

## CHAPTER 1

# *The Nature of Hermeneutics and Its Relevance to Educational Theory*

The connection between education and interpretation is an ancient one. In the educational practice of the ancient Greeks, for example, the central place of the interpretation of poetry attests to an essential relation summarized in Wilhelm Dilthey's observation that "systematic exegesis (*hermēneía*) of the poets developed out of the demands of the educational system."<sup>1</sup> The relationship between the interpretation of poetry and the acquisition of knowledge in ancient Greek sources shows that the educational value of poetry did not hinge on learning to author it, but on learning to take wisdom from it, that is, on the process of interpretation. According to Plato, for example, not only did poetry require interpretation, but poets themselves provided educational value only by being the "interpreters (*hermēnes*) of the gods" (*Ion* 534a).<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of the development of the modern discipline of textual hermeneutics the connections between education and interpretation, if blurred, were not entirely lost. Johann Martin Chladenius (1710–1759), in his systematic treatise on interpretation theory, followed Johannes von Felde's pedagogical definition of interpretation: "An interpretation is, then, nothing other than teaching someone the concepts which are necessary to learn to understand or to fully understand a speech or a written work."<sup>3</sup>

Since the development of nineteenth-century Romantic hermeneutics, however, the connections between education and interpretation have been obscured. One might trace this obscurity back to Friedrich Schleiermacher, who excluded *subtilitas explicandi* (exactness of explication) from the realm of hermeneutics. Only *subtilitas intelligendi* (exactness of understanding) belonged to the concept of interpretation. Thus, in contrast to Chladenius's identi-

fication of interpretation and teaching, and in contrast to Friedrich Ast's inclusion of explication within the rule of hermeneutics, Schleiermacher proclaimed that "hermeneutics deals only with the art of understanding, not with the presentation of what has been understood."<sup>4</sup> Even when, at the turning point of contemporary hermeneutical theory, Martin Heidegger defined interpretation as a development or education (*Ausbildung*) of the possibilities of understanding, the educational dimension of interpretation was never further explicated.<sup>5</sup> What Hans-Georg Gadamer refers to as interpretation's "merely occasional and pedagogical significance" is overshadowed by every other aspect of hermeneutical theory, from textual exegesis to fundamental ontology. Gadamer refuses to abandon "the insights of the Romantics, who purified the problem of hermeneutics from all its occasional elements. Interpretation is not something pedagogical."<sup>6</sup>

My intention in this introduction, however, is not to trace the connections between education and hermeneutics in historical terms. Indeed, a historical analysis would not suffice to show their essential relations. Even when these connections are not ignored, the understanding of them has been one-sided, for the most part emphasizing only the relation between interpretation and pedagogy. The connections, however, are more comprehensive and are relevant, not only to teaching, but even more essentially to learning. I postpone until the final chapter a discussion of the causes of the obscuring of these relations, which for all practical purposes amounts to a disconnection between hermeneutical theory and educational theory. My more immediate aim is to reassert the essential connections between interpretation and education within the contemporary framework of hermeneutics.

As a first requirement for clearly seeing these connections we need to provide a working conception of hermeneutics. This is not only helpful for those unfamiliar with hermeneutics, but, as those already familiar with the unsettled nature of contemporary interpretation theory will attest, it is a necessary task if some degree of clarity is to be achieved. Furthermore, a consideration of the various aporias or impasses that define the contemporary framework of hermeneutical theory will, in a general manner, help us to define the relevance of hermeneutics to education.

## A WORKING CONCEPTION OF HERMENEUTICS

If it has not yet entered into the standard vocabulary of educational theory, *hermeneutics* is a familiar word in many philosophical, theological, legal, literary, and social scientific contexts. Still, any attempt to provide an orderly definition of hermeneutics reveals that this concept has a long and complex history.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the term *hermeneutics* is used in many senses, and various commentators have pointed to its “definitional vagueness.” Thus in various contexts, hermeneutics is said to be a “theory, a philosophy, a view of reality, a methodology, an approach, a hope, a promise, an ideology,” or “a slogan, a battlecry . . . a field of study, a discipline.”<sup>8</sup> Our first task, then, is to sort out some of these senses and to arrive at a working conception, although not a final or adequate definition, of hermeneutics. The following collection of definitions gathered from various historical and scholarly sources may serve to indicate some of the different conceptions, as well as some of the common features of hermeneutics.

(1) Schleiermacher, writing in the early nineteenth century, defined hermeneutics as “the art of understanding,” an art or practice that related discourse and understanding (*Verstehen*) to each other.<sup>9</sup> For Schleiermacher, as for his predecessors and most of his followers, the art of hermeneutics was practiced in the reading of biblical, classical, and legal texts.

