

## Between Speech and Text: On Writing a Draft

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### I

The study of philosophical hermeneutics guides us to a clearer understanding of how we read, interpret, translate, and understand the written word. It helps us to think more clearly about finding the right word, putting ourselves into words, and making our way linguistically in the world. It draws our attention to the ways we articulate ourselves in dialogue with other people, texts, and works of art; how we understand ourselves linguistically, as always readers and speakers, sometimes writers.

What does the study of hermeneutics have to offer us as writers, to help us understand and inhabit that aspect of our linguisticity? Between the fumbling dialogue with another that helps us articulate ourselves in speech and the text that has been written and transmitted for interpretation, what of the process of writing? As academics, we regularly engage with the process of writing – taking notes in the margins of a text we’re studying, drafting paragraphs, presenting nascent ideas at conferences, then revising our drafts (and revising our drafts, and revising...) before we arrive at what we might call the published word. Hermeneutically and temporally speaking, what is a draft? It’s writing in the state of becoming, while yet also being complete and whole as what is written. Carolyn Culbertson uses this phrase to characterize the history of continental philosophy of language altogether, but perhaps particularly we might describe a draft as *words underway*.

Understood in this light, perhaps everything written is only a draft, for it is unclear what words *completed* could signify. But some writing is completed, polished and published, and that

would seem to be the writing we have in mind when we say of the temporality of writing that it's an effort to overreach our finitude and create something permanent in the world. Again, by these lights, what then is a draft, writing that is intentionally still underway with no pretensions to permanence? This is one question I wish to explore: the meaning and temporality of writing that is decidedly temporary, a work in progress. I worry that our experience of our linguistic being as writerly beings might too often be set aside as a derivative form of discourse not so worth our attention. But surely something important happens in the process of writing that allows us to move from this derivative mode of discourse (second to speech, of course) to the text – even the poetic word – which can discover to us a more exalted truth. So I want us to think more deeply about the process of writing, one which we as researchers are, it turns out, pretty familiar with!

Further, I want to ask what the study of hermeneutics has to offer us as *teachers* of writers, that is, as the university professors that we are, embedded in Writing Across the Curriculum programs perhaps, with student learning objectives concerning our students' ability to articulate *themselves* clearly and persuasively in writing. Does hermeneutics help us teach writing? As a trained writing consultant and erstwhile composition instructor, I notice many similarities between the dominant trends in writing pedagogy and some of the lessons about language to be learned from philosophical hermeneutics. Both fields teach (in their own way) that what is written is still a living conversation, involving play and openness to revision, which functions not only as a record of what is understood but as a tool for understanding. Unfolding these similarities is my second aim in this paper.

## II

Alienation from language is an existential experience as basic to human being as our dwelling in language in the first place. The experience many report with writing, though,

especially as compared to speaking, is that writing heightens that alienation. We struggle to articulate ourselves in writing, perhaps because our words will be decontextualized, disembodied, and subject to interpretations from temporally distant readers. For whatever reason, there is a phenomenological difference between the conversation we have in speech with its stuttering silences in which we struggle to find the right words, and the conversation we participate in when we write, often staring silently at a blank page, not knowing even how to begin. In a pair of conversations from 1985 and 1986, published as “Interview: Writing and the Living Voice,” Gadamer himself articulates an attitude we might be familiar with through self-reflection or through conversations with our students; he says, “Really, I am not a good writer, I am a speaker, a lecturer” (64). He describes himself as a hesitant writer, facing trouble with knowing where and how to begin (64). He says, “Writing is my secondary form of self-presentation, as Plato thought it should be” (65), preferring teaching and listening as his primary mode of “develop[ing] the melody of [his] own thoughts” (66). Our experience with language is alienating, but perhaps more so in writing than in speech, which I think our personal experience as researchers and our experience in the classroom with resistant students will confirm.

