

The Task of Hermeneutics in Ancient Philosophy

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In this chapter, I would like to identify the sources of hermeneutic thinking in ancient philosophy. Nevertheless, one might justifiably question whether or not there was such a thing as "hermeneutics" in the ancient world? Indeed, the latin word *hermeneutica* did not emerge until the 17th century when it was first introduced by a theologian from Strasbourg, Johann Dannhauer, as a necessary requirement of all the sciences that rely on the interpretation of texts - an understandable demand in light of the fact that the Renaissance sought fresh avenues of wisdom in returning to the classical texts.¹ When Dannhauer created the word *hermeneutica*, he openly drew his inspiration from Aristotle's treatise *Peri hermeneias* (*De interpretatione*), claiming that the new science of interpretation was in effect nothing but a complement to the Aristotelian Organon.² However, the first real historian of the hermeneutic tradition, Wilhelm Dilthey, proclaimed that hermeneutics was in fact created a century earlier by protestantism³ in the wake of Luther's principle of the *sola scriptura*. This principle, which had been used to undermine the authority of tradition advocated by the Catholic Church, was to be the one and only norm of Biblical exegesis. Following Dilthey's lead, many prominent historians of hermeneutics, such as Bultmann, Ebeling and Gadamer have paid great attention to Luther's hermeneutic revolution. However, even if Luther launched a hermeneutic revolution in the history of the Church, one would be hard-pressed to find in his own writings anything like a hermeneutics (i.e. a theoretical reflection on interpretation). Luther, who, as is well known, shunned theoretical and philosophical reflection, equating them with "dead scholasticism", concentrated entirely on exegesis. For instance, as a university

¹. On this relation between the Renaissance and the hermeneutic imperative, see C. von Bormann, article Hermeneutik, in *Theologische-Realencyclopädie*, vol. XV, New York/Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986, 131-137.

². On J. C. Dannhauer see H.-E. Hasso Jaeger, "Studien zur Frühgeschichte der Hermeneutik", in *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, 18, 1974, 35-84.

³. W. Dilthey, *Das hermeneutische System Schleiermachers in der Auseinandersetzung mit der älteren Hermeneutik*, in W. Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, XIV/1, 597.

professor, he only gave exegetical lessons, which involved concrete interpretation of texts.¹ However, even if Luther's exegesis cannot properly be thought of as a "hermeneutics" or a theoretical reflection on this practice, his exegetical interpretation of texts and the Catholic reaction to it are not without significance in regards to the emergence of hermeneutics. The Catholic counter-reformation's response to Luther was that it had no difficulty with his scriptural principle of *sola scriptura*, since its own authority also derived from the Bible. The only problem resided in the interpretation of ambiguous passages. Despite Luther's acclaimed principle, the Catholic Church contended that it was far from certain that the Bible is always clear and consistently serves as its *sui ipsius interpres* (i.e. its own interpreter). Indeed, the striking divergences among the protestants themselves on very important matters of Biblical interpretation confirmed this suspicion. Thus, the catholics concluded that it was necessary to rely on tradition and the authority of the magisterium to establish the correct interpretation of ambiguous texts. And, it was precisely in the Lutheran response to this catholic counter-reaction that one can pin-point the emergence of a hermeneutics in the protestant tradition. The first to offer such a hermeneutics were followers of Luther, Philipp Melanchton (1497-1560), in his treatises on rhetoric of 1519 and 1531², and Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520-1575), who delivered his hermeneutics in his *Clavis scripturae sacrae* in 1567. The task of Flacius was to develop a specific hermeneutics which would serve as a "key" for understanding difficult passages of Scripture while still relying on the Lutheran principle of the *sola scriptura*. Flacius took on this challenge by insisting on the prerequisite of grammatical or, as one would say today, linguistic knowledge. He also offered rules for the elucidation of ambiguous passages, borrowing most of them from the rhetorical tradition, following the example of Melanchton, but also from the Fathers of the Church and especially from Augustine's hermeneutic treatise *De doctrina christiana*. By doing this,

¹. See G. Ebeling, "Die Anfänge von Luthers Hermeneutik", in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 48, 1951, 174.

². A fresh edition of the last version of Melanchton's hermeneutically oriented rhetoric was provided by J. Knape, *Philipp Melanchtons "Rhetorik"*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993. For a recent and thorough account of Melanchton's importance in this regard, compare J. R. Schneider, *Philip Melanchton's Rhetorical Construal of Biblical Authority. Oratio Sacra*, Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990. For an appraisal of the significance of the rhetoric tradition for the history of hermeneutics, see our article "Hermeneutik" in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1995.

Flacius ably wanted to underscore that Luther's revolution was in perfect accord with the scriptural convictions of the Fathers, and thus less revolutionary or subversive than the Catholic Church had portrayed it. And while the theological implications of Flacius' hermeneutics cannot occupy us here, it is still important to note that the first hermeneutics of the modern age, those of Melanchton, Flacius and Dannhauer, drew heavily on an earlier hermeneutic tradition. This is true despite the fact that the name *hermeneutica* itself was not employed until the 17th century. It is also obvious that the first hermeneutic treatises of the patristic age depended on the achievements of Greek philosophy. It is, therefore, tempting to look to the Greek tradition for the roots of what may be called "hermeneutics" (i.e., a theoretical reflection on understanding and its difficulties).

