

## **Hermeneutic Inquiry: Paying Heed to History and Hermes**

### ***An Ancestral, Substantive, and Methodological Tale***

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***Abstract:***

*Hermeneutic or interpretive inquiry is a living tradition of interpretation with a rich legacy of theory, philosophy, and practice. This paper is not intended to be a treatise on the right way to view and practice this tradition, but an exploration of the legacies that inform the philosophy of practice as the author has taken it up. In this explication, the author examines the ancestral, philosophical, and methodological histories that inform a current practice of hermeneutic inquiry.*

***Keywords:*** *hermeneutics, phenomenology, Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, rigor, validity.*

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*...hermeneutics is a lesson in humility...it has wrestled with the angels of darkness and has not gotten the better of them. It understands the power of the flux to wash away the best-laid schemes of metaphysics. It takes the constructs of metaphysics to be temporary cloud formations which, from a distance, create the appearance of shape and substance but which pass through our fingers upon contact...and no matter how wantonly they are skewed across the skies there are always hermeneuts who claim to detect a shape...a bear here, a man with a long nose there. There are always those who claim they can read the clouds and find a pattern and a meaning.*

*Now, it is not the function of...hermeneutics to put an end to those games, like a cold-blooded, demythologizing scientist who insists that the clouds are but random collections of particles of water...its function is to keep the games in play, to awaken us to the play, to keep us on the alert that we draw forms in the sand, we read clouds in the sky, but we do not capture deep essences...if there is anything that we learn in...hermeneutics it is that we never get the better of the flux.*

*(Caputo, 1987, p. 258)*

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) wrote that we cannot step over our shadows. We are connected in a continuous thread with our past, with traditions, and with our ancestors. We are living out traditions that have been bequeathed to us by others, and although we may be taking them up in different ways, they are still the source of who we are and how we shape and live our lives. The echoes of history are always inadvertently *and deliberately* inviting us into both past and new ways of being in the present. We live in a world that recedes into the past and extends into the future, rather than pitting ourselves against history, and therefore we need to *remember*, *recollect*, and *recall* it. This is not an epistemological quest but an ontological one as we *are* historical. The address of tradition is not just something arching from before, for we are *in* tradition.

Hermeneutic or interpretive inquiry is a living tradition of interpretation with a rich legacy of theory, philosophy, and practice. This legacy is being lived out differently in varied versions, understandings, and practices of hermeneutics as a research approach or method. This paper is

not intended to be a treatise on the *right* way, or to reveal fresh possibilities for research, but it is an historical account with a weaving of others' interpretations of this history. It is an exploration of the legacies that inform the philosophy of practice as I have taken it up, being accountable to who and what have brought me to a place where I might be able to speak to this complex and often contentious history, recognizing that what I declare is necessarily and always full of people, territory, history, and of myself.

There are family members in this quarrel and ghosts in this historical tale and, to do the tale justice, they must be acknowledged and summoned. It is best that we invite them into the conversation rather than ignoring them, or they will linger. We can invite them into a conversation where we commit to listen with openness, earnestness, deference, and respect. This is an ongoing conversation that does not begin nor end with us, and in years hence, we too may be among the whisperers speaking to this very rich, contentious, and multivocal thing called hermeneutics.

### **What is Hermeneutics? A Substantive Question**

Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek verb *hermeneuein*, which means to say or interpret; the noun *hermeneia*, which is the utterance or explication of thought; and the name *hermeneus*, which refers to the playful, mischievous, “trickster” Hermes (Caputo, 1987; Grondin, 1994). In bringing the messages of the gods to humans, Hermes entices interpretation. Hermes has the character of complication, multiplicity, lies, jokes, irreverence, indirection, and disdain for rules; however, he is the master of creativity and invention. He has the capacity to see things anew and his power is change, prediction, and the solving of puzzles.

The practice of interpretation, or hermeneutics, dates to 17<sup>th</sup> century biblical and theological textual interpretation and has followed a changing course from rationalism to romanticism, pragmatism to philosophy, and conservatism to radicalization. The Latin word *hermeneutica* was introduced in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the theologian Johann Dannhauer, and it has grown into different schools including the realms of the theological, juridical, and philosophical (Grondin, 1994).

As I offer the first definition that comes to mind – that hermeneutics is the tradition, philosophy, and practice of interpretation – I am conscious that, by engaging in this pursuit of definition, I run the risk of betraying hermeneutics by slipping into “essentialist” thinking and language. Definition, however, is not necessarily essentialist, nor is it betrayal. Definition is the shape that language takes around a word. It is only when we begin to believe that definitions are “true” that we betray hermeneutics. Rather, when definitions are defined as interpretations, they become hermeneutic. Hermeneutics does not lend itself to objectivism, and to strip it of context and contingency and to claim an ultimate, knowable structure is the very opposite of what hermeneutics teaches us. However, when we treat definitions as interpretations, we balance the unforeseen with what comes to us anew. When we take up definitions hermeneutically, we venture into the contingent understandings that are situated in lives, relationships, contexts, and histories.

Hermeneutics has been described as the practice and theory of interpretation and understanding in human contexts (Chesla, 1995); the science, art, and philosophy of interpretation (Grondin,

1994); and the “discipline of thought that aims at (the) unsaid life of our discourses” (Grondin, 1995, p. x). It is considered a reflective inquiry concerned with “our entire understanding of the world and thus...all the various forms in which this understanding manifests itself” (Gadamer, 1976, p. 18). Hermeneutics peers behind language; it ventures into the contextual world of a word, considering “what is said, what is uttered, but at the same time what is silenced” (Grondin, 1995, p. x). Gadamer (1989) offered that the venture into the unsaid involves the speculative dimension in language, the mirroring of meanings, and the belief that the said is always in relationship with the unsaid; “we can understand a text only when we’ve understood the question to which it is an answer” (p. 370). Hermeneutics is about an attentiveness to language, recognizing that language has a forgetfulness to it; “it is completely forgetful of itself” (Gadamer, 1984, p. 62).

In this attentiveness to language, hermeneutics involves recognition of sameness, place, and belonging. Hermeneutic interpretation comprehends the recognition that occurs when something rings “true” of what is said; there is a familiarity, a kinship, a resonance, and a likeness. It is neither a replication nor a justification. It is an acknowledgment that things come from somewhere; they are not simply fabricated. However, along with sameness and recognition, hermeneutics requires a bringing forth and a bringing to language of something new. We work out this newness by working it into a world of relationships that can sustain it. In these relationships, others start to recognize not only something of themselves, but also of the world; they recognize something old and something new.

Hermeneutics is organized around the disruption of the clear narrative, always questioning those things that are taken for granted. In hermeneutics, there is a striking character of attention to the instance and the particular, rather than an effort to generalize (Jardine, 1992, 1998, 2000).

Interpretation is not a move to relieve the instance from its burden, and though things may be raised out of a strict burden of specificity (Smith, 1991). Rather, there is an effort also to conserve the burden and to celebrate the “stubborn particular” (Wallace, 1987). Interpretation moves to represent the particular and to bring it to presence, not essence. Hermeneutics calls forth the ordinary, “exoticizes the domestic” (White, 1993, p. 35), and makes it stand out. In this standing out, however, it does not stand alone, but stands with its history, legacies, and relationships, acknowledging that there are both hidden and apparent traces which constitute and constantly change how something comes to exist. In the end, hermeneutics brings things back home, domesticating the exotic, making what was once exotic to be recognizable and “true.”

