

The (Impossible) Future of Hermeneutics

1. Introduction¹

In his 1972 essay, “Semantics and Hermeneutics,” Gadamer comments, “Hermeneutics achieves its actual productivity only when it musters sufficient self-reflection to reflect simultaneously about its own critical endeavours, that is, about its own limitations and the relativity of its own position.”² The irony in this statement is obvious. Hermeneutic consciousness arises at the point when consciousness is made aware of its hermeneutic failures. To put it another way, hermeneutic reflection is irrevocably bound up and associated with the impossibility of hermeneutics itself. This is to put our theme very narrowly but such succinctness has the virtue of bringing into immediate focus the wide area of debate with which this presentation is concerned.

Impossibility is, perhaps, a matter of perspective. Given what appears to be the formal impossibility of hermeneutics, the argument presented here suggests that any consideration of the future of hermeneutics must respond to the hidden implications of current critiques of the discipline many of which are, if carefully thought through, far from negative. Furthermore, the question of hermeneutics and its future turns on another: how binding are those philosophical commitments which seem to render hermeneutics impossible? Two *Leitmotifen* in Nietzsche’s

¹ This paper was first presented at Limerick, Eire. I would like to thank Drs. Eileen Brennan and Tony O’Connor for their constructive responses.

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. D. Linge, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976, p. 93,

thought initiate our our argument, the question of truth and the question of forgetfulness. In Notebook 14 of Spring 1888, Nietzsche subsumes “truth” under the category “value” and commences a critique of the supposed moral values promoting belief in the actuality of truth as something in-itself (totally apart from questions of human evaluation).

The concept of “truth” is *absurd ... the whole realm of “true”, “false” refers only to relations between entities, not to the “in-itself” ...*³

As we shall see, belief in various forms of truth calls the possibility of hermeneutics into question. Truth, it is often claimed, is something that hermeneutics can never arrive at. But, to what extent does (or should) hermeneutics depend, if at all, on a belief in truth? With regard to forgetfulness, in the essay *The Uses and Abuses of History*, Nietzsche points to a virtue that hermeneuticians with their concern for remembrance are themselves prone to forget: living without forgetting is impossible.⁴ Philosophical hermeneutics has become ensnared - some would argue fatally so - in the entailments of procedural distinctions between the sciences and the humanities. There are sound philosophical reasons to suggest that the future of hermeneutics requires the forgetting of such distinctions. Overcoming the pre-occupation with question of truth and thereby displacing the burdensome arts-science distinction requires the development of a relational, participatory epistemology which in turn would secure the future of hermeneutics as a medium of cultural transmission, translation and transformation. To secure a future which can escape the nihilism and the methodological scepticisms which engulf it, hermeneutics must now if not forget its past then transcend it in order to demonstrate its continued relevance to philosophy and cultural transformation. Both advocate and critic alike need to overcome the methodological prejudices of hermeneutics’ past. Re-thinking the notion of *Wahrheitsanspruch* offers a way to re-think the hindrances posed by the demand for methodological legitimacy.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003,, 14(122), p. 258.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. Hollingdale, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p.1983.

Modern hermeneutics is born of the *Methodenstreit* between the *Natur-* and *Geisteswissenschaften* articulated fatefully by Wilhelm Dilthey.⁵ His empathetic historical hermeneutics and its resistance to modes of causal explication in the social world, led such notable critics as Theodor Adorno to strangely judge it as subjectivist: meaning is grasped as the reconstructable act of the human subject.⁶ The discipline has been similarly tarred by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault for whom any appeal to authorial intention betrays the solipsistic romance of subjectivity which, as Nietzsche notes, only discovers in its encounters what it projects into them, i.e. itself.⁷ That Heideggerian and Gadamerian hermeneutics should be similarly slighted is curious; both resist the philosophy of the subject and its inheritance. In his essay *On the Origin of the Art Work*, Heidegger avoids using the term aesthetics precisely because of its association with the *subjectivity* of response. Gadamer is more emphatic. In *Truth and Method* he asserts: “to start with subjectivity is to miss the point.”⁸ Indeed, the aim of philosophical hermeneutics is to discover in all that is subjective the substantiality that determines it.⁹

Despite Gadamer’s appeal to those “substantive” structures of both language and tradition which moderate hermeneutic interventions over and above our willing and doing, his view of tradition is frequently attacked as privileging subjectivity. One of the points we shall make is that any future development of Gadamer’s hermeneutics must pay attention to the contrary, i.e. that

⁵ Recent scholarship has called the history of this strict dualism. In his recent book, *The Invention of Science: A new History of the Scientific Revolution*, London, Penguin 2014, David Wootton puts the cogent argument that it was the New Sciences of Post-Renaissance Europe that brought the humanities (humanism) into European Universities rather than dislodging them from systematic learning. See *London Review of Books*, 29 - 30, 22 September 2016

⁶ Gadamer openly declares his “disavowal of the act of meaning” in the essay “The Nature of Things” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. D. Linge, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977, p. 81.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1968, p. 12- 13.

