

**Bryn Mawr College**  
**Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr**  
**College**

---

Philosophy Faculty Research and Scholarship

Philosophy

---

2008

# Gadamerian Hermeneutics and Irony: Between Strauss and Derrida

Robert J. Dostal

*Bryn Mawr College*, [rdostal@brynmawr.edu](mailto:rdostal@brynmawr.edu)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://repository.brynmawr.edu/philosophy\\_pubs](http://repository.brynmawr.edu/philosophy_pubs)

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

## Custom Citation

Dostal, Robert J., "Gadamerian Hermeneutics and Irony: Between Strauss and Derrida," *Research in Phenomenology* 38:2, (2008): 247-269.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. [http://repository.brynmawr.edu/philosophy\\_pubs/6](http://repository.brynmawr.edu/philosophy_pubs/6)

For more information, please contact [repository@brynmawr.edu](mailto:repository@brynmawr.edu).

Robert J. Dostal

Bryn Mawr College

## GADAMERIAN HERMENEUTICS AND IRONY: BETWEEN STRAUSS AND DERRIDA

### 1. Introduction

There is a well-known and well-founded, if somewhat oversimple, distinction between the hermeneutics of trust (or good will) and the hermeneutics of suspicion. Commentators on Gadamer, I among them, have counted Gadamer's hermeneutics as a "hermeneutics of trust" and contrasted it with the hermeneutics of suspicion.<sup>1</sup> As is well-known, this latter phrase, "hermeneutics of suspicion," was coined by Paul Ricoeur in his book on Freud.<sup>2</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> century masters of such a hermeneutics are Freud and Marx. It goes without saying that they have had much influence on contemporary hermeneutics. Gadamer himself devoted an essay to the hermeneutics of suspicion, which, for whatever reason, Gadamer did not publish in German.<sup>3</sup> In this essay Gadamer names Nietzsche as the "inaugurator" of radical suspicion, whose "most striking instances" are to be found in the critique of ideology and psychoanalysis. Though there is an important distinction, which I do not find Gadamer anywhere recognizing, between the Enlightenment and scientific approach of Marx and Freud and what might be called the anti-Enlightenment approach of Nietzsche, it is the case that all three are unmaskers in their own way. In this paper I would like to discuss irony and ask whether the interpretation of irony calls for a kind of unmasking and how Gadamer's hermeneutics of trust deals with irony. It is noteworthy

that often, when Gadamer comments on irony, he mentions Leo Strauss. Further, irony is an aspect of the challenge to the hermeneutics of trust by the hermeneutics of suspicion that motivated a development in Gadamer's hermeneutics which is evidenced in his important essay, "Text and Interpretation." Finally, as a reader of and commentator on Plato, Gadamer often has to deal with Socrates' irony. How much is the Platonic dialogue a model of the hermeneutical dialogue of the reader with the text that Gadamer wishes to foster? Does Socrates and his irony evince trust and good will toward Euthyphro or Anytus or Thrasymachus, for example?

## 2. Gadamerian Hermeneutics: A Hermeneutics of Trust and Good Will

While it may be a contentious claim to assert that the only appropriate hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of trust and good will, I do not think it a contentious claim that Gadamer advocates such a hermeneutics and defends such a claim. In short, for Gadamer, what hermeneutics is about is understanding (*das Verstehen*). What anyone is attempting to do in the hermeneutical situation is to understand the other, to understand the text. In this attempt to understand, one is trying to come to an understanding (*Verständigung*) with the other. Gadamer offers us the model of the dialogue. A basic presupposition of the dialogue, within which we attempt to come to an understanding, is good will toward the other. In the essay, "Text and Interpretation," Gadamer writes: "Thus for a written conversation basically the same fundamental condition obtains as for an oral exchange. Both partners must have the good will to try to understand one another."<sup>4</sup> This "good will" requires respect for the other. In addition to this, it calls for humility. Genuine listening or careful reading asks that we let the text or our partner in dialogue to speak to us and possibly correct us. He writes in a late retrospective of his work that

its [hermeneutic philosophy's] modesty consists in the fact that there is no higher principle (*Prinzip*) than this holding oneself open to the conversation. This means, however, constantly recognizing in advance the possibility that your partner is right, even recognizing the possible superiority of your partner.<sup>5</sup>

Though it might seem a stretch to speak about the “ethics” of hermeneutics—Gadamer never uses this phrase—Gadamer clearly sees trust, humility, modesty, fidelity and carefulness as the hermeneutic virtues.<sup>6</sup> At the core of this is what Donald Davidson calls “the principle of charity” and Jonathan Lear, “the principle of humanity.”<sup>7</sup> While Anglo-American philosophers like to think of this question in terms of ‘principles,’—witness Davidson and Lear-- it is more a matter of virtue or virtues for Gadamer (though he does on occasion, though rarely, use the term “*Prinzip*,” as just cited). Virtues are appropriate of a discipline; principles of a method. Recall the concluding line of Truth and Method: what method cannot achieve, discipline (or a habit of mind) can provide--a warrant for truth.

As I have just noted and is well-known, Gadamer develops his account of the interpretation of a text on the model of a dialogue or conversation between two speakers. There is a limit to the way a text can act as a partner in a dialogue. In a certain extended sense, the text can respond and answer questions, but, as Plato has Socrates point out in the Phaedrus, texts quite literally say the same thing over and over again. It is with regard to the written text (and not the dialogical partner of oral speech) that Gadamer, I would suggest, advocates the submission of the reader to the text. “Submission” is my word and not Gadamer’s. But Gadamer does use the language of “service” and “subordination.” For example, in “Text and Interpretation,” Gadamer writes, with regard to the interpretation of written texts, that “The interpreter has no other function than to disappear completely into the achievement of full

harmony in understanding. The discourse of the interpreter is therefore not itself a text; rather it *serves* a text.”(TI 41) In “On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth,” we find: “Now it is not only the poetic word that is ‘autonomous’ in the sense that we subordinate ourselves to it and concentrate all our efforts upon it as ‘as a text.’”<sup>8</sup> This notion of disappearance, subordination, and service is not something unique to this essay; nor is it a late development in Gadamer’s thought. In what might be called the proto-version of Truth and Method, the essay entitled “The Problem of Historical Consciousness,” which I have already cited and which was first presented in French in Louvain in 1957, Gadamer writes not of “disappearance,” but of “effacement”: “There is no intention [in the interpretation of texts] to place the realization of the text aside from the text itself. On the contrary, the ultimate ideal of appropriateness seems to be total self-effacement because the meaning [*Verständnis*] of the text has become self-evident.”<sup>9</sup> In Truth and Method Gadamer provides the criterion for the right interpretation—disappearance: “Paradoxically, an interpretation is right when it is capable of disappearing in this way. And yet at the same time it [the interpretation] must be expressed as something that is supposed to disappear.”<sup>10</sup> In sum, the interpreter, the mediator, humbly effaces himself or herself before the text, ideally disappearing—or doing the interpretative work such that it seems that there is no mediation, no interpretation. The interpretive work is done so well, no one notices it.

