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The aim of this article is to review some postulates of hermeneutics according to Hans-Georg Gadamer in light of literary translation. The link between the hermeneutic cycle and literary translation is perhaps not so clear at first glance. However, at the heart of both processes (the interpretation of a text and the translation of a literary text) the phenomenon of comprehension is crucial. One cannot interpret or translate correctly what one does not understand. Moreover, the comprehension of a text is not limited to the comprehension of the words that comprise it. Truly understanding a text has implications that transcend mere textual exegesis; understanding something has political, ethical and ideological implications, among others.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In this article, I will review some postulates of hermeneutics according to Hans-Georg Gadamer to show how they are of great relevance in literary translation. After all, the translator –like every attentive reader– is always an interpreter. In his book *Wahrheit und Methode* (Truth and Method), Gadamer developed several themes whose influence has been decisive in the field of hermeneutics. The link between the hermeneutic cycle (which we will discuss later) and literary translation is perhaps not so clear at first glance. However, at the heart of both processes (the interpretation of a text and the translation of a literary text) the phenomenon of comprehension is crucial. One cannot interpret or translate correctly what one does not understand. Moreover, the comprehension of a text is not limited to the comprehension of the words that comprise it. Truly understanding a text has

implications that transcend mere textual exegesis; understanding something has political, ethical, and ideological implications, among others. And these implications completely affect a translation process. As Maria Tymoczko states:

A translation's ideology is determined only partially by the content of the source text—the subject and the representation of the subject, even though this content may itself be overtly political and enormously complicated as a speech act, with locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary aspects of the source text all contributing to the effect in the source context. The ideological value of the source text is in turn complemented by the fact that translation is a metastatement, a statement about the source text that constitutes an interpretation of the source text (Tymoczko).

Hence the importance of reflecting on the understanding and interpretation of a literary text before translating it. “For he who listens to the other, always listens to someone who has a horizon,” says Gadamer. In a similar way, the translator never reads and interprets only one text; he also interprets a horizon from a set of horizons that are his own. Hence, translating is also a way of conversing.

Because who listens to the other, always listens to someone who has THEIR horizon. This is the same thing between I and you as between nations or between cultures. Everywhere we face this same problem. We must learn that it is precisely in listening to the other that the real path opens up, in which we find solidarities [...] Language belongs to practice, to human togetherness, and to interpersonal relations. And hermeneutics says that language belongs to conversation. That is, language is only what it is at all when it experiences attempts at understanding, when it experiences exchange and speech and

counter-speech, when it is both answer and question” (Bachmann)¹.

To speak of literary translation is, of course, to speak of a use of language that involves a series of decisions made on the basis of a sort of conversation between the translator, the writer of the source text and the text itself. Each of the participants in this equation occupies a place, which constitutes an ideological positioning, as we have already mentioned. In the words of Maria Tymoczko:

The ideology of a translation resides not simply in the text translated, but in the voicing and stance of the translator, and in its relevance to the receiving audience. These latter features are affected by the place of enunciation of the translator: indeed they are part of what we mean by the ‘place’ of enunciation, for that ‘place’ is an ideological positioning as well as a geographical or temporal one. These aspects of a translation are motivated and determined by the translator’s cultural and ideological affiliations as much as or even more than by the temporal and spatial location that the translator speaks from (Tymoczko).

Gadamer is considered the founder of modern philosophical hermeneutics. Hermeneutics has always been part of theology, philology, and jurisprudence. The linguist who wants to understand Homer, the pastor who interprets the Holy Scriptures, or the judge who is going to apply a law needs to learn hermeneutics as part of their professional training. Gadamer has placed hermeneutics at the center of philosophical analysis. He did not regard it as an auxiliary discipline but as a discipline in its own right. For him, hermeneutics is based on language even before it is based on a certain application. Understanding follows from and is established through language; for Gadamer, understanding is always a linguistic understanding and language is always at the core of history.

¹ All quotations have been translated into English by myself unless otherwise indicated.