Indeed, ancient philosophy offers some well-threaded paths for the elaboration of the classical sources of hermeneutics. First and foremost among them is the allegoric tradition which was established as a means of giving a rational account of the Homeric tradition. A second path would be to consider the role of interpretation and divination in the broad realm of Greek religion. A third approach would be to look for something like hermeneutics in a classical text like Aristotle's *De interpretatione*, even though it hardly deals with "interpretation" as we understand it, but with the basic elements that constitute a sentence¹. These three perspectives on Greek "hermeneutics" - that one can call the allegorical, the religious and the logical - are the object of a wide range of scholarly and specialized studies. However, their interconnection, if there is one, has seldom been analyzed in itself. In this Chapter, I would like to seek a common ground for this entire hermeneutical endeavour by starting with an elucidation of the word ἑρμηνευτικὴ as it appears in ancient texts. Although, this would seem to be a natural starting-point for an analysis of Greek hermeneutics, strangely enough, the notion of ἑρμηνευτικὴ has seldom been studied on its own. To the best of my knowledge, there are no systematic studies of this notion in the available literature, with the notable

¹. Nevertheless, in German translations and commentaries, the *Peri hermeneias* has often been referred to as Aristotle's *Hermeneutik*. See for instance, in a recent as well as important occurrence: H. Flashar, Aristoteles, in Ueberweg-Praechter, *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie: Die Philosophie der Antike*, 3, Basel/Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1983, 203, 237.

exception of a short, but too general and unfocused study by Karl Kerényi.¹ In addition, while the word is obviously related to the more commonly used terms ἑρμηνεία, ἑρμηνεύς, etc., its etymological origin remains quite unclear.²

In the absence of a definite etymological source and of related specialized studies, therefore, one has no choice but to confront, if not the things, at least the texts themselves. The notion of ἑρμηνευτικὴ first appears in the Platonic corpus where one finds three occurrences (*Politicus* 260 d 11, *Epinomis* 975 c 6, *Definitions* 414 d 4). Of course, one also finds many other incidences of words like ἑρμηνεία or ἑρμηνεύς. Unfortunately, none of the three occurrences of ἑρμηνευτικὴ give a precise indication about the exact meaning of this notion, and two of them are found in works that were not written by Plato himself (i.e., the *Epinomis* and the academic book of *Definitions*). In the *Definitions*, ἑρμηνευτικὴ is used as an adjective in the definition of the noun, characterized as "an uncompounded utterance meaning (ἑρμηνευτικὴ) what is attributed to some existing thing and all that is said of its substance". The adjective ἑρμηνευτικὴ thus signifies "to mean something", to "point toward something", in the way a noun "means" or "stands for" a certain thing. One may call this the semantic understanding of ἑρμηνευτικὴ (an understanding which is in itself important since it echoes the notion of ἑρμηνεία, understood as the transposition or the translation of thought into language). In the two other contexts, the *Epinomis* and the *Politicus*, the word is also used as an adjective. However, in these instances, it characterizes a specific skill or art, a τέχνη. Unfortunately, in these two cases, the nature of this specific type of skill or art is presupposed rather than named. Indeed, ἑρμηνευτικὴ is simply listed amongst a series of other sciences, and consequently its precise meaning is far from clear. Nonetheless, it should be noted that in both cases, ἑρμηνευτικὴ appears next to the art of divination, μαντικὴ. Let us focus on the passage in the *Epinomis*, which is the least

¹. "Hermeneia und Hermeneutike. Ursprung und Sinn der Hermeneutik", in K. Kerényi, *Griechische Grundbegriffe*, Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1964, 42-52. While it is instructive and philosophically suggestive, it gives very few verifiable indications on Greek ἑρμηνευτικὴ itself, concentrating instead on the art of interpretation in the Jewish tradition, the importance of tradition (παράδοσις), the art of divination in Greek religion and ending with reflections on Pindar's poetry.

². See P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1983, vol. I, 373. Despite popular tradition, there seems to be no etymological link whatsoever between the Greek god Hermes and the art of ἑρμηνευτικὴ.

unspecific of the two, and which is at least more "Platonic" in spirit than the *Definitiones*. The author of the *Epinomis* is considering which forms of knowledge can lead to wisdom. After jokingly excluding such sciences as the art of cooking, hunting and the like, divination and ἑρμηνευτικὴ also have to be excluded, so we are told, because they can only know what is said (τὸ λεγόμενον), but not whether it is true (ἀληθές). Although a certain τεχνὴ is obviously implied, it is difficult to figure out what it is, or how it differs from divination itself, μαντικὴ.

Most translators of the *Epinomis* and the *Politicus* have tried to twist their way around this difficulty by inventing an equivalent for ἑρμηνευτικὴ; and although nobody really knows what it is, the word they chose usually tends to assimilate it to the art of μαντικὴ. Thus, Léon Robin translates μαντικὴ by "divination" and ἑρμηνευτικὴ by the "interpretation of oracles".¹ In similar fashion, Lamb translates ἑρμηνευτικὴ by "interpretation", specifying in a footnote that what is meant is the "interpretation of omens, heavenly signs, etc."² Nonetheless, how do we know that ἑρμηνευτικὴ was ever used to characterize the interpretation of oracles? Indeed, the art of interpreting oracles, as is well known, also fell within the competence of μαντικὴ (divination). Numerous scholarly studies since A. Bouché-Leclercq, W. Halliday, A.W. Persson, J. H. Oliver have informed us of the multifarious functions of divination and the art of the seer (μαντής) in Greek religion.³ And although it is not our task to study in detail the religious function of the μαντής in the present context, it is striking to note that the word ἑρμηνευτικὴ remained conspicuously absent, until Plato at least, from earlier accounts of μαντικὴ. Moreover, no textual evidence appears to suggest that ἑρμηνευτικὴ ever had any meaningful significance in Greek religion.

