

Hermeneutic Forever: Voice, Text, Digitization, and the “I”

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1. Interpretation: Verbal and Other

Although we tend unreflectively to think of interpretation as carried on in language and as applied to linguistic expression in oral utterance or in text, interpretation can in fact be much larger than language in human life.

In a quite ordinary and straightforward sense, to interpret means for a human being to bring out for another human being or for other human beings (or for himself or herself) what is concealed in a given manifestation, that is, what is concealed in a verbal statement or a given phenomenon or state of affairs providing information. We can interpret anything that provides information: not merely a verbal statement but also a sunset, a rumble in an automobile transmission, a gesture, a performance of instrumental music, a person's gait.

The terms “concealed,” “manifestation,” and “revealed,” just used, betray that we are thinking of knowledge here, as is common, by analogy basically with the sense of vision, rather than of hearing (voice-and-ear) or smell or taste or the manifold senses we group under “touch” (hot-cold, wet-dry, rough-smooth, soft-hard, resistant-yielding, and so on). Interpretation could be considered with regard to knowledge conceived by analogy with one or another of these other senses, too, but to do so would make a long, long story, and we can forego such considerations here.

As interpretation can apply to any sort of phenomenon, so it can be expressed in all sorts of human ways, not merely verbal but also nonverbal—for example, by raised eyebrows, a wave of the hand, a thumbs-down gesture, a knowing grin, or in non-gesticulatory ways, as by a grumble or by the clothes one wears or by a fireworks display. These nonverbal interpretations are always to some degree dependent on the culture in which the interpreters live, but some are also to some degree common to all human cultures. Thus, there are different kinds of smiles

and the meaning of a smile may vary widely (acceptable egalitarian relationship, brash insolence), but there is a general sense in which, cross-culturally, a smile is a smile, as against, for example, a frown.

Besides interpreting both the verbal and the nonverbal nonverbally, one can also interpret the verbal and the nonverbal verbally. Typically (although not in every instance) verbal interpretation as such has a certain edge over other kinds of interpretation in that it can operate with incomparably more complex implications than can other forms of interpretation, such as, for example, gestures, which can be exquisitely complex but can hardly produce the equivalent of Newton's *Principia mathematica*. A scientist working in a laboratory normally brings the results of the laboratory work to a conclusion, that is, interprets them—which is not to say with total explicitness—not in gestures or in a show of fireworks, but in an article or book.

If the work contains elaborate graphics to clarify matters in ways more economical than words, nevertheless at some point or points, directly or indirectly, the graphics must be explained verbally—although, once explained, they can work exquisitely and nonverbally, through visual attention to the verbally explained graphics.

Yet, although both verbal expression and nonverbal expression can be interpreted verbally, neither can ever be fully interpreted verbally, for any verbal interpretation must be given meaning also from the nonverbal in which the verbal is always embedded. This is why all texts, kept to themselves apart from nonverbal and nontextual context, always automatically deconstruct themselves. To hold together, even as texts, they need not only other texts but also the nontextual. Paolo Valesio (1986) has put this beautifully in the title of his brilliant book, *Ascoltare il silenzio* (*Listen to the Silence*), pay attention to what they are not saying but are simply taking for granted, and Stephen Tyler (1978) has made the point in another way in his book bearing the significant title, *The Said and the Unsaid*. Any given verbal interpretation receives its meaning in part from accompanying nonverbalized communication—shared traditions, common knowledge, shared sensory experience, here-and-now personal interactions, and much more—in which it is embedded.

To put it in another way, any *use* of words, oral, textual, or digitized, is not just words but is also a speech *act*, and as a specifiable speech *act*, is entangled in all sorts of other nonverbal matters—these persons speaking and these listeners listening, the physical setting, the mood (jocular,

half-serious, serious, uncompromising, for example), and much else. Text always relies, directly or indirectly, on more than the textual. To hold together, even as a text, it needs something more than text. Verbal interpretation as verbal is never complete. Total verbal explicitness is impossible. The definition (or interpretation) of interpretation just provided above itself calls for interpretation—which is not to say that we do not grasp it but that we do not grasp it simply through words.

Syntax or structure, which makes possible virtually unlimited complexity in relating various words/concepts, is what makes language, as has been known since Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) and as has been confirmed on sociobiological grounds by Bickerton (1990). Referentiality—the use of a particular sound or sign to “stand for” or “represent” some specific kind of thing other than itself—is not restricted to full human language, Bickerton has shown. (Even in common parlance, we do not say that a concept or a word “presents” something, but that it represents something—which was somehow present nonconceptually or nonverbally before it was *represented*.) Even without human coaching, referentiality is found in the “protolanguages” of species such as the vervet monkey, which in the wild has separate alarm calls to represent respectively the python, the martial eagle, and the leopard (12-15), each of which was present to an individual monkey before it was represented by its special referent call. But no trace of syntax or structure, including the simple and essential subject-predicate structure of language, has been found in such monkeys or in the much higher anthropoid apes (108; 13, 38-39, 97) even after these have been coached by humans. It is not referentiality but structure or syntax, including the cardinal subject-predicate structure, that is distinctive of language. Saussure had this right.

