SPEECH, WRITING, AND PLAY IN GADAMER AND DERRIDA

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein,

ABSTRACT: I revisit the Derrida-Gadamer debate in order to analyze more closely the problem of the foundation of reason and of interpretation. I explore the theme of play as a metaphor of non-foundation in both philosophers and analyze how both extract this quality from their readings of Plato's *Phaedrus*. Does Derrida not essentialize the game by declaring that the playful experience of a Gadamerian dialogue must produce a metaphysical presence in the form of a hermeneutic intention? I find that the circular structure of understanding permits – for both philosophers – no clear *signifiant* either in speech or in writing. The game of interpretation produces – in changing endlessly between reading and rhetoric – an endless chain from one signifier to the next signifier without ever imitating a divine *logos*.

KEYWORDS: Gadamer; Derrida; Phaedrus; hermeneutic circle; theory of foundation; hermeneutics and style; philosophy of play; Platonism

INTRODUCTION

"Deconstruction" has widely been construed as an activity determined by the rejection of every continuum of meaning or orientation towards truth, leading to an absence of sense. In the words of James K.A. Smith this concerns very much the "received" Derrida, mediated by American English departments (Smith 2006: 113). Hermeneutics, as an activity able to retrieve and establish sense, can be understood as the opposite of deconstruction, the more so since Derrida has spelled out that, in his view, Gadamer depends on a Platonic understanding of truth, logos, and rationality in terms of a metaphysics of presence (Derrida 1989). Comparative studies, most of them revolving around the 1981 "Gadamer-Derrida Encounter" (Palmer & Michelfelder 1989), have established the differences between deconstruction and hermeneutics, the former being seen as pursuing a decentering, separatist, function, while the latter is working towards dialogue, conversation, and reconciliation. The former is thus

"progressive," revealing clichés and prejudices, while the latter can easily be seen as "reactionary" as it reestablishes the continuity of tradition and the unity of textual meaning (cf. Caputo 1989). Derrida himself has insisted on fundamental points of divergence by relating Gadamer's hermeneutic-dialogical philosophy to "a metaphysics of the will" (Derrida 1989: 54).[1]

However, during the last two decades, works linking hermeneutics and deconstruction (Risser 1997, Bernstein 2008) have also emerged. It turns out that the hermeneutic circle, as well as Gadamer's focus on playful moments within the process of understanding, can bring hermeneutics closer to the field of "deconstruction." Undeniably, both philosophers have many points in common: both share an extraordinary sensitivity to the nuances of language and both "deny the possibility of a transcendental, language-free standpoint for human understanding" and agree that "in language we encounter the limits of our subjectivity" (Michelfelder and Palmer 1989: 1). Both also emphasize that the interaction of text and reader never results in a simple "repetition" of the text using the concepts of "fusion of horizons" and "*différance*" respectively for this purpose. Furthermore, both philosophers provoke a disconcerting questioning about the epistemological criteria for distinguishing true and false prejudices. Gadamer's involvement of the subject in the achievement of truth can be interpreted as simple subjectivism or relativism. The same reproach has been made to Derrida who has been accused of transcending all semiotic grids by declaring the location of the author's intentions impossible. What remains, is "a creative game with the play of signifiers where the reader is Lord of the dance" (Smith 2006: 113), turning interpretation into a wholly arbitrary endeavor. However, what is this game for Derrida and Gadamer respectively? Does Derrida not essentialize the game by declaring that the playful experience of a Gadamerian dialogue *must* produce a metaphysical presence in the form of a hermeneutic intention? The Derrida-Gadamer debate must be revisited in order to analyze more closely the problem of the *foundation* of reason and of interpretation. In particular it is important to explore the theme of play[2] as a metaphor of non-foundation in both philosophers and analyze how both extract this quality from their readings of Plato's *Phaedrus*.

---

[1] Apart from authors contributing to the *Dialogue and Deconstruction* volume see Smith 2006 and Beiner 2003, Di Cesare 2004.

[2] The distinction the English language makes between *play* and *game* involves difficulties for this article. What non-English authors like Gadamer, Huizinga, Derrida and Wittgenstein call *Spiel* or *jeu* cannot consistently be translated as either game or play. Both in the English translation of Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* by G. Barden and J. Cumming and in Huizinga's own English translation of *Homo Ludens* the word *Spiel* (Dutch '*spel*') is translated as play. Equally, Derrida's '*jeu*' in "La Structure, le signe et le jeu

PLAY AND STYLE

The game has not only laws and rules but it must be played in a certain way. In this way it provides an equally non-founded quality: style. For many philosophers, style cannot be founded on rules only but is ruleless and rule-governed at the same time. There is no style without game and there is no (real) game without style. A good life-style appears as such not because the person X has been forced under a code of laws. If person X "has style" then it is only because she makes a good game of her life, which means that her good and styled manners are for her as self-evident as "unwritten laws." Charles Taylor writes:

