

## Hermeneutics

### *Literature and Being*

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“Within all linguistic phenomena, the literary work of art occupies a privileged relationship to interpretation and thus moves into the neighborhood of philosophy.”

(Gadamer 1985)

I find it interesting that, when it comes to interpreting literary texts, the term “criticism” has traditionally had far more currency, at least in the English-speaking world, than the word “hermeneutics.” The notion of literary criticism, of course, tends to imply a degree of value judgment, and while it does often entail pronouncements about the superiority of a Shakespeare or a Goethe over so-called “lesser poets” and a wide-ranging rank ordering of literary achievement of all kinds, the term itself, stemming from the Greek *krinein* (“to judge,” “to decide”) need not, of course, apply solely to the establishment of hierarchies. Much “criticism,” in fact, consists essentially of various kinds of analyses and modes of interpretation, whose efforts are oriented more primarily toward understanding, which is to say determining or deciding the meaning of a text, rather than evaluating it and comparing it to others. And even when it does involve such evaluations and comparisons, literary criticism (like any other mode of textual interpretation, for that matter) necessarily entails this more fundamental aspect of *krinein*, that of judging or deciding upon meaning, that is, to understand or to interpret. Ironically, however, the term “hermeneutics,” which predominately connotes interpretation theory rather than criticism per se and which tends to a more descriptive rather than evaluative employment, has been invoked primarily, at least since Schleiermacher, in nonliterary realms such as philosophy, wherein it has even been deployed, as often as not, in reference to nontextual phenomena.

Construed broadly as interpretation theory, however, hermeneutics could be understood to encompass all modes of interpretation (textual or otherwise), including any kind of literary criticism, from Aristotle’s poetics to the New Criticism of the 1950s, as well as the French tradition of structuralism and even perhaps Derridean poststructural thought. However, only a handful of late modern and postmodern thinkers, beginning with Schleiermacher and running through the likes of Dilthey, Heidegger (perhaps most significantly), Gadamer, Habermas, and Ricoeur, have either thematized hermeneutics or characterized their own thinking as, at least in some respect, hermeneutical, and even fewer have devoted extensive ruminations on the theme of hermeneutics and its relation to literature as such. Even Heidegger, having famously pulled the idea of hermeneutics into the realm of ontology in coining the term “the hermeneutics of facticity,” nevertheless rarely characterizes his own profound philosophical relation to poetry as a function of hermeneutics understood as a process of textual interpretation, which is why I would like to focus these remarks on two of the most prominent thinkers to have done so—

Hans-Georg Gadamer and, to a lesser extent and mostly by way of contrast, Paul Ricoeur. More specifically, however, I would like to zero in on what both Gadamer and Ricoeur refer to as a “limit case” in literary hermeneutics, the so-called “eminent” or “absolute” text, that is to say, the poetic work of art, the explication of which may reveal an aspect of textual interpretation that goes beneath criticism or analysis and not only carries it beyond the sphere of literary studies and into the realm of philosophy, but may perhaps even establish it, alongside the experience of art, the historicity of understanding, and the speculative structure of language, as a fourth primary exemplar of the phenomenon of understanding in Gadamer’s ontology, otherwise known as philosophical hermeneutics.

