

Doing Justice to Poetry

Gadamer and Derrida on Reading Paul Celan

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ABSTRACT

A large part of what scholars do in the humanities is reading and interpreting texts, and they must do so in a just and righteous manner. But what does that mean, doing justice to a text? To a philosophical text, but also to a literary or a poetic text? This is the question at stake in the ‘Gadamer-Derrida encounter,’ which remains relevant for our daily interpretative endeavors. Rather than adding another commentary to the already extensive literature on this debate, this paper offers a comparative analysis of two closely related essays in which Gadamer and Derrida read the work of the German poet Paul Celan with a keen eye for differences, as well as similarities, between the hermeneutical strategies of both philosophers. These two essays lead me to specify the guiding question of this paper: what does it mean to do justice to a poetic text, that is, to poetry? To answer this question, the paper discusses several issues, starting with Gadamer’s and Derrida’s shared rejection of the intentions of the poet as the decisive factor in interpreting poetry. This is followed by a discussion of Gadamer’s hermeneutical approach, as exemplified by his interpretation of Celan, and Derrida’s main objections to this approach. Having subsequently discussed the way in which Derrida demarcates his own hermeneutics from that of Gadamer, the paper first concludes that Gadamer’s and Derrida’s positions are sufficiently refined to be considered as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Second, this paper argues that doing justice to a philosophical, literary or poetic text means seeking to decipher its meaning, as Gadamer argues, whilst accepting that no articulated meaning can ever be final, certain or exhaustive, as Derrida emphasizes.

KEYWORDS

Hermeneutics, Deconstruction, Poetry, Gadamer, Derrida, Celan.

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to do justice to a text, be it philosophical, literary, or poetic? In this regard, what is the task of philosophical hermeneutics, the discipline traditionally concerned with explanation and interpretation? This is the question at stake in the ‘Gadamer-Derrida encounter’, an intellectual debate that retains its relevance, not only because it has ‘animated contemporary philosophy’ (Di Cesare 2004, 74), but also because the practice of reading and interpreting texts makes up a large part of research and education in the humanities as such. By revisiting the diverging hermeneutical strategies of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida, this paper seeks to determine how we can engage in the practice of reading and interpreting in a righteous and just manner.

The formal debate between Gadamer and Derrida started in April 1981, with a few exchanges at a colloquium at the Goethe Institute in Paris.¹ These exchanges are often considered to constitute a failed encounter for at least two reasons. First, Derrida responded to Gadamer's presentation with several questions that testify to Derrida's partial understanding of Gadamer's intentions at best; a response which Gadamer in turn had difficulty comprehending. Second, Derrida's presentation at the colloquium showed no interest at all in engaging in a dialogue with Gadamer, despite the latter's invitation. This 'improbable' encounter (Forget 1984), collected in the volume *Dialogue and Deconstruction* (Michelfelder and Palmer 1989), has attracted many commentaries that seek to redo the debate in a more constructive fashion (e.g., Dallmayr 1989; Bernstein 2008).²

Rather than adding yet another commentary to this already extensive literature, this paper aims to shed new light on the Gadamer-Derrida debate by taking its starting point in the shared admiration of both philosophers for the twentieth-century German poet Paul Celan. Since the debate between Gadamer and Derrida has continued throughout their readings of Celan's poetry (Di Cesare 2004, abstract), it is justified to use these readings as a way of entry into the differences and similarities between Gadamer's and Derrida's take on hermeneutics. In this endeavor, I focus on two closely related texts: first, on a book-length essay by Gadamer ([1973] 1997) called *Who Am I and Who Are You?*, that is nothing less than a running commentary on Celan's poetry collection *Atemkristall* from 1965; second, on a lecture presented by Derrida at a memorial conference in Heidelberg in remembrance of Gadamer, who passed away in 2002. This lecture, which later appeared under the title *Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue—Between Two Infinities, the Poem* (Derrida [2003] 2005), is interesting for a variety of reasons. It contains, for instance, a reading of several poems by Celan that considers Gadamer's comments on Celan in the aforementioned essay. This choice of sources leads me to specify the guiding question of this paper: what does it mean to do justice to a poetic text, i.e. to poetry, for Gadamer and for Derrida?