Language as such has always come into existence as sound (DeFrancis 1989, *passim*), and sound can be structured in illimitably intricate ways, as in a symphony. But nonverbal sound, even highly structured nonverbal sound, does not at all have the interpretive edge over other modes of expression that verbalized sound (and, later verbal text) has. For all its musicological and psychological resonance, Sibelius's *Finlandia* does not make Finland known in so circumstantial a way as does a history book about Finland, although it tells something about Finland that no words can express—once the hearer has been assured verbally that Finland is what the music is “about.”

But for all the edge that verbal interpretation has over other forms of interpreting, it is always joined with the nonverbal in one way or another. As has been noted, any *use* of speech, any speech act, oral or written, itself is never free of the nonverbal. We must be aware of the nonverbal setting as a whole in order to know what any given verbal expression says. “I’m going to get you” can be a serious threat, a not-so-serious threat, or a playful expression of any number of complex relationships, depending on the nonverbal setting in which the words are uttered—and, as the case may be, also on the antecedent verbal and/or nonverbal setting as well.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that verbal interpretation can never be purely verbal, interpretation, as has been seen, reaches a certain kind of peak insofar as it involves words. Studies in the ethnography of speech (e.g., Bauman and Sherzer 1989) or in the mass media of today (e.g., Downing et al. 1990) show how intricate the interaction between verbal utterance and nonverbal context can be. Although limited in a given instance by given exigencies, “context” as such for interpreting words can reach out indefinitely in space and in time, proximate or distant, which envelopes the present and which the present envelopes. Etymologies, for example, grounding the use of given words, can always be extended further. They can be historically bottomless, which is not at all to say inaccurate or uninformative. The information they supply is simply never total. There can be, and are, always further roots remaining to be accessed beneath those that etymology has bared.

A true anecdote can suggest how the nonverbal and the verbal can intermesh. At a meeting of the National Council on the Humanities some years ago, another member of the Council and a good friend, the distinguished director of a great municipal art gallery and thus a professional proponent of the visual, pulled me up on a remark I had made. I can no longer recall my remark but it must have been singularly nonilluminating. My friend countered with, “I would like to remind Walter Ong that, as has so often been said, one picture is worth a thousand words.” However stupid my own previous remark may have been, I could not let this remark of his get by. I came back, “If that is so, why do they keep *saying* it?” Why do they?

The reason of course is that, even in the case of a picture, verbal utterance can supply certain contexts and thus clarify elements that the graphic arts alone cannot clarify. A picture can be worth more than a thousand words if it is set in a cultural context that is adequately verbalized,

often enough not simply here and now but through memories or echoes of centuries-old discourse. A picture of a man with a sheep hoisted across his shoulders could mean a great many things. The centuries-old discourse about Jesus and the lost sheep fills it with specific and complex meaning, inviting limitless interpretation. But the verbalized context is itself defined in part extraverbally by its physical or historical setting, by cultural tradition, by gesture, and so on. In the instance just cited, the context of the story of the lost sheep includes a setting in a pastoral culture, where sheep are central to the human lifeworld, not in a hunting-and-gathering culture.

Besides being complex and supple, verbal interpretation is curiously self-propagating. For if, as has been seen, more than other sorts of interpretation (gesticular, and so on), verbalized interpretation moves toward maximized interpretation, it is at the same time never totally maximized, never totally completed and thus by its very existence invites further asymptotic movement toward completion.

In an asymptotic movement, the closer one gets to the objective, the more evident it becomes that the objective will never be reached. In a given situation, interlocutors can of course come to a satisfactory and true conclusion, not by reason of words alone, but because the meeting of their minds, mutual understanding, is realized not alone through the words spoken but also through the nonverbal existential context, such as the unconsciously shared cultural or personal memories out of which and in which the words are spoken. Plato notes that truth can be arrived at only after dialogue within long mutual acquaintanceship, "partnership in a common life" (*Seventh Letter* 341). Words alone will not do: the unsaid, in which words are embedded, must be shared in interpersonal relationship. Communication in words-and-context will yield truth here and now, will satisfy the demands of the present quest for truth even though the context and the words themselves are incomplete and could, of course, absolutely speaking, be subject to further verbalization and the grasp of truth thereby enlarged or deepened.

We can never understand anything to the limit. When we are communicating in words, verbalization can fruitfully stop where it does in a given situation not because there is nothing more that could be said, but because, given the present verbal-plus-nonverbal situation, the total existential relationship between interlocutors, each side senses that the other is at present satisfied, so that nothing more needs to be said, even though explanation could theoretically be prolonged indefinitely. A true and, for

the given situation, adequate stage of explanation has been reached. Silence ensues. But the silence can later generate more words (and more silence)—as it does in Valesio's book, *Ascoltare il silenzio*.

2. Stages of Interpretation or of Hermeneutic

In the past few decades, the Greek-based term *hermeneutics* or, alternatively, *hermeneutic*, with its cognates in French, German, and other languages, has attracted to itself discussion of the sort here carried on thus far with reference to the Latin-based term *interpretation*. Hermeneutics is indeed interpretation, but commonly refers to reflective or "scientific" interpretation. Reasons for the current fascination with hermeneutics will be touched on later. Meanwhile, the terms can be treated together here.