Hermeneutics is the practice of *aletheia*, the Greek word for “the event of concealment and unconcealment” (Caputo, 1987, p. 115). Heidegger referred to *aletheia* as an *unhiddenness* in relation to that which is hidden (Coltman, 1998). *Aletheia* occurs when something opens which was once closed. *Aletheia* can be represented by the metaphor of opening the lid of a well – of flipping the lid open and letting it rest allowing one to look into what lies beneath it. In this opening of one side, another side is closed, for with every opening there is closure and some things are necessarily left behind. *Aletheia* comes from *Lethe*, a river in Hades, the water of which, when drunk, produces oblivion of the past; thus, it is called the “river of forgetting” (Hoad, 1986). *Lethe* is hiding, concealment, amnesia, and it is also tied, etymologically, to the word lethal. *Aletheia* works against what is dead; it is about remembering. *Aletheia* is the

clearing of things into the mystery beneath; it is the “ongoing, historical, epochal process by which things emerge from concealment into unconcealment” (Caputo, 1987, p. 177).

In summary, in taking up hermeneutics interpretively rather than reducing it, hermeneutics tends to resist containment. It becomes larger and more generative with wider horizons and greater possibilities. When we search for a categorizing, confining, and “true” definition of hermeneutics, we will always come face to face with the trickster, Hermes, pestering us in different directions. Paradoxically, hermeneutics is not particularly interested in itself, its own character, or self-definition. Rather, it is more concerned with the “question of human meaning and of how we make sense of our lives in such a way that life can go on...[it] works to rescue the specificities of our lives from the burden of their everydayness...[it] is about finding ourselves, which also, curiously enough, is about losing ourselves” (Smith, 1991, p. 200-201).

Hermeneutics begins with the premise that the world is interpretable.

### **An Ancestral Tale: Inviting in the Ghosts**

Medieval practices of biblical interpretation were transformed by the Reformation, a period sometimes referred to as the beginning of hermeneutics (Grondin, 1994). The 17<sup>th</sup> century theories of hermeneutics were inspired by a unique combination of rationalism and divinatory ability, and focused on a style of interpretation guided by strict rules and methods for proper discernment of meaning, yet still influenced by the belief that understanding is inspired from a holy source. Despite the emergence of romantic and classical hermeneutics, the prevailing focus was on methodical interpretation of older materials (Palmer, 1969). The 19<sup>th</sup> century was focused on searching for a way to methodologize the human sciences. Although there are many ancestors

in this history and transformation, some stand out as distinctively, directly and indirectly, connected to the theory and practice of hermeneutics.

### **Ancestors and Lineages: Augustine, Luther, Schleiermacher, and Dilthey**

#### *Augustine (354-430)*

Augustine was a theologian and philosopher who had a significant influence on contemporary hermeneutics. Augustine was attributed credit by both Heidegger and Gadamer for the development of theories of the enacted meaning; for the universal claim of hermeneutics that one can never say all that lies in inner speech; for the forgetfulness of language; and for the place of tradition in language (Grondin, 1994; Palmer, 1969).

#### *Martin Luther (1483-1546)*

The rise of hermeneutics as a science coincided with the rise of Protestantism (Palmer, 1969). In this movement, Luther became a central figure and, although he had great influence on church history and ideas, it is debatable if he himself actually developed any theory of hermeneutics (Grondin, 1994). Disdaining philosophy and theory, which he saw as empty scholastic pursuits, he confined himself to scriptural interpretation and exegesis, believing that when literal meaning is properly and rightly discerned, it contains spiritual significance. In Protestantism, hermeneutics maintained that the word itself is “spirit” as it is revealed through the grace of God. Criticism from the Catholic Church about the considerable interpretive variations within the Protestant church prompted the attempt to develop an explicit, methodical, and scholarly hermeneutics for scriptural interpretation (Grondin, 1994).



*Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)*

Schleiermacher has been considered the father of contemporary hermeneutics (Grondin, 1995; Palmer, 1969) but, though he wrote many manuscripts, he never published his own work on hermeneutics. One piece from 1829 was published by others, and a series of Schleiermacher's lectures were similarly published in 1838 (Grondin, 1994). It was through his lectures that Schleiermacher's influence on hermeneutic thought and practice gained its audience.

Schleiermacher, who viewed himself primarily as a theologian, saw interpretation both as being loose, as in casual reading and understanding, and as being strict in the rigorous, methodological, and reconstructive science of hermeneutics, a technique which, when correctly applied, leads to a "right" interpretation. Schleiermacher's philosophy developed from competing interests and influences of Romanticism and a striving for a Cartesian clarity. Heidegger saw Schleiermacher as having taken the vital idea of hermeneutics that Augustine offered and reducing it to a technique (Grondin, 1994), though Schleiermacher did acknowledge the role of divinatory and creative knowing that is at work in interpretation (Smith, 1991). Gadamer (1984) interpreted Schleiermacher as essentialist in his belief in fundamental identities behind everything while participating in an era that aspired to the pursuit of justifying the validity of hermeneutic method. Schleiermacher did, however, leave an important legacy of three themes in hermeneutics: the place of creativity in interpretation, the role of language in understanding, and the movement between part and whole in the process of interpretation which later became known as the hermeneutic circle (Coltman, 1998; Palmer, 1969; Smith, 1991).

*Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911)*

Dilthey became familiar with Schleiermacher's work through one of Schleiermacher's students, August Bockh, and in 1860 he received the Schleiermacher Foundation award for an essay on

hermeneutics (Grondin, 1994). Dilthey taught and wrote on hermeneutics, with a focus on both being an historian of hermeneutics and developing a methodology for understanding in the human sciences (Coltman, 1998; Gadamer, 1984; Palmer, 1969). His focus in later years appeared to shift from hermeneutics to a descriptive school of psychology that influenced, and was influenced by, the emerging phenomenological studies of Husserl (Grondin, 1994). His greater influence, however, seemed to be on Heidegger and Gadamer through the idea that understanding was not simply something which occurred on a backdrop of conceptualization and explanation, but was an important and fundamental structure in human being or *Da-sein*, and as such occupied a central place in philosophy (Grondin, 1994). Dilthey's work became a precursor in the search for an existential, or interpretive, rethinking of philosophy. His view of interpretation as an artful understanding of expressions of life was constrained within an epistemological methodology, submitting to his more classical orientation to hermeneutics (Grondin, 1994). Dilthey was one of the first to suggest that written language is a superior form of communication, predating both Derrida's (1978a) critique of Western culture's phonocentrism (the privileging of speech over writing) and Ricoeur's (1981) emphasis on hermeneutics as textual interpretation.

