Professor's Notes

Gadamer and Interpretation

I. Preliminary Remarks

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) was a German philosopher who became known later in his career for his work on, and the advancement of, philosophical hermeneutics. As Gadamer himself explains in the assigned reading, the word 'hermeneutics' is a synonym of the word 'interpretation'. As a discipline, hermeneutics was for a very long time associated with the interpretation of texts, specifically religious texts (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, for example, all have a long standing tradition of textual interpretation). However, in the hands of philosophers—particularly in the hands of Gadamer—hermeneutics becomes a philosophical discipline that looks to apply the practice of interpretation beyond its historically narrow focus of textual interpretation. In fact, the first few pages of Gadamer's 'Aesthetics and Hermeneutics' reflects on the issue of whether works of art can be considered an appropriate subject for philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer, of course, asserts that works of art are indeed within the realm of hermeneutics' attention. As we will see, as long as we accept that works of art communicate something, or have something to say, as it were, and thus offer something to be understood, then art is a proper subject for interpretation. The general idea of hermeneutics is that interpretation happens only if there is something to be communicated, and thus something to be understood. And this, we know already now from reading other philosophers and artists, is very much the case with of works of art. In this essay, 'Aesthetics and Hermeneutics' Gadamer attempts to make clear what is the task of hermeneutics when focusing on a work of art.

II. What is Hermeneutics?

Gadamer spends the first few paragraphs of the essay considering the issue of whether art is, or not, an appropriate subject for philosophical hermeneutics. This question is significant because, as I said above, hermeneutics was traditionally limited to textual interpretation. Gadamer, however, envisions a wider universe for the possibility of interpretation. For Gadamer, the main condition for something to fall within the purview of hermeneutics is that it communicate or express

something. And art, as a human creation, is certainly a vehicle for meaning. However, before we tackle the relation between hermeneutics and art, it is pertinent ask and answer: What is hermeneutics? Gadamer provides a brief overview of its history and transformation into the version of the discipline he champions: philosophical hermeneutics.

The name itself, 'hermeneutics', gives us some indication of what the discipline is about. The word 'hermeneutics' comes from the name of the Greek god Hermes, who was the messenger god. Hermes was the bearer of information, and thus he was the bearer of meaning—as such, he carried information that required to be listened and understood. In this sense, hermeneutics is the practice of interpreting meaning that is not completely explicit (particularly in texts). In other words, hermeneutics becomes the deciphering of meaning there where meaning has been intended—that is, there where something is to be understood—but which is nevertheless not evident in what is said. "Hermeneutics", Gadamer points out, "operates wherever what is said is not immediately intelligible" ('Aesthetics and Hermeneutics', p. 98). Thus, the original or traditional practice of hermeneutics works under the assumption that misunderstanding is the fundamental threat of meaning and interpretation. Hermeneutics plays an important role in highlighting that which bears meaning, but meaning which is not readily understood, and thus which stands to be misunderstood. However, as Gadamer construes it, originally hermeneutics mostly highlighted confusion and misunderstanding, but it didn't guarantee that what it interpreted was true.

Gadamer points out that in the hands of the German romantics, hermeneutics entered a *second* phase: that of avoiding misunderstanding (not merely highlighting it). Gadamer seems to assume that in this second phase, hermeneutics looks at the interpretative process as a way of getting rid of any possible misunderstanding. In contrast to the first phase of hermeneutics, Gadamer seems to suggest that in the second phase, the assumption is that there is a possible true meaning to unveil in the process of interpretation. However, what Gadamer finds compelling about these two "phases" in the history of hermeneutics is that they always worked under the assumption that there is *something* to be understood. He finds the task of interpreting similar to the task of translating. That is, he suggests that interpreting is similar to the task of making what is meaningful in one language understood and clear in another. In this sense, Gadamer points out that all language works this way—that is, language works with the idea that meaning is to be understood.