This view of the role of the interpreter and the interpretation obviously runs contrary to the hermeneutical views of critics like Harold Bloom, for whom a “strong” interpretation would replace the text interpreted.<sup>11</sup> The critic would replace the author. On this view, the distinction between interpretation and text, or between critic and author, does not hold. Richard Rorty, in this sense, is right to call Gadamer a “weak textualist” and not a “strong” textualist.<sup>12</sup> For Rorty,

Bloom, Derrida and others, the interpreter's relation to the text is better characterized in terms of the will to power rather than humility, trust, respect, and good will. From this perspective the Gadamerian view is either naïve or a ploy of the will to power.

From Gadamer's perspective, the mistake that such a hermeneutics makes is to make paramount in the hermeneutical situation power rather than truth. Such a hermeneutics focuses on the subjectivity of the interpreter or the power balance (or imbalance) of the participants in conversation. This certainly plays a role, according to Gadamer—but a secondary role. What is primary for Gadamer is whatever it is that is under discussion, whatever it is that the text is about, the matter at hand, *die Sache*. What provides the basis for any conversation is what it is about. And, briefly stated, whatever it is that is under consideration (even if we are talking about ourselves) stands in the world, a world that we have in common. These hermeneutic virtues exercised together in our common world make solidarity possible—an important theme in Gadamer's work.

The primacy of *die Sache* renders authorship secondary. To say that it is secondary is not to say that it is irrelevant (or “dead”). Gadamer clearly recognizes what rhetoric, ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary, has always recognized, namely, that any speech, written or oral, has a number of aspects including the following four major ones (sometimes we have to remind ourselves of the obvious):

- 1) the speaker or author,
- 2) the listener or reader,
- 3) what is spoken or written about, and
- 4) the way that the speech is presented or written.

Each of these aspects is more or less complex. Gadamer provides a contemporary version of Plato's double move in the Phaedrus of underscoring the positive importance of rhetoric and criticizing those rhetoricians who ignored the third aspect, the truth aspect, on behalf of the other aspects.<sup>13</sup> He also would have us recognize, just as Plato does in the Phaedrus, the difference between written and oral speech, though both of these exhibit, in their own way, each of these four dimensions.

So, one version of the hermeneutics of suspicion is the consideration of any conversation as a struggle for power, for dominance. Another related but indirect version of this hermeneutics can be found in psychoanalysis and in what the Germans call the critique of ideology (*Ideologiekritik*). These modes of discourse are quintessentially Enlightenment modes of discourse which take a step back from everyday discourse and behavior and criticize it from the perspective of science. Both modes of discourse might be said, in a colloquial German expression, to display themselves as *Besserwisserei*. That is, these scientific modes of discourse "know better" what the speaker is saying than the speaker, "know better" than the patient, "know better" than the everyday political discourse, "know better" than folk wisdom and ways. In the psychoanalytic situation the patient presumably willing submits herself or himself for therapy and psychoanalysis. Authority and power are exerted by the analyst and there may well be resistance but the paradigm of this situation is not the same as the more straightforward struggle for power we have just discussed.

Gadamer makes the case against psychoanalysis and *Ideologiekritik* as models of interpretive practice generally, as we all know, primarily in his exchange with Habermas at the end of the 1960's. He returns briefly to this same theme in the late essay, "Wort und Bild—'so wahr, so seiend'," when he comments on Susan Sontag's essay "Against Interpretation," which

he says touches a “sore point” (*wunden Punkt*) concerning the “scientific interpretation of poetry and art.”<sup>14</sup> He writes here that scientific methodology for interpretation objectivizes and brings the object of interpretation into too much light (*überhellen*). Sontag, in this essay, distinguishes between an older “respectful” style of interpretation and a modern “excavating” kind of interpretation.<sup>15</sup> Her polemic is against the latter. Her point is much like that of Nietzsche in his preface to The Gay Science where he praises the Greeks for their superficiality and urges the reader to “stop courageously at the surface.”<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche here says further that “we no longer believe that truth remains the truth when the veils are withdrawn.” This defense of superficiality and critique of unveiling separates Nietzsche, a critic of modernity and the Enlightenment, from the interpretive work of Marx and Freud. How much Nietzsche’s genealogical work and exposé, for example, of Christian humility as a form of the will to power follows his own injunction for superficiality is a question we cannot pursue here. Nietzsche’s strategy of genealogical unmasking runs counter to his injunction against unveiling.

There are limits to the analogy of Freudian psychoanalysis and Marx’s *Ideologiekritik*, but it is interesting to note that the young Habermas made much of the parallel between these two modes of discourse. Central to the much discussed exchange and disagreement between Habermas and Gadamer in the late 60’s was precisely the model of psychoanalysis for hermeneutics and *Ideologiekritik*. As you will surely recall, Habermas in his Inaugural Lecture, embraced Gadamerian hermeneutics as providing the rules for determining “the possible meaning of the validity of statements of the cultural sciences.”<sup>17</sup> In the same lecture, Habermas claims that psychoanalysis and the critique of ideology go beyond hermeneutics and are transformative and liberating in ways that hermeneutics is not. Gadamer’s response, in short, was to point out the asymmetry and disequilibrium between the position of the analyst and the



patient. Gadamer asks how the analyst might give up his mastery of the situation and participate as a partner in a conversation.<sup>18</sup> Gadamer also suggests that Habermas dogmatically privileges the neurotic in making psychoanalysis a paradigm of the highest form of discourse and the union of theory and practice. In the course of Habermas' development he comes to accept Gadamer's criticism in this regard. He drops the psychoanalytic situation as a paradigm for emancipatory discourse and develops a model of an ideal and distortion free speech situation in which all are partners in dialogue.

### 3. The Difficulty of Irony

Gadamer, in one of the very few places that he discusses irony, writes, half-seriously, that "it has been said, and probably not unjustly, that to interpret something as irony often is nothing but a gesture of despair on the part of the interpreter." (TI 38) Put simply, to speak ironically is to say something other than one means. How can Gadamer's hermeneutics of good will and trust come to terms with irony? If we are not suspicious with regard to the text or the other speaker, are we not likely to be duped by irony? Won't we miss it? Is not a hermeneutics of trust naïve with regard to irony? And does not this naivete expose the weakness and inappropriateness of such a hermeneutic? Further, how can Gadamer point to Plato as presenting us with a model of dialogue (as he frequently does) when the major figure in the conversation is so often ironical. Does Gadamer's interpretative practice in reading Plato display trust? Can Gadamer's Platonism and his hermeneutics be reconciled?