The emphasis on the historical character of human beings allowed Gadamer to reflect on the epistemological opportunities presented by a productive confrontation with the past. If we look at this relationship in the literary field, it is not difficult to recognize that every literary text belongs to a tradition; however much one may wish to emphasize the individual style or talent of an author, the fact is that both the writer and the translator are born into a historical background that will influence all kinds of decisions (including, of course, the various ways of understanding, analyzing and interpreting texts). Moreover, literary works also belong to a historical becoming within which, over the years, readers classify or evaluate them. Ignoring, for example, that such a work belongs to the tradition of fantasy literature, science fiction, testimonial poetry of a certain country or ethnic group, for example, severely limits the ability of the translator to understand the source text (and its scope and possibilities of interpretation). Does this mean that whoever translates a literary text must be a specialist in a certain period, genre, etc.? Not necessarily, but it would be very convenient if literary translators could specialize in certain areas and publishers could locate such translators when venturing into the translation of a new work for their catalog. In this regard it is important to note that, for Gadamer, tradition is not fixed.

For him, tradition is something that has to be pondered anew in each generation; something that has to be redefined on the basis of what is seen as valuable to a person or group of people: what deserves to be continued. But, although it may seem a mere truism, this critical examination of tradition is only possible if one is aware that one is in a tradition. If this awareness does not exist, one cannot choose critically, one cannot maintain a critical relationship with history nor, by extension, with the present. An uncritical relationship with the literary texts to be translated can result in a myriad of practices with undesirable ethical or political repercussions. Translating racist manifestos or misogynist texts, for example, presupposes a conscious decision on the part of the translator. In no case could it be

said that the translator is not obliged to engage in a critical relationship with herself, with the working material and with the audience and social context for which her translation is intended. From this perspective, translation, although linked to linguistic studies, has more to do with a mediation of meaning, as Jane Elisabeth Wilhelm states:

Translation, for Ricoeur or Gadamer, does not appear as a problem essentially belonging to the field of structural linguistics, whose epistemological characteristic is to stand within the enclosure of the universe of signs, but as a mediation within a world that the human being apprehends through language. Ricoeur points out that a system of signs, as an autonomous entity of internal dependencies, has neither subject nor outside (Wilhelm).

Therefore, belonging to history requires a different way of thinking about one's own context, as well as history itself. According to Gadamer, the interpreter's encounter with historical and literary texts is a living and open dialogue. If, for example, we read poetry from the time of Goethe, we also test our own prejudices, we expose our own time horizon and confront it with the time horizon of the text and thus engage in a kind of conversation. Gadamer calls this process "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*). For Gadamer, interpretation is a constant, everyday praxis because we always seek to understand something and we always succeed in understanding something; we often have opportunities to question our understanding and our way of interpreting what surrounds us. For him, all understanding is transmitted linguistically, real understanding takes place in interpersonal communication, not in the self-referentiality of the individual. Language is the primary medium of hermeneutics, our joint exploration of the world. The relevance of hermeneutics lies in the search for a common language, for key concepts understood between two or more involved; a task in which the interpretation and correct translation of texts are fundamental. Gadamer states:

For we see this everywhere, that attempts of understanding between the blocs, the zones, the nations, the generations, fail because no common language can be found, but the used key words like irritant words rather tear open and deepen the contrasts and increase the tensions, which one actually came together to solve.

This shows us the experiential and everyday part that goes hand in hand with the hermeneutic theory of this German philosopher. In a similar way, literary translation feeds on this same philosophy through some of its key ideas, such as "finiteness" of knowledge. This means that our knowledge cannot predict how the conditions to which a person is subject at any given time will operate. We cannot add up an infinite amount of knowledge and therefore we have to constantly review how much we understand of the things that are under our control; "finiteness" forces us to be self-critical and to review again and again the relevant factors when interpreting a literary text. For Gadamer, history and language function as conditions of our knowledge that surpass our ability to identify our own dependence on them. The context and the hermeneutical tools we have are the same, and this limits and conditions our ability to understand a given text.

