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FEMINIST INTERPRETATIONS OF HANS-GEORG GADAMER

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2. See my discussion of this flight from concrete existence in an earlier article, Schott (1991). In that article, I connect Gadamer's notion of re-appropriation, of making a second home away from home, with a flight from the temporality and materiality of existence that has characterized much of the masculine tradition in Western philosophy.

3. Chapter headings are entitled "Paul Natorp," "Max Scheler," "Martin Heidegger," and so forth.

4. "Chairetic" comes from the Greek "chairos," referring to the most opportune moment in the body's healing process for a physician's intervention. Metaphorically it refers to the importance of timing in life.

5. See my earlier discussion in Schott (1991, 208–9). In that piece, I argue that Gadamer's philosophy is oblivious to issues of legitimacy and illegitimacy faced by oppressed groups. The problem of oppression is not only external, but also internal, as Beauvoir and Baldwin among others have so eloquently argued. If one has learned to be inferior, one will not feel entitled to be "it" in the game of interpretation, and individual feelings and thoughts will become suppressed.

6. Operation Rescue is an activist antiabortion group in the United States that has employed violence in targeting abortion clinics, then their doctors and their clients.

7. Sartre seeks to explore these factors in *Anti-Semite and Jew*. Though his analysis has often been criticized for equating anti-Semitism with other forms of prejudice, and thereby ignoring its specificity, he at least faces as historically inevitable the task of understanding anti-Semitism.

8. Thalia Gouma-Peterson, curator of "Breaking the Rules: Audrey Flack; A Retrospective 1950–1990," exhibited at the Speed Museum, University of Louisville, January 12–February 28, 1993

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14

Three Problematics of Linguistic Vulnerability

Gadamer, Benhabib, and Butler

Meili Steele

We are thinking out the consequences of language as a medium.

—Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Literature and Philosophy in Dialogue* 461

Could language injure us if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings, beings who require language in order to be? Is our vulnerability to language a consequence of our being constituted within its terms?

—Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 1–2

Many of the recent debates in feminist political philosophy are concerned with what problematic(s) to use in order to understand democratic political ideals, gendered differences, and their histories.[1] For the purposes of this chapter, I will contrast two important problematics in these debates, the procedural/deliberative politics in the tradition of Critical Theory, represented here by Seyla Benhabib, and the poststructuralist or postmodernist politics, represented here by Judith Butler. The goal of the contrast will be to set up the contribution that Gadamer's work can make to contemporary feminist philosophy.[2] Butler's postmodernism criticizes the way that liberalism and deliberative democracy accept a political community's linguistic inheritance and ignore the dynamics by which subjects are produced. In Butler's view, the only way to make available the workings of oppression and to give a space to difference and liberty

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is to think through the originary moments by which a community constitutes its meanings through excluding others. These originary exclusions are so deep that they are largely inaccessible to historical actors, and so the philosopher needs to avoid the subjectivist trap of reading hermeneutically and narratively. Instead, she tracks the movements of history by reading the self-understandings of a society as the repetitive effects generated by these originary moments. While Benhabib agrees that the self-understandings of political and cultural traditions have been so deformed by power and exclusion that a hermeneutics of tradition should be dismissed, she criticizes Butler on two counts: first, for renouncing the normative dimension through which political institutions receive their legitimation, and second, for ignoring the processes by which we understand and criticize each other as political subjects. For Benhabib, legitimacy is dialogically conceived through procedures of argumentation. Philosophy's task is to pursue the normative dimension of democracy, while the social sciences work on the empirical dimension.

How does Gadamer's work contribute to this debate? After all, it seems to present a conservative understanding of language and tradition as a nourishing medium that largely ignores the effects of power, the occlusion of difference, and the demands of political agency. Gadamer's metaphilosophical argument that we are historical, linguistic beings, which was an important contribution at the time *Truth and Method* was published (1960), is now largely a given in feminist philosophy. The question is now not whether to make the linguistic turn or not, but what problematic should be used to characterize our historical being-in-language. This chapter will argue for the indispensability of Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenology for feminist political philosophy. Both Benhabib and Butler, in opposing ways, remain caught in the Enlightenment desire to achieve liberty, justice, and clarity by setting up a philosophical problematic over and against a historical phenomenology, by trying to leap out of the hermeneutic circle. Our historical inheritance has indeed been complex and oppressive in ways that are constitutive of existence—indeed, in ways that Gadamer does not thematize; yet the way to deliberate about this inheritance is not by creating a formal procedural subject or by flattening ethical/political histories and their languages into the effects produced by transcendental engines.

However, since the dismissal of Gadamer is so widespread, I will not begin with Gadamer but rather with Benhabib's attempt to accommodate hermeneutics in her feminist Critical Theory. I then offer a response that shows how her theory fails to make available the complex ways that gendered subjects inhabit and act through language in the way that Gadamer's philosophy can. Nonetheless, this reply to Critical Theory leaves untouched Butler's understanding of language, so I will then lay out Butler's complex combination of Foucauldian constructivism and Derridean dissemination. I respond to Butler through a Gadamerian reading of Susan Glaspell's short story "A Jury of Her Peers," a story that shows how his hermeneutics displays the dynamics of power, difference, and contestation better than Butler's problematic. This is not to say that hermeneutics has all the answers to the politics of interpretation, but that the site of interpretive political judgment emerges through and not against dialogical hermeneutics. My point is not to drive out competing ontologies, but to put them into dialogue. The question that guides my exposition is how to develop an interpretive philosophy that can come to terms with the ontological complexity of our linguistic vulnerability that has made possible both women's oppression and achievement.

Benhabib: Modernity and the Denial of Language

Benhabib describes her project as "a postmetaphysical interactive universalism" that seeks to reformulate "the moral point of view as the contingent achievement of an interactive form of rationality rather than a timeless standpoint of a legislative project" (Benhabib 1992, 6). The "interactive form of rationality" comes from the work of Jürgen Habermas, who transforms Kant's moral universalism from the monological perspective of the categorical imperative to the dialogical perspective of the rules of communicative action. Habermas appeals to the universal presuppositions of communication that one cannot help but invoke (Habermas 1990, 89–95), and his conception of presupposition is not historical but Kantian: "The theory of communicative action *detranscendentalizes* the noumenal realm only to have the idealizing force of context-transcending anticipations settle in the unavoidable pragmatic presuppositions of speech acts, and hence in the heart of everyday communicative practice" (Habermas 1996a, 19).[5] These ideals are then turned into dialogical procedures. As Benhabib explains, "These rules of fair debate can be formulated as 'the universal-pragmatic presuppositions' of argumentative speech and these can be stated as a set of procedural rules"

(Benhabib 1992, 31). In other words, the rules of dialogue, not the substance of what is said, test whether or not the outcome of the exchange is rational and legitimate. Benhabib's claim for interactive universalism is that it addresses two persistent problems of democracy, legitimacy, and difference. First, her project confers legitimacy on the outcome that emerges when collective decision-making processes are "conducted rationally and fairly among free and equal individuals" (1996b 68). Second, "Proceduralism is a rational answer to persisting value conflicts at the substantive level" (73).

Habermas and Benhabib offer this view as an alternative to liberalism and republicanism/communitarianism (Habermas 1996, 23). Liberalism focuses on rights and the procedures for aggregating individual interests, while ignoring the role of public dialogue in constituting public institutions and citizens. In contrast, communitarianism rejects this separation of procedures from the substance of individual and collective identities, insisting that it is both undesirable and impossible to abstract ourselves from who we are individually or collectively in order to reason justly. Interactive universalism seeks to develop an idea of public reason dear to communitarians, without relying on the idea of shared community, since "politics may not be assimilated to a hermeneutical process of self-explication of a shared form of life or collective identity" (Habermas 1996, 23–24).

Benhabib seeks to qualify Habermas's commitment to procedures by "situating reason and the moral self more decisively in contexts of gender and community" (Benhabib 1992, 8), so as to take into account Gadamerian and feminist critiques of formalism: "From Hegel's critique of Kant, Gadamer borrowed the insight that all formalism presupposes a context that it abstracts from and that there is no formal ethics which does have some material presuppositions concerning the self and social institutions" (25). She deflects this Gadamerian point through her historicization of modernity and her understanding of language, and I will pursue each successively.