As noted earlier in this paper, the center of Gadamer's hermeneutics is an account of understanding (*Verstehen*) according to which we attempt to come to an understanding

(*Verständigung*) with the other, be it a text or a dialogical partner. In addition to Plato, there is a second moment in the history of philosophy for which irony is extremely important and which is also important for Gadamer—the moment of German romanticism, especially the work of Friedrich Schlegel. It is telling that one of F. Schlegel’s most important writings on irony is entitled: “*Über die Unverständlichkeit*”—literally, “On Non-understandability” or, as it has been translated, “On Incomprehensibility.”<sup>19</sup> In short, what makes a text incomprehensible for Schlegel is irony. How does a Gadamerian hermeneutic withstand the challenge of irony and the hermeneutics of German romanticism?

Gadamer rarely discusses irony in the context of his hermeneutics, but as I will show, it has a self-acknowledged importance for Gadamer much greater than the attention he bestows on it.<sup>20</sup> He mentions irony only once in Truth and Method; and it is in a footnote. (TM 295) The context for this footnote is a discussion of the conditions of understanding, the conditions for properly interpreting speech in the second part of Part II which is entitled: “Elements of a theory of hermeneutic experience.” Among these conditions, the first and primary condition (“*erster aller*”) is “one’s own fore-understanding” (“*das Vorverständnis*”). This fore-understanding or pre-understanding “comes from being concerned with the same subject (*Sache*).” Gadamer clarifies this by adding here: “Here again we see that understanding means, primarily, to understand the content of what is said, and only secondarily to isolate and understand another’s meaning as such.”(TM 294) This fore-understanding is a fore-conception (*Vorgriff*) of completeness, that is, a preconception of the whole of which whatever is before our attention is a part. The part is understood in terms of the whole. In coming to terms with any part, we are always projecting the whole within which it stands.

In the text proper Gadamer does not qualify, complicate, or express any reservations about this projection, nor about the primacy of understanding the thing which is spoken about. But in a footnote to this account, Gadamer does so qualify and complicate. He writes (footnote 224):

There is one exception to this anticipation of completeness, namely the case of writing that is presenting something in disguise, e.g., a *roman de clef*. This presents one of the most difficult hermeneutic problems (cf. the interesting remarks by Leo Strauss in Persecution and the Art of Writing). This exceptional hermeneutical case is of special significance, in that it goes beyond interpretation of meaning in the same way as when historical source criticism goes back behind the tradition. Although the task here is not a historical, but a hermeneutical one, it can be performed only by using understanding of the subject matter as a key to discover what is behind the disguise—just as in conversation we understand irony to the extent to which we are in agreement with the other person on the subject matter. (TM 294-295)

In other words, if a text does not mean what it says but means something else, we then need to go “back behind” the text “to discover what is behind the disguise.” We need to unmask the text, to find the deeper meaning behind the surface meaning. This seems very like the hermeneutical task that psychoanalysis and the critique of ideology set for themselves. In this brief comment, Gadamer considers irony to be analogous to, but not necessarily the same as, the *roman de clef*. This might seem to suggest that irony provides an example of a text that is untrustworthy much like neurotic rationalization and ideological propaganda. If texts can prove

to be untrustworthy, what then for a hermeneutics of trust? Gadamer is here acknowledging the importance of this question when he writes here, as I have cited, that “this presents one of the most difficult hermeneutic problems.”

We might be led to think that if the text does not say what it means, that we need to concern ourselves with what the author or speaker ironically means—that is, that the intention of the author would become primary in this context. But note that Gadamer insists 1) that such texts are the exception (*Ausnahmefall*), and 2) that the key to the unmasking of irony is our understanding of the subject matter. Even here *die Sache* is primary. In our understanding of the subject matter we find ourselves in agreement with the speaker or author and with the ironic meaning of the text.

In this footnote just cited, Gadamer mentions Leo Strauss and his book Persecution and the Art of Writing, which, for Gadamer, is both enlightening and problematic. He takes up again the question of irony and Strauss’s treatment of it in “Supplement I: Hermeneutics and Historicism” which he adds to the second edition of Truth and Method (1965).<sup>21</sup> Here he reiterates his claim that “even Plato’s artistic irony can be understood only by someone who shares his knowledge of the subject matter (as is the case with all irony).”(TM 538) As I will discuss later in this essay, Gadamer here goes on to criticize Strauss and the Straussians for taking the concern for irony too far in their interpretations of Plato and other philosophers.

It is only in the important and pivotal essay, “Truth and Interpretation” that Gadamer provides us a context within his hermeneutics by which we might understand irony.<sup>22</sup> The essay is written both to develop some central themes of Truth and Method and to open a conversation with Jacques Derrida. As we have noted, Gadamer develops his hermeneutics and his account of

understanding in large part on the basis of an analogy between conversation and the interpretation of texts. In this address Gadamer wishes to recognize the limit of the analogy and to challenge Derrida. Contra Derrida, everything is not to be considered a text.<sup>23</sup> Also, we should recognize the distinction between spoken and written speech. Further, even among fixed and written speeches, there are important distinctions to be made. In short, all that is written is not, on Gadamer's account, a text. Here Gadamer distinguishes texts from three "oppositional forms," that is, three forms of writing that appear in the form of a text but are not genuine texts. These are antitexts (*Antitexte*), pseudotexts (*Pseudotexte*), and pretexts (*Prätexete*). The primary example of an antitext is a joke. The dominant factor here, according to Gadamer, is the situation of the discourse which signals that the statement is to be taken as a joke and not seriously. Outside that situation it is difficult to tell whether the statement is to be taken seriously or as a joke. Outside that situation the joke is often not funny; the joke "cannot be repeated." (TI 37) Gadamer goes on to say that "basically, the same applies to another quite classical form of mutual agreement, namely, irony." (TI 37) It may seem surprising that Gadamer claims that the dissimulation of irony aims at solidarity, but Gadamer's claim echoes the brief account of irony in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (Bk IV) where Aristotle counts irony as one of the extremes for which the mean is truthfulness—and is thus a vice. Yet the self-deprecation of the ironist is attractive and noble inasmuch as it does not seek its own advantage and spares others the feeling of inferiority.<sup>24</sup> The hermeneutic difficulty of dealing with irony and with such anti-texts occurs when there is a cultural distance from the text, temporal or spatial (cultural), such that the reader does not share or is unclear about this set of prior cultural understandings.

