

Nicholas Davey, *Unquiet Understanding: Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

The most notable achievement of Davey's study of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is its clear epistemological mapping of how the key epistemological and ontological categories of Gadamer's thinking interact in mutually transformative ways. Davey contends that philosophical hermeneutics has not always proved its own best advocate. In his understandable resistance to the strictures of philosophical "system," Gadamer underplays the systemic nature of his own thinking. It is one thing to employ the principles of both the finitude of knowing and an ontology of flux to disrupt the universal truth claims of science and technology but quite another to build an epistemology that can accommodate the truth-claims of art and literature without succumbing to the very epistemological critique that he deploys against the truth claims of the sciences. In other words, paradox and asymmetrical bodies of reasoning establish the creative tension at the heart of philosophical hermeneutics, and it is this which, as Davey argues, renders it an 'unquiet' but nevertheless productive mode of understanding. With care and a good deal of conceptual detail, the author reveals how philosophical hermeneutics has a tragic core to its reasoning. On the one hand, it seems as if Gadamer is building against nihilism and deconstructive critique, a robust defense of the place of truth in both the arts and historical understanding. Although he acknowledges that philosophical understanding can never contain the truth, which is an artwork, he insists that artworks can and do speak to us plainly in ways that offer both meaning and direction to our lives. Gadamer's defense of art's truth is certainly defensible on the grounds that without an acceptance of its powers of life-structuring revelation, nihilism, and the interminable play of deconstruction would incapacitate life as meaningless. And yet there is an inherent paradox in this position: the flux and becoming which art can render meaningful also undoes the permanence of such meaningful structures. The ability of art to give structure and sense to the finitude of our understanding is itself rendered finite by the transitory nature of all human experience.

What Davey's book uncovers is the dialectical unease at the heart of philosophical hermeneutics. The epistemological outlook of philosophical hermeneutics appears to be at odds with its ontological framework. The very historical and linguistic conditions which make hermeneutical understanding possible also serve to undermine that completeness of understanding which Gadamer's appeal to the truth of art claims. This places philosophical hermeneutics within a formal impasse but only so long as the epistemological and ontological dimensions of Gadamer's thought are regarded as opposites rather than logical complementaries. To this end, Davey argues that philosophical hermeneutics is *philosophical* in that it strives to discern the ontological objectivities within subjective consciousness and *hermeneutical* in that it probes how hermeneutical consciousness both experiences and engages those objectivities and in the process of its engagement changes them. This emphasizes that hermeneutic understanding is not fixed but is essentially a process of movement, of inter-play, of transformation, and of transcendence. A substantial part of *Unquiet Understanding* defends the thesis that hermeneutical understanding is experiential in that it entails

undergoing a *Bildungsprozess*. An unavoidable characteristic of this a process is that its formative powers are synonymous with a disruptive capacity.

The core *Leitmotif* of Gadamer's hermeneutics—the life of spirit and understanding is movement - suggests that the objective and subjective elements of hermeneutic experience are deeply inflected by instability, in-betweenness, and difficulty. On an epistemological level, this suggests that philosophical hermeneutics is a failure. Hermeneutical consciousness comes to know that its understanding is always in difficulty, can never truly grasp its object, is constantly caught in between what it has understood and what it might yet understand, and also that whatever it believes it does understood is always prone to the negativity of experience itself. However, Gadamer's commitment to the negativity of experience does not dissipate the possibility of understanding. To the contrary, the temporality that prevents complete understanding is, in fact, the condition of achieving a completer understanding. That which makes understanding difficult - the ability of the withheld to disrupt, defer and dissipate the meaningful - is also that which gives the meaningful its depth, its resonance, and its weight. The difficulty, difference, and distance emerge as constitutive of hermeneutic consciousness and establish the possibility of learning itself. This renders philosophical a hermeneutics a difficult and uneasy philosophical practice.

Davey's volume *Unquiet Understanding* faces up to the more radical and disconcerting aspects of hermeneutical engagement. That understanding entails a constant dialectical interaction between the objective and subjective aspects of our language and being reenforces the view that philosophical hermeneutics is a negative hermeneutics. It requires a practiced openness to the negativity of experience, a willingness to sacrifice the stability of our regularized conceptual understandings to the sometimes uncomfortable demands of hermeneutical engagement. Though difficult, the practice assures the one who is attentive to the other and otherness, the possibility of transcendence. Philosophical hermeneutics affirms the dialectic of the word as opposed to the dialectic of ideas. It is not a logo-centric mode of thought but is unequivocally *logos* (word) centered. It is centered upon the play of the "word." The task of understanding is, therefore, not to fulfill concepts but to transform the dialogical relations that constitute our being in the world. Davey's study of philosophical hermeneutics offers a persuasive demonstration that it is a dialectic of negative experience that drives the possibility of transformative understanding.