions of the text and the hermeneutic conversation by which the interpreter finds the language to articulate its meaning.

1. The Hermeneutical Conversation

In the previous section of *Truth and Method* (II.3), Gadamer explains how the task of understanding a text is governed by the same logic of question and answer that governs a conversation. If we want to understand what a text or person states, we need to grasp the question for which the written or spoken speech is an answer. Suppose I overhear my aunt saying "That's just Noemi." Grasping what she means depends on my understanding the question to which her statement serves as an answer. Is she announcing who is at the door? On the phone? Or is my aunt affirming that Noemi's behavior in the story just told is typical of her? The meaning of my aunt's statement depends on the question it answers. The same holds for texts. In order to understand Aristotle's account of *akrasia* (weakness of will) in Bk. VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we need to grasp the question to which that account serves as an answer. Does the question motivating the

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[9] Grondin, The Philosophy of Gadamer, 124. For helpful discussion of the composition of *Truth and Method*, see Grondin, "On the Composition of Truth and Method," in *The Specter of Relativism: Truth,* Dialogue*, and Phronesis in Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. Lawrence K. Schmidt, (Evanston: Northwestern, 1995), 23–38.

passage concern the essential definition of *akrasia*? Or the difference between *akrasia* and vice? Or something else? If we can identify the question to which the text is an answer, we can identify its real subject matter, what the text is really about.

While summarizing this way in which interpretation is modeled after the conversation, Gadamer indicates the next step in his argument:

> When we try to examine the hermeneutical phenomenon through the model of conversation between two persons, the chief thing that these apparently so different situations— understanding a text and reaching an understanding in a conversation—have in common is that both are concerned with a subject matter that is placed before them. … This understanding of the subject matter must take the form of language. It is not that the understanding is subsequently put into words; rather, the way understanding occurs— whether in the case of a text or a dialogue with another person who raises an issue with us—is the coming-into-language of the thing itself. …Whereas up to now we have framed the constitutive significance of the *question* for the hermeneutical phenomenon in terms of conversation, we must now demonstrate the linguisticality of dialogue, which is the basis of the question, as an element of hermeneutics. (*TM*, 386)

The process of interpreting a text, of coming to understand the answer it gives to a question, is a process that "must take the form of language." This is because understanding a text is modeled after conversation, and understanding in a conversation happens only through language. The same holds for an interpreter and their text. Insofar as interpretation is dialogical, governed by the logic of question and answer, it, too, is only achieved in the medium of language. Or so Gadamer will argue in section III.1.

At the beginning of III.1, Gadamer clarifies the sense in which conversation always takes place in the medium of language. Obviously, conversation involves language. But Gadamer means something more. A genuine conversation is not merely an exchange of words, as when the participants already have thoughts that they simply wish to communicate. Relaying a message from your boss, delivering to your boyfriend a rehearsed breakup speech, or sharing with students your deep-seated views about Sophoclean tragedy—none of these are conversations in Gadamer's sense. The conversations he has in mind happen when "the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led" (*TM*, 401). On these occasions there is a shared subject matter, and the partners in conversation both seek to understand it.[10] The conversation develops as they both help one another in answering the question that is guiding them. Neither person knows what will come of their discussion. But any insight they do gain into the subject matter will have been achieved through their talking things through.

However, arriving at a shared understanding in conversation is not a matter of one participant intuiting some truth and then conveying it to the other. In order for the understanding to be *shared*, the participants need to "find a common language" in which the truth emerges for both (*TM*, 406). This is the deeper sense in which understanding in a conversation happens through language. Only by creating a common language can we truly come to a *shared* understanding.

