The Inner Word in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics

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Introduction

From Logos to Verbum to Sprache

The greater miracle of language lies not in the fact that the Word becomes flesh and emerges in external being, but that that which emerges and externalizes itself in utterance is always already a word.

—Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, III, 2, B

Hans-Georg Gadamer taught that interpretation underlies human experience through and through. Jean Grondin, a student of Gadamer, once asked him to explain this universality, and his answer was surprising:

In a formulaic and unsophisticated way, I asked him to explain more exactly what the universal aspect of hermeneutics consisted in. After everything that I had read, I was prepared for a long and rather vague answer. He thought the matter over and answered, concisely and conclusively, thus: “In the verbum interius.”

This reference to the theological idea that Gadamer used to understand the mystery of language has been cited often of late but is still not well understood, even though a great deal hangs on the extent of Gadamer’s allegiance to the Augustinian idea. What might otherwise be a comparatively uncomplicated assertion about interpretive understanding takes on a deeper complexion here, reflecting one of the profoundest revisions of knowledge theory in Western cultural history. In this opening chapter I would like to sketch out in a preliminary way what is at stake.
For Gadamer, Christian incarnation “is strangely different from” the manifestations of pagan gods in human form (TM, 418/WM, 422). In Christology, the spirit made flesh is “not the kind of becoming in which something turns into something else” (TM, 420/WM, 424). This strong enigma places the credal faith apart, and upends the normal relation of the spiritual and the material. The indivisible bond between the word and the person is a fuller ontological relation than simply the unity of the spiritual and material. The relation between word and person is no bloodless, conceptual abstraction. The constancy of the person in the word represents a concentration or fullness of meaning and an increase of being. We can see this, for instance, in the idea of a promise, in which a person stands behind the word that is given, since it is they as much as the word that is at stake, and the fulfillment of the promise strengthens the person who made it and the community it forms. The innovation of the doctrine of the word is to reverse the trend set in motion with the Greeks that the reasoning faculty distills the mind’s work from the accidents of the flesh. Logos is rather the fully embodied medium of human community.

The Judaeo-Christian habit of concentrating history, being, and action into the single locution “word” reverberated as an idiom of thought that fed back into the humanist tradition of the West and had a fruitful and consequential life thereafter. We can see a result of this, for instance, in the Renaissance revival of rhetoric, where the classical union of eloquence and wisdom is intensified by the ontological background of Christian Neoplatonism. It resonated deeply in German mysticism and Protestantism, explaining in part the depth of the German philosophy of language: “If I were as eloquent as Demosthenes I would yet have to do nothing more than repeat a single word three times: reason is language, logos. I gnaw at this marrow-bone and will gnaw myself to death over it. There still remains a darkness, always, over this depth for me; I am still waiting for an apocalyptic angel with a key to this abyss.”

The verbum interius, Gadamer tells us, “is more than a mere metaphor” (TM, 421). The link between human language and the theological doctrine of incarnation, if taken seriously, cannot be a convenience of explanation for language theory. Gadamer did not approach the theme from a religious perspective, but he did not link language to incarnation as merely an example. Augustine’s analogy of the verbum interius feeds on the epochal achievement of the church to conceive of itself and its
kerygmatic mission as an extension of God’s utterance, and of world history as a figural and narrative enactment that bespeaks the person of the Word. Gadamer’s reappropriation of the link between incarnation and Sprache (language or speech), worked out in ten or eleven dense pages of text in his magnum opus, continues to feed on this link. In the decades following the publication of Wahrheit und Methode, Gadamer often reaffirmed the importance of Augustine’s idea to his development of hermeneutic understanding, and we have to get to the bottom of this allusion. It is a great deal to say that thought and speech are as interrelated as the persons of the Trinity, and that the inner word “is just as consubstantial with thought as is God the Son with God the Father” (421). Gadamer does not say a similarity, a comparable relation or an illuminating likeness, but an analogy in which the terms of relation are the same. “Exegesis interprets the speaking of the word to be as miraculous as the incarnation of God” (III, 2, B).6

Gadamer relates the Augustinian doctrine to hermeneutics not in an off-hand way, but to his central thesis of human linguality (Sprachlichkeit). The verbum takes him straight to the complex ontological circularity of language and thought, word, and history, a relation that occurs along the circuitous path of discursive understanding. He recognized that this idea is prefigured and in great part prepared for in the sensitivity to the word as it existed in the Hebrew prophets: “And as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return no more thither, but soak the earth, and water it, and make it to spring, and give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be, which shall go forth from my mouth: it shall not return to me void, but it shall do whatsoever I please, and shall prosper in the things for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:10–11).7 The idea of the incarnate Word in Christian teaching goes even further, as the integration of each individual Christian life with the unfolding history of the universe:

[W]e shall be transformed more and more to the word, that is, the light of the son, while the holy spirit strengthens assent or faith in our hearts, and the word comes upon motions in harmony with it. And just as there is an order of cognition and will in us, so the word displays the reconciliation of the father and the holy spirit ignited joy so that we are able to invoke God, confirms assent, and ignites other
motions harmonious with it. So Athanasius said that the image is re-
newed to become like the son, and wherever the holy spirit is, it is
there through the word.8

Late in Gadamer’s career when he reflected back on his reference to the
verbum interius, he made it clear that he was modeling human solidarity
in language on the processive relation of the persons of the Trinity:

The true conversation is a lived with-one-another, in which the one and
the other unite themselves. To express this with reference to Augustine’s
speculation on the Trinity, I once used the Stoic concept of the “un-
spoken logos” (*logos endiathetos*) that does not disintegrate into differ-
ent languages and guides one to the mysterious sense of “process.”9

Humboldt, Herder, Hamman, and the tradition of German language
philosophy pushed deeper into the linguality of understanding, but hardly
approached the same breadth of conception underlying the processive
relation of Trinity and incarnation. This nexus anticipates the furthest
reaches of Heidegger’s most radical thought experiments, not only the
displacement of agency from the transcendental subject but the con-
stitutive significance of what Heidegger calls *Sprachwerden* (becoming-
language, lingual becoming, etc.).