(2) More recently, Richard Palmer defined hermeneutics as “the study of understanding, especially the task of understanding texts.” The discipline of hermeneutics tries to answer the question concerning “what understanding and interpretation, as such, are.”<sup>10</sup>

(3) Another definition might read: Hermeneutics is the study of the explicit and implicit rules and methods that govern textual philology and commentary. For example, according to Paul Ricoeur, hermeneutics is “the theory of the rules that preside over an exegesis—that is, over the interpretation of a particular text, or of a group of signs that may be viewed as a text.”<sup>11</sup>

(4) Dilthey, in the late nineteenth century, was concerned about defining the proper method for the social and human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). For him, hermeneutics was a “critique of historical reason” that formed the basis for the methodology of the

human sciences. As a method it improved the “art of understanding permanently fixed expressions of life.”<sup>12</sup>

(5) In the twentieth century, Heidegger radicalized the concept of hermeneutics and understood it to be the existential, phenomenological analysis of human existence insofar as “understanding” is an existential-ontological characteristic of human beings (see BT 62/37–38).

(6) Gadamer, following Heidegger’s ontological concerns, developed hermeneutics as a theory which illuminates the conditions of possibility of understanding. According to Gadamer, “the best definition for hermeneutics is: to let what is alienated by the character of the written word or by the character of being distanced by cultural or historical distances speak again. This is hermeneutics: to let what seems to be far and alienated speak again.”<sup>13</sup>

(7) Josef Bleicher offered the following, more general definition: “Hermeneutics can loosely be defined as the theory or philosophy of the interpretation of meaning.”<sup>14</sup>

(8) Jürgen Habermas, on the other hand, proposed a more specialized meaning: “Hermeneutics refers to an ‘ability’ we acquire to the extent to which we learn to ‘master’ a natural language: the art of understanding linguistically communicable meaning and to render it comprehensible in cases of distorted communication.”<sup>15</sup>

The variety of these definitions—and this is not an exhaustive list—should be enough to indicate that not everything about hermeneutics has been resolved. Behind each of these definitions there lies a complex theory, or theoretical dispute that I need not detail here. Again, my aim here is to supply a working conception of hermeneutics that will lend itself to the task at hand: the exploration of the relationship between hermeneutics and educational experience. This collection of definitions is one way to begin. The majority of them identify understanding or interpretation, especially as related to language and text, as the subject matter of hermeneutics. If we characterize hermeneutics as a study or theory of interpretation, we should also note that the paradigm of textual interpretation dominates hermeneutical studies.

The interpretation of a written text is frequently offered as a model of the way that we come to attain understanding. The process of arriving at the meaning of a text is conditioned by a number

of factors: factors built into the very act of reading, and conditions implicated in the situation of the reader and in the structure of the text. These conditioning factors constitute the limits within which the reader constructs an interpretation of the text. For example, the reader is defined by his or her own historical epoch, society and culture, educational background, linguistic ability, familiarity with a subject matter, and purpose or practical interests. The text is conditioned by its age, the culture in which it was produced, the language and talent of the author who produced it, and the author's intent. On one account the meaning of the text does not reside within the text alone, nor totally in the mind of the text's author; nor does it come to reside ideally in the mind of the reader. In the process of interpretation no one element—reader, text, meaning, and so on—exists in itself, in an isolated manner. Understanding a text involves building a complex series of bridges between reader and text, text and author, present and past, one society or social circumstance and another. These bridges have as their moorings the conditioning factors of interpretation; they are projected as possible interpretations defined by these conditions. One task of hermeneutics is to identify the different factors, including the epistemological, sociological, cultural, and linguistic factors, that condition the process of interpretation. Under the title of hermeneutics one might study, for example, the different factors that create a distance between the twentieth-century reader and a twelfth-century text: those factors that prevent the reader from attaining a complete or absolute understanding of it, as well as those factors that make possible an understanding of the text in question.

Language is a central concern of hermeneutics because of its importance in the process of interpretation. A number of the collected definitions emphasize this concern. Understanding is not an abstract mental act; it is a linguistic event. Language has a central role to play in understanding the world. Palmer nicely summarizes this hermeneutical principle.