⁸ Hans Georg Gadamer *Truth and Method*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1989, p. 111.

⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer *op. cit.* p. 302.

his account of the role of the hermeneutic subject in realising the moment of “address” is too weak. It seems that proponent and critic are caught in a binary vice of self-endorsing assumptions. Proponents think that for the sake of methodical respectability hermeneutics’ romantic heritage has to be escaped whilst critics believe that hermeneutics is irredeemably subjectivist. Vattimo is surely right: to escape this predicament hermeneutics must develop a mode of reasoning neither based on a poetry of free association nor upon a scientific model. He and Gadamer frequently allude to the need to develop a rhetorical mode of reasoning. Yet neither cross the River Jordan. The future credibility of hermeneutics depends upon the development of an explicit rhetorical, that is, hermeneutical mode of reasoning. This is tied to what I shall outline below as a participatory epistemology.

2. The Inheritance of Heidegger’s Ontological Turn

In some respects, Heidegger’s ontological inversion of Kant’s analytic was intended to end the epistemological limitations of subject-orientated hermeneutics: Being is no longer subject to the subject but subjects the subject to its epiphanic announcements. The consequences of the “ontological turn” for hermeneutics are radical: it *de facto* renders methodological hermeneutics impossible. As *Bewusstsein* is more being than knowing, knowing can never fully grasp the unfathomable ground of its knowing. For both Heidegger and Gadamer, the claim of truth (*Wahrheitsanspruch*) understood as the event of Being or the “address” of art is prior to the epistemological issue of truth-claims made about the address.¹⁰ The question arises as to the role of the hermeneutic subject in receiving Being’s transmissions. This is an issue on which the future of hermeneutics will turn.

¹⁰ When *Wahrheitsanspruch* is translated as truth claim rather than as the claim of truth, terminological confusion abounds. The conceptual implications of this mis-translation are discussed below in section 5.

Gadamer's understandable wish to avoid a subject-based epistemology prioritises the agency of language over any hermeneutical subject. The disclosure of meaning is not a subjective act but the autonomous act of the language world which breaks open subjective consciousness contrary to the willing and doing of any hermeneutic subject. The problem with this, as Hans Herbert Kögler has pointed out, is that language is elevated to the status of a super-subject before which the hermeneutic subject is prostrate. Dialogue and negotiation are rendered problematic.¹¹ The assertion of the ontological autonomy of language overcompensates for the excesses of philosophical subjectivism by refusing to acknowledge the necessary contribution the hermeneutic subject makes to the event of meaning. Gadamer fails to see that if it is to serve as the inter-active basis for transformative understanding, his commitment to a language ontology requires the development a participatory (relational) epistemology. Indeed, Gadamer's notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte* cannot itself function without selective functions: i.e. those established by the differentials of transmission and reception. Hermeneutics, it would seem, is still caught between the objectivism of regarding meaning as an effect of ontological structures and the subjectivism of judging meaning and its interpretation to be a matter of wilful caprice. A future hermeneutics must surely dissolve the object-subject binary in order to rethink the event of meaning as a participatory interaction between different hermeneutic agencies. It must reconstruct meaning-creation not as a subjective response to an otherwise independent world but as one event within and as an expression of a world which turns out to be nothing other than a totality of inter-acting interpretive processes. It would be to move towards a hermeneutically conceived Being rather than a hermeneutics of Being.

3. The Inevitability of Hermeneutic Failure

The explosive consequences of Heidegger's ontological turn demand that hermeneutics' future evolves not a hermeneutics of Being but a hermeneutically conceived Being. The argument that Being exceeds knowing renders traditional conceptions of hermeneutics as the

¹¹ Hans Herbert Kögler, *The Power of Dialogue*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1996, p. 41

pursuit of what is truly stated or meant classically impossible. The heritage of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer as well as post-structuralist and deconstructive critics collude in the formal impossibility of hermeneutics. The negativity of hermeneutics arises from the following play of elements.