To find an answer to this question, it is necessary to discuss a number of issues, starting with Gadamer's (1997) and Derrida's (2005) shared rejection of the intentions of the poet as the decisive factor in interpreting poetry. This is followed by an extensive discussion of Gadamer's hermeneutical approach, as exemplified by his interpretation of Celan (Gadamer 1997), in direct relation to Derrida's main objections to this approach. After discussing how Derrida demarcates his own hermeneutics from that of Gadamer, I take stock of my findings to articulate my own position with respect to the question at stake in the Gadamer-Derrida debate. I argue that doing justice to a philosophical, literary or poetic text means seeking to decipher its meaning, as Gadamer argues, whilst accepting that no articulated meaning can ever be final, certain or exhaustive, as Derrida emphasizes.

POET AND INTENTION

The classical answer to the central question of this article is that doing justice to poetry means trying to find out what the poet meant to say in their poems (see Gadamer 2004, 175–95). For Derrida (2005), however, this is not an option. For him, the essence of language is to be found in written language, which is characterized precisely by the absence of the living presence of the author. In the case of Celan’s poetry, Derrida argues, this means that we can never be sure what Celan intended to convey with this or that poem. Even if we did know ‘what Celan *meant to say*,’ his poems would still be much richer than those intentions (Derrida 2005, 149–50). By embedding these remarks in his discussion of Gadamer’s reading of Celan, Derrida gives the impression that Gadamer also tries to guess at the intentions of the poet. However, this would be a false accusation. In the preface to his Celan essay, for example, Gadamer clearly states that: ‘All that matters is what the poem actually says, not what its author intended’ (1997, 68). A little later, he adds that ‘it is the poem which speaks, and not an individual in the privacy of his experiences or sensations’ (Gadamer 1997, 68). In fact, Gadamer remarks, ‘A poem that withholds itself and does not permit further clarity always seems more meaningful to me than whatever clarity one might obtain from the poet’s simple assurances about his intentions’ (1997, 68).

At first glance, Gadamer and Derrida thus seem to agree on the insignificance of the poet’s alleged intentions in determining the meaning of poetry, which seems like a somewhat exaggerated conclusion. On closer inspection, however, their shared position in this regard is more nuanced. Gadamer, for example, admits that ‘outside information’, such as Celan’s remarks on poetry in *The Meridian*—a speech delivered when accepting the Georg Büchner Prize for literature—‘can be often valuable’ (Gadamer 1997, 133). In turn, Derrida notes that intentional meaning still has a place, be it as one factor amongst many others (Derrida 1982, 326; 2005, 149). Hence a more accurate conclusion of this preliminary comparison is that for both Gadamer and Derrida, the poet’s intention does play a role in interpreting poetry, even though a poem can never be reduced to the experiences and intentions of the poet. However accurate and valuable this insight is, the question remains: what does it mean to do justice to poetry, for Gadamer, and for Derrida?

MEANING AND INTERRUPTION

For Gadamer, the essence of language is spoken language, that is, conversation or dialogue. In Gadamer’s hermeneutics, this model of the dialogue serves to understand both spoken and written discourse: whereas a living, real-life conversation is aimed at gaining a better understanding of the issue under discussion, the interpretation of a text is like a dialogue with that text, aimed at

gaining a better understanding of that which the text is about (Gadamer 1989, 33–6; Gadamer 2004, 384–91).³ An important precondition for such understanding, Gadamer emphasizes, is the readability and decipherability of the text. ‘The text must be readable,’ he states in his lecture at the 1981 colloquium (Gadamer 1989, 31), and ‘[w]hat is written can be deciphered. It means something,’ we read in his Celan commentary (Gadamer 1997, 85). So, for Gadamer, doing justice to poetry means that we should do our very best to understand it, to try to grasp its meaning in an effort of reading and deciphering. The poem speaks to us, it tells us something, Gadamer often says, and it is the task of hermeneutics to correctly understand this something ‘with uniform coherence’ and ‘precision’ (Gadamer 1997, 133, 143).