One can divide the stages of interpretation or hermeneutic historically and/or cross-culturally in various ways. The division here undertaken is one opened by recent studies in contrasts between oral, chirographic, typographic, and electronic cultures, under the following subheadings. This pattern of interpretation is not preemptive or exclusive. It is examined here simply for whatever it can contribute to overall understanding.

1. *Oral interpretation of oral utterance*. It should be noted what is meant, and indeed what is at stake, here. We are not concerned with "texts" as such at all. In dealing with what I have elsewhere styled primary oral culture, a culture which has no knowledge of any sort of writing or even of the possibility of writing (for various movements toward writing and the final achievement of full writing, see DeFrancis 1989), to speak (or write) of an "oral text" is an anachronism. In a primary oral culture, there can be no oral "text," however we may have been addicted until recent times to think unreflectively of oral utterance not by examining oral cultures' utterances as such but only by conceiving of them by analogy with texts, retrojecting our concept of an oral culture out of what is known of our own or others' textual cultures.

It is of course true that our study of primary oral cultures involves texts. For study purposes, although we can now sound-tape an oral performance, we commonly at some point make even the oral taped performance into texts, to which we can return, as we cannot to a live oral performance. And, of course, although the acoustic tape can recreate the sound, it cannot bring back the total existential situation in which the

performance initially lived: this total real situation that defines orality of course eludes recovery. Moreover, today's linear, scientific or quasi-scientific discourse about oral performance and oral culture, as about anything else, is dependent upon mental structures that have been made available by writing and which implement our thought processes (Ong 1982). Thus, in a deeply textualized culture study of oral performance will always bear some mark of the textualized mental habits of the investigators. But intelligence is reflective, can turn back on itself, so that, while we can never totally re-create a primary oral culture in our imagination or minds, we can approximately re-create it and be aware that our re-creation is defective in various ways (not all of which we are capable of specifying, although we may, in various inarticulate ways, register virtually all of them). Such knowledge about the limitations under which we labor is the next best thing to not having the limitations. And it is crucial.

We need to remember that, by a well warranted extrapolation from Gödel's proof, any sort of closed system is impossible. Neither oral language nor text nor electronic "artificial intelligence" can be a closed system. They are all interactive somewhere with something other than themselves. The foundation of computer science, for example, as Leith (1990) has shown, is sociological. (Why does one start the science with this rather than that question or set of questions?—No computer can respond to such a fundamental query, precisely because it a question arising antecedently to all computerization.) Unless one wishes to suppose that computers were there from the beginning of *Homo sapiens* some 150,000 years ago (Stringer 1990), as some want to postulate "text" was.

Deconstructionists and others seem surprised (and delighted—or both) to be able to show that texts and anything considered by analogy as a text, can be found never to have total internal consistency. But this is hardly surprising if one notes that texts are not purely "natural" products, such as exhaled breath or sweat or spittle, but are technologically constructed systems (writing is a technology, as also, *a fortiori*, is print). As systems, they cannot be self-contained. They are built by something outside them. Indeed, *ceteris paribus*, the same is true of oral utterance, which cannot be self-contained either, for it also cannot be developed into a self-contained system.

There is no evidence that either writing or the very possibility of writing entered human consciousness for nearly all of the approximately 150,000 years of the existence of *Homo sapiens*—or, to adopt the outer

limit of existence of *Homo sapiens*, for the possibly 500,000 years of the existence of the species (Stringer 1990). We can assume, not unrealistically (see DeFrancis 1989), that *Homo sapiens* could in some way speak from the beginning, that speech of some sort was what constituted or made *Homo sapiens* the dominant species that we became. Yet, although we have evidence of other artifacts running back tens or even hundreds of thousands of years, we have no evidence of writing before 5000 to 6000 years ago—a mere nothing in 150,000 to 500,000 years of existence. To treat verbal expression for 150,000 years or more as always a “text” in the total absence of any such thing as a manufactured text—seems stultifying, when we now know in massive and circumstantial detail what differentiates the mental and speech activities of oral cultures from the mental and speech activities of writing cultures.

We know enough about the prechirographic, purely oral stage that has constituted almost all of human existence to be able to say that in oral culture itself all interpretation was in a certain sense ad hoc, and essentially dialogic, an oral exchange about an oral utterance or oral utterances. Oral interpretation ultimately owed what stability it had not simply to other oral utterances but basically to the cultural institutions in which utterance was deeply embedded rather than to any extensively analytic explanation of anything such as textual cultures make possible (in their oral as well as in their textual performance). The meaning of any word was validated by no textual or other record, but simply by its actual use over time in given situations and/or with gestures and other nonverbal signifiers (Sienaert 1990). You knew what the word meant from the way you had heard it embedded in usage, that is, in nonverbal context, perhaps mingled with the verbal context of other words accompanying it. There were no definitions, no records of how the word had previously been used and there was no way to “look it up”—“look up” was an “empty” expression, totally meaningless and incomprehensible in purely oral culture. Nor was there any way to retrieve earlier oral uses of the word in their fuller verbal and nonverbal contexts. Each person assessed the meaning of each word by interpreting the context in which he or she encountered the word.

