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Language and Hermeneutics

I LANGUAGE AS THE MEDIUM OF HERMENEUTIC EXPERIENCE

We say that we “conduct” a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will “come out” of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us. Thus we can say that something was a good conversation or that it was ill fated. All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it—i.e., that it allows something to “emerge” which henceforth exists.

In our analysis of romantic hermeneutics we have already seen that understanding is not based on transposing oneself into another person, on one person’s immediate participation with another. To understand what a person says is, as we saw, to come to an understanding about the subject matter, not to get inside another person and relive his experiences (*Erlebnisse*). We emphasized that the experience (*Erfahrung*) of meaning that takes place in understanding always includes application. Now we are to note *that this whole process is verbal*. It is not for nothing that the special problematic of understanding and the attempt to master it as an art—the

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concern of hermeneutics—belongs traditionally to the sphere of grammar and rhetoric. Language is the medium in which substantive understanding and agreement take place between two people.

In situations where coming to an understanding is disrupted or impeded, we first become conscious of the conditions of all understanding. Thus the verbal process whereby a conversation in two different languages is made possible through translation is especially informative. Here the translator must translate the meaning to be understood into the context in which the other speaker lives. This does not, of course, mean that he is at liberty to falsify the meaning of what the other person says. Rather, the meaning must be preserved, but since it must be understood within a new language world, it must establish its validity within it in a new way. Thus every translation is at the same time an interpretation. We can even say that the translation is the culmination of the interpretation that the translator has made of the words given him.

The example of translation, then, makes us aware that language as the medium of understanding must be consciously created by an explicit mediation. This kind of explicit process is undoubtedly not the norm in a conversation. Nor is translation the norm in the way we approach a foreign language. Rather, having to rely on translation is tantamount to two people giving up their independent authority. Where a translation is necessary, the gap between the spirit of the original words and that of their reproduction must be taken into account. It is a gap that can never be completely closed. But in these cases understanding does not really take place between the partners of the conversation, but between the interpreters, who can really have an encounter in a common world of understanding. (It is well known that nothing is more difficult than a dialogue in two different languages in which one person speaks one and the other person the other, each understanding the other's language but not speaking it. As if impelled by a higher force, one of the languages always tries to establish itself over the other as the medium of understanding.)

Where there is understanding, there is not translation but speech. To understand a foreign language means that we do not need to translate it into our own. When we really master a language, then no translation is necessary—in fact, any translation seems impossible. Understanding how to speak is not yet of itself real understanding and does not involve an interpretive process; it is an accomplishment of life. For you understand a language by living in it—a statement that is true, as we know, not only of

living but dead languages as well. Thus the hermeneutical problem concerns not the correct mastery of language but coming to a proper understanding about the subject matter, which takes place in the medium of language. Every language can be learned so perfectly that using it no longer means translating from or into one's native tongue, but thinking in the foreign language. Mastering the language is a necessary precondition for coming to an understanding in a conversation. Every conversation obviously presupposes that the two speakers speak the same language. Only when two people can make themselves understood through language by talking together can the problem of understanding and agreement even be raised. Having to depend on an interpreter's translation is an extreme case that doubles the hermeneutical process, namely the conversation: there is one conversation between the interpreter and the other, and a second between the interpreter and oneself.

Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says. What is to be grasped is the substantive rightness of his opinion, so that we can be at one with each other on the subject. Thus we do not relate the other's opinion to him but to our own opinions and views. Where a person is concerned with the other as individuality—e.g., in a therapeutic conversation or the interrogation of a man accused of a crime—this is not really a situation in which two people are trying to come to an understanding.¹

Everything we have said characterizing the situation of two people coming to an understanding in conversation has a genuine application to hermeneutics, which is concerned with *understanding texts*. Let us again start by considering the extreme case of translation from a foreign language. Here no one can doubt that the translation of a text, however much the translator may have dwelt with and empathized with his author, cannot be simply a re-awakening of the original process in the writer's mind; rather, it is necessarily a re-creation of the text guided by the way the translator understands what it says. No one can doubt that what we are dealing with here is interpretation, and not simply reproduction. A new light falls on the text from the other language and for the reader of it. The requirement that a translation be faithful cannot remove the fundamental gulf between the two languages. However faithful we try to be, we have to make difficult decisions. In our translation if we want to emphasize a

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feature of the original that is important to us, then we can do so only by playing down or entirely suppressing other features. But this is precisely the activity that we call interpretation. Translation, like all interpretation, is a highlighting. A translator must understand that highlighting is part of his task. Obviously he must not leave open whatever is not clear to him. He must show his colors. Yet there are borderline cases in the original (and for the "original reader") where something is in fact unclear. But precisely these hermeneutical borderline cases show the straits in which the translator constantly finds himself. Here he must resign himself. He must state clearly how he understands. But since he is always in the position of not really being able to express all the dimensions of his text, he must make a constant renunciation. Every translation that takes its task seriously is at once clearer and flatter than the original. Even if it is a masterly re-creation, it must lack some of the overtones that vibrate in the original. (In rare cases of masterly re-creation the loss can be made good or even mean a gain—think, for example, of how Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* seems to acquire an odd new vigor in Stefan George's version.)