Let us skip over what Gadamer calls pseudotexts for which he gives no clear example. He says that such writing provides “filler material” that need not be translated. A third kind of non-text is a pretext. It is under the title of “pretext” that Gadamer discusses ideology, dreams, and the psychopathology of everyday life. Pretexts, he writes, “are texts that we interpret on the basis of something that is precisely what they do not mean. What they mean, the apparent or surface meaning, is merely pretence, an excuse, behind which is concealed the ‘meaning.’”(TI 39) The appropriate mode of discourse in response to these is the critique of ideology and psychoanalysis which expose the pretence as pretence. That is, Gadamer affirms an appropriate role for psychoanalysis and the critique of ideology. He concludes his brief discussion of pretexts by saying: “However, I believe it is a mistake to privilege these forms of distorted intelligibility, of neurotic derangement, as the normal case in textual interpretation.”(TI 40)

Here Gadamer is distinguishing between irony as an antitext and ideological and neurotic texts as pretexts. Irony, for Gadamer, relies on mutually understandable cultural givens. Ironical texts demonstrate social solidarity. Since what I am calling the “cultural givens” are unspoken, written irony is often difficult to interpret from a cultural distance of space and/or time. But, nonetheless, irony is expressive of solidarity. It is meant to be understood. Ideological or neurotic speech, on the other hand, is expressive of the breakdown of solidarity, even if it appears or pretends to express solidarity. It misleads or covers over. Such speech, of course, calls for the critique of ideology or psychoanalysis. Irony is accordingly dissimilar to ideology and rationalization.

Gadamer’s criticism of Leo Strauss and, more sharply if somewhat vaguely, of the Straussians is that they sometimes take as paradigmatic for the writing of philosophy the necessity of hiding one’s views from the reading public because of the threat to one’s life. What

begins with Strauss's sensitive and persuasive reading of Socratic irony becomes a reading against the text—a reading of the text as a pretext. Philosophical writing, on this model, is not ideological or neurotic but esoteric. Gadamer does not explicitly refer to esoteric writing here, but it meets Gadamer's definition of a pretext, that is, a text in which "something masked or disguised comes to expression." (TI 39) Such esotericism, while it may make use of irony, entails more than irony. Again, Gadamer believes that sometimes the approach to a text as esoteric is well-founded but that the Straussians take this too far. For example, in an interview with Ernest Fortin about Strauss, Gadamer states that he found Strauss's reading of Maimonides persuasive but that "the same method did not apply equally well to Spinoza."<sup>25</sup> Further, this esotericism assumes, on Gadamer's account, too high a standard of logic and control of the text by the author. Every time there is a contradiction or a difficulty in a text does not mean that the author is dissembling or wishing to draw our attention to the contradiction (though it may be the case). Nor, for example, is every aspect of the setting or the dramatic structure central to the meaning of a Platonic dialogue.<sup>26</sup> Just as Gadamer would reject an epistemology that attempts to establish certainty and attain a god-like point of view, so too he resists a hermeneutics that assumes that the text has a god-like author. In this same interview he says, for example, of some aspects of Jakob Klein's readings of Plato, together with some of the work of the second and third generation Straussians, "That is Talmud in the wrong place."<sup>27</sup>

In regard to the consideration of the author in interpretative practice, Gadamer finds himself in agreement with Friedrich Schlegel who writes that "words understand each other often better than those who make use of them."<sup>28</sup> But Schlegel and the Romantics (and their latter day proponents like Paul de Man) go too far, for a Gadamerian hermeneutics, when they suggest, like Schlegel, that writing is the mistaken attempt to make reasonable that which is at bottom

“unconditioned whim” (“*unbedingter Willkür*,” [Paul de Man translates this “total arbitrariness”]) and the “chaos of human nature.”<sup>29</sup> For Gadamer, as I have reiterated, the primary matter in the interpretation is that which is said, i.e., *die Sache*, not who is speaking. And, though, the concept of play and playfulness is important for Gadamerian hermeneutics, texts are not a matter of sheer play in the sense of “total arbitrariness,” for play too has its rules, if only unspoken ones. Gadamer, apart from very brief comments never comes to terms with Romantic irony. Gadamer does consider ‘romantic hermeneutics,’ but under this title he deals almost exclusively with Friedrich Schleiermacher.<sup>30</sup> And irony is not discussed in this context, except with reference to Plato. In short, I take the Gadamerian objection to Schlegel’s romantic irony to follow from the romantic concern for the absolute. For Schlegel and the Romantics, the negativity of irony shows us, if only negatively, the absolute. Gadamer’s concern is not for the absolute but for coming to an understanding of what the speech is about--the matter at hand. In addition, the Romantics, especially Friedrich Schlegel, expand the notion of irony too far. All writing is seen to be ironic—or at least all philosophic and poetical writing. Paradox is irony, for Schlegel.<sup>31</sup> For Gadamer, who embraces dialectical thought, contradiction and paradox are not always ironic. Finally, we have seen how Gadamer finds irony revealing a common understanding of the topic of discussion, rather than Schlegel’s ‘incomprehensibility’ (*Unverständlichkeit*).

#### 4. Irony: The Spoken and the Written

In the late and important essay, “Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language,” (1992)



Gadamer writes that irony shows us the limits of writing.<sup>32</sup> As Gadamer points out in “Text and Interpretation, irony, like a joke, is, in the first place, a mode of spoken speech. The joke or the ironical statement is often very difficult to understand when it becomes written and deprived of the living context of its utterance. In this late essay on ritual and language, Gadamer is attending to the pre-linguistic and non-linguistic context for linguistic expression—gesture, facial expression, even action and deed. He insists here on the primacy of the spoken over the written. He speaks of “the incurable defect” of writing and the fact that “all presentation fixed in writing is still supported by something else that is conveyed only in living conversation.”<sup>33</sup> He mentions here, as we might expect, Plato’s Seventh Letter, which together with the Phaedrus, speak to the limits of writing.

But what is meant by what I have called “the primacy of the spoken” for Gadamer—what Gadamer calls the “originariness of the spoken” (*die Ursprünglichkeit des Gesprochenen*)? He surely does not mean that all written speech is derivative from a prior spoken speech. In “Text and Interpretation” he writes explicitly that those texts that are preeminently texts, namely, literary texts, do not refer back to some prior spoken speech. They do not present us with words somehow ripped out of a lived speech situation. Rather the words of these texts originate on the page; they are written to be read. They prescribe “all repetitions and acts of speaking.” (TI 42) Texts are meant for a reader. Readers do not share the same lived context with the author. It is this not being a part of the immediate lived experience of the reader that constitutes a text for Gadamer and why he rejects notes, letters, transcribed conversations or tape-recordings as genuine texts. A challenge for the written text is to provide, to some degree, its own context. What I take the primacy of the spoken to mean for Gadamer is the primacy of lived experience which has linguistic, non-linguistic and pre-linguistic aspects. And this primacy points to the

central significance, again, of *die Sache*, the matter at hand, for language and lived experience are always of something. Here we see the “phenomenological” side of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. In his later work Gadamer is much concerned with the limits of language and the limits of understanding. For him, this concern for limits is simply the other side of the concern for the conditions of understanding, which is closely tied to language and which predominates in Truth and Method.