2. *Textual interpretation of oral utterance.* This refers to interpretation of oral performance as such carried out by cultures that have interiorized writing, made it their own, and cultures that use print. The psychodynamics of orality have been described in appreciable depth only beginning with the work of Marcel Jousse from 1924 on (see Sienaert 1990)

and with Milman Parry's more immediately eventful collected works published in 1971, and are still passed over by much text-bound scholarship. But we do have (as in Goody 1968, Foley 1990, and many other sources) manuscript and printed hermeneutic of verbal performances of oral peoples as such, which has, of course, required intensive fieldwork, entailing, among other things, transcription in the field. Such interpretation cannot be identical with the oral interpretation of oral speech in a primary oral culture, for it cannot rid itself entirely of the textual mindset with which it operates. But it can reflectively undercut its own textuality to an extent, undertaking to approximate the mindset of the oral cultures it is studying. The problem is no more than the most basic problem of all history: not so much the problem of reconstructing past conditions out of details we have accumulated about them, as that of forgetting what we know that those we are studying did not know.

3. *Chirographic (handwritten) interpretation of written text.* This exists in massive quantity from antiquity. It is handicapped by the fact that manuscript texts are inherently unstable by contrast with the printed texts that we are used to and take for granted. In copying previously corrected copies, scribes inevitably introduce new errors of their own. Print can correct texts piecemeal, leaving untouched the parts of the original that are not to be corrected.

4. *Printed interpretation of printed text.* Here the text dealt with in the verbal interpretation of the text can be to all intents and purposes stable. Yet interpretation here has been handicapped by limited awareness of the psychodynamics of oral utterance and of the effects of this psychodynamics on early writing, where a good deal of conspicuous "oral residue" (habits of mind fixed by many ages of oral performance) is detectable in printed texts well into the nineteenth century in the West (Ong 1967:22, e.g.).

By the mid-eighteenth century, after print has interiorized itself thoroughly in human consciousness (see Kernan 1987), so that the text, fixed in print to an extent unrealizable in manuscript, is felt as a physical thing apart from spoken words, interpretation becomes a self-conscious, semi-scientific, reflective activity, such as we commonly today take "hermeneutics," strictly so-called, to be (see below, "The Hermeneutic Explosion"). The hermeneutic age begins roughly with romanticism and the concomitant dissolution of the centuries-old age of rhetoric, which had originated as a reflectively conscious "art" in the highly oral culture of Greek antiquity and which often enforced highly oral styles even in written

and printed utterance.

5. *Electronically implemented hermeneutic of oral utterance.* This is managed usually by recording the oral utterance as sound, most often via sound tapes or, now, compact disks. But the taped oral utterance finds itself inexorably transmuted into inscribed, visualized text for more intensive study. Once in text, the oral utterance is read—which is to say, reconverted into living sound either vocally or in the imagination of the reader.

6. *Electronically implemented hermeneutic of written or printed or electronically produced text.* With electronics, and particularly the computer, hermeneutics has entered a more intensely reflective stage than ever before, as greater and greater stores of information can be dealt with by means of more and more potent technological aids to interpretation. The distance of interpretation from utterance is increased exponentially as more circumstantially accurate, particularized hermeneutic is spectacularly improved. Computerized data bases will now, for example, give every instance of the use of a given key word in a computerized book text running to thousands of pages or even provide today every instance of the occurrence, with a multi-word context, of a given individual's name in the *New York Times* of yesterday (this for all the world, via a data base located in Ohio).

Most notably, as Bolter has explained in exquisite detail in his *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*, the computer produces an electronic text which is newly open and fluid, subject to constant supplementing and revision. Computerized hermeneutics operates in and on and out of this open, electronic text. Pictures and other graphics can become a part of the electronic text, a part of writing. But in the last analysis, the governing structure of such hermeneutics remains verbal, as Bolter's book itself shows. The book is available in print or on computer diskette. Yet in this new world of the open text, even on diskette, the verbal retains its primacy as explanation. Bolter uses illustrations and graphics, but these are embedded in a text which is overwhelmingly verbal, even when including and freshly interacting with visual presentation.

3. The Hermeneutic Explosion

Interpretation is thought of and practiced today more and more under the title of "hermeneutics." Although human beings have been interpreting

utterance from time immemorial, the development of hermeneutics, so labeled, has been a relatively recent phenomenon, following on the saturation of consciousness with print, which made verbalization into a fixed physical object as it never before had been felt to be. A text could now be operated upon as a stable physical object felt as somehow distinct from the living, moving thought and speech performing the hermeneutic operation. Instead of sounds, one had a visible object that, even more in mechanically rigidified print than in writing, could be felt as a fixed “thing” on which mobile, here-and-now moving verbal hermeneutic (oral, or more often textual) could operate. (One of the contributions of deconstruction and other recent literary theory and philosophy, has been to sound the alert that a text is not all that fixed a “thing.”) Hermeneutics refers to the resulting systematized or methodized interpretation, felt as different from the text on which it “operates” even if the hermeneutic emerges as itself a text. “Hermeneutics,” as against “interpretation,” suggests explicit reflection about the interpretive process itself. Hermeneutics is interpretation grown self-conscious.