Language shapes man's seeing and his thought—both his conception of himself and his world (the two are not so separate as they may seem). His very vision of reality is shaped by language. Far more than man realizes, he channels through language the various facets of his living—his worshipping, loving, social be-

havior, abstract thought; even the shape of his feelings is conformed to language.<sup>16</sup>

Hermeneutics, however, is not linguistics. Habermas makes a clear distinction: linguistics “aims at a reconstruction of the system of rules that allows the generation of all the grammatically correct and semantically meaningful elements of a natural language, whereas a philosophical hermeneutic reflects upon the basic experiences of communicatively competent speakers.”<sup>17</sup> Hermeneutics, in other words, is not the study of language as an objective entity; it is a reflection on the way language operates, such as, in the reader’s interpretation of a text. A text is not simply a collection of grammatically constructed sentences arranged in a certain syntactic order. It is a totality of composition that bears within itself possibilities of meaning that overflow grammatical and syntactical arrangement. Language used by the author, language sedimented in the text, language employed in the event of interpretation will lead us toward or away from certain of these possible meanings.

Hermeneutics investigates the process of interpretation, the communication of meaning through a text, linguistic competence in conversation, and so forth. The phenomenon of the text and the interplay of interpretation, meaning, and language in understanding the text are matters complex enough for textual hermeneutics. But hermeneutics has moved beyond its concern with the written text and spoken word to a more universal conception. This move is reflected in definitions (4) through (8) cited above. These definitions indicate that hermeneutics also deals with nontextual phenomena such as social processes, human existence, and Being itself. Still, hermeneutics must deal with things through the medium of language. Gadamer’s suggestion, that hermeneutics must make the things “speak,” is reminiscent of Plato’s proposal that the truth of things is arrived at by considering objects in the mirror of speech: “everything that is reflects itself in the mirror of language.”<sup>18</sup> The human being encounters the world and everything in it through language.

In some cases the move to a more philosophical conception of hermeneutics, beyond a more narrowly defined textual hermeneutics, has, none the less, been based on an expansion of the concept of text. In a certain sense, insofar as the world has significance for

the human being, the world is like a text which calls for interpretation. Paul Ricoeur, for instance, indicates in a clear manner this expansion of the concept of text: “the notion of text can be taken in an analogous sense. Thanks to the metaphor of ‘the book of nature’ the Middle Ages was able to speak of an *interpretatio naturae*. This metaphor brings to light a possible extension of the notion of exegesis, in as much as the notion of ‘text’ is wider than that of ‘scripture’.”<sup>19</sup> The accompanying claim is that the same kind of process involved in our understanding of a written text is involved in our understanding of the world. Accordingly, Gadamer’s definition indicates the broader task and subject matter of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics examines human understanding in general. All understanding is linguistic, and nothing that involves knowledge or seeking after knowledge escapes the domain of hermeneutics.

The dependency of hermeneutics on the extended textual paradigm raises the question of whether the model of the text is appropriate in all cases. Textual hermeneutics has a long history, and prior to this century it constituted the conception of hermeneutics in toto. Schleiermacher’s project to develop a “general hermeneutics” was a legitimate attempt to discover general prescriptives (canons) that would govern the interpretation of all kinds of texts—biblical, legal, classical. In this sense general hermeneutics is equivalent to textual hermeneutics as a whole. Dilthey, however, attempted to employ hermeneutical canons in social scientific *Verstehen*. This involved an expansion of hermeneutics beyond textual concerns. Yet Dilthey still relied upon Schleiermacher’s textual hermeneutical canons. Heidegger, inspired by Dilthey, proposed that hermeneutics be concerned with all types of interpretation insofar as interpretation is a universal feature of human experience. In developing this universal, philosophical hermeneutics, which is not simply a textual hermeneutics, Heidegger attempted to work out phenomenological-existential principles which describe human understanding and which go beyond the textual paradigm. Following Heidegger’s insights, one might say that the proper and essential subject matter of hermeneutics is not the text, but interpretation. Nonetheless, the historical primacy of textual hermeneutics has led, in most philosophical hermeneutical theory, to the use of the text as paradigm.

The word *textualism* has been used by Richard Rorty to characterize a general orientation in philosophy that may be stated as follows: there are only texts, and one text can only refer to another text. Rorty has in mind the work of poststructuralists like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.<sup>20</sup> Poststructuralist textualism, which clearly involves the expansion of the notion of text, may find its precursor in the medieval notion of the *liber naturae*, although there are obvious and profound differences between the medieval and contemporary versions. I will use the word *textualism* in a more specific way. Within the context of hermeneutics the problem of textualism can be stated in the following way: by basing its model of interpretation on the expanded notion of text, hermeneutics reduces all forms of interpretation to one form. From this viewpoint interpretation, whether it is the scientific study of the natural world or the attempt to understand another person through conversation, is always a form of reading. Does this reduction involve a distortion of the kinds of interpretation which are not textual readings? In textual hermeneutics, regarded as a theory, textual interpretation is not a paradigm but is properly the subject matter itself. But insofar as the text becomes a paradigm in nontextual hermeneutics, insofar as textual interpretation becomes the model for all interpretation, then hermeneutics involves a specific kind of textualism. If this hermeneutical textualism does not say that "there are only texts," it does say, at least, that "everything that is is analogous to a text," or that all interpretation is analogous to textual interpretation.

