

1

On the Silence of Texts Toward a Hermeneutic Concept of Interpretation

The dilemma involved in understanding texts was formulated decisively by Plato in the *Phaedrus*. Leaving aside the possibility that they will be corrupted as they are handed down, texts are stable linguistic units, creations of, at the very least, relative duration. Understanding appears to find a firm point of orientation in texts because we can return to the written word without any real difficulty, which is not the case with speech. Texts are a medicine for memory and wisdom: *mnémes te . . . kai sophías phármakon* (274e).¹ But *phármakon* does not merely mean medicine, but also poison. The written word entices us to trust it in a rather problematic manner and to forget understanding altogether (275a). Worse still, he who poses questions to texts receives no answer; in their stony existence they offer us nothing unambiguous and settled (275c), but rather tempt and entreat us to interpret them. Whoever is able to read can form an opinion about texts, and no author has the power to correct his readers, to exclude certain insights or propose other, more nuanced, ones. In short, texts are stable but not ambiguous; they are accessible, but they also conceal a meaning which the movement and motility of dialogue can at least illuminate.

One should recall the discussions of the *Phaedrus* in order to appreciate the context of the position which dominates the current debate, namely, the position in which un-

derstanding is, on closer inspection, taken to be a form of interpretation. The reason behind this is that the meaning of a text is not something that possesses a stable identity, but rather every reading enters into new linguistic contexts and consequently brings with it uncontrollable displacements of meaning.² Those who support this thesis are mainly concerned with overturning the relationships articulated in the *Phaedrus*. Poison becomes the only medicine because the silence of the texts apparently requires interpretation. Texts, so we are told, contain nothing that could disclose or illuminate itself. The notion that the meaning of a text possesses a stable identity is a false idealization, and whoever is moved to produce his or her own articulation of a text merely produces a new text within the infinite play of linguistic signs.

The assurance that no meaning hides behind texts waiting to be drawn out or unlocked can, of course, only be made when the expectation exists that there is such a meaning. In the case that this expectation persists, we can naturally ascribe it to the enduring influence and persuasiveness of the Platonic texts and the tradition which was founded upon them. A “deconstruction” of Plato and the Platonic tradition would then merely be a matter of freeing oneself from this expectation.

But we must ask whether this is at all possible. The “solemn silence” of texts which Socrates speaks of in the *Phaedrus* (275d) proves itself to be, on closer inspection, the necessary presupposition of every interpretation. If texts were simply dumb we would not want to learn anything from them; in the silence lies the possible but reserved or withheld speech. A text is not merely an arbitrary vehicle for one’s own speech, and if it were, this speech would not be interpretation. It is not possible, therefore, to interpret a text without having an expectation of what the text means.

If texts are truly silent, it appears that there is an expectation that has not been fulfilled. However, where we must engage in interpretation, we cannot hope that the text will provide an answer; rather one is compelled to speak oneself. What is expressed as a result of this process cannot be interrogated meaningfully to determine its agreement with the text; every comparison of a text and its interpretations is itself a new interpretation.

This much is certainly incontestable: no text speaks that liberating word which would confirm the interpretation that this and nothing else was meant. Whether this word would in fact be re-

ceived as a liberation is not so certain, for it would mean the end of interpretation. Interpretation, therefore, depends upon the silence of texts; it arises from this silence, and the text necessarily remains silent with respect to it. Meaning which is simply given needs no interpretation.

However, even if the reserved speech of texts as their claim to meaning is taken to be the fundamental condition of interpretation, the expectation of meaning which is thereby awakened naturally could be illusory. In this case the recommendation that we should not seek anything behind the text or assume that there is anything there to be sought would be in vain, because no interpreter could follow it. But then the thesis that every linguistic utterance is merely a displacement within the open system of language would be justified. To be sure, interpretation would then begin with the expectation of meaning directed to a text, but carrying out the interpretation would not be a process of discovering meaning but rather of inventing it, and while this might appear meaningful when it is enacted, it never uncovers a coherent meaning. If one were now to say that the expectations of meaning formed by the interpreter need not have any foundation in the text, one is then admitting that the act of interpretation is akin to being caught in a necessary illusion.

To the question whether this is illuminating or not, Gadamer has rightly said that it decides "about the range and extent of hermeneutics as well as the objections of its opponents."³ If interpretation is not, at the very least, also a discovery of meaning, we cannot say that it is a form of understanding. If interpretation were not essentially related to texts, a general elucidation of understanding, as philosophical hermeneutics understands it, would not lose merely a marginal field of application, but rather a paradigm, a model, largely by means of which it could establish its validity. It would become unbelievable as hermeneutics.