Moving within a tradition and, therefore, within a certain finitude, does not imply that we are condemned to interpret, understand, analyze, etc., only from a given point of view. In fact, Gadamer invites us to a permanent revision of those assumptions we take for granted with the intention of reviewing and, if necessary, modifying the tradition to which we belong. By tradition in literary translation, I am referring both to the literary tradition of the texts we translate and to the steps and methods of translation we follow in doing so. For example, to translate an English or German sonnet from the Renaissance, what should I privilege: rhyme, meter or meaning? And once certain decisions have been made when translating a literary text, the translator may very well change his or her mind when revising them or translating other similar texts, if he or she considers it pertinent in each case. In fact, the awareness of the finiteness

of knowledge is what forces the translator to constantly revise their translation practices. This process implies a deep understanding of the text and of the context around it, as well as the translation itself.

Gadamer expands about the concept of “understanding” in *Wahrheit und Methode*. Understanding is the way of realizing our existence. Since the author returns to this idea to explain it in different ways throughout his book, I have synthesized these ways in three brief sections: a) understanding as something that is grasped intellectually, b) understanding as practical knowledge, and c) understanding as a way of agreeing with someone.

1.1 Understanding as an Intellectual Act

Understanding (*verstehen*) refers in a general way to becoming aware of something (understanding), to seeing things more clearly, to being able to incorporate a particular meaning into a larger frame of reference. To Wilhelm Dilthey, Gadamer’s predecessor, understanding seemed to be the most elementary cognitive process in the humanities. For him, understanding an expression meant understanding the manifestation of a life experience (*Erlebnis*), which we seek to recreate through such understanding. For him, the humanities had to follow a rigorous method to guarantee a true understanding of what is read in the field of the social sciences and the humanities. This is what he called hermeneutics. In the same tradition are the works of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, Johann August Ernesti and Samuel Friedrich Morus, for example. They all spoke of the act of understanding a text as turning an obscure passage into something intelligible. Gadamer begins by questioning whether a rigorous method is really all that is required to understand a text.

1.2 Understanding as Practical Knowledge

The idea of understanding as the result of a solely intellectual process had already been discussed by Martin Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time) (1927). For him, understanding has less to do with a cognitive process than with a practical

knowledge, an ability, a capacity and a possibility of our existence. Heidegger reminds us that the expression “sich auf etwas verstehen” means “to be capable of something”. For him, someone who understands is not someone who has a specific knowledge (such as “mastery” of a foreign language in the case of a translator, for example) but someone who can perform a practical skill. A good sportsman, a good carpenter, for example, is not necessarily someone who has a great intellectual background, but he *understands* his trade. Another important point of Heidegger’s that Gadamer would later take up is that the German locution “sich verstehen” (to understand) is reflexive; this implies that in understanding something there is always implicitly a self-understanding. A being that is always concerned with itself (the Heideggerian *Dasein*) is also concerned with human existence and is in search of an orientation. This orientation is executed through a certain “understanding”, through my abilities, my capacities, etc. that add up to the act of “realizing my own existence”, as Gadamer would say. Hermeneutics is for Heidegger a search for ontological understanding, but for Gadamer it is enough to arrive at hermeneutics of texts, not of existence. That is, if we acquire a practical ability to handle texts, we are already interpreting them. It is not necessary to delve into ontological existence in order to interpret a written work. For Gadamer, to understand something is to be able to apply a certain meaning in a certain circumstance; to understand is to apply. Similarly, in the case of the literary translator, we can say that to understand is to have the ability to make the right choices in an accurate translation. It is not necessary to be an accomplished philologist of the source language.

Gadamer draws on Aristotle’s concept of *phronesis* (commonly translated as “wisdom”) in order to propose his own definition of the act of understanding as practical knowledge. According to Gadamer, Aristotle recognizes that the point of practical wisdom is in its realization, which always involves an element of self-knowledge, since it is always a possibility of the self that is involved in a concrete practical situation. This argument constituted a type of criticism that Aristotle

exercised towards a part of Plato's work. For example, when faced with the idea of the Platonic "good"; a universal and abstract "good", Aristotle said that this concept was not as important as being able to do good in everyday life; in a concrete situation. When speaking of translation processes, the validity of an interpretation on the part of the translator (someone who by force becomes a type of specialized reader) is decisive for the result. Subsequent interpretations will take this first interpretation as a basis (unless the source text is also taken into account in the exegesis).