Although I do not deny that there is a properly defined textual hermeneutics in which the concept of text plays a central role, I will suggest that textualism may present a serious problem if it is the chosen basis for the development of philosophical hermeneutics. I will contend that it is counterproductive to use the text as a paradigm in attempting to solve all hermeneutical problems. Moreover, I will argue that the problem of textualism is closely connected to the obscuring of the more general connections between education and hermeneutics. One of the aims of this book is to show that a nontextualist, philosophical hermeneutics is possible, precisely by employing the more inclusive model of educational experience in place of the narrow textual paradigm.

Beyond the issue of textualism, several other disputed ques-



tions or *aporiai* can be clarified by taking a hermeneutical approach to educational experience. Before moving on to an examination of these disputes within the field of hermeneutics, however, it may be useful to map out this field by distinguishing four contemporary but different hermeneutical approaches. For simplicity I will term these approaches conservative, moderate, radical, and critical hermeneutics.

(1) *Conservative hermeneutics* is based on the nineteenth-century hermeneutical tradition defined by Schleiermacher and Dilthey. It is clearly the approach taken by the legal historian Emilio Betti and the American professor of literature and educational reformer, E. D. Hirsch.<sup>21</sup> These theorists would maintain that through correct methodology and hard work the interpreter should be able (a) to break out of her own historical epoch in order to understand the author as the author intended, and/or (b) to transcend historical limitations altogether in order to reach universal, or at least objective, truth. The aim of interpretation is to reproduce the meaning or intention of the author by following well-defined hermeneutical canons that guide reading.

(2) *Moderate hermeneutics* is developed by theorists such as Gadamer and Ricoeur. They contend that no method can guarantee an absolutely objective interpretation of an author's work because, as readers, we are conditioned by prejudices of our own historical existence. These prejudices, however, are not simply a matter of time and place; rather, beyond that, they are embedded in language. They are the changing biases of various traditions which are not past and bygone but are operative and living in every reader and every text. Language does two things in the interpretive process: (a) it limits our interpretive powers and keeps us from gaining an absolute access to any textual meaning, even the meaning of our own texts (the author has no privilege in this regard); and (b) it enables *some* access to textual meaning. This enabling power can be defined in terms of a dialogical conversation, a "fusion of horizons," a creative communication between reader and text. Such communication is the positive basis of interpretation. As interpreters, however, we never achieve a complete or objective interpretation since we, limited by our own historical circumstance and by our own language, are inextricably involved in the interpretive conversation. This is in clear violation of conservative hermeneuti-

cal canons which seek for and promise objectivity. Theorists like Betti and Hirsch worry about the subjectivity they see implied in moderate hermeneutics. Moderate theorists respond that, since interpretation has a dialogical character, it is not purely subjective. No matter how we read Plato, for example, we never end up with Milton; the text itself constrains our interpretation. Subjective and objective interpretations, rather than being the only two possibilities, are two unattainable extremes of interpretation.

Moderate hermeneutics proposes a somewhat optimistic view of interpretation. Interpretation involves creativity and not just reproduction; the reader participates, just as much as the author does, in putting together the meaning, or in the case of poetry or literature, in creating the aesthetic experience. This optimism might be contrasted, on the one side, with what some would call the wishful thinking of the conservative school and, on the other side, with what might appear to be the nihilism of radical hermeneutics.

(3) *Radical hermeneutics*<sup>22</sup> is inspired by both Nietzsche and Heidegger, and is practiced by deconstructionists and poststructuralists like Derrida and Foucault. In contrast to conservative hermeneutics, this radical school would claim that reading is more a case of playing or dancing than a puritanical application of method. Interpretation requires playing with the words of the text rather than using them to find truth in or beyond the text. Through the use of deconstructionist techniques the text is played off against itself. In contrast to moderate hermeneutics, the radical reader is skeptical about creative interpretations that establish communication with original meaning; rather, for radical hermeneutics, original meaning is unattainable and the best we can do is to stretch the limits of language to break upon fresh insight. For Derrida, there is no original truth or being or *archē* beyond language itself. Moderate hermeneutics is too naively optimistic in this regard.