The constant hermeneutic appeal to terms such as *Miteinandersein*
(being with one another), *Sprachwerden, Sprachgebundenheit* (language-
boundedness), etc., point to a remaking of the ontological relation, one
in which word is the medium of being, dispersed across communities
and histories. The relation of humans to this linguistic playing out of
what is meaningful is radically different from the subject-centered model
of knowing that still permeates our conventional paradigms of knowl-
edge.10 Less well recognized is the extent to which Heidegger and Gadamer
fashioned the ontological structure of *Sprachwerden* from the example of
evangelical Christianity and the doctrine of the word, a connection that
depens and complicates considerably the paradigmatic implications of
their hermeneutic perspective. To lay bare this ontological complexity and
trace its different manifestations and relations is the purpose of this book.
As such, this is not simply an exegesis of Gadamer’s verbum, but a con-
tinuation of the inquiry into the paradigmatic significance of a herme-
neutic logos for our culture.
Gadamer took the leitmotif of the verbum interius as a project he carved out for himself, but it was not a departure from Heidegger. In the 1921 lectures on Augustine and Neoplatonism, Heidegger reflects on the *homo interior* (the inner human being) of the *Confessions*, an interiority in which a voice “soundeth, which time deprives me not of” [et ubi sonat, quod non rapit tempus], a sound that approaches the paradoxical discursivity of the verbum interius in the *De Trinitate*. But more importantly, Heidegger sees the complex structure of *Sprachlichkeit* latent in Augustine’s restless crossing back and forth between worldly experience and insight, and this structure is ultimately what Gadamer finds at stake in the verbum interius. This habit of crossing leads Heidegger to perceive the oscillating relation between “the initially constituting moment of meaning” in one’s own personal comportment and the enacting fulfillment of life knowledge, “a structure in which the possibilities for fulfillment (according to the structure) are inherent in the most multifarious way.” He concludes that “our living consciousness is a constant following and interweaving of situations,” attaching not only understanding but human knowledge to the *Vollzug* (actualization) of life experience. The path that Gadamer would follow in tracking the verbum interius as an anticipation of the hermeneutic reflexivity of lingual being is already roughly sketched out here. Nevertheless, Gadamer’s linkage of *Sprachlichkeit* to the *De Trinitate* rather than to the *Confessiones* was a critical move, because it shifted the focus from Augustine’s self-examination to the trinitarian dialectic of immanence and transcendence. It can be no surprise that the relation of language to Trinity became an inexhaustible lifelong theme for him.

Because Gadamer’s own explication of the verbum interius is rather cryptic and elliptical, it invites misinterpretation and neglect. Running to a mere ten pages in *Truth and Method*, it is more like a sketch of Gadamer’s investment in this idea. His assumption that readers would engage the primary texts of reference to come to terms with the idea was misplaced. In an age of specialization, his sources—spurious texts, doctrinal arguments, scholastic definitions—appear obscure and irrelevant. As a result much of the force of the analogy is lost. We seem increasingly less inclined to take Gadamer’s counsel that we must remain open to the claim of tradition, and that if we read the traditional texts “historically” we have already “thoroughly smoothed them out beforehand” (*TM*, 361). This book arises out of the conviction that, as conversation partners,
Augustine and Aquinas have said to Gadamer and to us something important that we have not fully taken in. Commentary has tended to flatten the significance of the analogy, Augustine’s insight has been disconnected from John’s innovation, and the verbum interius has been disassociated from the verbum. The position that I am going to advance is that the analogy is far more than an explanatory figure, and Gadamer’s appropriation more than an illustration of thought’s proximity to language. If it were only that, what would account for Gadamer’s constant invocation of trinitarian theology? If Gadamer’s point was only to turn our attention to the surplus of meaning beyond what is spoken, he need hardly have gone beyond the language theory of Seneca.

In a second conversation with Grondin some years after the cryptic remark in the Heidelberg pub, Grondin asked Gadamer why he had connected the unending hermeneutic task of finding the right word with Augustine’s doctrine. Instead of saying that the verbum is about the proximity of word and thought, or, as Grondin himself might have said, that Augustine discovers a surplus of meaning beyond any expression, Gadamer’s response was again cryptic: “Precisely because Augustine needed not fewer than fifteen books to come close to the mystery of the Trinity without thereby falling into the false expedience of the gnostic presumption.” It is important to note that Gadamer did not simply refer to the fifteenth book of the *De Trinitate* which contains the analogy of the inner word, but to virtually the whole of the work which Augustine had composed over a period of twenty years. Further, Gadamer places this achievement in the light of the gnostic heresy, which understood the divine Son as a different being from the mortal Christ figure. Therefore what struck Gadamer was not simply an anticipation of the intimate unity of thought and speech, but the feat of imagination that conceived the unity of transcendent and immanent being. Just so deep is the meaning of language. This gives some sense of the scope I believe Gadamer gives to the verbum as a contribution to what he calls hermeneutic understanding.

The Verbum in the Argument of *Truth and Method*

I would contend that the reference to trinitarian theology in Gadamer’s 1996 response to Grondin relates closely to his 1988 discussion with Grondin about hermeneutic universality. The enigmatic relation of the univer-
sal and the particular remained a central problem for Gadamer, because at its core the theme of interpretation addresses the fact that human experience is disparate, never quite whole, and yet understands itself somehow in relation to a whole. But this question is also fundamentally the question of language. The concept of Logos stood at the crossing point between the Greek and Judaeo-Christian traditions, at the center of the inscrutable middle place of human finitude. Heidegger himself had gone to these same sources first, although from a different direction, moving back from Augustine to Aristotle to the pre-Socratics. The theme was the same however: the ontic and ontological structure of language. Heidegger’s ontological innovation was precisely to interpose language at the core of the riddle of the one and the many, a riddle that had formed the course of speculative thought in the West since the pre-Socratics. While Gadamer took his cue from his mentor, he wanted to make two emendations to Heidegger’s program. First, he believed more strongly than Heidegger that grafting language onto the problem of universality was a natural development of Western thought in its history, not a leap back to origins. Second, he believed that sociality was at the core of the human relation between language and the problem of the one and the many. What is interesting and difficult about our inquiry is that the verbum interius which Gadamer makes so central to his idea of hermeneutic consciousness is eminently designed to speak to the first emendation, and less so to the second. His late comments on its importance obscure a bit its place in the historical development of hermeneutics, so we need to clarify the context of its introduction in *Truth and Method* in relation to the broader meaning of Sprachlichkeit.

Gadamer does this himself late in *Truth and Method*, where he speaks retrospectively of the scholastic innovation in relation to what came after. Significantly, he locates the verbum explicitly in relation to the ancient dilemma of the one and the many. The statement occurs in the penultimate section of the book (III, 3, B), just at the point where Gadamer turns from Hegel to Heidegger. (The phrase “Only now” refers to Heidegger’s speculative absolutism.)