- *The Hermeneutical Differential.* To understand a subject-matter is to differentiate my understanding of what is understood from that which is understood. Understanding is not a unitary but a differential process: it depends on an unclose-able differential space.
- *Hermeneutic Finitude.* All understanding is finite, arrived at from a singular perspective, tradition, or outlook. It is impossible to anticipate all the effects that the object-understood has across the range of perspectives that engage with it. All understanding is finite because subject to change. The objects, processes and circumstances of our understanding are like understanding itself: always in motion. Consciousness can never grasp the totality of the relations of which it is a part: we are always more than we will ever know ourselves to. Whereas for Heidegger Being precedes and is in excess of the beings that know it, for Gadamer Being is not so much incommensurable with being known but exceeds all knowing.
- *Hermeneutical Incompleteness:* If all linguistic meaning is indeterminate, there is always more that can be said of a subject-matter. There can therefore be no formal closure to hermeneutics.
- *Hermeneutic Remainder.* From the above, follows the axiom of excess or remainder: any statement of “x” will always invoke “x+” i.e. those unstated (speculative) determinations of meaning which enable any understanding of x in the first place.
- *Hermeneutical Incommensurability:* Given that the range of meanings attached to a subject matter is indeterminate, no finite interpretation of a subject-matter can be fully commensurate with its object.

The irony is clear., the very pre-suppositions of the hermeneutic operation make failure inevitable: meaning, it would seem is endlessly postponed. Negativity is not only built into the theoretical assumptions of philosophical hermeneutics, but threatens the outcome of any hermeneutic practice. All practical judgements are fallible because:

- Hermeneutical practice is obliged to treat the knowledge available to it as complete and certain and, in consequence, runs the risk of getting its judgements wrong;
- Hermeneutical practice involves choice and decision between possibilities and these are always subject to refutation by events.
- Hermeneutical practice delivers its judgements into an uncertainty of potential applications over which it cannot not preside. Gadamer remarks, “every addition to knowledge is, regarding its significance and consequences, unpredictable.” Particular practical judgements can always, in principle, produce unexpected effects.

The poise and assuredness of the accomplished practitioner may afford a degree of fulfilment but it is invariably momentary. The practical or narrative identity which participation in a practice enables is always vulnerable to being deconstructed by the same horizons of meaning that facilitate its emergence. Being a “situated subject” is not only to be enabled but also to be threatened by the linguistic and historical worlds one is located in. Narrative identities are vulnerable to the infinite varieties of description (or counter-narratives) that being in a language world exposes them to. Furthermore, narrative identities are “vulnerable” because they are connected with several horizons of anticipation and expectation. A practice might be grounded on the pre-supposition of certain linguistic meanings. Yet the polyvalence of meaning suggests that the locally nuanced signs and symbols of one practice can infect and disrupt meanings given to those same signs in another practice. There is also an inevitable dialecticity to participation in

linguistic being: whilst it enables the emergence of a position it is also capable of deconstructing it. What language gives, language can take away. An account of this dynamic is missing from philosophical hermeneutics, a striking omission in need of address.

These observations explain why any hermeneutical practice considered either as the application of a technique, a method of understanding or as a socially emancipatory programme will always be subject failure. There is an unavoidable incommensurability between what a practice seeks or anticipates and the ever changing circumstances in which a practice applies itself. The point is critical: it is that suggests hermeneutic reflexivity and hermeneutic failure are indissociable. The moment interpretive techniques or applied practices fail, hermeneutic reflexivity emerges. Put more strongly, hermeneutic reflexivity is a truth-effect of hermeneutic failure. Hermeneutics has here something in common with Adorno's thought: negative dialectics (hermeneutics) designates a position which includes its own failure, i.e. which produces a truth-effect through its own failure. It might seem that hermeneutic reflexivity is itself the truth effect of hermeneutic failure. Any evidential experience or insight is inseparable from a moment of self-conscious awareness. In this moment, the experiencer becomes aware of her experience, she becomes experienced.

Heidegger, Gadamer and Vattimo accept that in Being, in art or poetry, something fundamental is announced. Yet there is always something negative in such epiphanic events: "experience is always negative" and embodies the ancient axiom *pathei mathos* (learning through suffering). Thus, coming to self reflection, coming to hermeneutical reflection and arriving at the experience of distancing are all the emergent consequences of practical failure. "Every experience worthy of the name," Gadamer suggests, runs counter to expectation." We come to see things that we did not see and now realise that we should have seen. We become aware simultaneously of both our ignorance and arrogance. The formal asymmetry of Being and knowing underwrites the inevitability of practical failure and places a major qualification against

Vattimo's optimism that hermeneutic praxis offers a route to the overcoming of alienation. Not only is hermeneutical reflexivity born of practical failure but in its pursuit of *praxis* it is unavoidably subject to the possibility of further failure.