The translator is often painfully aware of his inevitable distance from the original. His dealing with the text is like the effort to come to an understanding in conversation. But translating is like an especially laborious process of understanding, in which one views the distance between one's own opinion and its contrary as ultimately unbridgeable. And, as in conversation, when there are such unbridgeable differences, a compromise can sometimes be achieved in the to and fro of dialogue, so in the to and fro of weighing and balancing possibilities, the translator will seek the best solution—a solution that can never be more than a compromise. As one tries in conversation to transpose oneself into the other person in order to understand his point of view, so also does the translator try to transpose himself completely into his author. But doing so does not automatically mean that understanding is achieved in a conversation, nor for the translator does such transposition mean success in re-creating the meaning. The structures are clearly analogous. Reaching an understanding in conversation presupposes that both partners are ready for it and are trying to recognize the full value of what is alien and opposed to them. If this happens mutually, and each of the partners, while simultaneously holding on to his own arguments, weighs the counterarguments, it is finally possible to achieve—in an imperceptible but not arbitrary reciprocal translation of the other's position (we call this an exchange of views)—a common diction and a common dictum. Similarly, the translator must

preserve the character of his own language, the language into which he is translating, while still recognizing the value of the alien, even antagonistic character of the text and its expression. Perhaps, however, this description of the translator's activity is too truncated. Even in these extreme situations where it is necessary to translate from one language into another, the subject matter can scarcely be separated from the language. Only that translator can truly re-create who brings into language the subject matter that the text points to; but this means finding a language that is not only his but is also proportionate to the original.² The situation of the translator and that of the interpreter are fundamentally the same.

In bridging the gulf between languages, the translator clearly exemplifies the reciprocal relationship that exists between interpreter and text, and that corresponds to the reciprocity involved in reaching an understanding in conversation. For every translator is an interpreter. The fact that a foreign language is being translated means that this is simply an extreme case of hermeneutical difficulty—i.e., of alienness and its conquest. In fact all the "objects" with which traditional hermeneutics is concerned are alien in the same unequivocally defined sense. The translator's task of re-creation differs only in degree, not in kind, from the general hermeneutical task that any text presents.

This is not to say, of course, that the hermeneutic situation in regard to texts is exactly the same as that between two people in conversation. Texts are "enduringly fixed expressions of life"³ that are to be understood; and that means that one partner in the hermeneutical conversation, the text, speaks only through the other partner, the interpreter. Only through him are the written marks changed back into meaning. Nevertheless, in being changed back by understanding, the subject matter of which the text speaks itself finds expression. It is like a real conversation in that the common subject matter is what binds the two partners, the text and the interpreter, to each other. When a translator interprets a conversation, he can make mutual understanding possible only if he participates in the subject under discussion; so also in relation to a text it is indispensable that the interpreter participate in its meaning.

Thus it is perfectly legitimate to speak of a *hermeneutical conversation*. But from this it follows that hermeneutical conversation, like real conversation, finds a common language, and that 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. Even between the partners of this

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“conversation” a communication like that between two people takes place that is more than mere accommodation. The text brings a subject matter into language, but that it does so is ultimately the achievement of the interpreter. Both have a share in it.

Hence the meaning of a text is not to be compared with an immovably and obstinately fixed point of view that suggests only one question to the person trying to understand it, namely how the other person could have arrived at such an absurd opinion. In this sense understanding is certainly not concerned with “understanding historically”—i.e., reconstructing the way the text came into being. Rather, one intends to *understand the text itself*. But this means that the interpreter’s own thoughts too have gone into re-awakening the text’s meaning. In this the interpreter’s own horizon is decisive, yet not as a personal standpoint that he maintains or enforces, but more as an opinion and a possibility that one brings into play and puts at risk, and that helps one truly to make one’s own what the text says. I have described this above as a “fusion of horizons.” We can now see that this is what takes place in conversation, in which something is expressed that is not only mine or my author’s, but common.

We are indebted to German romanticism for disclosing the systematic significance of the verbal nature of conversation for all understanding. It has taught us that understanding and interpretation are ultimately the same thing. As we have seen, this insight elevates the idea of interpretation from the merely occasional and pedagogical significance it had in the eighteenth century to a systematic position, as indicated by the key importance that the problem of language has acquired in philosophical inquiry.

Since the romantic period we can no longer hold the view that, in the absence of immediate understanding, interpretive ideas are drawn, as needed, out of a linguistic storeroom where they are lying ready. *Rather, language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting.* This statement does not mean that there is no special problem of expression. The difference between the language of a text and the language of the interpreter, or the gulf that separates the translator from the original, is not merely a secondary question. On the contrary, the fact is that the problems of verbal expression are themselves problems of understanding. All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language that allows the object to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter’s own language.

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Thus the hermeneutical phenomenon proves to be a special case of the general relationship between thinking and speaking, whose enigmatic intimacy conceals the role of language in thought. Like conversation, interpretation is a circle closed by the dialectic of question and answer. It is a genuine historical life comportment achieved through the medium of language, and we can call it a conversation with respect to the interpretation of texts as well. The linguisticity of understanding is *the concretion of historically effected consciousness*.