Part of her response to this Gadamerian line is to make Kantian procedures emerge after a prepolitical historical reconciliation that is sufficient to establish a public language and space of discussion, or "lifeworld." By making this move, Benhabib does not have moral rules stand over against the historical communities, but instead they become part of the communal inheritance: "The standpoint of communicative ethics has been made possible by the culture of modernity" (Benhabib 1992, 40).[4] This prepolitical internalization of modernity needs to be unpacked. First, this means that we must accept as given the Kantian division of reason, in which there is a "separation from each other of the good, the true, and the beautiful or of science, ethics, aesthetics and theology" (41). For Benhabib, these divisions are historical achievements of modernity and not timeless features of reason. Second, they provide a structural unity for the lifeworld that justifies the "assumption that the institutions of liberal democracies embody the idealized content of a form of practical reason." The word "idealized" here means that one "aim[s] at the reconstruction of the logic of democracies" (Benhabib 1996, 69). She forthrightly acknowledges her Hegelianism, by calling modernity's cultural/political inheritance "objective spirit," without a supersubject (68–69). Benhabib seeks to neutralize the Gadamerian objection about historical context through internalization, so that Kantian universal questions can be posed.

There is a paradox here. On the one hand, Benhabib's intersubjective project seeks to overcome Hegel's privileging of the trans-subjective perspective of the philosophical observer over the intersubjective perspective of the participants, a privileging that makes the meaning of history always work behind the backs of agents.[5] On the other hand, her fear of relativism ends up plunging subjects neck deep into a lifeworld that has solved enough important ethical/political issues to be unproblematic as a prestructured medium for argumentation. This understanding of modernity makes three assumptions that Gadamer and Butler will contest. First, Benhabib assumes that the differentiation of reason into three spheres is an empirical fact of modern culture; second, she assumes that this division is desirable; third, she assumes that it makes sense to "reconstruct" out of the histories and languages of democracy an idealized process that is neither determined by these histories nor fully abstracted from them. In her view, we are somehow in a special nonhermeneutic space between noumena and phenomena where the "logic of democracies" can be discovered and have a critical purchase on everyday practice.[6] Here we see the leap out of hermeneutics in order to create a space of rationality that can adjudicate hermeneutic conflicts.

Benhabib tries to soften this opposition to Gadamerian hermeneutics by recourse to narrative: "The 'narrative structure of actions and personal identity' is the second premise which allows one to move beyond the metaphysical assumptions of Enlightenment universalism" (Benhabib 1992, 5–6). Moreover, narrative helps her give nuance and particularity to her conception of "objective spirit" so that it does not fall prey to the holistic assumption she criticizes in Habermas's reconstructive project,

which "speak[s] in the name of a fictional collective 'we' from whose standpoint the story of history is told" (Benhabib 1986, 331). Benhabib draws her conception of narrative from Hannah Arendt, who helps her steer between "contextual judgment and universal morality" (Benhabib 1992, 124), and it is important to connect their positions on narrative and language with their Kantian understandings of modernity, in which truth, art, and morality are separated. The complications of Arendt's reading of the *Critique of Judgment* are not germane to this discussion.[7] However, what is crucial for this chapter is that Arendt's and Benhabib's understanding of narrative is very different from Gadamer's, or indeed from Alasdair MacIntyre's often cited account. Benhabib herself does not see it this way.[8] For her, the central tension between the contextualists—the "NeoAristotelians like Gadamer, Taylor, and MacIntyre" (134)—and the universalists does not involve language.

Benhabib makes Arendt's "enlarged mentality," the ability to "think in the place of everybody else" (Arendt 1977, 220, 241) that is developed from Kant, the centerpiece of moral theory because it bridges the demands of the universal and the particular: "The moral principle of enlarged thought enjoins us to view each person as one to whom I owe the moral respect to consider their standpoint. This is the universalist kernel of Kantian morality. Yet 'to think from the standpoint of everyone else' requires precisely the exercise of contextual moral judgment" (Benhabib 1992, 136). How we understand the language that makes subjects and contexts available is not an issue. The source for her view of language is Arendt, who wants to keep language and truth apart. For Arendt, storytelling is "thought" rather than "cognition," since the former "has neither an end nor aim outside itself" (Arendt 1958, 170; 1978, i, 13–15).[9] Hence, "culture and politics . . . belong together because it is not knowledge or truth which is at stake but rather judgment and decision" (Arendt 1977, 223). Arendt, like Kant, wants to keep reflective judgment apart from the concept, which is the domain of determinative judgments about truth (and morality).[10] In this way, Arendt blocks out the Gadamerian position of having language mediate our interpretations of ourselves and the world, in which stories inform experience. Arendt denies the ontological force of culture to constitute identities in enabling or oppressive ways. We are gripped and transformed by stories in ways that Arendt and Benhabib cannot make available.

The model of "enlarged thought" accepts a subject-to-subject model that fails to interrogate the historical medium that articulates these subjects, the tissue of being that connects and tears them. Benhabib, like Arendt, protects language from historical damage, as if language itself were not bound up with the catastrophes of modern life. At the same time, she fails to see it as a resource of moral reflection. The languages of the West since the Enlightenment are deeply implicated in the atrocities and traumas that we continue to work through and that must be given a larger place in a political philosophy than Benhabib's procedural theory can offer. Yet she deprives language and stories (literature) of any critical capacity, unlike Gadamer or Bakhtin, who make literature a mode of reflection on the languages of society.[11] Her way of understanding this medium keeps historicity and linguistic vulnerability at bay, as her reading of women's history reveals.[12]

In "On Hegel, Women, and Irony," she outlines three different approaches to feminist history. The first approach is a "mainstream liberal feminist theory [that] treats the tradition's views of women as a series of unfortunate, sometimes embarrassing, but essentially corrigible, misconceptions" (Benhabib 1992, 242–43). The second is "'the cry of the rebellious daughter,'" which accepts the Lacanian view "that all language has been the codification of the power of the father" and that seeks "female speech at the margins of the western logocentric tradition." (She makes no references, but presumably she is referring to French feminists such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray; this description does not fit Butler.) A third way, the one she endorses, is "a 'feminist discourse of empowerment'" (243). This view follows radical critique in "revealing the gender subtext of the ideals of reason and the Enlightenment," but, unlike the "rebellious daughters," Benhabib does not want to discard these ideals. There are two parts to fulfilling these ideals. On the one hand, she exposes the exclusion of women from political traditions such as social contract theory, where we find "boys [who] are men before they have been children; a world where neither mother, nor sister, nor wife exist" (157). On the other, she reads "against the grain, proceeding from certain footnotes and marginalia in the text . . . toward recovering the history of those the dialectic leaves behind" (245). She claims to restore "irony to the dialectic, by deflating the pompous march of necessity" and giving to victims their "otherness" and "selfhood" (256), thus counterbalancing her Hegelian reading of modernity.[13]

She recovers the story of Caroline Schlegel Schelling as an account of a female liberal agent whom Hegel rejected. Caroline was a politically active intellectual, who worked in the revolutionary groups in 1792–93,

when Mainz was under French control, and who was arrested when the German armies retook the city. After her release, she and her husband Auguste Schlegel moved to Jena, where she was active in that city's famous intellectual circle. She deeply influenced both Schlegel brothers, especially Friedrich's views of "women, marriage, and free love" (Benhabib 1992, 252). Shortly after her arrival in Jena, Caroline became estranged from her husband and attracted to Friedrich Schelling. After Auguste left Jena, Caroline moved in with her new companion, and the two of them shared a house with Hegel for two years (1801–3). (She eventually divorced Schlegel and married Schelling.) In sum, Hegel "encountered brilliant accomplished and nonconformist women who certainly intimated to him what true gender equality might mean in the future" and "he did not like it" (254). Hegel's threatening encounter with Caroline Schlegel Schelling forms the subtext of his reading of *Antigone* in which "the female principle must eventually be expelled from public life" (255).

By pulling out the stories of isolated individuals who assert liberal ideals, rather than having a hermeneutic engagement with language and tradition, Benhabib leaves unexamined the symbolic and social inheritance that other feminists have found to be so conflicted.[14] This kind of interpretive judgment cannot be thematized by simply taking another's point of view. Language's constitutive dimension shapes and gives us access to the complex ways we live our pains and aspire to goodness. Moreover, the history of the vocabulary of democracy shows how our ideals and our anguish are interconnected. This lacuna in her philosophy is not accidental, but is required by her commitment to two antihermeneutical positions: first, that formalized ideals can stand outside history and hermeneutics; and second, that narrative is about individuals rather than about languages. I will develop the weaknesses in this kind of formalism through a Gadamerian critique.