> Take the example of the gentleman; or its seeming opposite, the macho male. In either case, there may be very little articulation of the norms, of how you have to act and feel in order to be a proper gentleman, or macho. But this will be carried in the way we act towards each other, towards women, etc.; and it will be carried also very much in the way we display ourselves to others; the way we present ourselves in public space. Style is extremely important here. (…) Indeed, the real mark of a gentleman is to live by unwritten rules. Whoever needs to have the rules spelled 'out is not a gentleman. (Taylor 1984: 57)

The rules of style are not obligatory norms. A stylistic game does not come about through norms and rules but through its daily practice: "The path leading towards the human goes through ritual discipline, the education of the self. Greatness is in daily regularity," has said Emmanuel Levinas (1983: 35)[3] and Paul Ricœur puts forward a similar paradox concerning the production of style in language as a simultaneous transgression and recognition of linguistic rules. About Aristotle's position between poetics and rhetoric he concludes that the relationship between metaphor and understanding is basically gamelike:

> Metaphor occurs in an order already constituted in terms of genus and species, and in a game whose relation-rules – subordination, co-ordination, proportionality or equality of relationships – are already given. Second, metaphor consists in a violation of this order and this game. In giving to a genus the name of a species, to the forth term of the proportional relationship the

---

dans le discours des sciences humaines" (in *L'Écriture et la différence)* has been translated by Alan Bass with play.

[3] "La voie qui mène vers l'homme nous ramène à la discipline rituelle, à l'éducation de soi. Sa grandeur est dans sa régularité quotidienne." Levinas recognizes the stylistic value of this ritual game which can be seen as an essential point of his philosophy. In *L'Au-delà du verset* (1982) he writes about the Jewish people of our times: "Ses croyances, ses symboles, ses pratiques et ses textes se sont souvent transformes en contenus culturels: style de vie, coutume, littérature" (22).

name of the second term, and vice versa, one simultaneously recognizes and transgresses the logical structure of language (1457b, 12-20). (Ricœur 1978: 21)[4]

Derrida has been particularly interested in this gamelike notion of style. He calls *écriture* a *vêtement*, a dress, but this stylish *vêtement* is not a dress for allegedly serious people; it is not a uniform, a fatigue dress or a gown but it is a dress for feasts and for games, it is a dress for life: "Writing, sensible matter and artificial exteriority: a 'clothing'."[5] More precisely, the *écriture* or the *trace* is a dress permitting us to join life through play. Numerous people characterize this game-dress, this affirmation of a certain lifestyle, as "a festival mask that must be exorcised" (Derrida 1974: 35). *Ecriture* is the play-dress, the poison, the *pharmakon*, the supplement, the superfluous luxury detested by academics, scientists, intellectuals and all those who concentrate on the "essential." But what they all actually reject is in a very essential way one thing: style. Metaphysics, which depends on the reliability of "presence," "identity," "authenticity," etc. is afraid of this play-dress because it prefers a uniform or a professional dress, which signifies and re-presents clearly the "what" of the bearer. The people who do not want to join the feast, who do not like to play and who refuse style, usually concentrate on the "what." They despise the "how" of style as an "essentially" superficial and dangerous luxury. So did Rousseau: "Rousseau, who is 'ashamed' to toy with these trifles in a treatise on education" (Derrida 1974: 101).[6] By and large, Plato is the initiator of all philosophies refusing the game of *écriture* and the game of style, especially in language: "Here one must think of writing as a game within language. The Phaedrus (277e) condemned writing precisely as play" (50).[7] Saussure, the initiator of structuralism, is disgusted by orthographical "deformations" of spoken words, though he could have considered them just as stylistic variations (*Spielarten*). Derrida counters: "Lefebure [for Lefevre], not a bad name and we can love this play" (41).[8] *Trace*, *écriture*, and style break the claim for presence and for security contained in every (linguistic, orthographic or metaphysical) theory of representation; at the same time they enable a *jouisssance* of presence through the power of the game. This represents the most obvious link between play and style.

---

[4] "La métaphore survient dans un ordre déjà constitué par genres et par espèces et dans un certain jeu déjà réglé de relations: subordination, coordination, proportionnalité ou égalité de rapports. Le deuxième fait est que la métaphore consiste dans une violation de cet ordre et de ce jeu: (...) c'est à la fois reconnaitre et transgresser la structure logique du langage" (Ricœur 1975: 30-31).

[5] "L'écriture, matière sensible et extériorité artificielle: un 'vêtement'. (...) un masque de fête qu'il faut exorciser..." (1967: 52).

[6] "Rousseau: celui qui avait 'honte de s'amuser' aux 'niaiseries' de l'écriture dans un traite de l'éducation" (Derrida 1967a: 157).

[7] "Il faudra ici penser que l'écriture est le jeu dans le langage. Le Phèdre (277e) condamnait précisément l'écriture comme jeu ..." (1967a : 73).

[8] "ce n'est pas mal et nous pouvons aimer ce jeu" (1967a: 62).