The essential relation between language and understanding is seen primarily in the fact that the essence of tradition is to exist in the medium of language, so that the preferred *object* of interpretation is a verbal one.

(A) LANGUAGE AS DETERMINATION OF THE HERMENEUTIC OBJECT

The fact that tradition is essentially verbal in character has consequences for hermeneutics. The understanding of verbal tradition retains special priority over all other tradition. Linguistic tradition may have less perceptual immediacy than monuments of plastic art. Its lack of immediacy, however, is not a defect; rather, this apparent lack, the abstract alienness of all "texts," uniquely expresses the fact that everything in language belongs to the process of understanding. Linguistic tradition is tradition in the proper sense of the word—i.e., something handed down. It is not just something left over, to be investigated and interpreted as a remnant of the past. What has come down to us by way of verbal tradition is not left over but given to us, told us—whether through direct retelling, in which myth, legend, and custom have their life, or through written tradition, whose signs are, as it were, immediately clear to every reader who can read them.

The full hermeneutical significance of the fact that tradition is essentially verbal becomes clear in the case of a *written* tradition. The detachability of language from speaking derives from the fact that it can be written. In the form of writing, all tradition is contemporaneous with each present time. Moreover, it involves a unique co-existence of past and present, insofar as present consciousness has the possibility of a free access to everything handed down in writing. No longer dependent on retelling, which mediates past knowledge with the present, understanding consciousness acquires—through its immediate access to literary tradition—a genuine opportunity to change and widen its horizon, and thus enrich its world by a whole new and deeper dimension. The appropriation of literary tradition

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even surpasses the experience connected with the adventure of traveling and being immersed in the world of a foreign language. At every moment the reader who studies a foreign language and literature retains the possibility of free movement back to himself, and thus is at once both here and there.

A written tradition is not a fragment of a past world, but has already raised itself beyond this into the sphere of the meaning that it expresses. The ideality of the word is what raises everything linguistic beyond the finitude and transience that characterize other remnants of past existence. It is not this document, as a piece of the past, that is the bearer of tradition but the continuity of memory. Through it tradition becomes part of our own world, and thus what it communicates can be stated immediately. Where we have a written tradition, we are not just told a particular thing; a past humanity itself becomes present to us in its general relation to the world. That is why our understanding remains curiously unsure and fragmentary when we have no written tradition of a culture but only dumb monuments, and we do not call this information about the past "history." Texts, on the other hand, always express a whole. Meaningless strokes that seem strange and incomprehensible prove suddenly intelligible in every detail when they can be interpreted as writing—so much so that even the arbitrariness of a corrupt text can be corrected if the context as a whole is understood.

Thus written texts present the real hermeneutical task. Writing is self-alienation. Overcoming it, reading the text, is thus the highest task of understanding. Even the pure signs of an inscription can be seen properly and articulated correctly only if the text can be transformed back into language. As we have said, however, this transformation always establishes a relationship to what is meant, to the subject matter being discussed. Here the process of understanding moves entirely in a sphere of meaning mediated by the verbal tradition. Thus in the case of an inscription the hermeneutical task starts only after it has been deciphered (presumably correctly). Only in an extended sense do non-literary monuments present a hermeneutical task, for they cannot be understood of themselves. What they mean is a question of their interpretation, not of deciphering and understanding the wording of a text.

In writing, language gains its true ideality, for in encountering a written tradition understanding consciousness acquires its full sovereignty. Its being does not depend on anything. Thus reading consciousness is in potential possession of its history. It is not for nothing that with the

emergence of a literary culture the idea of "philology," "love of speech," was transferred entirely to the all-embracing art of reading, losing its original connection with the cultivation of speech and argument. A reading consciousness is necessarily a historical consciousness and communicates freely with historical tradition. Thus it is historically legitimate to say with Hegel that history begins with the emergence of a will to hand things down, "to make memory last."⁴ Writing is no mere accident or mere supplement that qualitatively changes nothing in the course of oral tradition. Certainly, there can be a will to make things continue, a will to permanence, without writing. But only a written tradition can detach itself from the mere continuance of the vestiges of past life, remnants from which one human being can by inference piece out another's existence.

The tradition of inscriptions has never shared in the free form of tradition that we call literature, since it depends on the existence of the remains, whether of stone or whatever material. But it is true of everything that has come down to us by being written down that here a will to permanence has created the unique forms of continuance that we call literature. It does not present us with only a stock of memorials and signs. Rather, literature has acquired its own contemporaneity with every present. To understand it does not mean primarily to reason one's way back into the past, but to have a present involvement in what is said. It is not really a relationship between persons, between the reader and the author (who is perhaps quite unknown), but about sharing in what the text shares with us. The meaning of what is said is, when we understand it, quite independent of whether the traditional text gives us a picture of the author and of whether or not we want to interpret it as a historical source.