Although Gadamer and Ricoeur both recognize the poetic work or, at least, lyric poetry, as belonging to a special class of literature, they do display somewhat different attitudes toward it. In what may be a slightly disparaging allusion to Gadamer, in his essay, “Speaking and Writing,” Paul Ricoeur makes the following pronouncement: “My contention is that discourse cannot fail to be about something. In saying this, I am denying the ideology of absolute texts. Only a few sophisticated texts, along the lines of Mallarmé’s poetry, satisfy this ideal of a text without reference” (1976, 36–37). Given that Gadamer often cites Mallarmé’s “*poésie pure*” as his prime example, it would seem that Ricoeur’s idea of an “absolute text” that is “without reference” does correspond to what Gadamer means by the eminent text. For our purposes, however, the most salient feature of this comment is that Ricoeur goes on to cite Mallarmé’s pure poetry as “a limiting case and an exception” that “cannot give the key to all the other texts, even poetic texts, ... which include all fictional literature whether lyrical or narrative” (1976, 37). Gadamer, too, refers to the eminent text as a “limit case” for hermeneutics, but, in claiming the “absolute text” as an exception—even from other forms of poetry—Ricoeur is clearly unwilling to grant Gadamer’s thesis that the eminent text does, in fact, offer us the “key” (or, at least, a key) not only to understanding “all other texts,” but to understanding the very nature of language itself, and thus Ricoeur would also seem unwilling to follow Gadamer into the phenomenological and ontological deep end of hermeneutic theory.

For Gadamer, one of the hallmarks of the eminent text is its un-translatability. That is, all literary works resist translation to one degree or another, but lyric poetry defies it altogether. Ricoeur addresses the question of translatability as well, only he tackles it via his theory of metaphor. Quoting Monroe Beardsley, Ricoeur sees a metaphor as “‘a poem in miniature.’ Hence the relation between the literal meaning and the figurative meaning in a metaphor is like an abridged version within a single sentence of the complex interplay of significations that characterize the literary work as a whole” (1976, 46). Ricoeur, however, distinguishes between two kinds of metaphor: metaphors of substitution, as in “the foot of the mountain,” where one simply substitutes one term (the figurative) for another (the literal—in this case, “foot” for “base”), and “tension metaphors,” which operate at the level of the sentence rather than the word and create a tension in that sentence between the literal and figurative meanings in which the literal meaning is sublimated and the figurative meaning comes to the fore; the tension between the two, however, remains, the idea being not to come up with an alternative way of expressing the literal, but to express something entirely new. The metaphor of substitution, for Ricoeur, is simply a kind of stylistic trick that typically functions as mere

ornament or a rhetorical flourish, whereas the tension metaphor (which, for Ricoeur, is the only true metaphor) is what actually allows for the possibility of poetic utterances. Hence, he tells us, “real metaphors are untranslatable. Only metaphors of substitution are susceptible of translation which could restore the literal signification. Tension metaphors are not translatable because they create their meaning. This is not to say that they cannot be paraphrased, just that such a paraphrase is infinite and incapable of exhausting the innovative meaning. ... a metaphor is not an ornament of discourse. It has more than an emotive value because it offers new information. A metaphor, in short, tells us something new about reality” (1976, 52–53). For Ricoeur, then, “real metaphors” and, by extension, poetry would not be susceptible to translation because translation assumes a “literal signification” or referent lying beneath the trope wherein the translator may presumably find its real meaning, a signification that would be missing from poetic discourse, which creates its own separate meaning.

Gadamer, as we will see, would agree with the latter part of this formulation—the untranslatability of the poem—but, as for the way that Ricoeur characterizes the function of metaphor in poetry, Gadamer seems to hold a contrary and rather definitive attitude, which he expresses in several places. For example, in his essay, “On the Truth of the Word,” he maintains that “the essence of poetry does not lie in metaphor and the use of metaphor. Poetic discourse is not attained by taking unpoetical speech and adding metaphor” (2007, 151). And, rather more vehemently, in “Text and Interpretation,” he declares that, “Rhetoric is the realm where metaphor holds sway. In rhetoric one enjoys metaphor as metaphor. In poetry, a theory of metaphor as little deserves a place of honor as a theory of wordplay” (1989a, 186). In all likelihood, what he has in mind here are metaphors of substitution, which Ricoeur would agree have no real place in poetry, but Gadamer seems to reject the notion of any kind of metaphor, tension or otherwise, as the creative engine of poetic expression. But, regardless of their differences on the function of metaphor in poetry, the more pertinent point here for our discussion is their apparent agreement concerning the translatability of poetry.