At this point Derrida would already object by drawing attention to the importance of a certain *interruption* in the process of understanding, as exemplified by the experience of encountering a word or sentence we do not understand. This is actually one of the issues Derrida raised in Paris in 1981, and which he recalls in his speech. ‘At that time indeed,’ Derrida (2005, 139) says, ‘I called for a certain *interruption* [emphasis in original]. Far from signifying the failure of the dialogue, such an interruption could become the condition of comprehension and understanding.’ So, whereas Gadamer puts forward the readability and decipherability of a poem as an indispensable precondition for comprehension, Derrida argues the exact opposite, by designating ‘unreadability’ and undecipherability as that which understanding presupposes. Derrida’s argument here is that if a poem does not also *conceal* its meaning, or leave its meaning in suspense, and thus interrupts the process of understanding, it will not attract any hermeneutical efforts in the first place. If the meaning of a poem were directly evident, there would be nothing to read, reread, and interpret. Stated succinctly, the interruption of decipherment is what keeps hermeneutics alive.

This diametrically opposed stance on the preconditions for understanding is also noticeable in the tone of voice in the writings of both philosophers on Celan’s poetry. In the epilogue to his essay, Gadamer (1997, 128) declares for example that ‘I believe I have more or less understood these poems,’ whereas Derrida remarks that ‘I am not sure of anything, even if I am also sure [...] that no one has the right to be sure of anything here.’ To which he adds: ‘The certainty of a guaranteed reading would be the first inanity or the worst betrayal’ (Derrida 2005, 148). Yet although Gadamer (1997) does remark that some things are certain and can only be understood in a particular way, Derrida would be wrong to accuse Gadamer of seeking such a final or ‘guaranteed reading.’ ‘Conclusive interpretation simply does not exist,’ Gadamer (1997, 146) writes later in the epilogue, not only because he admits to having adjusted his interpretations time and time again, but also because the reader is invited to produce a different, and perhaps even ‘better’

interpretation. Gadamer (1997, 64) writes: ‘If the reader believes that he or she has understood these poems differently and better, still more is gained. At that point such a reply will move us along—closer to the poetic work.’ The question then arises, how does this relate to Gadamer’s previous statements on the attainment of a correct understanding? Is Gadamer contradicting himself here, or can these statements be reconciled? I believe that they can in fact be reconciled, in the following manner: for Gadamer, the goal of hermeneutics is a correct interpretation, which nevertheless functions as a regulative ideal, meaning that one should direct its efforts towards it even though it can never be conclusively achieved. An example might clarify the refined position of both philosophers in this regard.

YOU AND I

In the poetry of Celan, one encounters a lot of personal pronouns, like ‘we,’ ‘you,’ and ‘I.’ For example, the line of verse that is central to Derrida’s memorial lecture states: ‘Die Welt ist fort, *ich muss dich tragen*,’ ‘The world is gone, *I must carry you*.’ The poem does not clarify to what or whom ‘you’ and ‘I’ refer here, making it a good example of what Derrida would call an ‘interruption’ in the decipherment of meaning. Hence in his lecture, Derrida is eager to point out that Gadamer himself recognizes this uncertainty. ‘We do not know at the outset,’ Gadamer (1997, 70) writes for example, ‘what I or You means here, or whether I is the I of the poet referring to himself, or the I that is each of us. *That is what we must learn* [emphasis mine].’ As the title of Gadamer’s essay already suggests, his commentaries revolve around this central question, which is taken up time and time again: ‘Who is I and who is you?’ (Gadamer 1997, 77).

The sentence italicized above is essential to the difference between Gadamer and Derrida. While Gadamer’s interpretative efforts attempt to overcome the indecision of Celan’s poetry by seeking to determine the referents of ‘you’ and ‘I,’ Derrida employs this indecision to illustrate his point about the necessity of interruption in the process of understanding. ‘I admire the respect Gadamer shows for the indecision,’ Derrida (2005, 145) remarks. ‘This indecision seems to interrupt or suspend the decipherment of reading,’ he adds, ‘though in truth it ensures its future’ (Derrida 2005, 145–6). Why does interruption ensure the future of interpretation? Because it makes sure, Derrida emphasizes, that we are never done with a poem or a text, and that it forever survives every reading and interpretation. Hence, what ‘you’ and ‘I’ mean in Celan’s poetry is not *what we must learn*, according to Derrida (2005), but *what we must leave open*. The task of philosophical hermeneutics is rather ‘to leave the undecidable undecided’ (145), because ‘one will never know, and no one has the power to decide’ (158), not even Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Gadamer does not really decide, however. At the beginning of his essay, he already warns the reader that since Celan's poems do not disclose their addressees, the meaning of 'you' and 'I' remains undecidable: 'Who the You is,' for example, 'cannot be determined,' Gadamer (1997, 68–9) remarks, 'because it hasn't been determined' by the poems, and, as we already discussed, 'one should not ask the poet.' At the end of the day, Gadamer must thus agree with Derrida that his guiding question, 'Who is I and who is you?,' must remain unanswered or left open (Gadamer 1997, 86), even though this does not absolve of the responsibility to venture an interpretative effort. So, while Gadamer acknowledges the kind of interruption to which Derrida seeks to draw attention and both philosophers reject the idea of one decisive interpretation, I conclude that their positions diverge with respect to the status of this interruption. For Gadamer, interruption is an obstacle to overcome in the process of striving towards a coherent understanding of a poem, whilst for Derrida, interruption is rather 'the gift of the poem' that secures the future of hermeneutics. As such, interruption functions as a starting point or end point, respectively. Now what we have yet to discuss is Derrida's own, positive view of doing justice to poetry.⁴

