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# Translation, Gadamer, and the Hermeneutical Perspective

**Cognition and Hermeneutics: Convergences in the Study of Translation**

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# Translation, Gadamer, and the Hermeneutical Perspective

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**Review article on: PIECYCHNA, Beata (2021): *The Hermeneutics of Translation. A Translator's Competence and the Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*. Berlin: Peter Lang. 265 pp. ISBN: 9783631851135.**

"It is a truism," writes Beata Piecychna in *The Hermeneutics of Translation*, "to say that in order to translate a text, the translator must understand and interpret it" (p. 43). It's indeed a truism, and therefore she is surely right to wonder, in this thoughtful and sophisticated book, why hermeneutics has been relatively neglected by translation studies. After all, the objective of hermeneutics is to elucidate the act of interpretation itself, and moreover to enhance our conceptual purchase on how we understand something at all. So why not explore that truism concerning the translator by adopting the analytical framework of hermeneutics?

It seems, in Piecychna's view, that the cognitive approach which "dominates over this discipline" (p. 31) has occluded hermeneutic lines of enquiry to a certain degree. This is probably true of the European context, though one might add that it's not really true of the North American context, largely because the profile of whatever might be called the "discipline" of translation studies is still delineated by the academic protocols of comparative literature studies. Leaving aside the North American context, in any case, we might indeed wonder at the occlusion of the hermeneutic approach. Perhaps there are a few more reasons explaining this relative neglect of hermeneutics. One is that hermeneutics has its roots in a philosophical tradition, and philosophy—let's admit it—can be intimidating. It's not that one has to do philosophy every time one studies translations and translators, of course, nor is it the case that adopting the hermeneutic approach to translation entails abandoning the field of *practical* enquiry into translation to empiricists of various stripes either. One of the tasks of Translational Hermeneutics has been to show that there can be a passage from hermeneutical philosophy to practice—see, for example, the 2018 volume, published by Zetabooks, entitled *Philosophy and Practice in Translational Hermeneutics* (see Stanley et al.).

It's good that we have a book like Piecychna's therefore, since there are clearly some intellectual conversations still to be had within translation studies in and around that truism —the common ground surely all researchers in translation studies can share. Invoking Radegundis Stolze, moreover, Piecychna refers to "the basic and obvious assumption that translation is a hermeneutic act in which the human factor plays a decisive role" (p. 24). Assuming we all agree with these truisms and statements of the obvious, then we're well set for the hermeneutic engagement Piecychna offers in this book:

an engagement with the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer that seeks to use Gadamer's thought in order to bring into better profile the notion of the translator as a hermeneutic practitioner. Such a portrait depicts a person possessed of critical self-awareness in respect of the interpretive activities of translation. At issue, in this regard, is taking what Piecychna calls a "holistic" (p. 30) look at the translation process and the translator involved in this process.

The central difficulty, when one deploys Gadamer in order to study translation and translators, however, is that his own remarks on the subject are markedly ambivalent: on the one hand, Gadamer views translation as almost paradigmatic for hermeneutics. On the other hand, Gadamer is frequently negative when assessing translations—that negativity is expressed in the usual ways (mostly in connection with translations of poetry), namely that translations don't ring true, that something gets lost in translation, and so forth. Negotiating Gadamer's ambivalence requires a considerable amount of dexterity on Piecychna's part, particularly insofar as the central focus of her book remains the provision of a hermeneutic portrait of the competent translator. It is this dexterity I want to register in the remainder of this review.

After a foreword to the English edition (her book was first published in Polish) and an introduction, the first chapter is devoted to Gadamer's concept of language. In this chapter, Piecychna quite rightly suspends reflection on the translator specifically in order to position the human being as such against the background of Gadamer's history of linguistic thought in the West. It begins, conventionally enough, with Plato and Aristotle. In respect of Aristotle, though, one might note that important moment where he invokes the famous man/animal divide: Aristotle philosophizes via yet another truism, which establishes that animals aren't capable of intel-

ligible speech whereas human beings (or human animals) are. Only we are possessed of the *logos*. There is much to be said, therefore, about the important fact that this argument (if it is one) is found in *The Politics*, and hence really concerns the *zoon logon ekhon*. The man/animal divide, elaborated in terms of capacities for *political* speech, problematically structures Aristotle's hierarchical vision of the roles of men, women and slaves. In terms of Gadamer's way with Plato, in any case, Piecychna discusses Gadamer's remarks on *The Cratylus*, but, to my mind, it's how Gadamer handles *The Phaedrus* in *Truth and Method* that really counts. I'll come back to that shortly. Then Piecychna assesses how Gadamer proceeds to the Christian contexts—at issue is God's Word, and whatever we might understand by the Word Made Flesh. The following remark is worth pondering in this respect: "Gadamer says that the Christian idea of incarnation saved the essence of language from oblivion" (p. 53). Piecychna clarifies the subsequent episodes Gadamer provides us as he relates his historical account of Western thinking upon the nature of language: the contribution of Nicholas of Cusa, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and then the significance of Humboldt in particular.

Consider, however, the moment in *Truth and Method* when Gadamer adverts to that capital moment in *The Phaedrus* (section 275) where Socrates—or Plato—expresses his anxieties concerning the invention of writing. "We need only recall," Gadamer writes, "what Plato said, namely that the specific weakness of writing was that no one could come to the aid of the written word if it falls victim to misunderstanding, intentional or unintentional" (p. 392–3). One is inclined to remind Gadamer that it's Socrates who *says* this, but it's Plato who *writes* it—the distinction isn't one I make out of sheer pedantry. One paragraph later, Gadamer then remarks that

"All writing is a kind of alienated speech, and its signs need to be transformed back into speech and meaning. Because the meaning has undergone a kind of self-alienation through being written down, this transformation back is the real hermeneutical task" (p. 393). Note "speech *and* meaning," as if the two terms mutually presuppose each other. The task of hermeneutics is one given to it, you might say, by Plato (or Socrates). But now let's note that this passage from *The Phaedrus* is the same one that Jacques Derrida examines so intensely at the beginning of his *Of Grammatology* (1967). Recall that what Derrida means by "grammatology" is an attention to the *written* side of language. Derrida hence deploys grammatology in order to explore the consequences of philosophy's (in this instance, Plato's) fear of writing, and hence the massive preference for speech over writing. That preference or privileging began with Plato, Derrida argues, and continues on at least as far as the Enlightenment. Moreover, it's on the basis of an extremely close reading of Rousseau's "Essay on the Origin of Languages" that Derrida then offers an account of "The Age of Rousseau" (it's the title of the second section of *Of Grammatology*), an age which perhaps still hasn't come to a close even as I write this review essay in 2022.