The text, which is simply linguistic—that is, words on a page--may evoke lived experience and the limits of speech and understanding through words. We see the priority of the spoken even for the text which is not derived from the spoken as Gadamer develops his account of the text by discussing the text’s “ideality” and the reader’s “inner ear.”(TI 43, 51)<sup>34</sup> Gadamer writes:

Its linguistic presence as text is such as to demand repetition of the words in the original power of their sound—not in such a way as to reach back to some original speaking of them, however, but rather looking forward toward a new, ideal speaking. (TI 44)

The text prescribes how it is to be read. In this reading, though it be silent, we hear it in our “inner ear.” In this engagement we are to be primarily concerned with what the text is about—its claim to truth. Just as Plato makes clear to us, in coming to terms with the text we have to consider the relationship of word and deed, *logos* and *ergon*.

Irony is a borderline case; it shows us “the limits of writing.” It is on the boundary, because, although it is primarily to be found in spoken speech, it can, with difficulty, be written. The best example for Gadamer of ironical writing is Plato and the ironical speech of Socrates. Plato is also the exemplar of irony for Schlegel and Kierkegaard. Plato provides us with

conversations, that is, the spoken, but as written and, quite surely, not as notes nor as a transcript of a conversation but as a carefully crafted literary philosophical work. The textuality of Plato's texts is an extremely complicated matter for Gadamer—too complicated for us to adequately deal with it here. Two large aspects of this complication concern, one, the distinction of philosophy and literature, and, two, irony. The distinction between literature and philosophy is an important one for Gadamer. Philosophy, he argues, does not provide us with “eminent” texts. Philosophical works, like the work of Penelope, constantly undo themselves as they find their place in the larger philosophical conversation.<sup>35</sup> Yet the example of Plato's work clearly challenges this distinction of literature and philosophy. Gadamer frequently refers to his artistry. Secondly, not only is one of his characters, namely Socrates, ironic, but Plato's own writing is ironic. Though Gadamer refers to Plato's use of irony fairly frequently in his two books and many essays on Plato (three volumes of his collected works), nowhere does Gadamer provide an extensive discussion of Platonic irony. The place where he gives irony the most attention (and even here the remarks are quite brief) is in a very early review of the then recent research on Plato from 1933. In this review essay Gadamer gives Friedländer high praise for many aspects of his two volumes on Plato but most of all for his treatment of irony. Gadamer writes that Friedländer shows us that not only is there Socratic irony but also Plato's artistic irony.<sup>36</sup> Gadamer also speaks here, following Friedländer, of Plato's literary accomplishment: “the most perfected (*vollendeste*) artistic accomplishment of the entire Greek literature.”(GW V, 225)

But how are we to understand the written and textual status of ironical texts such as those that Plato presents us with? We noted above how Gadamer distinguishes between texts and antitexts. He considers irony an antitext. Taken simply and straightforwardly, this would mean that, in the strict sense, Plato's writings are not to be considered texts. In light of the

Gadamerian distinction between literature and philosophy, between eminent texts and non-eminent texts, one might be led to say that for Gadamer, philosophy does not provide eminent texts in any case. Thus Plato's writings on this account alone are not texts. But if Plato is as much a literary artist as he is a philosopher, his writings ask for consideration as eminent texts. Further, how are we to consider prominent literary texts that are ironical. Thomas Mann, for example, writes with irony. Are his writings then anti-texts and not texts?

It is one thing for a character in the text to speak ironically and another for the author to write ironically. Inasmuch as Gadamer considers irony to be, in the first place, a matter of spoken speech and lived context, such irony can be presented in the dramatic situation and in the speeches of Socrates or one of the characters from a Mann novel. If irony were only to be found in the speeches of characters, the literary text within which these speeches are to be found, need not be considered an anti-text. But if the voice of the narrator or the text itself is ironical--that is, if Plato and Mann are ironical and not only Socrates and Adrian Leverkühn--then the text itself would seem to count as an anti-text. On Gadamer's account, the irony of the author (and not merely the character) requires solidarity between the author and the reader, a cultural understanding between the author and the reader. Since the author does not know his reader and since the reader may stand outside the immediate cultural context of the author, the irony of the author, that is, the irony of the text, is both risky and hopeful.

If we look carefully as to how Gadamer presents anti-texts, he does not, however, simply say that anti-texts are not texts. He says rather that anti-texts resist textualization. (TI 37) This speaks to the great difficulty of both writing and interpreting irony and to Gadamer's statement that irony is an example of the limits of writing. It does not necessarily mean that an ironical text

cannot be an eminent text in Gadamer's sense. His treatment of this speaks also to the priority of the spoken.

## 5. Derrida, Strauss, and Plato

Derrida resists not only the good will of Gadamerian hermeneutics but also, among other things, the priority of the spoken. For Derrida the metaphysical tradition from Plato through Rousseau, Hegel and Husserl understands the written to be derivative of speech. On his account this tradition treats writing as a mode of reproducing spoken discourse. Writing is, as such, secondary. But it wishes to supplant the primary, the spoken. Writing is, accordingly, dangerous. Plato inaugurates this understanding of the written, according to Derrida, with his "diatribe against writing" in the Phaedrus.<sup>37</sup> Derrida proclaims the priority, rather, of writing. Not wishing to simply reverse a binary opposition, the opposition of the spoken and the written, he suggests that all linguistic expression, spoken or written, is a form of writing.<sup>38</sup> Gadamer, as we have seen, would disagree. For Gadamer, what is spoken and not written is not a form of writing. What is written is not necessarily a text. Gadamer, in contrast with Derrida, does give a certain kind of priority to spoken discourse, but the highest form of writing, that is, the texts of literature and poetry, prescribe what is to be said and are not derivative from spoken discourse. For Gadamer, as we have seen, the priority of the spoken does not mean that a text is derived from or refers back to spoken speech; rather it refers forward to repetition in speech, if only for the inner ear. This kind of priority Derrida does not consider.

Plato's Phaedrus is an important text for both Gadamer and Derrida. For both it is a text that importantly defines their respective understandings of Plato and helps define their respective understandings of writing. Their writing on the Phaedrus also provides a good example for us of

their respective approach to texts, their respective hermeneutical practice.<sup>39</sup> Derrida's reading of the Phaedrus wants to show us how Plato wishes to repress or "exclude" writing, to show writing as the "miserable son" of speech. But, according to Derrida, Plato's attempt inevitably fails. The trace of writing, the supplement of writing, remains and shows itself. His interpretation culminates in his treatment of Socrates' statement, late in the dialogue in the context of the discussion of writing, that spoken discourse is "inscribed" or "written" on the soul. Derrida here says a number of things here that are telling:

- 1) That Socrates is "for the first time" led to envision speech as legitimate writing;
- 2) That the reader and Plato have "usually assumed" that what we are dealing with is a metaphor;
- 3) That for Plato and for "all of Western philosophy...metaphoricity is the logic of contamination and the contamination of logic,"
- 4) That it is "remarkable that the so-called living discourse should be suddenly described by a 'metaphor' borrowed from the order of the very thing one is trying to exclude from it," and
- 5) "Yet this borrowing is rendered necessary by that which structurally links the intelligible to its repetition in the copy, and the language describing dialectics cannot fail to call upon it."<sup>40</sup>

In short, the metaphor is a slip by Plato. This metaphor, this mistake by Plato, shows us the trace and the supplement that cannot be repressed. Much of Derrida's language in the interpretive telling of the dialogue is in the passive voice, e.g., "Socrates is led for the first time to envision...." The passive voice is indicative of the "structural necessity" of which Derrida

writes. Though Plato dreams of eliminating it, it has a necessity, according to Derrida, which cannot be repressed. Plato's dream that cannot come true.