Gadamer concurs with Ricoeur’s idea that one cannot really translate a poem. At best, another poet can attempt to create a new poem in the second language that approximates the feel and structure and perhaps suggests something of the world evoked by the original work. For Gadamer, however, when it comes to texts in general, translatability is inversely proportional to the degree to which the text itself disappears. Take, for instance, a simple message requesting one’s attendance at a business meeting or, say, asking one to lunch. Unless the lunch invitation has some emotional resonance, or the meeting is of some grand significance, in which case the note itself might be kept as a souvenir of some kind, in most instances, the precise wording of the note is of little significance and the text itself is of no importance and is typically set aside and forgotten immediately. Even in exceptional cases, the text itself is usually only of value as a reminder of the event. The important thing, of course, is the event, the state of affairs, or the occasion referred to in the message, not the message itself. And, of course, any such message could be easily translated into another language with little or no loss of meaning, because the exact wording of the text is irrelevant. This is shown by the fact that, in most cases, one could even express essentially the same thought with entirely different words in the same language with little or no loss of meaning. The message is all about its

referent and not at all about itself.

In poetry, on the other hand, the words and the syntax of a specific poem are in and of themselves essential to the poem, in fact, they are the poem. If, therefore, one changes the wording or substitutes foreign words for the original, the poem (at least the original one) is lost. And this untranslatability operates on a kind of “sliding scale” from the lyric poem to other, less hermetic, modes of poetry to novels and plays, which, because of their greater employment of ordinary diction, are considerably more translatable, to more propositional texts such as scientific works, or letters, or simple notes, which, because they are largely informational, may be, as Gadamer says, “translated without sacrifice, even by a computer” (2007, 151).<sup>1</sup> These latter are the kinds of texts that (unless one is a historian) one usually need not return to after one has understood their import. In most such texts, what is communicated is beyond the text. The text becomes simply the “root document” and is only dealt with as a text when problems in the interpretation occur (Gadamer 1989a, 180).<sup>2</sup> So the text, in effect, tends to disappear as soon as its meaning is grasped.

The text of a poem, however, never disappears in this way. Because it does not refer to anything outside of itself, there is nothing beyond the poem that is more important than the poem itself. The text of the poem remains, in other words, because the poem is not about anything, or rather, it is only about itself. What one is trying to understand when one reads a work of literature is the work itself. And, contrary to Ricoeur’s pronouncement quoted earlier that “only a few sophisticated texts, along the lines of Mallarmé’s poetry, satisfy this ideal of a text without reference” (1976, 36–37), for Gadamer, this lack of reference would hold true for any and all forms of literature, although, more properly speaking, no text, not even “*poésie pure*,” lacks reference altogether; otherwise, they would mean nothing. “Language and writing,” writes Gadamer, “always exist in their referential function. They are not, but rather they mean, and that also applies even when the thing meant is nowhere else than in the appearing word. Poetic speaking comes to fulfillment only in speaking or reading itself, and of course this entails that it is not there without being understood” (1989a, 186). That is to say, the referential function of discourse still operates in poetry, but the reference is turned back on itself, and this self-referentiality not only constitutes the meaning of the poem and thereby allows it to be understood, but the poetic word only exists insofar as it is understood.

Ricoeur, however, does say something slightly closer to Gadamer’s take on the referentiality of all literary texts (and not just lyric poetry) when, in *The Rule of Metaphor*, he tells us that “the production of discourse as ‘literature’ signifies very precisely that the relationship of sense to reference is suspended. ‘Literature’ would be that sort of discourse that has not denotation but only connotation” (1977, 220). If we understand connotation as a kind of implied or somehow diffuse production of meaning, as opposed to the direct referentiality of denotation, then perhaps reference in literature would not be eliminated altogether; presumably it would remain “suspended” within the tension inherent in poetic metaphor. But, while connotation and metaphoric tension may well preserve some degree of referentiality, albeit indirect, this does not necessarily amount to self-reference, a crucial aspect of Gadamer’s understanding of how meaning operates in literature. However, self-reference is not just about the production of meaning, for Gadamer. For in his claim that the poetic word does not even exist without being