With Derrida in mind, consider a line from Piecychna's excerpt of Gadamer's text "Von Lehrenden und Lernenden": "The real task for hermeneutics here is to interpret—so to speak—the living word and breathe a new life into the word, which has been petrified in writing. But no translation is really alive" (p. 35). Yet, as Piecychna remarks in a later portion of her book, "the translator's task is to translate the text back into living speech" (p. 82). In the first quotation we see writing demeaned as petrified—it's dead. And that death contrasts with the living word which we may presume is the living word of speech. But if this is the veritable task of hermeneu-

tics itself—to breathe new life into language, to rescue the word from its deathly petrifaction in mere writing—the key question is whether Gadamer thinks a *translator* can give the word the kiss of life, so to speak. It would seem not, if Gadamer can write "But no translation is really alive." So if "the translator's task is to translate the text back into living speech," we might wonder if this is an impossible task (*Aufgabe*) that a translator perforce has to give up on (*aufgeben*).

My emphasis should resonate with Piecychna's remark that "a writing becomes a repeatedly postulated living speech when it becomes 'revived.' Of course, we may understand this postulate in various ways, but the specific 'revival' of the message may also result from the translation of a given text into another language" (p. 37). I agree: I think translators revivify texts—they give them a new lease of life. Walter Benjamin thought so too, but the question is whether Gadamer does. It's clear, whether one chooses to juxtapose Derrida or not, that Gadamer distinctly privileges speech. Piecychna is therefore right to claim, in a footnote, that "Gadamer's *logos* stands for 'language' or 'speech'" (p. 49). We might even say "language *as* speech," and hence expediently get rid of, or at least pretend to ignore the question of *writing* in the logocentric philosophical system. Piecychna also puts it like this: "Language is truly realized only in living speech" (p. 49).

The objection that specialists of Gadamer will make at this juncture is that Gadamer explicitly declares that the true object of hermeneutics is writing. In *Truth and Method*, only one page after his allusions to *The Phaedrus,* Gadamer writes that "Everything written is, in fact, the paradigmatic object of hermeneutics" (p. 394). Indeed so, and Piecychna acknowledges this as well, but if Gadamer can *also* say "The real task for hermeneutics is to interpret—so to speak—the living word and breathe a new life into the word, which has been

petrified in writing" (already cited above), then one can nonetheless ask whether the reason why hermeneutics attends to the "fallen," dead, or otherwise petrified dimension of writing is because it has a deep desire to redeem writing of its fallenness. It's a matter of the hermeneutic aspiration to turn a stone body of writing into the living body of speech—a body enfleshed, like God's Word, suffused and infused with breath and Spirit.

Piecychna spots some of the problems lurking in Gadamer's account of language very well. Take Gadamer's keen preoccupation with a notion that emerges in St. Augustine—the "inner word." Once a word gets inside the body, then it partakes of our own breath and it can even be heard in our "inner ear." Once inside, it relinquishes its exteriority, which I imagine to be the exterior dimension of *writing*. Yet, Piecychna rightly remarks upon the fact that "We observe a turn in Gadamer's deliberations as he asks a number of questions about what an inner word is and whether it exists at all, since it is not subject to 'physical sound articulation'" (p. 54). Quite so. It's risky to try to save "the essence of language from oblivion" (cited earlier) by investing in *theo*-logy, because one exits the domain of enquiry where we can safely speak of the sounds a human body can make and hear (including silence, of course) and entering onto a terrain where the matter concerns mystical notions of the *parole* of the soul, the spirit, and so forth.

In Piecychna's first chapter, then, there is rich food for thought. There is an opportunity to inscribe Gadamer into the contexts of Derridean grammatology if one is minded to do so—though, of course, there is no obligation to do so. I cannot agree with the following statement, however: "Gadamer created his concept of language in the 1960s. As Jean Grondin rightly emphasizes, this theme belonged to the

philosophical terra incognita at that time" (p. 47). It may be true that Gadamer created his concept in the 60s, and perhaps Grondin means that the topic of language was philosophical *terra incognita* solely in Germany, but if Grondin means that such *terra incognita* was more widespread than that, then I would mildly point out to Grondin that Derrida published both *De la grammatologie* and *L'Écriture et la différence* in 1967. Philosophical reflection on language was hardly *terra incognita* to him, nor to many thinkers working in Paris during the 60s. And it's hardly true to say that "Neither Husserl nor even Sartre engaged in linguistic peregrinations" (p. 47). I'm not sure "peregrinations" is the right word, but in any case I cannot see how it would have been possible for Derrida to write his text on Husserl, namely *La Voix et le Phénomène*, if Husserl had nothing to say about linguistic issues. And, as for Sartre, we might recall those moments in *Nausea* when Roquentin experiences a situation where the name for a thing no longer "sticks"—this is the term he uses—to the thing itself.

It will doubtless seem paradoxical to invoke Sartre's Roquentin in order to stage a return to Piecychna's main claims for Gadamer. But, in fact, what one sees in *Nausea*, as also in literary modernism a few decades before, is the staging of linguistic *crisis*: the breakdown (to use Saussurean terminology) of the relation between signifier and signified, the collapse of referentiality, and so on. One thinks of Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, for instance, as an example in the high modernist context. But Gadamer, for his part, is deeply affirmative of the possibilities of language and its ability to make sense. It's why he appreciates Wittgenstein, he who inspects "language games" without indulging in the sort of linguistic catastrophism one sees in the various radicalizations of Saussure and Benveniste. It's also the same affirmative stance adopted by Ricœur as well, of course.