### **A Relative with a Different Voice: Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Phenomenology**

There is a very important ghost in this historical tale, one who both inadvertently incited and discouraged departure from his own philosophical path. To recognize Edmund Husserl, we must credit Descartes, for Husserl's work maintained and reflected his affection for Cartesianism (Caputo, 1987). Husserl's work was not preparatory for interpretive inquiry, nor did he consider it hermeneutic, but in some ways it has been seen as an example of it. Some maintain that

Husserl opened the door to hermeneutics (Caputo, 1987; Grondin, 1995) and thus maintains an ancestral place of honor.

Strongly associated with the work of Husserl is the notion of intentionality. This important idea embraces the idea that all experience is of something, and that thinking and interpreting are about the world. It suggests that we are always already connected to the world. Husserl understood intentionality as the movement of something beyond its own point of initiation towards some intended meaning (Coltman, 1998). Although he described intentionality as interpretation, Husserl himself clearly disclaimed his work as hermeneutic, occupying a “traditional antihermeneutic position” (Caputo, 1987, p. 53) that was more concerned with phenomena themselves than with any interpretation of them (Grondin, 1995). This very stance invited some criticism of Husserl’s work. For example, Heidegger saw Husserl’s aversion to hermeneutics, when describing intentionality, as the use of interpretative schemata without laying claim to it, suggesting that he used interpretation to defend his theory when it suited him but turned his back on it when he did not require it (Caputo, 1987). Gadamer (1984), too, accused Husserl of slipping into a prehermeneutic schema and resorting to an interpretive overlay when it served his purposes, while at other times denying its relevance.

Husserl introduced the notion of “life-world”, or *Lebenswelt*, a term that characterizes our sense of a world that is present without our recognition or actions (Smith, 1991). Husserl believed it was possible to reflect on everyday life and its character and structures, but not from within it, and this very objectivism of life made the shift to an inquiry in life that became known as a “science” of the life world. Husserl propositioned all experience as bracketed and, since

interpretation carries the subjectivity of the interpreter, it could not possibly be pure (Caputo, 1987). Although some have critiqued Husserl's work as having a naïve ring of romanticism and essentialism about it that implies that essence can be fixed and reported (Coltman, 1998), one might equally argue that Husserl attempted to make distinctions between exact and morphological essences, in some regard granting that things are sometimes 'not quite this, and yet not quite that' (see, for example Husserl, 1952).

Husserl is also attributed with being the identifier of phenomenology and this topic is important to explore in understanding some of the ruptures and divergences with the ancestors.

Understanding phenomenology and the distinctions between it and hermeneutics leads into a contentious topic that is living out the contention in practice and theory today. There is always a piece of phenomenology present and at play in hermeneutics but, whereas Husserl suggested attending to the phenomenon itself and describing it as richly as possible, hermeneutics argues that experiences of something are not isolated but are eventful, ongoing, emergent, forming, and generative (Jardine, 1992, 1994). In phenomenology, there is a vigorous and relentless desire to essentialize "what is" and a parceling out of something that is supposed to stand by itself. When something is talked about as an object, forgotten is the way human life constitutes it as an object; the sensuous immediacy of things and their powerful contingencies are lost. Phenomenology without hermeneutics has a ring of pretension that something has never been thought of previously (Jardine, 1994). In a certain way they need one another, and one might argue that the difference is that hermeneutics knows and acknowledges this relationship, whereas phenomenology has the tendency to forget or deny it, believing it stands alone as an extracted, uninfluenced entity. Hermeneutics without phenomenology is interpretation without context,

without situating in it in the world. Phenomenology without hermeneutics is arguably nothing but a façade. Still, hermeneutic inquiry differs from phenomenological exploration and they depart at philosophical junctures and traditions.

When Husserl converted to Christianity from Judaism, he had a religious vision and some might argue that much of phenomenology has this zealous echo to it (Caputo, 1987). Transcendental philosophy would suggest that phenomenology can discover the truth and essence of human experience through bracketing. Coming from an existential philosophical focus, Gadamer (1989) and Heidegger (1996) challenged this notion and placed emphasis on understanding people in their lifeworld rather than attempting to extract an essence or “truth” claim behind a particular phenomenology. Granted, this critique and challenge does not attend to Husserl’s effort in bracketing to raise attention to the very prejudgments and presuppositions that allow for phenomenon to exist and be noticed.

Phenomenology often begins with a case of something, but along the way the case is forfeited. It makes a claim to knowing without contingency and, as a result, the case disappears or gets lost in the demand for the extraction of an essence (Jardine, 1994). Phenomenology asserts that once an essence is uncovered or determined, we can always know what will happen next and the theme no longer needs the instance (Jardine, 1992, 1998, 2000). Caputo (1987) suggested that:

Phenomenology is content to live in the safe, assured, reassured, constituted effects...of repetition, oblivious of the constituting, repetitive system which generates or produces those effects. Phenomenology nourishes a natural attitude of its own. Its very vigilance...contents itself with evidence and the self-presenting. (p. 122)

Hermeneutics adds something very different to the gift phenomenology left us. In hermeneutics, objects are not fixed or given; they are interpreted, contingent things. Hermeneutics dispels the given-ness of things. It has a love affair with the ungiven-ness, always looking for the moment when something – when understanding – gets disrupted. It is always interested in events and how the event opens up what we took to be closed. It is aletheia. “Interpretation gives phenomenology its aletheia, for when phenomenology finds itself exposed to its opposite – whence the absolute necessity for the interpretive act to intervene” (Caputo, 1987, p. 42).

### **An Important Family Member: Husserl’s Student – Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)**

Though a student of Husserl, Martin Heidegger made some substantial choices, leading him to a very different road that opened up a remarkable path in this historical account. Heidegger brought the ontology of the subject and the “something” which Husserl disclaimed (self/being, tradition, history, prejudices, experience, ancestors, etc.) back into the “experience-of-something” (Caputo, 1987; Jardine, 1994). Heidegger wiped away the brackets, acknowledging that “we are in the matter and not simply enclosed in ourselves” (Gadamer, 1984, p. 59). For Heidegger, experience was already out in the world; experience is not a thing, but a movement in the world. As a result, understanding is deeply entrenched in the profound ontological makeup of *Da-sein*: care, existence, temporality, and being (Heidegger, 1996). Heidegger (1996) identified *Da-sein*, or being-in-the-world, as a thereness of being that is distinguished by the capacity for self-reflection concerning its own existence. Heidegger resisted Husserl’s ontological neutrality and his claims that Being can isolate and purify itself of worldly contamination. Heidegger recognized people as situated in, and constituted by, their worlds.

Gadamer (1984) believed Heidegger introduced the notion that interpretation is never an isolated human activity, but an experience: “we are always taking something *as* something” (p. 58).

Heidegger (1996) maintained that human life is not given to us as a phenomenon which requires our explication, but as a question, an address, as something which is revealing and concealing, coming and going, present and absent – and the work of hermeneutics is entering into the interpretation of these things.