1.3 Understanding as an Agreement with the Other

Later in his book *Wahrheit und Methode*, Gadamer presents us with another meaning of the act of "understanding". In German, "to understand" (*sich verstehen*) also means "to agree," "to concur." Gadamer reminds us that the noun *Verständigung* (derived from *verstehen*) means "agreement." This locution also exists in English: "we understand each other well," for example, in the sense that it is easy for such people to come to an agreement. Gadamer asks: when speaking of "understanding," is it the same thing to try to understand a text (the epistemological *Verstehen*), to know one's own craft (the practical *Verstehen*) and to agree with someone on something in particular (*sich verstehen*)? For him, these three senses of the act of "understanding" are not mutually exclusive. This is fundamental for addressing ethical issues in translation practice or in teaching literary translation, for example. Choosing to translate a given book does not only imply understanding the text at the linguistic level and then elaborating a correct interpretation; it also implies agreeing on the transmission of ideas, images, stories, descriptions, etc., from the source text. *Understanding*, according to the hermeneutic epistemological tradition (e.g. Dilthey), states that it is a matter of *reconstructing* in a disinterested way the meaning of a text in agreement with the one who wrote it. However, Gadamer claims that this hides the fact that the one who interprets the text is also involved with the content of the text. The meaning of *Verständigung* (agreement)

emphasizes that the one who reads and interprets a text shares a basic "agreement" or "understanding" with the author of the text about it. Gadamer uses the following example: when I read a text by Plato on the topic of justice, I do not read it solely in order to register Plato's views on this topic, I also share and bring into play a certain (at least basic) understanding of what justice is; otherwise, I could not have the slightest idea of what Plato is talking about. For Gadamer, this basic understanding of the matter at hand is inherent in every process of understanding and is fundamental, since according to him, the understanding of a text or of someone's discourse relates at a first level to the subject matter at hand and not to the author's intention. For him, the intention of the author of a text is of a secondary order in the process of understanding the text. That is, in certain cases one can understand and interpret a text without agreeing with its ideas, but one cannot *understand* it in the deeper sense, since this implies making those ideas one's own. Even if my goal is to analyze the intention of the author of a text, I must first be familiar with the topic or subject matter of the text.²

The sense of "agreement" implicit in the act of "understanding" (*verstehen*) is fundamental for Gadamer when speaking of text interpretation because "coming to an agreement" or "agreeing" is something that happens above all through language, dialogue or conversation (activities that are intimately linked to reading). Gadamer places the linguistic character of the "understanding" of something above the epistemological sense (i.e. the reconstruction of a process of creation as proposed by Dilthey) or the pragmatic sense (Heidegger). For him, to understand is to put something into words; to articulate (a meaning, an act, an object) in a series of words that are always one's own and at the same time belong to that which one aspires to understand. It may be objected to this, that not everything that someone

² This point is not minor. Irony, for example, often escapes interpretations even of classical texts. While this may be due to the writer's failure to clearly express his or her ironic tone, it is often the reader's lack of understanding of the main theme or subject that causes the irony to be misunderstood. See: Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, University of Chicago Press, 1974.

understands can be put into words. Someone can understand a piece of music, for example, and not necessarily be able to articulate in words an interpretation. Indeed, someone could interpret a certain work through a language that does not involve words (e.g., perform a ballet from a painting). Gadamer has taken these objections into account on the basis of the example of an artist who claims that trying to explain in words the experience of looking at a certain painting or listening to certain music makes little sense. Gadamer claims that such an artist could only discard one interpretation articulated in words in favor of another that might seem more pertinent to the artist. However, even this other interpretation (e.g. the ballet mentioned) can also be analyzed and expressed in words.