Deconstruction can only be performed within the language it attempts to deconstruct. Its aim is not to establish an authentic or even creative interpretation. Such an interpretation would simply be another text in need of deconstruction. Radical hermeneutics aims at deconstructing the meaning of a text, not in order to analyze it or to reconstruct a different meaning. It is not a replacement of one text with another, but a displacement of certain meta-

physical concepts such as unity, identity, meaning, or authorship, which operate in and around the text. The hope is not to establish some other version of the world as the proper or correct version, but to show that all versions are contingent and relative.

(4) *Critical hermeneutics* has been developed in the writings of critical theorists like Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel, who find inspiration in Marx, Freud, and the Frankfurt School of social criticism. Critical hermeneutics can be characterized as a curious combination of radical and conservative elements. On the one hand, it is radical to the extent that its social and political aims continue a tradition that is rightly called "radical." The aim of critical theory is social and individual emancipation from the political power and economic exploitation found in advanced (capitalistic as well as communistic) class systems. Hermeneutics is employed as a means of penetrating false consciousness, discovering the ideological nature of our belief systems, promoting distortion-free communication, and thereby accomplishing a liberating consensus. On the other hand, critical hermeneutics is conservative to the extent that it promises to destroy false consciousness rather than to live within it, as radical hermeneutics contends we must. It is conservative to the extent that it expects actually to accomplish an ideology-free situation of consensus. This is like saying, with conservative hermeneutics, that an absolutely objective perspective can be gained, that, given the right method, we can escape the hermeneutical constraints of our finite, historical situation. From the point of view of deconstruction, critical theory shares the conservative and moderate, naive optimism that language, through ideal communication, will deliver something other than itself or that it will, if played rightly, effect significant nonlinguistic, material emancipation.

#### APPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF HERMENEUTICS: THREE APORIAS

This map of contemporary hermeneutical theory is oversimplified. But it serves as a point of departure from which we can begin to identify three major aporias which disrupt the contemporary hermeneutical field. These three impasses are well defined by three debates which concern the nature and scope of hermeneutics. The

focus for each of these debates has been Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical theory. More than anyone else on the contemporary philosophical scene, he has attempted to work out the universal hermeneutics first broached by Heidegger early in the twentieth century. Gadamer's influential work, *Truth and Method* (1960), almost immediately sparked controversy. Emilio Betti, who represents what I have termed "conservative" hermeneutics, initiated an important debate with Gadamer concerning methodology and the possibility of valid and objective interpretation in the human and social sciences. In a second debate, Jürgen Habermas, representing "critical" hermeneutics, raised questions concerning Gadamer's claim for the universality of hermeneutics and proposed to define the possible limits of hermeneutical practice. Finally, in a third debate Jacques Derrida, developing a deconstructionist or "radical" hermeneutics, raised fundamental questions about the possibility of meaning and truth as it is proposed in Gadamer's theory.

The details of these debates, to the extent that they are relevant to educational issues, will be sorted out in later chapters. Here it is important to identify and briefly summarize the hermeneutical issues they raise. We will then be able to see that the aporias found in hermeneutical theory correspond in a remarkably significant way to related issues in educational theory.

### *Aporia I: Reproduction*

According to Gadamer's moderate hermeneutics, interpretations are always constrained by the prejudices of the interpreter. An inescapable condition of any interpretation is that it is biased in some way. These prejudices may be productive or nonproductive aspects of the interpretation process. So Gadamer recommends that the interpreter ought to "raise to awareness those prejudices that guide and condition the process of understanding," neutralize those that "are of a particularistic nature," and preserve those "which enable veracious understanding." In hermeneutical practice the task, according to Gadamer, is to base interpretation on the productive prejudices and to eliminate the nonproductive ones (see TM 291ff). The idea of the biased nature of interpretation motivates a question concerning the objectivity and validity of interpretation. Given the prejudicial nature of interpretation, is it ever possible to achieve an objectively valid interpretation? There

may be no problem arriving at what seems to be a correspondence or agreement between the subjectively conditioned (prejudiced) interpretation and the object of interpretation, but does this constitute objective agreement? In other words, is the interpretation correct? This is precisely the issue that had concerned Emilio Betti and that continues to define the difference between moderate and conservative hermeneutics.

According to Betti, the aim of hermeneutics is to prescribe how the process of interpretation should proceed so that we can successfully understand human forms of expression. Successful understanding is possible only if interpretation satisfies two seemingly contradictory requirements: it must achieve a degree of objectivity (that is, it cannot be arbitrary); but at the same time the requirement of objectivity must be met within "the subjectivity of the interpreter and his awareness of the preconditions of his ability to understand in a manner adequate to the subject-matter" (Betti 57). Interpretation is a dialectical process between these requirements. Hermeneutics works out the rules or canons that guide the dialectical process of interpretation. Betti, in contrast to Gadamer, insists on a measurable objectivity and a definable concept of validity in connection with interpretation.