Reopening Historicity and Language: A Gadamerian Response to Benhabib

Gadamer would disagree with both parts of Benhabib's accommodation. First, he rejects her understanding of modern reason as the historical realization of three spheres. Second, he rejects the conception of historicity

implicit in this view. These two issues come together in his conception of language and tradition.

Gadamer attacks the Kantian legacy that misapplies the methods of natural science to hermeneutic beings. The result is that we deform and impoverish our world by overlooking the bond between subject and object, by claiming that we can step out of the hermeneutic circle. The separation of truth from morality and aesthetics continues the legacy, even as it tries to make social science "hermeneutic." Gadamer's argument about our being-in-language seeks to undo the damage done by the Kantian division of reason into theoretical, practical, and aesthetic that Benhabib wants to enshrine. Gadamer aims to show how our being-in-language and being-in-dialogue is logically prior to any such division, how the hermeneutic circle is not an account of what we should do in making particular discursive claims but of what we inevitably do because of who we are. The attempt to stand outside hermeneutics in order to establish an epistemological and moral site of adjudication produces a specious clarity about the true and the good. Since we are interpretive beings, the question of "how understanding is possible" (Gadamer 1994, xxix) is fundamental.

Gadamer's answer to what makes understanding possible is tradition. However, "tradition" is not a mere substitute for Hegel's "Spirit" any more than it fits Benhabib's idea of objective spirit—"the collective and anonymous property of cultures, institutions and traditions as a result of the experiments and experiences, both ancient and modern, with democratic rule over the course of human history" (Benhabib 1996, 69).[15] What Benhabib's version does is take the ontological dimension of tradition away by making it a shared background from which we make narrative specifications. For Gadamer, "tradition" and "prejudice" are shaping forces of culture and subjectivity that the Enlightenment claimed to be able to step away from, when in fact they are inevitable characteristics of our being. The effects of tradition and prejudice are always ahead of the consciousness that tries to seize them. This means that the picture of the speaking subject is not the autonomous claims-maker of discourse theory. Rather, "the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being" (Gadamer 1994, 276–77). Our being-in-the-world is not conceived in terms of a subject who manipulates alien objects that stand outside all preunderstandings; rather, the subject moves in a hermeneutical circle that "describes under-

standing as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of the text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition" (293).

To make available his conception of subjectivity and to stress its importance, Gadamer offers a new phenomenology, one that is not individualistic as we find in Arendt and Benhabib, but one that displays our vulnerability as interpretive beings who are struggling to understand the languages they inhabit, and not just as choosers of words to make claims. Gadamer's subjects are not standing in a synchronic lifeworld together, as Benhabib's holism would have it, for such a conception leaves out the temporal and transformative dynamics of Gadamer's metaphor of "inhabiting." If "belonging to a tradition is a condition of hermeneutics" (Gadamer 1994, 235), this "belonging is brought about by tradition addressing us" (463). Gadamer's philosophy of tradition is not designed to "situate the subject," but to show how the subject is continuously reconstituted through dialogue with others and tradition. Tradition does not simply stand in the background; it asks us questions, nourishes, and oppresses (358ff). Tradition is not the medium through which the "lifeworld is reproduced," a medium whose rules can be reconstructed by the social scientific observer. Dialogue is not just an exchange of claims by individuals, but the "coming into language of what has been said in the tradition: an event that is at once appropriation and interpretation" (463). The dialogue of question and answer between past and present that subtends any conversation in the present avoids the simplifying understanding of "lifeworld," in which historical inheritance is an unproblematic "background" that is "intuitively known, problematic [and] unanalyzable" (Habermas 1987a, 298).[16]

Thomas McCarthy, a defender of Benhabib's line of reasoning, says that Gadamer's idea of tradition commits "the fallacy of treating logical conditions as normative principles." From the ontological insight that "we take for granted in any act of reflective critique" more than we call into question, McCarthy argues that "Gadamer tries to draw normative conclusions against enlightenment criticism and in favor of traditionalism." However, the idea that we are "more being than consciousness" is "no less true of the revolutionary critic than the conservative" (McCarthy 1994, 41). First, we need make it clear that Gadamer is not advocating traditionalism, but articulating tradition as the ontological condition of understanding. Thus, "the confrontation of our historical tradition is always a critical challenge of this tradition" (Gadamer 1987, 108).[17] Second, we need to reject McCarthy's suggestion that because Gadamer's ontology applies to everyone, it can provide no critical perspective on everyday understandings and thus drops out. This dismissal of the importance of historical inheritance is precisely the mistake that Benhabib makes when she neutralizes "tradition" as a shared background or lifeworld. Gadamer's description of our being-in-language does not determine whether one is a revolutionary or not, but it does make new understandings of our being-in-the-world available, and forecloses others. One of the views it forecloses is the phenomenology that McCarthy and Benhabib put forward, in which the subject of morality appears in a quasi-noumenal realm where ideals and rules are divorced from language and history.

The desire to escape from the ontology of prejudices, to seek a shallow clarity, is not only present in the epistemology of the social sciences, but also in the Kantian moral formalism that denies our historicity and puts out of play the linguistic fabric from which we are made. The separation of justice from the good offers the illusion that we can know deontological rules in a transhistorical way that does not apply to knowing linguistically mediated practices.[18] The claim of the subject of justice to be able to stand above and adjudicate competing understandings of the good presupposes clear epistemological access to competing claims and a moral site above the fray. Gadamer's ontology blocks both of these routes.[19] The meanings of the normative concepts of modern political life, such as "equality," are imbricated with the sexist and racist vocabularies that have infused them, and all are historically renewed through reappropriation.[20] An understanding of our historicity requires that we probe the ambiguous medium that we have internalized, which continues to infect and nourish our stories. The dethroning of the self-understanding of justice in no way entails that justice not receive the highest priority among moral goods. What it does require is that this priority not be conceived as a standpoint outside other goods with its own methodological requirements; rather, the claim to priority must be part of a historical argument in which justice makes comparative claims against other goods.

The idea of tradition gives us a way of understanding women's sufferings and achievements in the transformation of public and private life that goes beyond the retrieval of isolated individuals to the retrieval of aspects of alternative traditions. Thus, Gadamer's conception of tradition

does not have to be monolithic, even if he does not explore the multiplicity and divisions in the linguistic currents of culture. The idea of tradition has been developed by feminist literary historians, for example, who urge us to look at the distinctiveness and value of women's writing, from Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* to Beverly Guy-Sheftall's *Words of Fire* (Showalter 1977; Guy-Sheftall 1995). These feminists do not fit Benhabib's "rebellious daughter" category, which runs together two different understandings of our being-in-language proposed by feminist theories. The first group is made up of constructivists, who understand language and historical inheritance in terms of a third-person ontology of power that redescribes the self-understandings of historical actors from the point of view of linguistic and institutional forces. (I examine this idea in the next part on Butler.) The second group consists of "cultural or gynocentrics feminists," such as Showalter and Guy-Sheftall, but who would also include Irigaray or Hélène Cixous, who do not think women's practices are exhausted by the totalizing accounts of Hegelians, Lacanians, or Foucauldians.[21] Retrieval is not just of isolated individuals who embody Kantian conceptions of autonomy, but of women's practices that challenge a sexist and racist linguistic medium that constitutes subjects. Our freedom and agency are to be defined through our linguistic constitution, not against it. "Freedom implies the linguistic constitution of the world. Both belong together" (Gadamer 1994, 444); hence, "to be situated within a tradition does not limit freedom of knowledge but makes it possible" (361).