But how is such a common language created? Gadamer explains this process by first considering cases of conversation mediated by a translator. In such cases, the translator must understand what one speaker means and then translate that meaning into the other language. For the translation to be any good, it must preserve the intended meaning and yet express it in a way appropriate to the other language. Finding the appropriate expression is always an act of

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[10] For fuller discussion of Gadamer's technical notion of "conversation," see David Vessey, "Gadamer and Davidson on Language and Thought," *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 1 (2012): 33–42.

interpretation, since the translator must themself not only take a stand on what the speaker is saying, but also relay what was said in a manner that inevitably highlights certain aspects of the intended meaning at the expense of others. In a conversation in which everyone speaks the same language, the participants must carry out a similar interpretive task to the translator. The participants are trying to better understand some subject matter, and neither yet have the words adequate to answer their shared question. In the to-and-fro of dialogue, each participant will have to interpret what the other says. This interpretive task arises for at least two reasons. First, a participant will inevitably say something that is in some respect alien or foreign to the other. After all, both participants are groping for the right words that will make evident the answer to their question. The participants are therefore bound to say things that are difficult for the other to fully understand. Just consider the countless occasions on which Socrates says something without irony and still manages to leave his interlocutors confused. The second reason why conversations involve interpretation is because no speaker can fully articulate what they mean; there is always something left unsaid. As a result, the other participant must interpret what the person means in light of their shared communicative context. Through these acts of interpretation, the participants in a conversation build a common language in which the truth they seek can become evident to both. The extent to which they build a common language mirrors the extent to which they have come to understand one another, and thereby something about the subject matter under discussion.

The interpreter of a text is in a situation much like that of the participant in a conversation. The interpreter can accordingly be said to participate in what Gadamer calls a "hermeneutical conversation" (*TM*, 406). Admittedly, in such a conversation the text cannot speak for itself; the interpreter must speak on its behalf. But even so, the interpreter and text collaborate so as to allow something meaningful and true to become evident. To accomplish this, the interpreter and text

must find a common language. In a real conversation, participants develop a common language by taking the strange and unclear things that the other says and trying to understand them as true, and in their own words. "In saying…, do you mean…?" "Yes, exactly!" Or "No, not quite. I meant…" In a hermeneutical conversation, the interpreter must similarly try to understand the text as true and in her own words. The interpreter comes to understand the text through her interpreting its meaning in language, and the language by which she interprets the text is precisely the common language shared by her and the text. In this way, "finding a common language is not, any more than in real conversation, preparing a tool for the purpose of reaching understanding but, rather, coincides with the very act of understanding and reaching agreement" (*TM*, 406).

It might be objected that Gadamer has restricted his notion of conversation so narrowly that, however convincing his account of conversation may be, it fails to show that the understanding of *all* texts is also achieved in the medium of language. Conversations, as Gadamer characterizes them, are rare. It is not often that we speak with someone about a question that we both really share and work together towards and that consequently leads us to some conclusion neither of us had foreseen. Texts, by contrast, are commonplace. On my desk sits both a copy of Sophocles' *Ajax* and a page of notes that I jotted down while reading it. Are they not both texts? And yet the process of understanding them seems different. We can grant that reading the *Ajax* is like a conversation in which we readers are compelled to ask for ourselves the questions raised by the tragedy. Why, after all, did Ajax suffer such a fate, and what does his fate teach us about the human condition? With my notes, though, things are quite different. They seem to serve merely as mementos of my prior thought processes. I see the note and immediately remember what I had been thinking. In order to understand the note, I do not need to talk it out with myself or anyone else. Moreover, it would be a rare accident if in reading the note I happened to gain some novel

understanding of what it meant. Hence the worry: if understanding a note is so different from the understanding reached in conversation, then how can the conversation serve as an appropriate model for the understanding of *all* texts?