Gadamer addresses writing more philosophically in a 1983 essay, “On the Way to Writing?,” which begins with the observation that speech is more primary, more original, than writing, for meaning lives not in the word or phrase as such but rather in the process of articulation and the choice of words (183-184). Language repeated or recited from a written script is not always meaningful; sometimes it is empty, merely formulaic or ceremonial (184-185). He grants that in the transmission of history and tradition, “there is [...] no strict separation between the dimensions of orality and of writing” (186). But when we examine writing itself more closely, in light of the *Phaedrus*, “writing becomes a problem,” he says (186). The well-

known objections to writing found in that dialogue – that writing weakens memory and invites misunderstanding and misuse – prompt Gadamer to make what he calls a “hermeneutic appeal” “to the right use of writing” (187). Writing can be used as an *aid* to memory and can invite dialogue and understanding as well as misunderstanding.

Gadamer also presents in that essay how writing represents our attempt “to escape temporality” and “participat[e] in immortality” (188) by creating something permanent. But it can only achieve this permanence if the writing continues to speak, that is, if it does not fall silent from “dead repetition” and “the frozen sameness of writing” (189). Most writing does suffer this fate– its unchanging sameness, once written, prevents it from resonating in the future, and its meaning freezes and dies. But, Gadamer protests, not *all* written texts are dead and frozen in this way; some do transmit a living truth by their ever-sameness: poetic and eminent texts. These texts can be read, performed, translated, and adapted time after time, and while the “tonal totality of meaning” remains the same, the text will “become ever richer and speak to us ever more vividly” with each renewal (190). These “works” keep working and “always challenging us anew” (191) instead of deflating and paling with freezer burn. In resistance to our finitude, these are the written creations – literature and art – that help us to leave a permanent mark and touch immortality.

Now, for Gadamer, philosophical texts do not, ordinarily, reach this height; they are not permanent and infinitely repeatable while constantly new, but are only aids to memory. He says philosophy rather has its life in dialogue and in thought: “the dialogue of the soul with itself [which] continues and constantly renews itself” (191). A philosophical text lives not only in being read but in being engaged as an interlocutor. This certainly seems true of the genre I’m writing – the philosophical conference paper. As a piece of writing, a conference paper tends to

be temporary or incomplete or merely underway. Usually, the point of a conference paper is to spark a conversation and participate in an event of dialogue and understanding (the conference), not to be read again and again in the future. In the conference paper, we seem to have an example of writing that has no pretension to immortality. But some conference papers are what we call drafts, preliminary expressions of ideas that will become more permanent (or at least published) as articles or chapters. In the draft, we have a piece of writing that seems to lie between speech and text, a work that is written but not meant to be permanent, enduring only as continually changing, as in progress, as being revised, and *not* as same.

The idea of a draft draws our attention to the work of *writing* itself, which we so frequently engage in and yet gets neglected in much hermeneutic phenomenology. We tend to focus either on the use of language as speech to develop our understanding, including conversation, interpretation, putting our prejudices into play, and revising our preconceptions, or on the written text as fixed and interpretable (live and speaking, but transmissible and translatable because fixed in writing). Lawrence Hatab is one who explores the relationship between orality and literacy in his book, *Proto-Phenomenology, Language Acquisition, Orality, and Literacy*, where he also highlights the process of writing itself as an element in the use of language to develop understanding. He says, “Whether in rudimentary or refined forms, the labor of writing is itself a *process of thinking* and not simply an expression of thoughts. [...] The external presence of written sentences, notes, outlines, and feedback offer a material environment outside the mind for the gathering, organizing, and revising of thought...” (174) such that writing functions as an externalization and, again to use Hatab’s word, spatialization of the dialogue that develops understanding. In the work of writing, we can *see* the process of understanding unfolding through conversation, feedback, and revision – a moment in writing that

is between speech and the more permanent, unchanging version of a written text. We might wonder if a work in progress, a draft underway, might function more similarly to either a live conversation or a re-readable, interpretable eminent text, than to a frozen philosophical text that serves merely to aid our memory. Contrary to Gadamer's claim that "the true meaning of writing" is "as a preservation of what is valid against misuse, adaptation, distortion or even denial," ("On the Way to Writing?," 190), I suggest that a draft might be the liveliest and truest form of what is fixed in writing.

