

Under-Standing:

The Divine Messenger Hermes and the Character of Hermeneutics

By Rebecca Diggs

“My friend, it’s hard to say
all the things a fellow can see
with his eyes.
Many travelers use this road,
and some come and go
with very bad things in their mind,
others with very good things.
And it’s awfully hard
to know everyone.”

-Homeric Hymns 32

Although Hans Georg Gadamer’s theories of philosophical hermeneutics appear quite near the end of a long chronological history of western philosophy, springing mainly from the existential notions presented by his mentor, Martin Heidegger, his contributions to western thought tap their roots to a far more ancient stream. Historically, Gadamer’s epistemological ideas revivify and reshape for a modern context the nineteenth century practice of hermeneutics, designated at that time strictly to the interpretation of ancient texts in the pursuit of their supposed one true meaning. This tradition of hermeneutics, the art of understanding, having now passed through Gadamer’s radical hands, has been freed from the constraints of its elementary task and opened to the grasp of historians, artists, rhetoricians, psychologists, anthropologists, and philosophers. However groundbreaking and new it seems, though, philosophical

hermeneutics possesses a timeless and mythical parentage, reaching back to the originators of the western tradition, the ancient Greeks.

Rather than explicate philosophical hermeneutics' historical lineage, I wish here to illuminate its character, to personify it so that it may be relatable rather than dissect it with a detached Cartesian eye. This act of personifying, after all, is a hermeneutical practice. According to James Hillman, "To understand anything at all, we must envision it as having an independent subjective interior existence, capable of experience, obliged to a history, motivated by purposes and intentions" (16). Thus, while I nod to Aristotle's *On Interpretation*, the first written work in western history to confront the epistemological structures of hermeneutics, I invoke rather the Homeric "Hymn to Hermes" to animate this practice and reveal its underlying mythology. Hermes' character as drawn in this Hymn embodies several of the key elements of Gadamer's philosophy, to be discussed below.

I imagine Gadamer would approve of such a personifying route to his ideas, as he seems to highly value mythological consciousness, turning time and again in his works to "the peculiar relation between myth and *logos* that we find at the beginning of Greek thought" (*Philosophical Hermeneutics* 51). To him, mythological consciousness allows a more dynamic, alive, and authentic relation between subject and object, signifier and signified, word and concept, than does post-Enlightenment rationality (*Philosophical Hermeneutics* 128). An examination of Gadamer's theories through the lens of the "Hymn to Hermes", then, ought to remain in this spirit of authentic relationship. And who better to turn to for such a mythological understanding of philosophical hermeneutics than the god of interpretation himself, the divine messenger, the guide of

the underworld, the signifier of borders (and traverser of those borders), swift-footed Hermes?

In the shadowy hours of dawn, deep in an underground cave, the precocious babe Hermes is born. From this moment, nothing remains untouchable, no realm unreachable. The son of mighty Zeus and the lowly earth nymph Maia, Hermes is the very essence of in-between-ness. Half god, half nymph, his foundation lies with a foot in two very different worlds, to which neither does he quite belong. An inventor from his first breath, however, Hermes realizes this misfit status as a windfall and eventually uses it to become a double agent, discreetly permeating the boundaries at which the heavens, earth, and underworld meet.

It is in this same liminal space, this territory between territories that Gadamer finds his philosophical hermeneutics. One of the foremost concepts of Gadamer's theory is the "fusion of horizons," occurring at the fertile and equalizing space in which one being's horizon meets and interpenetrates that of another (*Philosophical Hermeneutics* 39). "His concern was always with the horizons," describes John Caputo, "with their mutual nourishment and interaction, with a certain wedding or joining of the horizons such that each draws strength from the other and all in the service of the present" (96).

According to this concept, both subject and object, necessarily delineated in their individuality, are situated in fixed unique positions from which they perceive and experience all that lies within the horizons surrounding those positions. Says Gadamer of these horizons, "every finite presentation has its limitations" (*Truth and Method* 269). These perspectives, though ridden with intrinsic presuppositions and alienations, allow an

interpenetration of their horizons with those of others, from other times, other languages, other cultures, or merely other individual beings. And it is in the overlaps, the places in which one horizon commingles and even fuses with another, that meaning, that ever-sought boon, may be cultivated. Meaning, according to Gadamer, does not simply appear at the beckon of the isolated Cartesian mind peering down upon its subjects of study, but rather develops and grows in the fusion of horizons which occurs in the equalizing space between the two. And it is to the exploration of this synergistic space that Gadamer and other practitioners of philosophical hermeneutics devoted much of their work, taking detailed notice of its conditions, its characteristics, and its potentials for meaningful communication. In short, “hermeneutics is a kind of phenomenology of the between” (Bruns 11).