Two things about his reading stand out, especially in the context of our concerns here. First, his reading is flat and without a sense for Plato's irony.<sup>41</sup> In this regard he is much like Heidegger, on whose Plato interpretation Derrida is so much dependent. Secondly, though Derrida is happy to talk about what Plato would like to do in the text and of what Plato dreams, Derrida does not consider Plato to be the master of his text. There is a necessity that is operating in the text that surpasses Plato, the author. Derrida understands this necessity through a kind of structuralist psychoanalysis. He knows or has the key, *le differance*. Plato does not know what he is doing, but Derrida does. He knows better than the author.

Before we turn to Gadamer, we might take note of Leo Strauss' quite different interpretation of the Phaedrus and Plato's understanding of the status of writing. We do not have an extended interpretation of the Phaedrus by Strauss, as we do of the Symposium or the Laws. What we find in Strauss, in contrast with Derrida, is a much deeper appreciation of Plato's irony and playfulness. We also find, as an interpretive principle, an assumption of the author's mastery of the text. This fits, as we noted above, with Strauss' esoteric approach to Plato's texts. Specifically, with the regard to the Phaedrus, we find a sharp contrast with Derrida's central interpretive thesis. Strauss writes that, for Plato, "writing on the highest level is higher than nonwriting on the highest level."<sup>42</sup> This claim is made in a brief comment, so perhaps we should not make too much of it. But Strauss' very brief argument on behalf of the superiority of writing to nonwriting, that is to oral speech, is as follows: since Plato wrote Socrates' critique of writing, it must be assumed that he regarded writing higher than nonwriting. Implicitly Strauss is arguing that had Plato agreed with Socrates' treatment of writing, Plato would have followed

Socrates' example and would not have devoted so much of his life to writing. There is not so much a textual contradiction which shows us this as a performative contradiction—the very writing of the dialogue contradicts Socrates' speech.

Gadamer's position in regard to Plato and the Phaedrus is somewhere between Derrida and Strauss. He would disagree with Strauss' claim that Plato regarded writing higher than nonwriting. And, as we have seen, Gadamer has reservations about the degree of mastery of the text by the author, even if the author is Plato. But, nonetheless, he is clearly much closer to Strauss than he is to Derrida. Gadamer would have us see how Plato ironically supports the positive importance of rhetoric and writing in the Phaedrus. Plato is not trying to exclude or repress writing. Metaphors are not a contaminant. On Gadamer's account Plato--through his irony, the dramatic structure of the dialogue, and the relation of word and deed--would have us see affirmed much of what Derrida suggests Plato unsuccessfully attempts to exclude and repress. Gadamer happily acknowledges that Plato "laid the foundation for the metaphysical conceptuality of our tradition" but at the same time Plato "mimetically limited all his assertions."<sup>43</sup> Through his irony and what Gadamer calls his "dialogical poetry," Plato not only limited his assertions but he "robbed his reader of his assumed superiority."<sup>44</sup> Reading Plato carefully, should, on Gadamer's account, lead us to adapt the appropriate hermeneutic posture of humility and modesty, of which we spoke at the beginning of this paper.

In addition, Gadamer, like Strauss, takes seriously the notion of a "hidden doctrine." And, like Strauss, too, Gadamer thinks we can make some sense of this on the basis of the dialogues. But unlike Strauss, Gadamer does not find this primarily motivated by politics and the threat to the life of the philosopher. Rather it has more to do with the limits of writing. For Gadamer, it is not so much a matter of having a hidden doctrine as having an oral teaching.<sup>45</sup>



“Oral instruction,” he writes, “stands under a different law.”<sup>46</sup> This “different law” follows from the continuity of what was said before and after and from the knowledge of one another in community. Though Gadamer points to the harmony of the Seventh Letter with the Phaedrus in regard to the oral and the written, and he relies on these two texts to make his case about the oral teaching, he violates Plato’s prohibition in the Seventh Letter when he, Gadamer, speculates about the oral teaching, about which he thinks we can make some reasonable, though qualified, assertions based on the written tradition together with the dialogues. But it is not for us here to concern ourselves further with Gadamer’s speculations about the oral teaching. We have taken this into account to mark the difference of his approach to this matter with that of Strauss and to mark again the primacy of the spoken for Gadamer..

Finally, it is important to note that Gadamer not only points out the limits of writing, but that he is concerned to point out as well the limits of oral speech, that is the limits of speech or *logos* as such. In the two essays where Gadamer writes about the Seventh Letter and the unwritten doctrine or teaching, he argues that fundamental to Plato’s “doctrine” is Plato’s appreciation of “the weakness of the logoi” and “the limitedness of all human knowing.”<sup>47</sup> All three of these contemporary hermeneuts—Gadamer, Derrida, and Strauss—would agree about our human limits, our finitude. But Gadamer and Strauss see it as something positively embraced by Plato, while Derrida does not. Derrida rather follows Nietzsche and sees in Plato and even in Socrates *ressentiment* about our human condition.<sup>48</sup>

Above all for Gadamer, this limit of understanding is displayed in our understanding of ourselves, in self-understanding. He takes seriously Socrates’ ironic statement in the Phaedrus that he has yet to fulfill the injunction of the Delphic oracle: “to know myself.”(229e) Like his other ironic statements, there is a sense in which the statement is meant and a sense in which the

statement is not meant. Though Socrates knows himself better than his fellow Athenians (witness Socrates' self defense in the Apology), the task is an open one that can never be completed. Paradoxically, our own self-understanding is best attained in dialogue with others about matters that concern us all.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See my "The World Never Lost: The Hermeneutics of Trust," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research XLVII, No. 3 (March 1987), pp. 413-434.

<sup>2</sup> See Ricoeur's Freud and Philosophy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970) where he contrasts the "school of suspicion" with "postcritical faith." (p. 28)

<sup>3</sup> "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion," Man and World 17 (1984), 313-323; also in Hermeneutics, ed. G. Shapiro and A. Sica (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 54-65.

<sup>4</sup> "Text and Interpretation," Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter (Albany: SUNY, 1989), p. 33. As is well-known, this essay was written for the occasion of Gadamer's "encounter" or confrontation (*Auseinandersetzung*) with Derrida in Paris in 1981. Gadamer considered this talk to be an extremely important addendum to Truth and Method. Hereafter I will refer to this essay as "TI".

