
The Theoretical Eye

I believe the sense in which I shall be using the expression manners of interpretation will have to remain unspecified for some time, but I also believe such is ultimately an irrelevant enigma. I shall illustrate rather the enigmatic nature of the latter irrelevancy with the help of a passage from the founding text of the canon of literary theory, namely Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Chapter XXII of the *Poetics* consists in a rather detailed criticism of some poets' lack of propriety in "several modes of expression". The prescriptions offered by Aristotle are technical prescriptions, just as the *Poetics* is, of course, a technical work. Conversely, as one can see for instance in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (e.g., 1140a, 6ff.), any *tekhnè* is, by definition, *poietikè*. A poetics would thus be doubly technical, if we like: it deals not only with a matter of technical production (such as shoemaking) but also with the very matter of producing production itself. And, like any other *tekhnè*, like any other craft, the fact that poetics is "a certain state involving reason concerned with production" (ibid.) implies its entire subordination to the prescriptions of reason, not just in the sense that a pair of shoes, like a tragedy, cannot afford the luxuries of nonfunctionality (aesthetics was invented much later) but especially in the sense that the rationality of shoemaking is reducible to a set of shoemaking prescriptions. Chapter XXII of the *Poetics*, which is relatively short, in fact, develops a whole arsenal of detailed rules, supported by at least nine different examples.

The discussion of such prescriptions is not the object of my concern. It is sufficient for the reader to be aware that they are essentially what one would call today stylistic prescriptions. Toward the end of the chapter, however, Aristotle writes: "But the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by

another; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances" ["eu metapherein to to homoion theorein estin": literally "to metaphorize well is to look to the similar"] (*Poet.*, 1459a). The passage is crucial because it exemplifies the problematic notion of "what cannot be imparted by another" within a technique such as poetics. "What cannot be imparted by another" is not attributed to the following of rules but to an "eye for resemblances," to an ability of perceiving as identical (*homoion theorein*). The converse idea that a unique (in the sense of 'incomparable') product can derive from a set of technical prescriptions would be contradictory (for reasons not unlike the ones of Wittgenstein's "private language argument"): and the greatest part of the efforts of some of the heirs of Aristotle's problem, such as the Longinus of *On the Sublime*, can be seen as the efforts to reconcile the contradiction (namely, through the very interesting notion that "natural genius" itself is technically produced).

Be that as it may, a curious scheme follows from Aristotle's passage: even if poetics is meant as a *tekhnè*, the most important thing about its technicality (the rational rules of technical composition) is not due to technical knowledge but rather to "an eye": *theorein* being here the mode on which the bypassing of technical knowledge is grafted. And just as, so to speak, the rationality of the rules has to be invented (in the rhetorical sense later made famous by Cicero, Quintilian, and Hermogenes) so ultimately the center of a poetic technique is, for Aristotle, neither technical nor poetic but, properly speaking, theoretical. This latter point means that, for Aristotle, poetics is a technique that cannot keep itself fully technical; that is, a technique that has to paralyze itself as a technique. Moreover, the point where such a technique ends is far from being unimportant: it is rather a pivotal point for a theory of production; namely, the point where conditions of production are produced.

In the five chapters of this work, I propose to follow this particular structure, along some of the arguments and disputations that have marked literary studies (without necessarily being all restricted to the institutionalized fields of literary studies) since their emergence. But it is perhaps clear from my Aristotle excursus how such a structure tends to be the very figure of theory: the figure of the termination of argument in the name of an irrefragable last perception, the figure that makes argument necessary in the first place, and the figure of what thinks the paralysis of argument.

II

The distinction that Aristotle utilized in his *Nicomachean Ethics* between technical knowledge and practical knowledge has been used by Hans-Georg Gadamer as a way of dealing conceptually with the problem of methodological shortcomings in hermeneutics. It would be accurate to say, perhaps, that in his famous title *Truth and Method* the second term corresponds to the horizon of a purely technical knowledge, whereas the first term corresponds to a practical desire of overcoming such a horizon. Moreover, if, as Gadamer writes, "understanding is...a particular case of the application of something universal to a particular situation" (1960, p. 278), then it is fairly clear that the criteria of such an application lie on a *homoion theorein*, on the perception of an analogy between something accepted as a rule and something recognized to be the case.

As Gadamer remarks, "it is obvious that this is not the knowledge of science" (*ibid.*, p. 280). And his use of Aristotle is above all the use of an alternative mode of knowledge, "not detached from a being that is becoming, but determined by it and determinative of it" (*ibid.*, p. 278). Aristotle, in the beginning of Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, contrasts two different families of knowledge: "when thought is concerned with study, not with action or production, its good or bad state consists [simply] in being true or false. For truth is the function of whatever thinks; but the function of what thinks about action is truth agreeing with correct desire" (*Eth. Nic.*, 1139a). The distinctive trait that interests me here, though, is related to the modalities of the transmission of knowledge. Since "what is known scientifically is by necessity...every science seems to be teachable, and what is scientifically knowable is learnable" (*ibid.*, 1139b). On the contrary, objects of knowledge that do not exist by necessity, that is, "what admits of being otherwise" (*ibid.*, 1140a), must be known through different processes. Aristotle considers two different kinds of knowledge of such objects: the knowledge of things made and the knowledge of things done. The former are due to a *tekhnè*: through technical knowledge, something is brought into existence, even if produced objects cannot be said to be necessary, because they belong to the set of varying things. "In a way," Aristotle writes, "craft [*tekhnè*] and fortune [*tukhè*] are concerned with the same things" (*ibid.*). On the other hand, knowledge of things done, of action, is attained through deliberation. The practical wisdom that makes deliberation possible Aristotle calls