Let us here recall that the task of hermeneutics was first and foremost the understanding of texts. Schleiermacher was the first to downplay the importance of writing for the hermeneutical problem because he saw that the problem of understanding was raised—and perhaps in its fullest form—by oral utterance too. We have outlined above⁵ how the psychological dimension he gave hermeneutics concealed its historical dimension. In actual fact, writing is central to the hermeneutical phenomenon insofar as its detachment both from the writer or author and from a specifically addressed recipient or reader gives it a life of its own. What is fixed in writing has raised itself into a public sphere of meaning in which everyone who can read has an equal share.

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Certainly, in relation to language, writing seems a secondary phenomenon. The sign language of writing refers to the actual language of speech. But that language is capable of being written is by no means incidental to its nature. Rather, this capacity for being written down is based on the fact that speech itself shares in the pure ideality of the meaning that communicates itself in it. In writing, the meaning of what is spoken exists purely for itself, completely detached from all emotional elements of expression and communication. A text is not to be understood as an expression of life but with respect to what it says. Writing is the abstract ideality of language. Hence the meaning of something written is fundamentally identifiable and repeatable. What is identical in the repetition is only what was actually deposited in the written record. This indicates that "repetition" cannot be meant here in its strict sense. It does not mean referring back to the original source where something is said or written. The understanding of something written is not a repetition of something past but the sharing of a present meaning.

Writing has the methodological advantage of presenting the hermeneutical problem in all its purity, detached from everything psychological. However, what is from our point of view and for our purpose a methodological advantage is at the same time the expression of a specific weakness that is even more characteristic of writing than of speaking. The task of understanding is presented with particular clarity when we recognize the weakness of all writing. We need only recall what Plato said, namely that the specific weakness of writing was that no one could come to the aid of the written word if it falls victim to misunderstanding, intentional or unintentional.⁶

In the helplessness of the written word Plato discerned a more serious weakness than the weakness of speech (*to asthenes ton logon*) and when he calls on dialectic to come to the aid of the weakness of speech, while declaring the condition of the written word beyond hope, this is obviously an ironic exaggeration with which to conceal his own writing and his own art. In fact, writing and speech are in the same plight. Just as in speech there is an art of appearances and a corresponding art of true thought—sophistry and dialectic—so in writing there are two arts, one serving sophistic, the other dialectic. There is, then, an art of writing that comes to the aid of thought, and it is to this that the art of understanding—which affords the same help to what is written—is allied.

As we have said, all writing is a kind of alienated speech, and its signs need to be transformed back into speech and meaning. Because the

meaning has undergone a kind of self-alienation through being written down, this transformation back is the real hermeneutical task. The meaning of what has been said is to be stated anew, simply on the basis of the words passed on by means of the written signs. In contrast to the spoken word there is no other aid in interpreting the written word. Thus in a special sense everything depends on the "art" of writing.⁷ The spoken word interprets itself to an astonishing degree, by the manner of speaking, the tone of voice, the tempo, and so on, and also by the circumstances in which it is spoken.⁸

But there is also such a thing as writing that, as it were, reads itself. A remarkable debate on the spirit and the letter in philosophy between two great German philosophical writers, Schiller and Fichte,⁹ starts from this fact. It is interesting that the dispute cannot be resolved with the aesthetic criteria used by the two men. Fundamentally this is not a question of the aesthetics of good style, but a hermeneutical question. The "art" of writing in such a way that the thoughts of the reader are stimulated and held in productive movement has little to do with the conventional rhetorical or aesthetic means. Rather, it consists entirely in one's being drawn into the course of thought. The "art" of writing does not try to be understood and noticed as such. The art of writing, like the art of speaking, is not an end in itself and therefore not the fundamental object of hermeneutical effort. Understanding is drawn on entirely by the subject matter. Hence unclear thinking and "bad" writing are not exemplary cases where the art of hermeneutics can show itself in its full glory but, on the contrary, limiting cases which undermine the basic presupposition of all hermeneutical success, namely the clear unambiguity of the intended meaning.

All writing claims it can be awakened into spoken language, and this claim to autonomy of meaning goes so far that even an authentic reading—e.g., a poet's reading of his poem—becomes questionable when we are listening to something other than what our understanding should really be directed toward. Because the important thing is communicating the text's true meaning, interpreting it is already subject to the norm of the subject matter. This is the requirement that the Platonic dialectic makes when it tries to bring out the logos as such and in doing so often leaves behind the actual partner in the conversation. In fact, the particular weakness of writing, its greater helplessness as compared to speech, has another side to it, in that it demonstrates with redoubled clarity the dialectical task of understanding. As in conversation, understanding here too must try to strengthen the meaning of what is said. What is stated in

the text must be detached from all contingent factors and grasped in its full ideality, in which alone it has validity. Thus, precisely because it entirely detaches the sense of what is said from the person saying it, the written word makes the understanding reader the arbiter of its claim to truth. The reader experiences what is addressed to him and what he understands in all its validity. What he understands is always more than an unfamiliar opinion: it is always possible truth. This is what emerges from detaching what is spoken from the speaker and from the permanence that writing bestows. This is the deeper hermeneutical reason for the fact, mentioned above,¹⁰ that it does not occur to people who are not used to reading that what is written down could be wrong, since to them anything written seems like a self-authenticating document.

