

A DIALOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON COMPOSITION: THE CLASSROOM RESPONDS TO GADAMER

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Composition theory has in the past two decades been informed by three pedagogical movements. The older process pedagogy foregrounds the student writer in the act of composing. In the past decade, reader response theory has spoken to classroom practice in the forms of collaborative learning and writing across the curriculum pedagogies. In both of these pedagogies, the student writer is perceived as an initiate in a specialized community of writers, and her goal is to master the reading and writing conventions that shape the knowledge in that chosen field. Finally, in the pedagogies of E.D. Hirsch and Allan Bloom, there is a focus on determining valid textual meaning: for these theorists, student writers need to learn their culture before they can engage in any meaningful reading and writing.

What I would like to pursue in this essay is a pedagogy that takes a little from each preceding pedagogy but that begins with fundamentally different ontological premises. I want to explore a fourth pedagogy which I have come to name a hermeneutic of textual dialogue. As such, I will be translating the hermeneutical theories of Hans-Georg Gadamer, particularly as they are expressed in his magnum opus *Truth and Method*.

Hans-Georg Gadamer was a student of Martin Heidegger: consequently, his hermeneutical theories have a phenomenological ground, so that the traditional philosophical distinction between subject and object is replaced by the event of understanding which occurs between human perceiver and his life world. Such a

philosophical premise thus begins from process and discourse community pedagogies which assign ontological priority to the subject, or human consciousness. Further, a hermeneutical pedagogy also responds to the cultural literacy pedagogies of Hirsch and Bloom which assume the ontological priority of the object, or text; rather, these entities become necessary participants in the event of textual understanding.

Gadamer begins with the metaphor of conversation (as opposed to argument) to explain his hermeneutical theory. One who has not read Gadamer might assume that such a metaphor is inappropriate because conversations are essentially oral and unstructured linguistic activities. Before examining the details of Gadamer's hermeneutics and its translations in the classroom, one therefore needs to define conversation from Gadamer's phenomenological perspective.

For Gadamer, immanent meaning does not reside within a text nor does a reader impose her meaning upon a text. As a result, knowledge can not be seen as a static entity; rather, for Gadamer it is a constantly reinterpreted encounter between reader and text. As in good conversation, the speaker does not impose his meaning on the listener but responds to and is transformed by, what the other has to say, so in textual conversation the reader allows a text to speak and responds to what the text says.

The structure of these textual conversations is similar to the question and answer movement of Socratic dialogue, the first speaker eliciting an initial question to which the participant responds, yet her response necessarily entails additional questioning. This to-and-fro movement, Gadamer affirms, has no end, just as Socratic dialogues invariably end with a myriad of unanswered questions.

In this sense, Gadamer contends that truth is never a fixed entity, but a constantly transforming experience that readers experience as they continue to read and respond to a text. In this regard, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics provides a response to Hirsch and Bloom who affirm that textual meaning is a recognizable, static entity within every text. Yet Gadamer is not saying, as does Stanley Fish, that truth is the result of the interpretive conventions which a community of readers brings to a text. The text has something to say, and the reader must respond. By responding to the text, the reader realizes that additional textual meanings emerge.

Just how do texts speak? Again, Gadamer is careful to examine the unique "voice" that texts present to readers. In face-to-face conversation, Gadamer notes, there are audible voices as well as a myriad of pragmatic and contextual clues that help contribute to the

conversation. He notes: "In writing, language gains its true intellectual quality, for when confronted with written tradition understanding consciousness acquires its full sovereignty" (*Truth and Method* 352). Reading thus becomes the most purified conversational encounter that humans engage in.

Though it is purified, the reader-text conversation is also eminently difficult, for the reader must make a mute text speak—a task which becomes the significant hermeneutical challenge for all readers, both scholars and basic readers. If the text does not initially speak, then conversation can not begin. Readers, Gadamer affirms, must be patient, must let the text initiate the conversation, usually with a question. The reader in this hermeneutical scene is not armed with a series of interpretive methods that will make the text speak, nor should she be searching for those key sections of the text which reveal its kernel of truth.

A patient reader who waits for the textual conversation to begin is like a good partner in conversation who listens carefully and deeply to what the other say and is unwilling to dominate the conversational encounter. When the text begins to speak, then the reader has found a way into the textual conversation. Texts speak to each reader differently; that is, readers find a myriad ways of entering into a textual conversation.