Yet there is a positivity in the negative dialectic of hermeneutic experience. The moment of failure which is also the moment of consciousness becoming self-aware, marks another truth-effect: the emergence of practical wisdom. The negativity of experience entails humans becoming aware of their finitude. In this, the limits of self-knowledge and practical reasoning are discovered. In moments of failure we do not so much as catch but become caught out by the realisation of what is at play within our practices. In so many words, failure discloses the extent of the practical ignorance that underlies our practical engagements. We become undone by the incommensurability of being and knowing, between being and our conscious doing. The wise practitioner has, then, become aware of the extent of his practical ignorance, of his blindness to what was and is at play in his judgements. The emergence of practical wisdom can be characterised, then, as the truth-effect of failure.

4: Failure Redeemed

“Where the danger is, there also grows the saving power”. (Friedrich Hölderlin

“Ever tried? Ever failed? No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better” (Samuel Beckett)

At the beginning of this reflection we noted Gadamer's remark that “Hermeneutics achieves its actual productivity only when it musters sufficient self-awareness to reflect the limitations of its own position.”¹² The negativity of experience is arguably, hermeneutically speaking, revelatory.

¹² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1976, p. 93

Our argument turns to an affirmation of hermeneutic negativity because of the positivity within it. It is precisely because and when interpretation fails, that an attempt at interpretation can be revelatory. Hermeneutic interpretation is not a method: rather, it offers methodological ploys to solicit the emergence of unexpected insights. As interpretation occurs within horizons of meaning *already* in play, interpretation can both disrupt and be disrupted by inducing new and unexpected possibilities for meaningfulness. It is precisely the linguistic nature of interpretation in the humanities that make disruption and transformation of understanding unavoidable. The humanities are in fact a force for uncertainty: they simultaneously disrupt as well as construct their subject-matters. *Each humanities discipline practises the impossible and yet it is only in the controlled pursuit of the impossible that the unexpectedly possible can arise.* The Irish poet Eavan Boland put it well: in the often nocturnal horizons of language where the as yet unsaid can be as eloquent as the spoken, “things are always waiting to happen” and those things can be “game-changers”, that is, serendipitously rather than methodologically arrived insights capable of transforming a framework of understanding. Hermeneutics and the humanities venture controlled risk.

The negativity of hermeneutic experience is revelatory for the following reasons. Hermeneutic failure is not the equivalent of making an erroneous step in a closed circuit of reasoning. Neither is it a refutation. It concerns becoming conscious of an omission, an oversight, an unjustifiable claim to completeness and even the displacement of one interpretation by another more suggestive. The negative dimension of hermeneutic failure is incontrovertibly connected with becoming progressively aware of how, contrary to expectations, a different way of seeing is possible: something comes to light which displaces one’s former judgement. Consciousness of failure is, then, indissociable from an emergent awareness of overlooked and unremarked ways of thinking: “I should have been alert to this” or “I failed to take account of that.” Consciousness of failure is revelatory precisely *because* something else and something other than my expectation has shown itself to be decisive and in so doing has displaced my former

understanding. This is the basis of the claim that the educative and spiritual importance of hermeneutics lies precisely in the practical pursuit of the impossible.

Two ideas are pertinent here: (1), Wolfgang Iser's claim that "interpretation is basically performative: it makes things happen, and what arises out of this performance are emergent phenomena"¹³ and (2), Gadamer's notion of *der Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit* (the anticipation of completeness). An aspect of any interpretation is its anticipation of completeness i.e. a text moves towards saying this and towards an action suggesting that. The notion of *Vollkommenheit* is not unlike Ricoeur's concept of an ideal text: engagement with a complexity of shifting (textual) elements, develops a provisional image of the whole which becomes what is grasped as that text. The more that complexity is navigated, the greater becomes our knowledge of the projected whole. Furthermore, the more consolidated the image becomes, the more it can be used to judge what is appropriate or not to the reading of that text. The notion of a completeness of understanding, of arriving at an end-interpretation, is of course a fiction but without it, the performative character of hermeneutic interpretation - and what it induces - collapses. This brings us to a pivotal point in the argument: the question is not whether hermeneutic completion is realisable but what the (arguably necessary) pursuit of the unrealisable gives rise to or, in otherwords, what the hermeneutic effects of that pursuit are. The implication is clear. Combining Gadamer and Iser, hermeneutically speaking, the value of the pursuit of the impossible (i.e. *Vollkommenheit*) is its performative capacity to generate adjunctive effects by which the following is meant.