This objection loses its force when we see that Gadamer means something very specific when he here speaks of a "text." By *text* he is not referring to anything that has been written down, typed out, or otherwise inscribed. He means, rather, a linguistic meaningful whole whose meaning does not depend upon any one particular occasion or context in order to be understood. The *Ajax*, for example, is a meaningful whole that we can all understand without having to transport ourselves—either literally or imaginatively—back to classical Athens. My notes, by contrast, do not form a meaningful whole. If I forget enough of the original context in which I took down some note, I will become unable to understand its meaning. A text, then, unlike other writings, bears a meaning that can be understood across time and place, without recourse to the original occasion for which the text was intended. A text can accordingly detach itself from its original historical context and be handed down by tradition. This is why Gadamer insists that the text is the paradigmatic object of hermeneutics.[11] In III.1.a, Gadamer will develop this notion of text in order to clarify the sense in which language is the medium in which the hermeneutical conversation between text and interpreter takes place.

2. The Nature of the Text (TM III.1.a)

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[11] In later writings, Gadamer will refer to them as "eminent texts." See, for example: the Afterword to *Truth and Method* (*TM*, 600); "Text and Interpretation," in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. Richard E Palmer (Evanston, IL: Northwestern, 2007), 156–91; "The Eminent Text and Its Truth," *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 13, no. 1 (1980), 3–10. Everything Gadamer says in TM III.1 is consistent with this characterization of a text, except for perhaps: "Everything written is, in fact, the paradigmatic object of hermeneutics" (*TM*, 413). However, Gadamer must here be speaking loosely, because just a few pages earlier he distinguishes literary texts from writings like inscriptions, which (at least often) are fragments of a past whose meanings can only be grasped by understanding the historical context in which they were produced.

Texts differ from other historical artifacts insofar as they are not merely "to be investigated and interpreted as a remnant of the past." Texts are not "left over" *for* us, but rather "speak" *to* us (*TM*, 407-8; cf. *TM*, 163). By this Gadamer means that texts make a claim upon us to take them as saying something true about ourselves and the world in which we presently live. Insofar as the *Ajax* is a text, it is not merely a fragment of ancient Greek life, but rather something which reveals truths that still hold for us today about, say, the need for mortals to know their limitations and to moderate their ambitions. We can, of course, also study the *Ajax* as a historical document and mine it for information about ancient theatrical performances, among other things. But as a text it is always of more than historical significance for us. This is generally not the case for other written artifacts. Inscriptions on monuments and business records on papyrus typically do not "speak" to us, but instead point us towards a bygone age.

How is a text able to "speak" to us in this way? The answer, for Gadamer, lies in the fact that writing detaches language from its original communicative context. When language is put in writing, it becomes accessible to others even when the original speaker and audience are no longer present (either because separated by space or time). In this way all language is detachable from its original context. This, however, does not necessarily imply that the *meaning* of what is written can always also be so detached. In many cases the meaning of something written depends on the original context for which the writing was intended. The famous Dipylon inscription found on an archaic Greek wine jug reads "whoever of all the dancers plays most delicately, to him this." The meaning of the inscription depends in part on the historical context in which the ancient Greeks held contests for which wine jugs served as prizes. Without having some awareness of that original context, the inscribed meaning would be lost on us.

The meaning of a text, by contrast, does not depend on the original context in which it was written. This is because a text, as Gadamer puts it, "always express[es] a whole" (*TM*, 408). A text is not a "fragment" whose meaning depends on the historical context from which it originates. That said, the meaning of a text is not completely context-independent. Like all spoken or written language, the meaning of a text depends on some context or other. But a text is distinctive insofar as the only context on which its meaning depends is the one in which a reader seeks to understand it. That is, its meaning depends on the context in which the text and its reader participate in hermeneutical conversation. It is in that context that the reader seeks to make the text speak, and what the text has to say is something which purports to be true not just for some prior culture, but for the reader, too. In this way the texts handed down by tradition are not relics of the past, but "contemporaneous with each present time" (*TM*, 408).

