The Stakes of the Event

There exists a double temptation present in our interpretations of the other. On one hand, we are tempted by an egoistic, total commensurability; that is, the temptation to reduce everything foreign to the self, the familiar, to our own culture. Here, all understanding of the other is predicated on our own terms and the other is forced into being commensurable to our interpretation of it. On the other hand, perhaps in response to our dissatisfaction with total commensurability, we are tempted by the incommensurability of heterogeneity. Here, we despair of understanding the other, believing the other to be so incommensurable to our own interpretations that there exists no place of contact between the self and the other.

Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics provides us with – better yet, insists upon – a certain type of openness that enables the possibility of a meeting-place, a point of contact, between the self and its other. This is a position that resists both of these temptations. But, because this alternative refuses to affirm the exclusivity of either of these temptations, this in-between is a place of constant mediation, a position that is always being forced to shift. The dynamism inherent in such a position precludes the possibility of conceiving this in-between as a compromised position of fear, as unradical, reactionary, or as a place of rest. Instead, this in-between resists the safety of one-sidedness for a task of continual risk. At this point of contact there is the possibility of negotiating ourselves in the light of others which, on the one hand takes the form of bringing the foreign closer to us, and on the other hand, takes the form of a self-
diremption where, due to its engagement with alterity, the self distances itself from its former understanding of itself. It is not difficult, then, to recognize this event of contact with another as one of especial political significance, something most easily recognized when it takes the form of cross-cultural interpretation.

We will concern ourselves primarily with the challenge of the incommensurabilists who, in their concern for preserving the alterity of the other, accuse philosophical hermeneutics of the opposite extremity. The accusation here is that philosophical hermeneutics privileges sameness at the expense of otherness and has a commitment (perhaps, unknowingly) to a metaphysics of total commensurability. The incommensurabilist position views any contact, any attempt by the self to go to the limits of its horizon in order to expand it through conversation and the attempt to understand, as a violent attempt to reduce the other’s alterity to one’s ipseity. This is both its strength and weakness. Because of its sensitivity to the violence done to the foreign when it is reduced to the familiar, incommensurabilism is especially vigilant in its attempt to preserve the difference between the one interpreting and the one interpreted – this is its strength. Its weakness, however, lies in the either/or distinction it sets up. That is, incommensurabilism suggests itself as the better of only two options, total commensurability or total incommensurability. The terms of this distinction bar the possibility of the mediating in-between position of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. It is our contention here that in Gadamer’s notion of a fusion of horizons we establish the connection with another, moving toward (always moving toward) an understanding.
But it is also here, in the event of the fusion of horizons, that we shall further
defend the possibility of disagreement. In this manner, we will not argue, as some have,
that the reality of noncommunion, of conflict, or of interruption is contrary to the idea of
fusion of horizons, or worse yet, delegitimizes the very notion. Instead, we shall argue
that while it is the anticipation of each horizon to converse with what lies at its
boundaries, to understand the unfamiliar, bringing the alien closer, the possibility of
disagreement, of noncommunion, does not spell defeat for the fusion of horizons. Instead,
it will be argued that even in the face of conflict we can see the fusion of horizons as
successful; that is, we will defend Gadamer’s hermeneutics as radical and flexible enough
to account for successful disagreement. Untranslatability and conflict do not indicate a
position wholly beyond understanding, but instead open up a space where difference is
discernible and acknowledged rather than external to this encounter that is the fusion of
horizons. This conflict is characteristic of understanding itself; it is the nature of its risk.