Only now can the great dialectical puzzle of the one and the many, which fascinated Plato as the negation of the logos and which received a mysterious affirmation in medieval speculation on the Trinity, be given its true and fundamental ground. When Plato realized that the
word of language is both one and many, he took only the first step. It is always one word that we say to one another and that is said to us (theologically, “the” Word of God)—but the unity of this word, as we saw, always unfolds step by step in articulated discourse. (TM, 457–458)\(^8\)

The scholastic innovation thus represents a progressive step in the cultural conversation, and the achievement has to do with the successiveness or temporality of discourse: The word unfolds (legt sich ... je und je) in the process of thinking things through or talking things out, and this on the grand stage of history—we think here of Shakespeare’s “to the last syllable of recorded time.” This aspect of discursivity is given its true and fundamental ground in Heidegger’s embrace of an insurmountable human finitude. In this passage, to clarify Heidegger’s importance, Gadamer creates a simple axis between the metaphysical assumption of an order of perfection and a world operating with the limits and possibilities of finite, speaking communities. “The fundamental finitude of being,” he asserts, is constituted out of “the occasionality of human speech” (TM, 458). The commitment to a language that emerged slowly out of German historicism and philosophy of language (Herder, Humboldt, Schleiermacher, Ranke, Droysen, Dilthey, etc.) put Heidegger and Gadamer on a collision course with the dualism and idealism that the West had nurtured.

To be sure, the simplicity of this division within the tradition works only so long as Gadamer fixes his attention on the tendency of Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, and Hegel toward an order of perfection. The way Gadamer puts this contrast in the opening of III, 3, B shows how elusive a simple contrast will be for him:

That human experience of the world is linguistic in nature was the thread underlying Greek metaphysics in its thinking about being since Plato’s “flight into the logoi.” We must inquire how far the answer given there—an answer that lasted until Hegel—does justice to the question we are concerned with. (TM, 456)

“How far?” indeed. The ramifying, compounded tradition that contributed to Gadamer’s Sprachlichkeit sits on more than one simple axis, and Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, and Hegel are in many respects allies to Gada-
mer’s cause. Because Gadamer sees the various contributions to his idea of Sprachlichkeit from so many different sides, the distinctions between the various perspectives tend to lose their edges. Such a compositing of ideas is a characteristic of Gadamer’s mode of thinking. His hermeneutic palimpsest does not discard the Hegelian dialectic, which is in many ways trinitarian, but instead superimposes on it the Christian, and also ultimately Heideggerian, insight into the brokenness and “compli- catio” of human reason. This is in part what is at issue for him in the Augustinian and Thomist contrast of the Word of God and the multiplicity of human words. Moreover, discursive finitude for Gadamer is not an idea that ripens progressively in the movement from Plato to Aquinas to Hegel to Heidegger, but is rather an amalgam of their contributions, since each historical figure offers something more and less than what Gadamer calls Sprachlichkeit.

The intriguing thing about Gadamer’s statement on the one and the many (above) is that it mixes the language of theology and philosophy with the language of rhetoric, that is, of everyday speech: “Es ist immer ein Wort, das wir einander sagen und das uns gesagt wird (theologisch: ‘das’ Wort Gottes)—aber die Einheit dieses Wort legt sich, wie wir sahen, je und je auseinander in artikulierte Rede” (WM, 461–462; emphases added).

[It is always one word that we say to one another and that is said to us (in theology, “the” word of God)—but the unity of this word, as we saw, always unfolds step by step in articulated discourse (TM, 457–458).] Rede is the German word for talk, the informal common speech that occurs in daily life, or the public speech of the political sphere. Gadamer refers twice in this passage to communal dialogue, and he uses only the first person plural, we and us—e.g., the word that we speak to one another, even though the theme he is addressing is the word of God. This mixed discourse expresses the composite layers of Gadamer’s discursivity: both its deep theological and speculative ground, and its dialogic, practical embodiment. To understand Gadamer’s claim clearly we want to tease out these various strands or voices and see how they relate to each other. In order to do this, I will start with the speculative dimension of the problem, unity and multiplicity as it relates to the idea of language, and then indicate how the dialectical structure of language will eventually be related to the rhetorical structure of the polis and Socratic dialogue. The verbum will locate itself in relation to this double obligation.
The Speculative Dimension of the One and the Many

The aspect of Hegelian dialectic that Gadamer holds onto is the ceaseless movement between the particular and the universal that constitutes temporal-historical understanding. Separately, the concrete and the abstract are virtualities, since they exist only in relation to each other. This is what we might call the speculative dimension of the one and the many, to distinguish it from the existential or rhetorical dimension. To it applies all the issues of determinacy, temporality, and logic that relate to the power of language to signify.

The Western speculative tradition is tied closely to the development of this question. The temptation at a certain point was to harness language as a pointer to an ideal world beyond accidents and imperfections. The tendency for immanent and transcendent reality to split off into distinct realms was embraced and spurned in various ways. It was more difficult to reject than to affirm, and no challenge to dualism maintained itself for long. Plato's methexis and mimesis did not satisfy Aristotle as a solution to separation (χωροσμός) and so Aristotle bound the universe more tightly into the dialectic of dynamis and energeia. In turn, Aristotle did not satisfy his Peripatetic followers, who found a greater unity between nature (φύσις) and mind (νοῦς), but who in their turn reduced the kosmos even more to a physical process (κίνησις). The Stoics found a greater unity (ηγεμονικόν) in the reason (νοῦς) of the cosmos and the soul, only to distance the soul from its bondage to the world. The Epicureans retrieved a greater dignity for the material world, but withdrew from judgment anything beyond practical insight. Neoplatonism retrieved the transcendent realm for a greater unity, but in the process consigned the finite world to insignificance. Patristic thought elevated the world of the flesh to a necessary role in the divine order, finding the balance point between the immanence and transcendence of God's identity, and as we shall see in chapter 5, Hegel's dialectic mirrored this structural relation. That achievement may have been the high point of the effort to reconcile the world to an ideal order of perfection.

But this shows the problem. In a divine and perfect order, the particular would give way to the universal, and language would resolve into concept as an unalloyed grasp of what is. Indeed, the section following the verbum section in Truth and Method is entitled "Language and Concept
Formation,” because the hope of escaping the overdetermination of language, fatefully for the West, depended on the promise of the unifying concept. This is what Hegel tried heroically to mediate when he spoke of a concrete universal. But the point of hermeneutics would be to disappoint this long experiment, and describe a human order unavailable to perfection. In a late repetition of the theme of language and the concept (1995), Gadamer drove the point home. In a paper entitled “From Word to Concept,” he announced somewhat subversively in the opening paragraph: “Of one thing I am sure: the concept, which very often presents itself as something strange and demanding, must begin to speak if it is to be really grasped. For this reason I would first like to revise my topic a little to read: ‘Not only from word to concept but likewise from concept to word.’” Hermeneutics leads away from the dream of an absolute purity and toward an inexhaustible discovery inherent in the uniqueness and diversity of human language. Here is a partial quotation from what I will refer to as Gadamer’s definition of language: “Le langue, c’est en réalité le mot unique dont la virtualité nous ouvre l’infinité de la poursuite du discours’ . . .” [Language is in reality the unique word whose virtuality opens to us the infinite pursuit of discourse . . .] The speculative relation between the one and the many does not resolve to the one, but expands in a ceaseless interplay of unity and difference.