Benhabib repeats the mistake of liberalism by separating out the norms of equality from the languages and myths that shape identities. As Adrienne Rich states, "Until we know the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves," for "our language has trapped as well as liberated us" (Rich 1979, 35). However, Rich's remark does raise a question about Gadamer's understanding of the subject's relationship to tradition as one of dialogical play, a problem that Robin Schott's observation pointedly addresses: "Ontology for Gadamer clearly does have normative implications, since he speaks of those who refuse to abandon themselves fully to the play. Therefore, differences in human identity (such as gender) may become normatively inscribed into interpretations of being" (Schott 1991, 204). Gadamer does indeed conflate the ontological and the normative in his concept of play. In his desire to overcome the distanciated understanding of subject and object, Gadamer generalizes the phenomenology of one kind of textual experience. Play

certainly does not account for the violent relationship that women often have with traditions, as we will see in the Glaspell story. However, the conclusion to be drawn from this is not that we can separate the ontological and the normative, as Critical Theory does, but that we need to have phenomenologies of the different ways that we inhabit language, ones that display oppression, contestation, admiration. My reading of the story is a gesture toward how our being-in-language can be given characterizations alternative to the ones that Gadamer gives, without breaking with his fundamental insight that we inhabit language. I do not mean for these Gadamerian responses to exonerate his work entirely, for clearly, he is insensitive to the multiplicity of traditions and to the different effects of power. What I am trying to deflect are familiar critiques from the perspective of Critical Theory, which Benhabib represents.

Even more deeply entrenched in modern culture than ethical formalism is the legacy of Kant's reduction of literature to the subjective, aesthetic realm—whether as formalism or as Benhabib's and Habermas's individualistic expressivism. Such an understanding of literature helps modern reason ignore the way the languages of literature and other domains weave in and out of each other as they constitute and make claims on us: "The work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person experiencing it" (Gadamer 1994, 102). Indeed, "experience" is an important word for Gadamer because he wants to deliver it from a subjective sense of *Erlebnis* and give it the transformative sense of *Erfahrung* (60–100).[22] Gadamer traces the history of the word and concept of *Erlebnis* in *Truth and Method*, locating its emergence into general usage in the 1870s with the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, who employed the term to capture both the lived experience of an author or social actor and the result (64). Dilthey reconceives of experience as something more than mere sensation so as to offer the human sciences a new foundation: "The primary data, to which the interpretation of historical objects goes back, are not data of experiment and measurement but unities of meaning" (65). Although this concept of experience is primarily epistemological, its legacy isolates aesthetic experience from other forms of experience: "As the work of art as such is a world for itself, so also what is experienced aesthetically is, as an *Erlebnis*, removed from all connections with actuality" (70).[23] *Erlebnis* thus encapsulates two features of modernity's misreading of our being in language: the subjectivization of experience and the isolation of the aesthetic. "The work of art is not some alien universe into which we are magically transported for a time. Rather,

we learn to understand ourselves in and through it. . . . The binding quality of the experience (*Erfahrung*) of art must not be disintegrated by aesthetic consciousness" (97).

While the subjectivist conception does "not include the Thou in an immediate and primary way" (Gadamer 1994, 250) because it aims to "get inside another person and relive his experiences," Gadamerian "understanding begins . . . when something addresses us" (299). In addition, *Erfahrung* brings an understanding of historicity to the concept of experience that Dilthey's *Erlebnis* omits (346). Like the scientific experiment, Dilthey's historical method was "concerned to guarantee that [its] basic experiences could be repeated by anyone." By insisting on repeatability, Dilthey's concept of "experience abolishes its history and thus itself" (347). Gadamer draws on Hegel's idea of experience as reversal of consciousness, as negation: "Insight is more than the knowledge of this or that situation. It always involves an escape from something that had deceived us and held us captive" (356). However, Gadamerian negation is tracked through the linguistically mediated experience of the subject, and not by the trans-subjective account of the Hegelian narrator: "The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definite knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself" (355), and in an awareness "of our finitude and limitedness" (362).

Gadamer seeks to break down the tyranny of the philosophical concept over our idea of truth. This Kantian legacy, which Hegel refined rather than repudiated, keeps literature in secondary position.[24] For Gadamer, literature serves "as a corrective for the ideal of objective determination and for the hubris of concepts" (Gadamer 1985, 190). Moreover, he does not isolate the speculative pursuits of philosophy from everyday speech, for he finds speculation in ordinary conversations: "Even in the everyday speech there is an element of speculative reflection," since this happens any time "words do not reflect being but express a relation to the whole of being" (Gadamer 1994, 469).[25] Instead of sequestering the task of philosophy into normative debates, as Benhabib does, or trivializing its significance, as Richard Rorty does,[26] Gadamer's puts philosophy at the heart of our daily conversations. Every utterance is an event of language that touches ontological, normative, and epistemological issues simultaneously. Philosophy's task is not to content itself with the insight that we are linguistic constructs or to seek truth and goodness beyond these "linguistic appearances," but to unfold the potential and the historicity of the medium that constitutes us.

Butler: Freedom as Effects Without Subjects

Judith Butler, like Gadamer, follows in the wake the "ontological turn" initiated by Heidegger. She claims that her ontology of power is more primordial than Gadamer's tradition, in the same way that he claimed his problematic was more primordial than the subjectivism of his predecessors. While both understand language as a medium for the subject and the world, their understandings of this medium are radically different. For Gadamer, our being is formed through the dialogical play of tradition, of critique and retrieval; while for Butler language is not a medium in which we swim but a disseminating ontology of power that produces effects that cannot be characterized in the vocabulary of tradition and dialogue. While Gadamer makes a linguistic and hermeneutic revision of phenomenology, Butler breaks completely with the self-understandings and narratives of subjects.

In her recent works, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997) and *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), Butler aims to show that her philosophy does not deny agency, freedom, and equality, as detractors such as Benhabib maintain, but in fact gives a more perspicuous account of these ideas once we understand ourselves as linguistically vulnerable beings.[27] Her philosophy draws on elements from both Foucault and Derrida. From Foucault, she takes the concept of power, which is the "formative and constitutive" medium in which subject and world are made. Power's particular manner of constitution tends to produce a shallow, defensive self-understanding that disguises the way that power really operates: "The conditions of intelligibility are themselves formulated in and by power, and this normative exercise of power is rarely acknowledged as an operation of power at all" (Butler 1997a, 134). This dissimulation produces the two levels typical of the hermeneutics of suspicion: a surface level that characterizes the self-understanding of the culture, and a deeper level that her analysis seeks to make available. Power "works through its illegibility: it escapes the terms of legibility that it occasions" (134). Our superficial understandings of the production of meaning lead us to mis-frame issues such as censorship in terms of individuals and the state. We should not make the humanist mistake of seeing this as a question of what one can say; rather, we need to make the deeper ontological cut and interrogate the "domain of the sayable within which I begin to speak at all" (132). Unlike the hermeneutics of suspicion, Butler's approach does not place an explanation behind the self-understanding—

i.e., a truth beneath the appearance. Rather, the point is to make the illegible legible.

But the key to understanding her work is not the familiar reworking of Foucault, but the way in which she revives Derrida, particularly his reading of speech-act theory. The choice of speech-act theory is apt because it embodies the liberal assumptions about subjectivity and language that she wants to challenge, assumptions that underwrite not only the work of Habermas but also contemporary debates over pornography and hate speech, which serve as the examples for her critique. For Butler, liberalism falsely associates agency and autonomy with the control of meaning, and her phrasing of this critique often sounds very Gadamerian: "The linguistic domain over which the individual has no control becomes the condition of possibility for whatever domain of control is exercised by the speaking subject. Autonomy in speech is conditioned by dependency on language whose historicity exceeds in all directions the speaking subject" (Butler 1997a, 28). Indeed, Gadamer could only agree with her critique of the liberal interpretation of hate speech, which ignores such speech's inherited character: "The subject who speaks hate speech is clearly responsible for such speech, but that subject is rarely the originator of that speech. Racist speech works through the invocation of convention" (34). Hate speech and pornography are "traditions," which cannot be located only at the level of speakers. Moreover, like Gadamer, Butler challenges the separation of description and norm that informs liberal practical reason in which "we first offer a description . . . and then decide . . . through recourse to normative principles" (140).