Just as language can be detached from the original context of utterance by virtue of its inscribability, so too linguistic meaning can be detached from the original context because of its *ideality*: "The ideality of the word is what raises everything linguistic beyond the finitude and transience that characterize other remnants of past existence" (*TM*, 408). Meaning is ideal in the sense that it is not spatio-temporally individuated, not "real" in the Husserlian sense. In this respect meanings differ from physical objects, which are determined in part by their belonging to a specific place and time. Meanings are not so determined. All meanings can in principle be repeated and shared across time and space.[12] The meaning of a text, however, is distinct insofar as its meaning does not depend on the original context for which it was produced. A text detaches "both from the writer or author and from a specifically addressed recipient or reader," and thereby "raises itself into a public sphere of meaning in which everyone who can read has an equal share" (*TM*, 410).

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[12] Gadamer has already discussed the way in which the ideality of a work renders it "repeatable and hence permanent" earlier in section I.II.1.b (see especially *TM*, 115).

All meanings are public, but not all meanings can be shared equally by everyone. Some meanings are shared only by those participating in their little private conversation. But the greater degree to which the meaning of something written can be shared by everyone (or at least everyone literate), the greater degree to which that writing comprises a text. The ideal meaning of the text allows it to be contemporaneous with every present and to speak to every reader.

Examples from literature readily demonstrate this ability of a text to be intelligible to us even when we are ignorant of the author or the intended audience. We do not know who wrote *Beowulf*, but that hardly prevents us from understanding what the epic poem is about. There are surely interpretive disputes about the poem, but those disputes can be settled by the text alone insofar as it stands as an autonomous, meaningful whole. Moreover, even if scholars were able to determine who the author was, whatever relevant information they learn about that person can only confirm what the text already gives us. For other texts it is not the author who is unknown, but the intended audience. But once again this ignorance does not preclude our understanding. Franz Kafka's *The Trial* was published posthumously, against his wishes, by his literary executor. It is unclear who the intended audience was, if anyone; Kafka wanted it burned. But we can read the novel today and understand it as speaking trenchantly to us about the injustices of the criminal system in the modern bureaucratic state. Whoever Kafka may have been writing for, the text is also for us.

From this brief account of the text Gadamer already draws important hermeneutic implications.[13] The biggest implication is that the nature of the text calls into question the "sensible hermeneutical rule … that nothing should be put into a text that the writer or reader could not have

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[13] For a richer account of texts, see Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation." For helpful discussion of that account, see James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: SUNY, 1997), 163–68.

intended" (*TM*, 413). However sensible this rule may seem, and however much it may be true for certain sorts of writing, it does not also hold for texts. Since the meaning of a text does not depend on the original context for which it was produced, neither the author nor the intended original audience determine its meaning. The written word of a text can detach its meaning from that original context, and when it does so it "makes the understanding reader the arbiter of its claim to truth" (*TM*, 412). By this Gadamer does not mean that we readers get to decide that the text means whatever we want. He means, rather, that by participating in hermeneutic conversation with the text, we come to understand what it has to say *to us*. In section III.1.b, Gadamer will expound further upon the linguistic process by which we carry out this conversation and come to understand the text.

Before turning to that exposition, let us revisit Gadamer's relationship to Schleiermacher, since now we can better see how general points of agreement between the two belie important differences in their hermeneutic theories. Schleiermacher characterizes hermeneutics as "the art of understanding another person's utterance [*Rede*] correctly."[14] This echoes Gadamer's claim that the paradigmatic object of hermeneutics is linguistic. For Schleiermacher, just as for Gadamer, this process of coming to understand the utterance of another is modeled after the conversation. And, again like Gadamer, Schleiermacher considers the relevant model of conversation to be one in which the discussion is not guided by some "specific objective intention." Rather, the interlocutors happen to "get fixed on something" that "is striven for by both sides," with the result that there arises "a common development of thoughts."[15] The model conversation is therefore not some mundane chat about the weather.[16] However, unlike Gadamer, Schleiermacher contends that

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[14] *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, 5; *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, 75.