The central point in the act of interpreting (especially when interpreting a text) is for Gadamer that its linguistic character is inherent. Whoever reads a text seeks to understand something, and for this purpose questions, sketches answers, investigates, interprets and arrives at the words that best express their understanding. This process does not guarantee understanding or the correct interpretation of a text. Sometimes this process fails and what is put into words does not coincide with the content of the text. Hence the importance of putting it into words, Gadamer thinks, from what those words do not say, we can recover the experience of understanding the text. For him, the unsayable is only unsayable insofar as someone particular at a given moment cannot say something (not because it is not possible to say it). “[Language] is not a closed area of the sayable, beside which other areas of the unsayable would stand, but it is all-embracing. There is nothing that is fundamentally withdrawn from being said, as long as only what is meant means something.” Gadamer adds a little further on: “Everything said does not have its truth simply in itself, but refers backwards and forwards to unsaid things” (Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*. Bd.2. Hermeneutik: Wahrheit und Methode -2. Ergänzungen).

The limits of language, for Gadamer, confirm the universality of language as a means of understanding. This is why the idea of

“agreement” (Verständigung) within the act of “understanding” is so important; understanding is expressed in words if dialogue and agreement are to be reached. It is important to note that many of the linguistic resources when translating arise spontaneously (as in literary creation). Of course, there is a passive vocabulary in each person who translates, but this is activated at the moment of translation in the same way that occurs, to paraphrase Gadamer, in any conversation; one does not know beforehand everything one is going to say. That is why there is a need, for some scholars of hermeneutics linked to translation such as Arno Renken, to point out that both (language and idiom) are, strictly speaking, momentary realizations of an infinite process:

If translation appears at the threshold of understanding, it is because it intervenes simultaneously on two limits that meet: that of speaking and that of language [...] Language, Gadamer will not cease to insist on this point, is not available; it is not given as such: it emerges from dialogue, from the *Gespräch*, which is not the frozen face-to-face of two individuals emitting a message in a linguistic code that they activate, but the joint elaboration of a common language. Language, always caught in the movement of dialogue, thus always has a lack as a background: it is never there, never sufficient, never completed (Renken).

And as Gadamer states, more than putting ourselves in the place of the other, understanding is linked to our way of expressing ourselves through language, as our interlocutor does.

Understanding what one says means, as we have seen, to communicate in language and not to put oneself in another’s place and to comprehend his experiences. We emphasized that the experience of meaning, which happens in such a way in understanding, always includes application. Now we note that this whole process is a linguistic one. It is not for nothing that the actual problem of understanding and the attempt to master it artfully-the subject of hermeneutics-traditionally belongs to the field of grammar

and rhetoric. Language is the center in which the understanding of the partners and the agreement on the matter takes place (Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*. Bd. 1. *Hermeneutik: Wahrheit und Methode-1*).

According to this, as we mentioned before, there are three connotations in the concept of “understanding” for Gadamer; there is a cognitive, a practical and a linguistic element. These elements are added together and we have the concept of “application”. This concept is key to the whole process of interpreting a text and its translation. As Jean Grondin states, this concept “has been widely misinterpreted in a subjectivist sense, [as something] that would open the door to relativism”; that is, to think that Gadamer proposes that everyone should interpret what he wants, excusing himself in his own particularity. The German philosopher called this hermeneutic nihilism. In *Truth and Method* he warns us of “overinterpretation” as a consequence of subjectively biased interpretations. Gadamer uses a statement by Paul Valéry as an example of the absence of a communicative intention in the work of art and the consequences this has for its interpretation: »Mes vers ont le sens qu'on leur prête«³ (“My verses have the meaning that we lend them.”). In this regard, Gadamer states:

Paul Valéry has indeed seen things this way. He also did not shy away from the consequences that result for the one who confronts a work of art and tries to understand it. If it is true that a work of art is not complete in itself, what is the measure of the adequacy of its reception and understanding?... It follows, then, that it must be left to the perceiver to decide what he, for his part, makes of what is present. One way of understanding an entity is then no less legitimate than the other. There is no standard of adequacy. Not only does the poet himself not possess such a one... Rather, every encounter with the work has the rank and right of a new production. - This seems to me an untenable hermeneutic nihilism (Gadamer,

Gesammelte Werke. Bd.2. *Hermeneutik: Wahrheit und Methode -2. Ergänzungen*).