Since Plato was the first author to use the word, both in the *Politicus* and at least "in spirit" in the *Epinomis*, one could perhaps attempt to

¹. Platon, *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, II, 1950, 1137.

². Plato, with an English translation by W. R. M. Lamb, vol. VIII, London/New York: Loeb, 1927, 433.

³. Bouché-Leclercq, A., *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité*, 4 volumes, Paris, 1879-82; Halliday, W. R., *Greek Divination. A study of its methods and principles*, 1913 (repr.: Chicago, 1967); Persson, A. W., "Die Exegeten und Delphi", in *Lunds Universitets Årsskrift*, 14, 1918; Oliver, J. H., *The Athenian Expounders of the Sacred and Ancestral Law*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1950; for more recent literature see W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1985, 391 and the extensive bibliography in Irad Malkin, *Religion and Colonization in Ancient Greece*, Leiden: Brill, 1987.

understand the original meaning of ἑρμηνευτικὴ from its immediate Platonic context. Given this hypothesis, one would have to recognize that while ἑρμηνευτικὴ is different from μαντικὴ, it is still closely related to it. However, if the two terms were synonymous, as some translators imply, there would be no sense in using two different concepts. Yet, if they were totally different, it would not make sense to place them in such close proximity, as is the case in the *Epinomis*. In order to differentiate the two, one has to start with the more familiar term, μαντικὴ. Plato's view on divination is well documented.¹ He accepts the traditional notion that the art of μαντικὴ is related to a certain μανία or frenzy. One might perhaps expect a rational philosopher like Plato to dismiss this frenzy as nothing but crazy folly, unsuited for the philosophical pursuit of truth. It is certainly on account of this suspicion that he passes such a severe judgment on the claims of poetical inspiration. Nevertheless, if Plato is suspicious of the poets, he seems to have more sympathy for the more specific art of divination as practised by the seers. In a well-known passage of the *Phaedrus* he praises, for example, the priestess of Delphi for having bestowed so many benefits on Greece, this despite the fact that she was subject to manic frenzy (although this eulogy on the alleged "benefits" of the Delphi priestess might be ironic, since the Delphic oracle fell in some disrepute after having erroneously predicted a Greek defeat in the Persian wars, having even recommended surrender before the Greek victory!²). Madness, however, can be a genuine indication of divine presence. The priestess or seer (μαντις) ceases to be merely human when she is befallen by divine revelation. Her utterances in such a state of ecstasy are so strange for human ears that they require interpretation. According to the *Timaeus* (71-72), it is the task of the προφητής to provide a rational account of the, at first, incomprehensible meaning of what is uttered in a state of trance by the seer. Possessed by a higher force, the seer cannot pronounce a sound judgement on the meaning of what she is herself experiencing (72a). The *prophetes* therefore functions as an instance of sobriety that sheds light on the proper meaning of what is being uttered by the seer. As L. Tarán rightly points out, the author of

¹. Compare F. Pfeffer, *Studien zur Mantik in der Philosophie der Antike*, Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1976, 6-42; L. Brisson, "Du bon usage du dérèglement", in *Divination et rationalité*, Paris: Seuil, 1974, 220-248

². See. W. Burkert, *op. cit.*, 116.

the *Epinomis* surely had this passage from the *Timaeus* "very much in mind" when he spoke of the art of divination and ἑρμηνευτικῆ.¹ In this regard, I would like to suggest, again as a hypothesis, that this distinction between divination and the *prophetes* in the *Timaeus* be paralleled with the distinction between divination and ἑρμηνευτικῆ in the *Epinomis*. The "hermeneutical" skill would thus consist in explaining the meaning of what is uttered through the art of μαντικῆ. The hermeneut acts, therefore, so to speak, as an intermediary between the seer and the rest of the community, in like manner to the seer who is an intermediary between the gods and mortals. Furthermore, the passage from the *Epinomis* states that while the interpreter can ascertain what is said, he cannot determine if it is true. In other words, the interpreter can translate the meaning of a revelation, but cannot say if its prediction will turn out to be true. The task of hermeneutics thus consists in explaining "what something means", and the truth of this meaning, being a separate matter altogether, is to be determined by a higher science, such as philosophy. It is interesting to note that this function corresponds exactly to the definition that hermeneutics would later receive from Dannhauer in the 17th century. According to Dannhauer, there are two basic sciences: logic and hermeneutics.² The role of logic is to determine the truth claim of our knowledge by showing how it derives from higher rational principles. However, in order to understand what an author actually means, another science is required. This science, the science of interpretation or hermeneutics, sorts out the signification that the author attached to the signs he used, regardless of the validity of what was conceived on the level of thinking. Dannhauer thus distinguishes two kinds of truth: hermeneutical truth, which strives to discover what is meant, and logical truth, which seeks to find out if what was meant is true or not. This distinction, which also corresponds to the medieval distinction of *sententia* and *sensus*, that gave rise and legitimacy to the modern science of hermeneutics represents a distant, yet direct echo to the *Epinomis*.