Adorno astutely observes that, "Nothing can be understood in isolation, everything is to be understood only in the context of the whole, with the awkward qualification that the whole in turn lives only in the individual moments". Gadamer's notion that genuine conversation leaves

¹³ Wolfgang Iser, *The Range of Interpretation*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 153.

its participants with an understanding none would have anticipated at its commencement in fact understates the key point: the value of such conversations is that they can often change our understanding of what was never brought into the conversation in the first place. Not only does the whole live on through the elements of conversation but changes and reveals itself differently because of the shifting nature of conversational exchange.

Perhaps because of a strong epistemological bias, hermeneutics has been overwhelmingly concerned with the relationship between the text and its reader. But of course there is more at play in hermeneutic engagement than this. The future of hermeneutics must attend closely to the mapping of such complexity. Of course we want to understand a text, an argument or a musical composition. But we also want to understand so much more than this. We want to understand what they enable us to understand, those unresolved events in our lives, failed relationships, emotional wounds, and the anxieties of identity. Gadamer quite understands that the projection of a semblance of wholeness and completeness is integral to our sense of expectancy and hope for bringing resolution to the endless strands of open meaning running through experience. Further work is needed on Gadamer's notion of concept formation and its bearing on wholeness as an imagined construct. However, the point remains. It is what the pursuit of this impossible brings about - its performative effects - that is key to the present argument.

The horizons of human experience are multiple. We move between and are involved in multiple practices and narratives and their unresolved questions. Every living practice is full of nagging tensions and ambiguities. Commitment to these practices is a commitment to sense making-processes whereby we endeavour to render their ambiguities clear. What links these practices ontologically is the horizon of linguistically. It unlocks the question of how the complexity of our hermeneutic engagements and practices over-lap and inter-lock. The horizon of linguistically ensures that no dialogue, practice or language holds a monopoly on a subject-matter or living concern. We meet with the joys and fears of love in our own horizons as well as

in those of art and literature. It is a gross misrepresentation of hermeneutic consciousness to suppose that we only think about the representation of a subject-matter in a poem that we are engaged with it. The axiom that consciousness is more being than knowing is profoundly pertinent.

There is a world constantly at play in my sub-conscious, the consistently shifting world of my concerns, practices and involvements. These are for the most-part unresolved and ongoing and all of us have anticipations and expectations which cannot be guaranteed. Here we move towards the summation of our argument. The multiple concerns and practices in which we are existentially embedded gain structure and sense from the linguistic and symbolic meanings around which they are built. The polyvalence and indeterminacy of linguistic meaning suggests that the structures through which we and our practices understand themselves are always vulnerable to being destabilised. The values and meanings attached to a set of signs and symbols in one practice can have a destabilising effect on the meanings given to the same symbols in another practice. An emergent meaning in one horizon can prompt an emergency in another. Here we arrive at the thrust of Iser's contention that interpretation is performative, it has effects and brings things about. The hermeneutical dialectic which Iser anticipates can be outlined as follows.

There is no beginning to our hermeneutical involvements. We are from the start already in play, we are all situated subjects located in streams of unresolved experience. To achieve a degree of sense for what is at play within experience, our involvement with a community or with a creative concern, involves projecting an sense of completeness capable of rendering its complexity into an intelligible structure. In formal terms because of the incommensurability of Being and knowing, the interpretive projection of completeness will fail but, as we have seen, that is not the point. It is what the failure of the projection gives rise to that is key. The failure of an interpretation, that is, its displacement by another perspective, is an effect of the emergence of other ways of thinking. Whilst it may disrupt the interpretation projected it can, at the same time,

quite serendipitously re-configure the fields of our other unresolved concerns in potentially revealing and transformative ways. This is one of the most powerful hermeneutical arguments in favour of the humanities. Immersing oneself in those patterns of the meaningful that constitute poetry, literature music and history is to absorb figures of reasoning able to expand repertoires of response to those moments of failure that challenge any practice existential, professional or creative.

Here we arrive at the redemption of hermeneutic failure: it is redeemed by its adjunctive effects. The projection of a determinate interpretation with its anticipation of completeness will in formal terms necessarily fail. But the performative element of that failure - the adjunctive effects it gives rise to - will potentially trigger new and unpredicted alignments of meaning across the numerous horizons of concern that constitute our being. What does this notion of hermeneutic effects point to?