phronesis. And, once it is understood that the reason for the difference between *to produce* and *to act* lies in the fact that “production has its end beyond it; but action does not, since its end is doing well itself” (ibid., 1140b), it is easy to realize that *phronesis* is the ability to build an analogue of scientific demonstration for the realm of things that are both not susceptible to demonstration and not susceptible to technical regulation: “it seems proper, then, to an intelligent person [*phronimon*] to be able to deliberate finely about what is good and beneficial for himself” (ibid., 1140a). The building of this analogy has, however, a deep consequence: to conduct an efficient deliberation one has to possess *phronesis*, whereas it is possible to conduct a scientific demonstration without necessarily being scientifically competent. One of the favorite similes of Aristotle’s commentators is dance. Although it is possible to learn how to make a pair of shoes without actually making one, one does not learn how to dance without dancing, because the process of learning how to dance *is* the process of dancing (we shall see later the same reasoning in Augustine).

That is precisely why *phronesis* is not

about universals only. It must also come to know particulars, since it is concerned with action and action is about particulars.

Hence in other areas also some people who lack knowledge but have experience are better in action than others who have knowledge. For someone who knows that light meats are digestible and healthy, but not which sorts of meats are light, will not produce health; the one who knows that bird meats are healthy will be better at producing health. And since intelligence [*phronesis*] is concerned with action, it must possess both [the universal and the particular knowledge]¹ or the [particular] more [than the universal]. Here too, however, [as in medicine] there is a ruling [science]. (ibid., 1141b)

Because it operates a mediation between the universal and the particular, the deliberative process, as Aristotle says, “may be in error about either the universal or the particular” (ibid., 1142a). It is, however, as if this double possibility of error were irrelevant to the purpose of deliberation, for “we can reach a good by a false inference, as well [as by correct deliberation], so that we reach the right thing to do, but by the wrong steps, when the middle term is false” (ibid., 1142b).

And last, but by no means least, comes a very important restriction to the learning of phronesis; that is, to the quality of being able to deliberate:

whereas young people become accomplished in geometry and mathematics, and wise within these limits, intelligent young people [that is, young people possessing phronesis] do not seem to be found. The reason is that intelligence [phronesis] is concerned with particulars as well as universals, and particulars become known from experience, but a young person lack experience, since some length of time is needed to produce it. (ibid., 1142a)

One has now an extensive set of arguments that tend to render incompatible the notions of deliberation and method. They proceed in two main directions: deliberation can transgress the "syntactic" postulates of a method (either by being satisfactory *and* syntactically questionable or by being unsatisfactory *and* syntactically beyond reproach) and deliberation can transgress what one could call perhaps the democratic principle of method, because the possession of phronesis is independent from a phronetic position, so to speak. As a matter of fact, time is, as it were, the sanction for deliberation; it takes time to acquire phronesis, both in the sense that the process of deliberation is more devious than the process of demonstration and in the sense that the one who is entitled to deliberate tends to be characterized as *older* than the one who is entitled to demonstrate. In the first sense the geometrical model of proof as the syntactically shortest distance between two points is called into question (by suggesting that at least some proofs cannot be evaluated in terms of either economy or elegance). In the second sense the notion of an automatism of preconditions for proof is restricted (by suggesting that at least some proofs require as precondition an override of the automatism of preconditions, viz. one requirement that demands that the access to the situation of proof not be determined on the basis of requirements alone—and *age* is conceptually the name of such a dispensation). The substitution of an alleged syntax of deliberation is precisely what makes deliberation a difficult process; the very notion of difficulty denotes in fact here what cannot be comprehended by syntax—no one can tell in advance the *form* of a deliberation. But at the same time the difficulty of deliberation is, for Aristotle, a necessary one.

III

The idea of a method, for Gadamer, would correspond to the belief in an analogy-generating procedure. And, as in the case of Aristotle in the *Poetics*, such an idea is put aside, under the assumption that there are no universal conditions for the perception of identity.

Gadamer's use of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, then, can be due only to Gadamer's very particular eye for resemblances. In fact, Aristotle's theory of moral knowledge is seen as the model for a hermeneutic theory. But what makes such an eye required and indeed indispensable is that, as Gadamer acknowledges, "Aristotle is not concerned with the hermeneutical problem and certainly not with its historical dimension, but with the right estimation of the role reason has to play in moral action" (1960, p. 278). Gadamer's argument, then, rests on the possibility of theoretical (in both sense of the word) consideration of three families of structural resemblances between his particular project and Aristotle's theory.