In light of Gadamer's highly positive view of language and the human activities of sense making, we can now begin to focus upon the translator. For when Piecychna describes the translator's attitudes to a text, and then the work a translator does with that text, the spirit of her description is informed by Gadamer's encouraging promotion of language's vital meaningfulness. Piecychna is both lucid and deft with the nuances of what now has to be described on the translator's behalf. It all begins with the translator's approach to the text at hand. She writes, "Understanding of the text is determined by the so-called anticipation of meaning" (p. 111). Agreed: translators would hardly undertake translations if they anticipated that the task would involve translating sheer nonsense. Thus, "Anticipation is the key prejudice characterizing a translator's work" (p. 117). This is a good prejudice to have —translators pre-judge the text, possibly even before they begin the work of translation, and the verdict is that texts want to mean, wish their meaning to be transposed into the foreign language. It remains a prejudice, however, up until translators actually begin translating, and then they will find out whether that prejudice was justified or not. Only then will translators find out that the text is not nonsense, or—since we cannot exclude the possibility—that the text *is* nonsense. Prejudices, since they belong to the time of the "pre," the "fore," and the "beforehand," always have to await the posterior time of their eventual verification or rebuttal.

So once that preamble-time of "anticipation" has ended, and the work of translation has properly begun, Piecychna can now deploy the full resources of the hermeneutic circle in order to describe the subsequent interpretive stages of the translatory operation. Chapter Two, entitled "Translation as the Realization of a Circular Structure of Understanding," offers a stimulating account of those circular operations as

the translator steadily works on parts of the text in light of an apprehension of the textual whole, slowly culminating the text, phase by phase, until completion. A very good remark Piecychna makes, concerning the contending "geometries" of translation, namely a circle versus a flat line, is this:

> For linearity would indicate the impossible ideal of conducting certain stages in the translation process and definitely ending the process of interpretation. But we also know that once the translation "slips out" of the translator's hands, it continues to live its own life, is subjected to successive interpretations, and sometimes gives impulse to creating a retranslation of the same source text. (P. 130)

If one adheres to the linear model, we would envisage something resembling a well-constructed "Aristotelian" play or novel: there would be a beginning, a middle, and an end—the end marked by a full stop or period in order to halt the "line" of translation, so to speak. But it's preferable to invoke the geometry of the circle because, while circles do indeed describe a closure (a seamless circle), each translator, upon finishing his or her text, nonetheless acknowledges that such a translation, achieved though it may be, is never so closed around the text that a putatively definitive translation has been accomplished. Not so: a translator who acknowledges the infinite possibility of texts to offer themselves to other translators and interpreters therefore admits that other circles can begin and succeed each other. To make this acknowledgement is simply what it means to be a hermeneutic translator in the first place. Texts, then, are always open to interpretive and translatory possibility. That openness doesn't exactly resist each translator's desire to finish his or her own translation and hence achieve for that particular translation the gratifying sense of an ending (to invoke Frank Kermode). It's rather that the text finds its translatory freedom in the necessary exposure of that finalized translation to whatever

contingencies enable a translation to slip out of the translator's hands, just as it also slipped out of the author's hands as well, and found itself in the hands of a translator. Having slipped the bonds of authorship and the translator's authorship as well, the text—the translation—can circulate further, and find itself being read and contemplated at other times and places. The condition of being read and contemplated like this is the hermeneutic condition that necessarily conditions any account of the ontology of texts. For a text finds it own *being* at those moments of being read, contemplated, interpreted and translated.

Consider, in view of that "slipping out" of the translator's hands, however, how the Plato of *The Phaedrus* might view matters, given his fear of writing wandering about, getting into the hands of people who have no business with it. In any case, as Piecychna describes it for us, hermeneutics and its sense of interpretive circularity gives us way to think about the provisional end of translation and the beginning (or even the beginning-before-the-beginning) of translation as well. Let's keep on beginning, in fact, since Piecychna has further insights to offer in this regard. The nub of the matter concerns the battery of terms Gadamer uses to describe the interpretive moments of the "beforehand," so to speak. An important aspect of the hermeneutic circle involves what Gadamer calls "pre-comprehension." At issue, here, is what the translator will have had to have understood in advance of the proper work of translation. For Piecychna, this will have been the sort of background information all translators need to have at their disposal: a sense of the tradition in which the text is situated, be it generic or otherwise, a sense of what was at stake, intellectually or creatively, at the historical moment when it was written, and so forth.

That pre-comprehension—effectively a prior sense of the manifold horizon in which the text was situated—must be matched, as Piecychna rightly claims, by the translator's own sense of horizontal self-situatedness: "The translator starts from one's own familiar world knowledge, and any phenomenon appears subjectively against the backdrop of this given individual fore-knowledge" (p. 121). So here are more starting points and preliminary beginnings to consider. And once the translatory work actually commences and proceeds towards its final (but never definitively finalizable) end, hermeneutic translators conduct themselves with a sort of self-interrogating lucidity *vis-à-vis* their various understandings and misunderstandings of the text at hand. Piecychna puts it very nicely: "In a way, it is an inner act of speaking to oneself, translating to oneself, explaining to oneself, because everyone understands the text in his own way" (p. 107).

Now, one question that arises here is whether what is part of that silent soliloquy is an engagement (or even a dialogue) with the various doctrines concerning translation: those methodological premises one decides to adhere to or to resist, like the dogma or edict of "equivalence," for instance. We know that mention of "equivalence" can often trigger heatedly polemical debate, but I think Piecychna's hermeneutic approach allows us to express a bit of mild common sense: hermeneutics acknowledges that the interpretative strategies of a translator will be informed by many factors, and one factor could well be the doctrine of equivalence (it could even be the determining factor). Some translators adopt that doctrine as a sort of regulative ideal, in the Kantian sense, some do not. Some feel, moreover, the burden of a certain ethics governing the translator's work—Piecychna refers, in this regard, to the somewhat risky bid to invoke an ethics of hospitality and hosting. One thinks of George Stei-

ner, of Antoine Berman, and of Richard Kearney, whose work is clearly influenced by Levinas's ethics of alterity.