5: Towards a Participatory Hermeneutics.

Developing Gadamer's linguistic ontology, we argue that the participant-subject is always 'positioned', always part situated within a larger nexus. The participant subject is an embodied subject, not standing apart from the sum of relations that constitutes its environment but simultaneously acting on and being acted on by it. Such a subject is always located within a situation that is both historical and linguistic and, in Gadamer's words, "to throw light on it (the situation) is a task that is (can)never entirely completed" (TM 1979 269). To be is to do: participatory-subjects are in effect clusters of activities, not beings that act but actions that have a being insofar as they are effective agencies: their essence is a consequential construct, an effect of and not a pre-requisite for action. Subject-participants are, to use Nietzsche's phrase, multiplicities that act as subjects but are not actual subjects. They are processes of assemblage or

composure that gather received events and possible courses of action into one constantly revising story, identity, or practice. The situated subject is located within a horizontality of multiple dimensions, a complex environment of personal, national, linguistic, professional interests and concerns. Because of its placement in such a “thick” environment of concerns, the situated subject is cross hatched with the competing anticipations and expectancies of the different practices that constitute its being.

The quest for a unifying sense to each practice or project involves the subject of that practice in the projection a guiding leitmotif, an anticipation of completeness. The situated subject is a dialogical, negotiable being. The other can see things about my perspective, my interpretive projections I cannot see. The situated subject needs the other to present perspectives enabling it to think differently about the possibilities within its own. Each (dialogical) position is unfinished and yet unfinishable, “constantly under pressure” to open itself to what is other than itself. The quest for completion is of course impossible but here the impossibility of hermeneutics is redeemed. The situated-subject is grounded in what transcends it, in the infinite nexus of historical, linguistic and cultural meanings whose horizons articulate the tensions of its being. Each “position” is dependent upon and resonant with the sum of inter-actions it is part of. The quest for completeness is thus provocative: though it will fail, its failure is synonymous with the emergence of alternative alignments of meaning. Though such emergences may displace the initial projection of completeness, because of metaphorical associations or analogous lines of reasoning, they will trigger other alignments of meaning capable of bringing to resolution to other fields of hermeneutic engagement. However, if the existential purpose of hermeneutics is to trigger alignments of meaning capable of offering resolution to the ambiguities of experience, has not my argument also failed on a number of levels?

Of course such resolutions are temporary and subject to alteration by the ever changing horizons from which they emerge. All understanding shifts in time and so, as we have seen, any

one projection will fail but that is not the point. Viewed collectively, such failures disclose an emergent pattern or continuity of involvements. The emergence of such narratives are a truth-effect of hermeneutic failures. Say a new emergent interpretation of the ambiguities of an experiential manifold arises. What justifies that interpretation when logically speaking it is but one of many possible contenders? Here we meet, at last, the sceptical ghost haunting this paper: the Kantian ghost of metaphysics past.

Hermeneutics is so often condemned as failing because its claims to truth can never comply with the strict truth-criterion set. If the later are understood epistemologically and include universality, completeness, wholeness, then hermeneutics is judged as failing because its truth-claims can never capture an unconditional world of truth and meaning that there can, in fact, be no experience of. It is becoming increasingly clear that hermeneutics has been wrongly condemned by deconstructive theory for failing to provide what it could never offer - a universal theory of meaning. However, hermeneutics is not theory alone and any attempt to render it as a philosophy of meaning it must fail: philosophy will never be adequate to the complexities of experience. Gadamer did not fully see the consequences of this: to establish a *philosophy* of hermeneutics is to commit hermeneutical hubris. To reflect philosophically, however, on what hermeneutic practices do and to meditate on their effects is quite another matter. Hermeneutics reflection evolves from the fall-out of “evidentiary” experience. Evidentiary experiences be they in art, ethics, or music are in one sense “beyond interpretation” - any single interpretation will in formal terms fail. Yet the elusiveness of such experiences demands a plurality of interpretations, a montage of different genres and textual approaches all of which will bring into conscious play much of what is at play in such experience. The future of hermeneutics looks towards an inter-relational perspectivism grounded in the ontologically explosive nature of evidentiary truth. Even if we grant both that evidentiary experience is at the root of the hermeneutic quest and that evidentiary experience requires multiple forms of cognition, what justifies the place of one interpretation amongst a community of others? What justifies one interpretation over another?