Horizons

In interpretation there exists the very real danger of the interpreter reducing the
text of a foreign culture to her own, ignoring what differences it has, and consequently
claiming the text as her own. To protect against this type of appropriation some believe
the necessary precaution to be one of understanding the categories of self and other as
wholly unmediated, precluding any type of contact. Such a proposition is one of closed
and thereby incommensurable horizons. But how does this understanding prevent us from
the conclusion of the “primacy of the solus ipse,” the isolated self? This is to ask of the
position of incommensurable horizons how it avoids a personal or cultural solipsism,
where one is indifferent to what lies beyond oneself.
To avoid seeing horizons merely as standpoints that limit all vision beyond themselves, we turn to a richer description of what is meant by ‘horizons.’ In order to understand the ways in which Gadamer’s fusion of horizons differs from the incommensurabilist position we must conceive of horizons in a phenomenological way and return to Husserl. Let us take as our starting point our life-world, those experiences that make up our world prior to any sort of explicit analysis or self-reflection; that is, our involuntary condition of being-in-the-world. This life-world is our standpoint, our condition for any understanding. From the standpoint of our life-world, we have a foundation of everyday customs and prejudices that serves as the basis of our anticipation of what the unfamiliar might mean. Our horizon consists of these tacit, anticipatory (prejudiced) interpretations that we project onto that which lies at the limit of our life-world’s understanding. Like a visual horizon, say, a mountain range at the limit of our perception, we draw upon the familiar, what lies within our visual scope, to anticipate what might lie on the other side. Different horizons correspond to their different prejudgment-producing life-worlds. In other words, to draw upon our example, living in a different environment will change the way we anticipate what lies on the other side of the mountain range.

As we note in Hegel’s discussion of the limit, where each limit points to what lies on its other side, beyond its demarcation, our horizon, at the limit of our life-world, catches a glimpse of that which limits it. A wall is never exclusively the possession of what lies inside it nor is it the possession of the outside, but, in fact, it draws the inside to recognize the outside and the outside to recognize the inside (albeit this form of recognition, when we think of those walls surrounding countries, is not always amicable).
Our horizon, those traditions, cultural orientations, and backgrounds that determine us, points toward what is not ours, that which is to us indeterminate. Husserl describes this horizon as, on the one hand, of “indeterminate actuality,” and as “an empty mist of obscure indeterminateness.” But just as it is not fully determinable, Husserl writes that, on the other hand it is not fully undetermined:

This horizon, however, is the correlate of the components of undeterminateness essentially attached to experiences of physical things themselves; and those components…leave open possibilities of fulfillment, which are by no means completely undetermined, but are, on the contrary, motivated possibilities predelineated with respect to their essential type. Horizons, then, far from being closed, as we had understood them in the incommensurabilist sense, are potentialities, invitations, for our understanding. We acknowledge the limit, but the limit is never insurmountable. The border between our life-world and what lies outside of it is a gateway to the beyond that horizons attempt to, however slowly and incrementally, move through. From any position, any standpoint, we are limited. To draw upon an example from our sense-perception, when I stand talking to another I am limited from seeing the back of their head. But this limitation, this horizon, is not closed in the sense that it cannot, through its anticipations, move to grasp what is beyond that which is immediately present to me and venture to verify this anticipation. Because of my familiarity with the human body, I can anticipate that my interlocutor has hair at the back of her head and can encircle her to prove these anticipations true or false. The fusion of horizons is not a move to escape one’s life-world, but rather a move to expand one’s horizon of understanding and, therefore, it is “something into which we move and that moves with us…always in motion.” Thus, horizons open up a trajectory
to understand that which is unfamiliar, which thereby enables ethicality, the response to the call or demands of the other by moving further beyond the comfortable.

**The Fusion of Horizons**

We are confronted with the question as to how this fusion of horizons is not a mere boomerang approach, an attempt to go to the limits of our understanding and return unchanged. How is this point of contact not merely a self-interested attempt to understand the other on our own terms? Before we make an attempt at accurately responding (alternately: Before we attempt to accurately respond) to this concern, let us turn to properly articulating the event of this fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*). First, it is an event because it is continually unfolding; since the identity of any culture is always shifting, so too must our horizon shift when we move to encounter what lies beyond our understanding. In fact, it is because of this continual shifting that we are always moving toward a better understanding. Our hermeneutic task is never completed for there is always something beyond our current vision, an ethical imperative to be cautious in our declarations and receptive in our listening: humility, in a word. In an interview with Riccardo Dottori, Gadamer has clarified as much:

> The horizon that one speaks of in the fusion of the horizons of interpretation is nothing that one ever reaches, so it can’t assume a metaphysical position….The horizon of interpretation changes constantly, just as our visual horizon also varies with every step that we take.iii

Second, we must inquire into what is meant by ‘fusion’ in the fusion of horizons, a site of considerable confusion to many. To be sure, Gadamer clarifies how this is not to be understood:

> [The fusion of horizons does not consist in] subordinating another person to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own
particularity but also that of the other. The concept of “horizon” suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have.\textsuperscript{viii}

This “higher universality” is irreducible to either’s particularity, but in their meeting opens up, even generates, new histories, new events, new influences at the borders between cultures.\textsuperscript{ix} In my encounter with another culture, a new, \textit{in-between} space is created that is not only mine nor my other’s, but unique and yet familiar to both of us, where I see myself in the other and the other sees herself in me. The fusion of horizons is just this: an encounter and contact where the new possibilities of understanding our relation to alterity lie.

The incommensurabilist externalization of “the category of alterity to the point that any contact with the self [would be a] contamination”\textsuperscript{x} ends up meaning that the self must actually be \textit{indifferent} to difference! Against this type of lacuna, the possibility of a new space must be affirmed to allow conversation that transforms us “into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.”\textsuperscript{xii} Gadamer exclaims that “one must lose oneself in order to find oneself,”\textsuperscript{xii} never knowing who one will become. I “return,” per se, to my life-world irreversibly changed. This attempt to understand the other is not merely in order to impose my own interpretation on the other, but the other, in fact, pushes me to become other to my former horizon, beyond what I identify with, and returns me to myself as if to another.\textsuperscript{xiii}

Conformity between the two parties need not be the aim nor the condition here, but, rather, there must simply be an orientation toward a shared subject matter. To ignore such a possibility is to ignore the attempt to gain superior breadth of vision. To insist on our complete incompatibility is to play it safe in a monologue and neglect the risk of letting another shape your vision, of entering into a conversation where what you say or
hear might offend, put you at risk, or be challenged. Furthermore, it is to overlook the fact that, insofar as we encounter people or texts that are unfamiliar to us (a fact which is undeniable), the “external” influence of the other is already a characteristic of our being. In Heideggerian language, “Being towards Others [is an] irreducible relationship of Being…[one which] already is…. The possibility of understanding the stranger correctly presupposes such a hermeneutic as its positive existential condition.”xv That is, we are always already in a situation of interaction with others insofar as we are always sharing a world with others. The possibility of interpreting another and being interpreted by another is already assumed in our very constitution as Being-with-others.

The existence and distance of the stranger is the very condition of understanding. Difference is not a problem to be overcome, but, seen as the very condition of understanding, is the possibility of contextualizing the familiar “within a larger whole and in truer proportion”xvi and breaking out of the exclusivity of the familiar. There is a positive claim that a foreign text’s alterity makes on its reader that is not possible when we suspend its claim to truth. We suspend the other’s claim to truth when we conceive of understanding as if it were a mere transmission of meaning, where one says that they have exactly understood another’s intentions. Here we are reminded of Schleiermacher’s psychologistic divination of meaning. We also suspend the other’s claim to truth when we deny ourselves any possibility of understanding the other’s text. This latter position is the one held by the incommensurabilists.

Openness

We must, instead of the alternatives addressed above, be open to recognize that the meanings possible in foreign texts “represent a fluid multiplicity of possibilities…and
if a person fails to hear what the other person is really saying, he will not be able to fit what he has misunderstood into the range of his own various expectations of meaning.”