<sup>5</sup> "Reflections on my Philosophical Journey," The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, ed. Lewis Hahn, The Library of Living Philosophers Volume XXIV (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 36. Much of this essay comes from "Selbstdarstellung" GWII, 478-508. For this citation, see p. 505. This late statement echoes the relatively early statement that the appropriate hermeneutical attitude "requires a readiness to recognize the other as potentially right and to let him or it prevail against me." See "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," Interpretive Social Science: A Reader, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 108.

<sup>6</sup> See my essay, "Philosophical Discourse and the Ethics of Hermeneutics," Festivals of Interpretation, edited by Kathleen Wright (Albany: SUNY, 1990), 63-88.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 136-137, 152-153, 168-169, 196-197, 200-201; Jonathan Lear, Radical Hope (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>8</sup> "Subordinate" is "*unterordnen*." The other two sorts of text to which we subordinate ourselves are religious and legal texts. See "Über den Beitrag der Dichtkunst bei der Suche nach der Wahrheit," GW VIII, 74; in English translation by Nicholas Walker in The Relevance of the Beautiful, edited by Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 109.

---

<sup>9</sup> This French lecture from 1957 was first published in French in 1963. It has been translated into English and published in the Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal 5 (1975), 1-52; also in Interpretive Social Science: A Reader, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 103-60; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 82-140. See Jean Grondin, Hans-Georg Gadamer: Eine Biographie (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), p. 318, concerning the genesis of this text. According to Grondin, the original German version has been lost. Gadamer writes in the introduction to the text in the Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal that “no German text exists.”(p.2)

<sup>10</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1999), p. 398; hereafter cited in the text as “TM.”

<sup>11</sup> See Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) and Kaballah and Criticism (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), especially “The Necessity of Misreading,” 95-126.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Rorty, “Idealism and Textualism,” Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 139-159. Strictly speaking, Gadamer is not a “textualist” at all.

<sup>13</sup> See Gadamer’s comment in “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” Man and World 17, p. 314: “Recently, it seems, some of my colleagues have been trying to “save my soul” from such dishonest things as rhetoric! They think that hermeneutics is no noble pursuit, and that we must be suspicious of rhetoric. I had to reply that rhetoric has been the basis of our social life since Plato rejected and contradicted the flattering abuse of rhetoric by the Sophists. He introduced dialectically founded rhetoric as in the Phaedrus, and rhetoric remained a noble art in the whole of antiquity.”

<sup>14</sup> GW VIII, 373-399. This essay was first published in the collected works. For the comment about Sontag, see p. 394.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in Against Interpretation (New York: Dell, 1961), 3-14; for the distinction between the “respectful” and the “excavating” see p.6. Sontag mentions Freud and Marx as the paradigms of the latter mode.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 38. Nietzsche’s position is paradoxical inasmuch as he also insists that nature has hidden something. In this preface he writes further: “One should have more respect for the bashfulness with which nature has hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties.” Also here: “Today we consider it a matter of decency not to wish to see everything naked, or to be present at everything, or to understand and ‘know’ everything.”

<sup>17</sup> This was first published in Merkur in 1965. It appeared in English translation as an Appendix to Knowledge and Human Interest (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968): “Knowledge and Human Interests: A General Perspective”, 301-317. Habermas’ footnote to this cited statement (p. 309) reads: “I concur with the analyses in Part II of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode.”(p. 348)

<sup>18</sup> See the exchange with Habermas; in German, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971); in English there are two essays by Gadamer, see “On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” trans. R. E. Palmer and G.B. Hess, Philosophical Hermeneutics, ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 18-43. This translation was also published in Brice Wachterhauser, ed., Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy (Albany: SUNY, 1986), 277-99. See also, “Reply to My Critics,” The Hermeneutic Tradition, ed. Gayle Ormiston and A.D. Schrift (Albany: SUNY, 1990). These two essays by Gadamer can also be found in his Gesammelte Werke, vol. 2.

---

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, "Über die Unverständlichkeit," Kritische Ausgabe, Bd. 2, ed. Hans Eichner (München: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1967), 363-372; in English translation by P. Firchow, Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics, edited by J. M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 297-307.

<sup>20</sup> There are four explicit references to irony in the first two volumes of his collected works, volumes that are dedicated to hermeneutics: GW I, 300; GW II, 347, 420, and 501. There is no discussion of irony in volumes III and IV which are dedicated to modern philosophy. There are a good number of references to Platonic and Socratic irony in the three volumes (GW V, VI, and VII) which concern ancient philosophy. I have found two references to irony in GW VIII (391, 434), which deals with aesthetics and poetry, none in volume IX, and one in volume X (130). In sum, outside the essays on Plato, I have found only 7 references to irony in his collected works. None of these is extensive; most are a mere passing reference. There are only two references to irony in the English translation of Truth and Method, one in the text proper (295) and one in an appendix (538). Both are closely connected to a discussion of Leo Strauss.

<sup>21</sup> Gadamer adds a supplement (*Anhang*) to the second edition of Truth and Method (1965): "Hermeneutics and Historicism." A later edition provides another supplement; the English translation provides both. In this first supplement, an essay on historicism, Gadamer responds to the first wave of response and critique to the publication of Truth and Method in 1960, most importantly that by Emilio Betti and that by Leo Strauss. Betti's response had been published; Strauss's response had not. It came by personal letter. This correspondence has since been published; see Independent Journal of Philosophy, vol. II (1978), pp. 5-12.

<sup>22</sup> I call this essay "pivotal" because Gadamer himself singles it out time and again as the place where he most importantly attempted to develop some of the themes of Truth and Method: truth, the role of the poetic work, what it is to be a text. See Gadamer's attempt at self-criticism "Zwischen Phänomenologie und Dialektik: Versuch einer Selbstkritik," GW II, 20 (1985) and the late essay "Wort und Bild: So wahr, so seiend," GW VIII, 374 (1992). See also my discussion of the development of Gadamer's thought and the place that this essay plays in that development: "The Development of Gadamer's Thought," Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, 34 (October 2003), 247-264.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158: "There is nothing outside of the text."

<sup>24</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1127b. The example that Aristotle gives is Socrates. See Ernst Behler's "Irony in the Ancient and Modern World," in Irony and the Discourse of Modernity (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990); See also Susan Collin's treatment of Aristotle on irony in her Aristotle and the Rediscovery of Citizenship (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 147-154.

<sup>25</sup> See "Gadamer on Strauss: An Interview," Interpretation 12 (1984), 6. The principles of the "method" that Gadamer refers to can be found in Persecution and the Art of Writing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 25-31. The word "method" is presumably an overstatement. This book was first published by the Free Press in 1952.

<sup>26</sup> Gadamer praises Strauss for paying close attention to the setting and dramatic structure of the Platonic dialogues, but he thinks that the Straussians sometimes take this too far, producing "clever but unfounded interpretations." "Gadamer on Strauss: an Interview," 8.