understood, we have our first inkling of a Gadamerian ontology of language insofar as this recursiveness overcomes what Gadamer refers to in Part Three of *Truth and Method*, as “*Sprachvergeffenheit*,” the forgetting of language that characterizes most of the history of philosophical discourse and which occurs whenever language is construed in purely referential terms, as a mere instrument used to denote reality, rather than as a phenomenon of ontological significance in its own right. The philosophical tradition, in other words, allows language itself to “disappear” in much the same way that the nonliterary text disappears in favor of the subject matter to which it refers.

But the self-referentiality of the eminent text has a special status with respect to spoken language as well. On the one hand, insofar as the poetic text stands by itself in its lack of outward referentiality, it also stands apart from any prior speaking, which is to say that it does not refer back (or forward, for that matter) to any specific external linguistic utterance as, say, the text of a speech does, or the record of a legal proceeding, or the minutes of a meeting, or the text of a play. The poem does call out for recitation, but, for Gadamer, no actual verbalizing of the text can ever quite do justice to the poem as a literary work of art. And, while some forms of literature do demand to be read out loud, lyric poetry in particular “cannot be read aloud,” says Gadamer, because the speech must be a meditative speech” (1985, 249). In other words, one hears a poem best not with one’s ears but with what he calls the “inner ear.” And, though he is never entirely explicit about what he means by this, the inner ear is presumably nothing more than the way a poem sounds (or resounds?) in our minds when we read it silently. As he puts it, “My thesis is now that the literary work of art has its existence more or less for the inner ear. The inner ear apprehends the ideal meaning in language, something nobody ever can hear. The ideal form of language, then, demands something unattainable from the human voice, and that is exactly the mode of being of a literary text” (Gadamer 1985, 248). Hence, while Gadamer finds himself in agreement with the Plato of the “Seventh Letter” and the Socrates of the *Phaedrus* that the peculiar weakness of the written work as a series of propositions is that it cannot defend itself because it is detached from the original speaker and the circumstances in which it was originally uttered, and that speech as dialogue is therefore, as he says, “ahead” of writing, the audible voice, nonetheless, is never adequate to the literary text, which is therefore ahead of language (as speech) because the intentions of the author are essentially irrelevant to its full meaning, which cannot be said of most propositional texts. For Gadamer, “What is truly unique to it is the fact that a literary text raises its voice from itself, so to speak, and speaks in nobody’s name, not in the name of a god or a law but from itself! Now I maintain the following: the ‘ideal speaker’ of such a word is the ideal reader!” (2007, 145). Presumably, then, the “ideal reader” of the poem would not be the author or even a very skilled actor, but the “inner voice,” the voice that speaks when we read silently. In literature, then, it is the author of the text and his or her intentions that disappear rather than the text itself or language, which, far from disappearing, actually comes into its own in the poetic work.

However, it is not that the enunciated sounds of the words in a poem are irrelevant—quite the contrary. For Gadamer, the verbal sound and shape of the words, their tone and rhythm, are completely essential to and inseparable from their meaning. This inseparability, in fact, is what constitutes the text as text: “Just as the word ‘text’ really means an inter-wovenness of threads