[15] *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, 124; *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, 202.

[16] *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, 13; *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, 83.

the model of conversation only *partly* characterizes the process by which we understand spoken or written discourse:

> Every text is twofold, on the one side a conversation [*Gespräch*], on the other the communication [*Mitteilung*] of a particular, intentionally willed sequence of thoughts. If we think of the latter without the former, and think of the former as absent, then to this also belongs the fact that the writer is not at all determined by the ideas of the readers with which he is confronted. If we think of this, we must say that this kind of thing is not really a text, because the author would only have written for himself. However, as soon as one thinks of a particular text as a communication it is also determined by the ideas of those to whom the text is directed. Everything in this kind of text which bears a dialogical character can only be explained by what is common to the writer and his readers.[17]

According to Schleiermacher, a text is both conversation *and* communication. It is a communication insofar as every author has some "sequence of thoughts" they wish to put in writing. But a text cannot be a communication alone. A text is a recording of thoughts *for* someone, and for that reason the author must take into consideration the intended reader. Those considerations modify the thoughts which the author wishes to put in writing, since the author must consider which things the audience will already know, and which things the audience will either misunderstand or not understand at all. The result is that the text comes to represent one side of a conversation in which "a common development of thought" arises between the author and their intended audience. By participating in this conversation, the author is stimulated by the reader such that they arrive at a distinct sequence of thoughts they had neither intended nor anticipated. But even as Schleiermacher acknowledges that authorial intentions are influenced by the intended

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[17] *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, 129; *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, 208.

audience, that by no means diminishes the fact that, on his view, a necessary part of understanding a text is understanding the intentions of its author.

Here we strike at arguably the deepest difference between the theories of hermeneutics defended by Gadamer and Schleiermacher. For Schleiermacher, language is always a vehicle of expression by which speakers and writers communicate their thoughts to their intended readers or hearers.[18] A text is therefore always, at least in part, an act of communication that requires the psychological method of interpretation. Fully understanding a textrequires understanding what the author thinks and intends to communicate.[19] For Gadamer, by contrast, language is not always such a vehicle of expression. More fundamentally, it is a medium through which truths are made evident. Those truths can subsequently be communicated to others, but first they must be disclosed. That disclosure for Gadamer takes place in "conversation," in his sense of the term. Such a conversation can be a real one between two people, or a hermeneutical one between a person and text. As participants in hermeneutical conversation, texts can speak for themselves, not just for others.[20] They can do this because texts are special linguistic utterances that are ideal, meaningful wholes and whose meaning does not depend on the original context for which the utterance was

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[18] This is different from the claim that Schleiermacher conceives of language as "aesthetic self-expression which expresses *only* the subjectivity of the person expressing himself" (Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method*, 220, emphasis added). This is a misreading of Schleiermacher, since for him the grammatical and psychological methods of interpretation are complementary. Gadamer himself does not commit this misreading. He acknowledges the complementarity of grammatical and psychological interpretation, even while focusing on the latter in order to make clear its historical influence and philosophical inadequacy (see *TM,* 192). This final point has already been made by Georgia Warnke in *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Oxford: Polity, 1987), 14.

[19] This seems a fair representation of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. Andrew Bowie, for example, characterizes his theory in the following way: "Hermeneutics seeks the specific intentions of the individual in the contexts of their utterances. These intentions are obviously not exhausted by the possible general validity of those utterances." For Bowie, this follows from Schleiermacher's conception of language: "Because language results from concrete 'speech acts' the speech act is necessarily individual: it is your or my act at a particular time in a specific situation." ("The Philosophical Significance of Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics," 84–85.) Michael Forster makes a similar point: "Schleiermacher implies, very plausibly, that . . . in order to fix the linguistic meaning of words and sentences one often needs to address problems of semantic and syntactic ambiguity, and that can only be done by appeal to conjectures about the author's intentions." (*After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition* (New York: Oxford, 2010), 374.)