The dispute between Betti and Gadamer, which has been called "the chief contest in philosophical hermeneutics,"<sup>23</sup> revolved around the problem of objective reproduction. Can the historian, for example, objectively reconstruct the original meaning of past events? Indeed, what would an objective interpretation consist of? The notion of objectivity here is not the same as that found in the natural sciences (see Betti 63). But Betti claims that a form of objectivity corresponding to the historical evidence can be and must be achieved if the interpretation is to be successful. The historical fact must remain autonomous; the interpretation must take account of its otherness. Betti agrees that historical interpretation depends on the historian's perspective, and that different perspectives are possible, but this element of subjectivity ought not touch the objectivity of the interpretation. The concept of objectivity employed by Betti does not signify an absolute and ultimate truth. The hermeneutical task is in fact never complete, and this means that "the meaning contained within texts, monuments, and fragments is constantly reborn through life and is forever transformed

in a chain of rebirths" (Betti 68). Nonetheless, Betti insists, the historical text speaks to us in a nonarbitrary way: it says something that has some degree of objectivity. As the dialogue between the subjective element (interpreter) and the objective one (text), the interpretation is always determined to some degree by the objective element. Objective reproduction is accomplished and arbitrariness avoided with the help of controllable, consciously employed, historiographical-methodological guidelines.

In Betti's view, Gadamer emphasizes the subjective factors of interpretation too much, and this results in a "loss of objectivity" (Betti 78). For Betti the prejudices involved in interpretation are subjective conditions and should not be allowed to undermine the objectivity (nonarbitrariness) of the interpretation gained by a methodically defined set of hermeneutical canons or procedural rules.

This debate has raised issues, not only with respect to the objectivity of interpretation and the autonomy of the object, but also in regard to the nature and application of hermeneutics. In Betti's conception hermeneutics is a method employed by the human and social sciences to guarantee the objectivity of its conclusions. For Gadamer, on the other hand, hermeneutics is not intended to "elaborate a system of rules to describe, let alone direct, the methodological procedure of the human sciences." Gadamer's concern has been philosophical; for him "the methods of the human sciences are not at issue" (TM xxviii). The question that Gadamer sets out to address is: How is understanding possible? "At any rate," he responds to Betti, "the purpose of my investigation is not to offer a general theory of interpretation and a differential account of its methods (which E. Betti has done so well) but to discover what is common to all modes of understanding" (TM xxxi). Gadamer's concern has not been with empirical descriptions or with rules of procedure, but with hermeneutical principles, not with "what we do or what we ought to do, but [with] what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing" (TM xxviii). Gadamer has thus protested that Betti attempts to make him answer a question that he (Gadamer) never intended to ask (see TM 512).

E. D. Hirsch, who joins the debate on the side of Betti, is also concerned about validity and objectivity. In Hirsch's view, to the extent that Gadamer has disregarded the question of the author's

original intention, he has foreclosed on the possibility of a determinate objective meaning. None of Gadamer's principles can save him from the "indeterminacy of textual meaning." Gadamer, who, for his part, holds that such a position would lead to an "untenable hermeneutic nihilism," nonetheless, on Hirsch's reading, ends up in just that untenable position.<sup>24</sup>

Ricoeur calls this debate over methodology and validity "the central *aporia* of hermeneutics" (HHS 47). We note, for future consideration, that the general terms of this debate are repeated within the context of educational theory. One way to pose the impasse defined by the Betti-Gadamer debate is to ask whether it is possible to *reproduce* the original meaning of the object of interpretation. Betti and Hirsch have maintained, not only that such reproduction is possible, but that it ought to be the aim of interpretation. Within the context of educational theory, conservative theorists, including Hirsch, argue that education must be based on a similar reproduction of meaning, whereas others, using the critical hermeneutical approach, provide normative arguments against reproduction. We will see (in Chapter 7) that a third argument in educational theory can be formulated on the basis of Gadamer's approach to the hermeneutical question of reproduction, namely, every attempt at reproduction involves a production of new meaning, and thus, strict reproduction is not possible. This approach would undermine both the conservative and the critical normative positions.