Hermeneutics simply proposes that the translator's understanding is informed by many things. This is yet another truism, of course. But the commonsensical and neutrally proffered insights of Gadamerian hermeneutics, for all that they risk platitude, are a refreshing change from what sometimes passes for translation "theory" (or even "philosophy"): the simplifying reduction of the translator's subtle praxis to invidiously either/or options. One thinks of Schleiermacher: either the translator ushers the reader to the text or the translator escorts the text to the reader. One thinks of Venuti's opposition between domestication and foreignization. One thinks of Richard Kearney's Levinasian account of translation as a hosting of the other, a vexingly tendentious account, in my view, since it licenses Kearney's problematically confident assessment of what constitutes a good translation or a bad one.

I find Piecychna's approach much more intellectually inviting, therefore, insofar as there is no *parti pris* that the reader, or the reviewer, is forced to confront in this book. Yes, there is advocacy for hermeneutics, but for all the philosophical elaborateness of Gadamer's account, it still seems commonsensical and hardly partisan. Moreover, if truisms are somehow at the heart of the discussion, it would seem rather philosophically nugatory to take up a strident position—a *parti pris*—in defense of something so true as to be a truism. If there are moments in her book one might find "problematic" (to use that somewhat disingenuous term), then they concern problems with the philosophical account Gadamer gives of the hermeneutic circle. Piecychna's account of Gadamer's account is extremely philosophically competent and I have no qualms on her account. The qualms I do have,

however, concern what Gadamer himself has to say about the hermeneutic circle. Let's get back to those terms Gadamer uses, therefore, all of which purport to describe the interpreter's fore-knowledge.

Now, one thing Gadamer invites us to contend with is what Piecychna characterizes as "an initial grasp of the fullness" (p. 114) of a text—in Gadamer's German, a *Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*. So what would an interpreter, or a translator, initially grasp, or even fore-grasp, and apprehend as a fullness? Of what is a text "full"? Piecychna cites P. Feliga in order to clarify: "Well, for us, only that which has full unity of meaning is understandable. We always assume the full unity, when we read a text. It is only when the text becomes incomprehensible to us that we start to have doubts about the message and try to heal it" (p. 115). So like the prejudice that anticipates texts wanting to mean, we can now add the prejudice that texts mean their meaning to be meaning-*full*—and indeed that texts represent themselves to we readers, translators and interpreters as a "unity" that can never be less than full of meaning.

It goes without saying that Gadamer could never have written Friedrich Schlegel's "On Incomprehensibility" (which is why I hesitate to call Gadamer a thinker who unproblematically stands in the Romantic tradition——Gadamer, revealingly, to my mind, has no sense of Schlegelian "theory" or "critique," and I think it's also why Gadamer cannot seem to engage with Benjamin either). But, as Piecychna rightly observes, "it would be interesting to analyze the phenomenon of translation against the background of the metaphor of healing" (p. 115). Let's do so. We are wearily familiar with the many descriptions of translation as a violent activity. If we agree that it is violent, then perhaps it's high time to think about healing those putative "wounds" translation

makes upon the body of the original text. I'm thinking, in this regard, of George Steiner's hermeneutic motions of translation, and the much-discussed violence he describes. On the other hand, one wonders whether there are any cases where one would not seek to "heal" a certain breakdown in meaning. Is it not conceivable that a text might wish to remain—in the translation as much as in the original—incomprehensible? Góngora, Mallarmé, or Beckett might reject the presumptuousness of a translator declaring something to be incomprehensible and then "healing" that incomprehensibility. Beware calling something incomprehensible when it may be that what is really going on is a deliberate poetic strategy of *hermetic* meaning-making. And that strategy should be preserved as much as possible, rather than "healed."

It's true, of course, that any working translator cannot risk leaving portions of the text incomprehensible for the target audience. So I willingly admit that it's an indulgence to imagine a translator leaving spots of garbled nonsense in a given translation. Nonetheless, it's no accident that when one bristles at the translator's presumptuousness faced with so-called incomprehensibility, one does so the name of literature, precisely. So what about literature in Gadamer's account? Compare and contrast Gadamer and George Steiner. The latter invests all his hermeneutic energies in literature, and places his trust in literature's *Vollkommenheit* of meaning—indeed, as Steiner argues in *Real Presences*, this meaning is so full in literary texts that such texts resemble, or perhaps even *are* sacred texts, similarly capable of wielding the Word of God convoked by the Bible. Gadamer, for his part, also venerates literature, particularly in view of the literary texts of "tradition" and the texts he describes as "classics." Yet he doesn't veer into Steiner's risky blend of literary criticism and theology. Nonetheless, let's read the following quotation

from Gadamer's text "Vom Zirkel des Verstehens" and let's note the vocabulary that emerges here:

> We presuppose not only an immanent unity of meaning, which gives the reader guidance, but the reader's comprehension is also constantly guided by transcendent expectations of meaning which arise from the relationship to the truth of what is meant. Just as the addressee of a letter understands the news he receives and, to begin with, sees things with the eyes of the letter-writer, i.e., takes what the writer says to be true – instead of, say, trying to understand the writer's opinion as such – so we too understand the texts which are handed down on the basis of expectations of meaning drawn from our own relation to the issues under discussion. (Gadamer 1959: 62, quoted on p. 115)