The Social Dimension of the One and the Many

Incarnation did not only speak to the speculative dimension of the problem of universals. That the Church is the body of Christ, and that this embodied Word unfolds in the community of the faithful as its history, is a manner of thinking that literally transforms the notion of language. We are accustomed to speak figuratively of the living “word” in the singular, and there is a good deal that is invested in this locution. It carries the mark of the religious teaching, starting with Jewish covenant, that faith community is bound together by speech, by a promise that unites history. It is the nature of this speech that it should be one word, that is, lacking equivocation and enduring in its constancy. A great effort of thought was required to reconcile the “discursivity” of human speech, i.e., that we must use more than one word, with this perfection. Religious
teaching did not give up on the essential relation between the divine and human word, and this is one of its greatest gifts to thought. The idea that a professing Christian, for instance, lives in and professes the word, that the living word unfolds through history, and that human history is in effect that word, implicitly acknowledges a commonality between divine and human language. The question, then, is to reconcile or explain the difference. One answer is that the human logos is many words because our reason is processive and discursive. We need to talk things out and think things through. This is the answer that the verbum interius points to specifically, although, to be sure, Augustine and Aquinas are never too far from John’s prologue and the greater potency of the link to incarnation. That the word of God unfolds in human history as the nexus between the transcendent and immanent procession will be a kind of touchstone for the idea of discursivity Gadamer develops all through his career. Therefore in an important way Christology moves beyond the conceptual problem of universality and touches the existential questions Heidegger was absorbed in. Here is where the axial opposition of Heidegger and the tradition is confounded, and we can find common cause in that tradition all the way through.

We go beyond the speculative dimension when Heidegger’s exploration of linguistic finitude sends the matter back to Rede in a way that undermines the simple axis of Gadamer’s “dialectical puzzle” statement. The interaction of the one and the many in language works much closer to the ground, in the occasionality of speech and in the indeterminacies of human situations, so that it refers now not only to a cognitive phenomenon but to a lived experience. Gadamer’s definition of language (the full quotation this time) provides a marvelous example of Gadamer’s mixed speculative-practical discourse: “Le langue, c’est en réalité le mot unique dont la virtualité nous ouvre l’infinité de la poursuite du discours, et du discours avec les autres, et de la liberté du ‘se dire’ et du ‘se laisser dire.’” [Language is in reality the unique word whose virtuality opens up for us the endlessness of the pursuit of discourse, and the endlessness of the discourse with others, and the endlessness of the freedom to let something be said.]24 It is precisely because Gadamer conceives this interaction as people engaged in situated dialogue about things that matter that he returns to Plato. This Plato is not the theorist of numbers and signs, but rather the author of those dialogues that model for us the embodied
character of understanding. The rhetorical culture embodied in Socrates’ status as gadfly, a questioning of meaning “that will make us better and wiser,” manifests the discursive relation of the one and the many as a social phenomenon.

This return to Plato is acted out in the narrative progression of the third part of *Truth and Method*, where Gadamer first moves his argument beyond Augustine and Aquinas after the verbum section to Cusa and Humboldt, who prize the multivocality of language and its resistance to any standard of perfection. In moving from a faith in the absolute to an acceptance of the inexactness of language (*TM*, 437), the privileging of the particular and the contingent (*TM*, 430), the metaphoricity of concept formation (*TM*, 429), and the occasionality of speech (*TM*, 458), Gadamer ultimately finds himself back in the classical rhetorical polis, although certainly transformed by the journey. My cautionary claim about this return is that the circling back is not a *destruktion*. Whatever direction Gadamer goes in, it is always tracking with a sympathetic resonance that picks up the harmonics of the tradition, in the same way that the notes of a stringed instrument in its lowest registers contain all of the overtones.

I would propose that the resonance of the idea that the Church of Christ is the historical community of faith, and that the body of Christ is His word unfolding in the life of individual Christians down through history, *heightens* Gadamer’s ideal of ancient dialogue when he finally comes back to it. Gadamer returns to Plato and the ancients at the end of *Truth and Method* as to a kind of goal or end, but now with a special value added. Gadamer wants the extraordinary advance that the idea of incarnation brings to language, an idea we shall begin to understand in this book, but he also wants to keep this ontological turn within the useable framework of practical discourse.25 The dialectic of the one and the many shucks off the vestiges of its idealist purity and dons the patchwork mantel of our rough-hewn indeterminacy. On the other hand, the occasional and the contingent are no longer simply the vocabulary of everyday rhetoric, but the truth of our being. Gadamer wishes to transplant all that has been learned about our middle place between the particular and the universal back into the ethos of dialogic inquiry. If he can do it, if he can imagine a rhetorical community informed now by the exquisite structure of speculative reflection, he will have the framework
for hermeneutic experience he aspires to give his students. Gadamer’s discussion of the verbum sits within this context; it is a fundamental moment in the narrative that leads to what Gadamer calls hermeneutic experience.

From the Agora to the University and Back Again

In spite of a growing scholarly reputation in the German university system, Gadamer wrote and published relatively little for the first decades of his scholarly career. With great difficulty in his fifties he set about writing “a book which was indicative of my practice of the interpretation of texts and my teaching generally.”

The product of almost ten years, Wahrheit und Methode was an effort to show “how the various paths of philosophizing which I retraced in my teaching could be made genuinely relevant to today by starting from the current philosophical situation.” This is a fair description of how the book reads, a heady navigation through compounded layers of tradition to create a new amalgam, a humanism cured in the fires of German romanticism, historicism, and phenomenology. When I say humanism, and this is the word Gadamer himself uses, I am referring to the hermeneutic transformation of the studia humanitatis by a new emphasis on the constitutive role of language. Unexpectedly the book hit a nerve, gaining a rapid international reputation, and brought Gadamer to prominence among scholars worldwide, although the interest generated by the book went in a direction away from Gadamer’s original question. His idea was to recuperate the humanist tradition as a response to the twin modern threats of subjective relativism and instrumental objectivism.