The first family derives from the contrast between technical knowledge and moral knowledge; that is, between the two main branches of nonepistemic knowledge:

we learn a *tekhne* and can also forget it. But we do not learn moral knowledge, nor can we forget it. We do not stand over against it, as if it were something we can acquire or not, in the way that we can choose to acquire or not an objective skill, a *tekhne*. Rather, we are always already in the situation of having to act...and hence must already possess and be able to apply moral knowledge. (ibid., p. 283)

Gadamer's rhetorical demonstration of this first set of resemblances proceeds through the supposition of an intermediate case, the case of juridical knowledge. Even if "there are laws that are entirely a matter of mere agreement (e.g. traffic regulations)...there are also things that do not admit of regulation simply by human convention, because the nature of the thing constantly asserts itself" [*die Natur der Sache' sich stets durchsetzt*] (ibid., p.285). We are then led to "a curious legal ambiguity" (ibid., p. 284):

the person who is 'applying' law...in a specific instance...will have to refrain from applying the full rigor of the law. But if he does, it is not because he has no alternative, but because to do otherwise would not be right...The law is always imperfect, not

because it is imperfect in itself, but because, in comparison with the ordered world of law, human reality is necessarily imperfect [*notwendig mangelhaft*] and hence does not allow of any simple application of the former. (ibid.)

Such an ambiguity was, of course, the object of Aristotle's remark that "what is decent [*epieikes*] is just, but is not what is legally just, but a rectification of it" (*Eth. Nic.*, 1137b). However, whereas Aristotle (although, not unlike Gadamer, acknowledging that "the source of the error is not the law or the legislator, but the nature of the object itself," ibid.) recommends that "the law choose the [universal rule] that is usually [correct], well aware of the error being made" (ibid.), Gadamer, as it were, rewrites the very notion of the law under the determination of the object, under the determination of the case. Consequently, the methodological prescriptions we are to find in the field of interpretation are, in his version of Aristotle, "not norms...nor...mere conventions, but really do correspond to the nature of the thing [*die Natur der Sache*]*—only that the latter is always itself determined in each case by the use*" (1960, p. 286).

This conclusion entails what Gadamer sees as a second family of structural resemblances; that is, "a fundamental modification of the conceptual relation between means and end" (ibid.). For "where there is a *tekhne*, we must learn it and then we are able to find the right means" (ibid.), but "even if we conceive [moral] knowledge in ideal perfection, it is the perfection of this kind of deliberation within oneself (*eubolia*) and not knowledge in the manner of a *tekhne*" (ibid.). The reason is of course that the results of a deliberation cannot be known in advance because the very process of deliberation lies on the consideration of an individual situation, a case, just like the question What to do? taken in itself does not mean anything: "the relation between means and ends here is not such that the knowledge of the right means can be made available in advance, and that because the knowledge of the right end is not the mere object of knowledge either" (ibid., pp. 286-287). What is being deliberately blurred here is the distinction, which applies to technical knowledge, between 'knowing how to do' and 'doing', because "moral knowledge must be a kind of experience" [*das sittliche Wissen enthält selbst eine Art der Erfahrung in sich*] (ibid., p. 288), precisely as knowledge of dancing must be a kind of dance and hermeneutic knowledge a kind of interpretation. Ironically enough, however, Gadamer's procedure, because it remains essentially a *distinguo* ("eine Art der..."), introduces the same relation between law and case his reading of Aristotle tries to

dispel, which is to say that the relationship he assumes to exist between moral knowledge and experience is not, in his sense, an ethical relationship, but, rather, a technical one. In fact, Gadamer shares this same predicament with Aristotle, in that the only form Aristotle has in which to conceptually claim the irrelevance of technical preconditions for proof is through the introduction of yet another precondition ("be experienced"). If hermeneutic knowledge is to be a kind of interpretation, therefore, it can never help but be a case of interpretation—and, as a matter of fact, the notion of the hermeneutic circle is going to become decisive in Gadamer's theory, not so much in an ontological sense as in the sense in which it will become the figure through which the possibility of a law of interpretation is played down.

The third family of structural resemblances between Aristotle's theory of moral knowledge and Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics is seen by the latter as the dominance of what the former calls *sunesis*, that is, the dominance of the concern with the other throughout the process of moral reflection. The somewhat paradoxical nature of *sunesis* comes from the fact that it describes the inclusion of such a concern as the most radical feature of the evaluation of one's own unique situation; it is, if we like, the specific difference between a paratechnology of survival, in which an analogue of *phronesis* would be the ethical designation for strategy, and something like the demands of practical reason. Within Gadamer's theory, the counterpart of *sunesis* is rather to be found in his treatment of the notion of dialogue. But his rendition of Aristotle's term (employed to distinguish *deinotes*, cleverness, from *phronesis*), translated—and, of course, not just by him—as *Verständnis*, makes especially noticeable the double sense in which Gadamer's theory is a theory of the 'understanding of'. As I shall try to suggest later, such is the invariable trait of appurtenance to an ethical tradition in hermeneutics. In the case of Gadamer, nevertheless, it happens not so much because of his constant reference to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (and perhaps even in spite of it, as it is possible to say that Aristotle hesitates constantly between an ethics and a self acknowledging "unjust technique") as because of his theory's being set on a rhetoric of comparison (which is here allegorized by translation) that invariably moves within the alternation of case and law. This latter alternation is the very movement of a relation toward the individual dominated by the requisites of an 'understanding of'. It is maybe in this sense that it can be said that all perception of the identical, all *homoion theorein*, tends to be eth-