However, she differs from Gadamer in that she wants to break with the unifying ideas of hermeneutics, such as narrative, tradition, and understanding. All of these ideas obscure where the action of language really takes place. In order to discern the way meaning operates, we need to recognize that the entire speech system depends on a repressed other, "the constitutive outside": "This 'outside' is the defining limit or exteriority to a given symbolic universe, one which, were it imported into that universe, would destroy its integrity and coherence. In other words, what is set outside or repudiated from the symbolic universe in question is precisely what binds that universe together through its exclusion" (Butler 1997a).[28] Because coherence is achieved through exclusion, Butler justifies reading against the grain of meanings and understandings for "effects," so that we are not trapped in the symbolic system.[29] Butler is

careful never to put the site of her theory "outside" the system since opposition is "implicated in the very processes it opposes" (Butler 1997b, 17). Indeed, she criticizes such spatializing notions of subjectivity, which block out the temporality of repetition: what Derrida calls "iterability," the agent of change, as we will see momentarily. However, if Butler refuses to spatialize her relation to the languages and subjects she addresses, she nonetheless claims superiority for her language over the languages that she targets. Her language blends together the explanatory ambitions of the work of Freud and Lacan with the Derridean ambition of transcendental philosophy to consider the conditions of possibility of being. Through Derrida, she explicitly distances herself from the determinism that she finds in psychoanalysis and Foucault (Butler 1997b, 130) without relying on a Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology. For Foucault, liberty is achieved by working out the conditions of "the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do or think" (Foucault 1984, 45). For Derrida, language itself manifests a disseminatory dimension that is obscured by attention to conceptualization, a dimension that he discusses through his neologisms such as "iterability."

Hence, when Butler discusses the historicity of speech acts and language, she draws from Derrida's idea of iterability rather than Gadamer's idea of tradition. Performative acts "engage actions or constitute themselves as a kind of action, . . . not because they reflect the power of an individual's will or intention, but because they draw upon and reengage conventions which have gained their power precisely through a sedimented iterability" (Butler 1995, 134). "Sedimented iterability" is a way of referring to cultural channeling without presupposing that there is understanding or "know-how" that accompanies such redundancy.[30] Butler reminds us that for Derrida, the break with existing contexts is a "structurally necessary feature of every utterance and every codifiable written mark" (Butler 1997a, 150). The break is a transcendental condition of the utterance, a break that goes all the way down, and not a recontextualization of a core of meaning that would provide a continuity of understanding. What Butler is getting at is the difference between the transcendental and the empirical level of deconstruction. Perhaps the simplest way to characterize this distinction is through Derrida's well-known debate with John Searle over how to categorize fictional speech acts. At the empirical level, Derrida is challenging Searle's taxonomy, but at the transcendental level he is challenging the capacity of any

taxonomy to contain the disseminatory dimension of language, because "iterability blurs a priori the dividing line that passes between . . . opposed terms" (Derrida 1977, 210).[31]

We should not lament this truth about the interrupting other of our language, about our inability to control meaning, because such logocentric mourning ignores how this disseminatory movement of language—and not the wills of actors—opens space for new possibilities and for a nonsovereign idea of freedom: "The disjunction between utterance and meaning is the condition of possibility for revising the performative. . . . The citationality of the performance produces the possibility for agency and expropriation at the same time" (Butler 1997a, 87). Hence, "untethering the speech act from the sovereign subject founds an alternative notion of agency and ultimately of responsibility, one that more fully acknowledges the way in which the subject is constituted by language" (15). The disjunction of meaning is the condition of the possibility of resignification, of linguistic change that no individual or institution can contain. Thus, those who want to ban hate speech attribute to the speaker and his or her language a sovereign power that overlooks the way that those targeted by such languages have fought back, have come to respond to and reinscribe the language of oppression by various means. These responses are not to be attributed simply to the punctual agency of individuals, but also to the transcendental uncontainability of language that makes discrete acts of revolt possible.[32]

However, there is a tension here between Butler's account of the agency of the oppressed and their own self-understandings. The liberty of the subject for Butler comes from the disseminating effects of meaning as they work through and against the received self-understandings: processes that deny and/or ignore this truth. Butler senses that she must negotiate these two levels of meaning, one for the received vocabularies of the subject and one for those who think through her third-person vocabularies of effects.[33] For Gadamer, the ontology of tradition requires that we revise but not abandon the vocabularies of self-understanding in order to bring them into his new understanding. There is still a tension between inside and outside, a tension that Gadamer thematizes with the expression "historically effected consciousness," which means "at once the consciousness effected in the course of history and determined by history, and the very consciousness of being thus effected and determined" (Gadamer 1994, xxxiv). However, while Gadamer makes his conceptions of finitude and language open to challenge by third-person

accounts, he insists that the challenger draw the hermeneutic circle between her theory of subjectivity and her own utterance.

Butler, on the other hand, makes the category "disseminatory effects" stand at such an angle to all the ethical and axiological vocabularies of philosophy and everyday life that the hermeneutic circle is forever broken and practical judgments are paralyzed. This paralysis emerges from the gap between her ideals and her problematic. The goals of her project are uncontroversial: "the development of forms of differentiation [that could] lead to fundamentally more capacious, generous, and 'unthreatened' bearings of the self in the midst of community" (Butler 1995, 140). However, we need to ask how we should understand and cultivate such virtues and the intersubjectivity on which they depend, when we are always looking from the transcendental site of effects. Without an account of how these ideals emerge from the history of effects, they seem to simply drop from the sky, as does the subjectivity of a critic who is not ensnared in the same way as her predecessors.[34]

Benhabib mounts two criticisms of Butler's deconstructive position, one empirical, which is grounded in social science, and the other normative, which is grounded in philosophy. To the first issue, she writes that "some form of human agency . . . is crucial to make empirical sense of processes of psycho-sexual development and maturation" (Benhabib 1995, 110). In other words, "Can the theory account for the capacities of agency and resignification it wants to attribute to individuals?" (111). With truth in the hands of social science, philosophy is now only about working on the proofs of universals: "A certain ordering of normative priorities and a clarification of those principles in the name of which one speaks is unavoidable" (27).[35] Benhabib brings these criticisms together when she says to Butler and Joan Scott, "Women who negotiate and resist power do not exist; the only struggles in history are between competing paradigms of discourses, power/knowledge complexes" (114).[36] For Benhabib, this is ultimately a moral question rather than a question about epistemology or ontology: "Should we approach history to retrieve from it the victims' memories, lost struggles and unsuccessful resistances, or should we approach history to retrieve from it the monotonous succession of infinite 'power/knowledge' complexes that constitute selves?" (114). Here we see how she conflates a historical question over the force of language and institutions into a question of the morality of memory.

How we remember the lives of women is not determined by a historical reading of the causal efficacy of their actions. This stark opposition

between agents and constructs blocks out a more perspicuous phrasing of the question of how to read history that both Benhabib and Butler avoid, but that Gadamer brings to the surface.[37] Should we read the languages that constituted the subjects in question as enabling or damaging forces (or both), and to what extent are our current languages continuous or discontinuous with them? We must make an interpretive judgment about whether we want to write a narrative that hermeneutically retrieves, or a genealogy that helps us resist and escape. Both Benhabib and Butler and Scott stay away from a hermeneutic understanding of language, Benhabib for the sake of formal dialogue of legitimacy and Butler and Scott for the sake of epistemological commitment to the sociological and historical conditions of subjectivity.

This problem points to a larger issue in Butler's overall project. There is a limit to how far we can read our predecessors and contemporaries as "dupes" of processes that they do not understand but that are available to the critic armed with a theory and a therapeutic interest. We have to be able to account for our own ability to escape and for the values that drive this effort. This phrasing of the performative contradiction is historical—i.e., Gadamerian—not Kantian, as Benhabib's and Habermas's is. Butler's problematic offers no way to discriminate among languages that empower and those that do damage, for this would require more guidance than is available from reference to a transcendental generator of liberty through effects. This problem is nicely dramatized in the following statement by Butler: "If performativity is construed as that power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration, how are we to understand the limits of such production, the constraints under which such production occurs?" (Butler 1993, 20). "Effects" has the anti-hermeneutic dimension that characterizes language divested of its axiological character. This useful moment of distanciation must be appropriated by the language of a "we," and Butler puts this hermeneutic vocabulary in her sentence—"we" and "understand"—however, she never says how she makes the move from "performativity" and "production" to this "we."