Once a text poses a question, then the reader can answer it; yet he needs to be open to how his answer will invariably lead to further questioning. These questions which readers ask need to be directed toward the text—not away from it. If, for example, a student is reading *Hamlet* and is puzzled as to whether Hamlet's father has in fact been killed by Claudius, it is to the text itself that the reader needs to return in order to examine textual moments that can respond to this question. Moving outside of the text to answer this question prevents the text from continuing the dialogue with the reader. In this sense, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics encourages careful textual reading, but it assumes that this textual experience will not lead to one operant reading. Rather, each reader can allow a valid interpretation to emerge from the text and can reshape this interpretation as he continues to examine the text.

In his conception of the I-Thou, Gadamer depicts an engaging hermeneutical scene for how readers allow texts to speak. In order for a text to speak, the reader must be willing to listen to the text; she must believe that the voices of the text have something to say to her. Instead of bringing a set of interpretive strategies to the text or a set

of assumptions that she wants the text to conform to, Gadamer's experienced reader is willing for the text to question her assumptions.

Gadamer refers to this particular hermeneutical stance as one of being open and being willing to be at risk. Though Gadamer admits that a reader's prejudices play a central role in shaping textual meaning, he is also insistent that these prejudices can be reseen if the reader is willing to place them at risk, if he allows the prejudices of the text to question his own.

What Gadamer's notion of being at risk suggests is an ethical dimension to reading. In Gadamer's hermeneutical scene, the reader believes that what she reads has the potential for reshaping her assumptions. In fact, an I-Thou stance sees all knowledge as being shaped and transformed by what the participant (the I) learns from his partner (the Thou). Such a hermeneutical notion calls into question Stanley Fish's conception of a reader who makes meaning by bringing his conventions to the text. Nowhere in Fish's theory is the notion that the voices (the Thou) in the text can reshape these conventions or call them into question. For Fish, interpretations change once the interpretive community decides to bring a different set of conventions to the text.

In Gadamer's hermeneutics, the text plays a necessary dialectical role in creating and reshaping the reader's assumptions about the world and the nature of the reading conventions that she brings to the text. Continuing the metaphor of the conversation, Gadamer sees the I and Thou as partners who respect what the other has to say and so are always willing to listen. If the I can no longer listen to the Thou, then the conversation ceases. In Fish's interpretive scene, (particularly in his *Is There a Text in This Class?*) the textual conversation becomes a monologue in which the reader talks at the text, creating meaning without listening to what the text has to say.

Gadamer admits that the issue of authority also plays a significant role in the I-Thou textual encounter. At times the text has more to say than the reader, so the reader does more listening than responding; at other times it is the reader who brings more questions and answers to the text. If a text is particularly dense—a passage from Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example—the reader often has much listening to do. If the text is less textured or if the reader returns to reread a text, then the reader likely has more to bring to the conversation—both in regard to the nature of the questions and to the subtlety of the textual responses.

If the text refuses to engage in an I-Thou relationship, then Gadamer says that it remains mute. In these mute interpretive

encounters the reader's hermeneutic always tries to find reasons why the text refuses to speak and attempts to find ways to initiate the conversation.

Keenly related to Gadamer's I-Thou notion is his conception of application. A text speaks to a reader, he notes, because a textual voice or voices speak to the reader's traditions or prejudices. Gadamer is not trying to say here that textual understanding emanates solely from the reader's perspective; rather, textual conversations occur because the text has something specific to say to the reader. It is within this sense of commonality that the reader can then apply what the textual voice says to the reader's particular assumptions. Through this textual encounter, the reader can examine his assumptions and sometimes even transform them.

Ultimately, because of the hermeneutical power of application, Gadamer suggests that reading is profoundly interconnected to writing. What speaks to a reader addresses and transforms the reader's prejudices, so what the reader finally has to say about the text reshapes both her beliefs as well as her reading and writing strategies. Reading and writing strategies continue to develop, Gadamer affirms, because of the reader's particular responses to texts.

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is both a meaningful advancement to the phenomenological assumptions advanced by his predecessor Martin Heidegger as well as an interpretive system that affords some profound pedagogical translations. And it is this hermeneutic pedagogy that the second part of this essay addresses.

First and foremost, a composition classroom responding to Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is one which foregrounds the activity of reading. Students are encouraged to respond in writing to what they read: in journals, class discussions, formal essays, and so on. What teachers respond to in student writing is not initially the discourse's form (the models pedagogy) or the content (a sense that there is an immanent meaning within the text that the reader must uncover). Rather, always keeping the notion of conversation in mind, students and teachers look to see what the texts that they read and those they write have to say to them and to others.