REMAINDER AND EXCESS

At one point in his speech, Derrida distinguishes two types of hermeneutics. Under the first type, which is reminiscent of the discipline's traditional self-understanding, Derrida groups:

indispensable formal approaches, thematic, polythematic approaches that are attentive, as any hermeneutic must be, to the explicit and implicit folds of meaning, to ambiguities, overdeterminations, to the rhetoric and to the intentional meaning of the author, to all the idiomatic resources of the poet, of the language, and so forth (Derrida 2005, 149).

Now these kinds of approaches are also employed by Gadamer (1997) in his reading of Celan: the points of attentiveness mentioned above are all aspects he considers in his interpretations. In addition to analyzing the formal structure of the poems in terms of transpositions, line breaks and rhyme schemes, Gadamer (1997) discerns several recurring themes, such as ephemerality and death, and language and poetry itself. And although he claims to disregard the intentions of the poet, he does pay attention to the rhetoric and distinctive cultural resources of Celan, like his Meridian speech, familiarity with Jewish mysticism and his 'extraordinary knowledge of nature' (Gadamer 1997, 71).⁵

Although this is all very important and we should indeed take all these factors into account, Derrida argues, there is always more to a poem, something one cannot exhaust by any

interpretative effort, and which forms a condition of possibility for interpretation as such. This brings us to the second type of hermeneutics, which Derrida describes as:

a disseminal reading-writing that, endeavoring to take all this into account [...], also directs itself toward an irreducible remainder or excess. The excess of this remainder escapes any gathering in a hermeneutic. This hermeneutic is made necessary, and also possible, by the excess (Derrida 2005, 149).

According to Derrida, it is precisely because a poem harbors an excess of meaning that it calls for infinite (re)readings and necessitates recurrent hermeneutical efforts without ever exhausting this remainder. So, for Derrida, doing justice to poetry means doing justice to this remainder, for example by taking the words and lines of a poem out of their original context and inscribing them into new ones to show how they can acquire a new meaning, time and time again.⁶ A hermeneutic which seeks to expose this excess or remainder that produces the dissemination of meaning is what Derrida here refers to as a ‘disseminal reading-writing’ strategy.

The difference between these two types of hermeneutics can also be perceived in the architecture of Gadamer’s and Derrida’s discourse. Gadamer, for his part, neatly follows the sequence of Celan’s poetry collection *Atemkristall* by repeatedly quoting an entire poem to be supplemented with his own interpretation. His interpretative efforts reflect the hermeneutical circle in that he continuously goes back and forth between a single line and the poem as a whole, and between the poem and the whole of the bundle. Derrida, by contrast, takes just one line from a single poem by Celan—‘Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen’—and takes it up again and again in different parts of his lecture, so that it continuously appears in a new light and thus gains a new meaning. These two hermeneutics thus correspond with ‘two infinities,’ one might say. Gadamer thinks of interpretation as an infinite ‘process of approximation,’ which is directed at the ‘correct understanding’ of a poem (Gadamer 1997, 143). ‘[T]he discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art,’ Gadamer (2004, 298) says, ‘is never finished, it is in fact an infinite process.’ Derrida (2005), in turn, thinks of interpretation as an infinite process ‘going from meaning to meaning, from truth to truth’ (152), which should always leave open the possibility of being ‘led along a wholly other reading or counter-reading’ of a poem (157). Notably, this may be the most fundamental point of divergence between the hermeneutical strategies of Gadamer and Derrida.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to shed a new light on the influential Gadamer-Derrida debate by comparing and contrasting two of their closely related readings of the German poet Paul Celan.