Piecychna deploys this quote very skillfully in the course of her own assessment of what Gadamer might mean by the *Vorgriff der Volkommenheit*. For my part, I would just note that Steiner could have written those first three lines. Notice how "immanent" works in alliance with "transcendent" expectations of meaning. Note "the truth of what is meant": for a philosopher like Gadamer (and like Plato as well), we must mean what we say. And what we mean must imply—and successfully convey—the *truth* of what we mean. Any other scenario is inconceivable for Gadamer. Irony, lies, the sort of infelicitous or misfiring speech acts described by J. L. Austin (or Derrida) are off the table, otherwise Gadamer loses that wonderful word—so wonderful and so cherished by philosophy (for philosophy, and *as* philosophy)—, namely *truth*. Notice the analogy enabled by the swift convenience of the "just as" rhetorical move: Gadamer envisages the truth of a text in terms of being both addressed by a letter, and receiving it. Gadamer premises the truth of whatever that letter communicates upon the unarguable fact that the letter was meant for the addressee—for the recipient. So if a text, likewise, enters into the domain of truth itself then it's because it can re-

liably send itself via the post to whomever is destined to receive that letter. Postal hermeneutics: letters, in Gadamer, never get lost in the mail, always get read by the persons they're intended for. And indeed (to twist what Gadamer really means here, admittedly), these letters get read with the *same* eyes as the eyes of the letter-writer. These letters never end up—as Plato feared—being read by those who have no business with them. The letter Plato fears has an uncertain addressee; Gadamer's letter does not. Unlike Poe's purloined letter—read or un-read with so much intensity by Lacan and indeed Derrida—that purloining never happens in Gadamer. It suffices to put a stamp on the envelope, inscribe the addressee, and *truth* would then be a matter less of what the specific content of that letter is (upon opening, a matter of the contestable "opinions" of the letter-writer) but more the incontestable fact that meaning is always a matter of meaning *meant* for the right person.

The entire issue now comes into focus: Gadamer isn't necessarily characterizing the recipient here as a "translator" because the recipient who is supposed to be capable of presuming upon this truth, upon this plentitude of meaning, is whomever is addressed by *tradition*. So what is at stake is this "handing down," and hence what is necessarily at stake is the identity of those for whom, or to whom a traditionary text is meant and sent. Will Gadamer risk the scenario where a traditionary text is received by a translator and therefore sent to other languages and therefore to other audiences and readerships that "tradition" hadn't intended? Or is it that traditionary texts hand themselves down only to those who share the same language as the traditionary text itself and therefore risk no such voyages and vicissitudes of translation?

Let me suspend answering such questions, and turn briefly to Piecychna's account, given in Chapter Three, enti-

tled "Translation as a Concretization of Historically Effected Consciousness." For Piecychna is right: it's almost impossible to adequately assess Gadamer's figure of the translator without assessing matters concerning tradition. As Piecychna says, "Tradition is also a fundamental concept in Gadamer. It is an inalienable component of the process of reaching agreement" (p. 147). Moreover, "The process of transmitting tradition—a kind of a keystone of intersubjective understanding—is another way in which he reveals the specificity of the translation act and the role of the translator who becomes an intermediary between past and present" (p. 137). Presently, I will return once more to Gadamer's addressed envelope or letter in order to wonder a little more about that "transmitting," but for now we can appreciate that the scenario here is that of a text (but let's insist, a *traditionary* text) "sent" from the past towards the present of the translator. Now what, in that case, would be the mediation with which the translator is tasked? Nothing less, it seems, than the mediation between past and present—which is as much to say history itself.

But the translator's mediation between past and present is apparently restricted to the rather bland scenarios of what Gadamer calls "dialogue." So when Piecychna adverts to Andrzej Bronk, in connection with Gadamer's notion of hermeneutical experience, and says that "Bronk suggests that it has the character of a conversation, because it refers to a dialogue with the historical message, thus enabling the interpreter to understand things" (p. 140), Bronk's suggestion, while accurate, is too understated (and a little banal). Gadamer himself is far too neutral as well. Piecychna quotes him from *Truth and Method*: "For tradition is a genuine partner in dialogue, and we belong to it, as does the I with a Thou" (p. 140). But there is no sense of the fractious relationship some have with "tradition," no sense of the resistance one might wish to muster

*vis-à-vis* that "belonging"—for colonial subjects, to take an example, if not *the* example, that so-called belonging will have been foisted upon them. Some will feel that Gadamer's concept of dialogue is calamitously ill-equipped to deal with that kind of traditionary situation. Moreover, there are other, rather different ways of construing the I–Thou relation in this respect as well. Althusser's notion of interpellation, for instance, registers a more minatory scenario where "tradition" is replaced by a term Gadamer hesitates to use, namely "ideology." And when ideology addresses a person, it's an address couched in the form of a command rather than in the form of a benign invitation to dialogue. Theorists weaned on different intellectual fare (postcolonial theory, Marxian theory, specialists of Gramsci, followers of Bakhtin, and so forth) will accordingly have little time for what will seem, to them, to be Gadamer's rather strategically *trite* notion of conversation with the past and with tradition.

Nonetheless, Gadamer, Piecychna and Bronk are right to insist that all interpreters—including translators—are situated in history (they are right because it's a truism, of course), and hence negotiate between the *past* which constitutes history as such and the *present* (which also constitutes history as such, I suppose) of their own interpretive or translatory circumstance. In her section on "Translation and Tradition," Piecychna remarks that

> In the translation process, tradition performs a very important function. It shows interpreters what is past, while making them aware of their place in the present. It is a bridge that enables the interpreter to melt the horizons of the past and the present. It is a process of mediation between present and past and between the alien and the known and learned. (P. 156).

If the question is whether the translator is only a passive bridge-builder or can in fact operate in a more active (perhaps

even activist) way, Piecychna valuably remarks, in that regard, that "On the one hand, translators should not uncritically give in to tradition, but on the other hand, they should take it into account, be aware of it, and identify themselves with it, but not dogmatically" (p. 157).

The problem that Piecychna is skillfully negotiating here, is what is sometimes objected of Gadamer, namely his "conservative" position *vis-à-vis* tradition. *Mutatis mutandis*, the question is whether Gadamer's preferred translator will also be conservative—the preserver of tradition's "message" or "missive" at all costs. Yet when Piecychna writes that, "[f]or Gadamer, transgressing tradition is a way to verify one's own beliefs and obtain partial self-knowledge, since when the interpreter comes into contact with something unknown, the transmission of tradition leads to a deeper reflection on historical existence" (p. 157), one wonders whether Gadamer actually uses the term "transgression," or really shows us what such a transgression looks like. One also wonders whether Gadamer would be comfortable if one replaced the word "interpreter" in that sentence by the word "translator." I suspect he wouldn't be or at least he would probably advert to his essay "Lesen ist wie Übersetzen" (1989) and enter the same caveats one sees in that text concerning the different kinds of "translations" operated by readers and by translators in the conventional sense. Moreover, when Piecychna writes that "tradition allows creative freedom to the interpreter" (p. 157), one wonders how much freedom is allowable in Gadamer's scenario. Does it matter who the interpreter is here, in view of that freedom and that balance between transgression and conservation?