that does not ever again allow the individual threads to emerge, so, too, the poetic text is a text in the sense that its elements have merged into a unified series of words and sounds” (Gadamer 1980, 6). In his 1985 essay, “Philosophy and Literature,” he adds, “We have an insoluble network in a good poem, one so thickly intermeshed of sound and meaning that even small changes in the text are able to destroy the entire poem” (1985, 254). Thus, the eminent text is, for Gadamer, the only true text in the sense of something woven, intertwined, a “textile” in which the sound and the meaning constitute the warp and weft of a fabric that would fall apart completely were any of its threads pulled. A poem, therefore, is nothing without enunciation, but that enunciation is inevitably diminished whenever a particular speaker recites it out loud because he or she can never do justice to, and the outer ear can never adequately capture, every possible nuance or shade of meaning that a great poem is capable of. More importantly, however, the verbal recitation of the poem is inevitably occasional and thus a temporal occurrence in which the spoken “text” fades away immediately upon completion. The phenomenon of reading and listening with the inner ear, however, while it too will never exhaust the possibilities of a poetic work of art, has a way of dispensing with this temporal aspect insofar as the text, as he says, “stands written” (Gadamer 1986, 114), which is to say that it does not fade away but remains present. And not only does this persistence, this “standing written,” in some sense account for the timelessness of a text (the sense in which a poetic work, just as in other artistic genres, might come to be considered a great work of art, a so-called “classic” or a “masterpiece”), it also allows us an insight into the ontology of language in a way that propositional texts do not.

If its self-referentiality exempts it from the ephemeral nature of propositional texts (and even the spoken word) and thus brings the poetic word to “stand” (or perhaps “stand out”), this would seem to have ramifications for the temporality of the literary text, which, for Gadamer, is of great ontological significance. When it comes to a simple message (or most nonliterary texts, for that matter, which Gadamer refers to as belonging to “ordinary discourse”), its referential function establishes a separation, a distance, between the text and its meaning, and, because the text itself is transient, a certain temporality attends to it. It functions as a mere stage on the way to what is really of interest, that is, the subject matter of the text. On the other hand, the fact that a lyric poem is not about anything but itself means that this distancing is eliminated, and this particular kind of temporality no longer obtains because there is no separate referent. There are only the words themselves; the text is everything and, as such, does not disappear but persists and presents itself, shows itself, as itself and not in relation to something else. In “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” he observes that “the poem does not fade, for the poetic word brings the transience of time to a standstill. It too ‘stands written,’ not as a promise or as a pledge, but as a saying where its own presence is in play” (1986, 114). This would seem to imply that poetry’s “eminence” is not simply an epithet that Gadamer employs to characterize it as somehow different from other modes of discourse and, therefore, something special or even unique; rather, insofar as it “stands written,” the “e-minence” of the eminent text, its “standing out,” also serves as an implicit description of its ontological status with respect to language itself. Unlike ordinary discourse, the fact that the literary text “demands to become present in its linguistic appearance and not just to carry out its function of conveying a message” (1989a, 182) has profound implications for our understanding of

language itself, insofar as it explains why, as he says, “In literature we find that language itself comes to appearance in a very special way” (TI 181). In other words, it is only in the literary text, and especially in poetry, that we encounter language as language, and not simply as a medium for communicating a separate subject matter.

However, if the words “standing” and “presence” would seem to suggest a complete lack of temporality, anyone familiar with Gadamer’s work will immediately recognize that, when he uses the phrase “in play” in the aforementioned passage, he does so advisedly. If the word “play” sounds as though it implies some kind of temporality or, at least, motion, it should, because the poetic word is by no means atemporal. It is just that its temporality, like its reference, is turned inward and expresses itself, not as a transient stage in a linear movement toward an understanding of something beyond it, but as the constant and changing relation between sound and meaning, the play that constitutes the very textuality, the fabric, of the poetic text. In this understanding of the literary work of art, in fact, one can see Gadamer bringing his analysis of the role of play in the ontology of the work of art in general, which he develops in [Part I](#) of *Truth and Method*, together with his discussion of the ontology of language in [Part III](#) of that seminal work.<sup>3</sup> And, given that Heidegger’s famous essay, “Origin of the Work of Art,” serves Gadamer as a primary impetus for his understanding of the art in general, it is only appropriate that he would lean on a Heideggerian notion of temporality, when he explains that, “The temporal structure of this movement is something I call ‘whiling’ [*Verweilen*], a lingering that occupies this presentness and into which a mediatory discourse of interpretation must enter. Without the readiness of the person who is receiving and assimilating the text to be ‘all ears,’ no poetical text will speak” (1989a, 189). Thus, the poetic word takes on a nonlinear temporality that is not at all static, but is constituted by a kind of internal movement or “whiling,” a movement that Gadamer also characterizes as “play,” and play, for Gadamer, is a kind of dialogical movement that operates in all linguistic understanding. In the poetic text, play manifests itself as an interaction between sound and meaning that entails no subjective control because the reader is not in charge of this movement but is, instead, taken up by it. And it is in this dialectical interplay of sound and meaning, as the reader’s world and the world of the text come together in what Gadamer famously calls “*die Horizontverschmelzung*,” (1989b) a fusion (or, better, a ‘blending’) of their respective horizons, that understanding occurs, and it is within this dialectical phenomenon of understanding that Gadamer finds the real ontological power or “valence” of the poetic word.