Moreover, this stance is vulnerable to the critique Gadamer makes of social scientific explanation—that it does not listen to languages of the past. The ear for otherness is tone deaf toward most languages. To be sure, a deconstructive approach can be open to otherness in a way that is left out by conceptual and humanistic categories such as voice and dialogue. But there is also a loss in trying to escape all humanist vestiges through

a vocabulary of "effects," which divests these languages of their appeal and the dialogical relationship we can establish with them. "Historical consciousness knows about the otherness of the other, about the past in its otherness, just as the understanding of the thou knows the Thou as a person" (Gadamer 1994, 360). Butler's recourse to a third-person transcendental perspective reproduces the reflective elevation of the philosophical observer outside a dialogical perspective on experience, by virtue of his or her access to a theoretical model. "A person who reflects himself out of the mutuality of such relation changes this relationship and destroys its moral bond" (360). It is this kind of philosophical hubris that Gadamer's own transcendental arguments for tradition are designed to check: "We are concerned to conceive of a reality that limits and exceeds the omnipotence of reflection" (342). Of course, the holistic language of hermeneutics—"dialogue," "tradition," "self-understanding," and "narrative"—can be broken down into alternative units of analysis that open and redescribe the phenomenological vocabularies of individual and collective actors. This was always the claim of social explanations against "subjectivism." However, to set up an absolute break with these understandings, even if through the auspices of a transcendental argument rather than a theoretical explanation, is a logical, ethical, and political mistake.[38]

Is it indeed empowering to have no way of orienting ourselves or of accounting for our linguistic capacities? Does it make much sense to speak of Rosa Parks's agency only through the third-person language of "effects" (Butler 1997a, 147), and to avoid discussing the resources of the traditions outlined by Guy-Sheftall's book on the history of African American feminist writings? Moreover, Butler's philosophy of language does not help us understand the appeal of Rosa Parks's story, its claim on us.[39] By refusing to move to a hermeneutic vocabulary in which subjects appropriate the "effects" of historicity, she cannot account for women's achievement and action, or for the way in which texts move us to political change.[40]

A similar problem arises in Butler's discussion of trauma. Trauma opens a dimension of historicity that is not available in Gadamer. As Cathy Caruth explains, trauma is not an experience at all, but a skip in experience, in which the subject must "check out" in order to survive.[41] Traumatized persons, says Caruth, "become the symptom of history they cannot entirely possess" (Caruth 1995, 5). However, Butler draws on this theory only to extend the distance between the violent construction of

subjectivity and our self-understandings. "Social trauma takes the form, not of a structure that repeats mechanically, but rather of an ongoing subjugation, the restaging of injury through signs that both occlude and reenact the scene" (Butler 1997a, 36). True enough, but now the task is to understand how the effects of traumas are to be ameliorated or "worked through" by witnessing, in which the intersubjective connection and the particulars of representation are crucial. Butler poses this question precisely: "The responsibility of the speaker does not consist of remaking language ex nihilo, but rather of negotiating the legacies of usage that constrain and enable that speaker's speech" (27). However, she never addresses the question of how we make political judgments about historical inheritance, preferring to speak only of the "prior," transcendental condition of all languages through such phrases as "citationality."[42]

We are now ready for an example of how Gadamer's hermeneutics can help advance this debate. I have selected Susan Glaspell's short story "A Jury of Her Peers" because it offers a phenomenology of interpretation in a straightforward, "gossipy" language that calls into question the boundaries of art and everyday speech. Moreover, it foregrounds the way Gadamer's understanding of language can bring literature and philosophy together in a productive and speculative way so that truth is not handed over to social science, as Benhabib is too quick to do. Moreover, this story will permit us to address two familiar objections to Gadamer's work—that his idea of tradition is unitary and exclusive, and that it ignores power.[43]

The tale begins when Mrs. Hale is called from her work in the kitchen to join her husband, Mr. Peters (the sheriff), and his wife. Mrs. Hale, the center of focalization for the third-person narrative, learns that Mr. Wright, the husband of an old friend, has been killed. The sheriff suspects Mrs. Hale's friend Minnie has killed her husband. The group proceeds to the Wrights' home, where it splits up. The men go out to the barn to look for evidence that can establish a motive for Minnie, while the women wait in the kitchen. While sitting there, they encounter the "text" of Minnie's life—the dirty towels, the mishandled stitching on her quilt, the act of violence of which she is suspected, and so on. That is, the dominant tradition that the women bring to Minnie's house, a tradition that they share with their husbands, forms preunderstandings that do not help them reconstitute the self-understanding of the text. The men have called Minnie "mad," and the women at this point can articulate no other reading, even though they sense that more is at stake here for them.

Slowly the women start to put together an explanation of the strangeness of Minnie's text—the systematic psychological torture to which her husband subjected her, a torture that culminated in the strangulation of Minnie's double, her pet bird. The process of coming to this explanation forces them to transform their self-understandings (the texts of their own lives and indeed the entire culture of the time). Minnie's text asks them disturbing questions, not just the other way around. To understand this text means that they can no longer remain who they are. This is the risk and promise of linguistic vulnerability. They discover that Minnie's husband was not just "a cruel man," but also a typical one and that Minnie's response differs only in degree, not in kind, from the ones they have had but repressed. The story's off-stage narrator shows their complex hermeneutic interaction with the text—sometimes it grabs them and sometimes they push it away—that is rarely made explicit in their consciousness or in dialogue. The women are not exchanging claims in discursive dialogue, but experiencing a rupture in the very medium that constitutes them. This medium that Glaspell displays finds no place in either Benhabib's or Butler's understandings of language. The women of the story do not "enlarge their mentality," and they do not suddenly find themselves downstream from a history of effects. The context of their reading—their moments of isolation interrupted by their husbands' condescending remarks about the triviality of women's occupations—helps foster their transformative reading. The women recognize that the values and textures of their own lives are neither read nor recognized by their husbands, and that the forces that drove Minnie mad operate around and within them as well. However, this is not just a liberal drama of equality. The women come to understand the distinctiveness of their tradition, a tradition that goes unread by the men and the tradition that dominates their culture. The women do not simply take Minnie's point of view; they discover the narrow social space in which their living has been channeled and the anger that they have been socialized to ignore. The dominant tradition in which they have lived, which has nourished them into the particular cultural shapes they now inhabit, suddenly appears as narrow and oppressive as well. Gender and power make the ontology of their being in language something far different from Gadamer's play, but it is an ontological relationship nonetheless.

Ambivalent about the knowledge that their reading is bringing about, they alternatively leap at it and then hide from it. The boundaries of their selves have been unraveled as Minnie's text not only speaks to them

but for them: "It was as if something within her not herself had spoken, and it found in Mrs. Peters something that she did not know as herself" (Glaspell 1918, 272). When Mrs. Peters discovers the strangled bird, she does not just solve a detective's riddle but reworks the fabric of her memory and identity. As she recalls and reinscribes the story of what a boy with a hatchet had done to her cat many years ago, she gets back the feeling of that past moment. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters arrive at an explanation not by detaching themselves, but by engaging their personal feelings and the particularities of their individual lives. Minnie's text forces them to see themselves and their husbands in a way that requires a new language, a language that draws on the particular ways that the women have of understanding.[44] Unlike Minnie, they are able to create a way of speaking that unites them with each other and separates them from the men. They choose to hide the bird (conceal evidence) and betray their husbands. The women do work in a distinctive holistic and intersubjective way, as Carol Gilligan notes.[45] However, what is crucial in the story is not the "different voice" they bring to the house, but the one that emerges during the course of the story. Simply to valorize their "care" overlooks the forces of domination in the linguistic drama of their transformation, and attributes to them an idealized agency that Butler and Scott rightly criticize.[46]

These women are not asserting their autonomy over and above their linguistic embedding. Reading through that conception of agency, we would miss where the action is. At the same time, to read the story in terms of movements of discourse does not account for their achievements, which are their newfound capacity to recognize Minnie and each other and their capacity to reinterpret their lives. We see a linguistic phenomenology that can display both the forces of domination and the forces of change at work in the women and their situation. Such a phenomenology cannot limit itself to the boundaries of consciousness, nor can it dismiss experience as merely superficial in order to locate historical movements only in discursive shifts inaccessible to participants. Rather, their achievement is captured better by Gadamer's idea of historical consciousness: "Historical consciousness no longer simply applies its own criteria of understanding to the tradition in which it is situated, nor does it naively assimilate tradition and simply carry it on. Rather, it adopts a reflective posture toward both itself and the tradition in which it is situated. It understands itself in terms of its own history. Historical consciousness is a mode of self-knowledge" (Gadamer 1994, 235).