Teachers thus foreground student responses to texts, not in order for students to find an operant textual meaning, but for them to develop textual meaning by cogently examining the text in question. The teacher encourages students to see how the strategy of reading dialogically encourages questions and answers, never assuming that there is one totalizing interpretation of any text. Teacher's comments thus frequently are in the forms of questions to students, generally

asking variations on the following questions: What is this text saying to you? Where do you see this interpretation in the text? Could you see another interpretation in this passage?

Students are also encouraged to ask similar questions to each other, either in a partner or group setting. Since students do not conceive of the teacher as possessing the final answers to their textual questionings, they also encourage what their peers have to say about a text and about their responses to the text.

What Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics suggests to the classroom is a particular type of collaborative learning. In some collaborative learning scenes, knowledge becomes what the group says it is to be, and often the text in question is forgotten. Gadamer's hermeneutics also encourages the reader's dialogical responses to other voices who have read the text, but he foregrounds the text as the final arbiter of interpretive questioning, and he emphasizes that dialogue best occurs between two, rather than several, participants. Therefore, in philosophical hermeneutics' pedagogical scene, collaboration is encouraged, but it is consistently focused on the text and on the conversation which emerges between the members of a group focusing on the text.

Further, what the students say in the classroom takes precedence over how it is said. Gadamer has repeatedly noted that form is the unconscious correlate of language. He affirms; "The real being of language is that into which we are taken up when we hear it—what is said" (*Philosophical Hermeneutics* 65). For Gadamer, language ultimately is the medium for human meaning-making. Teachers in Gadamer's pedagogical scene foreground what students say, even at the basic writing level. To focus on form—particularly surface errors at the beginning levels of instruction—reverses the natural relationship that meaning has over structure. This focus on meaning does not suggest that teachers in a hermeneutic pedagogy do not teach editing strategies to their students, rather that these strategies are not the center of their composition classroom.

Similarly, teachers in a hermeneutic pedagogy never assume that students can blindly apply heuristics to their writing and consistently see writing improvement. Heuristics like the five-paragraph essay and the caution to begin each paragraph with a topic sentence formalize and dogmatize the writing process, again foregrounding form over meaning where form is conceived as a separate entity from content. A major point made in *Truth and Method* is that dogmatic methods can never be productively used in understanding human behavior and

thought. For Gadamer, textual methods are always revised in the encounter between reader and text.

Consequently, teachers of a hermeneutic pedagogy may teach heuristics but only as fluid changing standards, so that students never feel compelled, for example, to check that each of their paragraphs has a topic sentence or that only three paragraphs are used to support the thesis of their essay. Again, the teacher's focus is on student interpretation which shapes the structure of the student response. In a hermeneutic pedagogy, students realize early on that the shapes of their essays emerge from what they have to say about the text and that no two textual responses need have an identical form.

Ultimately, what students read in a hermeneutic pedagogy are most often texts that speak about human behavior. Such a pedagogy, for example, cannot effectively address ways to read a physics text or strategies in writing a laboratory report. A hermeneutic pedagogy works more productively with texts that treat the ambiguity of human experience, both narrative and expository texts that examine human behavior and thought. Gadamer refers to these texts as forming the discipline of the human sciences which include texts in literature, philosophy, history, and law—texts that examine, rather than measure, human experience.

For this reason, personal experience essays are often not the focus of a hermeneutic pedagogy because such topics assume that students can create knowledge solely within their own experiences, that a dialectical encounter with a text is unnecessary for meaningful textual response. The types of essay questions which emerge from a hermeneutic pedagogy are those which foreground the text, yet elicit an application to the reader's own understanding of the topic. For example, the following question on John Holt's *How Children Fail* would be a question which elicits careful textual reading and the examination of the reader's assumptions:

What is Holt saying about failure in the schools? How does he feel children learn, and how do children generally learn in school? Test his ideas with an examination of certain educational experiences in your own life or in the life of someone you know well.

In this question, the students are encouraged to speak to the text, even to challenge it, by seeing how their own experience re-sees Holt's ideas. Such a question encourages a genuine to-and-fro dialectic between reader and text.