In [Part I](#) of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer lays out for us the history of aesthetics and takes issue with the kind of “aesthetic consciousness” that takes the work of art as an object of study and evaluation. Instead, he argues that “play” constitutes the mode of existence of the work of art and that the work of art is not fully present until it is experienced. In his discussion of how an artistic image or picture (*Bild*), such as a painting or an artistic photograph, differs from a mere copy of something (*Abbild*), like, for example, a passport photo, he points out that, unlike the copy, the image is not merely trying to show us the original as accurately as possible, that is, to merely present the original to us in a different form; instead, the image “represents” the original somewhat in the way that a lawyer or an agent represents his or her client. Whether or not the client is physically present in the courtroom, he or she is legally present insofar as the

lawyer is there in his or her stead. But the lawyer is not simply a cipher or a stand-in for the client but, in a way, combines with the client to create something greater (at least in legal terms) than the client would be alone. Gadamer's contention is that the artistic picture is not just something physically new in its own right, nor is it simply a stand-in for the thing it is depicting; rather, in its relation to the original (*Urbild*), it actually constitutes an "increase in being" for that original in at least two ways. First, the picture re-presents the original, not as it ordinarily appears, but in a new way; that is to say, it shows us something new about the original that would not be apparent in a more mundane encounter with it. Second, and rather more subtly, the image increases the being of the original to the extent that the thing depicted is only the original insofar as it has been depicted. The original, in other words, would not be an original without the existence of the image. This is perhaps easier to see in the German: the "*Urbild*" is only an "*Urbild*" in relation to a "*Bild*." Otherwise, one would never call it this.

Gadamer does include the literary work of art in his discussion of aesthetic ontology in *Truth and Method*, but it is almost as afterthought, and he focuses on the novel as his exemplar rather than the poem. It is apparently not until his later writings, some of which I have invoked here, including his extensive ruminations on poets such as Friedrich Hölderlin, Rainer-Maria Rilke, Stephan Georg, and (perhaps most significantly) Paul Celan<sup>4</sup> that he begins to understand the poem, precisely because of its linguistic nature, as having even greater ontological significance than the plastic arts. In his essay, "On the Truth of the Word," in fact, Gadamer asks the following question with regard to poetic expression (or *Aussage*): "What is it that is there in everything that is said and comes to stand before us, when the *Aussage* takes place or happens?" (2007, 148). If simply posing the question in this way shows us that he is thinking of poetry in very different terms from those of traditional aesthetics or literary criticism, his answer takes us squarely into Heideggerian territory: "I think it is self-presence, the being of the 'there' [*Sein des 'Da'*], and not what is expressed as its objective content. There are no poetic objects, only poetic presentations of objects" (2007, 148). Heidegger, of course, tells us that the human being "dwells poetically" (1971), and his most famous way of expressing this is to refer to language as "the house of being" (1993). Gadamer will follow his mentor into the ontological realm of language, but if Heidegger sees language as the house of being (otherwise understood as the 'Da' or the 'there' of being), then Gadamer's will express it somewhat differently when he says that "being that can be understood is language" (1989b). That is, human beings do not simply possess language as a tool for communication or a more or less transparent lens through which to view the world, they actually exist linguistically. Language, in other words, is the mode of human existence in the world, and, because of the fundamental linguisticity (*Sprachlichkeit*) of human being, our mode of understanding is linguistic, and, consequently, what we can understand of the world is inevitably linguistic as well. This is not to say that nothing in the world exists apart from human beings or language; it is just that language represents the world in the way that the picture represents the original. The original, in some way, gains being through being represented, and Gadamer's later work not only extends this formulation to the poetic word, it does so with a rather profound difference: "It is not so much the thing said in the sense of expressing an objective content that now gains in being as rather it is being as a whole. ... The word is not an element of the world like colors