The fusion of horizons shall be visited more thoroughly later on. To reach it, the *Hymn to Hermes* continues to unfold. Once born, the infant Hermes ventures out into a bright and unknown world. The first creature he spies on his first day of life is a beautiful tortoise, plodding along a mountain path. Having beheld the small beast for its aesthetic pleasure, Hermes immediately sets to work discovering every possible meaning it may possess: “‘Alive, of course, / you’re good medicine / against the pains / of black magic. / But dead, dead / you’ll make great music!’” (*Homeric Hymns* 20). Having thus settled upon the most delightful meaning for the tortoise’s appearance, Hermes kills the reptile and transforms its hollow shell into the earth’s first lyre.

This moment of invention, of inspiration and reflection, illuminates another facet of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. In this practice, experience, followed by reflection, allows meaning to be revealed. In direct opposition to the scientific tradition

which preceded him, in which meaning was attained through methodological contemplation followed by predictions and exhaustive testing, Gadamer's philosophy strongly emphasizes the importance of immediate experience as the necessary touchstone for meaning to develop. Gerald Bruns calls this a "Copernican Revolution, namely, [the] idea that understanding is not an activity of consciousness but a condition of belonging to a world" (2). Thus the phenomenological influence on philosophical hermeneutics is revealed—much like phenomenology, the task of this hermeneutics is to study and describe the process of understanding the world, rather than predicting and predetermining its possible facets of meaning, and to accomplish this one must begin with personal and unique experiences and explore their potentials through reflection.

Beyond the phenomenological aspects of Hermes first invention, this act concretizes his place in the world. Hermes is a god in the world, not above it; he interacts with his surroundings and experiences them hands-on rather than lingering in the clouds atop Mount Olympus, observing and speculating. This is the "belonging to a world" indicated by Bruns above. Gadamer speaks often of the alienations inherent in the scientific method, arguing that when one attempts such an approach to understanding, she necessarily separates herself from experiencing it directly by attempting to "preunderstand" in accord with the universal body of truths shared by scientists, rather than allowing the meanings of the moment of interaction to develop (*Philosophical Hermeneutics* 39). While Gadamer does not discredit this method of understanding, he does describe the ways in which it separates one from the animated world, disallowing a true fusion of horizons for the sake of a controlled environment. Such alienation it is the

aim of philosophical hermeneutics to overcome. And in his moments of invention, of openness to experience, of belonging to the world, Hermes embodies this endeavor.

Having made a place for himself in the world, Hermes next sets out to infiltrate the pantheon of his Olympic family. After the sun has set on his first busy day, baby Hermes, feeling a pang of hunger, flits up the moonlit path to a lovely lush pasture upon which his brother Apollo's cattle graze. The sumptuous-looking beasts before him look too delectable to pass by, and Hermes makes quick work of herding them down the road to his own hidden pasture, discovering the mechanics of fire and building one for his ritual, and slaughtering two of the cattle in sacrifice to the pantheon (of which he makes himself a part by dividing the sacrifice into twelve portions, the Olympic gods having previously numbered only eleven).

This cattle-rustle not only initiates Hermes into the realm of Olympus, but it steals away a symbol of golden Apollo's great power. Apollo, the god of rational thinking and the voice of the oracle, whose great straight arrows pierce through to the core center of their targets, is forced at this moment to concede to Hermes' cunning, and to share some of his power with the young trickster. In such a leveling of the Apollonian hegemony, the worldly ways of Hermes find validity.

This moment in Hermes' story reveals a crucial element of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. The philosopher's theories achieve a leveling of scientific objectivism much akin to Hermes' leveling of Apollo's reign. Gadamer's primary criticism of scientific methodology reveals it as a practice which thoroughly enforces the Cartesian (Apollonian) hierarchy in which the human individual possesses the power to rationally and objectively understand the world, and thus the world exists merely as

specimen to be understood. The attitude of scientific methodology, and it has been a dominant one for several centuries, seems to relegate the world to the underclass of primitive phenomenon, elevating the scientist to the dominant and glorified role of rational interpreter who peers down from the detached heights of Olympus. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics aims to release the notion of understanding from the tight grip of scientific methodology. He describes this Apollonian stronghold: "We live with the awareness of a world that is changing in unforeseeable ways, and in conflicts and tensions we expect science, out of its own resources, to constitute the decisive factor....Society clings with bewildered obedience to scientific expertise..." (*Philosophical Hermeneutics* 111).

Much like Hermes' power play, in which he simply shares in the wealth of the dominant deity and includes himself in the pantheon rather than trying to rule, Gadamer argues that society would benefit immensely from merely including a reflective method of understanding the world, one with a tone of reciprocity rather than dominance, amongst the pantheon of human understanding. In this shift a great leveling, a horizontal-ness may occur—no longer does the interpreter look down on the object from the isolated heights of scientific rationality; rather, she seeks the point at which her own horizon, including all of its influential factors such as culture, language, and existential experience, meets the respective horizon of the figurative text she wishes to understand. Thus, both subject and object carry equal weight in their horizontal-ness, and their relation becomes the vital point at which meaning may be grasped. This move emphasizes again Gadamer's fusion of horizons concept, in which the space between, the interpenetration which can only occur between beings of equal gravity, becomes the seat

of meaning. The great Apollonian eye rules no longer, but shares its reign with the curious body of Hermes; the archer who once pierced all must begin to allow himself to be penetrated.