For Gadamer, the meaning of what is to be understood (not only of a text but of an event, a picture, etc.) always requires a kind of translation; so that understanding, application and translation become equivalent terms for him. Actually, the term “application” refers to something similar to “translation” in his work. That is, to an adaptation of content with emphasis on the receiver without falsifying the information. Gadamer continues:

It is in the disturbed and aggravated situations of communication that the conditions under which any understanding stands become most readily apparent. Thus, the linguistic process in which a conversation in two languages foreign to each other is made possible by translation and transmission is particularly revealing. Here the translator must transfer the meaning to be understood into the context in which the partner of the conversation lives. As is well known, this does not mean that he may falsify the meaning that the other person means (Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*. Bd. 1. *Hermeneutik: Wahrheit und Methode-1*).

What I seek to translate is always, at first, something strange to me, but at the same time that strangeness makes me want to interpret it. If I wish to understand a scientific theory or a sonata, for example, I cannot say whatever I want and have that count as a valid interpretation; however, I can only unfold my understanding in terms of what I can follow and what I hope to be able to communicate. This even in cases of supposed untranslatability. For example, if I want to understand a word in ancient Greek for which there is no equivalence in modern English, I need to put into words familiar to me what such a word might mean; once I make a decision to translate such a word I have made an *application* (in the terms proposed by Gadamer). This decision is not necessarily final. I may return to this question and change my mind, choose another word or another way of translating. This is a search for “applications” rather than words according to Gadamer, for application carries the burden of understanding a term, of its due interpretation

³ *Apud* Gadamer, 1999: 100.

and thus of a translation proposal. All this as part of a process in which our prejudices play a very important role.

According to Gadamer, our prejudices are conditionings for comprehension. At the beginning of reading and interpreting a text we have some vague anticipations of what we are going to read; these anticipations will undergo a revision as our reading progresses. The most stimulating readings, according to the German philosopher, are those that refute our prejudices, that break with the expectations of these anticipations. He speaks of basic hermeneutical experience. At the end of the second section of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer concludes that true hermeneutical experience (i.e. true understanding) must lead us to an open-mindedness that allows us to revise our own prejudices and beliefs with a view to new experiences. Someone with sufficient experience will be ready to leave open several possible interpretations, since no interpretation can be exhaustive. This openness (followed by the questioning of one's own prejudices and beliefs) makes a literary translator recognize in each translation project a different experience that requires a different creative stimulus. It is this hermeneutic experience that leads us to foster new approaches and methods for translation; it encourages us not to approach different source texts in the same way, nor to solve translation problems in the same way as we usually do. It is an invitation to permanently question our abilities as readers and also as authors of our translations.

Some critics of Gadamer, such as Claus von Bormann, have objected that in reality this hermeneutic experience can also serve to further reaffirm our prejudices. In this sense, our practices of analysis or translation, for example, may also be reaffirmed rather than questioned. Ultimately, we can never fully transcend our prejudices, for we are always limited by ourselves and our circumstances at any given moment, but we can transcend those that we have seen that do not work, that can be improved, or that simply have not contributed anything positive to our personal development. Hence Gadamer divides our prejudices into false and true. The true ones

are those that we do not understand and, consequently, fail to see. And there is no method to guarantee that we will always be able to recognize the difference; it is a personal work born of a true desire to understand oneself and, at the same time, the other through reading, dialogue and interpretation. As experiences add up and offer us more and more opportunities to contrast our prejudices with the object of analysis and interpretation in front of us, time is a key element in learning to recognize our true prejudices.