### *Aporia II: Authority and Emancipation*

A more developed and more complex debate has taken place between Gadamer and Habermas, and to some extent it continues in various commentaries. In his review of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and in subsequent essays, Habermas has raised a number of questions concerning language, scientific knowledge, reflection, authority, tradition, and the operation of political and economic power. For example, Habermas has pointed out that a number of hermeneutical problems originate in the process of scientific communication, because discussions within the community of scientists must take place in natural language. Hermeneutics is "called upon in one area of interpretation more than in any other and one

which is of great social interest: the translation of important scientific information into the language of the social life-world."<sup>25</sup>

According to Gadamer, the necessary translation from scientific and technological studies to practical knowledge understood in natural language is conditioned by the universality of language itself. In effect, specialized scientific language always remains related to ordinary language. "The findings of science, travelling through modern channels of information and then, after due (many times after unduly great) delay, via the schools and education, become at last a part of the social consciousness."<sup>26</sup> Gadamer maintains that this translation and communication process is possible because the "universality of human linguisticity" is unlimited and carries everything understandable within it, including the entire procedure of science and its methodology. No less than practical and political consciousness, scientific consciousness is conditioned by various traditions and conducts itself according to the universality of human linguisticity.

Habermas questions this claim of universality. The fact that scientific activity is dependent on natural language communication, which has a *dialogical* structure, does not solve the problem of translation between the technical field and everyday life. Simply put, the technical language of science and the everyday language of communication are quite different. The sociologist Anthony Giddens explains it in this fashion: "The technical language and theoretical propositions of the natural sciences are insulated from the world they are concerned with because that world does not answer back."<sup>27</sup> Science arrives at its conclusions by using *monological* interpretation. In such cases, "linguistic expressions appear in an absolute form that makes their content independent of the situation of communication."<sup>28</sup> Habermas contends that in such cases hermeneutical processes do not apply. This indicates a problem with the claim of universality made by hermeneutics. Precisely here, Habermas argues, hermeneutics discovers its own limitations.

Hermeneutic consciousness does, after all, emerge from a reflection upon our own movement *within* natural language, whereas the interpretation of science on behalf of the life-world has to achieve a mediation *between* natural language *and* monological language systems. This process of translation transcends the lim-



itations of a rhetorical-hermeneutical art which has only been dealing with cultural products that were handed down and which are constituted by everyday language.<sup>29</sup>

The dispute between Habermas and Gadamer, then, concerns whether there is a universality, based on language, that bridges the dividing line drawn by Habermas between the monological language systems of science and dialogical natural language. If Gadamer is right, then hermeneutical principles are universal and apply across the board. On the other hand, if Habermas is right, then hermeneutics has run into one of its limitations.

Two different conceptions of language operate within this dispute. For Habermas, language is always limited by extralinguistic experience. Moreover, a type of interpretation (critical reflective interpretation) which escapes the constraints imposed by language systems is always possible. In contrast, Gadamer maintains that even extralinguistic experience, if it is to have any significance or effect, must always be mediated by language. All interpretation falls under linguistic constraints. "There is no societal reality, with all its concrete forces, that does not bring itself to representation in a consciousness which is linguistically articulated."<sup>30</sup>

Habermas challenges the universalization of hermeneutics in another important way, helping to move the discussion more deeply into social and political contexts. He charges that Gadamer's position remains politically naive to the extent that Gadamer fails to recognize the elements of distortion and deformation of interpretation imposed by force, compulsion, and coercion, that is, by extrahermeneutical factors. An adequate frame of reference for the interpretation of meaning must include not only language and its corresponding hermeneutic but also economic facts of labor and class and political factors of domination. If, as Habermas admits, language is a "metainstitution on which all social relations are dependent," language itself is dependent on extralinguistic social processes of domination, organized force, modes of production, scientific-technical progress, and so on.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the objective framework of social action is not exhausted by language. "The linguistic infrastructure of a society is part of a complex that, however symbolically mediated, is also constituted by the constraint of reality," that is, by economic, political and technical

relations which “behind the back of language . . . also affect the very grammatical rules according to which we interpret the world.”<sup>32</sup> Extralinguistic factors always distort language, and therefore they distort ordinary interpretation and communication.

Distorted communication may be the result of consciously perpetrated falsities—the product of political rhetoric or propaganda—or unconsciously enforced determinations—the result of economic arrangements beyond the present control of social groups. Habermas has brought this viewpoint even to the level of the individual psyche by citing the psychoanalytic realization concerning the repression and conversion of socially unacceptable behavior or expression. In both the political-economic and the psychoanalytic models, the key concept is power. Insofar as philosophical hermeneutics ignores or denies the dimensions of power in interpretation, by focusing exclusively on language as meta-institution, hermeneutics remains inadequate to its task.

In place of a trusting interpretation, Habermas proposes a “depth hermeneutics” in the service of the critique of ideology. In a critical or depth hermeneutics, hermeneutical reflection is supplemented by metahermeneutical explanation. Through critical reflection depth hermeneutics uncovers and attempts to neutralize built-in distortions operative in understanding in order to promote emancipation through self-reflection. For Habermas, Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics remains limited insofar as it fails to recognize or deal with extralinguistic elements that shape ideology and misshape the contours of communication.