Let's put it this way: if it's true that Gadamer has a conservative attitude to tradition, will he risk entrusting the message handed down by tradition to a translator? That is: if we

assume that the language of tradition itself is perforce a native language, and therefore imagine that if one stands in the lineage of the German tradition, for instance, Gadamer's traditionary texts will be written in German as well, is it legitimate to assume, on Gadamer's behalf, that those texts are therefore primarily, perhaps even *exclusively* meant for German readers? To return the Gadamer's letter analogy: is it that the "letter" of that German tradition will always have been addressed to a fellow German? Or will Gadamer venture the riskier scenarios where tradition—and the very message that it hands down—is received by non-native German speakers for one thing, and for another by translators who send that message toward foreign shores and foreign languages?

Consider, in view of these questions, a quote I find particularly revealing from Gadamer's essay "Heidegger's Later Philosophy": "The poet is so dependent on the language he inherits and uses that the language of his poetic work of art can *only* reach those who command the same language" (Gadamer 1960/2008: 228; the italics are mine). I'm not going to quibble with Gadamer here, although I cannot refrain from raising a quizzical eyebrow in the name of Samuel Beckett. The point I want to make concerns why Gadamer, so often in his writing, feels it necessary to say things like this. I suspect it's because he feels the specter of the translator hovering dangerously over the cherished products of tradition, and especially of poetic tradition. So if Gadamer is right to claim that the language of the poetic work of art can *only* reach those who speak the same language, then the task of the Gadamerian translator becomes acutely difficult and perhaps doomed to failure. How could a poem of Rilke ever reach an Anglophone audience if Rilke's poetic language is *only* meant, addressed, sent, and transmitted for and to a German audience?

Happily, we can redeem this somewhat invidious situation for the translator by re-quoting Piecychna's valuable remark that "we also know that once the translation 'slips out' of the translator's hands, it continues to live its own life, is subjected to successive interpretations, and sometimes gives impulse to creating a retranslation of the same source text" (cited above). I think we could also paraphrase this a bit and say that once the source text, notwithstanding its desire to be read by those who share the same language it is written in, "slips out" of the authors hands, it can find other audiences, other translatory vistas, and indeed other prospects for life. Let's paraphrase even more pointedly: once the traditionary text, notwithstanding its desire to be read by those who share the same language it is written in, "slips out" of the hands tasked with the act of *transdare*, even such texts that are otherwise hampered by the leaden label of "traditionary" can still find other audiences, other translatory vistas, and indeed other prospects for a life beyond the conservative half-lives reserved for the fetish texts of unchanging canonicity. Tradition—and surely Gadamer would agree, despite what some have condemned as his hermeneutic conservatism—cannot and should not protect the texts of that tradition from the contingencies of translation, interpretation and forms of re-writing. Otherwise they ossify into archaism, and die off like the dinosaurs. So translators remain vital protagonists for Gadamer, and for Piecychna. And what is vital about texts—what keeps them alive, in a sense—is that they offer themselves to an infinity of interpretations, readings and translations. Piecychna remarks, therefore: "As Gadamer emphasizes, there is no single sense of a text and there is no way we can ever work out such a sense" (p. 165). I heartily endorse that remark even though I'm not entirely sure if Gadamer, any more than Ricœur, would actually put it like that.

Now, Piecychna's book is not intended to be a full-scale engagement with the contentions in literary theory concerning the limits or limitlessness of interpretation. Nor is her book intended to be a work of literary theory either. Still, there are literary-critical angles that Piecychna develops, and so let's attend to these. Piecychna cites E. D. Hirsch: "Textual meaning is not a naked given like a physical object. The text is first of all a conventional representation like a musical score, and what the score represents may be construed correctly or incorrectly" (p. 188). Hirsch, author of the 1967 book *Validity in Interpretation*, is keen to establish interpretive criteria for such validity (correctness and incorrectness, in this case), and he has been vigorously criticized for that reason. But one wonders why Hirsch—nowadays rarely cited in literary-theoretical circles—is still invoked in the context of hermeneutical thinking. Ricœur, in *Time and Narrative,* approvingly cites Hirsch as well. In any case, whatever dubieties one might have concerning Hirsch's criteria for interpretive "validity" (I have many) and whatever one feels about Hirsch's analogy between a musical "score" and a "text," there is no doubt about it: there needs to be an assessment of the way Gadamer characterizes the name and nature of "text." What is a text?

Piecychna's assessment spreads out along two axes. The first axis lays out the types of text to be translated, but more importantly the sort of things a translator feels to be the salient features of the text to be translated. Piecychna thus writes: "Since each text creates problems of a different nature, a competent translator can prioritize by focusing on what constitutes the essence of the source text. Identifying priorities in the text is a skill which reveals the high competence of the translator" (p. 166). She invokes Stolze in this regard as well: "each text has features distinguishing it from others, hence, we may describe it as an autonomous or individualized

entity" (p. 166). Finally, and intriguingly, Piecychna writes that "In each case, a translator must decide what constitutes the so-called translation dominant in a given text" (p. 166). A literary theorist might have some qualms about "the essence of the source text," however, and there is perhaps more to be said about the text as an autonomous or individualized entity, since a lurking problem—in literary studies at any rate—might be the issue of intertextuality which de-autonomizes or de-individualizes any given text to a certain extent. But what is a "translation dominant"? It would have been desirable, given that very interesting term, to provide a few examples (not necessarily exclusively drawn from literature, to be sure) in order to clarify how a translator decides on that "translation dominant," and then what he or she does next. Nabokov, I suggest, would have been an interesting example: faced with the poetic aspect of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, that poeticity being the "translation dominant" of that text, perhaps, Nabokov took his famous decision to render Pushkin's text in prose. "If we consider that the text itself reveals its truth to the reader," Piecychna writes moreover, "then we should state that the text provides the reader with information about what its most important aspect is" (p. 167). This is a very interesting remark, particularly in view of the word "truth"—again, an example would have perhaps been helpful to show how texts provide the reader with that information in light of the revelation, no less, of their truth.