ically grounded or, rather, that ethics tends to be the ground for all theories of fiction as such (a point that Wayne Booth made—albeit *a contrario*—thirty years ago). At least from the time of the Kant of *The Conflict of the Faculties* on down (but with roots as remote as Augustine), such is the tradition of refusing any automatic subsumption of individual cases, by giving precedence to the pragmatic considerations of practical reason vis-à-vis the methodological principles of a constituted discipline (only to grant the possibility of such a subsumption later, once the law is conceived as excluding all possibility of syntactic derivation of consequences, as in the cases of the divine and the moral laws). In Chapter 2 we shall see how such a tradition is opposed to the tendentially technical tradition of philology one finds intermittently in authors like Friedrich Schlegel and Schleiermacher.

Like those who exercise their natural gifts “without being led in any way by moral being and hence without inhibitions and without orientation towards moral ends” (ibid., p. 289), the clever (*deinos*) interpreter who “dealing with a traditional text seeks to apply it to himself” (ibid.) is a misunderstanding interpreter, which is to say, an interpreter who refuses to acknowledge the *other* that the law simultaneously creates and exemplifies; in this sense, what such an interpreter does not understand is *Verständnis* itself. The gallery of *unverständige*, and often *unverständliche*, interpreters could very well extend from Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty, an excellent patron saint for philology, to John Stuart Mill, the purely aesthetic (in the sense of “willing to be sensuously affected”) reader of the *Autobiography*. Curiously enough, Oscar Wilde would be here a considerably accomplished Gadamerian reader—with some lapses in several different directions; namely, his letters.

But another decisive implication of Gadamer’s appeal to Aristotle is linked to his configuration of the concept of the otherness of the law. In fact, through Aristotle’s *Ethics* Gadamer introduces in *Truth and Method* a decisive comparison that usually goes unnoticed: the metaphor of the other as a person and, consequently, the notion of interpretation as dialogue. However, the possibility of seeing the other as identical (which is to say, the possibility of seeing cases as *comparable*) is carried out by a sunetic faculty; such a faculty is the faculty, again, of judging according to a perceived identity beneath the disparate sphere of individual cases: the faculty of, as Aristotle says in the *Poetics*, *metapherein*. In a good sense, then, a metaphor cannot help but be *just*, in that it invariably tends to convey the *critical* moment of the understanding of the other, translated in the perception of the

other as a "case of the same." Perhaps the "prosopopeization" of the law is the latest episode in the adventures of the concept of "case of the same" (the one in which it takes the shape of "one of us"). Such an episode can be traced back to Kant and the discredit of the arguments for the divine right or the divine origin of the law. Be that as it may, it seems possible to say (and I shall adduce some arguments toward the end of this chapter) that for Saint Augustine (and even perhaps for Spinoza) the other of interpretation was not a person.

IV

That the most important thing is to have an eye for resemblances means that there are no sufficient rules for engendering comparisons. Gadamer's hermeneutics, understandably enough, offers a straightforward rejection of the idea that the process of interpretation can be subject to methodological prescriptions, and the point is usually duly emphasized by commentators. For his theory of dialogue, such a point entails the impossibility of a conception of conversational rules: "To conduct a conversation," writes Gadamer, "means to allow oneself to be conducted by the object to which the partners in the conversation are directed" (*ibid.*, p. 330). However, the very considerations that allow for the dismissal of the technical aspects of interpretation introduce, as we have seen earlier, a principle of phronesis that overrides any syntactic determinants.

There arises, thus, the question of the status of the constraints entailed by such a principle. In this respect, the "rules" of action dealt with by phronesis (like the "rules" of critical judgement dealt with by sunesis), when compared to the constraints of both *tekhne* and *episteme*, would appear to be of a less syntactic nature. Less syntactic nature means here (and the expression is not excessively felicitous) the conception of a nature that tends to imply the rejection of a principle of automatic subsumption. For this realm, the universal is not purely axiomatic because it does not provide a strict ground for inference (which explains why Gadamer's use of the term dialectics refers to Plato, rather than Aristotle) as it is merely regulatory. The "universal" of conversation tends, thus, to be literally inconsequential (non sequitur being here the rhetorical mode of a refusal of automatic subsumption), but, on the other hand, consequential enough for statements such as "Love thy neighbor" being used as if produced by it.