Hermeneutics, or alternatively *hermeneutic*, is a relatively new term in English, as are its equivalents in other languages. The earliest citation of the English-language term in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1961, rpt. 1983) is from the year 1737, in the period when, some two centuries after its invention, print was taking definitive possession of human consciousness in the West, as Kernan (1987) has so well shown in his *Printing Technology, Letters, and Samuel Johnson*.

Hermeneutics as such at first addressed itself largely to biblical and other sacred texts, but it has now expanded far more widely. Specialized hermeneutics, more or less methodical interpretive operations and theories, have been developed for different sorts of text—literary or poetic, political, philosophical, scientific, and other. Elaborate, often deeply insightful ways of managing textual hermeneutics have been devised in recent times, notably by theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Bultmann, and Jürgen Moltmann, by philosophers such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Paul Ricoeur, and by hosts of literary commentators, from the Formalists and the New Critics through the Deconstructionists. Hans-Georg Gadamer has produced a magisterial treatment of the subject in his *Truth and Method* (1983, original German 1960), which has itself been subject to further hermeneutic processing by Joel C. Weinsheimer in his *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics: A*

Reading of Truth and Method (1985). Weinsheimer explains or interprets what Gadamer was doing when he was explaining or interpreting what he was interpreting—which was often one or another interpretation worked out by earlier authors.

But the work of these practitioners and theorists is only the tip of the iceberg. In our present electronic era, the term *hermeneutics* has become a cross-disciplinary academic and intellectual buzzword. It encompasses far more than interpreting simply texts. Cruising through a university library catalogue, one finds endless listings of diverse *hermeneutics* under title and/or subject headings, largely from the 1970s on, such as “literary hermeneutics,” “hermeneutics and analysis,” “science, hermeneutics, and praxis,” “Buddhist hermeneutics,” “hermeneutics as method, philosophy, and critique,” “context and hermeneutics,” “hermeneutics, tradition, and reason,” “hermeneutics and deconstruction,” “hermeneutics and social science,” “hermeneutics as politics,” “hermeneutics of postmodernity,” “hermeneutics of ultimacy,” “hermeneutics versus science” (is hermeneutics opposed to science, allied with science or even constitutive of science, or simply used to explain science?), “religion, literature, and hermeneutics,” “feminist hermeneutics,” “philosophical hermeneutics” (is hermeneutics allied with philosophy, supplementary to philosophy, interwoven with philosophy, constitutive of philosophy?), “Yeats’s autobiography and hermeneutics,” “hermeneutics and the personal structure of language,” and so on and on. The alternative term *interpretation* is not uncommon, but its use in past or present shows nothing of the trendiness found in the use of the more reflectively intensive *hermeneutics* from the past few decades through the present. The textually targeted *hermeneutics*, born of the study of texts, is evidence of the hold of the text and its intellectual accessories on the mind today, which has set the stage and furnished the raw material for the New Criticism, structuralism, and deconstruction, and doubtless will set the stage for much else still in the offing.

In his impressively comprehensive study of hermeneutics and related subjects just mentioned, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer notes that formal study of what we now style hermeneutics was originally rooted in the study of texts and that “Schleiermacher was the first to see that the hermeneutical problem was not raised by written words alone, but that the oral utterance also presented—and perhaps in its fullest form—the problem of understanding” (353). The astounding fact that, according to Gadamer, no one before Schleiermacher appeared to be aware of the need of

hermeneutics for interpreting oral utterance is something to reflect on in relation to our recent textual fixation.

In fact, the Greek term *hermeneia* refers indifferently to interpretation or explanation of oral utterance or text or other phenomena. Interpretation or hermeneutic originated with oral utterance, but the relevance of interpretation or hermeneutic to oral utterance in our time grows anachronistically out of awareness of its relevance to texts. This anachronistic cast of thinking is symptomatic of the textual bias that still affects study of language and thought almost everywhere—and understandably so, for systematic, linearly developed, abstract, scientific or quasi-scientific study of any kind depends on writing. There is no oral treatise on orality, no oral “study” of orality, and there cannot be, for there can be no oral treatise on anything (Havelock 1968). All you can have—and this, indeed, is a lot—is oral interpretation of an always fluid sort, existentially meaningful (fitting into the immediate, living situation), but never “scientifically” controlled (that is, quasi-static).

The widespread and ultimately indispensable use of writing and its sequels, print and electronic text, ultimately established our present and longstanding textual bias, but it also enables us to correct our textual bias, at least to a degree, even though we seldom do so. In cultures so reliant as ours on writing and print and now electronics, text becomes all too readily the model for all utterance, and eventually for all of existence. All text, we must remember, is the creation not just of unaided human beings, as oral speech is, but of human beings plus technology, without which text is impossible. Relating Gadamer’s observations here to the four stages of verbal communication we have mentioned earlier—primary oral culture (no knowledge of writing or of its possibility), scribal or chirographic culture, print culture, and electronic culture—we can discern a profoundly significant sequential pattern. (1) In primary oral cultures, interpretation certainly took place in oral verbal exchange, paradigmatically in a dialogic setting. One of Plato’s objections to writing in the *Phaedrus* (275) is precisely that it cannot interpret itself if you ask it what it means, whereas oral utterance can normally be interpreted by its speaker. (2) With handwritten texts, interpretation becomes more urgent, precisely because there is no direct dialogic interaction—the writer and the reader or audience need not be and normally are not present to each other. Since verbalization always implies dialogue, the writer and reader have always to fictionalize one another into a dialogue setting (Ong 1975). (3) With the deep