With respect to this problem, a philosophical hermeneutics in Gadamer's sense gives us no reason for worry. Within the framework of its conceptual possibilities, interpretation allows itself to be grasped as understanding, and without at the same time falsifying that which is essential about the interpretative process. In what follows I want to show that interpretation is a discovery of sense that has nothing to do with either the decoding of a text which conceals its meaning or with the freeing of a secret meaning

which can only be identified by the interpretative process. Interpretation is a type of invention whose freedom is not devoid of all constraint.⁴

The particular characteristics of such an interpretative process are best seen when we do not immediately focus upon the explicative and reflective exegesis of a text, but rather upon an activity which clearly can be recognized as a kind of "interpretation," namely, the performance or presentation of a piece of music or the recitation of a work of poetry. Gadamer explores this phenomenon in the first of the two parts of *Truth and Method* devoted to the "experience of art"⁵ and there emphasizes its two essential elements: constraint and freedom. It is worth considering both elements and their relationship to one another in more detail.

Superficially it is rather easy to understand what is here meant by constraint and freedom. Every interpretation that is also a representation has its virtue in its faithfulness to the work. That is to say, it should aim at nothing more than to make it possible for the work to come forth. It should not, therefore, allow its attention to the work to be diverted by the example of other, putatively more exemplary, presentations, but rather be concerned with allowing the work itself to become present. The interpreter is restrained by what the text itself prescribes. This includes musical scores, which are also texts.

However, as we know no text deprives an interpreter of all his or her decisions. Measure and phrasing cannot be determined at all exactly, to say nothing of the particular tone of a performance. In addition, if we consider the unique circumstances of every lecture and every game, then it is clear that no two performances can be completely similar to one another. Although the work is unique, its performances will always diverge from one another. That aspect of the work which remains the same and endures, whose parameters all performances must respect, becomes present by means of a performance or presentation, though each time in a different manner. The continuous presence of a work manifests itself only at a particular time. The freedom of the interpreter consists in how he gives form to this time.

If we were to say merely this, then we would not have genuinely grasped the essential freedom which belongs to every interpretation. The decisions which are required of each interpreter and are mostly not explicitly made, can be seen on closer inspec-

tion to have their basis in the fact that the work allows for these decisions in the first place. Autonomy only subsists within the play-space of the work, so that this play-space actually constitutes the freedom of the interpreter. Interpretation means to remain within the freedom of the work and in each case to allow this freedom to manifest itself in the free play of performance.

The work is the freedom of the interpreter because it discloses possibilities which are perceived in the process of interpretation. In very few cases these possibilities are laid out clearly for us, and we then can and must decide between them. More often, when the work itself says nothing, the work requires that the interpreter become autonomous. It leaves the enactment of the interpretation open by saying nothing. Whenever works appear to us as texts in that they can and must be read, then the freedom of interpretation is the silence of the texts.

For this reason the freedom of interpretation is far from being an indeterminate openness. An indeterminate openness cannot be represented. Representations are possible only when something determinate is present, which must, insofar as it is determinate, give direction to the representation. With this we have reached the point at which the thesis that interpretation is invention has its strongest support. In the end it is undeniable that there is no access to a "work in itself." Nothing can be said about a work if we ignore our own experience. No work can be understood otherwise in its determinateness than through interpretation. When the issue concerns the determinateness of a work, it is impossible to avoid interpretation.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to use the determinate nature of a work to define interpretation. If we think of the representative function of interpretation in the sense of a performance, we will certainly find this to be illuminating. No one would think of seriously asserting that an interpreter invents his score during a performance. And if the concept of "interpretation" is to have a controllable sense at all, we would have to object to this presupposition whenever it is a matter of more than a mere performance. The conceptually articulated and considered exegesis of a poem can also only be considered "interpretation" if it is, in its enactment, comparable with the poem as recited; the exegesis, too, must remain within the play-space of the text which allows it to manifest itself as a representation. When we speak of interpretation, it is a

matter of a range of possible realizations which extend—without a qualitative leap—from simple performance to the conceptually differentiated exegesis.