Heidegger challenged and deconstructed metaphysics and transcendental knowing, turning metaphysical philosophy on its head. He attempted to reclaim the difficulty that Husserl ignored and to challenge the Cartesian duality which infused much of Husserl’s work (Gadamer, 1984). In his deconstruction, Heidegger radicalized the Romantic hermeneutics passed on by Schleiermacher and Dilthey. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Meister Eckhart became guiding influences on Heidegger (Caputo, 1987). Heidegger’s thinking cumulated in his magnum opus of *Being and Time*, first published in 1927. In this work, Heidegger took up the topic of metaphysics. Madison (1988) described metaphysics as the art of asking questions, reflecting on difficult notions, and “conferring some semblance of intelligibility on the chaotic reality of our lived experience...by enabling us to have the feeling that we understand the Why, What, and Wherefore of things” (p. 125). Heidegger departed from Kant’s view of metaphysics as an a priori sense or knowledge of something beyond experience, to a view of it as an attempt to secure an ambiguous and fragile place in the world within a framework (Grondin, 1995). As Caputo (1987) put it, hermeneutics should not try to make things look easy, but should recapture the difficulty of things present before metaphysics tries to offer a way out of the flux or difficulty. Caputo (1987) wrote of Heidegger: “He thus recommitted phenomenology to the difficulty of

life, rooted it in an ontology of care, and so fashioned what has come to be known as

‘hermeneutics’ in the contemporary, post-Diltheyian sense” (p. 59). In Caputo’s (1987) view:

Metaphysics always makes a show of beginning with questions, but no sooner do things begin to waver a bit and look uncertain than the question is foreclosed...But Heidegger wanted to try something new, something revolutionary...to raise the question of Being as presence and let it hang there and to resist the temptation to cut it down when it starts to look a little blue. (p. 2)

Heidegger had an early appearance of the word “hermeneutic” in his work that appeared in 1919, with his characterization of Husserl’s notion of intuition as hermeneutic (Caputo, 1987). *Being and Time*, however, has been critiqued as offering meager remarks on hermeneutics, which makes it “difficult to understand what Heidegger meant, exactly, by hermeneutics...indeed, in *Being and Time*, a mere half-page at the end of Heidegger’s otherwise elaborate Section Seven on phenomenology is devoted to situating and systematically defining hermeneutics” (Grondin, 1994, p. 7). Critiquing Husserl’s existential phenomenology and, in his later work, even critiquing his own hermeneutics, Heidegger himself dropped the terms “hermeneutic phenomenology” and even “hermeneutics” from his vocabulary (Caputo, 1987; Grondin. 1995).

Caputo (1987) wrote:

The later Heidegger became his own most important critic. He submitted...to a searching critique with the result that he no longer described his work as hermeneutic at all...meanwhile, Gadamer (with whom we today most readily associate the word ‘hermeneutics’)...took over notions which had been brought under fire by the late Heidegger - preunderstanding, the hermeneutic circle...the theory of horizons. (p. 95)

Although Derrida supported the radicalization of hermeneutics, his critique of Heidegger was focused on the way Heidegger questioned metaphysics and the ontological question of Being.

This “onto-hermeneutic” project was accused by Derrida (1978b) as slipping back into the very metaphysics it was trying to undo. Although Heidegger challenged metaphysics and shifted the



focus from meaning in a transcendental sense to the ontological question of “Being,” one might think, in his critique of Husserlian transcendental idealism, that he simply shifted the argument and did not abandon metaphysics. Although Heidegger brought back ontology, his work is at risk for being seen as onto-centric (Caputo, 1987). Heidegger was also critiqued by Habermas (1990), who believed that Heidegger’s later work exemplified a shift to a philosophy that was void of argumentative rigor and personal responsibility as an effort to justify his involvement with the Nazis. This critique has been disputed by others (Grondin, 1995), but the question of Heidegger’s Nazi involvement remains a topic of considerable debate and speculation.

**The Genogram Grows: Husserl and Heidegger’s Student - Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900 - 2002)**

*There is no question that contemporary hermeneutics received its most forceful and coherent exposition in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. (Grondin, 1995, p. xi)*

*Gadamer might be described as the last writer of a hermeneutics of continuity, a hermeneutics which attempts to hold the structure of understanding together within a language of understanding. (Smith, 1991, p. 193)*

Gadamer’s (1976, 1981, 1984, 1985, 1989, 1996) work is known, along with Paul Ricoeur’s (1965, 1971, 1977, 1981), as philosophical hermeneutics. Distinct from a concern with method, methodology, or practice, philosophical hermeneutics attempts to hermeneutically look at understanding and interpretation (Palmer, 1969).

Refusing to accept that there need be a wedge between metaphysics and hermeneutics, Gadamer retrieved metaphysics and philosophy, bringing back art, history, law, language, aesthetics, and humanism. Gadamer’s (1989) philosophical extension of Heidegger’s existential hermeneutic

theory included the significance of the researcher, the importance of historical understanding in all interpretation, and a clarification of a fusion of horizons where horizon is seen as the range of vision which can be seen from any particular viewpoint (Palmer, 1969). Understanding occurs when horizons of the other and our selves fuse to extend the range of vision.

Gadamer (1985) specified that Heidegger deconstructed to clear the way for re-building: “For me, Heidegger had pointed out a new way, in that he had transformed the critique of the metaphysical tradition at a preparatory stage in order to pose the question about being in a new way” (Gadamer, 1985, p. 190). Although Heidegger deferred to Gadamer in this area, much of Heidegger’s work and thought fits well with a hermeneutics guided by philosophy. However, Derrida (1978b) and Caputo (1987) critiqued Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics as a “reactionary gesture to Heidegger and as an attempt to block off the radicalization of hermeneutics and to turn it back to the fold of metaphysics” (Caputo, 1987, p. 5). On the other hand, some see Gadamer’s address of hermeneutics in *Truth and Method* as closer to Heidegger’s earlier work in *Being and Time* (Grondin, 1994).

Caputo (1987) described Gadamer’s philosophical stance as a conservative hermeneutics, and I concur, but with a different appreciation of conservation. The word conservative means to conserve, to hold as precious, and to preserve something of importance. Gadamer does a gathering, reclaiming, restoring, and conserving of a history of metaphysics that Heidegger dismantled, paying attention to the movement of tradition and how it passes on its richness in such a way that horizons are reformed, expanded, and extended. In his retrieval of metaphysics, Gadamer invited us to ask questions of philosophy, suggesting that we can let philosophy have a

voice without losing our attention to the difficulty of life. Gadamer had a sense that hermeneutics instinctively leads us back to metaphysics, not as an abdication or as an escape, but as an acceptance of the place of metaphysics in interpretation. “Some elements of metaphysics need to be saved against hermeneutical thinkers who are too sure of themselves” (Grondin, 1995, p. 16). A touch of metaphysics keeps us in the adventure and in the flux, it buffers us against believing we know with full confidence. Contrary to Caputo’s claim, Coltman (1998), on the other hand, recognized the radicality of Gadamer’s position in both its boldness and conservativeness:

The one figure whose work really allows for this possibility, the thinker with arguably the most radical, and at the same time, the subtlest command of deconstructive modes is a man with one of the most conservative reputations in all contemporary thought - not Jacques Derrida, but Hans-Georg Gadamer. In Gadamer, we find that rare postmodernist who remains undaunted (and unhaunted) by the specter of metaphysics, one of the few who is not afraid to engage the metaphysical tradition head-on - not so to simply deconstruct it, to expose its rhetorical chiasms and logical presuppositions, but to carefully yet forcefully dismantle it and retrieve that which he finds hermeneutically and phenomenologically viable....We see Gadamer’s radicality, in other words, not so much in his ability to deconstruct but in the boldness of his retrieval...Gadamer actually *succeeds* in recovering a new mode of philosophizing...the idea of remaining open to the possibility of being wrong, the idea of constantly putting one’s own ideas at risk, constitutes the very core of philosophical hermeneutics. (pp. xi-xii)

### **Gadamer and Heidegger: Convergences and Departures**

I choose to regard Gadamer and Heidegger as membered and connected, rather than contradictory or antithetical. In many ways, Gadamer defended, clarified, and extended Heidegger, such as in the consideration of language. Gadamer extended Heidegger’s suggestion that there is something beyond language by fully addressing the interiority of language as a speculative dimension that mirrors the motivation and inner dialogue of the speaker. Gadamer’s work developed around the historico-temporal quality of life and the linguisticity of understanding as a dialogical engagement between question and answer.

Metaphysics may not have been the actual point of departure between Heidegger and Gadamer, and it is suggested that Gadamer may have returned the “Heideggerian project directly into the heart of the history of metaphysics” (Coltman, 1998, p. xii). Grondin (1995) suggested that Gadamer departed from Heidegger around the critical junctures of humanism and language. The statement “Gadamer is a humanist and Heidegger is not” (Grondin, 1995, p. 112) does not suggest a humane moral position, but a stance on humanism itself. Heidegger massively critiqued humanism with the belief that the anthropocentric character of humanism obscures the understanding of Being. Gadamer retrieved humanism in the recognition that it is not a question of superiority or centrality but that humans are in a constant effort to distinguish themselves from animals and in this effort they argue reason, culture, values, and tradition (Grondin, 1995). Gadamer saw humanism as an ongoing search for “civility in human affairs” (Grondin, 1995, p. 118). This search, if disregarded or critiqued as anthropocentric, abdicates the complicity of belonging to the quest. What distinguishes humanity is not a capacity of reason, but the ability to reach beyond our own particularity, to gather up our heritage, and to see our place in what is to come. Humanism, according to Gadamer (1989), does not reside in the belief that humans are the center of the universe, but are merely grains of sand standing in language and socio-historical context at the receiving end of cosmic order. Grondin (1995) suggested that in the abandonment of humanism, human sciences have been subject to the “alienating methodology of the exact sciences which is not at all attuned to the humanistic mode of knowledge” (p. 134).

Coltman (1998) read Gadamer’s departure from Heidegger as occurring in both subtle and clearly different interpretations of Plato and Aristotle. He suggested that Gadamer’s project inverts, but does not counter, Heidegger and the inversion is complementary rather than

oppositional. Gadamer takes Heidegger's dismantling of the philosophical tradition and retrieves philosophy back into the home of thinking, language, and being. Gadamer brings forth "a hermeneutical phenomenology that permits the Heideggerian critique to carry itself out from within the very linguistic tradition in which it originally finds itself...moving along a path that is more Heideggerian than Heidegger's own" (Coltman, 1998, pp. 95-96). Gadamer did not simply discard what he disliked of Heidegger; he carried on in faith with Heidegger, while also claiming obligation to the retrieval of philosophy to the academic world. Coltman (1998) suggested that Gadamer embraced interpretation and the troublesome risk that accompanies it:

Gadamer exhorts us to go ahead and interpret...decide what a text means and argue for our interpretation, but...he also exhorts us to always remain open to the eventual inadequacies of our own considered opinions. Philosophical hermeneutics is all about putting our interpretations at risk; it's all about recognizing that along with textual violence comes a hermeneutic danger - the danger (perhaps the inescapability) of misinterpretation...Like Derrida, Gadamer too recognizes the danger of assigning meanings but his approach to reading does not attempt to avoid or somehow circumvent that danger through constant deferral but boldly confronts it by engaging the text as other, a dialogue partner with whom we can only have a genuine conversation if we are willing to admit the limitations of our own understanding. (pp. ix-x)

In his reading of Gadamer's extension of Heidegger, Madison (1988) identified three central theses to Gadamer's hermeneutics: that all understanding is interpretation; that understanding is integrally bound with language; and that understanding is inseparable from self-application to the current situation of the interpreter. Other topics, which Gadamer embraced in his philosophical hermeneutics, are those of historicity and truth.

#### *The address of history*

Although historicity is a significant part of Heidegger's understanding of *Da-sein*, which always carries its past with it, he chose to address it only briefly in the middle of the last three chapters of *Being and Time* and, surprisingly, it assumes the character of an appendix to his work

(Caputo, 1987). Gadamer, on the other hand, took up the notion of historicity thoroughly, arguing that we can understand historically because we *are* historical and we belong to history. Both Heidegger and Gadamer envisioned historicity as a folding back upon itself where things are meaningful only against a backdrop of their own history (Grondin, 1994). Heidegger, however, on one hand addresses time and temporality as an extension into the future; Gadamer further embraced temporality as an extension of the past into the present (Coltman, 1998). Although Caputo (1987) critiqued Gadamer as wanting to “ease the difficulty in history” (p. 111), I argue that Gadamer wanted to keep the difficulty in view. Caputo (1987) claimed that Gadamer’s attention to tradition is “innocent of Nietzsche’s suspicious eye, of Foucaultian genealogy...he does not face...tradition, its vulnerability to difference, its capacity to oppress” (p. 112). I do not think that Gadamer’s attention to tradition is about denying any of these legacies of tradition, but conversely, it is about speaking to them, suggesting that, although we may not like what tradition has done, we must account for it, we must take it all up and own it, and we must then speak to these very influences of tradition. Whether we like particular traditions or not does not change them; it is *not* about honoring all traditions, but recognizing and becoming responsible for their implications, not just choosing the ones for which we have preference. “For Gadamer, tradition...opens out into the future to engage what comes to meet it as new” (Smith, 1991, p. 193).

### *The address of truth*

In a similar way, it does not appear as though Gadamer’s regard of “truth” was an area of departure from Heidegger’s work, but rather another extension, exploration, and explication. Gadamer’s (1989) *Truth and Method* was originally published in 1960, with the first English translation in 1975. *Truth and Method* is a paradoxical name: the legacy the book is trying to

resist is embedded in the title in both its irony and play of the words themselves. The kind of “truth” Gadamer wrote of cannot be revealed by any kind of method (Jardine, 1994). From the legacy of Descartes in the 1640s, “truth” is equated with frequency, reoccurrence, and control and the natural sciences have carried along this notion of “truth” with the human or social sciences following in kind. Gadamer’s (1989) regard of “truth” is that it can always be understood differently, and one understanding is not absolutely better than another. He maintained that interpretation carries the expectation that it will encounter both meaning and truth, without which understanding is not possible. Both, however, are not absolute; they are contingent, preferential, referential, and changing. In this regard, Gadamer was to have stated at the Heidelberg Colloquium on July 9, 1989 that “the possibility that the other person may be right is the soul of hermeneutics” (Grondin, 1994, p. 124).