interiorization of print in the mid-eighteenth century, when authors could for the first time make their living out of producing texts for sale (earlier, even after print was invented, books were not priced to include royalties, so that writers had to have a patron or some independent source of income—see Kernan 1987 for details), hermeneutics as a self-conscious, more or less systematized activity comes into its own. (4) With the development of electronic communication, today hermeneutics has of course become little short of an obsession. Electronic texts are the product of digitization, that is, of fractioning, of treating everything in terms of numerically distinct units, a radical act of separation contrasting with the unifying drive of hermeneutics. We see here that interpretation becomes more and more self-conscious as the originally spoken word is distanced more and more from the human lifeworld.

Why is it that hermeneutics has become such an obsession precisely in the era of the development of electronic communication? One reason that suggests itself is that electronic communication has made us into an information society, and information of itself says nothing unless it is interpreted or treated hermeneutically. DNA carries massive “information” that is cogent enough in itself operationally but that “says” nothing: to be put into words and thought patterns it has to be interpreted, or treated hermeneutically by the human mind.

But further, a deep subconscious or unconscious compensatory psychological development seems to be at work here. Computers and other electronic media work by fractioning. Information in a computer has to be reduced to binary numerical units, 0 and 1. For computerization is now virtually all digital: early analogue computers are mostly outmoded. Binary digitization, like all digitization, breaks everything apart, but into more and more infinitesimal pieces until the breaks are so tiny that they can in effect be disregarded.

Nevertheless, the breaks are there and always will be, as Leith, among others, has made clear. While hermeneutics can and does profit from use of digitization in computers, it also moves in the opposite direction, away from digital breakdown. Hermeneutics, interpretation, seeks ultimately not to divide but to integrate. Hermeneutics operates on the deep underlying principle that everything is related to everything else. By relating one thing to another, and, in intent if not in actual achievement, ultimately relating everything to everything else—for example, explaining the past by the present and the present by the past and otherwise utilizing

the “hermeneutic circle”—its implicit ambition is ultimately to connect all things in consciousnesses to one another in the unbroken web of history out of which all experience of anything and everything emerges—William James’s “big, blooming, buzzing confusion” that impacts the newborn infant. We can live with digitization (which is disguisedly but always radically incomplete, even when entirely adequate) because we have hermeneutics (though it also is always incomplete): the two are complete and incomplete in different and complementary ways.

Compared to one another, the present-day preoccupation with digitization, in the computer and elsewhere, and the present-day preoccupation with hermeneutics thus appear to be psychologically complementary. Both preoccupations are in evidence across the world in varying degrees, most notably in industrialized societies. It appears that we can live with digital fractioning (dehumanizing in itself) because we are involved so deeply in the humanizing effort of hermeneutics. Never have communications media been given to such detailed interpretation of their own meaning and impact, humanizing and dehumanizing, as in our digitizing society. One need only scour through the subject headings in a library catalogue for recent titles featuring “communication” and “communications” to see the state of affairs. Isocrates and Plato and Socrates and Aristotle are far from neglected today. We have more knowledge of them than ever. As a result their thought is digested and interwoven with and even smothered by ongoing interpretations of interpretations of interpretations of their work and that of others.

In sum, although digitization, as a fractioning enterprise, and hermeneutics, as a holistic or totalizing enterprise, are opposed to one another, they are also complementary. That is, digitization can serve hermeneutic. The vast net of textual hermeneutic with which the scholar is surrounded today could not have been woven and could not be maintained without the use of digitizing technology. And without hermeneutic, which tells us what digitization means and relates digitization to things outside itself, digitization is only gibberish. Hence the multifarious works interpreting computers and the specific characteristics and meanings of the texts they produce.

The highly reflective self-conscious rhetorical cultures of the West from classical antiquity through the nineteenth century cannot begin to match the self-conscious reflectiveness concerning communications that marks our present age, when thousands of new books on communications in

its verbal and multifarious other forms are published every year to serve the internet of communication departments and research centers, as well as innumerable individuals across the world.

4. All Utterance Is Interpretive or Hermeneutic

If we take interpretation (or self-conscious interpretation, which is styled hermeneutic) in a quite ordinary and straightforward sense, so that interpretation, as here indicated at the start, means for a human being to bring out for another or others (or for himself or herself) what is concealed in a given manifestation, it appears evident that all use of language is interpretive or hermeneutic. Interpretation or hermeneutic makes manifest something (perhaps highly controversial or ironic) that was not evident before the interpretation or hermeneutic was provided. And of course it also simultaneously conceals something. All explanation or hermeneutic warrants further explanation or hermeneutic, including this explanation or hermeneutic being provided here. Again, total verbal explicitness is impossible. As has been indicated earlier, hermeneutic or explanation stops not when there is nothing left to be explained but when, for present purposes, in this given existential situation, nothing further is felt to be necessary. Thus the papers being delivered at the meetings of learned societies stop when they do.