The second axis offers a spread of more literary-theoretical reflections on the notion of text, and in this case, there is a significant invocation of Roland Barthes. The quotation is from *Sollers écrivain*: "The text is full of white spots, cracks to fill, and whoever sent it predicted that they would be filled, and left them blank for two reasons. First of all because the text is a lazy (or economical) mechanism that lives at the ex-

pense of the added value of the sense that the recipient introduces into it" (p. 176). Piecychna follows up on Barthes's remarks adding, "Therefore, texts 'live' also through translations, which embody reading, understanding, and interpretation. Translations show the truth contained in texts, indicating an ontological moment in the hermeneutic conversation" (p. 176). And then Piecychna cites E. Tabakowska: "Reading a translation—understood as a process—is a special case in which the reader's consciousness combined with rationality creates, reproduces, and processes images (re)created and recorded in the word of the Other—the translator" (p. 176).

One of the things I admire about Piecychna's book is its willingness to push hermeneutics beyond its comfort zone. In specific regard to Gadamer, I cannot imagine him finding Barthes particularly congenial, and especially not Philippe Sollers. Gadamer might have preferred to displace Barthes's reflections concerning those white spots (or blank spots) towards the phenomenological contexts of Ingarden and Iser —they both theorize the reader's activity as an "actualization" of textual cues given by the text. But there is a great deal of merit in remaining, as Piecychna does, with Barthes here, since it allows her—once more—to envisage the *life* of texts, and hence appreciate the "value-added" (whether in an economical sense or not) provided by translators—by those who fill (or perhaps widen) those cracks and textual lacunae with new meaning. But I doubt that Barthes would have been keen on the description of those putatively translatory exercises in filling-in-the-blanks as a "conversation," and I'm not sure he would have regarded the interaction between translator and text as an instance of hermeneutics either. For Barthes, as we know, one key distinction is between *lisible* and *scriptible* texts —Sollers, for Barthes, instantiates the "writerly" text, and it is writerly texts which afford exuberant opportunities for re-

writing—be it by a reader still reading Soller's French, or (though Barthes never countenances this) by a translator transposing that French into another language. For Barthes, such exuberance gives us not a hermeneutics of translation and/as reading so much as an *erotics* – the distinction here concerns the difference between *plaisir* and *jouissance* worked out in *The Pleasure of the Text*. And since this is so for Barthes, I wonder about putting Tabakoska's observations concerning "the reader's consciousness combined with rationality" in any vicinity with Barthes. For in Barthes's account of reading, "rationality" is not a guiding term.

What emerges from Piecychna's engagement with Barthes, in any case, is a sharply consequential remark: "The concept of text poses a particular challenge to Gadamer" (p. 180). That is indeed true—and Piecychna has the intellectual integrity to profile what is indeed challenging for Gadamer in respect of the notion of "text." Let's follow her here. "For Gadamer," she writes, "a text can mean a musical work, a film, an opera spectacle, a theater performance, a painting or a sculpture, and thus anything that is subject to understanding and related interpretation" (p. 178). Yet a gap seems to open up between the "texts" of music, film, painting, and sculpture, and then the texts supplied by *writing* when Piecychna says that "In Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy, we may also describe a text as representing a written manifestation of language" (p. 179). On the one hand, Gadamer affords himself an expansive notion of "text" since it extends to non-written artworks like sculpture and painting and musical performance, but on the other, if one insists on a notion of text that only implies (or *also* implies) a "written manifestation of language," then we have a quandary: which is it? Is the definition of "text" as inclusive as Gadamer seemingly wants it to be or is "text" actually something which excludes

painting and (unless one wishes to argue matters concerning librettos and musical scores) a Beethoven symphony, because the basic definition of a "text" presupposes the written manifestation of language? Moreover, Piecychna writes, "texts are all manifestations of life" (p. 178). But then again, Piecychna can cite Gadamer in *Truth and Method* saying that "A text is not to be understood as an expression of life but with respect to what it says" (p. 179).

These confusions are not of Piecychna's making. They are Gadamer's confusions. It would take many books, besides Piecychna's own, to sort out why Gadamer is so contradictory here. Partly, one supposes, it's because Gadamer never really engaged with structuralism and the Saussurean linguistics it drew upon. Ricœur did, of course, which is why there is considerable interest to be found in his essay "What is a Text?" (and indeed, in Barthes's piece, "From Work to Text"). Perhaps Gadamer, despite using the term "text," really meant "work." And, of course, if one were to be flagrantly blunt about it, the strongest way of explaining Gadamer's challenges with respect to "text" would involve us, once more, risking the formidable complexities of Derrida on *écriture, texte, œuvre*, and so on. That would return us, in the end, I think, to the different way Gadamer and Derrida read that moment in *The Phaedrus* I mentioned earlier.

Let's continue by looking at Piecychna's survey of Gadamer's way with texts and, to do that, one has to also discuss paratexts. Her discussion, in this regard, is very interesting. It's apparently possible to speak of "the authentic quality of a text" (p. 180), and this is apparently achieved by distinguishing that integral text from antitexts, pseudotexts and pretexts (or fore-texts). She writes, adverting to Gadamer, of types of paratexts that are "linguistic expressions impossible to frame within a text" (p. 181). Let's retain that notion of expressions

"impossible to *frame* within a text" (my italics). Piecychna proceeds further with Gadamer's typology. Texts "that do not conform to the essence of Gadamer's textuality per se are pseudotexts—or text-opposed texts—which contain elements that do not engage at all in the process of transmitting meaning and do not submit to interpretation procedures. Very often, these are rhetorical elements which play a strictly functional—or even decorative—role" (p. 181).