### III

With these hermeneutic considerations in mind, let us now consider how we might transform student writing in our own classes into a lively conversation instead of the dead and frozen phrases we might be more used to reading in student work. (Perhaps my short answer: we have to value drafts.) Let's return to the similarities I mentioned above between the dominant trends in writing pedagogy and some of the lessons about language to be learned from philosophical hermeneutics. First, both fields teach that even what is fixed in writing is a living conversation, that writing is meant to participate in a tradition and be interacted with by a reader. In hermeneutics, a text carries with it a history and tradition while also being constantly renewed as it is read and interpreted anew. We know that as readers, we participate dialogically in the unfolding of a text's meaning. Similarly, a common conception in writing pedagogy is presenting any piece of writing as participating in an existing and ongoing conversation. Cathy Birkenstein and Gerald Graff's book *They Say, I Say* is a staple in many first-year composition courses and teaches how the structure of academic writing can be understood as posing both a review of the literature (what *they* say) and the author's intervention into the existing discourse

(what *I* say). Students are taught to locate and read their way into an existing conversation, and then to formulate their own thoughts in response to others already engaged in that conversation.

Folks who study instructors' responses to student writing also recommend that the feedback process be constructed as an ongoing conversation. (See Peter Elbow, for one.) Students learn to invest in their work as writers if they're encouraged to ask questions about their work for the sake of feedback, and if they have a chance to revise in response to the feedback they receive. It makes the writing process more like an ongoing conversation, more iterative, interactive, and dialogical. This supports student learning and reshapes writing more in the image of spoken dialogue, which might ease the hyper-alienation many find in writing. This change is also related to reframing writing in a class setting as more process-oriented than product-oriented, a shift that's been dominant in writing pedagogy for decades (though change in matters of writing pedagogy can be glacial) and which shifts our attention from a finished product to the draft, the writing underway.

This leads to another similarity: the importance of the ability to revise for both hermeneutics and writing pedagogy. Integral to the hermeneutic posture in a dialogue or an encounter with a text is one's openness to learn from the other and to put one's prejudices into play in such a way that they are put at risk. One must be willing to revise what one formerly understood to be true. We know that this is how understanding develops. In the writing classroom, learning also happens through an openness to revising, an openness which must originate in the instructor and be cultivated in the students. I recognize that the role of revision in a classroom setting is bound by time constraints, but it's essential to the learning that can take place in that setting: students must have the opportunity to respond to the feedback they receive by revising their writing.

A brief side note about the constraints in the classroom that make it challenging to give students the time and space to revise. In my experience, one of these constraints is the necessity of assigning grades to student work. Pioneering writing instructors have a response to this, too: contract grading. (To learn more about the use of contract grading in composition classrooms, I recommend Asao Inoue's *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*.) In a nutshell, contract grading separates the *learning* from the *grading* in a course. Students agree to complete a number of assignments in order to earn a certain grade. Individual assignments then receive feedback but not grades or points. The purpose is to encourage risk-taking, genuine attempts at learning, and, particularly in writing, play. In play we find another essential component in a hermeneutic approach to writing, and a friend in the process of revising. As writers, we may wrestle words into their places and compose according to our best judgments, but we must also be open to losing ourselves in the playing out of the subject matter in the piece we're writing. Students, too, need room to play as they write and in their writing. Without openness to revision and play, students' prejudices about writing will not truly be put at risk, and we cut off the possibility of growing understanding.

A third similarity is the mindset that the written word is not just a dead record of established knowledge but a tool for continuing to grow our understanding. Clearly, this is related to the idea of writing as a process and an ongoing conversation, but this might be one example where traditional hermeneutics can stand to learn from the norms of writing pedagogy. (Recall Gadamer's claim, quoted above, that the essence of writing is preservation, and Hatab's counter-suggestion that writing is "a process of thinking.") Writing programs often promote using low- or no-stakes writing in the classroom as a tool for learning: not full-blown assignments that will receive feedback and grades, but writing that is private, exploratory,



experimental, or instrumental as a way to externalize the dialogue we have with ourselves when we think. Writing can be used as the first step in a “think - pair - share” exercise to open up a class discussion. It can be used to brainstorm connections among ideas or questions that remain unanswered. Freewriting or “quick writing” in the classroom can help students to better see what they do think about a text or idea, and it helps all students begin on an even playing field when it comes to sharing their ideas (so that more than the quickest hand-raisers have something concrete to share). In this context, writing instructors tap into what Gadamer recognizes as there being “no strict separation between the dimensions of orality and of writing.” Where hermeneutic thinkers rely primarily on dialogue in speech to connect with others, explore new ideas, and grow in understanding, writing instructors cash in on dialogue’s tangible twin, writing, as a process that can accomplish the same.<sup>1</sup>