FOUNDATION AND NON-FOUNDATION

Theories of non-foundation are not new. The Socratic refutation of the *technè* says quite clearly what is not true but leaves wide open any positive definition of terms like "knowledge" or "the good." Socrates founds an entire theory of knowledge on (a kind of holy) non-knowledge. Hegel's conception of *Weltgeschichte* (world history) as the manifestation of a *Geist* exposes some of the main characteristics of philosophical definitions of the *game* as a model of non-foundation: The *Geist* of history is absolute self-reflexivity or self-consciousness (*Selbstbewusstsein*) whose condition is absolute liberty. The consciousness which *is* merely itself (which has already found itself) strives for nothing and is thus free and unfree at the same time:

> Spirit (…) may be defined as that which has its center in itself. It has not a unity outside itself, but has already found it; it exists *in* and *with itself*. Matter has its essence out of itself; Spirit is *self-contained existence*. Now this is Freedom, exactly. For if I am dependent, my being is referred to something else which I am not; I cannot exist independently of something external. I am free, on the contrary, when my existence depends upon myself" (Hegel 2001: 31).[9]

Circular, gamelike structures of philosophical thinking appear also in Nietzsche and Heidegger who have characterized the history of philosophy as the symmetrical reversals of metaphysics, Christian versions of Platonism, historical theories or any ideologies. Gadamer introduces the notion of *Spiel* "(play or game) in relationship with Heidegger's ideas on the hermeneutic circle. Gadamer's hermeneutics is determined by the notion of "historicity" (*Geschichtlichkeit*) claiming that within every process of understanding we are constantly referred back to our own historical position. The process of understanding is deprived of its (theoretical or methodological) ground and understanding can look like a game.

Here arises a parallel with Derrida, who defines the 'what' of philosophy as *trace*, *écriture*, or as the origin of the non-origin, playing with some classical metaphysical questions: "The trace is in effect the absolute origin of meaning in general. Which comes down to saying (…) that there is no absolute origin of meaning in general. The trace is *différance* that opens appearance and signification" (1974: 65).[10] Derrida disrupts the foundational nature of classical metaphysical concepts and establishes a circular

---

[9] "Der Geist (...) ist eben das, in sich den Mittelpunkt zu haben, er hat nicht die Einheit außer sich, sondern er hat sie gefunden; der Geist ist das Bei-sich-selbst-sein. Dies eben ist die Freiheit, denn wenn ich abhängig bin, so beziehe ich mich auf ein andres, das ich nicht bin; ich kann nicht sein ohne ein Äußeres; frei bin ich, wenn ich bei mir selbst bin" (Hegel 1961: 59).

[10] "La trace est en effet l'origine absolue du sens en général. Ce qui revient à dire (...) qu'il n'y a pas d'origine absolue du sens en général. La trace est la *différance* qui ouvre l'apparaitre et la signification" (1967a: 95).

interdependence of presence, absence, and origin: "The trace is not only the disappearance of origin (...) it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which becomes the origin of the origin" (61).[11] The outcome of this gamelike, parodic gesture is the *trace* or the *écriture* as a game: "It plays enjoyment, renders it present and absent" (312).[12]

It is possible to oppose Gadamer to Derrida on account of the former's unequivocal declarations in favor of the spoken word and against writing (in *Wahrheit und Methode* and the follow-up volume [*Ergänzungsband*]). However, in spite of their apparently opposed interpretations of Plato's *Phaedrus* (see below), Gadamer and Derrida try to deconstruct by means of play the sign, the signifier, and the unequivocal expression. So we can read in Gadamer: "The word of everyday language points towards something and disappears behind the word."[13] If the word hides behind itself to signify a meaning, does that not remind us of Derrida's mute *écriture*? In the same way, "deuten" (to interpret) helps to surmount in the work of Gadamer, a naive signifying of pure presence which becomes not a sign (Zeichen) or a *phone* but an "expression of gestures" (Ausdruck von Gebärden, in Dilthey's words)." The poet does not signify (hindeuten) but he merely "highlights" (herausheben).

GADAMER'S AND DERRIDA'S *PHAEDRUS*

Charles Grisword concludes, in his important study of the *Phaedrus*, that Derrida's reading of the text is "anti-Platonic:" "Given his anti-Platonic assumptions, he reaches anti-Platonic conclusions about Plato. Hence his approach seems circular" (Griswold 1996: 235). At first sight it looks like an easy task to establish Gadamer's and Derrida's readings of the *Phaedrus* as antagonistic. In general, Derrida consistently appropriates Heidegger's critical view of Platonism as a metaphysics that needs to be overcome, while Gadamer walks along tortuous lines of a "Platonic aesthetic" that adopts Plato's concepts of mimesis, anamnesis and kalon (beauty) to art, and art as an experience of truth. While Gadamer advertises himself as "The Platonist,"[14] the "arch anti-Platonist Derrida" (Haliwell 2002: 38) establishes deconstruction "as an anti-Platonist machine for undoing metaphysics" (Peters & Biesta 2009: 54). While Gadamer finds in Plato's

---

[11] "La trace n'est pas seulement la disparition de l'origine, elle veut ici (...) que l'origine n'a même pas disparu, qu'elle n'a jamais été constitué qu'en retour par une non-origine, la trace, qui devient ainsi l'origine de l'origine" (1967a: 90).