Truth, as described by Gadamer (1989), is the event of meaning, rather than something of objectivity or repetition. To say that we uncover truth in understanding simply means that we have found a meaningful account that corresponds to experience. Truth is a living event; it is changing, not stagnant, and is expansive and full of possibilities. The truth is what allows the conversation to go on, recognizing that understanding is not a solo undertaking for it always occurs with others. Truth is not a judgment about worth; it is always being worked out and one truth is not intended to reprimand all the others, but to show the eventfulness of a topic. It occurs in keeping something open, in not thinking that something is known, for when we think we already know, we stop paying attention to what comes to meet us. The sign of something being true is not that something is repeatable, but that it lasts, lingers, and even changes.

### **Interpretive Inquiry: The Ghosts Who Whisper Loudest to Me**

Though there are many influences, voices, whispers, writings, and passions surrounding hermeneutics, we necessarily make choices in selecting whose voices speak the loudest to us and recognizing which philosophers fit best with our own beliefs, philosophies, and practices. These choices, then, are decisions in the selection of who and what serve to guide our own practices of hermeneutics. In some ways, however, I argue that they are not choices at all and perhaps not even preemptively conscious. We naturally find family where our hearts and cells feel a sense of fit or belonging. In this regard, I find kinship with Gadamer, and through him with Heidegger, for their points of departure, though interesting and substantive, are not necessarily relevant to how one would choose to practice the tradition handed down through them. They guide and direct how I have taken up the practice and tradition of hermeneutics.

#### **Role of the Researcher in Hermeneutic Inquiry**

Within Gadamer's philosophy, the role of researcher takes on a particular acknowledgment, recognition, and place in this work. Our strengths, as hermeneutic researchers, lie in a belief in the interpretability of the world and in a willingness to allow ourselves to be read back to us. Hermeneutics demands that we proceed delicately and yet wholeheartedly, and as a result of what we study, we carry ourselves differently, and we live differently.

It is not that the writing is not *by me*, but it is not *about me*, though in one sense all writing is autobiographical (Smith, 1991). I cannot remove my subjectivity from my work, but I can take it up with a sense of responsibility in recognizing how it translates into the way I listen to my participants, what I hear, what stands out to me, and how I interpret it.



## **Forestructures and Prejudices**

Embracing a hermeneutics guided by Gadamer and Heidegger requires an address of what Heidegger identified as forestructures, and Gadamer called prejudices. Heidegger (1996) asserted that our understanding proceeds from our preunderstandings and forestructures. Contained in this preunderstanding lies what Gadamer (1989) termed our “prejudices” or presuppositions, or our leanings toward what we are able to see. Gadamer (1989) described prejudices as judgments that exist or are rendered before all other situational elements are examined. Unlike the notion of bracketing, we do not hold our prejudices in abeyance but we situate them in our understandings. Our prejudices allow us to hear something we would not have heard otherwise, they determine what we can recognize, and they provide our access to the world. We do not, however, know all of our prejudices, for they are intricately woven into the fabric of our lives, our beliefs, and our behaviors. In hermeneutic research, we need to keep our prejudices within view, but I also submit that we are most influenced by the ones we have no idea we possess. A declaration, even to ourselves, of our prejudices does not serve to shed them, but to acknowledge that our prejudices move with us and stand in front of and between us and the world, filtering our perceptions and interpretations.

### **A Tale of “Method” in Hermeneutic Inquiry**

*Hermeneutics pits itself against the notion that human affairs can finally be formalized into explicit rules which can or should function as a decision-procedure...but...such a view does not throw us back into anarchy and chaos-although a little chaos is a good strategy...Our preoccupation with methodology needs to be replaced with a deeper appreciation of methodos, meta-odos, which is ‘the way in which we pursue a matter’...The concern with ‘method’ so characteristic of modern science...makes science subservient to method, so that method rules instead of serving, constrains instead of liberating, and fails conspicuously to let science be.*  
(Caputo, 1987, p. 213)

Hermeneutics offers a substantive philosophy rather than a strategic method. In other words, one might say hermeneutics is substantively driven rather than methodologically given. Although hermeneutics does not “give” a method, it does not ask that we proceed without any guidance. This guidance, however, is characterized by different things than other research approaches. Gadamer (1989) suggested that it is not possible to determine a way to proceed without being guided by the topic. At the beginning of interpretive work, there is necessarily a deliberate showing of questionableness, intentionally allowing the topic to guide the direction of the character of the work (Jardine, 1994). This questionableness, however, does not mean that we respond tentatively, but rather that we proceed attentively, recognizing that hermeneutics is a practice of meticulous scholasticism. If we translate the notion of method into something of an inheritance, then method is simply a means of knowing one’s way around a particular typography (Jardine, 1994; 1998; 2000). For even though it is not a method, one can cultivate hermeneutics and the questionableness becomes: how can I turn my attention to human life and my topic and not require methods which render it to something else; how can I avoid betraying it and not delivering it unto itself; and how do I preserve its character without reducing it?

Koch (1996) suggested that we attend less to method and more to methodology, which is “the process by which insights about the world and the human condition are generated, interpreted and communicated” (p. 174). Therefore, to address methodology means to claim a philosophical ground that guides our research and which accurately reflects interpretive practices within its philosophical traditions. Given this groundwork, Koch (1996) offered that the soundness or rigor of a particular methodology lies in “excursions into the philosophical literature” (p. 175) that

supports it. If we claim a tradition, we must be accountable to knowing it. For example, we are quite free to use the term “hermeneutic phenomenology,” but in doing this, we must recognize that the language has implications and that we accept the legacy which travels with these words. If we lay claim to practicing “Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology” we must somehow remember and be able to account for the history of Heidegger both critiquing phenomenology and, later, hermeneutics.

We live in understanding and interpretation and no amount of measured techniques will save us from the task of interpretation (Jardine, 1994, 2000). Hermeneutics has to do with the art of presentation, of drawing people into a place where my topic lives, of making it compelling, and of restoring it to its original difficulty (Caputo, 1987; Jardine & Field, 1996). Restoring the difficulty, however, does *not* mean making it impossible.

### **The Experience of Address**

Hermeneutic inquiry begins with an experience of being addressed by a topic (Gadamer, 1989). Address is the feeling of being caught in something’s regard and of being guided by the thing itself rather than someone else’s version of it (Jardine, 1992; 1994). Before the researcher arrived, it already existed and something was at play. Hermeneutics lets what is already at play move forward.

Address, as experienced, can be a breathtaking and breath sustaining gift. In its own arrival, it asks the researcher to suffer the topic – to be compelled to do well by what comes to greet you, in the letting of itself in a way true to how it was given to you. There is obligation in this act

(Caputo, 1993; Jardine, 1994). It is not simply a question of “how do I broach my topic?” but “how do I cultivate what is already there?” – existing, speaking, opinionated, and teasing. Topics are inhabited by tenants with proper names. In responding to this address, there is a sense of opening and transforming into a living, provocative conversation that was already going on before our arrival.