Everything written is, in fact, the paradigmatic object of hermeneutics. What we found in the extreme case of a foreign language and in the problems of translation is confirmed here by the autonomy of reading: understanding is not a psychic transposition. The horizon of understanding cannot be limited either by what the writer originally had in mind or by the horizon of the person to whom the text was originally addressed.

It sounds at first like a sensible hermeneutical rule—and is generally recognized as such—that nothing should be put into a text that the writer or the reader could not have intended. But this rule can be applied only in extreme cases. For texts do not ask to be understood as a living expression of the subjectivity of their writers. This, then, cannot define the limits of a text's meaning. However, it is not only limiting a text's meaning to the "actual" thoughts of the *author* that is questionable. Even if one tries to determine the meaning of a text objectively by regarding it as a contemporary document and in relation to its original *reader*, as was Schleiermacher's basic procedure, one does not get beyond an accidental delimitation. The idea of the contemporary addressee can claim only a restricted critical validity. For what is contemporaneity? Listeners of the day before yesterday as well as of the day after tomorrow are always among those to whom one speaks as a contemporary. Where are we to draw the line that excludes a reader from being addressed? What are contemporaries and what is a text's claim to truth in the face of this multifarious mixture of past and future? The idea of the original reader is full of unexamined idealization.

Furthermore, our conception of the nature of literary tradition contains a fundamental objection to the hermeneutical legitimacy of the idea of the original reader. We saw that literature is defined by the will to hand on.

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But a person who copies and passes on is doing it for his own contemporaries. Thus the reference to the original reader, like that to the meaning of the author, seems to offer only a very crude historico-hermeneutical criterion that cannot really limit the horizon of a text's meaning. What is fixed in writing has detached itself from the contingency of its origin and its author and made itself free for new relationships. Normative concepts such as the author's meaning or the original reader's understanding in fact represent only an empty space that is filled from time to time in understanding.

(B) LANGUAGE AS DETERMINATION OF THE HERMENEUTIC ACT

This brings us to the second aspect of the relationship between language and understanding. Not only is the special object of understanding, namely tradition, of a verbal nature; understanding itself has a fundamental connection with language. We started from the proposition that understanding is already interpretation because it creates the hermeneutical horizon within which the meaning of a text comes into force. But in order to be able to express a text's meaning and subject matter, we must translate it into our own language. However, this involves relating it to the whole complex of possible meanings in which we linguistically move. We have already investigated the logical structure of this in relation to the special place of the *question* as a hermeneutical phenomenon. In now considering the verbal nature of all understanding, we are expressing from another angle what we already saw in considering the dialectic of question and answer.

Here we are emphasizing a dimension that is generally ignored by the dominant conception that the historical sciences have of themselves. For the historian usually chooses concepts to describe the historical particularity of his objects without expressly reflecting on their origin and justification. He simply follows his interest in the material and takes no account of the fact that the descriptive concepts he chooses can be highly detrimental to his proper purpose if they assimilate what is historically different to what is familiar and thus, despite all impartiality, subordinate the alien being of the object to his own preconceptions. Thus, despite his scientific method, he behaves just like everyone else—as a child of his time who is unquestioningly dominated by the concepts and prejudices of his own age.¹¹

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Insofar as the historian does not admit this naivete to himself, he fails to reach the level of reflection that the subject matter demands. But his naivete becomes truly abysmal when he starts to become aware of the problems it raises and so demands that in understanding history one must leave one's own concepts aside and think only in the concepts of the epoch one is trying to understand.¹² This demand, which sounds like a logical implementation of historical consciousness is, as will be clear to every thoughtful reader, a naive illusion. The naivete of this claim does not consist in the fact that it goes unfulfilled because the interpreter does not sufficiently attain the ideal of leaving himself aside. This would still mean that it was a legitimate ideal, and one should strive to reach it as far as possible. But what the legitimate demand of the historical consciousness—to understand a period in terms of its own concepts—really means is something quite different. The call to leave aside the concepts of the present does not mean a naive transposition into the past. It is, rather, an essentially relative demand that has meaning only in relation to one's own concepts. Historical consciousness fails to understand its own nature if, in order to understand, it seeks to exclude what alone makes understanding possible. *To think historically* means, in fact, *to perform the transposition that the concepts of the past undergo* when we try to think in them. To think historically always involves mediating between those ideas and one's own thinking. To try to escape from one's own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible but manifestly absurd. To interpret means precisely to bring one's own preconceptions into play so that the text's meaning can really be made to speak for us.

In our analysis of the hermeneutical process we saw that to acquire a horizon of interpretation requires a fusion of horizons. This is now confirmed by the verbal aspect of interpretation. The text is made to speak through interpretation. But no text and no book speaks if it does not speak a language that reaches the other person. Thus interpretation must find the right language if it really wants to make the text speak. There cannot, therefore, be any single interpretation that is correct "in itself," precisely because every interpretation is concerned with the text itself. The historical life of a tradition depends on being constantly assimilated and interpreted. An interpretation that was correct in itself would be a foolish ideal that mistook the nature of tradition. Every interpretation has to adapt itself to the hermeneutical situation to which it belongs.

