

## **Hans-Georg Gadamer**

According to H.-G Gadamer hermeneutic process involves not only the moments of understanding and of interpretation but also the moment of interpretation, that is to say, understanding oneself is a part of this process.

It is therefore also a serious mistake to think that the universality of understanding includes within it something like a harmonizing attitude or a basic conservatism with regard to our social world. To understand the structures and ordering of our world, to understand ourselves with each other in this world, just as much presupposes critique and struggle with what has grown rigid or outdated as it does the recognition or defense of the existing order of things. p. 97

H.-G. Gadamer: *Language and Understanding*. The Gadamer Reader. Bouquet of the Later writings. Edited by Richard Palmer. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press 2007, p. 97

### **Gadamer's conception of word**

To speak of the first word is a contradiction in itself. There is always already a system of words that is the basis for the meaning of each word.

But when a word comes into being, this is certainly not how it happens. A word introduces *itself*. A word only becomes a word when it breaks and enters into communicative usage. In this connection – Gadamer argues – we cannot consider language and word as something like an instrument of the language user. The conception of language as an instrument suggests that words are like something one has in one's pocket and when one uses them one just pulls them out of one's pocket, as if linguistic usage were at the whim of the user of language. But language is not dependent on this or that user. In reality, language

usage shows us that ultimately the language refuses to be misused. For it is language itself that prescribes what will be linguistically acceptable. This should not be taken to mean some kind of mythologizing of language; rather, that claim of language can never be reduced to what an individual subjectivity intends. It belongs to the way of being of language [Seinsweise der Sprache] that *we* and not just one of us but indeed all of us are the ones who are speaking. Ibid. The Gadamer Reader, p.105.

### **Understanding and Interpretation.**

Understanding and interpretation have to do with the basic relationship of human beings to each other and to the world. German term *Verstehen* comes to mean “to have appreciation for something”, to comprehend it [für etwas Verstandnis haben]. The ability to understand is a fundamental endowment of man, one that sustains his communal life with others. Understanding takes place by way of language and partnership of conversation.

H.-G. Gadamer: *Text and interpretation*. In: The Gadamer Reader, p. 156-151, quoted place p. 158.

### **Gadamer and Heidegger on understanding**

I followed Heidegger’s raising of the concept of understanding to the status of an existential – that is, to a fundamental categorical determinant of human existence.

### **Interpretation**

What is the literal meaning of the word *interpretes* ?

This term refers to someone who stands between and therefore has first of all the primordial function of the interpreter of languages, someone who stands

between speakers of various languages and through intermediary speaking brings the separated persons together.

Ibid., p. 179.

The discourse of the interpreter is itself not a text: rather, it *serves* a text. This does not mean, however, that the contribution of the interpreter to the manner in which the text is heard would completely disappear. The contribution is just not thematic, not something as objective as the text, rather it has entered in the text.

Ibid., p. 180.

### **What is a relationship between text and reader?**

When the text interpreter overcomes what is alienating in the text and thereby helps the reader to an understanding of the text, his own stepping back is not a disappearance in any negative sense; rather, it is an entering into the communication in such a way that the tension between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader is resolved. Gadamer calls this *a fusion of horizons* [*Horizontverschelzung*]. The separated horizons, like the different standpoints, merge with each other. The process of understanding a text tends to captivate and take the reader up into that which the text says, and in this fusion the text disappears. But not in the case of *literature*! That is to say, that do not disappear in our act of understanding them, but instead stand there confronting our understanding with normative claims, and stand continually before every new way the text can speak. Ibid., p. 180.

Literary text are only authentically there when they come back to themselves. They fulfill the true meaning of the text, so to speak, from out of themselves: they speak. Literary texts are such texts that in reading them aloud one must also listen to them, if only with the inner ear; and if one recites, one not only listens but inwardly speaks with them. These texts attain their true existence only when one has learned them “by heart”. Then they live in memory, in remembrance by the great bard or the lyric singers. As if written in the soul, they are on their way to *scripturality* [*Schriftlichkeit*]. Ibid., s. 180.

A literary text is not just the rendering of a spoken into a fixed form. Indeed, a literary text does not refer back to an already spoken word at all. This fact has hermeneutic consequences. In this case, interpretation is not longer merely a means of getting back to an original expression of something and mediating it to the present. Instead, the literary text is text in a most special sense, text in the highest degree because it does *not* point back to the repetition of some primordial act of oral utterance. Rather, a poetic text in his own right prescribes all repetitions and speech acts out of itself. No speaking can ever completely fulfill what is prescribed in a poetic text. The text of a poem exercises a normative function that does not refer back either to an original utterance or to the intention of the speaker but is something that seems to originate on itself, so that in the felicity of its success, the poem surprises and overwhelms even its author.

H.-G. Gadamer: *Text and interpretation*. In: *The Gadamer Reader*, p. 156-151, quoted place p. 181.