[12] "Elle joue la jouissance, la rend absente et présente. Elle est le jeu" (1967a: 440).

[13] "Das Wort in der alltäglichen Sprache weist auf etwas hin und verschwindet hinter dem Wort" (1976b: 45).

[14] Title of interview with E. Fortin in *Interpretation* 12:1, 1984.

philosophy the shape of his own philosophical hermeneutics (Dostal 2010: 50), Derrida delivers a lengthy "non-Platonist account of what holds language together in its relations with the world" (Bennington 2010: 87). However, as the following analysis will show, there are some anti-Platonic moments in Gadamer as well as Gadamerian moments in Derrida. One such points has been touched upon by Richard Bernstein: Derrida's insistence that "Plato's language has a logic and spirit of its own that has little to do with Plato's intentions" bears witness to his "Gadamerian spirit" (Bernstein 2008: 600).

The *Phaedrus* is a discussion on rhetoric led by means of three speeches made or read within the dialogue itself. At the end of the dialogue, written speech is condemned in favor of conversation because conversation enables a direct action on the person who understands. In both Gadamer's and Derrida's bodies of work, the *Phaedrus* has, among all other Platonic works, a paramount importance. In *Truth and Method*, the *Phaedrus* is the most quoted Platonic work and in *La Dissemination* Derrida gives a hundred and thirty pages long analysis of the Platonic distinction between oral and written speech. Gadamer devotes a large part of his *Truth and Method* to the phenomenon of *mimesis* and the finding of truth as a re-memoration (anamnesis) in a Platonic context. Gadamer's main point about the *Phaedrus* is that for Plato rhetoric is more than a pure technique. If rhetoric were merely a technique it would not participate in dialectics and thus would be irrelevant for the understanding of written texts all together, in which case there would not be any reason to condemn writing. Rhetoric is neither a sure dialectical way of deriving meanings from written texts, nor is it a technique unable to lead to philosophical insights about a text. In Plato it has an intermediary function. Rhetoric is ambiguous to the extent that it is never autonomous but an integral part of dialectical knowledge. Along these lines Gadamer prepares the ground for an application of Platonic philosophy to the questions of hermeneutic understanding. Through the interdependence of rhetoric and knowledge in the *Phaedrus*, understanding loses its foundation, which is what separates Gadamer's view from the conventional interpretations of the *Phaedrus*. Hamilton, for example, thinks that "the Phaedrus is concerned to establish the possibility of a genuine art of persuasion which is based on knowledge" (Hamilton 1973: 71). However, rhetoric cannot be based on knowledge because knowledge has first to be gained by rhetoric itself. There is no philosophical ground for rhetoric as a technique; there is only the process of understanding whose existence depends on the way in which rhetoric is used.

Derrida attaches a symbolic character to the fact that Plato condemns writing. According to him, writing, the *pharmakon*,[15] an intermediary leading from a lower to a higher level of knowledge using its dynamic power, is "tamed" by Plato in order to establish the more natural *phonè* as a basic quality in philosophical discourse. Through Plato, the *écriture*, the dynamic movement of mimesis in philosophical thought, which so masterfully and playfully manipulates the *trompe-l-œil* and other artistic ambiguities, becomes "a subordinate character" (un personnage subordonné). *Écriture* still has the right to play but it is now relegated to the position of a second class actor, just good enough to play in subsidized state-theatres instead of being the anarchic, cynical mime from the street. The *écriture occulte* and *ambiguë* has been too suspect to the technocrats and suddenly, after Plato, writing is no real game any longer: it is changed into a formalized, structured and official version of those people who know exactly what is positive, serious and healthy.

It is insufficient to establish the difference between Gadamer's and Derrida's "play" in terms of continuity and discontinuity respectively. Bernstein describes Gadamer's use of play as a sort of "to-and-fro movement of play, the primacy, continuity and the communal aspect of play" while "Derrida focuses on play as unstable disruption and discontinuity" (Bernstein 2008: 588). However, both forms of play are speculative (*speculation* being the Latin translation of *theoria*), which is the reason why Gadamer's and Derrida's interpretations of the *Phaedrus* are different but not incompatible. Gadamer is less radical as he interprets Plato's skepticism towards what Derrida calls the game of writing as a playful gesture itself and thinks that

> Socrates advises us (*Phaedrus*, 276d) to look at writing not with utmost seriousness but to look at it from a playful distance. Is this really a rejection of writing or is it not rather a defense of the right use of writing, something we would call today a hermeneutic appeal? (my trans.)[16]

For Gadamer the ambiguity of rhetoric renders written speech ambiguous as well. He recognizes that written speech can be a mischief if it serves only to memorize words in a technical way (if it serves the *hypomneseos*) without any dialectical help. On the other hand, dialectics can be introduced into the understanding of written speech only by means of rhetoric. Writing can help to acquire knowledge of the good as well as rhetoric, but only "in the eventuality that, beyond realizing the weakness of the spoken word, one also recognizes the weakness of anything written" (Gadamer 2007:

---

[15] Hamilton translates *pharmakon* as "receipt," J. Wright as "medicine" and Jowett as "aid."