And, likewise, any foreign text or culture, however much it might look like a “world wholly closed within itself[,]…[is] open toward the [interpreter], in whom it achieves its whole significance.” What this goes to show is that an openness is required for cross-cultural interpretation. This openness is ripe with risk, as the mere presence of the other leads us to acknowledge our deficiencies and limitations. This openness is perhaps best captured by Aeschylus’ *pathei mathos* or, in English, “learning, through suffering.” This, however, means more than that we gain wisdom through tribulations. Moreover, what we gain through this suffering is insight into the deficiency of our previous position, the particularity of our understanding, the finitude of our experience. This openness is the acknowledgment that the other might be correct, that I might need to accept something that goes against my interests, and that I am willing to lose.

We must be ready to be addressed and bound by the word of another; to recognize in the speech of another that they are directing it towards us, making a claim on us that is not neutral and cannot first be tested or verified. If our horizon’s initial invitation was to bring the alien closer, here, in this moment of self-doubt, the close is made alien. Gadamer gives an example of the potential discomfort of such an openness by claiming that the West’s insistence that the USSR act in terms of furthering human rights, parliamentary democracy, and industrialization reveals only the West’s pre-occupations and does not reflect the USSR’s traditions, values, and history. This openness is no less needed in today’s world, concerning Western pre-occupations with topics ranging from globalization and technological modernization to headscarves and arranged marriages.
We must avoid the temptation to use the other merely to gain perspective on our own life-world, that is, to colonize the other for their resources, including the ability to serve as a catalyst for our atonement and redemption. But, instead, we must realize the implications of this openness: often an alternative or threat to our life as we knew it is being offered. To recognize the true impetus of this openness is to recognize that such an event is not comparable to a New Age trip to the Far East where we hope to be revitalized with a spiritual awakening. Instead, our personal enrichment in this encounter, our taking with us, or “appropriation,” of what we have learnt from the other, must be reconceived. As Kearney writes, this “notion of appropriation does not…imply some triumphalist return of a sovereign subject to itself. If the goal of hermeneutics remains ‘self-understanding,’ this must be reinterpreted in the altered sense of understanding oneself in front of the text.”

I appropriate the new horizon of possibility opened up by the other’s text, but only through my own disappropriation, my resignation from the status of the master and my submission to the power of the other’s text.
Resistance/Interruption

There is still a problem the incommensurabilist is likely to raise: that of the other who refuses to be understood. Does this count as incommensurability? The fusion of horizons must account for potential altercations. Sometimes the other does not wish to be understood for fear of being that catalyst to quick redemption, aware of the likelihood of misunderstanding, and in fear of being culturally homogenized. The other might worry about what Heidegger called “leaping in” for another, where I, under the guise of genuine help, attempt to disburden, by taking on, the concerns of the other. In this “leaping in,” I reassure the other that they can relieve themselves of their fears concerning my attempt to understand them. Here, I dominate the other insofar as I do not acknowledge their concern as their own and attempt to take this concern away from them by reassuring them of my own interpretive abilities. “Fear not,” I say, “for I will completely understand your perspective, leaving you nothing to be concerned about.” Such a takeover often results when one assumes too much commonality and impatiently predicts agreement. As Emerson has put it, there is often some violence in the gift, even if the “gift” is, in our case, listening, attending to the other, or attempting to understand them, for sometimes the other wishes to be self-sustained. This is to say that some encounters produce violence and that some conversations are going to be interrupted, sometimes before they even start. There are times when the possibility of understanding is doubted and looked upon suspiciously.

Though we have suggested some reasons why someone might wish to not be understood, we must still view this refusal as a type of communication. These reasons for not wanting to be understood come from interpretations of what the interpreter will bring
to their text and, in this sense, a contact between the two has, in a fundamental way, already occurred. In fact, genuine dialogue often occurs in times of pressure, at the brink of war. But this contact is in the space of the encounter, in the event of the fusion of horizons, where the “closer and more distant acquaintances…friends and enemies” are recognized. It is here in the fusion of horizons where any interruptions, any refusals of further understanding, are discernible and “in this experience [there lies] a potentiality for being other that lies beyond every coming to agreement about what is common.” All solidarity presupposes this possibility of difference and interruption; all unity presupposes a multiplicity of perspectives. In the Gadamer-Derrida encounter (a public debate that brought the two thinkers together in 1981) Gadamer makes clear his position on the topic of difference:

I would not want to say that the solidarities that bind human beings together and make them partners in a dialogue always are sufficient to enable them to achieve understanding and total mutual agreement. Just between two people this would require a never-ending dialogue…we speak past each other and are even at cross-purposes with ourselves.