This comparative analysis revealed several methodological differences between the hermeneutical efforts of Gadamer and Derrida. Gadamer's focus on living conversation or dialogue, as well as the readability and decipherability of the written word, lead him to a teleological reading strategy in which understanding serves to orient and attract our interpretative efforts. In contrast, Derrida takes his starting point in the so-called death letter, which enables him to draw attention to the unreadability and undecipherability of written language that—by means of an interruption in the process of understanding—safeguard the continuation of interpretation. These considerations lead Derrida to what he calls a disseminal reading strategy, which, rather than seeking to approximate the 'true' meaning of a poem or a text, attempts to demonstrate the multiplicity and possible alteration of meaning.

Reiterative comparisons have also revealed, however, that the characteristics of Derrida's and Gadamer's reading strategies appear to mark a difference in emphasis rather than acknowledgement. For example, whilst Derrida acknowledges the importance of seeking to determine the meaning of the poetic word, Gadamer recognizes the existence of uncertainties and the undecidable that interrupt the decipherment of meaning. Moreover, as diverging as the hermeneutical strategies of Gadamer and Derrida may be, they find each other in decentralizing—if not disqualifying—the alleged intentions of the author when it comes to interpreting texts, as well as in their eventual dismissal of a conclusive or guaranteed reading and interpretation of a poem. Notably here, Gadamer retains the notion of a correct understanding as regulative ideal, whilst Derrida replaces it with an effort to disclose the variability and dissemination of meaning. As such Gadamer's and Derrida's positions are not necessarily the result of two mutually exclusive hermeneutics, but rather they are sufficiently refined to be considered as complementary or reconcilable. In this sense, the distinctive analysis conducted in this paper supports a conclusion widely shared in previous literature on the debate (see e.g., Bernstein 2008; Evink 2021).

This conclusion also paves the way for articulating my own position in this debate. To do so, let me return to the guiding question of this paper: what does it mean to do justice to a text, be it philosophical, literary, or poetic? Additionally, how should we understand the task of philosophical hermeneutics in this regard? Now, of course, doing justice to a text means throwing everything in the game to try to understand it, as Gadamer holds, and as Derrida acknowledges. Usually, this is also done when we read a philosophical text, for example: the text presents itself as meaningful to us. Gadamer can be commended for following up on this 'experience of meaning.'

Yet doing justice to a poetic, literary or philosophical text also means doing justice to the remainder or excess of meaning that draws the reader to these texts in the first place. Those notoriously difficult or even ‘unreadable’ texts that appear to leave their meaning forever in suspense are often the ones most eagerly submitted to recurrent hermeneutical efforts. Derrida should be credited for pointing us in this direction. Although doing justice to the inexhaustible resources of meaning of a text can be accomplished by means of a ‘disseminal reading-writing’—here lies the value of Derrida’s writings—this is not a necessity. It is enough to simply acknowledge that interpretation is an infinite process which leaves open other readings that will uncover new and unforeseen meanings in the text. The task of hermeneutics may thus be understood as approaching an understanding of a text and an articulation of its meaning(s) that can never be final, certain, or decisive.

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¹ For antecedents of this formal encounter, see Evink (2021).

² A large sample of these commentaries is collected in Part III of the edited volume mentioned above. Part I presents a translation of the exchanges at the Goethe Institute, based on the original German volume edited by Philippe Forget, *Text und Interpretation* (1984), and Part II brings together Gadamer’s reflections on the debate.

³ For some critical remarks on this comparison, see Bernstein (2008).

⁴ In view of this discussion, one might be tempted to question whether Derrida would accept this criterion of 'doing justice.' On many occasions, however, Derrida has expressed his intention in these exact words, that is, as wanting 'to do justice' to a particular person, theme, question, or text.

⁵ Gadamer repeatedly emphasizes the fact that Celan was a 'poeta doctus,' an educated or learned poet. See e.g. Gadamer (1997, 71, 129, 186).

⁶ For a theoretical discussion rather than an application of this possibility of writing, see Derrida (1982).