[16] Sokrates davor warnt (Phaedrus, 276d), Geschriebenes als höchsten Ernst gelten zu lassen, statt es mit spielerischer Distanz anzusehen. Ist es aber wirklich eine Verwerfung der Erfindung der Schrift, die daraus folgt oder ist es eher ein Apell an den rechten Gebrauch der Schrift, etwas, was man mit einem Ausdruck unserer Tage einen hermeneutischen Apell nennen könnte?" (1991: 263)

253).[17] Written speech is powerless because it is written and the remedy of this powerlessness is the spoken word, which, rhetorical as it is, can equally be powerless. The rhetorician has to apply all those remedies in full consciousness of their possible powerlessness. The rhetorician Gadamer, for example, has cultivated this subtle skepticism towards Plato himself, especially when it comes to Plato's radicalism towards writing:

> The question arises if using all those insights in order to undermine writing has not been too radical. Was Plato not too one sided when he condemned textuality as such just in order to make sure that he will never fall into the decadent dogmatism of writing? (my trans.)[18]

In this important passage, Gadamer abstains from radical pro-Platonism. Of course, he will establish the "less radical" concept of writing with the help of typically Platonic arguments of anamnesis, which blurs the earlier position. As a matter of fact, his concept of writing depends on a hermeneutic-circular treatment: the writing that is understood (das Erkannte) is already understood (bekannt) through the conditions of speech. But this is not so different from Derrida who writes that the interpreter reminds himself "in a hypomnesic mode, of that of which he already has mnesic knowledge" (2004: 135).[19] The decisive point is that Gadamer suggests that, instead of insulating writing from speaking, we have to put up with the circle formed by speech and writing. There is a fundamental doubt about the concepts of text and speech as presence or essence. For Gadamer the word of everyday life, the living *phonè*, should at least temporarily hide behind itself, ("verschwindet hinter dem Wort)" in order to become a silent writing thus "highlighting" and not signifying ("nicht hindeuten sondern herausheben," 1976b: 45) its meaning. The death of speech which becomes writing (the fact that the spoken word disappears) is not a real death as the word disappears, in a circular gesture, behind itself. What remains of the text is neither its essence nor its truth but a game hidden inside the text. Is this so different from *écriture*? It is a game which "mimes knowledge, truth" (Derrida 1972: 105/2004: 120) or in Gadamer's words, which provides "an expression of gestures" (ibid.). Both use play as a system of differences able to disrupt presence.

---

[17] "wenn einer (...) – über die Schwäche des gesprochenen Wortes hinaus um die Schwäche alles Geschriebenen weiss" (1986b: 307).

[18] Man muss sich fragen: Ist nicht die Anwendung dieser Einsichten auf die Bedenklichkeit aller schriftlichen Fixierung allzu radikal? Hat Plato hier nicht eine allzu einseitige Partie geliefert, wenn er sich gegen den Verfall in den Dogmatismus der Schriftlichkeit so total absichert, daß er alle Textualität überhaupt verdammt?" (1991: 266)

[19] "se remémorer, sur le mode hypomnésique ce dont il a déjà le savoir mnésique" (1972: 154).

In Derrida's view, the jeu of *écriture* is played down by Plato when he likens writing to a divertissement (*paideia*), which is declared to be unhelpful for understanding. Once this game is taken seriously it will make people ill and mad. This is the "scheme that will dominate all of Western philosophy: A "good writing" should be "natural, living, knowledgeable, intelligible, interior, and speaking" (1972: 176). Derrida sees here a hermeneutic circle: all that can be read about nature, life, knowledge, etc. is only read with the eyes of the natural, living, knowing speaker who knows already what she wants to know and who remains captured in this circle. This speaker is captured in a world full of noises, presences and meanings. Derrida wants to reduce this noisy world to silence in order to enable understanding.[20] For Derrida the silence of *écriture* means to "faire taire" the world of the text but not in transforming it into a virtually dead language of science. The silence of *écriture* is the silence of the game of interpretation, it is the silence of the game able to simultaneously negate and affirm life. Gérard Genette expresses this idea when writing about the structure of poetical language: "Poetical language seemingly reveals here its true structure, which is not to be a particular form defined by its specific accidents but rather a state, a degree of presence and intensity that can be any expression on condition that it is surrounded by the silence that isolates it (…) from everyday speech" (Genette 1969: 150, my trans.).[21] The silent game of the text is the silence of a stylistic game or, in the words of Vladimir Jankélévitch: "Every time we guess behind the letter the secret respiration of the spirit and every time the weight of the letter tends to keep us on the ground. To read what is not written, to hear what has not been said we need silence" (Jankélévitch 1964: 47).[22] For Jankélévitch this is what represents the "acrobatics of style." Correspondingly, Peter Gay has said about style that "whenever style is produced or perceived we need *Schlichtheit* (sobriety) and silence" (Gay 1974: 5, note 1).