My reading of this story is designed to show how hermeneutic phenomenology has an indispensable place in contemporary feminist philosophy. Although Gadamer's ideas of tradition and dialogue need serious revision, the attempts by Critical Theory and poststructuralism to set up problematics against a hermeneutic understanding of our being-in-language have impoverished the conceptions of interpretive political judgment available to us. Benhabib's moral certainties cannot rise above their linguistic historicity. Butler's explorations of the limits of the sayable may expose the inconsistencies and inequalities of our linguistic inheritance; however, her work leaves us no way of choosing how to live through our languages instead of simply against them. Here we see where Gadamer can mediate the dispute between Benhabib and Butler, between the separation of individual agency and language and the poststructuralist reading of linguistic agency without persons. The need to account for power and rationality cannot lead us to ignore this kind of linguistic embodiment. Hermeneutics can serve as a mediator to the ontological dogmatism of its competitors, for understanding has a priority over genealogy in the same way that it does over explanation. Any theory of subjectivity and intersubjectivity must make holistic assumptions about what subjects are embedded in, and Benhabib, Butler, and Gadamer all give different and overly grand answers. The ontological medium of women's being-in-language does not have a monolithic answer in which an antihermeneutic ontology of power or hermeneutic ontology of tradition determines subjectivity. An interpretive philosophy needs to be ontologically flexible enough to have a place for the complex history of women's internal and external oppression, for women's achievements, for the multiplicity of their languages, and for their revisions. An interpreter must make a Gadamerian move that Benhabib's Kantianism and Butler's transcendental linguistic generator prevent. She must show how she closes the hermeneutic circle, placing herself in the linguistic lineage that she wants to retrieve and against the languages that she wants to critique.

Notes

1. Two collections give good representation of the alternatives. Butler and Scott, eds. (1992), *Feminists Theorize the Political* and Benhabib, ed. (1996), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political.*

2. Later in the chapter, I will address other concerns of feminist political philosophy and give the details of Benhabib's and Butler's problematics.

3. Habermas goes so far as to tie a universal theory of intuition to communicative presuppositions: "There is a universal core of moral intuition in all times and all societies and this is because there are 'unavoidable presuppositions of communicative activity'" (Habermas 1986, 206).

4. Benhabib says, "I am still enough of a Hegelian to maintain . . . that such reciprocal recognition of one another's rights to moral personality is a result of a world-historical process that involves struggle, battle, and resistance, as well as defeat, carried out by social classes, genders, groups, and nations" (Benhabib 1996, 79).

5. See Benhabib's excellent discussion of this problem in chap. 3 of her *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*.

6. "As distinguished from certain kinds of Kantianism, I would like to acknowledge the historical and sociological specificity of the project of democracy while, against ethnocentric liberalism, I would like to insist that practical rationality embodied in democratic institutions has a culture-transcending validity claim" (Benhabib 1996, 69).

7. See Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Benhabib is critical of other dimensions of Arendt's thought but not of her philosophy of narrative and language.

8. In brief, Gadamer and MacIntyre maintain that we always-already inhabit narrative—"stories are lived before they are told," (MacIntyre 1984, 212)—whereas Arendt makes language secondary to space of appearances: "Was it not precisely the discovery of a discrepancy between words, the medium in which we think, and the world of appearances, the medium in which we live, that led to philosophy and metaphysics in the first place?" (Arendt 1978, I, 8). Because she wants to preserve the priority of the world over language, she reverses philosophy's typical unmasking operation, so that everyday self-understanding unmasks the thinking self, which is "unaware of it own withdrawal from the common world of appearances" (Arendt 1978, I, 87). Benhabib cites MacIntyre in *Hannah Arendt: The Reluctant Modern* (96), as if this view were compatible with Arendt's and her own. I discuss these narrative issues at length in "Arendt versus Ellison on Little Rock: The Role of Language in Political Judgment."

9. Because Arendt accepts the epistemological tradition of philosophy that locates truth outside language, "she must," as Albrecht Wellmer says, "locate the human world, that is, the common world of men opened up by speech, the world of politics and poetry, of thinking and judging, beyond or above the sphere of cognition" (Wellmer 1996, 42).

10. "Since a judgment of taste involves the consciousness that all interest is kept out of it, it must also involve a claim to being valid for everyone, but without having a universality based on concepts. In other words, a judgment of taste must involve a claim to subjective universality" (Kant 1987, 54).

11. Bakhtin says this nicely when he tells us that literature "reveals not only the reality of a given language but also, as it were, its potential, its ideal limits and its total meaning conceived as a whole, its truth together with its limitations" (Bakhtin 1981, 356).

12. Habermas performs the same trick with his idea of lifeworld: "As a resource from which interactive participants support utterances capable of reaching consensus, the lifeworld constitutes an equivalent for what the philosophy of the subject had ascribed to consciousness in general as synthetic accomplishments. . . . [C]oncrete forms of life replace transcendental consciousness in its function of creating unity" (Habermas 1987a, 326).

13. She claims that this approach to the history of philosophy follows Walter Benjamin (Benhabib 1992, 239). Benjamin and Arendt shared a horror of Hegel's philosophy of history, and, in Benhabib's view, "her response was the same as [his]: 'to break the chain of narrative continuity . . . to stress fragmentariness, historical dead ends, failures, and ruptures" (1996a, 88).

14. Joan Scott's *Gender and History* is the locus classicus for the critique of this view: "Feminist history then becomes not the recounting of great deeds performed by women but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organization of most societies. With this approach women's history critically confronts the politics of existing history and inevitably begins the rewriting of history" (Scott 1986, 27). I return to Scott later.

15. In "Destruktion and Deconstruction," Gadamer says, "When I speak of tradition and conversation with tradition, I am in no way putting forward a collective subject" (Gadamer 1989, 111).

16. See Charles Taylor's Gadamerian idea of articulation: "to transfer what has sunk to the level of organizing principle for present practices and hence beyond examination into a view for which there can be reasons either for or against." Like Gadamer, Taylor insists that such a project asks us to "undo forgetting" (Taylor 1984, 28).

17. The same misunderstanding informs the Habermasian critique of so-called "communitarians," such as Taylor. Taylor's critique is not advocating that we belong to communities but, like Gadamer, offering an ontological portrait of our being in language and history. This portrait criticizes the procedural portrait of language and subjectivity as a distorted and impoverished form of reasoning.

18. Taylor gives a Gadamerian critique of proceduralist accounts on the issue of the right and the good in "The Motivation Behind the Proceduralist Ethics": "The procedural theory is an illusion because it rests upon a substantive vision of the good" (Taylor 1993, 358).

19. Michael Sandel says this well in his critique of Rawls: "As the priority of justice arose from the need to distinguish the standard of appraisal from the society being appraised, the priority of the self arises from the parallel need to distinguish the subject from its situation" (Sandel 1982, 20).

20. Setting up presuppositions of communication as ahistorical noumena, rather than as historicized Gadamerian traditions, makes easy pickings for Butler, who celebrates the oppressed for contradicting the historical meaning of universality. "Subjects who have been excluded from enfranchisement by existing conventions governing the exclusionary definition of the universal seize the language of enfranchisement and set into motion a 'performative contradiction,' claiming to be covered by that universal, thereby exposing the contradictory character of previous conventional formulations of the universal" (Butler 1997a, 89).

21. See Linda Alcoff's discussion of the tension in feminist theory between third-person constructivist stances toward gender (e.g., Butler and Joan Scott) and those who retrieve certain practices from the patriarchal hegemony (Alcoff 1988). I develop my own typology, in chap. 4, "Feminist Theories: Beyond Essentialism and Constructivism," in *Critical Confrontations* (Steele 1997a). For specific use of Gadamer in feminist theory, see Henderson 1992.

22. See especially the sections entitled, "On the History of the Word Erlebnis," "The Concept of Erlebnis," and "Critique of the Abstraction Inherent in Aesthetic Consciousness." I will focus here on Gadamer's reading of Dilthey, who gave the term its first important modern definition. A fuller account would have to look at Gadamer's reading of Husserl and Heidegger. See Risser 1997

23. Many critics have taken up Gadamer's challenge to aesthetic autonomy. One of the most important is Paul Lauter's *Canons and Contexts*, where he shows how the institution of literary criticism invoked the separation of the aesthetic from the political and the referential in order to denigrate and exclude African American literature for its engagement.