Although not too explicitly, in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer develops the topic of these "conversational ideas" (as opposed per-

haps to "conversational rules"). But such ideas are, first and foremost, envisaged as *precautions*, as negative rules. They are not so much an etiquette of interpretation as they are its manners. That is, they are the prudent fulfillment of practical potentialities as opposed to a method for action. During his discussion of the concept of *Bildung*, Gadamer retains from Helmholtz's talk "Über das Verhältnis der Naturwissenschaften zur Gesamtheit der Wissenschaften" a term that is central in this respect: the term *tact* [Takt]. "By 'tact,'" he writes, "we understand a particular sensitivity and sensitiveness [Empfindlichkeit und Empfindungsfähigkeit] to situations, and how to behave in them, for which we cannot find any knowledge from general principles" (ibid., p. 16). Tact as an element of *Bildung* (or as a *Bildung* formation prerequisite) does not mean an inferential ability that would allow for the production of practical maxims, but rather the very ideal of pure practice that acknowledges somewhat the unique configuration of practical problems and hence the permanent inconsequentiality of moral prescriptions regarding action. Within an Aristotelian framework, both being tactful and learning how to become tactful can mean performing only actions that deploy "a particular sensitivity and sensitiveness" to situations: "Hence an essential part of tact is inexplicitness and inexpressibility. One can say something tactfully; but that will always mean that one passes over something tactfully and leaves it unsaid, and it is tactless to express what one can only pass over" [und taktlos ist, das auszusprechen, was man nur übergehen kann] (ibid., pp. 16-17). This particular aspect illustrates further the distinction between tact and a "positive" etiquette (because for the realm of tact to say is not to say) and shows why the notions of method and tact are incompatible. The idea is of course that tact is not the ability to perform certain acts embodied in some sort of positivity, but rather the ability to perform certain acts that consist in *not* performing certain other acts as, for instance, not becoming *tactilis*. There is, then, a sense in which Gadamer's notion of a tactful action is irreducible to a rhetoric of omission, in which each omission would gain a positional value, so to speak, within a rule-ordered system; the limitational aspect of tact is due not to the fact that there is a strategic knowledge of the value of limitation, but, on the contrary, to the fact that such a knowledge is never fully specifiable.

It is therefore very understandable that Gadamer sees tact as a quality of distance, in a way clearly related to the core of Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*: "tact helps one to preserve distance, it avoids the

offensive, the intrusive, the violation of the intimate sphere of the person" (ibid., p. 17). Even if here we are more than ever under the spell of the founding comparison between hermeneutics and human relations, it would be absurd not to acknowledge the enormous power of such a spell. Within Gadamer's own theory that power is built through a process of amplification; "the tact that functions in the human species is not simply a feeling and unconscious, but is at the same time a mode of knowing and a mode of being" (ibid.). But independent from the ontologizing and epistemologizing of tact (very similar to what one finds in authors like Polanyi) it is perhaps noteworthy that the argument for tact is built by Gadamer as an argument for human rights (namely and perhaps significantly, for the right of privacy), grafted on and perhaps shaped as an ethical argument. There is, therefore, an important respect in which the hermeneutical ontology Gadamer proposes is a hermeneutic ethics, contaminated by the theme of procedural limits in a way that makes it all too evidently and awkwardly a companion to the more technical tradition of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. In some of the following chapters I shall be insisting on an essential proximity of all hermeneutic traditions, vis-à-vis, for example, philological traditions.

The question of knowledge through tact in the human sciences could be seen as an equivalent to the question of the possibility of nonregulated in the sense of nonteachable true insights in interpretation. However, because the latter base themselves on an ongoing reserve toward the communicability of perceptions of sameness, Gadamer's hermeneutics is also the precise opposite of the so-called subjectivism and the indifference of principle that subjectivism tends to profess. In fact, it does not deal with either the possibility or the legitimacy of the production of mutually incompatible statements as it deals with the legitimacy of avoiding certain statements that in some cases could even be syntactically compatible. At this juncture, Gadamer's theory is equally opposed to aesthetics and philology. The latter point shall be discussed later in Chapter 2. But the former point can be easily made from Gadamer's notion of tact. The introduction of a principle of distance that, beyond the pleasure principle, would regulate *in absentia et per absentiam* the process of interpretation carries not just the denial of the exemplary role of every methodological instance but, and most important, the denial of a kind of truth built through an accumulation of singular perceptions (which is to say that the concept of experience is understood not aesthetically but historically). And when theories of modes of knowledge become antiaes-

thetic, they tend to become theories of the limits of knowledge (but this is after all just another aspect of the Kantian lesson).

V

Gadamer's idea that the structural role of method in hermeneutics is played by an analogue of phronesis finds its most radical formulation in Saint Augustine's theory of interpretation of the Scriptures, contained in his treatise *De doctrina christiana*. It is perhaps trivial to remark that the consequences of Augustine's theory's being modeled on the reading of the Bible are overwhelming, but for the time being I shall prefer triviality to cursoriness.