---

[20] There is a similar thought in Nietzsche who pointed to the importance of self-discipline in interpretation when asking the philologist to understand "with the intention of comprehending what the text intends to say but without sensing, indeed presupposing, a *second* meaning" (Nietzsche 1996: 15). [20] Nietzsche talks about the "danger of the own voice:" "Sometimes in the course of conversation the sound of our own voice disconcerts us and misleads us into assertion which in no way correspond to our opinions" (ibid.: 139) German: "Mitunter macht uns im Gespräch der Klang der eigenen Stimme verlegen und verleitet uns zu Behauptungen, welche gar nicht unserer Meinung entsprechen" (ibid.: 253).

[21] "Le langage poétique révèle ici, nous semble-t-il, sa véritable 'structure', qui n'est pas d'être une forme particulière, définie par ses accidents spécifiques, mais plutôt un état, un degré de présence et d'intensité auquel peut être amené, pour ainsi dire, n'importe quel énonce, à la seule condition que s'établisse autour de lui cette marge de silence qui isole (…) du parler quotidien."

[22] "à tout moment nous devinons, derrière la lettre, la secrète respiration de l'esprit, et à tout moment le poids de la lettre risque de nous retenir au sol. Pour lire ce qui n'est pas écrit, pour entendre ce qui n'est pas proféré, il faut que le silence se peuple."

Didier Cahen has said in a comment on Edmond Jabès: "How to reduce to silence the superficial in order to make place for the essential? Everything will happen between the drunkenness of the profoundest silence and the exhilaration of the word that adopts the black color of the letters and the grammatically separating blanks. The Whole of the comment feeds the play between words. (…) All that counts is that the letters exist, that they carry life and not the sense."[23] The sense of the wordy world of the *phonè* which is already *be-kannt* tries incessantly to make us believe that the game of interpretation is unnecessary, that there is no reason to reach out further for an *Er-kennen*. At this point "faire taire" and Heidegger's "going through" the hermeneutic circle ("den Kreis ausstehen") reveal themselves as similar philosophical strategies. Both have in common their skepticism towards meaning which they try to reduce through a search not for an essence or a presence but for a *dynamis*. Jabès' "jeu entre les mots" is the real game of the text but not necessarily its sense. Representing unwritten and silent rules, *écriture* is not the writing underneath the *phonè* but the "unwritten text" underneath writing.

An analysis of the *Phaedrus* shows that Gadamer's "hermeneutics of play," which is so closely related to Heidegger's ideas about the circularity of understanding (explained by Heidegger in *Being and Time* sec. 32), is similar to Derrida's theory of understanding as it has been explain in the preceding section. Gadamer's claim that one has to recognize "the weakness of everything that is written" (1986: 396) arises from a hermeneutic skepticism about everything which is "real," "as such" or simply: *not played*. To negate the absolute value of writing and to introduce elements of rhetoric into writing in profiting from the "confusability (*Verwirrbarkeit*) through speech" (1991: 149) also means to turn the *reading of the text* into a game. When Gadamer insists that every text must be seen in its rhetorical context in order to produce understanding he does not suggest a search for textual truth leading directly from the written text to its "authentic," rhetorically animated, present, oral version. The Platonic rhetoric functions as a "concretization" of the text only in the sense of a theatrical *mise en scene*, a dramatization playing with the different possibilities of the text's "where" and "how." Similarly, Derrida says that "the theatrical cannot be summed up in speech: it involves forces, space, law, kinship the human, the divine,

---

[23] "Comment taire le superflu et, ce faisant, faire place nette à l'essentiel? Tout doit se passer alors entre l'ivresse du plus profond silence et la griserie du mot qui se colore du noir des lettres et de tous les blancs qui séparent de la grammaire – le Tout du commentaire qui alimente le jeu entre les mots. (…) La seule chose qui compte, en l'occurrence, est que les lettres existent, qu'elles portent la vie – non le sens" (Cahen 1991: 133 and 142).

death, play festivity" (Derrida 2004: 143).[24] Gadamer notes in reference to a text of Heraclitus: "This text was destined for oral presentation. The speaker could articulate in a way that permitted the word 'always' to radiate in both directions and color the neighboring words" (my translation).[25] Gadamer likens the reading or the interpretation of a text to the interpretation of a theatre-play in which the "right" interpretation can be found by the actors only in playing, this means in playing through many possible interpretations: "But here it is a free play and not directed towards a concept. This cooperative interaction forces us to face the question about what is actually built up in this process of free play between the faculties of imagination and conceptual understanding" (1986c: 29).[26]

