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Gadamer's hermeneutics, non-intentionalism and the underdeterminedness of aesthetic properties[1]

The fundamental thesis of Gadamer's hermeneutics is that our understanding or interpretation of objects and events is always conditioned or shaped by our historical situation in a way not fully transparent to us. Significantly, this circumstance does not so much impede as enable knowledge and experience in the first place.[3]

So when we understand something (a text or a work of art, for instance), we always understand it differently from the way it is understood by others, without this difference necessarily amounting to an error in judgment. Gadamer's recognition of diverse, non-erroneous understandings makes him an advocate of pluralism. A text's meaning is always conditioned and constituted, in part, by its readers. Since readers bring different assumptions and interests to a text, textual meaning is not fixed. And if textual meaning is not fixed, then, of course, the intention of the author of the text does not and cannot uniquely determine its meaning. The aim of this essay is to reconstruct Gadamer's anti-intentionalist theory, and to show that, at least in the case of artworks, it is coupled with a view about the underdeterminedness of meaning. In Part I, I explain Gadamer's reasons for rejecting intentionalism, i.e. the

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3 *Hans-Georg Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, 4. Auflage (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1975). Truth and method, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1990). Further references to this text will be indicated in parentheses, first to the German original, then the English translation. I have occasionally emended the translation for clarity.*

view that authorial intention determines textual meaning. In Part II, I discuss Gadamer's reasons for distinguishing artworks as a special domain of the objects of understanding. In Part III, I sketch out an argument for thinking that the meaning of artworks is pluralistic because their properties are underdetermined.

I.

If we begin with common sense, we might be inclined to think that a text means what it says and it says what the author intended it to mean. Of course, many texts are complex, symbolic, vague or ambiguous, which causes uncertainties to arise in the reader as to what the text is actually saying. In such cases, so the thinking goes, we should consult, whenever possible, the author's intention. All in all, then, common sense seems to tell us that a text means what its author intends. This is not only a commonsense view; it has also been carefully considered and defended by philosophers and other theorists, perhaps most convincingly by the philosophically schooled literary critic E.D. Hirsch.[4] *Gadamer, a meticulous reader of philosophical and literary texts and an exegete himself, tells us that this intentionalist view is wrong about both textual meaning and the entire enterprise of reading and understanding texts. The question is why.*

The first step in the argument comes with Gadamer's assertion that all understanding is historically situated and thus historically shaped. In Being and time, Heidegger famously argues that understanding always involves a three-tiered forestructure of expectations that come out of a way of life, a conceptual/linguistic scheme and specific hypotheses about whatever object or event is being understood.[5] *Gadamer adopts this idea and makes it the focal point of his hermeneutics when he insists on "the essential prejudgment-ladenness (Vorurteilshaftigkeit) of all understanding" (WM 254; TM 270). What Gadamer means by prejudgments or prejudices are not so much explicitly held theoretical positions, but much more an opaque and unreflected set of interests, assumptions, and attitudes shaped in large part by our cultural surroundings. As Gadamer puts it, "[H]istory does not belong to us; we belong to it ... The individual's self-reflection is only a flickering in the closed circuits*

4 *See Hirsch 1967, and, more recently, Irwin 1999.*

5 *See the passage on fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception (Vorhabe, Vorsicht and Vorgriff) in Sein und Zeit:150.*

of historical life" (WM 260f.: TM 276). So our understanding of texts, artworks (or anything else) is always inescapably embedded in particular historical circumstances in a way that cannot be made fully transparent to ourselves.

Most of us would agree on the truth and importance of this point. It should be uncontroversial that our understanding and knowledge of everything is always shaped by our reflected as well as unreflected theoretical and practical precommitments. But what follows from this? For Gadamer, it follows that human understanding of texts, events, etc. cannot be properly modeled along the lines of somehow restoring things to what they really were independent of us. Rather it can only be modeled along the lines of a "fusion of horizons" (WM 289; TM 306), i.e. a mediation of past and present or self and other. We should not hope to restore textual meaning by recreating the author's intentions since the intervention of our precommitments does not allow this. So understanding the text is a matter of interacting with it in the light of our own situation.