Understood in this semantical fashion, hermeneutics, as we can now call it, can be separated from the context of religious divination. Everywhere where

¹ L. Taran, *Academica: Plato, Philip of Opus, and the Pseudo-Platonic Epinomis*, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 1975, 224.

² On Dannhauer, see our *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.

there is some meaning to be sorted out, a hermeneutical effort will be called for. In an often quoted passage from the *Ion*, Plato contends that the poets are ἑρμηνεῖς τῶν θεῶν (534 e), intermediaries for the gods, and those who recite the works of the poets (i.e. the rhapsodes) will in turn have to be called intermediaries of those intermediaries, that is interpreters of the interpreters themselves, ἑρμηνέων ἑρμηνεῖς (535 a). Therefore, wherever the meaning of an utterance needs to be determined and mediated, a hermeneut is required.¹ Ultimately, as contemporary hermeneutics has rediscovered, this hermeneutical effort is rooted in language itself. Indeed, one may recall that in the *Definitiones* of the platonician corpus, the term ἑρμηνευτική generally signified "to mean something".

This general definition of the spirit of ancient "hermeneutics" can help us understand the meanings associated with the terms ἑρμηνεία and ἑρμηνεύς. Ἐρμημέια, an uttered sentence, is the transposition into the linguistic medium of "what is meant" at the level of thinking. Uttered language is nothing but uttered thinking, the translation, or "interpretation", of thought into language. In fact, this was so evident for the ancients that the Latins immediately translated ἑρμηνεία by the latin word *interpretatio*. However, ἑρμηνεία can also mean "style".² Aristotle was not the only one in antiquity to write a *Περὶ ἑρμηνείας*. Demetrius, himself a Peripatetic, also wrote one. However, his dealt exclusively with what one might call stylistics. Again, the Latins displayed remarkable flexibility in translating the title by *De elocutione* (in English: *On Style*).³ The fact that the Greeks used the same word to characterize the linguistic utterance, the statement and style is itself revealing. For style is nothing but a way of meaning something, of expressing something, and of transmitting it to others. Language itself is a "style", a means of both putting things and of being properly understood by others. The unitary function of ἑρμηνεία consists in meaning something through language, of translating

¹. In a famous passage of the *Symposium* (202 e), Eros is praised as a ἑρμηνεῦσιν, an "hermeneut" or a go-between, that mediates between the gods and the mortals. As if to confirm the immediate association of "hermeneutics" with μαντική, Plato, or rather, the priestess of Mantinea (in itself an allusion to *mantikè*), goes on to say that it is through this mediation that the art of divination was instituted (203 a).

²See J. Pépin, article Hermeneutik, in *Reallexicon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 14, Stuttgart, 1988, 726 (with numerous references)

³. See the common edition Aristotle, *The Poetics*; Longinus, *On the Sublime*; Demetrius, *On Style*, Cambridge/ London: Loeb, 1927, 4th ed. 1946).

thought into expression, of making oneself understood. The Greeks also used the word ἑρμηνεία to describe what we would call translation, and the ἑρμηνεὺς also functioned as a "translator", that we, in Greek fashion, continue to call an "interpreter".

One should not, however, put too much stress on the task of "translation" for the Greeks, since it was never a major preoccupation for them. They even lacked a specific word for translation, using more often than not the term ἑρμηνεία or the verb ἑρμηνεύειν, usually reserved for language and style (but they could also invoke very graphic notions such as μεταφράζω and ἀναλαμβάνω εἰς τὴν φωνήν). In fact, to say that the Greeks had little interest in translation is hardly an understatement. Not only did they not reflect on the theoretical problems of translation, they did not translate foreign works (with the exception of one) and did not bother to learn foreign languages.¹ The only relevant language for the Greeks was their own; and although we have no real way of knowing, they probably felt that "barbaric" languages (barbaric was not meant pejoratively: foreign idioms just sounded like a repetitious "bar-bar"²) served only to express their particular thinking and did not deserve any special attention. The Latins, on the other hand, displayed great interest in the problem of translation, and indeed, they had little choice since most of their culture derived from Greek translations. It was they who coined the word *translatio*, which literally means: "to carry over on the other side" (which was also to be understood geographically: to carry a body of culture across the Adriatic³). The Greeks themselves had developed a homogeneous culture and consequently did not burden themselves with translations. As a matter of fact, they seemed much more interested in the problems raised by the translation of *proper names* into Greek. In this regard,

¹. Accordingly there are almost no studies on the problem of translation for the Greeks. The only one I am aware of was written by J. Kakridis, "The Ancient Greeks and Foreign Languages", in *Hellenica*, 1966, 22-34. It confirms that the Greeks had no passion for translation. See esp. 24: "The ancient Greeks were entirely indifferent to foreign languages. No foreign language was ever taught in their schools; throughout the history of Greek literature we find only one book translated into Greek from a foreign language." The only translation that has come down to us was done in the 4th century B.C. It is a translation of an amazing story of an expedition by the Carthaginians on the west coast of Africa. The translator is not known (J. Kakridis, *op. cit.*, 29). I gratefully acknowledge the help provided on this subject by my colleague Luc Brisson (CNRS, Paris).

². J. Kakridis, *op. cit.*, 30.