As it may be expected, Apollo is at first quite furious about this new arrangement. Realizing the culprit of his missing cattle he charges into Hermes' home and dangles the baby god before his great face, threatening to expel him to dark Tartarus if he refuses to admit to the crime (a humorous foreshadowing of Hermes' future career as messenger and guide of the underworld). When Hermes laughingly refuses to yield in the face of such an adamant demand for truth, Apollo demands a hearing by Zeus to bring him to justice. As the brothers stand before mighty Zeus, however, Hermes' silver tongue goes to work, and spins a tale so fantastic and persuasively sweet that his father cannot help but admire the boy and reward this unique power of rhetoric rather than punish him for the stolen cattle.

This scene points to the importance of linguistics and rhetoric in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer expounds often about the role language plays in processes of human understanding, arguing that language and reality are inextricably bonded, that language does not describe truth, but is equal to it. "Reality does not happen 'behind the back' of language;" he states, "it happens rather behind the backs of those who live in the subjective opinion that they have understood 'the world' (or can no longer understand it); that is, reality happens precisely *within* language" (*Philosophical Hermeneutics* 35). Because philosophical hermeneutics aims to understand the process of understanding, language plays a crucial role, as it is a fundamental way in which humans understand the world and share their perspectives with others.

Further, it is this emphasis on language which supports the distinction between scientific thinking and hermeneutical reflective thinking. Rhetorical language seeks to communicate shared experience and meaning, that which exists in the fusion of horizons, rather than cling in isolation to empirical “truth”. Again, reality is not limited to that which scientific methodology apprehends, but includes all that occurs in the realm of language. As Gadamer states, “rhetoric from oldest tradition has been the only advocate of a claim to truth that defends the probable, the *eikós* (verisimile), and that which is convincing to the ordinary reason, against the claim of science to accept as true only what can be demonstrated and tested!” (*Philosophical Hermeneutics* 24).

Despite the weighty evidence against him, Hermes, realizing this power of rhetorical reality, insists to Zeus that that which is probable is also true, and what the facts say is simply absurd: “a baby, / just new-born, / who could walk right in the door / with a herd of cows. / What you’re talking about is ridiculous. / I was just born yesterday!” (*Homeric Hymns* 37). And Zeus in his wisdom seems to acknowledge the truths in both stories, the empirical and the rhetorical, laughing heartily at Hermes’ masterful story as the little trickster winks up at him. This is precisely the move Gadamer wishes to make with his philosophy—to allow the ways of understanding the world’s truths to be unleashed from the dominant and exclusive scientific view, simply so that personal experience and reflection may be allowed to develop truth as well.

As a solution to his sons’ conflict, Zeus orders the two to find a way to love one another, and assigns a job to Hermes: from this day forward he shall be the messenger of the gods, the giver of gifts and overseer of transactions among humans, and the one and only liaison between Hades and those who dwell in the upper levels of the world. These

are the roles which distinguish the adult Hermes, which grant him the characteristics by which he is best known. As messenger of the gods, he is present in all moments of rhetoric and communication, of the truth in language. And from his meetings with Hades, god of the underworld, Hermes brings to the surface pure and powerful treasures from this subterrain, truths that dwell only in the depths. Christine Downing describes their relationship as a unique combined effort: Hades pulls down to the underworld, and Hermes leads back up (39).

Because the underworld is the realm of deep and ancient truths, “where the fundamental forms of imagination are revealed” (Smith 2), it seems vital that acts of meaning-seeking involve a reach down to its recesses. As E. Lansing Smith argues of the hermeneutic tradition, “the [underworld] myth can be seen as...analogous to the process by which the text is interpreted (hermeneusis)” (335). Thus, Hermes’ underworld access is vital to understanding—the peak of Olympus, home to Apollo, is not its only territory. Hermes connects the points along the *axis mundi*, mining buried gems from the underworld, and pulling radiant wisps of cloud down from the heights of the heavens.

Though the immediate connections between Hermes and the practice of hermeneutics are revealed in the god’s role as divine messenger and interpreter, the *Homeric Hymn* illuminates many more nuanced instances of his workings in the world of human understanding. He will always be the tricky wing-footed messenger Hermes, and Hermes Trismegistus, the thrice great father of alchemical transformation, but as the *Hymn* shows the astute reader, in his first days on earth Hermes has much to teach philosophers about the art of understanding.

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