Being bound by a situation does not mean that the claim to correctness that every interpretation must make is dissolved into the subjective or the

occasional. We must not here abandon the insights of the romantics, who purified the problem of hermeneutics from all its occasional elements. Interpretation is not something pedagogical for us either; it is the act of understanding itself, which is realized—not just for the one for whom one is interpreting but also for the interpreter himself—in the explicitness of verbal interpretation. Thanks to the verbal nature of all interpretation, every interpretation includes the possibility of a relationship with others. There can be no speaking that does not bind the speaker and the person spoken to. This is true of the hermeneutic process as well. But this relationship does not determine the interpretative process of understanding—as if interpreting were a conscious adaptation to a pedagogical situation; rather, this process is simply *the concretion of the meaning itself*. Let us recall our emphasis on the element of application, which had completely disappeared from hermeneutics. We saw that 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. That this does not in the least relativize the claim to truth of every interpretation is seen from the fact that all interpretation is essentially verbal. The verbal explicitness that understanding achieves through interpretation does not create a second sense apart from that which is understood and interpreted. 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. And yet at the same time it must be expressed as something that is supposed to disappear. The possibility of understanding is dependent on the possibility of this kind of mediating interpretation.

This is also true in those cases when there is immediate understanding and no explicit interpretation is undertaken. For in these cases too interpretation must be possible. But this means that interpretation is contained potentially within the understanding process. It simply makes the understanding explicit. Thus interpretation is not a means through which understanding is achieved; rather, it enters into the content of what is understood. Let us recall that this means not only that the sense of the text can be realized as a unity but that the subject matter of which the text speaks is also expressed. The interpretation places the object, as it were, on the scales of words. There are a few characteristic variations on this general statement that indirectly confirm it. When we are concerned with understanding and interpreting verbal texts, interpretation in the medium of

language itself shows what understanding always is: assimilating what is said to the point that it becomes one's own. Verbal interpretation is the form of all interpretation, even when what is to be interpreted is not linguistic in nature—i.e., is not a text but a statue or a musical composition. We must not let ourselves be confused by forms of interpretation that are not verbal but in fact presuppose language. It is possible to demonstrate something by means of contrast—e.g., by placing two pictures alongside each other or reading two poems one after the other, so that one is interpreted by the other. In these cases demonstration seems to obviate verbal interpretation. But in fact this kind of demonstration is a modification of verbal interpretation. In such demonstration we have the reflection of interpretation, and the demonstration is used as a visual shortcut. Demonstration is interpretation in much the same sense as is a translation that embodies an interpretation, or the correct reading aloud of a text that has already decided the questions of interpretation, because one can only read aloud what one has understood. Understanding and interpretation are indissolubly bound together.

Obviously connected with the fact that interpretation and understanding are bound up with each other is that the concept of *interpretation* can be applied not only to scholarly interpretation but to artistic *reproduction*—e.g., musical or dramatic performance. We have shown above that this kind of reproduction is not a second creation re-creating the first; rather, it makes the work of art appear as itself for the first time. It brings to life the signs of the musical or dramatic text. Reading aloud is a similar process, in that it awakens a text and brings it into new immediacy.¹³

From this it follows that the same thing must be true of understanding in silent reading. Reading fundamentally involves interpretation. This is not to say that understanding as one reads is a kind of inner production in which the work of art would acquire an independent existence—as in a production visible to all—although remaining in the intimate sphere of one's own inner life. Rather, we are stating the contrary, namely that a production that takes place in the external world of space and time does not in fact have any existence independent of the work itself and can acquire such only through a secondary aesthetic differentiation. Interpreting music or a play by performing it is not basically different from understanding a text by reading it: understanding always includes interpretation. The work of the philologist too consists in making texts readable and intelligible—i.e., safeguarding a text against misunderstandings. Thus there is no essential difference between the interpretation that a work

undergoes in being performed and that which the scholar produces. A performing artist may feel that justifying his interpretation in words is very secondary, rejecting it as inartistic, but he cannot want to deny that such an account can be given of his reproductive interpretation. He too must want his interpretation to be correct and convincing, and it will not occur to him to deny that it is tied to the text he has before him. But this text is the same one that presents the scholarly interpreter with his task. Thus the performing artist will be unable to deny that his own understanding of a work, expressed in his reproductive interpretation, can itself be understood—i.e., interpreted and justified—and this interpretation will take place in verbal form. But even this is not a new creation of meaning. Rather, it too disappears again as an interpretation and preserves its truth in the immediacy of understanding.

This insight into the way interpretation and understanding are bound together will destroy that false romanticism of immediacy that artists and connoisseurs have pursued, and still do pursue, under the banner of the aesthetics of genius. Interpretation does not try to replace the interpreted work. It does not, for example, try to draw attention to itself by the poetic power of its own utterance. Rather, it remains *fundamentally* accidental. This is true not only of the interpreting word but also of performative interpretation. The interpreting word always has something accidental about it insofar as it is motivated by the hermeneutic question, not just for the pedagogical purposes to which it was limited in the Enlightenment but because understanding is always a genuine event.¹⁴ Similarly, performative interpretation is accidental in a fundamental sense—i.e., not just when something is played, imitated, translated, or read aloud for didactic purposes. These cases—where performance is interpretation in a special demonstrative sense, where it includes demonstrative exaggeration and highlighting—in fact differ only in degree, and not in kind, from other sorts of reproductive interpretation. However much it is the literary work or musical composition itself that acquires its mimic presence through the performance, every performance still has its own emphasis. There is little difference between this emphasis and using emphasis for didactic ends. All performance is interpretation. All interpretation is highlighting.