Any literary theorist worth her salt would find easy to deconstruct Gadamer here. Gadamer, it seems to me, is on very treacherous ground, for all that he seems confident in the capacity of *frames* to delimit texts from whatever textual material is supposed to lie outside that frame, and indeed serve merely functional or decorative purposes. Frames, paregons, borders, and even "text-opposed texts": I don't think this is the sort of theoretical terrain Gadamer traverses particularly well, and indeed if one has Derrida in mind here (*The Post Card*, *Living On: Borderlines*, and so on), Gadamer will appear as nothing short of naïve. But it all comes out in the open when Piecychna offers her central insight: "According to Gadamer, such (fore-)texts contradict the true essence of textuality. In fact, proper, true, authentic texts are literary texts which, with every reading, speak anew and, importantly, "live" after we decipher the meaning they carry, which is not the case with the other types" (p. 181).

Here it is at last: only literary texts are authentic, and they earn their authenticity because reading can turn the petrified matter of writing into *speech*—and thus do they veritably *live*. The true essence of textuality is precisely not the fact of a text being written down, but the availability of a text to the redemption of its "dead letter" (to sound like Plato), a redemption that is achieved by means of its availability to be spoken, re-spoken or recited. Unacceptable to Gadamer would ac-

cordingly be the statement that the true essence of textuality is that textuality *has no essence*. Equally unacceptable would be the assertion that textuality is *not* to be thought of in reference to organic life either. Derrida, and in an important sense the Benjamin of "The Task of the Translator," confront such truths, whereas Gadamer does not. And that is why, to return to Piecychna's first chapter on Gadamer's history of philosophical thinking on the concept of language, he is so attracted to *The Cratylus*, and to the Christian theo-logical reflection on the living, incarnate Word.

Gadamer's reflection on textuality converges, then, on the opposition between speech and writing, which in turn is patterned on the opposition between life and death. If foretexts "contradict" the very essence of textuality, it's because fore- or para-texual materials are dead, petrified or ossified —un-living because they are merely the functional or decorative marks of a *Book*, rather than part and parcel of a *living* work or text. And that is why Piecychna excellently cites a passage from Gadamer's essay "Text and Interpretation" where two lines jump out with alacrity. First line: "Literary texts are such texts that in reading them aloud one must also listen to them" (p. 181). Second line: "As if written in the soul, they are on their way to *Schriftlichkeit* (scripturality)" (p. 181). Once one reads a piece of writing aloud, that recitation enables the oral performance of a text, and now it can be heard in the one hermeneutic organ Gadamer so consistently privileges, namely the ear. And how Rousseauean is that "as if written in the soul." Is it any wonder, to briefly return to Derrida, that the central portion of *Of Grammatology* concerns precisely Rousseau and his fantasy of a writing—an ideal script or scripturality—that is "ideal" because it is *as if* written on the transparently expressive "page" of the heart or soul itself? How fascinating, in any case, that Gadamer, when he inves-

tigates the etymological usage of "text," offers two strategic examples: firstly, the text of the Bible, and secondly "the text of a song" (p. 180). Gadamer, as I tried to show in my essay "'Theological Hermeneutics and Translation: Ernst Fuchs's 'Translation and Proclamation'" (cf. O'Keeffe 2021), is rather keen on releasing the message of the Bible from the bonds of writing, and it's why he dwells on the performative aspects of preaching from the pulpit: once a preacher reads from the Bible, he reads it aloud. And while a song might have a script, that script yields to the performative exercise of singing aloud (or in silence to oneself).

Gadamer is highly consistent in his preference for speech over writing, and that preference informs a great deal, I think, of what he has to say about notions of "text." It also informs what he has to say about the various figures he selects as candidates for hermeneutic interpreters—readers, and translators. At issue, at the end of the day, is whether translators, in Gadamer's mind, can operate that transformation back (in his German, the *Rückverwandlung*) from writing to speech – from dead writing, that is, to living speech. I've had my own things to say about that, in connection with Gadamer's "Lesen ist wie Übersetzen" (I permit myself to refer to my essay entitled "Reading, Writing, and Translation in Gadamer's Hermeneutic Philosophy", O'Keeffe 2018), and I won't rehearse all of my argument here, but my point, in a nutshell, is that reading is *like* translation only up to the point at which reading is *not* like translation. And the point at which the likeness breaks down is precisely at the point where Gadamer regards translators as being incapable of operating the *Rückverwandlung* whereby petrified or otherwise "dead" writing is transformed into living speech. Gadamer thinks the reader can do such a thing, but that a translator cannot. Hence Gadamer's pervasively negative view of translations.

Besides wishing to record Piecychna's kind engagement with my own work in this respect, let me say that Gadamer's symptomatically negative appraisal of translations clinches my positive appraisal of Piecychna's book, in fact. For, as I suggested at the outset of this review essay, the challenge Piecychna faces is to negotiate Gadamer's own ambivalent relationship to translation and translators while making the case for a hermeneutic approach to translation. What this means is that Piecychna has had to write a multi-layered book that can be read in equally multiple ways. It is, therefore, a book written in the very spirit of Gadamerian hermeneutics: available to more than one dialogue, available to more than one kind of reader—a specialist of European translation studies, literary theorists, or even, dare I say, a Derridean. What is admirable about *The Hermeneutics of Translation* is the polyvocality of the text—there are Polish scholarly voices to be heard, other scholars like Barthes to be hearkened to, and conversations to be had between disciplines as well as within whatever currently constitutes the specific discipline of translation studies. I'm not sure what kind of reader—or reviewer—I have been of her book, but I can attest to the fact that dialoguing with her text has been thoroughly stimulating and an invitation to further reflection. Let me end by citing her one last time, referring to Gadamer: "Gadamer states that every time we return to a text in order to better understand its content, we take into consideration its so-called primary message (*Kundgabe*), i.e. the primary information that must be understood" (p. 186). The primary message or announcement—the *Kundgabe*—of Piecychna's book is that the hermeneutic approach to translation gives (this is the giving of "*geben*") rich resources for reflection, and this message is very effectively transmitted to whomever will read Piecychna's book. Moreover, as she argues in the "Coda," entitled "Hermeneutics of Translation,

Where Are You Heading?" Piecychna announces a healthy future for the hermeneutic approach to translation. At least one reason why that future looks healthy is because the profile of that future might well resemble what we are fortunate to be able to read in the present, namely such a good book as *The Hermeneutics of Translation*.

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