Living in the crisis of Humboldt’s Geisteswissenschaften, Gadamer looked to the rhetorical curriculum of Renaissance humanism, which itself was a recuperation of an earlier classical humanism, as a useable framework for an education based on dialogic understanding. Gadamer reawakened this spirit from out of the tangle of post-Kantian, post-Hegelian thought in the age of reproduction, and breathed new life into the ancient ideals of practical philosophy and rhetorical culture. But this retrieval was always strangely tied up with strains of mysticism and theology that had pervaded Heidegger’s thinking. In Gadamer’s “palimpsestuous” thought the Greek logos could never be un-
derstood except as it was refracted through the millennia of Western cultural history, and this worked its way laboriously back through German language theory, speculative idealism, Kantian metaphysics, and Christian theology.29

This book is primarily about the influence of the compounded tradition of Graeco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian logos. In his nineties, Gadamer wrote retrospectively that it was the verbum interius that guided his understanding of the question of language: “I myself relied on Augustine’s reception of the Stoic teaching of the ‘inner word.’”30 This statement occurs in Gadamer’s review of the historical argument about linguistic being from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Derrida and himself. Gadamer conceives the prodigious mystery of language under the mantra that there is only ever one word (TM, 427/WM, 430). That human language is multiple and heterogeneous, discursive and evolving, that it exists only in its enactment, that its temporal expression is always incomplete, ambiguous, contingent, and indeterminate, stands in productive tension with and does not at all obviate the truth of its singularity. That finite human understanding is not able to grasp the unity of the word is the occasion for its history. We can begin to hear this in Gadamer’s response to Grondin’s question about the verbum: “Words are not what is written down. Words are not buried in the brain. What is unfolded, so to speak, is rather the capacity to create new combinations that makes language possible. This is linguisticality, an expression that means the ‘inner conversation’ that the Stoa called the logos endiathetos.”31 The performativity of language has to do with the fact that discursivity (discursus) stands in a dialectical relation to insight (intuitus). It is patently clear that for Gadamer the idea of the Leibnizian intuitus is by itself only a phantasm, a romantic dream, but what is easily missed is that, for him, the discursive manifold by itself is equally virtual. For Gadamer human finitude is not simply a failing, but bears some indistinct and generative relation to the singularity of the word.

If the verbum is the locus classicus for Gadamer’s insights into the universality of the hermeneutic experience, it cannot simply be extracted from the philosophical history that underlies Gadamer’s larger effort. Even more than this, the central place of the word for Gadamer (logos, verbum, Sprache) depends on its recursive incarnations in Western intellectual culture, and what Gadamer sees in the verbum is strengthened
by its resonance with that ongoing tradition. Of particular importance is the life of logos in the humanist tradition that is the subject of the first part of *Truth and Method*. We shall find that there is a crucial nexus between the theology of the word and the rhetorical culture of civic humanism that plays out in Gadamer’s thinking. Gadamer makes this connection explicit in his conversation with Grondin, where he links Augustine’s reflection on the Trinity to the long rhetorical tradition of contingent knowledge: “There is a knowledge not always of mastery. It has to do with familiarity. . . . There are many things that we basically do not understand with which we are yet familiar. How we know so much in this way is full of mystery.”

The argument of *Truth and Method* as it is developed initially was an attempt to mediate the framework of the *Geisteswissenschaften* of the German university system and the Renaissance curriculum of the *studia humanitatis*. Gadamer sees the former as a complex and wayward development of the latter, and his idea is to see past the distortions of the “human sciences” by taking guidance from the humanist past. It is this ramified standpoint between Renaissance humanism and the intellectual culture of post-Enlightenment Germany that is worked out through the first two parts of *Truth and Method*. Gadamer’s argument reflects his standing in and speaking from these multiple locations, which is what accounts for the complexity of his exposition. If we extract the theme of classical humanism out of the larger setting, the nature of its appropriation looks fairly straightforward, i.e., a recuperation of humanism for the foundations of human culture as the language of political discourse and practical judgment, of historical and literary studies, of ethics and aesthetics. Gadamer conjures up the classical and Renaissance worlds of decorum, common sense, cultivation and judgment, worlds of civility, of pragmatism, and above all of sociality. The sense of the appropriate that guides judgment extends across the boundaries of art and politics.

But we cannot extract the humanist theme from *Truth and Method* if we are to follow Gadamer’s argument, because the *studia humanitatis* is always refracted through the contemporary situation. Gadamer’s starting point, the *Geisteswissenschaften*, betrays in its name a subordinate relation to the natural sciences. This is what makes following his argument particularly complex. To start with the *Geisteswissenschaften* is to pick up the subject of the humanities in midstream, rather late in its course, and to follow several of its currents as they disperse and intermingle. More than
this, Gadamer is simultaneously paddling upstream as “we work our way back” to the ideal of humanism from the Geisteswissenschaften, and then riding on ahead beyond the line of vision to a world of hermeneutic understanding, treating the modern appropriation of humanism as a work in progress in which his book will play a part.

There is a question of relevance to the modern situation of the balanced and humane world of the agora and the court that Gadamer is looking for—civic humanism—and we hear in the first part of Truth and Method a somewhat forced encounter of the two incommensurate worlds. It seems possible for Gadamer to bring together Thomas Reed, Vico, Oetinger, Humboldt, and Shaftsbury, with Pseudo-Dionysius, Chrysippus, and Marcus Aurelius, but it becomes progressively more difficult to introduce Kant, Hegel, and Dilthey into this complex tapestry. Enlightenment had already been weakened by the growing dominion of technique, by objectifying method and categorial division, and there is a sense that beyond this its cultivation of Bildung suffers by a kind of inordinate growth. Having lost the delicate humanist balance, there is both a tremendous deepening of insight and a distortion. Kant is really the pivot point, and his mixed contributions express this conflict. His moral philosophy “purified ethics from all aesthetics and feeling” (TM, 40/WM, 46), yet he asserted that “The beautiful is the symbol of the morally good” (in Gadamer, TM, 75/WM, 81). The intellectual history that Gadamer follows exhibits this pattern of gain and loss. Romanticism (e.g., Schiller) finds genius at the source of beauty and goodness, but at the expense of reason. With German idealism, life itself becomes the object of aesthetic pleasure, but as a life of beautiful experience, so that beauty is “contrasted with practical reality” (TM, 82/WM, 88). In so many ways the German sensitivity to the ontological claims of art expand and enrich the understanding of the aesthetic, but the balance that humanism had achieved among all spheres of life has been sacrificed. The epitome of this loss of balance is what Gadamer calls “aesthetic consciousness” (TM, 89–100/WM, 94–106), and it is with the critique of this concept that the first part of Truth and Method ends.