Awareness that all use of language is interpretative or hermeneutic connects with the awareness that truth can never be simply propositional, as the Ramist and Cartesian drive in Western noetics had commonly supposed or implied. Every propositional truth is limited in explicitness and thus demands interpretation. Every statement is embedded in history, nonverbal history even more than verbal history. As has just been stated, total verbal explicitness is impossible.

In this last statement, for example, I have not made verbally clear what is meant by “explicitness.” But hearers can *sense* quite adequately what is meant. The Latin *explicare*, from which we derive our *explicit*, means to unfold, as a piece of cloth or papyrus. We readily sense the analogy between unfolding and verbal explanation, but no one can give an absolutely total philosophical and/or phenomenological account of exactly what the details of this analogy come to, no more no less. We need not be entirely explicit about explicitness. For we get the sense of the statement

that totally verbal explicitness is impossible from more than just the words in the statement. We sense the analogy from our experience of the world around us, and that suffices in a given case.

The truth of the most clear-cut proposition is *never* within the words alone, but in the words-plus-existential-context. As the earlier mentioned title of Paolo Valesio's (1986) book puts it, *Ascoltare il silenzio* (that is, *Listen to the Silence*, or *Listen to What They Are Not Saying*, so as to understand what they are saying), and Tyler's (1978) earlier cited title, *The Said and the Unsaid*, recommends similar cautions. The tremendous shared experience out of which two persons with a shared cultural background make their utterances is what gives them the full sense of the utterances—which would be puzzling or utterly incomprehensible to persons without the shared experience. This is why persons of utterly diverse cultural backgrounds often find it hard or impossible to understand what each other are saying.

5. Textual Bias, Fundamentalisms, and the “I”

Textual bias, proneness to identify words with text and only the text, encourages religious fundamentalists, cultural fundamentalists, and other fundamentalists, but also perhaps most persons, declared fundamentalists or not, in a culture so addicted to literacy as that of the United States, to believe that truth, of various sorts or even of all sorts, can be neatly enclosed in a proposition or a limited set of propositions that are totally explicit and self-contained, not needing or indeed even tolerating any interpretation. This runs contrary to Gödel's theorem, earlier mentioned, which in essence, shows that a self-contained system—mathematical in Gödel's proof, but by extension, a self-contained noetic system of any sort—is impossible. Any purportedly closed system is bound to contain unresolved oppositions. Every utterance in a purportedly closed system ultimately has to be supported somehow, directly or indirectly, from the outside.

In the case of Christian fundamentalists, for example, what they commonly may not advert to is the biblical statement of Jesus's: “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14.6). Jesus leaves his followers no list of a given number of propositional statements that total up all that he comes to utter as the Word of God. There is no way even for the Word of God to

do this. In Christian teaching, full truth reaches beyond, transcends any propositional statement. This statement by Jesus reaches beyond itself, via the personal “I,” to indicate that full truth, self-contained truth is not a statement at all, but *is* nothing less than a *person*.

The person not only of Jesus, for a believer, but the person of every human being, for believers and nonbelievers, lies in a way beyond statement. The “I” that any one of us speaks lies beyond statement in the sense that although every statement originates, ultimately, from an “I,” no mere statement can ever make clear what constitutes this “I” as against any other “I” spoken by any other human being.

“I” is not a name. “I” is not a noun, but a pronoun, something in place of a noun or name (Latin *pro*, “in place of”), for the person uttering “I” can be referred to by various nouns or names: a human being, a woman or a man, a Vietnamese, a Canadian, an athlete, Margaret, James, and so on. (In English the words *name* and *noun* derive from the same Indo-European root. Latin uses the same word, *nomen*, to mean either a name or, grammatically, a noun.)

Names are always given or applied to what they refer to. No thing and no person comes equipped with a name. Names come from the outside. A name is either “given” to a person or thing, or, in the case of a person, may be “taken” by the person. No person is born with any name at all. Nothing in the universe comes fitted with a name: every name is exterior to what it denotes. Because it is something applied from the outside, in slang parlance a name, especially a personal name, is readily called and sensed as a “handle.” As a “handle,” a name makes it possible to manipulate what it is attached to.

The “I” that a person utters is not *given* to the person at all, as his or her name is. Unlike one’s name, the “I” comes from the inside, from the interior of the person uttering it and has its referentiality in terms of an interior. “I” expresses itself by uttering or “outering” itself from inside consciousness (*utter* is etymologically a variant of *outer*). Here, in the case of the “I,” what the “handle” would be attached to somehow eludes the reach of the one using the “handle.” The “I” is precisely too interior to be accessed by any “handle.”

The “I” that one person speaks sounds just like the “I” that another person speaks. There is no way to express externally what differentiates any one “I” from any other “I.” Individuals can be differentiated by their names, once they have been given names, which, as has been seen, are

external “handles,” appendages fastened on from the outside. “I” is a *pronoun*, something in place of a noun (Latin *pro*, “in place of”). Since each utterly different person uses the same sounded or textualized “I” (or its equivalent in whatever language is being spoken), what a particular “I” refers to is actually known only as a particular presence of a particular interior (but outwardly directed) consciousness. The presence of one person is utterly different from the presence of another person.