It is only because the performance has no permanent being of its own and disappears in the work which it reproduces that this fact does not emerge clearly. But if we take a comparable example from the plastic arts—e.g., drawings after old masters made by a great artist—we find the same interpretive highlighting in them. The same effect is experienced in

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watching revivals of old films or seeing for a second time a film that one has just seen and remembers clearly: everything seems overplayed. Thus it is wholly legitimate for us to speak of the interpretation that lies behind every reproduction, and it must be possible to give a fundamental account of it. The interpretation as a whole is made up of a thousand little decisions which all claim to be correct. Argumentative justification and interpretation do not need to be the artist's proper concern. Moreover, an explicit interpretation in language would only approximate correctness and fall short of the rounded concreteness achieved by an "artistic" reproduction. But this precludes neither the fact that all understanding has an intrinsic relation to interpretation nor the basic possibility of an interpretation in words.

We must rightly understand the fundamental priority of language asserted here. Indeed, language often seems ill suited to express what we feel. In the face of the overwhelming presence of works of art, the task of expressing in words what they say to us seems like an infinite and hopeless undertaking. The fact that our desire and capacity to understand always go beyond any statement that we can make seems like a critique of language. But this does not alter the fundamental priority of language. The possibilities of our knowledge seem to be far more individual than the possibilities of expression offered by language. Faced with the socially motivated tendency toward uniformity with which language forces understanding into particular schematic forms which hem us in, our desire for knowledge tries to escape from these schematizations and predecisions. However, the critical superiority which we claim over language pertains not to the conventions of verbal expression but to the conventions of meaning that have become sedimented in language. Thus that superiority says nothing against the essential connection between understanding and language. In fact it confirms this connection. For all critique that rises above the schematism of our statements in order to understand finds its expression in the form of language. Hence language always forestalls any objection to its jurisdiction. Its universality keeps pace with the universality of reason. Hermeneutical consciousness only participates in what constitutes the general relation between language and reason. If all understanding stands in a necessary relation of equivalence to its possible interpretation, and if there are basically no bounds set to understanding, then the verbal form in which this understanding is interpreted must contain within it an infinite dimension that transcends all bounds. Language is the language of reason itself.

LANGUAGE AS THE MEDIUM OF HERMENEUTIC EXPERIENCE

One says this, and then one hesitates. For this makes language so close to reason—which means, to the things it names—that one may ask why there should be different languages at all, since all seem to have the same proximity to reason and to objects. When a person lives in a language, he is filled with the sense of the unsurpassable appropriateness of the words he uses for the subject matter he is talking about. It seems impossible that other words in other languages could name the things equally well. The suitable word always seems to be one's own and unique, just as the thing referred to is always unique. The agony of translation consists ultimately in the fact that the original words seem to be inseparable from the things they refer to, so that to make a text intelligible one often has to give an interpretive paraphrase of it rather than translate it. The more sensitively our historical consciousness reacts, the more it seems to be aware of the untranslatability of the unfamiliar. But this makes the intimate unity of word and thing a hermeneutical scandal. How can we possibly understand anything written in a foreign language if we are thus imprisoned in our own?

It is necessary to see the speciousness of this argument. In actual fact the sensitivity of our historical consciousness tells us the opposite. The work of understanding and interpretation always remains meaningful. This shows the superior universality with which reason rises above the limitations of any given language. The hermeneutical experience is the corrective by means of which the thinking reason escapes the prison of language, and it is itself verbally constituted.

From this point of view the problem of language does not present itself in the same way as *philosophy of language* raises it. Certainly the variety of languages in which linguistics is interested presents us with a question. But this question is simply how every language, despite its difference from other languages, can say everything it wants. Linguistics teaches us that every language does this in its own way. But we then ask how, amid the variety of these forms of utterance, there is still the same unity of thought and speech, so that everything that has been transmitted in writing can be understood. Thus we are interested in the opposite of what linguistics tries to investigate.

The intimate unity of language and thought is the premise from which linguistics too starts. It is this alone that has made it a science. For only because this unity exists is it worthwhile for the investigator to make the abstraction which causes language to be the object of his research. Only by breaking with the conventionalist prejudices of theology and rationalism

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could Herder and Humboldt learn to see languages as views of the world. By acknowledging the unity of thought and language they could envision the task of comparing the various forms of this unity. We are starting from the same insight but going, as it were, in the opposite direction. Despite the multiplicity of ways of speech, we are trying to keep in mind the indissoluble unity of thought and language as we encounter it in the hermeneutical phenomenon, namely as the unity of understanding and interpretation.