[20] Gadamer repeats this point in "The Problem of Language in Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics," 77.

intended by the author. Schleiermacher fails to recognize the true ideality of the text: "Schleiermacher was the first to downplay the importance of writing,"...but this prevented him from seeing that the meaning of a text can be detached "both from the writer or author and from a specifically addressed recipient or reader" (TM, 410).

3. Understanding the Text (TM III.1.b)

Remember that the main thesis of section III.1 is twofold: (i) the objects of hermeneutics are linguistic; and (ii) the interpretive acts by which we understand those objects are also linguistic. In III.1a, Gadamer has clarified (i): on his view, the paradigmatic objects of hermeneutics are not just linguistic, but, more specifically, ideal texts. Now, in III.1.b, Gadamer clarifies (ii) by showing how the nature of the ideal text determines the specific sense in which we come to understand texts through language.

We have already seen that coming to understand a text handed down by tradition takes place in what Gadamer calls a hermeneutical conversation between the text and its reader. This conversation is an interpretive process whereby the reader understands the text such that it speaks to them. As an interpretive process it differs from two naïve approaches that Gadamer finds common in the historical sciences. One of those approaches involves employing whatever concepts one has at the ready in order to interpret the text and employing those concepts "without expressly reflecting on their origin and justification" (*TM*, 414). This is especially easy to do when treating cognates. When, for example, Aristotle mentions *theōria*, it should not be presumed that he means *theory* just as modern English speakers are apt to understand the term. When readers unreflectively apply familiar concepts in this way, they run the risk of "assimilating" the meaning of the text to fit their own "preconceptions" (*TM*, 414). An alternative approach, also pervasive in the historical sciences, tries to prevent the preconceptions of the reader from leading them to misunderstand the

text. This second approach accordingly insists that in understanding texts, "one must leave one's own concepts aside and think only in the concepts of the epoch one is trying to understand" (*TM*, 414; cf. *TM*, 313–15). However well-intentioned this strategy may be, it is ultimately an incoherent interpretive ideal. It is incoherent because nobody can entirely escape their own concepts; any attempt to understand a text must be in terms of the concepts by which readers themselves think. To think in terms of Aristotle's concepts is inevitably to think Aristotle's concepts *in terms of one's own*. But this ideal—to grasp as accurately as possible the concepts of past thinkers—is not just incoherent but illegitimate. The point of our reading a text as a text, and not merely as an historical artifact, is to understand what it *presently* has to say to *us*. The meaning of the text depends not upon the original context in which it was produced but rather the present one in which we read it. This does not necessarily make our interpretive task any easier, for we still have to work to understand what is alien and unfamiliar to us in the text. Doing this, moreover, is not a matter of grasping the concepts of the past as they were understood by the author or original audience. We must instead "*perform the transposition* [*Umsetzung*] *that the concepts of the past undergo* when we try to think in them" (*TM,* 415/401).

What does such a "transposition" of concepts entail? Suppose we are reading Horace's *Ode* I.11, a poem about accepting the lot given to us by the gods. The end of the poem famously bids Leuconoe, its explicit addressee, to "seize the day" (*carpe diem*). What exactly does this mean? In the film *Dead Poets Society,* Professor Keating (played by Robin Williams) explains to his students that "seize the day" is an enjoinder to "make your life extraordinary." Such an interpretation, however, seems to assimilate the meaning of the expression to the preconceptions typical of American secondary education. Professor Keating wants his students to make the most of themselves and their abilities. The students themselves want to grow up to be somebody, to achieve