In response, Gadamer clearly objects to a conception of critical reflection that claims to dissolve or neutralize the process and force of tradition. In response to Habermas, who contended that Gadamer had failed to recognize the power of reflection, Gadamer states: “My objection is that the critique of ideology overestimates the competence of reflection and reason. Inasmuch as it seeks to penetrate the masked interests which infect public opinion, it implies its own freedom from any ideology; and that means in turn that it enthrones its own norms and ideals as self-evident and absolute.” In Gadamer’s view, a critical hermeneutics can only be accomplished in an ongoing communication which “always demands a continuing exchange of views and statements” but never claims a privileged ideological neutrality.<sup>33</sup>

This impasse concerning language, power, and the universality of hermeneutics constitutes a second *aporia* within contemporary hermeneutical theory. It can be expressed in terms of the following question: Does hermeneutics, even when conceived of as depth hermeneutics, actually move us beyond constrained communication to a reflective emancipation, or is such critical reflection itself bound by hermeneutical constraints? In other terms, to what extent are traditions (and various authority or power structures) necessarily assimilated or *reproduced* in understanding, thereby lending themselves to forces of domination, or to what extent are traditions (authority or power structures) *transformed* in hermeneutical experience? This *aporia* is also reflected in the conflict between moderate and critical approaches to educational theory. To what extent are traditions and established power structures reproduced in educational experience, or to what extent can they be transcended by critical work? Those who take the critical approach to education will insist upon the power of reflection to break up structures of power and authority in educational processes and institutions. Those who take an approach to educational theory consistent with a moderate hermeneutics will insist that structures of power and authority are inevitably embedded in educational experience. These are issues to which we return in Chapter 8.

### *Aporia III: Conversation*

What we have termed “hermeneutics” up to this point is contested by Derrida’s deconstructive approach to interpretation, which is sometimes viewed as an attempt to get beyond hermeneutics. Derrida offers the following definition of hermeneutics: “By hermeneutic, I have designated the decoding of a sense or of a truth hidden in a text. I have opposed it to the transformative activity of interpretation.”<sup>34</sup> The contrast made here between interpretation as decoding meaning or truth and interpretation as transformative activity is the contrast between traditional hermeneutics and radical deconstruction. Derrida acknowledges that such a transformation was first explicated by Heidegger.

The concept of deconstruction comes originally from Heidegger’s early work (see BT, section 6). Heidegger there defines a “destructive” interpretation of the Western metaphysical tradition

as a “transformation” (*Verwandlung*) of that which has been handed down to us. This seemingly violent rereading of tradition which aims at getting out from under the domination of traditional categories does not pretend to be able to escape traditions or to think in a vacuum. Heidegger’s description is somewhat more moderate: “Deconstruction means—to open our ears, to make ourselves free for what speaks to us in the tradition.”<sup>35</sup> Deconstruction, in Heidegger’s terms, is more of a listening; it allows the release of a meaning different from the usual interpretations of reality.

Derrida perceives a tension or conflict within Heidegger’s conception of deconstruction.<sup>36</sup> If Heidegger sets out to disrupt the domination of traditional metaphysical thinking, he ends up simply repeating that thinking to the extent that he seeks to listen to a truth or origin which he terms “Being” (*Sein*). Derrida contends that the categories of truth, origin, and Being belong to traditional metaphysics. He proposes a different regime of deconstruction: “The hermeneutic project which postulates a true sense of the text is disqualified under this regime. Reading is freed from the horizon of the meaning or truth of being. . . . Heidegger’s reading subsists, throughout the near totality of its trajectory, in the hermeneutic space of the question of the truth (of being).”<sup>37</sup>

So, for Derrida, there are “two interpretations of interpretation,” and thus two hermeneutics. One “seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin.” In this sense, hermeneutics is always oriented toward an original text which requires explication—and thus is oriented toward a hidden truth, origin, being, or presence. Its role is to conserve, reproduce, and flourish within the tradition of metaphysics and its traditional interpretation of human existence as “man” (that is, humanism). On the other hand, radical deconstructive hermeneutics, “which is no longer turned towards the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism.”<sup>38</sup> Derrida sees elements of both interpretations in Heidegger but appropriates only the radical, disruptive, antihermeneutical approach. In Derrida’s view, Gadamer embraces the more conservative search for truth.<sup>39</sup>

The differences between Gadamer and Derrida can be discerned in the “encounter” which took place between the two thinkers in Paris in 1981. The contrast in their styles reflected a