In the hands of Gadamer we can say that hermeneutics enters a third phase. No longer is

hermeneutics narrowly limited to the interpretation of texts. With Gadamer hermeneutics assumes that other human creations—like art—behave similarly to language, in the sense that they carry meaning that requires to be understood. In looking at art as a language that calls for, or demands, interpretation, hermeneutics finds itself departing from its traditional role of focusing *only* on texts, and of merely avoiding misunderstanding. However, philosophical hermeneutics looks to also be more systematic than previous conceptions of hermeneutics. Since philosophical hermeneutics deals with human creations that are, as Gadamer points out, non-linguistic—like most art, except literature and poetry—hermeneutics calls for a more rigorous and organized approach to the act of interpretation.

III. What is Art?

In the context of reading and discussing Gadamer's essay, the question 'What is art?' takes on a slightly different sense. Although on page 99 of the essay, Gadamer doesn't ask the question explicitly, his discussion of the difference between sources and vestiges, is driven by this question, albeit within the context of *philosophical hermeneutics*. Gadamer points out that more traditional conceptions of hermeneutics distinguished between *sources* and *vestiges*. Gadamer makes clear that "*vestiges* are fragments of a past world that have survived and assist us in the intellectual reconstruction of the world of which they are a remnant. *Sources*, on the other hand, constitute a linguistic tradition, and thus serve our understanding of a linguistically interpreted world" ('Aesthetics and Hermeneutics', p. 99; my italics). The difference seems to be this: whether we are talking about texts or objects, vestiges are pieces of a fuller version of something—a text, a tool, part of a building, etc.—which only portrays a *fragment* of the worldview or culture that created it. A vestige offers a portion of what was a more complete view of the world or culture it belonged to, and thus offers *limited* information about it. We can imagine that, as only a trace of a former culture, a vestige posits a more difficult challenge for hermeneutics, since so much might remain unknown. A source, in contrast, is a more complete text (in this instance Gadamer seems to be limiting himself to texts only) which offers a fuller view, and thus offers a more complete interpretation of the worldview or culture that engendered it. Think of it as the difference between finding only two or three pages of an old book—a vestige—versus finding a whole book—the source. By having access to the whole book, you can read it in its entirety and learn about whatever

it has to offer. As such, a complete book offers a fuller view of the culture it belongs to. If you only have access to a few pages, you'll hardly make out what the whole book was originally about.

The question that captures Gadamer's attention is: What sort of thing is art, for hermeneutics? Is it a *source*, or is it a *vestige*? To be candid: Gadamer doesn't offer a straightforward answer. As non-linguistic creations, works of art, for the most part, seem to be a type of vestige. A work of art represents a portion of the worldview or culture in which it was created. But this seems to be merely a superficial appearance. Works of art can also be seen, and in fact sometimes are treated, as sources. That is, a work of art carries a world of meaning, as it were—it carries with it the world or culture in which it was created. Its passing on to others, as well as its preservation throughout time, is not unlike the way sources (in their literal sense, as documents) are treated. We can surmise that this is so because of the "amount" of meaning a work of art can bear. A (successful) work of art, in a sense, always means more than just what the artist intended it to mean with it. It also means more than just ordinary fragments of a world or culture—despite being akin to fragment of a culture, a work of art projects more meaning than any ordinary fragment. However, unlike literal sources (like documents), the non-linguistic dimension of works of art place them somewhere in between sources and vestiges; they are almost in a category of their own. Gadamer says,

> The work of art says something to the historian: it says something to each person as if it were said especially to him, as something present and contemporaneous. Thus our task is to understand the meaning of what it says and to make it clear to ourselves and others. Even the nonlinguistic work of art, therefore, falls within the province of the proper task of hermeneutics. It must be integrated into the self-understanding of each person. ('Aesthetics and Hermeneutics', p. 100)

The last sentence in the passage above is important. Gadamer is suggesting that one way in which works of art are different from sources and vestiges is that the meaning they carry is one that is not only limited to the context or culture they were created in; they also bear a meaning that often requires the individual audience members to include themselves, as it were, *in* the experience of what the work of art means. In simpler terms, this is what Gadamer means: Works of art are powerful bearers of meaning, insofar they convey meaning without appealing to language. Art is, as Gadamer points out, its own language.[1] Works of art carry the weight of the meaning given to