### **The Search for Exemplar Cases**

Hermeneutics chooses the best players, on purpose. Still, it is significant to recall that the topic *is not* the participants, nor should the writing be a *portrait* of the participants. Hermeneutic inquiry is not validated by numbers but by the completeness of examining the topic under study and the fullness and depth to which the interpretation extends understanding (Smith, 1991). “An adequate sample size in qualitative research is one that permits...the deep, case-oriented analysis that is a hallmark...that results in...a new and richly textured understanding of experience” (Sandelowski, 1995, p. 182).

### **Data Collection: Language as a Gathering and a Shelter**

Hermeneutic inquiry calls for a reconceptualization of the language of research, but it does not necessarily require that language be discarded; it simply needs to be reconsidered. The natural or physical sciences do not own, nor should they solely define, research terms; rather, human research can have a say in what the terms mean in their own domains. Heidegger regarded language as a house of being, a house that is big enough to hold many worlds, not just a house that includes some and excludes others. In this regard, I see data for human research as arising

from a gathering and harvesting of experience. Heidegger (1975) further suggested that language or *legein*, is connected to the German word *legen*, which means to lay down and lay before:

In *legen* a 'bringing together' prevails, the Latin *legere* understood as *lesen*, in the sense of collecting and bringing together. *Legein* properly means the laying-down and laying-before which gathers itself and others. (p. 60).

To lay is to gather (*lesen*)...But gathering is more than mere amassing. To gathering belongs a collecting which brings shelter. Accommodation governs the sheltering; accommodation is in turn governed by safekeeping...*legein*...means just this, that whatever lies before us involves us and therefore concerns us. (pp. 61-62)

### **Data Analysis: The Harvesting of Interpretation and Understanding**

Madison (1988) suggested we understand retroactively that, as Kierkegaard offered, we live forward, but understand backwards. In this understanding, the text serves to situate meanings into a more parsimonious and accessible context. Once translated, Ricoeur (1981) suggested the data never stand alone; their meanings are always dependent on the researcher and the reader. Hermeneutics involves the reading of a text as the answer to a question which could have been answered differently (Gadamer, 1989). It is the reading of something back into its possibilities.

In hermeneutics, analysis becomes synonymous with interpretation. Interpretation begins with reflection (Gadamer, 1989). It involves careful and detailed reading and rereading of all the text, allowing for the bringing forth of general impressions, something that catches the regard of the reader and lingers, perturbing and distinctive resonances, familiarities, differences, newness, and echoes. Each re-reading of the text is an attempt to listen for echoes of something that might expand possibilities of understanding. This is distinct from a search for themes, which is generally validated by the reemergence and repetition of specific ideas. Hermeneutics, rather, pays attention to the instance, the particular, the event of something that does not require

repetition to authenticate its arrival. The search for interpretations rather than themes is an attempt to escape the practice of fracturing data, which lays claim to some capturing of knowledge. Abram (1996) suggested that, when faced with anything, even a clay bowl, examination always exposes only a part of itself. We get a glimpse of one aspect, while the rest withholds itself for further discovery.

There can be no question of ever totally exhausting the presence of the bowl with my perception...there are dimensions wholly inaccessible to me...If I break it into pieces, in hopes of discovering, I will have destroyed its integrity as a bowl; far from coming to know it completely, I will simply have wrecked any possibility of coming to know it further, having traded the relation between myself and the bowl for a relation to a collection of fragments. (Abram, 1996, p. 51)

### *The hermeneutic circle*

The process of interpretation involves an entering into the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle is not a method for uncovering meaning, but a metaphorical way of conceptualizing understanding and the process of interpretation to which I participate, belong, and am situated. When one enters into the circle, it is not without the bringing of culture, gender, understandings, experiences, prejudices, anticipations, expectations, and changing biological structure, which in the end determines what can be received and brought forth as understanding (Maturana & Varela, 1992).

The hermeneutic circle is the generative recursion between the whole and the part. Being in the circle is disciplined yet creative, rigorous yet expansive. There is an inherent process of immersion in, and dynamic and evolving interaction with, the data as a whole and the data in part, through extensive readings, re-readings, reflection, and writing. In this process there is a focus on recognizing the particular, isolating understandings, dialoguing with others about

interpretations, making explicit the implicit, and, eventually finding language to describe language.

### **Interpretive Writing: Bringing the Topic to Life in Language**

*Experience is not really meaningful until it has found a home in language.*

*(Madison, 1988, p. 165)*

Hermeneutics requires a tragic, loving relationship with language. Language holds something open in its possibilities; it clears a space around it and hands it on through articulation.

Articulation, however, needs to be done well and in a way that allows the topic to stand against the articulation and not be consumed, constrained, or contained by it. Things should not be captured in the writing, not imprisoned by it, but set free within it. Yet, the tragedy lies in the notion that whenever words are given some meanings are denied. The writing must also preserve some of the concealedness, and must respect some of the privacy and the mystery of the thing. Articulation should not flatten something out, but infuse it with energy, image, and imagination, in such a way that the articulation itself disappears, and the thing shows itself, perhaps even allowing the thing to be read in a more generous way than it reads itself.

Hermeneutic writing often has the character of exaggeration in strengthening what it wants to be heard (Smith, 1991). This does not mean that it invents things but it highlights them.

Exaggeration occurs deliberately, purposefully designed to disrupt, find, and cultivate the familiar. Hermeneutic work has to be a good description, a version that will bear up clinical descriptions and exemplars and expand them into rich and full descriptions of the understandings generated and created within the study. Hermeneutics differs from other methodologies such as

ethnography or grounded theory that attempt to give an account of the participants, and whose practitioners sometimes return to the participant for member checks to authenticate and substantiate how well they were represented (Smith, 1991). Hermeneutics does not report on meaning, but creates it, not by translating one's subjectivity out of the interpretation but by applying oneself to it with a sense of responsibility to deepen understanding.

### **Sustainability, Substance, and Soundness: Rigor and Validity**

The soundness of qualitative research is established and discerned by different criteria of judgment, rigor, validity, and credibility than that of other kinds of scientific inquiry (Koch, 1994). In this vein, rigor or trustworthiness is reconceptualized in hermeneutic research. Part of trustworthiness is believability. Gadamer (1989) suggested that there are many interpretations, and though none are finite there are some which offer a better account and ring more "true." The readers decides for themselves if the account is believable and, in this decision, there is often a seemliness, fitness, or sense of appropriate character in the work which is recognizable. In this commitment to rigor and trustworthiness, Koch (1994) suggested the qualitative researcher must provide evidence of credibility, transferability, and dependability.

Credibility in qualitative research can take the form of consulting participants and asking for validation of the constructions of the researcher (Koch, 1994). "The strategy of returning to the subjects for validation is often based in a mirror epistemology in which the goal is to copy or reproduce the original meaning of the subjects' responses. This is questioned in hermeneutics" (Allen, 1995, p. 179). Alternately, the researcher can request that other readers can offer not an expert evaluation of "truth," but an opportunity to open the interpretations from the narrowness



of one's vision, prejudices, and focus. In recognition that hermeneutics honors that all things can be answered differently, the call to different readers is a call to this generative nature of interpretation.