In spite of this historical devaluation of the humanist ideal, Gadamer develops simultaneously an increasingly complex picture of the ideal modeled on the humanist appreciation of beauty, both moral and aesthetic, and cultivation of the public good, all held in balance in a harmonious civic life. The Greek sense of kalon must be the paradigm, because
here the beautiful was in no sense divorced from the true expressing the pervasive order of the cosmos (TM, 477–480/WM, 481–484). The progressive demotion of beauty and art into separate and then ancillary subjects defines in part the career of humanism, and this is the historical point at which Gadamer’s inquiry enters. Even Hemholtz, who opposed the Diltheyan effort to find method in the humanities, conceded too much by searching for its equivalent (TM, 8/WM, 13–14). But the guiding concept that anchored the Geisteswissenschaften was sturdy enough to expand in healthy and unhealthy directions without losing its core. This guiding concept, a child of the eighteenth-century German classicism, is Bildung (Part I, I, 1, B, i). Gadamer’s conception of Bildung is intimately related to the classical tradition of phronesis, a central pillar of Gadamer’s entire hermeneutic programme.34 To understand phronesis and Bildung is to go a great ways toward grasping the circular structure of hermeneutic understanding, and of the structure of the word that guides this study. Bildung, the formation of character and culture, unites in a processive way meaning, experience, and judgment in a kind of feedback loop that gains at each pass. Gadamer reinterprets Bildung’s relation to the past (tradition and language) and the future (possibility and invention) through Heidegger’s temporal ecstatic being of Dasein, which is what gives hermeneutic truth its special complexity.

The language of Bildung in its cognates—Einbildungskraft, Bild, Vorbild, Abbild, Nachbild, Urbild—expresses “in advance” of our conceptualizing, as Gadamer would say, the reciprocating structure of being-in-the-world (WM, 98/TM, 103). Our informing form, which is “consciousness at work” (arbeitende Bewußtsein), working the world through works, is simultaneously a coming to terms with the world and a self-forming. Human being is such that, “by forming the thing it forms itself” (TM, 13/WM, 18). The distance between the agencies of self and thing are actually generative, since, in a Hegelian sense, the alienation of spirit in time motivates the movement of understanding. The basic character of Bildung is “to reconcile itself with itself, to recognize oneself in other being” (TM, 13/WM, 19). The felt absence of what has been lost of us to ourselves through time, quoting Hegel, “contains at the same time all the exit points and threads of the return to oneself, for becoming acquainted with it and for finding oneself again” (TM, 14).35 The meanings of Einbildungskraft, Vorbild, and Bildung as a network of terms are all related to this interani-
mating characteristic. Humboldt prepares us for what this is when he says that Bildung is “something both higher and more inward, namely the disposition of mind which, from the knowledge and the feeling of the total intellectual and moral endeavor, flows harmoniously into sensibility and character.” [Wenn wir aber in unserer Sprache Bildung sagen, so meinen wir damit etwas zugleich Höheres und mehr Innerliches, nämlich die Sinnesart, die sich aus der Erkenntnis und dem Gefühl des gesammten geistigen und sittlichen Strebens harmonisch auf die Empfindung und den Charakter ergiesst.]36 Gadamer relates this definition to “the ancient mystical tradition according to which man carries in his soul the image of God, after whom he is fashioned, and which man must cultivate in himself” (TM, 11/WM, 16). Humans form in disposition and character out of the culture they subsequently enrich by their own actions.

Gadamer reads the relation of the German concept of Bildung to phronesis through the intermediary concept of the sensus communis, the basis of Vico’s rhetorical humanism. We can see here the three-point perspective with which Gadamer views his subject—from the Geisteswissenschaften through Christian humanism to ancient classicism. I would maintain that, although the Greek and Roman ideals are the constant orienting star of Gadamer’s thinking, the true center of gravity of Gadamer’s treatment of humanistic understanding in the first part of Truth and Method lies between the querelle des anciens et des modernes at the balancing point of the studia humanitatis. When Gadamer acknowledges that hermeneutics is fundamentally grounded in the classical tradition of rhetoric, he is pointing not only to Aristotle and Cicero but to Renaissance humanism, a movement that took its direction from the recovery of the rhetorical tradition. Italian humanists believed that knowledge was fundamentally social, and their conception of education linked intellectual activity to praxis.37 At the center of culture they placed rhetoric, which meant for them both the texts of the ancients and the public oratory of self-government (text and speech). The cultivation of the arts of language became “the basis of a general education and of an integrated culture” (204). Excellence in the word turned for its models to the tradition of classical texts, whose authority was such that it “needed no demonstration” (204). The humanists believed that speech was in no way separate from knowledge (“wisdom speaking copiously”38). All of this is repeated in Gadamer as central to his purpose.
Although Renaissance humanism constituted itself in many ways in opposition to scholasticism, it emerged out of that Christian worldview. Valla’s translation of *logos* as *oratio* rather than *ratio* thus honors both Ciceronian republicanism and Christian evangelism. Valla’s choice “not only suggests the dynamism and the substantive importance of rhetoric but is also significantly closer to the biblical than to the philosophical world of thought.” The classical curriculum allowed Renaissance scholars opportunities both to distance themselves from their more immediate patrilineage and to deepen their understanding of it. We can see, for instance, how decorum “suggests that language seeks man out as he is from moment to moment and addresses him not as the representative of a species, in the timeless language of absolute truth, but as an individual” (425). Language’s “malleability, its adaptability to the nuances of experience, allowed it to mold itself flexibly around the infinitely varied and constantly shifting particularities of life” (425). This combination of influences, the rhetorical and the biblical, is a hybridity that continues to resonate through German intellectual culture up to the present. The classical ideal is deepened and enriched by the uniqueness and centrality of personal experience as it is taught in the salvation narrative. Christian humanism reads the existential pathos of the Gospels in the situated and contingent art of rhetoric. On the one hand, with “its gravitation toward classical rhetoric, Renaissance humanists developed a worldview that contrasted with the relatively static and hierarchical absolutism of medieval theology” (425). On the other hand, with its rejection of “the abstract man of classical anthropology with its separate, hierarchically distinguished faculties, rhetoric accepted and appealed to man as it encountered him in the individual moments of his existence. Man was no longer merely a rational animal but an infinitely complex being . . . a mysterious unity” (425). Christian humanism combined the rhetorical understanding of language with the theological reverence for the word. Instead of a bloodless contrast between the particular and the general of dialectical studies, it sees particularity in the complex wholeness of the individual in the fullness of life and experience. The rhetorical word is produced out of and addressed to this whole. This is very much in keeping with biblical tradition. The individual person is an image of the model of Christ, and this recapitulation draws its meaning from the singularity of personal redemption.
Gadamer’s humanism, and his debt to the humanists, can be fixed in relation to this point. There is no danger in misinterpreting his appropriation of the personal nature of the word as a return to subjectivity. This cannot be an alternative, since the thrust of his thought is to depose the idea of the transcendental subject. He was opposed as much to the Romantic ideal of personal genius as to the Cartesian self as starting point. The full energy of his thought points toward the dispersion of agency from person to text, from person to culture, from conscious presence to history. But the important nuance is that this is not an appeal to an impersonal reality, or for a world spirit. It is rather the Greek idea that what is meaningful is present and carried on in our works and words as much as in ourselves. This is where the Judaeo-Christian word again becomes crucial, because it provides the purest and fullest model for this idea. The word passed down through generations, observed in ritual, alive in the reading of scripture, returning us to its source. This comes full force in Gadamer’s explanation of the word of the gospel, which is proclaimed anew to each individual soul, something that is “not extractable from what is spoken from someone to someone. What can be understood with regard to it is not the abstract logical sense of an expression, but a convenientia that happens in it” (WM, 431). The convenientia of person and word is the convergence of rhetorical decorum and the theological verbum. The living word brings together persons, experience, and culture in meaningful relation. Thus Gadamer will break decisively from the current of the tradition, present almost from the beginning, that flows towards the subjectum. Language is not on the outside of the constitution of social meanings, but is its living center.