Without being facetious, the answer is straight forward word; the appropriate interpretation announces itself and is hermeneutically speaking, self-selecting. Keeping the priority of experience over theoretical reflection in mind, we can now draw on the full significance of Gadamer's notion of the *Wahrheitsanspruch* (the truth claim of art or literature though plainly evidentiary experience is not restricted by disciplinary boundaries). The *Wahrheitsanspruch* does not concern a work's epistemological status (whether what it proclaims as true can be accepted as a legitimate truth claim). The *Wahrheitsanspruch* is not a proposition, nor is it an experience of "truth" as if the latter were separable from the content of the work. Rather the *Wahrheitsanspruch* is that astonishing moment of address, when a work seizes our attention and compels us to attend to it. If one of the classical meanings of truth concerns that which commands our assent, we might say that when art work speaks to us we *truly* experience being addressed. Two qualifications are necessary here. First, what presents itself to me in evidentiary experience is logically speaking only one way of seeing the world: others are (in formal terms) perfectly feasible. The question has to be why this evidentiary experience rather than another. Why not a "road to Mecca" experience rather than a "road to Damascus" revelation? Second, to recognise the *Wahrheitsanspruch* that a specific work makes upon me does not place that experience beyond interpretation: to the contrary, as an evidentiary experience it is open to multiple interpretations. The evidentiary nature of the *Wahrheitsanspruch* re-affirms the ontological priority of experience over theory such that, to use Gadamer's phrase the *Wahrheitsanspruch* of art, of music or of the other upon us occurs contrary "to our willing and doing." To conclude from this that the *Wahrheitsanpruchen* of history or literature are logically arbitrary and is therefore without serious cognitive content is an obvious error. Admittedly the *Wahrheitsanspruch* of a work has no strict logical necessity to it but given that it is one of vast range of logically possible manifestations of meaning, why does a given *Wahrheitsanspruch* address a hermeneutic spectator in the way that it does? Ontologically speaking, the *Wahrheitsanspruch* is far from arbitrary: we might even say that the hermeneutic subject who

undergoes an evidentiary experience is already disposed (or is hermeneutically inclined) towards the reception its address.

The *Wahrheitsanspruch* is hermeneutically non-arbitrary because:

1. It is never *ex vacuo*; a religious insight or aesthetic experience always arises from within a discernible tradition or body of concerns. Even if dissenting from or seeking to overturn the enabling tradition, the *Wahrheitsanspruch* remains, broadly consistent with its concerns.
2. The sheer force of the *Wahrheitsanspruch* - that it speaks so directly to problematics at play within a continuity of concerns - demonstrates its cognitive force, that is, it brings us to see old problems differently or to offer resolution to unresolved difficulties at play within and across the different horizons which articulate the terrain of our being.
3. The *Wahrheitsanspruch* is far from arbitrary because it is a moment within a process of non-identical repetition. It can reveal something missed, over-looked, dimly hoped for: something is recognised but in a new guise or idiom.
4. The *Wahrheitsanspruch* can certainly be aesthetically compelling in that it brings a cluster of on-going concerns and experiences into a coherent structure. However, the issue is whether what is aesthetically persuasive is also cognitively compelling, that is, whether what is brought into an aesthetic order makes sense of the material that is brought into pattern and order. In other words, the plausibility of the cognitive claim of a *Wahrheitsanspruch* depends upon the extent to which it reveals itself to be consistent with the structures it has transformed. The *Wahrheitsanspruch* is far from arbitrary as deconstruction claims but shows itself as a legitimate cognitive development of possibilities at play within the multiple horizons out of which it springs. It can be strongly argued that hermeneutics has to overcome its sense of inferiority before the claims of a legitimising methodology. Nothing can legitimate a *Wahrheitsanspruch a priori*. It demonstrates its own legitimacy by asserting itself in the event, that is, by recognisably transforming and thereby making manifest what is at

play within out horizons of concern. Hermeneutics needs to explicitly return to and articulate such rhetorical forms of reasoning.