In fact, notions like authorial intention and reconstruction of intended meaning (to name just two traditional topics of the historiography of hermeneutics) lose their point if one assumes, as Augustine does, that the author of the Scriptures is the Holy Spirit; that is, the third person of the Trinity as opposed to the first person of knowledge. Therefore, one of the major issues of Augustine's hermeneutics has to do with the intrinsic complexity that the structure of authorship has in its framework, which leads him to elaborate a very sophisticated rhetoric of authority that, in fact, knows several procedures of proof and has to tackle the very problem of such a diversity:

he who examines the divine eloquence, desiring to discover the intention of the author [*ut ad uoluntatem perueniatur auctoris*] through whom the Holy Spirit created the Scripture, whether he attains his end or finds another meaning in the words not contrary to the right faith, is free from blame if he has evidence [*testimonium habens*] from some other place in the divine books. For the author himself may have seen the same meaning in the words we seek to understand. And certainly the spirit of God, who worked through that author [*qui per eum haec operatus est*], undoubtedly foresaw [*praeuidit*] that this meaning would occur to the reader or listener. Rather, He provided that it might occur to him, since that meaning is dependent upon truth. For what could God have more generously and abundantly provided in the divine writings than that the same words might be understood in various ways [*ut eadem uerba pluribus intellegantur modis*] which other no less divine witness approve? (*Doc. Christ.*, III, xxvii)

The right understanding, then can never correspond to the positivity of a reconstruction, for there is no argument-finding procedure. What is elaborated, rather, is the ironization of all procedures, which amounts to some sort of methodological *credo quia absurdum*; not only can everything become an argument, but also the potential becoming argument of everything is a supplementary argument for the structure of authorship from which the former principle was derived in the first place. Whereas the possibility of envisaging interpretation as a matter of recovering an intention has to account, so to speak, for a moment of decayed intention, Augustine's author is by definition the very figure of the refusal of any decayed intention: there is nothing from which to reconstruct the word of the Holy Spirit because such a word is immune to destruction. The signs for such an archeology would be only *too* present: they cannot but be completely present. The studious contemplation of the signs of a hopeful recovery, that is, the whole procession of the emblems of erudition, is, then very remote to Saint Augustine's doctrine. The former is the traditional allegory of the pathos (and the bathos) of absence, whereas the latter tends to emphasize the former's inaptitude in dealing with both evidence and apathy: "Whoever . . . thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbour does not understand it at all" (*ibid.*, I, xxxvi).

We are once more in the realm of the specific truth of action, from which, incidentally, would stem the notion of application that is central to both pre-Kantian hermeneutic theories and their reappraisal by Gadamer. But action is not a mere consequence of understanding, even an indispensable step in the process of edification: action is both the cause and the reason, in a Wittgensteinian sense, of understanding: "whoever finds a lesson there [in the Scriptures] useful to the building of charity, even though he has not said what the author may be shown to have intended in that place, has not been deceived nor is he lying in any way" (*ibid.*). Augustine's emphasis on what one could call, for lack of a better term, *practical truth*, then, can be shown to portray a movement that is similar to the one we noticed when we discussed tact: the ultimate end of interpretation (and its ultimate cause) being action, interpretation itself consists primarily in the *end* of interpretation. Those who become active do not need any further interpretation, and those who are already active do not need any reading at all: "a man supported by faith, hope and charity, with an unshaken hold upon them, does not need the Scriptures except for

the instruction of others. And many live by these three things [*per haec tria*] in solitude without books" (ibid., I,xxxix). It is not difficult to understand the sense of Augustine's restriction "except for the instruction of others" [*nisi ad alios instruendos*]: instruction is *not* a matter of practical truth and requires in consequence a method, but it is also clear that if everyone were "fide et spe et caritate subnixus" there would be nothing to teach and literally nothing to say. Not to read means to know how to act well. Conversely, reading in spite of the promise of redemption it conveys, corresponds to the moment of indecision that precedes deliberation. Therefore, the subject of reading (to use perhaps a too-formal expression) is in a very important sense an unreconciled subject. Such a sense is perhaps twofold: unreconciled because it awaits redemption but also because it cannot yet incorporate action as a legitimate dimension of itself.

Augustine's ironization of method (like his notion of an end of interpretation) is closely related to a specific theory of the nature of hermeneutic problems. Referring to the "many and varied obscurities and ambiguities [that] deceive those who read casually," Augustine does not doubt "that this situation was provided by God to conquer pride by work and to combat disdain in our minds, to which those things which are easily discovered seem frequently to become worthless" (ibid., II, vi). In passages like the preceding one, in fact, it is again the status of nonpractical knowledge, such as the one emblemized by erudition, that is redirected. It is as if the pathos of science would *not* correspond to any scientific depth but, rather ironically, again, to the depths of an antiscientific argument; in this sense, even hermeneutic problems are practical problems, in that they are seen as connected primarily and exclusively to the apprenticeship of patterns of action. Hermeneutic discourse thus becomes the equivalent of a form of deliberation within oneself that precedes, but preferably accompanies, action. Augustine's precept concerning figurative language is particularly helpful here: "what is read should be subjected to diligent scrutiny until an interpretation contributing to the reign of charity is produced" [*uersetur diligenti consideratione quod legitur, donec ad regnum caritatis interpretatio perducat*] (ibid., III, xv). Not only "pure heart . . . good conscience and . . . unfeigned faith" (1 Timothy 1:5, quoted by Augustine in *Doc. Christ.*, I, xl) are required to be part of the essential posture of those who need interpretation, but also what will later become a secularized philological attitude is required, consisting in one's being "meek through piety so we do not contradict Divine Scripture, either when it is understood . . . or when it is not