Certainly this does not resolve the question of the identity of a work or of a text in general. Whenever this is contested, one clings to the—pertinent—observation that it is impossible to avoid interpretation. But then one forgets that the silence of a work is a positive experience: only that which is determinate and that which can be articulated in a determinate manner can be silent. Even if the musical score does not produce its own sound, one can only produce music with the score by referring to it and—perhaps by essaying different interpretative possibilities—also referring back to it. In the process one stands in a relation to that which “is there,” to the motionless existence of signs. If the particular meaning expressed by a sign cannot be determined precisely for she who utters it through the context of its utterance and its associations, it nevertheless remains a simple fact that signs can be fixed and can be identified as fixed. The materiality of texts, their mere existence, is therefore at the very least a first criterion for their identity. Theuth, the founder of writing of whom Socrates speaks in the *Phaedrus*, invented a medicine for the memory to the extent that the fixed musical score and the stable text are things to which we can return.

In spite of this, it would be clearly insufficient if we were to ground the identity of a text solely in its material constancy; moreover, considered more precisely, it would even be false. No one who says that he is reading a particular book is referring to the copy of the book that he holds in his hands, but rather to the identical text which can be reproduced any number of times—to something, therefore, that needs to be realized materially, but whose existence does not consist essentially in this realization.

Wherein does it consist? Because it is impossible, as we have seen, to interrogate texts themselves without the mediation of interpretation, this question evidently can be answered only by appealing to interpretation itself. If interpretations can be understood only by appealing to the work as such, they must contain at least a reference to the identity of the work, so that the material existence of texts can be understood as an indication of their existence as bearers of meaning.

The indicative function of texts depends upon something which is quite obvious. Every interpretation which aims to be the representation of a work must satisfy two conditions. It must do justice to both the unity and the multiplicity of a text; superficial and vulgar interpretations are no less unsatisfying in themselves as those interpretations which lose themselves in the nuances of a text. This would not be the case if we did not expect that the multiplicity of nuances which can be discovered by an interpreter remain tied to the unity of the text, and that, conversely, the unity of the text will unfold itself in as many nuances as possible.

If these two conditions are valid for any interpretation, we are obliged, in enacting the interpretation, to take them into account. More precisely, the nuances of an interpretation must be limited by the unity of the whole. This requirement constitutes an obstacle and a challenge, just as conversely, the diversity of a text represents an obstacle and a challenge to the representation of the text's unity. To categorize a text and draw out its nuances, to unify and arrange a text, these are the aims of interpretation. What resists and challenges this process cannot stem from the force of the interpreter, but must rather be the claim of the text itself.

In this way the work itself proves to be a form of opposition and a challenge within interpretation. Interpretation is a process which is based upon a complementary tension: while the unity of the text unfolds itself, displaying its nuances, the nuances of the text seek to be made manifest as a unity. Accordingly, unity and multiplicity both play a double role in the relationship of interpretation to the text: as the claim of the text itself and as representation in the enactment of the interpretation. Both elements are doubly constrained in relationship to one another: what opposes the interpretation also makes it possible. Hence the work, in its unity, is the play-space for interpretation insofar as the latter aims to bring out the nuances of the text, while the work, in its multiplicity, is the play-space for the unifying power that is expected from interpretation. The freedom of the interpreter is, in each case, that essential characteristic of a work that both constrains the interpreter from being able to develop the work for himself and that which makes this development unnecessary. What constrains the interpreter in this manner makes its appearance by being brought forth in the enactment of a contrary

interpretation. This appearance is the process of being represented, while this coming forth is representation itself.

The work constrains interpretation in a manner corresponding to the double limitation which governs the relationship between the work and interpretation. At the same time, it is not possible to establish a connection to the work as a whole by circumventing interpretation. The work is not in any sense “given” in the absence of interpretation, and for this reason it is not possible to conceive of interpretation as the discovery of something which exists prior to the interpretative process. On the contrary, to the extent that it is the task of interpretation to facilitate the representation of the work, its function is rather like invention. But it is an invention that is both autonomous and constrained—like an intelligent answer is related to a question; we must reach the answer ourselves, and yet the question precedes the answer and determines its parameters. We must have understood the question in order to be in a position to give an independent answer. The work which is to be interpreted is a double question which expects a double answer.