An objection to the claim that “hermeneutics is impossible” is that it concedes too much to the negativity of deconstructive criticism. Rather than accepting its critique, its pre-suppositions should be dismantled, allowing lingering doubts about hermeneutics’ credibility to be dispersed. The sentiment within this objection is well taken but arguably misplaced for two reasons. First, deconstructive and post-structuralist criticism is on many levels right to attack hermeneutics. The terms of its operations are in need of re-thinking but the mode of attack is skewed and obscures what can be meaningfully re-constructed in the discipline. Second, the problem with deconstructive criticism is not that it is incorrect: it is right to insist that there can be no final interpretation but where it goes wrong concerns a failure of its own making. Critics of hermeneutics often fail to grasp that what it perceived as a disabling limit to interpretation is infact the enabling presupposition of the endlessly transformative nature of interpretation. Of course, no interpretation can grasp or be commensurable with an object (*Sache*) whose meaning and significance is of infinite extent. Finite understanding can never grasp such an object: there is no such object to be grasped. Deconstructive thought cannot criticise philosophical hermeneutics for failing to get to the bottom of things since the very supposition of final meaning is erroneous. What deconstruction identifies as the formal impossibility of hermeneutics actually establishes the practical possibility of hermeneutics. What delimits and seemingly negates the formal possibility of hermeneutics - the inability of interpretation to exhaust the infinite determinations of its object - enables hermeneutics to extend its finite understandings infinitely. Completeness and infinity are not features of understandable objects but of the endlessly repeatable processes of understanding. If hermeneutic understanding were understood as just the linear progress towards an ever more accurate account of a final truth, no recursive looping would be possible. As a consequence, the reflective understanding which emerges from recursive looping could not itself occur. Thus, the points of continuity and difference, the development of narrative patterns

and points of re-appraisal which constitute the emergence of hermeneutic consciousness would not themselves emerge. In other words, hermeneutic understanding depends upon the endless recurrence of non-identical processes of repetition. Hermeneutic truth is not arrived at as the intended terminus of a methodological enquiry. Rather *hermeneutic truth is a practice based emergence*, the adjunctive effect of recursive looping within a given practice. Deconstructive criticism of hermeneutics for failing to ever arrive at the truth is dangerous not because its claim is wrong but because it blurs what is really at stake, i.e. promoting the conditions which enable the emergence of hermeneutic truth. Philosophical hermeneutics responds to Nietzsche's question concerning the value of truth: the 'truth' is valuable not in-itself but for what its pursuit gives rise to, namely, the unexpected and potentially transformative emergence of hermeneutic truths. These points return us to our main position.

The argument that hermeneutics is in formal theoretical terms impossible does not concede too much to theory, rather it re-connects matters of theoretical reflection with the subject-matters of experience. Hermeneutics asserts the primacy of experience over theoretical reflection. The *Wahrheitsanspruchen* of art, poetry and history are evidential experiences. Iser comments, Evidential experience is almost like an assault: it happens to us, and we are inside it.¹⁴ The enormity of such *Wahrheitsanspruchen* demand multiple forms of interpretation and theoretical inquiry to tease out what is at play within them. Theory is not opposed to evidential experience, to the contrary, philosophical reflection is the mid-wife to evidential experience, drawing out and rendering more explicit what is at play within it and thereby inducing other possibilities within such experience to arise.

On the basis of the arguments presented above we can argue that Vattimo is right to argue that "the task of contemporary hermeneutics... consists in the affirmation that the rational

¹⁴ Wolfgang Iser, *The Significance of Fictionalising*, (Anthropetics 111, no. 2 (Fall 1997, Winter 1998) at www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0302/iser_fiction.htm

(argumentative) interpretation in history is not scientific in the positivistic sense (objective) and yet neither is it purely aesthetic and subjective. This opens the door to re-covering a form of rhetorical (hermeneutical) reasoning which is free of the dominance of rationalist and positivist form of reasoning. Now that the objective co-relative of rhetoric - the ideal of pure reasoning - has waned, rhetoric can be recognised as the mode of practical reasoning that it is. Once the evidentiary nature of experience is accepted and that multiple forms of cognition and interpretation are required to grasp albeit provisionally what is at play in such experience, then all the devices of rhetorical reasoning can be brought back to sharpen, challenge if not justify the way in which any one interpretation can add to and illuminate a larger body of interpretation. One thinks for example of *Komparatistiks*, *Kombinatoriks*, *Nomothetiks* and *Konjekturalkritik*.¹⁵ However, it is not the attainment of such rhetorical justification that matters, but the effects of its pursuit, what it gives rise to in bringing to light what is at play within experience. The adoption of such principles and practices remains but a device, to prompt what is presently withheld to come into disclosure. Over the gates of hermeneutics future should be written “hermeneutics deciphers palimpsests, projects the meaningful, uncovers the hidden, disputes the given and imagines the possible.”¹⁶ In this, the impossible quest of hermeneutics remains transformation.

JRND, St Johns, Ceres

¹⁵ Johann Figl, *Die Vorbereitung zur Hermeneutik und Kritik*, Nietzsche Studien, 1981/2 Vol 10/11, p. 408-41.

¹⁶

Ben De Bruyn, *Wolfgang Iser, A Companion*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2012, p.253.