The appeal to the theology of the word has another reason. There is nothing in the classical or humanist tradition after Heraclitus that gives to the mystery of language the same weight of purpose. When Gadamer defends his famous formula that being that can be understood is language, he uses a Heideggerian locution that goes well beyond even Cicero’s fusion of wisdom and eloquence: “Vor allem heißt es das eine: Sein, das erfahren und verstanden werden kann, bedeutet: Sein spricht” [This signifies above all that being that can be experienced and understood means: Being speaks]. This is an idiom formed out of contact with the Graeco-Christian tradition of the logos. When Gadamer addresses the question of language in the third part of Truth and Method, a topic that he
is always careful to qualify as an inexhaustible mystery, he needs a model that outstrips the practical idioms of the rhetorical tradition. What he sees in language and what he is after in deciphering it is a structure that goes to the heart of the human mystery, and he finds this model in the theology of incarnation. It is here that he will develop the structure of the hermeneutic circle as it manifests itself in the interplay between reflective being and language.

The development of trinitarian doctrine in the first centuries of the Christian church pressed the mediation between the material and spiritual realms to its extreme by insisting on the full humanity and the full divinity of the Logos. Here lies the inordinate power of the dogmatic model for hermeneutics, because the question of language is placed in juxtaposition to the person of the word. The nexus between humanity and divinity is not a reduction of some kind, as an overflow or surplus, as a tool or instrument, but contains the whole within it. The impact of this idea can be felt throughout the subsequent intellectual history of the West. When Renaissance humanism appropriates classical rhetoric, it is no wonder that it should be receptive to the idea that reason lies in the fullness of the person. And when hermeneutics takes an ontological turn, it is no wonder that it should appeal to the great refusal of a reduction in the idea of incarnation.

The Circularity of the Word

I will sketch out briefly what is on offer here that affects our normal conception of experience and understanding, which is what Gadamer regards as fundamentally lingual and which the verbum helps to characterize in a radically different way. The word for Gadamer is not just a sign, a package carrying meaning from a sender to a receiver. Different from this simple functionalism, language has a circular structure that enfolds the being of the linguistic animals who live in it and the historical world that unfolds dialectically with it. What is meaningful is carried along in the constancy of language and pivots in the reflective consciousness of beings, gathering up and returning to its source, with each pass reflecting a new aspect. This circularity is a quietly recurring theme in Western thought, but no match for the linear model of the sign.42 The
Christian conception of God as Word is the literal apotheosis of this circularity in which language passes through and includes the constitution of being in the world. The identification of word and true personhood is an innovation that pushes to the furthest limit the idea of ontological circularity, but it includes and is built up from the notions of circularity that came before it. Likewise, the hermeneutic circularity of language that Gadamer develops borrows from this earlier iteration and continues to draw illumination and guidance from it.

In Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, the circular structure of understanding is articulated in terms of a reciprocity between consciousness and history: “Historical consciousness . . . adopts a reflective posture toward both itself and the tradition in which it is situated. It understands itself in terms of its own history. Historical consciousness is a mode of self-knowledge” (TM, 235/WM, 239). The hermeneutic foundation stone on which the circle of understanding is built is Heidegger’s contention that “understanding is Dasein’s mode of being” [Verstehen ist die Seinsart des Daseins] (259/264). Reflection is a structure constitutive of human being: “[L]ife itself is ordered toward reflection” [Das Leben ist selbst auf Besinnung angelegt] (235/239). More than once in Truth and Method Gadamer quotes Dilthey that “life is understood by life” (229/233). Gadamer interprets this to mean that “for historical consciousness the whole of tradition becomes the self-encounter of the human mind” (229/233). The immanent knowledge of life “folds back on and returns to itself” [es sich mit sich selbst zusammenschließt] (253/257) through a series of intermediaries. It is this circular ontological structure that constitutes Gadamer’s appropriation and innovation. Gadamer goes further in insisting that the path of reflection is not “still oriented to the interiority of self-consciousness” but orients “itself toward the functional circle of life” (250/254–255). By “life” Gadamer means something like the Diltheyan-Husserlian conception of “the intersubjectivity of the communal world” (250/254). He transforms the idea of Erfahrung from the conventional “experience” of the individual phronimos to a “fundamentally anonymous intentionality”—i.e., not achieved by anyone by name” (246/250–251). Gadamer’s emphasis is on the with-one-another (Miteinander) of dialogic philosophy, a development beyond Heidegger’s less socially emphatic notion of Mitsein (BT, 308/SZ, 263). The dispersal of agency and displacement of the Western mind into “the intentionality of universal
"life" is completed by a “self-reflection” that involves a redistribution of agency from subject to communal history (259/263). The privilege attached to subjective understanding, reaching its apotheosis in Hegel’s complete presence of the absolute idea is, in retrospect, a grand overreach, and the Western rationalist orientation of subject and substance finds a corrective: “In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. . . . The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life” (276/281).