or forms that can be fitted into a new order of things. Rather, every word is itself already an element of a new order of things and therefore is itself potentially this order in its entirety. When a word resonates, a whole language and everything it is able to say is called forth—and it knows how to say everything” (OTW 152). Thus, it is not that the ontological valence of the poem is simply, as with the picture, that it increases the being of what it represents, but, because the medium of poetry is language, and the poem does not refer to anything beyond itself, it only refers back to itself—as language. Consequently, if a poem can be said to represent anything, then what is “re-presented” in it is language itself, because, for Gadamer, it is only through the hermeneutic interplay between the whole of language and individual words that anything can mean anything at all.

So, whether or not we are speaking in strictly poetic, literary, or even textual terms, if we do understand hermeneutics straightforwardly as “interpretation theory,” and if we understand interpretation broadly as a process of understanding or arriving at meaning, then we are still left with the question of how we are to understand (or interpret) the words “understanding” and “meaning,” which, in turn, raises the obvious question of how to “understand” whatever explanation we might offer for these words, and so on—a process that might be characterized as a potentially infinite (and therefore futile and empty) logical regression, or, insofar as each chain of successive interpretations might lead inevitably back to the original term, a seemingly vicious (and therefore futile and empty) logical circle—and yet, we do understand, and we do find meaning in the world. Gadamer is not alone in characterizing this phenomenon as the so-called “hermeneutic circle,” the play or interplay between part and whole, text and context, the individual words and the entirety of language, that allows understanding to occur and meaning to emerge without becoming vicious or futile or empty. But Gadamer’s great innovation is to see this emergence of meaning as a kind of dialectical and dialogical “*Aufhebung*,” a sort of Hegelian sublation of the antithesis of whole and part in the emergence of something new, an emergence that occurs in every instance of understanding, including textual understanding, and (at least in his later writings) the literary text, and the lyric poem in particular, that is to say, the eminent text, seems to have emerged for him as the quintessential exemplary moment of this phenomenon.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Although I think Gadamer tends to overestimate the efficacy of computer translations of complicated texts, even if they are primarily informational, as anyone who has tried to use the translate function in Google or a web browser to figure out what a foreign Web page is all about can attest.
- <sup>2</sup> This, of course, would seem to raise the second-order question of the status of the text of the interpretation itself, the critic’s own text, but, as Gadamer puts it, the discourse of the interpreter is not itself a text, rather “it serves the text” (1989a, 180).
- <sup>3</sup> See especially 1989b, Part I, Section II: “The Ontology of the Work of Art and Its Hermeneutic Significance,” and Part III, Section 3, “Language as Horizon of a Hermeneutic Ontology.”
- <sup>4</sup> For one of the most illuminating texts in the regard, I would recommend Gadamer’s essays on Celan, especially, “*Wer bin Ich und Wer bist Du?*” (“Who Am I and Who Are You?”), which have been collected and translated into English (Gadamer 1997), and I would

particularly recommend Gerald Bruns' introduction to the volume, to which the present essay owes a great debt.