The interpretation of a work does not distinguish itself from the dialogue between question and answer in virtue of the fact that it is the task of an answer first to develop the question, so that the meaning of the question first appears in the answer. Rather the difference lies in the fact that the question which the work poses to the interpreter is not enunciated by the work but is posed in silence. The richness of nuances within a work is not a determinate question posed to the interpreter’s ability to locate such nuances, but rather is posed to his powers of unification. Just as the unity of a work is not a determinate question posed to the interpreter’s powers of unification, but rather posed to his sense for nuances. The work is not a question but is open to question, and this corresponds to the fact that interpretations are always contested. Interpretations do not portray a work in such a way that the resemblance of the original to the copy can be checked. Interpretations in this sense can never be either true or false, but can at best underestimate the complexity of a work and misjudge its unity in such a manner as to make themselves unconvincing in comparison with other interpretations. It is also true that interpretations are distinct from one another in a manner which cannot precisely be determined. Different ways of reading and their respective contexts, which no one interpreter can

master, essentially elude all control. Nevertheless, interpretations are not arbitrary parts of a boundless multiplicity, but are representations. Interpretations agree in that they allow the play-space of the work to which they belong to manifest itself in a similar manner. Interpretations articulate both of the essential elements of the work by presenting the otherness and agon of the works within themselves.

The strife within the relationship between work and interpretation is the reason that interpretations are merely provisional. No interpretation, no matter how convincing it may be, is definitive; consequently, all interpretations of a work are equal in the very least in that they are all equally entitled to claim correctness. However, they all have an equal claim to correctness only because they are all equally original; every interpretation, whether good or bad, is an original representation of the work. Later interpretations are not necessarily better than earlier interpretations, and vice versa. Knowledge of earlier interpretations, as mentioned above, can even be disadvantageous for the later interpretations; they carry with themselves the danger that one is more concerned with other interpretations than in engaging the claims of the work itself.

If all interpretations of a work are equally original, then their temporal order is irrelevant with respect to the work itself. It is, or course, possible to write something like a history of interpretation, and within the domain of conceptually articulated interpretations later interpretations can refer back to earlier ones and confront them. We can compare interpretations with one another. However, this will not make it possible for us to extrapolate the true form of the work, but rather from the similarity of the interpretations we can conclude that they all belong to the same play-space. All interpretations of a work belong together in that they have their freedom within the work, the freedom of their temporally bound enactment.

This also can be expressed by saying that the work is the presence of its interpretations, while the interpretations are the temporal presence of the work. The work anticipates all its interpretations; this is shown in a constancy which is not merely the constancy of its material existence. Its constancy is rather an openness which is continually capable of being represented. The work is the constant play-space of its interpretations.

That which is written or otherwise fixed waits, as something with a material constancy, to become the play-space of a representation and to be represented as a play-space. It regards potential interpreters silently, full of anticipation, and as soon as the interpreter counters this silence and elucidates the work, she is bound by the play-space of the work, by the need to return to the work in the act of representing it. In the course of interpretation the work is experienced in a three-fold manner: in its material constancy, as the play-space of articulation and in the particular ways in which it is articulated. The work speaks to the interpreter in its constancy by promising the play-space which allows for its—the work's—articulation and thereby for its representation.

The interpreter proceeds in dual fashion from the work; it provides him with the occasion and the play-space for interpretation. The enactment of interpretation proceeds from the constancy of the work as a promise, in order to bring forth the meaning of that which continues to exist. Interpretation is the articulation of the work which both begins and ends with the work itself. We can refer to this as the anamnestic structure of interpretation, following Gadamer's many references,⁶ which in turn are based upon Plato's assertion that the essence of understanding is anamnesis. As Plato represents it, anamnesis also proceeds, as it were, in the form of a circle. It arises from within sense experience and refers back to something by means of which that which is perceived is understood as that which it is. In this way it makes manifest, with respect to that which is perceived, that which allows the object of understanding to be understood at all.⁷ Interpretation is thus a form of discovery, namely, it discovers the play-space of the work. However, this process of discovery within interpretation can be articulated only as something invented, because no work prescribes how its essential elements are to be represented.

To be sure, the structure of interpretation distinguishes itself from anamnesis in the Platonic sense in one essential respect: what one returns to is not something which confronts one always in the same essential way, but rather is something which exists only in a relative way as a work or artifact. Works belong to time, even to their time, and when they outlive their time they no longer speak immediately, but under favorable conditions earn that venerable appellation which Socrates associates with meaningful but uncertain silence. Of course these works are not vener-

able in the sense of relics from a distant period, but as material memory. Becoming and passing away are deposited in texts and works of all kinds.

Seen in this way, every interpretation that refers to a work also refers to history. That certainly does not mean that the texts and works that are interpreted are documents of what and how things were. For when history takes the form of a work, it is no longer experienced as something in the past, but rather as the play-space, the freedom, of understanding. The existence of the work is a sign of a presence that fulfills itself as the presence of interpretation. It follows then that we find ourselves in the play-space of texts and works from history, without being guided by historical representations. In the play-space of texts and works, we return to history in order to find a presence which is no longer merely temporal, the presence of a comprehending interpretation.