[1] The exception to this, of course, is literature and poetry. However, a case can be made that even literature and poetry do not use language in an ordinary way—thus, they often do not mean in a literal sense, but in an allegorical or metaphorical way, defying the ordinary use of language. Thus, even literature and poetry behave similarly to other

them by the artist, but they bear the weight of the world that they were created in, or at least a large part of it. However, works of art are peculiar in the sense that they communicate in a very intimate and personal way. When we attend to a work of art, we often feel that it speaks *to us*—this painting that I see right now, or this piece of music that I listen to, is as if directed *at me*. As I attend to the work of art, and understand it, I understand myself in relation to it—it is as if my subjectivity is suddenly included in the world of that work of art. It is also in this way that art breaks away from the binary classification of being either a vestige or a source.

However, we must be careful how we take what Gadamer means by this. He doesn't mean that I can make whatever I want of the work of art. He is not speaking of forcing an interpretation *on to* the work of art. Rather, from the hermeneutic perspective attending to a work of art requires a certain amount of effort, and a certain disposition.

IV. The Hermeneutic Disposition

Gadamer argues that the interpretation carried out by hermeneutics is not just any interpretation we impose on what is being said to us. There is, for Gadamer, an ideal disposition in order for interpretation to unfold in the proper way. Gadamer illustrates this well in the first paragraph of page 101. He makes clear that understanding, from the hermeneutical perspective, doesn't simply involve what is being explicitly said to us. "Understanding speech", he points out, "is not understanding the wording of what is said in the step-by-step executions of word meanings" ('Aesthetics and Hermeneutics', p. 101). In other words, what Gadamer means is that even in the plainest of linguistic communications, there is always more to understand than simply the words spoken. The act of communication goes beyond what is expressed immediately by the words—there is more than meets the eye to the event of communication. In this sense, understanding is itself an event that requires interpretation, not because something is intentionally concealed, but because as humans, we always mean more than what we intend to mean. In this sense, the act of understanding that is invoked by hermeneutics requires a more attentive disposition than we would ordinarily assume in an ordinary interaction. It requires an attentiveness that remains constantly open to what is being communicated, including the surplus of meaning that comes along with the intended meaning. "We cannot understand without wanting to understand, that is, without wanting

non-linguistic forms of art, insofar they mean in spite of being language-bound.

to let something be said" ('Aesthetics and Hermeneutics', p. 101). This subtle remark by Gadamer serves as a way of pointing out that hermeneutics requires a disposition of openness and attentiveness to the unfolding of meaning. And this seems to be particularly important when attending to a work of art.

In attempting to explain what the experience of being confronted by a work of art is about, from the hermeneutical perspective, Gadamer covers at least three important points: 1) The disclosure of unexpected meaning; 2) the language of art as speaking to self-understanding; and 3) the excess of meaning inherent in works of art.

Regarding the first point Gadamer says:

> The experience of art does not only understand a recognizable meaning, as historical hermeneutics does in its handling of texts. The work of art that says something confronts us itself. That is, it expresses something in such a way that what is said is like a discovery, a disclosure of something previously concealed. The element of surprise is based on this. "So true, so filled with being" [*So wahr, so seiend*] is not something one knows in any other way. ('Aesthetics and Hermeneutics', p. 101)

Gadamer is suggesting that when we attend to a work of art, it compels us to attend to it, or it lures us into its world, as it were, in order to pay attention to what it communicates. But in contrast to reading a text (like a historical document, i.e., a source), which states, for the most part, explicitly what it wants to say, a work of art is not completely forthcoming. This, we can assume, is because of the non-linguistic nature of art. It is unequivocal that all art means, in the sense that every work of art is a work of intention (this is something that Kant certainly got right). But works of art are no entirely explicit about *what* they mean. Thus, the hermeneutical effort consists in attending to the work—in paying it enough attention as to let it say what it wants to, as if almost under its breath (as if the work of art were telling us a secret). In this sense, uncovering what a work of art communicates, Gadamer points out, is often something surprising. A successful work of art, we can surmise, always leads to a moment of unexpected discovery. The hermeneutical act—the interpretation of a work of art—becomes an experience. But not just any ordinary experience—it becomes an experience that changes, even if only slightly, our understanding of the world. Or, as Gadamer says, a work of art involves the "task of integrating" the work of art "into the whole of one's orientation to a world" ('Aesthetics and Hermeneutics', p. 101).