This is where I begin to wonder what hermeneutic thinking may have missed about writing as a process of understanding. The title of Gadamer’s essay is promising: “*On the Way to Writing?*” (emphasis added, and I like his question mark) but while he engages with the temporality of what is written, he seems to skim past the ways human beings can be temporally and hermeneutically involved with the act of writing itself. Orality and writing may have no strict separation, but I feel a qualitative difference between the way I struggle to articulate myself in a spoken conversation (that icy in-the-moment silence) and the way I struggle to find the right word when writing. (Just as there is a qualitative difference between typing and writing with ink on paper.) When writing, I get an extended while to squirm around in the inability to articulate what needs to be said. The alienation of language takes its time in writing; it seeps in and lives

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<sup>1</sup> When we see writing as a tool for understanding, we can also begin to break down the false choice between teaching writing skills and teaching content. We *can* allow students the time to revise a draft when we recognize that work as part of the process of learning the content.

with me for whole stretches of time, which means it also tolerates my avoidance of it, without quite putting me on the spot. I wonder how the prolonged exercise of struggling to write might help us understand and live in the linguistic experiences that draw us up short in the moment, in the face of the other or an event of beauty, for instance. Because we are linguistic beings, I suspect we can learn to live well and have our being most fully by practicing writing, but we will also have to learn from this temporal difference between being linguistically in speech and being linguistically as writing. I also suspect that as we increasingly experience our linguisticity digitally – at the distance and in the temporality of writing in place of speaking – we may need to pay more attention to the process of writing itself as a phenomenon distinct from either speaking or writing-as-what-is-already-written.

If this is true, that we need to attend more closely to the process of writing as not only a middle step between speech and text but a vital point of understanding and dialogue, we are in luck, for we get loads of practice as researchers and as teachers. In our own work, we can begin to examine more closely our own processes of writing. We all have our methods for managing the alienation and impossibility of expressing ourselves when we write – the “zero draft” or “shitty first draft,” the ambitious word count goals that encourage us to dump sand into a sandbox so that we can later build castles, the plodding daily time commitments to build a work one bit at a time, also the flurry of writing when we feel blessedly carried away by the muse, and the colleagues and longsuffering partners who read draft after draft to help us refine both what we’re saying and what we’re thinking. We might start to think more about how our writing functions as an ongoing conversation and a means of externalizing the thinking process itself than about how to express clearly and completely an already-formed thought. We might attend

more closely to the ways we read our own drafts and the drafts of colleagues as mediated points in the ongoing conversation. Do we interpret as readers or listen as interlocutors?

This question leads us also to the ways we can interact differently with student writing. How can we support our students' process of developing understanding by responding to their writing as interlocutors, as listeners, rather than as readers and interpreters of a finished text? (I tell you, for one thing, it would mean less focus on grammar and syntax, the "correctness" of language, and more focus on the ideas underway.) We need to let them write drafts and cherish their writing as underway. Digital tools like the peer feedback platform Eli Review out of Michigan State ([elireview.com](http://elireview.com)) help teachers create learning communities grounded in the iterative nature of writing, where conversation, feedback, and revision are central to the learning and writing process. Course design can also support students' reconceiving of writing as a process of learning or developing understanding—giving them opportunities to present works in progress to their peers, like we're doing here, for feedback, questions, and dialogue. In short, we can use what we learn about writing from a hermeneutic standpoint to revise our own writing pedagogy and uncover writing as not just what is written but a tool for developing understanding through dialogue, play, and revision. Perhaps we can help ourselves and our students to develop a more authentic, less alienating, relationship to writing so that we can better recognize and use it as a tool for thinking.

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