Often the time gap is able to make the actual critical question of hermeneutics solvable, namely to separate the true prejudices under which we understand from the false ones under which we misunderstand. Hermeneutically trained consciousness will therefore include historical consciousness. It will make conscious the own prejudices guiding the understanding, so that the tradition, as an opinion of difference, will in its turn stand out and be validated. To make a prejudice as such stand out obviously requires to suspend it in its validity. For as long as a prejudice determines us, we do not know and consider it as a judgment. How is it to be set apart as such? To bring a prejudice before us, as it were, cannot succeed as long as this prejudice is constantly and unnoticed in play, but only when it is, so to speak, disturbed. What is able to disturb in this way is precisely the encounter with tradition. For what tempts to understanding must have already brought itself to bear in its otherness. The first thing with which understanding begins, as already said above, is that something appeals to us. This is the highest of all hermeneutic conditions. We now know what is required by this: a fundamental suspension of one's own prejudices. But all suspension of judgments, consequently and especially that of prejudices, has, logically seen, the structure of the question (Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*. Bd.2. *Hermeneutik: Wahrheit und Methode -2. Ergänzungen*).

Thus, Gadamer adds, "it is often through a temporal distance that we come to resolve the

critical question about hermeneutics.” This process is known as hermeneutic circularity. The first antecedent of circularity in interpretation comes from Friedrich Schleiermacher, whose contributions to the area of translation are nicely summarized by Jane Elisabeth Wilhelm:

Schleiermacher’s description of the “hermeneutic circle” as the fundamental structure of understanding [...] will become after him the hermeneutic act for translation. The figure of the circle illustrates the movement of understanding from the particular to the general and back again in a back-and-forth relationship [...] This first circle illustrates, by way of example, the need for the translator to have an overview of the original text and to know the context as a necessary complement to the polysemy of words. If Schleiermacher describes understanding as proceeding from the circular reference of meaning between the detail and the whole, or the part and the whole, he also introduces the dichotomy of the objective and the subjective in the process (Wilhelm).

Gadamer’s hermeneutic circle is also based on the circle proposed by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, as we will see below. For Heidegger, every interpretation (*Auslegung*) presupposes understanding (*Verstehen*), because every interpretation is guided by anticipations. However, this idea of circularity may presuppose a vicious circle for Heidegger, because from an epistemological perspective, an interpretation results from reaffirming what was already presupposed before. Escaping this vicious circle is practically impossible for Heidegger. Gadamer, on the other hand, sees it differently. First of all, he reminds us that this circle of interpretation as a way of understanding something comes from the classical philosophers, for whom the parts of a text had to correspond to the whole and vice versa. This principle of rhetorical composition passed into hermeneutics where it had a purely phenomenological meaning; that is, it was used to describe the movement back and forth from the parts to the whole made by the one who seeks to understand a text.

What Schleiermacher developed as subjective interpretation may be set aside altogether. When we try to understand a text, we do not put ourselves into the mental condition of the author, but if one wants to speak of putting oneself into it, then we put ourselves into the perspective under which the other person has gained his opinion. This means nothing else than that we try to accept the factual right of what the other person says. If we want to understand, we will even try to strengthen his arguments. This already happens in conversation. How much more is it true in the understanding of what is written that we move in a dimension of what is meaningful, which is understandable in itself and as such does not motivate a decline to the subjectivity of the other. It is the task of hermeneutics to clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but a participation in the common meaning (Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*. Bd.2. *Hermeneutik: Wahrheit und Methode -2. Ergänzungen*).

Gadamer’s hermeneutic circle describes the constant process of revising one’s anticipations before undertaking the interpretation of a given text, in order to achieve each time (at each turn) a better interpretation and a better understanding of the whole. This coherence that is refined by the process of going back and forth to our anticipations and to the text (similar to what happens in literary translation) is what leads us to the “correct criterion of comprehension”. This coherence between the whole and the parts, Gadamer claims, is what one seeks to understand; it is the tacit anticipation. According to this, understanding presupposes that meaning constructs a coherent whole. Since there is a primordial anticipation there is the hermeneutic circle for Gadamer.

The adequacy between what the reader anticipates and the meaning that seeks to be understood functions as the main goal of text interpretation, according to Gadamer. Hence, understanding always involves coming to terms with the subject in question.