³On the posterity of this notion of the *translatio studiorum* in the Middle Ages, when science was passed over to the Byzantine, the Arab and "back again" to the Latin world, see A. De Libera, *La philosophie médiévale*, Paris: P.U.F., 1993.

they usually solved the problem by remoulding foreign names into Greek-sounding words. For example, Nabu-Kudurri-Ussur became Nabouchodonossor, and Khshaiarsha, Xerxes.¹

According to the Greek understanding of language, the linguistic element does not appear to enjoy any respectable autonomy of its own. It is but a means of expressing something, a thought process that lies "behind" the graphic or phonetic expression itself. The unitary task of hermeneutics in antiquity seems to have consisted in going back from what was said to what was meant, to the *vouloir-dire* beneath language. This understanding of hermeneutics tacitly assumes that language is invested with a meaning that precedes or goes beyond the uttered word itself. There is something like a transcendence or excess of meaning in regard to what is uttered. An utterance can even carry a different meaning than the one it appears to have (as exemplified by irony, and, say, radicalized in the practice of allegory). However, if the Greeks showed no interest in translation, they still seemed to have been startled by this bizarre, yet undeniable fact of language that words can mean something different from what they immediately express. This is genuinely puzzling: if one considers that words are the very expression of thinking, how is it possible to use words in a manner that conveys a meaning other than the one which is immediately uttered? This discrepancy might appear trite to us, accustomed as we are at looking up the different meanings of the words we use in dictionaries. But dictionaries appeared very late in the history of civilization and were unknown to classical Greek philosophers. In fact, dictionaries are based on the abstract view of language that words have in themselves different "levels" of meaning, levels which happen to find application in the varied, but somewhat "extrinsic" contexts of linguistic use. It is much more natural, or so it was for the Greeks, to suppose that each word has a specific meaning and serves as an instrument or accessory to make something present by using its sign. Any meaningful word can only have but one specific meaning, and, in spite of dictionaries, this remains a contrafactual presupposition of the everyday speaker: every word has but one meaning. To this end, Plato teaches in the *Phaedrus* that one should find new words to alleviate the ambiguities of polysemy and to eradicate synonymous words that redundantly refer to the

¹ J. Kakridis, *op. cit.*, 34.

same thing.

But how did the Greeks become aware of this chasm between the word and what it really means? In the light of new research in the field of classical philology, it seems appropriate to trace back this insight to the discovery of writing that occurred around the end of the 8th century. In this regard, I am alluding mostly to the pioneer work of the Yale classicist Eric Havelock on the "literate revolution".¹ Before the invention of the written alphabet, and long after its appearance, the survival of Greek culture depended solely on oral transmission. The entire body of knowledge, culture and statutes necessary in order to maintain the coherence of the Greek community was preserved in an oral mode, through memorization, and more specifically through the memorization of the poetic verses that made up the epic tradition, and that were repeatedly recited and sung at the festivals and public ceremonies which were a constitutive part of the Greek community. The invention of writing made memorization and its dependance on the poetic medium less important and, ultimately, dispensable. From that point on, one no longer had to rely exclusively on the immediacy of oral transmission. As Havelock has demonstrated, the oral medium is a more holistic medium of communication. It alludes to a whole yet undifferentiated sphere of meaning when it speaks. The tone of a voice in a conversation for instance can induce a whole atmosphere of sense and evocation that is specific to the oral medium. Written language, on the contrary, is more linear, more easily retraced. For example, one says A, because of B, that precedes it, and that derives from C, etc. One can thus readily understand how the invention of writing made the appearance of linear, rational thinking possible. To think rationally is to be able to retrace the ground of something and to understand its presuppositions, which are constructed in such a manner that they can be traced back by any mind that can think properly, i. e. that can read and follow a linear argument.

In spite of the irreversible nature of the invention of writing, Greek philosophers retained for a long period of time a nostalgia for the oral medium.

¹. Eric A. Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences*, Princeton University Press, 1982; *Preface to Plato*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963, 2nd printing, 1982; *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences*, Princeton University Press, 1982; *The Muse Learns to Write. Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.

Early philosophers such as Xenophanes, Parmenides and Heraclitus wrote in verse, in hexameters. Evidently, such works were meant to be recited and not to be read (as we know, the Greeks always read aloud, such was their fascination for the oral medium). In addition, one might also note the fact that one of the most influential philosophers of antiquity, Socrates, did not even write a single word. Plato, his pupil, tried to remain faithful to the spirit of his oral teaching by placing his ideas in dialogue or conversational form.

Given that in a pre-literate context it was clearly impossible to distinguish a word from its meaning, there was thus no room (if one allows the anachronism) for hermeneutics or any hermeneutic reflection on the estrangement of meaning. There is an immediacy to oral transmission: the spoken word immediately means what it says: the context is immediately present at hand to the listener or to the hearer, and the tone of the voice already gives an indication on how the "utterance" is to be understood. Moreover, should misunderstanding occur, the speaker would always be present to elucidate what is said by evoking a wide range of what we would call "synonyms" to re-establish the immediate flow of understanding and shared meaning. In fact, one may argue that language (i.e., a distinct body of signs with transcendent meanings) does not really exist in a purely oral context. In other words, given that in a purely oral context the linguistic medium is never separated from the person using it, there is no such thing as a language that would exist independently from the speaker and the context of the utterance.¹