---

<sup>27</sup> “Gadamer on Strauss: An Interview,” p. 8. In Supplement I to Truth and Method, “Hermeneutics and Historicism,” Gadamer also speaks about Strauss’ assumption of too high a control of the text by the author: “Thus in my opinion, it is by no means clear that when we find contradictory statements in a writer, it is correct to take the hidden meaning—as Strauss thinks—as his true opinion. There is an unconscious conformism of the human mind to considering what is universally evident as really true.” (9)

<sup>28</sup> See Friedrich Schlegel, Kritische Ausgabe, vol. 2, 364. In a late essay Gadamer states that he has more in common with certain aspects of romantic hermeneutics than he had been aware of; see “Frühromantik, Hermeneutik, Dekonstruktivismus,” GW X, 134. Among other things they share is the model of Platonic irony.

<sup>29</sup> See Lyceum fragment 37 (Schlegel, Kritische Ausgabe 2, 151) and “Rede über Mythologie (Kritische Ausgabe 2, 319). See also Schlegel’s assertion in “Ideas,” fragment #69 that “irony is the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos.” Kritische Ausgabe 2, 263. Paul de Man comments on Lyceum fragment #37 (incorrectly cited as fragment 42) and takes it a step farther than Schlegel when he writes that in writing “there is a machine there, a text machine, an implacable determination and total arbitrariness.” See Paul de Man, “The Concept of Irony,” in Aesthetic Ideology, edited by Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 180.

<sup>30</sup> Gadamer’s primary discussion of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics is to be found in Truth and Method in the first section of the second part. See the index for the many references to Schleiermacher. In a number of essays after the publication of Truth and Method Gadamer returns to Schleiermacher to defend and adjust his view of romantic hermeneutics given the criticism of a number of readers, most especially the criticism of Gadamer’s account by Manfred Frank. See, for example, GW II, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Lyceum fragment 48: “Irony is the form of paradox.” Kritische Ausgabe 2, 153.

<sup>32</sup> “Ein anderes allgemein-bekanntes Beispiel für die Grenze der Schrift ist die Ironie.” “Zur Phänomenologie von Ritual und Sprache,” GW VIII, 434. Unlike most of Gadamer’s work, this essay found its first publication in the Gesammelte Werke (1993). This essay has been translated by Lawrence Schmidt and Monika Reuss in Language and Linguisticity in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics, ed. Lawrence Schmidt (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2000), pp. 19-50. Unfortunately they translate a critical part of this statement as “boundaries of language.” The context of the statement concerns the difference between oral speech and written speech. The text, “der Schrift,” clearly refers to “writing” and not language as such.

<sup>33</sup> GW VIII, 433; in English translation, Language and Linguisticity in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics, 45. He says something similar in “Text and Interpretation” (TI 34)

<sup>34</sup> This concept of an “inner ear” can be found in Schlegel. See, for example, Athenaeum fragment 174, Kritische Ausgabe 2, 193.

<sup>35</sup> See “Philosophie und Literatur,” GW VIII, 240-257; and “Der ‘eminente’ Text und seine Wahrheit,” GW VIII, 286-295. For the Penelope remark, see GW VIII, 430. See my discussion of the distinctive character of philosophy for Gadamer at the conclusion of “Philosophical Discourse and the Ethics of Hermeneutics,” Festivals of Interpretation, 63-88.

<sup>36</sup> “Er zeigt, daß man auch, und nicht minder wesentlich wie von sokratischer Ironie, von platonischer ‘Künstlerironie’ sprechen muß.” “Die neue Platoforschung,” GW V, 226. This essay was originally published in Logos 22 (1933), 63-79. One can find a hint in Friedländer’s treatment of Plato’s irony of the

---

distinction of “mask” and irony. See Paul Friedländer, Plato, vol. 1 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), p. 142.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Dissemination, translated by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 61-171. For Derrida’s referring to the Phaedrus as Plato’s “diatribe against writing,” see pp. 106, 108. Derrida also speaks of Plato’s scorn for the written word, p. 115. This essay was first published in French in *Tel Quel* in 1968.

<sup>38</sup> In an interview with Paul Brennan in 1983 (On the Beach, no. 1/1983: p. 42) Derrida says: “Ah... it’s not an opposition. What I’ve been doing in the last few years is to extend I mean to give an absolute extension to - the concept of writing so that even the spoken language is written in some way. I mean, there is what I call an ‘arche-writing’ (*arche-écriture*) which is implied within the spoken language, which implies that the concept of writing is transformed, of course. So there is no opposition between them. For instance, tape recordings are writings in some sense.” This theme of arche-writing can be found in, among other places, Of Grammatology, Speech and Phenomena, and “Force and Signification,” in Writing and Difference.

<sup>39</sup> This lengthy essay is the only extensive treatment of a Platonic text that Derrida published. Among Gadamer’s voluminous writings on Plato, there is no essay, chapter, or book that focuses on the Phaedrus, yet he refers frequently to this dialogue, most importantly perhaps in the concluding section of Truth and Method.

<sup>40</sup> All these remarks are made on p. 149.

<sup>41</sup> He not only has no sense for Plato’s irony, he has no sense for Plato’s playfulness. In “Plato’s Pharmacy” Derrida also writes about Plato’s subordination or condemnation of play.(158)

<sup>42</sup> Leo Strauss, On Plato’s Symposium (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 250.

<sup>43</sup> “Reflections on My Philosophical Journey,” 32. In German, “Selbstdarstellung,” GW II, 501.

<sup>44</sup> “Reflections,” 32; “Selbstdarstellung,” GW II, 501. The task for us, Gadamer writes here, is to learn to read Plato mimetically. He says that in this century some have assisted us in learning how to do this, and, among others, he mentions Leo Strauss “and his friends and students.”(33)

<sup>45</sup> In “Plato’s Unwritten Dialectic” (125) Gadamer suggests near the beginning of the essay that “in order that we might ...find a reasonable direction in which to proceed, let us completely exclude from our discussion such concepts as esoteric doctrine or even secret doctrine. These formulations unduly stress the contested points in the problem we are investigating.” Strauss is never mentioned in the essay, but I take this reference to a possible esoteric doctrine to be a reference to Strauss’ approach to Plato as well as to the Tübingen school, with which Gadamer here explicitly concerns himself.

<sup>46</sup> “Plato’s Unwritten Dialectic,” 126.

<sup>47</sup> See “Dialectic and Sophism in Plato’s Seventh Letter,” and “Plato’s Unwritten Dialectic,” both in English translation in Dialogue and Dialectic, translated by P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 93-123 and 124-155.

<sup>48</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, Gay Science, §340 (272): “Socrates, Socrates *suffered life!* And then he still revenged himself.... Did his overrich virtue lack an ounce of magnanimity? –Alas, my friends, we must overcome even the Greeks!”

---