24. In Hegel's system, art is a lower form of thought than philosophy, which realizes itself in the concept. Philosophical "thinking evaporates the form of reality into the form of the pure concept" (Hegel 1976, II, 976). See Gadamer's complex critique and retrieval of Hegel in *Hegel's Dialectic* (1976) and throughout *Truth and Method*.

25. See Kathleen Wright (1986) for a good analysis of the speculative dimension of Gadamer's understanding of language. In his discussion of literature (in particular Gadamer 1994), however, Gadamer ignores prose and the novel, focusing on poetry, as does Heidegger. Such a focus is unfortunate since it helps reinforce the distance between literature and everyday life, making literature a site for extraordinary experience.

26. Rorty says, "When philosophy has finished showing that everything is a social construct, it does not help us decide which social constructs to retain and which to replace," in "Feminism,

Ideology and Deconstruction: A Pragmatist Critique," *Hypatia* 8 (1991, 96). Gadamer offers a very different understanding of the "linguistic turn."

27. I will focus on *Excitable Speech* and Butler's contribution to *Feminist Contestations: A Philosophical Exchange*, in which she debates with Benhabib, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser.

28. In *The Psychic Life of Power* and *Bodies That Matter: The Discursive Limits of 'Sex,'* Butler develops the "constitutive outside" in psychoanalytic terms as the "degraded object" of same sex desire, which is denounced and internalized (Butler 1993, 3). Heterosexuality is thus melancholic since it cannot witness and mourn the loss of this desire.

29. Foucault says that hermeneutics seeks "the re-appropriation through the manifest meaning of discourse of another meaning at once secondary and primary that is more hidden but also more fundamental" (Foucault 1970, 373).

30. Like Derrida, Butler thinks that the hermeneutic idea of "understanding" is too grandiose and opts for a minimalist idea of sense. "One of the things SEC [his essay "Signature Context Event"] was driving at is that the minimal making sense of something (its conformity to the code, grammaticality, etc.) is incommensurate with the adequate understanding of intended meaning" (Derrida 1977, 203).

31. I discuss the Derrida/Searle debate in the context of hermeneutics in Steele (1997a, 47–57).

32. See Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), in which he discusses how the African American tradition of "signifying" reworks the Master's language. Gates vacillates between a Derridean characterization of signifying and a hermeneutic one that speaks of tradition. I chart this contradiction and its significance in Steele (1996).

33. In the Introduction to *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler speaks of the tensions between two temporal modalities of subjection, between the transcendental condition and the self-understanding: "First, as what is for the subject always prior, outside of itself and operative from the start; second as the willed effect of the subject" (14).

34. This same problem of interpretive judgment undermines Joan Scott's deconstructive "history" of feminism in France in *Only Paradoxes To Offer* (1996). Scott's transcendental generator is a formal paradox produced by the demands of equality and difference. This paradox is then reinscribed by the particular historical languages employed through time: "To the extent that feminism acted for 'women,' feminism produced the sexual difference it sought to eliminate. This paradox—the need both to accept and to refuse 'sexual difference'—was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement through its long history." Although "the terms of her [the subject of feminism] representation shifted" (14), they nonetheless illustrate a nontranscendable paradox: "Feminism is not a reaction to republicanism, but one of its effects, produced by contradictory assertions about the universal human rights of individuals, on the one hand, and exclusions attributed to 'sexual difference,' on the other. Feminist agency is constituted by this paradox" (168).

35. Habermas also accepts this impoverished role for philosophy in "Philosophy as Stand-In Interpreter," in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* (1987).

36. Benhabib refers here to a debate between Joan Scott and Linda Gordon over women's agency in *Signs* 15 (1990): 848–52. Although the debate began as a question over the specifics raised by Gordon's attribution of agency to the women in her book *Heroes of Their Own Lives*, the argument quickly escalated into a question of what problematic should be used to read women's lives throughout history. Scott's 1996 book is a sequel to this argument.

37. Scott also calls up the strawperson of "liberal agency" in order to justify her problematic: "Instead of assuming that agency follows from an innate human will, I want to understand feminism in terms of the discursive processes—the epistemologies, institutions, and practices—that produce political subjects, that make agency . . . possible" (Scott 1996, 15). She does exactly the same thing in her well-known argument for a constructivist view of "experience." She calls up the specter of a naive "appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence and as originary point of explanation" (in "Evidence of Experience," (Scott 1991, 777). But the rejection of "willful agency" and "experience as evidentiary bedrock" in no way entails her description. The key question is the one she leaves out: how should we characterize these languages? As I will show, the answer is a matter of interpretive judgment, not determined by either a constructivist or hermeneutic position on language.

38. Gadamer is making a contribution to interpretive history, not causal history. To those who say that a causal account completely invalidates an idealistic account—i.e., contingency and power rather than ideas drive history so that historical actors are deeply deceived—Gadamer could answer that history is messy and that ideas are neither decisive nor irrelevant. Butler and Scott are not making an empirical, causal claim, but a transcendental claim for an alternative problematic.

39. In speaking of the effect of reading Rilke, Gadamer says, "Thou must alter thy life!" (Gadamer 1977, 104). That said, I would join Gadamer's critics who point out that his analysis focuses on how the changes that are brought about through dialogue produce unity rather than difference. Thus, "To reach an understanding in a dialogue is . . . being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were" (Gadamer 1994, 379).

40. Scott says of the women she studies, "I do not think of these women as exemplary heroines. Instead I think of them as sites—historical locations and markers—where crucial political and cultural contests are enacted and can be examined in some detail. To figure a person—in this case, a woman—as place or location is not to deny her humanity; it is rather to recognize the many factors that constitute her agency, the complex and multiple ways in which she is constructed as a historical actor" (Scott 1996, 16). Fair enough. But the language through which we characterize these "locations" is not a positivistic one but one imbued with the hopes and ideals of the speaker.

41. Cathy Caruth, "Introduction: Trauma and Experience" (Caruth 1995). See also Saul Friedlander's *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews in Europe* (1993).

42. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* offers an excellent example of trauma and witnessing, both within the novel—e.g., Sethe and Paul D.—and between the text and reader. Morrison retells the slave narrative because of the failure of American society to witness the trauma of slavery. Interestingly, Butler discusses Morrison in *Excitable Speech* only to illustrate the thesis that the subject does not control language, and not for the intersubjective achievements in Morrison's work.

43. See Pascal Michon's (2000) powerful critique of Gadamer's reductive, Heideggerian understanding of language for the way it drives out the linguistic diversity in the history of literature and public life. (He insists, for instance, that the proper French translation of "Sprache" is "langue," not "langage" or "discours.") I discovered Michon's study too late to integrate it into my exposition, but the challenge his work might pose to my reading of Glaspell is that this reading shows how we need to leave Gadamer behind rather than appropriate him.

44. See Lorraine Code's discussion of the story in *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations*, 145–49. "Glaspell's story offers a cameo portrait of knowledge production" (147).

45. See Gilligan's discussion of the story in "Moral Orientation and Moral Development," in *Women and Moral Theory* (1987).

46. I discuss Gilligan's reading of this story at length in *Theorizing Textual Subjects: Agency and Oppression* (1997b, 333–39).

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15

Three Applications of Gadamer's Hermeneutics

Philosophy-Faith-Feminism

Laura Duhan Kaplan

A colleague invited me to write an essay about some of the difficulties I face in trying to reconcile my philosophy, my feminism, and my faith. After two botched attempts to outline such an essay, I came to realize that I had nothing to say on the topic because I have no difficulties reconciling philosophy, feminism, and faith. Instead, all three pursuits converge in my understanding of tradition. This understanding is not an intellectual achievement, but a way of life. It is difficult for me to rip this way of life far enough out of its context to articulate it in words. But perhaps I do not have to, as the words of other writers can serve me well here.

For example, Hans-Georg Gadamer has written that "understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a tradition, in which past and present are constantly fused" (Gadamer 1995, 258). For Gadamer, interpretation is not adequately described by the phenomenological hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur and others, as an encounter between a human subject and a text or social fact. More is at stake than simply these two reasonably open