But Gadamer does not simply repudiate the humanist tradition, and this is evident in the fact that he keeps the language of reflection and consciousness in many of his principle themes, a practice that he has had to defend while others have gone much further in the deposition of intentional agency. The tightrope Gadamer walks is illustrated in the concept of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*, an idea that brings to a culmination the second part of Truth and Method. The locution is untranslatable partly because it uses the peculiar resources of German to express a doubled over, folding back structure that is neither completely subjective understanding nor the anonymous intentionality of history, but something “in between.”43 Weinsheimer offers an admirable précis of Gadamer’s coinage:

*Wirkung* is related to *wirken* (knit, weave, integrate), to *verwirklichen* (realize, make real), and to *Wirklichkeit* (reality, actuality). *Wirkungsgeschichte* is the reality of history in that it is the history of realization. What is real works—that is, in realizing itself it works itself out. The history of how something works out, or history in its working out, is *Wirkungsgeschichte*. *Wirkung*, then, means work in the transitive sense. History is *Wirkungsgeschichte* in that it works something or works on something: it effects and has an effect. The effect of history—its realization, its reality—is history itself. Precisely for this reason history itself always exists in relation: to its effects and hence to subsequent history, the course of events. The history of an event’s consequence and effects is not something different from the history of the event but is rather the history of the event itself, its own history.44

It is only after an extended exploration of Heidegger’s thought on language (chapter 6) that the significance of this compromise will come fully
into view, but we can get an inkling of its structure in the language Gadamer uses to indicate its in-between status. The miracle of understanding, he says, “is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning” (*eine Teilhabe am gemeinsamen Sinn*) (TM, 292/WM, 297). This phrase puts us in mind of the *sensus communis*, and gives it the proper accent. Gadamer is not after something mystical or idealist, but something grounded in the practical life of the political community, the humanist ideal of the civitas. Unlike Heidegger, Gadamer draws the Judaeo-Christian achievement back into the humanist tradition. The Christian overtones of the *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* (historically effected consciousness) enter into Gadamer’s further description of the mediation and human being and language: “Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as an involvement in the event-happening of what is passed down” (*Einrücken in ein Überlieferungsgeschehen*) (TM, 290, modified/WM, 295). Subjectivity is not the end-all, but only part of a participatory structure in which destiny plays an equal role. The genius of the phrase is that it captures the push-pull of the two sides of this new conception of agency, one in which subjective intentionality is diminished in importance and yet reflexivity is an essential component. On the one hand “we are always already affected by history,” but on the other hand, we are conscious of the hermeneutical situation in which we are surrounded (300/305). This is the positive case for the dog that chases its tail: “Understanding proves to be a kind of effect that knows itself as such” (341/346).

Gadamer gives an entire section (Part II, II, 3) to the question of “how knowledge and effect belong together” (TM, 341/WM, 346), and the critical point for us is that, in spite of all his cautions and remonstrances about reflective philosophy, *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* is inherently reflexive: “The structure of reflexivity is fundamentally given with all consciousness. Thus this must also be the case for historically effected consciousness” (341/347). He will get at the limits of reflexivity by a process of subtraction:

We are concerned with understanding historically effected consciousness in such a way that the immediacy and superiority of the work does not dissolve into a mere reflective reality in the consciousness of the effect — i.e., we are concerned to conceive a reality that limits and exceeds the omnipotence of reflection. (342/348)
Gadamer explores the concept of experience (Part II, II, 3, B), particularly as it is understood by Hegel and Heidegger, as a way to delimit the claims of reflection. Experience (Erfahrung) is conventionally thought to be the possession of the person, but Gadamer conceives it as a shared possession, the incursion of history into the person, the imprint of common human finitude: “Although in bringing up children, for example, parents may try to spare them certain experiences, experience as a whole is not something anyone can be spared” (356/362).

Experience is the learning of one’s own finitude: “The nature of experience is conceived in terms of something that surpasses it” (355/361). Thus self-consciousness is consciousness of what the self is not. Gadamer’s preoccupation with the idea of human finitude is not the simple fact of finitude, but the self-knowledge of finitude’s constituitiveness. This is not only the awareness of our extreme limitation, but the understanding that such a limit offers. Any limit or boundary has this attribute: “What makes a limit a limit always also includes knowledge of what is on both sides of it” (343/348).

Gadamer specifies the character of this limit by relating it to the Socratic docta ignorantia, which is paradoxically both a vigilant humility and the wisdom that arises out of that humility, thus operating from both sides of the limit. Gadamer prepares the way for this double-sidedness by an extended analysis of Aristotle’s notion of phronesis (Part II, II, 2, B). The comportment of the phronimos (the person who has phronesis) is, on the basis of prior hard experience and knowledge of the constitutive indeterminacy of the future, a cultivated openness to what is probable. This means that the phronimos has both “a sense of direction” (Richtungssinn) (362/368) about the question in hand—i.e., what direction to face in addressing the question—and a deeply internalized sense of inadequacy before the question. The combination of these two sides of the limit is expressed in a comportment that we recognize in the wise person, what Gadamer calls a “readiness for experience” (Erfahrungsbereitschaft) (363/367). We trust someone who seems to be on the razor’s edge of the probable. This comportment is formed under the pressure of awareness that we are less directing our own destinies than responsive to the questions that present themselves to us, and that these questions typically will remain “unsettled” (Nichtfestgelegtsein) (363/369). In fact understanding proceeds by a process of destruction. It is when we are pulled up short by the interruption of our preconceptions that we learn.
It is in this way that Gadamer describes the cooperation of subjectivity and history. Human being is on a balancing point between the creative agency of history and the responsiveness of personal understanding. Hermeneutics is a relocation of agency that does not diminish the value of the human. This is accomplished primarily through a redefinition of language. After establishing the intermediate status of the *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* at the macro-level of history and experience, Gadamer turns in the third part of *Truth and Method* to an analysis of language in order to reimagine the relation of human community and historical finitude. Language for him is the site of mediation (as opposed to subjectivity) where history and understanding collide.

The understanding of language that Gadamer is tracing, it is fair to say even now, is alien to much of the dominant Western culture. Its first glimmering was present in archaic Greece, when the name of a person seemed “to belong to his being,” but then this was lost to the instrumentalist view of language that is our heritage (405/409). Historically the *verbum cordis* is a temporary reprieve in the face of the forgetfulness of language in the West. Plato’s *Cratylus* depicts language as a network of signs modeled on mathematical numbers, and the correctness of words is determined by their adequacy in describing a prior truth. In dismissing this Gadamer points to the elusive alternative: “But all this misses the point that the truth of things resides in discourse—which means, ultimately, in intending a unitary meaning concerning things—and not in the individual words, not even in a language’s entire stock of words” (411/416).

Here the word is not merely inseparable from the thing, but from the community that speaks it and the future that it hopes for itself. The hermeneutic anticipation of the whole is transformed into an expectation of existential wholeness that our discursivity perpetually denies and imagines. What is it that does not exist “even in a language’s entire stock of words” but the *dynamis* that that language allows? To say precisely what that potential is, Gadamer turns to the idea of the *verbum interius* in the third part of *Truth and Method*. 