Rhetoric is a game able to dissolve presence instead of producing it. The fixed structure of the text (or, as Gadamer says, the text's "logische Raster") is varied through a playful rhetoric: "Nobody will doubt that real conversations (…) can contain logical mistakes and imprecisions but are still capable of rhetorically suggesting the right and the true." What counts is the "philosophical knowledge in [the conversation] and not in those things that are covered by the logical grid" (my trans.).[27] Like the doctor, as Plato says in the *Phaedrus*, "who has read something in his book (...) and believes to be a doctor" (*Phaedrus*, 268) has not yet the right *pharmakon*, the text must be animated through rhetoric:

> If anyone were to possess only all the physician's information and rules of thumb without knowing where and when to apply them, he would not be a physician. Were a tragedian or musician only to have learned the general rules and techniques of his art and yet produced no work using that knowledge, he would not be poet or musician. In the same way, the orator has to know all about where and when to speak (2007: 253).[28]

---

[24] "Le théâtre ne se laisse pas résumer dans une parole: il y a des forces, il y a un espace, il y a la loi, il y a la parenté, l'humain et le divin, le jeu, la mort, la fête" (1972: 164).

[25] "Dieser Text war aber für den Vortrag bestimmt. Dann konnte der Sprecher so artikulieren, da das Wort 'immer' nach beiden Seiten ausstrahlen und die Nachbarworte färben konnte" (1991: 56).

[26] "Aber hier ist es ein freies, nicht auf Begriff zielendes Spiel. Dieses Zusammenspiel zwingt uns vor die Frage, was das eigentlich ist, was sich auf diesem Wege des freien Spiels zwischen dem bilderschaffenden und dem begreifend-verstehenden Vermögen aufbaut" (1977: 39).

[27] "Daß wirkliche Gespräche (...) logische Fehler und Ungenauigkeiten enthalten und gleichwohl rhetorische Suggestion für das Rechte und Wahre auszuüben vermögen, wird niemand bestreiten." What counts is "das philosophische Interesse daran [an dem Gespräch] nicht an dem, was das logische Raster abdeckt" (1991: 110 ["Sokrates Frömmigkeit des Nichtwissens"]).

[28] "Wer nur alle ärztlichen Kenntnisse und Verhaltensregeln besäße, aber nicht wüßte, wo und wann sie anzuwenden sind, wäre kein Arzt. Der Tragödiendichter oder Musiker, der nur die allgemeinen Regeln und Verfahrensweisen seiner Kunst gelernt hätte, aber damit kein Werk zustande brächte, wäre kein Dichter oder Musiker. So muss auch der Redner von allem das Wo und Wann kennen" (1986b: 307).

"Animation" does not mean evoking a static and present rhetoric about the text but the rhetorization of the text produces a hermeneutic game: general rules will be reduced to individual situations and individual cases need to be considered in a more general context. However: "Neither the physician nor the poet not the musician knows the good" (ibid.). Rhetoric becomes a means of complication in the sense of a creative, imaginary conversation, which has surmounted the narrowness of a technique and which "animates" the text in pointing to the manifold possibilities of its game.

Gadamer sees the possibility of an irony in Socrates condemnation of writing which Derrida in his search for *écriture* never mentions: perhaps Plato *really* believes that writing is good and bad at the same time. At least, it need not be bad in all cases but it *can* be bad if it is interpreted in a bad way. Whether it will be a mischief or a useful end to understanding depends on the way in which the interpreter applies rhetoric. But how the interpreter can find the rules for its right application cannot be learned only from texts or only from rhetoric. Those rules are written with the silent writing of the game itself. Or they are only known, as Plato says (ironically?) in *The Statesman* by those "who were originally noble and who have been nurtured in a noble way" (thus by those who have style).

The circular structure of understanding permits no clear *signifiant* either in speech or in writing. The game of interpretation produces – in changing endlessly between reading and rhetoric – an endless chain from one signifier to the next signifier without ever imitating a divine *logos*. Gadamer says: "What is said in the Phaedrus about the designation of rhetoric as true knowledge transcending mere technique (...) must also be applied to hermeneutics as the art of understanding" (2007: 252).[29] He points towards a hermeneutics in which the rhetorical aid to understanding is founded neither on subjective knowledge (which must be found by rhetoric) nor on phonetic rhetoric. Knowledge is produced through a hermeneutic game in which writing becomes constantly speech and speech constantly becomes writing.

Gulf University for Science and Technology
Kuwait
botz.t@gust.edu.kw

---

[29] "Was im Phaidros für die Erhebung der Rhetorik über eine bloße Technik zu einem wahren Wissen (...) gesagt wird, muss sich am Ende auch auf die Hermeneutik als die Kunst des Verstehens anwenden lassen" (1986b: 306).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beiner, Ronald. 2003 **"**Gadamer's Philosophy of Dialogue and Its Relation to the Postmodernism of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and Strauss" in B. Krajewski (ed.). *Gadamer's Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Ewing, NJ, USA: University of California Press, 2003)

Bennington, Geoffrey. 2010. *Not Half no End: Militantly Melancholic Essays in Memory of Jacques Derrida*. Edinburgh University Press.