Furthermore, when written language finally began to exist, it manifested itself as just that, "written orality", as it were. In this regard, when Plato reflects on literary discourse in the *Phaedrus*, he underscores that the best written discourse can only have a function of "rememoration" (276 d, 278 a). The written word is only there to help us recall the immediacy and fullness of meaning that belongs to orality, which in turn, ultimately echoes discourses

¹. See E. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write. Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*, 112-113: "It is only as language is written down that it becomes possible to think about it. The acoustic medium, being incapable of visualization, did not achieve recognition as a phenomenon wholly separable from the person who used it. But in the alphabetized document the medium became objectified. There it was, reproduced perfectly in the alphabet, not a partial image, but the whole of it, no longer just a function of "me" the speaker but a document with an independent existence. This existence, as it began to attract attention, invited examination of itself. So emerged, in the speculations of the sophists and Plato, as they wrote about what they were writing, conceptions of how this written thing behaved, of its "parts of speech", its "grammar" (itself a word which defines language as it is written)."

written in the soul itself. Words are nothing but "mnemotechnic" devices to help us recreate a density of meaning, a density which remains foreign to the written medium as such. For Plato, thinking is nothing but "the dialogue of the soul with itself"¹ - that is, in essence, an oral means of self-communication which is so immediate and pure as to be thought almost "wordless". In like manner Aristotle states in his *De interpretatione* that written signs are merely symbols for oral utterances.² Thus, we see that both Plato and Aristotle refer the written medium back to the spoken word, which is itself a symbol for the "word" of the soul, the "inner Word", as the Stoics and Augustine will aptly call it.³

Nonetheless, there is a small, yet important difference between Plato and Aristotle in their explanation of the relationship between the written word, the spoken word and the soul. Aristotle seems to assume that nothing is really lost in this chain of transmission from the soul to speech and from speech to writing. The written sign functions as a "mark" that conveniently stands for the voice and the "affections of the soul".⁴ This suggests that such signs and affections are, in principle, the same for everybody. Plato, however, seems to put more stress on the gap between the written and the spoken word. Just as for Aristotle, the written is a means to indicate or memorate the spoken word of the soul, but there is no assurance that the written medium will be understood properly.

The "peril" of the written is that it is fixed and is therefore subject to a double alienation. It can first be alienated from the intention of the speaker and even outlive him, thus making it impossible for the speaker, the immediate utterer of the word, to specify what he or she meant. It can also become alienated from its meaning and context and receive the most superficial and

¹. *Theaitetus* 184 e; *Sophistes* 263 e, 264 a.

². *De interpretatione*, 16 a 4, on this see the instructive new article of H.-G. Schmitz, "Die Eröffnung des sprachphilosophischen Feldes. Überlegungen zu Platons *Kratylos*", in *Hermes. Zeitschrift für klassische Philologie*, 119, 1991, 43-60, spec. 46 f.

³. *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta*, ed. Armin, Leipzig, 1903, II, 135; Karlheinz Hülsner, *Die Fragmente zur Dialektik der Stoiker*, Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1987, vol. II, fr. 528-535. See M. Pohlenz, "Die Begründung der abendländischen Sprachlehre durch die Stoa", in *Nachrichten von der Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*, Philologisch-Historische Klasse, Neue Folge, 3. Band, 1938-39, 151-198 (spec. 191 f.). Augustine, *De trinitate*, XV.

⁴. 16 a 4-6 (translation used: Aristotle, *Categories and De Interpretatione*, translated with notes by J. L. Ackrill, Oxford: Clarendon Aristotle Series, 1963, 43).

ludicrous interpretations. Only the wise will be able to apprehend the truth of the statement, by relating the words back to the spirit that animates them.¹

The full significance of the word, or its "truth", is not something that merely lies "beyond" the word, as if the word was simply an exterior manifestation of an intellectual meaning that is beyond language. Indeed from the perspective of contemporary hermeneutics, this full sense of the word is what is already at work in language itself. This is true provided we are attentive to it in a hermeneutical way, i.e., understanding the spoken word as an answer to a question, a quest or a query. According to hermeneutics, the essential logic of language is not to be found in a propositional logic that would take predicative judgements for being self-sufficient semantic entities. For hermeneutics, there is no such thing as a self-sufficient judgement nor a "pure proposition" that would exhaust all there is to say about what is being said. Propositional logic, which has dominated our philosophical tradition ever since Aristotle, proposes that all knowledge can be expressed in predicative statements (i.e., S is P). Furthermore, this logical requirement happens to "copy" (or dictate) the substance-accident relation in the things themselves, an ontological structure which is in itself a logical construction of Aristotle's "hermeneutics". However, according to Gadamer's more Platonically motivated hermeneutics, this "construction of logic on the proposition" was "one of the most fatal decisions of Western culture".² For hermeneutics, for Gadamer, and for Plato, there is no such thing as a pure statement, i. e., an utterance which one could fully understand without taking into account its motivation, its intent, its addressee, its context, in a word, its soul. The privilege of the proposition in the Western logical-metaphysical tradition is, to be sure, something all too understandable. If all that is said can be put into propositional form, then all knowledge can be verified, reiterated, repeated and controlled. This presupposes an understanding of truth as something that we can dispose of, that we can master, verify and control. And while control and verification are useful in certain areas of our knowledge, do they really render justice to the life of

¹. On this inner truth of the word and its hermeneutical actuality, see H.-G. Gadamer, "Von der Wahrheit des Wortes", in *Jahresgabe der Martin-Heidegger-Gesellschaft*, 1988, 7-22.