Thus the question that concerns us is *the conceptual character* of all understanding. This only appears to be a secondary question. We have seen that conceptual interpretation is the realization of the hermeneutical experience itself. That is why our problem is so difficult. 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. Thus it is understandable that this side of the hermeneutic process has been wholly ignored. But there is the further point that the situation has been confused by incorrect *theories of language*. It is obvious that an instrumentalist theory of signs which sees words and concepts as handy tools has missed the point of the hermeneutical phenomenon. If we stick to what takes place in speech and, above all, in every dialogue with tradition carried on by the human sciences, we cannot fail to see that here concepts are constantly in the process of being formed. This does not mean that the interpreter is using new or unusual words. But the capacity to use familiar words is not based on an act of logical subsumption, through which a particular is placed under a universal concept. Let us remember, rather, that understanding always includes an element of application and thus produces an ongoing process of concept formation. We must consider this now if we want to liberate the verbal nature of understanding from the presuppositions of philosophy of language. The interpreter does not use words and concepts like a craftsman who picks up his tools and then puts them away. Rather, we must recognize that all understanding is interwoven with concepts and reject any theory that does not accept the intimate unity of word and subject matter.

Indeed, the situation is even more difficult. It is doubtful that the *concept of language* that modern linguistics and philosophy of language take as their starting point is adequate to the situation. It has recently been stated by some linguists—and rightly so—that the modern concept of language presumes a verbal consciousness that is itself a product of history and does

not apply to the beginning of the historical process, especially to what language was for the Greeks.¹⁵ From the complete unconsciousness of language that we find in classical Greece, the path leads to the instrumentalist devaluation of language that we find in modern times. This process of increasing consciousness, which also involves a change in the attitude to language, makes it possible for “language” as such—i.e., its form, separated from all content—to become an independent object of attention.

We can doubt whether this view’s characterization of the relation between language behavior and language theory is correct, but there is no doubt that the science and philosophy of language operate on the premise that their only concern is the *form* of language. Is the idea of form still appropriate here? Is language a symbolic form, as Cassirer calls it? Does this take account of the fact that language is unique in embracing everything—myth, art, law, and so on—that Cassirer also calls symbolic form?¹⁶

In analyzing the hermeneutical phenomenon we have stumbled upon the universal function of language. In revealing the verbal nature of the hermeneutical phenomenon, we see that it has a universal significance. Understanding and interpretation are related to verbal tradition in a specific way. But at the same time they transcend this relationship not only because all the creations of human culture, including the nonverbal ones, can be understood in this way, but more fundamentally because everything that is intelligible must be accessible to understanding and to interpretation. What is true of understanding is just as true of language. Neither is to be grasped simply as a fact that can be empirically investigated. Neither is ever simply an object but instead comprehends everything that can ever be an object.¹⁷

If we recognize this basic connection between language and understanding, we will not be able to view the development from unconsciousness of language via consciousness of language to the devaluation of language¹⁸ even as an unequivocally correct description of the historical process. This schema does not seem to me to be adequate even for the history of theories of language, as we shall see, let alone for the life of language. The language that lives in speech—which comprehends all understanding, including that of the interpreter of texts—is so much bound up with thinking and interpretation that we have too little left if we ignore the actual content of what languages hand down to us and try to consider language only as form. Unconsciousness of language has not ceased to be the genuine mode of being of speech. Let us, therefore, turn

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our attention to the *Greeks*, who did not have a word for what we call language, when the all-embracing unity of word and thing became problematical for them and hence worthy of attention. We will also consider *Christian thought in the Middle Ages*, which, because of its interest in dogmatic theology, rethought the mystery of this unity.

2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE IN THE HISTORY OF WESTERN THOUGHT

(A) LANGUAGE AND LOGOS

In the earliest times the intimate unity of word and thing was so obvious that the true name was considered to be part of the bearer of the name, if not indeed to substitute for him. In Greek the expression for "word," *onoma*, also means "name," and especially "proper name"—i.e., the name by which something is called. The word is understood primarily as a name. But a name is what it is because it is what someone is called and what he answers to. It belongs to its bearer. The rightness of the name is confirmed by the fact that someone answers to it. Thus it seems to belong to his being.

Greek philosophy more or less began with the insight that a word is *only* a name—i.e., that it does not represent true being. This is precisely the breakthrough of philosophical inquiry into the territory over which the name had undisputed rule. Belief in the word and doubt about it constitute the problem that the Greek Enlightenment saw in the relationship between the word and thing. Thereby the word changed from presenting the thing to substituting for it. The name that is given and can be altered raises doubt about the truth of the word. Can we speak of the rightness of names? But must we not speak of the rightness of words—i.e., insist on the unity of word and thing? Did not the most profound of all early thinkers, Heraclitus, discover the depth of meaning contained in the play on words? This is the background of Plato's *Cratylus*—the fundamental statement of Greek thought on language, which covers the whole range of problems so thoroughly that later Greek discussion (of which we have, in any case, only an imperfect knowledge) adds scarcely anything essential.¹⁹

Two theories discussed in Plato's *Cratylus* try in different ways to describe the relationship between word and thing: the conventionalist theory regards unambiguous linguistic usage, reached by agreement and practice,