Transferability (Koch, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), rather than generalizability, is connected to the notion that the interpretations of the research can "fit into contexts outside the study situation and when its audience views its findings as meaningful and applicable in terms of their own experiences" (Sandelowski, 1986, p. 27). This transferability is demonstrated in the application of the findings to other contexts from the research context, and the possibilities created by the research. Rather than transferability, Madison (1988) suggested that research should be judged by the criteria of suggestiveness and potential, which are the extents to which the research raises more questions and is capable of extension. Dependability lies in the exact documentation of the process of inquiry in such a way that demonstrates how "interpretations have been arrived at" (Koch, 1994, p. 978). Evidence of this lies in part in the thoroughness to which selected transcripts reflect the interpretation.

Another reflection of rigor is the showing that the research is consistent with the philosophical ground determined as the foundation for the work. An example of research consistent with Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics lies in research that, although it strives for the best interpretations, it does not represent them as "truth." Interpretations are arrived at in a referential and relational, rather than absolute, way (Smith, 1991). In an identification of specific interpretations, different ones will occur to other readers that may even appear to contradict the ones that come through in the research. It is important to see this generative nature of

interpretation not as a contradiction but rather evidence of the fertility of this kind of research. Koch (1994) suggested that a study is credible not when a reader holds the same interpretations, but when the reader can follow how the author came to interpretations they chose. Therefore, to an extent, credibility is based not on agreement, but on harmony. Gadamer (1989) suggested that “the harmony of all details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding...failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed” (p. 291). Harmony, however, does not mean that there cannot be contradictions or differences, for in harmony there must be opposites and differences; harmony is based on an echoing of different tones that blend and work together. Harmony does not arise out of uniformity, sameness, and repetition, but out of the fitting of difference onto itself; the combination of difference to make something else; the combination of parts into a pleasing whole; the simultaneous sounding of different tones which is satisfying to the ear; and the blending and compromise of tension (Neufeldt & Guralnik, 1988). There is something about harmony that is akin to alchemy, or the apparently miraculous transmutation of something into something better (Neufeldt & Guralnik, 1988). This is the power of differences to make something new.

Veracity, or truth value and credibility, is enhanced when interpretations provide faithful, recognizable, and “true” descriptions of experience, in that they ring true to those who read the disseminated descriptions in the form of a research report (Sandelowski, 1994). “Everything comes down to our capacity to recognize ourselves in the finished account, in the ‘story’ of human existence which is recounted there” (Caputo, 1987, p. 80). A good interpretation takes the reader to a place that is recognizable, having either been there before, or in simply believing that it is possible. Hermeneutics is aware of the “storied nature of human experience...we find

ourselves, hermeneutically speaking, always in the middle of stories, and good hermeneutical research shows an ability to read those stories from inside out and outside in” (Smith, 1991, p. 201). Validity in interpretive inquiry, according to Lather (1993), is a form of recovery and legitimization that incites discourse. Validity lies in the attempts to resist closed truths of the past encased in the shape of rigid, tight arguments, to recover possibilities, and to free the present for discussion, new thoughts, and practices. First and foremost, validity is an experience of application; it does not arise out of the past but from the future, becoming something only in the way it is lived out.

Gadamer (1984) suggested that there are two competing approaches to validity - - *rhetorica* and *critica*:

Rhetorica is obviously based on common sense, on the probability of arguments insofar as they are well received and assured by appearances. On the other hand, the critical attitude stands against appearances, on the side of the new physics with its insistence on method. (p. 55)

Rhetoric, or the art and argument of persuasion, is suggested by Gadamer (1984) as having a “deep inner convergence” with hermeneutics, in that one needs rhetorical tradition to not only “give a good talk, but also in order to *read* and understand extended argumentation” (p. 55).

Gadamer elaborated that rhetoric serves to extend and share common and important insights, and that the measure of “valid” hermeneutic work is how persuasively it is presented and how well the reader participates in it.

Madison (1988) suggested that a more useful question than asking what makes a *true* interpretation is asking why some interpretations are more readily accepted than others are. This leads us to the notion that truth always lies in the fact that a community of interpreters has

accepted it as such. One interpretation is accepted over another because it seems more “fruitful, more promising...it seems to make more and better sense of the text...it opens up greater horizons of meaning” (Madison, 1988, p. 15). Madison further offered that “all interpretation works under the promise of truth...when we opt for a given interpretation, we do not do so because we *know* it to be true...but because we *believe* it to be the best” (p. 15).

### **An Epilogue to a Tale**

*In the end...hermeneutics does not lead us back to safe shores and terra firma; it leaves us twisting slowly in the wind. It leaves us exposed and without grounds, exposed to the groundlessness of the mystery...this intractable mystery is the final difficulty that hermeneutics is bent on restoring.*  
(Caputo, 1987, p. 267)

*Lethe*, or the forgetting and concealment of the mystery, is the constant call to hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics strives to keep itself open to the mystery and it commits to be true to the movement back and forth that occurs in play. Hermeneutics aims to keep the play in play and to keep itself in the play while simultaneously trying to uncover what is hiding. Caputo (1987) wrote that it is suffering that takes us close to the mystery and prevents us from confusing what we find with idealized poetic notions or reveries. Suffering occurs in the heart of the flux and at the edge of the abyss, and as such hermeneutics is there along with it. “The face of suffering is a mask through which something deeper resonates, leaving its echo behind.... the task of...hermeneutics is not to decipher the speaker beneath the mask but to alert us to the distance which separates them - and then to preserve and keep it open” (Caputo, 1987, p. 290). Suffering, as a vital part of human life, is a clear call to hermeneutics as an approach to inquiry and understanding, *aletheia* and interpretation.

On the surface, hermeneutics has a charming, ebullient, and almost illiterate face, but there is a deep and long-standing tradition of literacy beneath it. When something is not guided by a procedural method or character, its strength and credibility then lies in its history and ancestry, in being citatious, in being literate, accountable to, and able to speak to these things.

What might these ghosts and ancestors whisper about the account I have drawn and connections and implications I have brought forth in this writing? Perhaps Luther, Schleiermacher, and Dilthey are mumbling that I have taken too many licenses and the writing has ignored the methodological rules that fundamentally govern hermeneutics. I imagine I hear Husserl arguing that I have somehow missed the essence of what experience-of-something is all about and have made the cardinal mistake of involving *myself* in this endeavor. I arrogantly trust that, if it were worthy of notice, Derrida would critique and deconstruct it all. I am optimistically hopeful that Heidegger, Gadamer, Madison, and maybe even Caputo are recognizing that this very discussion serves not to define, but to keep me in the flux, at the abyss, and in the play. In the nature of aletheia, we experience again that as we lift the lid of the well and flip it over to uncover those mysteries beneath, we at the same time conceal what the lid now rests on. Perhaps Luther's, Schleiermacher's, Dilthey's, Husserl's and others' voices are trapped beneath the opened lid, but they are still there. They are not silenced, and the lid can be opened again in the other direction; there are always many choices and possibilities, and none are finite. Such is the nature of hermeneutics and the very mischievous play of Hermes to keep us constantly at the edge.

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