Bernstein, Richard J. 2008. "The Conversation That Never Happened (Gadamer/Derrida)" in *The Review of Metaphysics* 61:3, 577-603.

Blanchot, Maurice. 1955. *L'Espace littéraire*. Paris, Gallimard.

Cahen, Didier. 1991. *Edmond Jabès*. Paris: Belfond.

Caputo, John D. 1989. "Gadamer's Closet Essentialism: A Derridean Critique" in Michelfelder & Palmer.

Derrida, Jacques. 1967a. *De la Grammatologie*. Paris: Minuit. Engl.: *Of Grammatology*, trans. G.C. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

————. 1972. *La Dissemination*. Paris: Seuil. Engl. trans. by Barbara Johnson: *Dissemination*. London: Continuum, 2004.

————. 1989. "Dialogue and Deconstruction" in Michelfelder and Palmer (eds.).

————. 1967b. *L'Ecriture et la différence*. Paris: Seuil. Engl. trans. by Alan Bass: *Writing and Difference*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978.

Di Cesare, Donatella. 2004. "Stars and Constellations: The Difference between Gadamer and Derrida" in *Research in Phenomenology* 34:1, 73-102.

Dostal, Robert J. 2010. "Gadamer's Platonism: His Recovery of Mimesis and Anamnesis" in J. Malpas & S. Zabala (eds.), *Consequences of Hermeneutics: Fifty Years after Gadamer's Truth and Method*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press.

Feldman, Stephen M. 2000. "Made for Each Other: The Interdependence of Deconstruction and Philosophical Hermeneutics" in *Philosophy Social Criticism* 26:1, 51-70.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1986. *Wahrheit und Methode*. Tübingen, Mohr. Engl. *Truth and Method* trans. Joel Weinsheimer, Donald G. Marshall. London: Continuum, 2004.

————. 1986b. "Hermeneutik als theoretische und praktische Aufgabe" in *Wahrheit und Methode Ergänzungsband*. Tübingen, Mohr. Engl.: "Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task" in R. Palmer (ed.), *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2007.

————. 1976. "Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik" in *Kleine Schriften I*. Tübingen: Mohr. Engl.: "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical

Reflection" in *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.

—————. 1976b. *Kleine Schriften II*. Tübingen: Mohr.

—————. 1977. *Die Aktualität des Schönen*. Stuttgart: Reclam. Engl.: *The Relevance of the Beautiful* trans. R. Bernasconi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986c.

—————. 1991. *Plato im Dialog*. Tübingen: Mohr.

Gay, Peter. 1974. *Style in History*. London: J. Cape.

Genette, Gérard. 1966. *Figures I*. Paris, Seuil.

—————. 1969. *Figures II*. Paris, Seuil.

Griswold, Charles L. 1996. *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Halliwell, Stephen. 2002. *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hamilton, Walter. 1973. "Introduction" to Plato's *Phaedrus*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Hegel, G.W.F. 1961. *Philosophie der Geschichte*. Stuttgart: Reclam. Engl.: *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree. Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001.

Heidegger, Martin. 2006. *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Niemeyer. Engl.: *Being and Time*. New York: Harper, 1962.

Huizinga, Johan. 1970. *Homo Ludens*. London, Temple Smith.

Jankélévitch, Vladimir. 1964. *L'Ironie*. Paris, Flammarion.

Levinas, Emmanuel. 1983. *Difficile Liberté*. Paris, Albin Michel.

Michelfelder, Diane P. and Richard E. Palmer (eds). 1989. *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Peters, Michael A. & Gert Biesta. 2009. *Derrida, Deconstruction, and the Politics of Pedagogy*. New York: Peter Lang.

Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred. 1979. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Ricœur, Paul. 1975. *La métaphore vive*. Paris, Seuil. Engl.: *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*. Oxford: Taylor-Francis, 1978.

Risser, James. 1997. *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Rodi, Fritjof. 1990. *Erkenntnis des Erkannten*. Frankfurt, Suhrkamp.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1974. *Essai sur l'origine des langues*. Paris: Aubier.

Smith, James K.A. 2006. "Limited Inc/arnation Revisiting the Searle/Derrida Debate in Christian Context" in K. Vanhoozer, J.K.A. Smith, B.E. Benson (eds.). *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Taylor, Charles. 1984. "Philosophy and its History" in: R. Rorty (ed.), *Philosophy in History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Todorov, Tzvetan. 1975. "La Lecture comme structure," in *Poétique* 23.

Tylor, Edward B. 1891. *Primitive Culture*. London: Murray.

Wach, Joachim. 1926-33. *Das Verstehen*, 3 vol. Tübingen: Mohr.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1990. *Philosophische Untersuchungen*. Leipzig: Reclam. Engl.: *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1958.