something. But the poem is not calling upon its readers to live extraordinary lives, as the remainder of the line makes clear: "seize the day, trusting as little as possible in the next." The poem is calling upon its readers to seize the day not so that their lives may become great, but because they cannot be sure that they will live to see tomorrow. Professor Keating missed this. But his interpretation would not have been on any firmer footing if he had instead tried to determine what *carpe diem* meant for Horace or his original Roman readers. That historical past, unmediated by the present, remains forever inaccessible. The transposition of concepts therefore involves neither assimilating traditional concepts to our own preconceptions, nor shedding all our preconceptions and escaping to an undistorted past. The transposition of concepts instead involves considering a concept in the context of the *whole* text in which the interpreter is in hermeneutic conversation. Failing to do so would be just as problematic as if someone were to (mis)interpret what another person has said by taking some comment out of context, without a view to the whole of their discussion. The interpreter, moreover, must come to understand that concept by articulating its meaning in their own words. This process of articulation will quite often involve "bring[ing] own's own preconceptions into play such that at least some of those preconceptions must be rethought and revised" (*TM,* 415). For Professor Keating, then, transposing the concept of "seizing the day" (*carpere diem*) as it is handed down in Horace's poem required considering the meaning of that concept in the context of the whole poem to which it belongs. And in coming to understand its meaning, Professor Keating needed to articulate what "seize the day" meant for him; if he had done so correctly, he would have grasped what it was to *count* as seizing the day in his own circumstances. He also would have thereby called into question his preconceived idea of what the poem meant by "seize the day."

This is the very same notion of transposition that Gadamer has already attributed to judges when they interpret a law promulgated long ago (*TM*, 332−33). Interpreting the law correctly does not involve merely assimilating its meaning to the judge's preconceptions. Nor is it a matter of understanding how the legislators and original public would themselves have understood the law. To interpret a law correctly is rather to understand how the whole law, as handed down by the legal tradition, is to be fittingly applied by the judge to the case at hand. It is through such transposition that laws, like other texts, "speak" to us.

Since every circumstance is different, the way in which interpreters transpose historical concepts conveyed by a text will differ for each and every interpretation. Even if Professor Keating were to interpret the Horace poem correctly, his understanding will inevitably differ from our own. This is in part because what it is to "seize the day," to make the most of the present because there is no assurance of the future, must be carried out differently in different times and places. As Gadamer puts the point more generally: "to understand a text always means to apply it to ourselves and to know that, even if it must always be understood in different ways, it is still the same text presenting itself to us in these different ways" (*TM*, 416; cf. *TM*, 307). No two interpretations of a text will therefore be the same. In this way the interpretation of a text is like the performance of play: just as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is performed differently by each and every production and yet remains one and the same play, Horace's *Odes* I.11 is read differently by each and every reader and yet remains one and the same poem.[21] There is no exclusively correct interpretation. There is instead a multiplicity of correct interpretations, each of which "has to adapt itself to the hermeneutical situation in which it belongs" (*TM*, 415). For each such hermeneutical situation, a

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[21] None of this eliminates the possibility for correct interpretation. Gadamer does not here spell out a criterion of correctness. He does, however, describe what happens if we interpret correctly: "The interpretive concepts are not, as such, thematic in understanding. Rather, it is their nature to disappear behind what they bring to speech in interpretation. Paradoxically, an interpretation is right when it is capable of disappearing in this way" (*TM,* 416).

different interpretation emerges from a different hermeneutical conversation between interpreter and text. Such conversations differ insofar as interpreters find different language, appropriate to their own context, through which the meaning of one the same text becomes evident.

4. Toward a Conceptual History of Language (TM III.2)

For Gadamer the interpreter is in principle always able to find the language by which to understand the text. Just as every conversation can, in principle, arrive at genuine insight into the subject matter discussed, so too can every hermeneutic conversation arrive at the correct understanding of the text.