². H.-G. Gadamer, *GW*, II, 193: "Wir reden von Aussage in der Verbindung, Aussagelogik, Aussagekalkül, in der modernen mathematischen Formalisierung der Logik. Diese uns selbstverständliche Ausdrucksweise geht letzten Endes auf eine der folgenschwersten Entscheidungen unserer abendländischen Kultur zurück, und das ist der Aufbau der Logik auf der Aussage."

language, to the dependance of language on all that is not and cannot be said? Do we understand language only to the extent that we can master and dominate it? The hermeneutic response, simply put, is "no". We only understand to the extent that we are willing to engage in the dialogue opened by what is said and venture into all that isn't said, but remains essential to understanding. Understanding is less a domination of a state of affairs than a participation in shared meaning.

This is why Gadamer retreats back from Aristotle's propositional logic to the spirit¹ of Plato's dialogical hermeneutics. One can only understand language, both the written and the spoken, if one goes back to the soul of what is said. Language is never self-sufficient. In order to understand an utterance, we must always ask ourselves: To what question or to what provocation was it the answer? Was the statement ironic? To whom was it addressed? Without taking into account this motivational context, which makes the understanding of the written more perilous than that of the spoken word, there is no way one can hope to understand. This is the heart of both Plato's dialectic and of contemporary hermeneutics. As we saw earlier, this inner dimension of the spoken discourse is not to be thought of as something beyond the utterance. It lies within it or even "around" it, so to speak, circumscribing the meaning which wishes to be grasped in language. The Greeks had a nice word to express what is meant here: ὑπόνοια, which was regularly used by authors such as Plato and Xenophon. The word literally means: what is thought under, the thought at the root of what is said. It was first used at Plato's time to characterize the "hidden meanings"² in the work of Homer and later as a technical concept by the Stoics who popularized it in order to present their allegoric interpretations. In fact, ὑπόνοια was the forerunner of the word ἀλληγορία which appeared much later, not before the first century A.D., so that the first Stoics were not acquainted it³. It is somewhat misleading to

¹. To the "spirit" again, and not to the letter, of platonism, because, as *Truth and Method* will establish, Plato retained an instrumental conception of language, that Gadamer sought to overcome by relying on the help of Augustine's doctrine of the verbum as the exteriorisation of the inner word. For a fuller account, see our study on Gadamer and Augustine.

². See J. Tate, "Plato and Allegorical Interpretation", in *Classical Quarterly*, 23, 1929, 142-154.

³. Compare J. Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie. Les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes*, Paris, 1976, 159-167; H.-J. Klauck, *Allegorie und Allegorese in synoptischen Gleichnistexten*, Münster, 1978, 45-53.

translate ὑπόνοια by "hidden meaning", even if this is perhaps accurate for the allegorical interpretations the Stoics were so found of. For what is "thought underneath" is not necessarily "hidden", it is only that which is presupposed, that which precedes the utterance and makes it understandable. In addition, this interpretation of the word ὑπόνοια as the "thought underneath" also helps us comprehend the original meaning of "allegorical" interpretation as it was practised by the Greeks. As J. Tate convincingly demonstrates in an article that goes back to 1934,¹ the first motivation of allegory was not defensive or apologetical. Its purpose was not to defend Homer and Hesiod against accusations of immorality but to expound, intrinsically, what the first poets really *meant*. The motivation of allegory, as it was first practised, before and during the time of Plato, was therefore positive and strictly exegetical: what did the poets actually mean when they said what they said? The preoccupation of the first allegorists was not with the moral impunity of the poets but with the inner truth of their sometimes less than transparent doctrines.² Furthermore, is this notion of inner truth and that the truth of the statement lies behind or "under" what is said, as suggested by the word ὑπόνοια, which is the soul of hermeneutics.

This notion of an "inner word" might appear naive, even bizarre, and it is indeed meant here as somewhat of a provocation. To be sure, no physician or linguist has ever found anything like an "inner word" under their scalpel. Contemporary philosophy has no use and no patience whatsoever for anything resembling a world of "ideas" or "representations" that would precede the linguistic medium. It is often argued that the stress on the precedence of

¹ J. Tate, "On the History of Allegorism", in *Classical Quarterly*, 28, 1934, 105-114.

² The invention of writing can also be held responsible for the rise of allegorical interpretation. In an oral culture, there was no discrepancy between the myth and its present meaning: the story told was only present as it was recited and tacitly adapted to its audience. There was no way to control the "accuracy" of the present-day story-tellers, since the only available version of the myth was its latest oral presentation. See on this L. Brisson, "Mythes, écriture et philosophie", in *La naissance de la raison en Grèce*, éd. par J.-F. Mattéi, Paris: P.U.F., 1990, p. 51: "Car si on la compare à l'écriture, où il est interdit d'utiliser d'autres mots que ceux qui ont été retenus et même de modifier l'ordre de ces mots, la parole présente, comme moyen de communication, une grande souplesse qui permet une modification lente, mais constante, du message transmis dans son fond comme dans sa forme, la dernière version d'un mythe étant la seule disponible." But as the myth was fixed in writing, one became aware of a distance between these stories and the (scientific) requirements of the later times. A bridge, or a hermeneutical mediation, became necessary between the letter and its intended, presupposed meaning, its ὑπόνοια. Again, as J. Tate has stressed, the original purpose of these allegorical interpretations of Homer was not to inject different or more pious, "hidden", meanings into his texts, but to expound what he really wanted to say.