The anticipation of perfection, which guides all our understanding, thus proves itself to be determined by content. Not only is an immanent unity of sense presupposed, which gives guidance to the reader, but the reader's understanding is also constantly guided by transcendent expectations of sense, which spring from the relation to the truth of what is meant. Just as the recipient of a letter understands the messages it contains and first sees things through the eyes of the letter writer, i.e. considers true what the letter writer writes - and does not seek to understand the strange opinions of the letter writer as such - so we also understand transmitted texts on the basis of sense expectations that are drawn from our own prior factual relationship. And just as we believe news of a correspondent because he was there or otherwise knows better, so we are fundamentally open to the possibility that a traditional text knows better than one's own prior opinion wants to let stand. Only the failure of the attempt to let what is said count as true leads to the endeavor to "understand" the text as the opinion of another -psychologically or historically-. The prejudice of perfection thus contains not only this formal thing, that a text should express its opinion perfectly, but also that what it says is the perfect truth (Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*. Bd.2. *Hermeneutik: Wahrheit und Methode -2. Ergänzungen*).

Coupled with this prejudice of perfection, with this constant forgetfulness of weighing other opinions besides our own as being susceptible of being true, is the reiteration that our finitude is linguistically constituted. Every hermeneutical tradition, every philosophical, scientific inquiry, etc., is posited (and understood) according to the terms of a certain conceptual language that has its own history. This can be seen not only in the tradition of any hermeneutical current but also in the rhetoric and metaphorical language, for example, of a certain literary current or epoch (e.g. the use of hendecasyllables in the Spanish Golden Age or blank verse in Elizabethan poetry). Gadamer suggests that already our linguistic interpretation of the world constitutes a kind of bias in our thinking. From this point of view (and

in a great consonance with the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*) language is the true limit of our finitude.

We are always biased in our thinking and knowing by our linguistic interpretation of the world. To grow into this linguistic interpretation means to grow up in the world. To this extent, language is the real mark of our finitude. It is always out beyond us. The consciousness of the individual is not the standard de which the being of language can be measured. Indeed, there is no individual consciousness at all in which a spoken language is actually present. How then is language present? Certainly not without the individual consciousness, but also not in a mere summation of the many who are each a particular consciousness for itself (Gadamer and Linge).

The influence that language has on our thinking is such that it exceeds the limits with which we can identify such influence. Language is the first medium through which history exerts its influence on us. Gadamer calls the series of effects that language has on us *Wirkungsgeschichte* or "History of Effects" (Gadamer 1999, 305 ff.). With this term he seeks to point to the causal conditioning aspect of our relation to history. These effects include the perception of materiality, of economy, aesthetics, politics, etc. and, while they are still words, they cannot be reduced to just that either. That is to say, the history that shapes me as an individual (my identity) is constructed from a narrative (where I was born, who my ancestors were, etc.) but that identity can never be reduced to that narrative alone (*Philosophical Hermeneutics* 18-43).

For Gadamer, language is the medium that increases or enhances the intelligible character of reality. Language is the repository of tradition and the medium in and through which we exist and perceive the world (*PH* 29). For him, to lack language would make our understanding of the world infinitely poorer than it is. Hence, the various languages we have, the different languages, for example, allow us to have more

tools to understand reality. Translation creates opportunities for access to a greater understanding of reality not so much (or not only) by the transfer from a source text to a target text but by the interpretation that the translator makes and the windows, so to speak, that it opens to the reader to exercise his own interpretations of a text that otherwise (not knowing the language of the source text) would have remained completely closed to him.

That knowledge always depends on historical, linguistic and normative conditions-which is a relative point of view for each person who interprets a text-does not imply an inherent danger towards gaining knowledge; in fact, it shows its possibilities. Transcending our prejudices, our limiting conditions, is a way of obtaining and propagating knowledge; this is what literary translation does (H.-G. Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*. Bd. 1. *Hermeneutik: Wahrheit und Methode-1*).

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