Gadamer recognizes, however, that there are a number of reasons not to share his optimism. Is it not the case that "language forces understanding into particular schematic forms which hem us in"? (*TM*, 419). Will not these schematizations of language preclude us from correctly understanding anything that does not readily fit them? Are we not therefore always bound to misunderstand texts in languages other than our own? While it is no doubt true that every language possesses conventions of meaning, it does not follow that these conventions are inescapable and that we consequently cannot articulate in language our correct, even if unconventional, understanding of a text. According to Gadamer, this worry demonstrates not the limits of hermeneutical experience, but rather its need. For the experience of coming to understand through hermeneutical conversation is "the corrective by means of which the thinking reason escapes the prison of language" (*TM*, 420). Hermeneutical experience is precisely that by which Professor Keating and the rest of us can overcome conventions of meaning that preclude our understanding.

Even so, the inseverable connection between thought and language, between coming to understand and articulating that understanding in language, might still seem unobvious, if not dubious. Gadamer identifies three sources of difficulty. First, language remains largely unthematic

to interpreters in and through the process of their coming to understand a text: "The interpreter does not know that he is bringing himself and his own concepts into the interpretation. The verbal formulation is so much part of the interpreter's mind that he never becomes aware of it as an object" (*TM*, 412). Because language remains unthematic to interpreters in this way, they are prone to overlook the constitutive role that language plays in their interpretations. Second, this neglect is reinforced by instrumental theories of language. According to such theories, language is a sort of tool employed by reason to express thoughts that can be developed without language. Instrumental theories of language promote the notion that interpreters can first interpret a text and then go on to convey their interpretation in language for others. Instrumental theories of language are therefore at odds with the Gadamerian view that all achievements of understanding take place in the medium of language.[22] The third and related source of difficulty is a narrative in linguistics about the historical development of the concept of language. That narrative begins with "the complete unconsciousness of language that we find in classical Greece," and then "leads to the instrumentalist devaluation of language that we find in modern times" (*TM*, 422). There is some truth to this narrative, but, even as it recognizes that the instrumental theories "devalue" language, it also wrongly suggests that we moderns do not in a certain sense share with the ancients a certain unconsciousness of language. In fact, for Gadamer, unconsciousness of language "has not ceased to be the genuine mode of being of speech" (*TM*, 423). We have not ceased being unconscious of language precisely because, as we seek to understand, the language by which we come to understand remains unthematic to us. We are so busy attending to the subject matter itself that we overlook the way in which our language brings the matter to presentation.

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[22] This broader claim—that we understand *being* in language—Gadamer will defend later in TM III.3. Here in TM III.1 he is primarily concerned with the narrower claim that we understand *texts* in language. He does, however, make clear his commitment to the broader claim, and he offers some preliminary reasons in support of it. Due to limitations of space, however, those reasons have been omitted from this chapter.

To help address these difficulties, Gadamer will turn in TM III.2 to develop his own conceptual history of language. That conceptual history will sketch how the phenomenon of language has come to appearance in different ways through the Western tradition. The history will, among other things, address some of these lingering worries about the claims made in TM III.1. It will demonstrate that an essential dimension of the being of language is that it always remains unthematic, at least in part. We can never be conscious of language in the way that we are conscious of, say, a physical object, since language is the medium by which we come to understand everything intelligible, including language itself. The history of language bears this truth out. That history will also offer resources, particularly from Christian medieval thought, to better appreciate how language conceals itself in the process of making evident that which we seek to understand.[23]

All this reflects the sense in which Gadamer agrees with Schleiermacher that "everything to be presupposed in hermeneutics is language." Language is *the* presupposition of hermeneutics not only insofar as the primary aim of hermeneutics is to understand the language of texts, but also insofar as the process of coming to understand itself takes place in language. The degree to which hermeneutic understanding presupposes language is so great, however, that it is often overlooked. It may be readily acknowledged that texts are composed of language and can be understood by means of language. But beneath those points of agreement are often inadequate conceptions of language, text, and the conversation through which the meaning of the text is brought to language.

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[23] For more on this, see John Arthos, *The Inner Word in Gadamer's Hermeneutics* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame), 2009, as well as Gert-Jan van der Heiden's contribution to this volume.