Reflecting on the Gadamer-Derrida exchange, many have interpreted Derrida’s position as an attempt to resist communication. Whether or not this was, in fact, the case, Gadamer’s position on this matter is clear: any possible rejection of an attempt to communicate would still imply that the one resisting communication must speak and write in order to be understood – at least inasmuch as both parties need to understand the boundary beyond which violence will erupt. In other words, “to cancel means to [some extent] take up and use.” After all, surely the other wishes to be understood in their declaration “do not try to understand me, you cannot.” And so, in the incommensurabilists’ defense of an other beyond this encounter of the fusion of horizons,
their explicit rejection of communication actually relies on the implicit recognition of the other and the possibility of dialogue, even if only continually interrupted dialogue. That is to say, the implicit recognition necessary to defend such a wholly other position is itself reason to doubt the possibility of that age-old allegory of two ships passing at night, unaware of one another.

Thus, we can say of the fusion of horizons that it can be regarded as successful insofar as there is an encounter, even in those situations where conversation is difficult or prohibited. There is now one further point to add about the event in which I am prohibited to understand another. Even in times such as these, if I have approached the encounter with the openness we previously spoke of, my previous standpoint is, nevertheless, jeopardized. I cannot return to my initial perspective without an understanding of its contingency, and have, thereby, returned with an expanded, but discomforted horizon. The same thing stands for that other prohibiting any further interpretation, for, as we mentioned, the contingency of her position is acknowledged in the perception of a threat that endangers her position, such as my attempt to understand.

There is, then, some conversation taking place, a fusion of horizons, despite its sometimes fragmented and resistant nature. And in this conversation there must be some shared connection between the two parties concerning the matter-at-hand (in our example, the matter shared between the horizon of the interpreting self and the other is those restrictions to my understanding). When both parties are able to, even partially or antagonistically, exchange ideas with one another, this is indication of an encounter, and it is the accomplishment of such an encounter that the subject matter of this conversation is recognized as a coming-into-language. As Gadamer writes, “Every conversation
presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language…worked out in
the conversation.” We can see now that this new common language is that ever in-
between space opened up by the fusion of horizons, the “higher universality” of two
different parties encountering one another.

Often such an encounter and the arbitration of such a language is neither
comfortable, nor met with an equally zealous attempt at conciliation by both sides. To be
sure, in the creation of a new language, i.e., the forging of a continuity of traditions
between two cultures, there always exists that which eludes translatability: a certain
slippage between the horizons, an excess that cannot be properly shared and runs over on
both sides. It is this “higher universality” created through even the most antagonistic of
encounters, the most disruptive and disjointed of fusions of horizons, that I think Paul
Celan was referring to in his speech upon receiving the literature prize from the city of
Bremen. Reflecting on his personal experiences as a victim of the Shoah, he captures the
tension in this coming-into-language:

Reachable, near and not lost, there remained in the midst of the losses this one thing: language. It,
the language, remained, not lost, yet in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own
answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darknesses of
deathbringing speech. It passed through and gave back no words for that which happened; yet it
passed through this happening. Passed through and could come to light again, 'enriched' by all
this.xxxi

What we conclude from this is that a sufficiently dynamic hermeneutics capable
of cross-cultural interpretation will need to provide an open conception of the fusion of
horizons in direct opposition to the one-sided conception of horizons offered by the
incommensurabilist understanding. Furthermore, as Gadamer has demonstrated, this
hermeneutics must be able to account for both those possibilities of agreement and freely exchanged commonalities opened up in language as well as for the possibility of resistance and interruption in our usual amenable conversations.