understood" (ibid, II, vii). Augustine's formulation shares with some contemporary formulations of what J. Hillis Miller called an ethics of reading the notion that the ground of hermeneutic arguments is to be found in what is written and therefore that such a ground is not only independent but also a priori in relation to interpretation. But to the willingness in yielding to such paradoxes one finds in Miller (as, for instance, C. Norris remarked, e.g., 1988, p. 115), a trademark of the aestheticized ethics of high modernism, corresponds, in Augustine, a total distrust of singular perception. The point is crucial in order to distinguish Augustine's formulation from an ethics of reading, properly speaking: whereas in the latter the *homoion theorein* is primarily a perception of the other as identical (and thus the forgetfulness of perception itself), in Augustine all *homoion theorein* carries the awareness of its own tropological nature, that is, the awareness of the other's being identical only for the momentary sake of edification; the other, one could say, is never indifferent. The functional role of the proliferation and the variety of stimuli triggered by Miller's philological imperative is occupied in Augustine by a whole topic of restriction of the aesthetic. The basic attitude of the interpreter consists here in the exercising of an ability not to do (and not to enjoy) certain things; that is, the ability to see perception as yet another replacement, of not detaining oneself on what one could call the evidence and the singularity of perception. Prompted by the rejection of any psychological account of identity, such is the ability, which Miller is unable or unwilling to think, of seeing subjectivity as engendered: the ability to be terrified by perception (and terror here is the mode of enthusiasm, of the possession by God). "It is necessary," writes Saint Augustine,

that we be turned by the fear of God toward a recognition of His will [*ad cognoscendam ejus uoluntatem*: towards (the part of) His will that is to be known], so that he commands that we avoid. Of necessity this fear will lead us to thought of our mortality and of our future death and will affix all our proud motions, as if they were fleshy members fastened with nails, to the wood of the cross [*Timor autem iste cogitationem de nostra mortalitate et de futura morte necesse et incutiat et quasi clauatis carnibus omnes superbiae motus ligno crucis affigat*]. (. (Doc. Christ., II, vii)

We are definitely beyond the pleasure principle. That it is so, in Augustine's text, is signaled by the bluntness of the final allegory (*quasi clauatis carnibus . . . ligno crucis*). The allegory works in a double

way in that it is built on the paradox of the passion of Christ: to think of our mortality is to think of Christ's resurrection. But once the interpreter is "clauatis carnibus ligno crucis" the interpreter becomes simultaneously redeemed and redeemer. The identification between redeemed and redeemer, interpreter and author, however, is framed, as it were, by the precautionary measures of syntax: the adverbial prefix *quasi* maintains the ultimate impossibility of such an identification; indeed, there is a sense in which the author can never be a metaphor for the interpreter because the act of transporting oneself beyond is hopelessly one-sided: the interpreter only can wish to become like God; but God can never wish to become an interpreter. Augustine's allegory exemplifies the irrelevance of all singular perceptions in that it is precisely the place where two opposite singular perceptions (seeing the other as oneself, seeing the other as what can never be seen as oneself) are maintained.

Curiously enough, the dismissal of a pleasure principle carries the partial dismissal of the sciences of disputation, that is rhetoric and dialectics, because "the love of controversy [*libido rixandi*] is to be avoided, as well as a certain puerile ostentation in deceiving an adversary" (ibid., II, xxxi). The ability to draw correct inferences can be learned and may be useful; but the laws of propositional connection are one thing and their use is something else; for "correct inferences may be made concerning false as well as true propositions" (ibid.). What cannot be learned is "the truth of propositions": such is, in fact, "a matter to be discovered in the sacred books of the Church" (ibid.). Augustine shows, nevertheless, a constant distrust of inferential procedures that reminds us of Aristotle's concerning the realm of practical truth: "he who knows that there is a resurrection of the dead is better than another who knows that it follows from the proposition that there is no resurrection of the dead that 'then Christ is not risen'" (ibid., II, xxxiv.). And this is, of course, the ultimate sense of Gadamer's use of Plato's seventh *Letter* (namely, of 343 c-d), against the possibility of an identification between refutability and falsity.

Dialectics, however, is not Augustine's sole target. The essential ambiguity that Aristotle already noticed in the core of all techniques of proof, namely in rhetoric, is emphasized by him when he remarks that "an expression of charity conciliates an audience . . . [it] is easy to understand a brief and open account of events. . . [and] the variety of discourse keeps the auditors attentive and without fatigue" (ibid., II, xxxvi). But he also adds that "it frequently happens that men more easily learn the things themselves on action of which these principles

are learned than the very knotty and spiny precepts of these disciplines" (ibid., II, xxxvii), thus making of their knowledge a very minor issue: "studious and intelligent youths who fear God and seek the blessed life might be helpfully admonished that they should not pursue those studies which are taught outside the Church of Christ as though they might lead to a blessed life" (ibid., II, xxxix). The simile he uses to illustrate this thesis, in a rather proto-Wittgensteinian way, emphasizes once more what could be seen as the priority of pragmatics over syntax:

it is as if one should wish to give rules for walking and admonishes that the rear foot is not to be raised until the first foot is put down, and then goes on to describe in detail how the hinges of the joints and knees are to be moved. He speaks truly, nor is it possible to walk in any other way. Yet men more easily do these things when they walk than pay attention to them while they are doing them or understand them when they are described. (ibid., II, xxxvii)