In contrast, the following question on John Holt would not encourage the same kind of dialectical textual encounter:

In *How Children Fail*, John Holt analyzes the ways that children are punished in school, thus becoming ineffective learners. Discuss the kind of learner you are. Cite educational experiences from your own life.

In this question, the text merely becomes a convenient backdrop in order for the student to write a personal essay. After the first paragraph, the Holt text may very quickly fade away from the essay's purpose.

Similarly, a question that foregrounds the form of the Holt text would also discourage textual conversation:

In John Holt's *How Children Fail*, the author writes a compelling narrative of specific students' lives in his classroom. Write a narrative about a student you know (it could be yourself), employing meaningful details from your memory.

Here, the Holt text merely provides a formal model for the student's narrative. As with the previous question, Holt is very quickly forgotten as the student is immersed in personal recollection. In both these questions, reading the Holt text merely becomes the excuse for student response, not an active participant in the knowledge that students develop as they compose their essays. What a hermeneutic pedagogy calls for are essay questions which encourage textual interpretation and the concomitant re-examination of student ideas concerning the topic in question.

Ultimately a hermeneutic pedagogy encourages a philosophical attitude toward the classroom. Teachers come to the classroom without a list of objectives which students must achieve or identical strategies which students must bring to each assignment; rather. Instead, teachers and students alike see the reading of texts as one manifestation of the primordial human need to understand life experiences. They come to realize that as in understanding the events in one's life, the experience of reading develops as students continue to respond to and question texts. Neither teacher nor student has a magic reading formula that provides cogent answers to the questions that they ask texts. Rather, as students and teacher continue the dialogue with texts, they learn different ways of reading. As they continue to read, their strategies invariably become more complex, yet unique to their own nexus of traditions and assumptions which

they bring to each text. Therefore, for Gadamer, no one reader can be examined as the ideal textual reader. Further, as participants in the textual conversation, teachers and students view the text and each other as a Thou—a voice which can further the conversation, rather than a body of information that either needs to be mastered or shown to be wrong.

Finally, in a hermeneutic pedagogy, the conception of pedagogy itself takes on a philosophical dimension. Just as a reader in Gadamer's hermeneutics is seen as a partner in dialogue with the text, so are teachers and students in the classroom engaging texts dialogically. Pedagogy thus becomes a kind of hermeneutics which examines a group's interpretation of texts and the teacher's reflections on how student readers respond to texts.

Few pedagogies have been written thus far which see reading as interpretation. Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* and E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* foreground reading, but their interpretive notions see reading as a one-directional activity. For them, the text has an unchanging meaning that certain readers become skilled enough at uncovering. There is no sense in either one of these pedagogies that interpretation involves creating meaning; rather, interpretation rescues an immanent textual meaning.

Two pedagogical studies have emerged which conceive of interpretation as an encounter between reader and text: *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* and *Reclaiming Pedagogy*. In Bartholomae's and Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*, basic writers are asked to examine a series of texts on the issue of adolescence. Their curriculum focuses on a topic that will likely speak to incoming undergraduates. Student responses to these texts are foregrounded in the forms of reading journals, peer discussion of these texts, and peer editing of student writing on these texts. Teachers assign a long paper which asks students to compose their autobiography, referring to the several autobiographies and theoretical studies on adolescence which they have read during the term. In all of these writing assignments, students are not asked to write merely their own opinions regarding the topic of adolescence. Rather, they consistently apply what they have read to their own experiences in order to see ways in which these experiences can be transformed, reseen.

Donahue and Quandahl's *Reclaiming Pedagogy* is a series of essays situating critical theorists like Barthes, Burke, and Bakhtin in the classroom. Each of the studies focuses on how the respective theorist helps the teacher and student see the activity of reading from

a different perspective. As with *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*, the focus is on students interpreting texts and on meaning as a constantly transforming textual encounter. In many of the essays, students are asked to reread the same text in order for it to present a different perspective. Revision thus rightly becomes a function of rereading, not a mechanical exercise in surface error correction.

A hermeneutic pedagogy—a pedagogy that foregrounds textual interpretation as a transforming activity—seems to provide a cogent response to expressivist and collaborative learning classroom perspectives. Inherent in a hermeneutic pedagogy is the continual affirmation that reading and writing are profoundly interconnected activities—conversations which encourage the willful and pleasurable participation of both members. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics gives students a challenging and, in many ways, empowering way of reading, and it seems to encourage teachers to become active participants in textual dialogue, rather than what they are traditionally perceived to be: all-knowing transmitters of monological truth.

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