Here is the paradigm of all sense of “presence”: the presence of one *person* to another *person* or other *persons*. A nonhuman animal, and *a fortiori* nonliving thing, is not a “presence” to a human being in the way another human being is. As compared to what we sense face-to-face with another human being, we all know the emptiness that stares out from an animal’s eye.¹

The “I” that each of the billions of persons in the world utters is each one’s own, as a name never is, because the “I” emerges from inside the person himself or herself, from inside his or her own interior consciousness, where no other human being exists.

No one else can say “I” and make it mean what it means when I say “I.” When you try, saying “I am speaking of what you mean when you say ‘I,’” In “what you mean when you say ‘I,’” your word that refers *directly* to me is not the “I” but the “you.”

“You” is similarly not a name applied from outside. It is felt by the interlocutor as belonging to the interior of the one the “I” is addressing. “You” indicates that the person who utters it is in some kind of immediate psychological contact with the person to whom “you” refers, a contact inaccessible simply with names (nouns).

Because “I” and “you” are utterly unlike the rest of discourse, when a name for the particular “I” or “you” occurs appositively in a text, it is set off with commas (or in oral discourse, with changes of pitch and pauses): “I, Mary, certify to you, John, that my statement is true.” Somehow, “I” and “you” establish a level of discourse in which names referring to the “I” and/or “you” are an intrusion. “I” and “you” operate in a special and deeper way because of their source or grounding in the human interior, which is not accessed by a name.

Linguistically “I” and “you” are referred to as “floaters”: “I” means whoever says it, “you” means whoever is being addressed. “I” and “you” are

¹ Fuller discussion in Ong 1967:298-308, etc.

not nouns but *pronouns*, name substitutes. As words, “I” and “you” are not of themselves attached to any designatable object or person other than the person by whom or to whom they here and now happen to be “uttered” (or “outered,” as noted above). There are other “floaters” in language, all of them determined by their reference, direct or indirect, to the ambiance of a particular “I” or “you,” expressing something by reference to the individual’s own personal world or awareness: for example, here, now, then, there, soon, and so on.

The most radically unambiguous words in any language are the words for “I” and “you,” as spoken in direct dialogue. “I” and “you,” or their equivalents in any language, do not demand or indeed tolerate interpretation or hermeneutic. Either you “get” them, make the connection with them, or you do not. When I say “I” and you fail to connect, I might undertake some maneuvers, verbal or other, to enable to you “connect” with me, but I have no way to give you an interpretation or a hermeneutic of what the “I” might “mean.”

Discourse founded in the direct relationship of “I” and “you” (singular sense, formerly expressed by “thou”) represents a different level of discourse from that where only nouns (representing not persons directly, but things, and persons only indirectly) are in control, as Martin Buber decades ago made clear in his *I and Thou* (1923).

Since each “I” must sense the “you” whom the “I” addresses before speech begins, dialogue demands, paradoxically enough, that the persons addressing one another be somehow aware of the interior of each other before they can begin to communicate verbally. Although we have no way of retrieving the point in human history at which the first words or words were spoken, we can be quite sure of certain underlying features that speech possesses from the beginning. In verbal communication, the hearer must be aware that the speaker intends the utterance to be a word or words and not just noise; the speaker must know that the hearer knows this, and the hearer must know that the speaker knows that he or she (the hearer) knows it. The hermeneutic circle again. We are somehow inside one another’s consciousnesses *before* we begin to speak to another or others.

Otherwise, there is no way to *say* anything.

6. A Note on Fingers and Digits

Digitization means treatment of data in terms of numerically distinct units. A digit today commonly means a numerical unit such as digitization employs—in computer programs 0 and 1. The English *digitization* and *digit* both derive from the Latin term *digitus*, which means a finger or a toe, as the English term *digit* still does at times.

In many, though not all, cultures, the child uses his or her own fingers and/or toes to learn counting, that is, digitization. Reflection on the etymologies of the words *digit*, *digitize*, and their cognates and on the structure of fingers and toes shows how digitization is grounded in the human lifeworld in a remarkably human way. The fingers and/or toes are separate from one another at their tips, but part of you at their bases. Using fingers and/or toes, the infant, fearful of separation, as is well known, in his or her initially and provisionally intact world of infant-and-mother, can count effectively and with some security because, so clearly separated at their tips, the fingers and toes are securely attached to the body and manipulable. It is common with children counting with their fingers or toes to *touch* each of them successively. This reassures the child that the neatly tip-separated digits are still theirs, part of themselves somehow, not threatening total dismemberment or disintegration.

This human rooting of digitization is never quite eliminated: Leith (1990) has shown how the ultimate starting point for computerization is not abstract but concretely sociological, as has been noted earlier. A computer program begins with a decision to start this way rather than that way, with this question rather than that question—a decision made and formulated in the human lifeworld, not within a computer. Computers, after all, do not breed themselves. They come out of the human lifeworld, are tools, extensions of human beings (not vice versa). Computers are artificial, but in being so are eminently human. For there is nothing more natural to human beings than to be artificial. Digits start by being connected with the person.

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