The role of rhetoric in Augustine's hermeneutics is, then, that of an antidote not only to rhetoric's essential ambiguity but also to rhetoric's ill uses; that is, and once more, a practical role. Practical role means here, among other things, the role of restraining the use of rhetoric through metarhetorical precepts and recognizing that such a use is inescapable:

for since by means of the art of rhetoric both truth and falsehood are urged [*suadeantur*], who would dare to say that truth should stand in the person of its defenders unarmed against lying, so that they who wish to urge falsehoods may know how to make their listeners benevolent, or attentive, or docile in their presentation, while the defenders of truth are ignorant of that art? Should they speak briefly, clearly and plausibly while the defenders of truth speak so that they tire their listeners, make themselves difficult to understand and what they have to say dubious? Should they oppose the truth with fallacious arguments and assert falsehoods, while the defenders of truth have no ability wither to defend the truth or to oppose the false? Should they, urging the minds of their listeners into error, ardently exhort them, moving them by speech so that they terrify, sadden and exhilarate them, while the defenders of truth are

sluggish, cold and somnolent? Who is so foolish as to think this to be wisdom [*Quis ita desipiat, ut hoc sapiat?*]? (ibid., IV, ii)

Augustine does not provide us with any kernel of rhetorical rules (cf. ibid., IV, i), for such rules can be learned outside the Church. Rather, he is concerned with what in a more technical language is usually referred to as the ethical and hypocritical components of rhetorical devices; that is, those components that are connected to the ethos of the speaker and the nature of the performance (cf. ibid., IV, xxvii). By doing this Augustine points inadvertently to the core of the tension that inhabits the systems of ancient rhetoric; that is, the asymmetrical relationship between the propositional and compositional features of discourses and their metasyntactic (and in a way metase-mantic) features: to be righteous, to act rightly. But even if it is possible to see eloquence as some sort of antidote, subject to the specific demands of doctrine teaching, it should never be forgotten that, precisely as the wise do not need interpretation (for they already know what to do with it) so the general horizon of Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* is the disappearing of doctrine itself: the coming of the reign of pure and right practice means the end of theology, the end of a logos of (and on) God:

since infants are not taught to speak except by learning the expressions of speakers, why can men not be made eloquent, not by teaching them rules of eloquence, but by having them read and hear the expressions of the eloquent and imitate them in so far as they are able to follow them? Have we not seen examples of this being done? For we know many men ignorant of the rules of eloquence who are more eloquent than many who have learned them; but we know of no one who is eloquent without having read or heard the disputations and sayings of the eloquent. For boys do not need the art of grammar which teaches correct speech if they have the opportunity to grow up and live among men who speak correctly. (ibid., IV, iii)

VI

In what is perhaps the central chapter of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argues that "we have the task of redefining the hermeneutics of the human sciences in terms of legal and theological hermeneutics" (1960; p. 277). This aim entails two different theoretical maneu-

vers: the formulation of a concept that expresses the terms of the redefinition (or, in simpler words, the perceived similarity between the two families of hermeneutics) and the suggestion of the eventlike structure of hermeneutic experience. The first maneuver consists primarily in the rehabilitation of the concept of *subtilitas applicandi* and focuses both on the notions of *applicatio* and *subtilitas*. Referring to J. J. Rambach's *Institutiones hermeneuticae sacrae* (1723) and to the distinction between *subtilitas intelligendi* (understanding), *subtilitas explicandi* (interpretation), and *subtilitas applicandi* (application), Gadamer remarks that "it is notable that all three are called *subtilitas*, i.e. they are not considered so much methods that we have at our disposal as a talent that requires particular finesse of mind [*Feinheit des Geistes*]" (ibid., p. 274). The very notion of *subtilitas* is seen then both as an alternative to that of method and a practical virtue comparable to tact or phronesis. However, the nature of application prevents Gadamer's use of pietist hermeneutics from being a mere revival of a somewhat pre-Kantian theory of knowledge as, from his point of view, there is a natural heterology between the three classical *subtilitates* that turns application into an all-encompassing feature of interpretation: "understanding *always* involves something like the application of the text to be understood to the present situation of the interpreter" (ibid., my emphasis). And this means "that the text, whether law or gospel, if it is to be understood properly, that is, according to the claim it makes, must be understood at every moment, in every particular situation, in a new and different way" (ibid., p. 275).

As I remarked earlier, there are instances in which *application* is used by Gadamer in a less festive manner; namely, when application is seen as the ability *not to apply* something. There seems to be, therefore, a consistent and important tension in Gadamer's arguments: a tension between the "more" of the application (to apply is to produce more and renewed answers to an ever-changing question) and the "less" of the application (to apply is to be able to refrain from producing more and renewed answers). This double use of *application* is not necessarily aporetic when considered by itself. However, it signals the full burden of the redefinition of hermeneutics that Gadamer tries to undertake, because in the possibility of a double usage of *application* is entailed the conception of a subordination of what Gadamer calls the text to the realm of justice in general: the positional value of the "less" of the application in fact can be determined only within a metalinguistic code; in Gadamer's case, this is a code of practical virtues. Which is to say that there is a somber literality in the kind of law to be