"representations" has functioned as a smoke-screen that prevented philosophers from Plato to Frege from actually seeing the phenomenon of language as it has come to impose itself so massively on the philosophy of the last century. In short, a strong case can be made against the mere notion of an "inner word" or its actuality.

Nevertheless, I would still like to argue that the notion of an "inner word" is what hermeneutics justifiably aims at when it seeks to understand. This inner word is not so much "beyond" language, in a sort of "stratospheric representational sphere", it is rather "in" language itself, in what is said or conveyed "with" language. The Greeks knew all too well that the written medium is not self-sufficient and that it has to be supplemented by an understanding of what lies before, better still, beneath or in language itself. In this regard, when the Stoic philosophers expounded this notion of an inner "logos", they recognized in it precisely what distinguishes the human species. Unlike other animals such as crows and parrots who are also quite able to utter meaningful sounds, what characterizes the human species is the fact that their speech is preceded by something like an inner reflection, an interior capacity of reasoning (λόγος) that is not to be found in other animals.¹ Whereas animals are bound by the sounds they utter, the human species is able to take a distance from what has been uttered, to reflect on its meaning, to put it in context and, in short, it is able to think when it speaks.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that thinking could occur in a wordless fashion in some kind of non-linguistic medium, as Greek philosophers such as Plato and the Stoics would seem to suggest. In this regard, our attention should not be placed so much upon the "wordless" nature of thinking (which is an impossibility for human beings anyway), but on the insufficiency and indigence of the "outside" word, of the word that alone is read and heard if one fails to take into account the context, the "soul", the motivation and the overall thrust of what is being said. This is what one can call the "dialogical" nature of language, the fact that one can only understand what is said if one also understands to what question it is an answer, the motivation and situation from which it springs. In short, one can only understand human language, that is

¹. *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta*, ed. Armin, Leipzig, 1903, II, 135; Karlheinz Hülser, *Die Fragmente zur Dialektik der Stoiker*, Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1987, vol. II, 582 (fr. 528-529).

language in its irreducible humanity, if one also hears through the outside word the inner word which is present.

What the hermeneutical distinction between the inner and outside word means is that there is, and always is, a tension between what we happen to say and all that wants to be said and heard. Language can never be reduced to what is uttered in propositional statements. There are always presuppositions, motivations, and conditions that remain unsaid, but which nevertheless have to be heard if we wish to understand the outside word properly. To understand language hermeneutically is to trace back what is said to what wishes to be said. However, this inner word is not something that "pre-"exists in some way "before" language (e.g., in a representational realm, or in the "purity" of the human heart) nor is it something (some "thing") or some discrete sphere of meaning one could astutely distinguish from that which is said. Rather, it is the soul or "spirit" which never ceases to nourish every human utterance and constitutes its human depth. It is, to be sure, not something that one could reach once and for all, but an endless source of questioning and dialogue.

The focus on language that has dominated philosophy in recent decades was less a focus on language than it has been a focus on its alleged propositional nature. It could very well be that propositions and statements are more abstract entities than is usually believed. And despite the fact that one may believe statements and propositions to be self-sufficient entities ("S is P, x is a function of y, and that's that"), perhaps, it is never just "that". Indeed, there is more to say than one can encounter in a single proposition, or even in the explanations it can receive. The proposition is always embedded in a situation. It emerges from a context, answering a question, a query, or a provocation. In short, language cannot be understood without taking into account what language means, what carries it, and what makes it human (i.e., the inner word). The terms we stammer out are just that, eloquent stammering. The words we use are the ones that happen to come to our lips, or from our fingers when we write. We are not the authors of these words. They come to us. This is why no psychological sphere whatsoever, no neatly circumscribed "*mens auctoris*",¹ is

¹ I owe this necessary specification to the excellent commentary on an earlier draft of this study provided by Professor Christopher Smith. I am in full agreement with him when he states that the speaker stands more or less in the dative case when she comes to speak. This accounts for the lack of satisfaction we can feel towards our own words: they hint at part of what strives to be said, without fully exhausting it. This struggle with

implied by the idea of the inner word as being the constant goal of the hermeneutical quest. Moreover, others can find better, or less indigent words for what we have to say. It is often in dialogue with others, or with ourselves (i.e. the self-dialogue Plato called "thinking"), that we find expressions for all there is to say, for the toil of the inner word that hopes to be heard behind any spoken word.

The task of hermeneutics, from Plato to our times, is to preserve this true meaning of the word, the written or spoken word, by relating it back to its intent, original meaning, scope and context. Insofar as Plato was attuned to this task, which is central to his dialogical, Socratic endeavour, he can rightly stand as the father of hermeneutics as we know it. It is perhaps no coincidence that he was probably the first to use the notion of ἑρμηνευτική. If it is true, as Whitehead wrote, that the "safest characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of footnotes to Plato",¹ then perhaps another footnote should be added: the development of hermeneutics - concerned as it is with the living and tragic discrepancy between the outside and the inner word - is also a footnote to Plato's insight into the logos.

language is thus a battle with ourselves, with our own self-understanding. This struggle forms the core of the inner word.

¹. A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, New York, 1929, 63.