This change in orientation brought on by the surprise that is the unveiling of the meaning of a work of art leads directly to Gadamer's second point: a work of art becomes almost personal. Gadamer remarks: "The language of art is constituted precisely by the fact that it speaks to the

self-understanding of every person, and it does this as ever present and by means of its own contemporaneousness" ('Aesthetics and Hermeneutics', p. 102). To a certain extent Gadamer means that a work of art is experienced as if it were directed at us. Part of the experience of understanding a work of art involves being pulled into its world. This doesn't mean that we become part of the work of art; however, in understanding what the artist meant with it, we are also *as if* transported into the world of the work of art. As such, this experience forces us, as the audience, to reflect on ourselves; and thus, at that moment, we are forced to reflect on how the work relates to us, and how we relate to it. It is in this sense that Gadamer means that works of art speak to our own self-understanding—it is in this sense that I mean to say that art becomes a personal experience too. If the work of art is effective, and our understanding of it is successful, this self-understanding involves also, as Gadamer pointed out before, a change in our orientation towards the world. However, we must be careful not to misunderstand what Gadamer is saying. He doesn't mean that this experience of self-understanding requires us to force our own personal interpretation on to the work of art. Interpretation is not an isolated and subjective experience, and thus not a subjective reading of the work. Instead, what is personal about it is that we notice something about the work—we notice something we hadn't seen in it initially. In general, from a hermeneutical perspective, "[u]nderstanding does not occur when we try to intercept what someone wants to say to us by claiming we already know it" ('Aesthetics and Hermeneutics', p. 102). Thus, the personal dimension of the experience of interpretation is not about imposing a meaning on to the work. Instead, it is about learning how to let the work of art speak to us. This, in fact, seems to be part of what Gadamer believes is the experience of self-understanding that is triggered by the work of art—learning how to allow the work of art to do its work, as it were.

Finally, what I'm describing as the work that a work of art does, is the task of communicating more meaning than what the artist intended to convey with the work. Gadamer asserts that "the language of art means the excess of meaning that is present in the work itself. The inexhaustibility that distinguishes the language of art from all translation into concepts rests on this excess of meaning" ('Aesthetics and Hermeneutics', p. 102). What Gadamer means by this is that, although a work of art is created by an artist, and as such it means what the artists intended with it, a work of art means *also* much more than its intended meaning. In other words, apart from meaning whatever it is that an artist intended to mean, a work of art carries with it a surplus of meaning. A work of art brings with it also a portion of the web of meaning of the world or culture

the artists belongs to. In this sense, the excess of meaning that Gadamer describes art as carrying is the life that surrounds the artist and the work of art—art is, in this sense, a vessel for the culture and life that engendered it. In fact, from what Gadamer says, although what the artist intended with the work is important, from the hermeneutical perspective the personal connection that the work holds with the artist is more or less irrelevant. The work, in this sense, should be able to stand on its own, as it were—a successful work of art becomes independent from its creator, and reflects much more that what is individual author meant.

With this we can return to an idea Gadamer had introduced earlier in the essay: that the task of hermeneutics is to bridge two worlds by means of interpretation—much like translation does. Although Gadamer initially rejects the notion that art fits into this way of characterizing what hermeneutics does, eventually Gadamer has to give up this resistance. Art, as an object of hermeneutical interpretation, plays the same general role as any other object of interpretation does: it is a vessel for meaning which connects two worlds. We can surmise, then, that this means that the hermeneutical interpretation of a work of art does in fact bridge two worlds: the world of the artist and the world of the audience. As such, Gadamer sees works of art as also bridging, or even bypassing, the passage of time. Gadamer's way of seeing it is not so much that a past work of art is inherited into our time, nor is it fully that we, as an audience, in interpreting the work are transported back into the time of the work. Instead, the work and the audience exist, even if only for a moment, unified in a unique form of present, a now that only belongs to the connection between the work and the audience. In this sense, hermeneutics aids in highlighting the timelessness of art.