However, this first step itself is sufficient neither for rejecting restoration as a model of understanding nor for displacing the authority of the author in reference to textual meaning. This is so for a very simple reason. Even if it is true that our own historical situatedness (both cultural and temporal) can never be left behind altogether, it can still be kept in check, at least to some extent, by careful study of the text, the author's situation and the surrounding world from which it came. In other words, even if we cannot reconstruct the author's intention perfectly and with any real certainty that we've got it right, we can and should try our best to do so because that is what it is to understand a text. So goes the initial objection to Gadamer's hermeneutics. It seems to be a perfectly reasonable response. Were one to defend Gadamer by saying that it makes no sense to try to accomplish what is impossible, the objection would still not be met. It makes sense to strive for the impossible if it serves as a useful regulative ideal that enhances interpretive practices. So Gadamer must point to more than ineluctable historical embeddedness. And he does. Gadamer rejects the identification of texual meaning with authorial intention on a number of grounds — by my count, six.

1) ***Less in the text than the author intended****. Gadamer discusses the fact that in many cases "an author meant more than one was able to understand." He agrees with Chladenius that the task of interpretation lies in seeking "not to understand this 'more,' but to understand the true meaning of the books themselves"(WM 172; TM 184). The idea here is that the author's state of mind may contain all sorts of personal or idiosyncratic associations that do*

not really belong to the meaning of the text. Thus, in writing "sky", the author may have in mind the particular look of the sky out the window at the time of writing, but this cannot be properly said to be what the word "sky" in the text actually means. For one thing, that particular sky is irretrievable; for another, it seems extraneous to the text. This point is also noticed by some proponents of intentionalism. Hirsch writes:

> *Verbal meaning is, by definition, that aspect of a speaker's "intention" which, under linguistic conventions, may be shared by others. Anything not sharable in this sense does not belong to the verbal intention or verbal meaning. Thus, when I say, "The air is crisp", I may be thinking, among other things, "I should have eaten less at supper", and "Crisp air reminds me of my childhood in Vermont", and so on. In certain types of utterance such unspoken accompaniments to meaning may be sharable, but in general they are not, and therefore do not belong to verbal meaning.*[6]

Hirsch's solution is to say that idiosyncratic associations, while they belong to the author's mental state, are not part of her/his intention and thus not part of the meaning of the text. Gadamer would agree with this move to exclude the idiosyncratic from textual meaning. However, the point reveals a deep problem in the intentionalist position. Intentions are clearly mental states or at least start out as such. Yet how is one to decide what in the mental state of the author is a mere association and what truly belongs to the intention and thus to the textual or verbal meaning? Hirsch suggests that "sharability" is the key. But most idiosyncratic associations are sharable, including, for example, memories of the crisp air of Vermont. Perhaps the idea is that the criterion is not so much "sharability" but "what is shared in and by the text itself or can be shared through it alone." But once this becomes the touchstone, we have left the mental as such behind. That is, once we take seriously that there is less in the text than in the author's mental state, the author's mental state, or that part of it thought to be the intention, cedes to the words on the page. It is the words, not the author's mental state or intention that win out in deciding textual meaning.

2) ***More in the text than the author intended****. According to Gadamer, the reverse also holds. What is in the text is always more than was intended by the author. Gadamer writes: "What expression expresses is not merely what is*

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6 *Hirsch 1967:218-219. Hirsch finds support for this point in Husserl's Logical investigations. See also pp. 31, 50f.*

supposed to be expressed in it — what is meant by it — but primarily what is also expressed by the words without its being intended — i.e., what the expression, as it were, 'betrays.'" (WM 318; TM 335f.)

By "what is supposed to be expressed," Gadamer means something like the author's express intent. By what might be "betrayed," he means all sorts of things: things that the author may wish to conceal, things that s/he unconsciously represses, things that s/he is simply unaware of or things about which the author is cognizant but which s/he is not explicitly intending at that moment (e.g. background beliefs). On one level, what is "betrayed" are psychological and social circumstances that escape the author. Any of this may be quite crucial to what the text means. Yet, on another level, it is language itself that allows for more than was intended because language opens onto so much more. In fact, there is a long tradition in the history of hermeneutics of seeing more in human actions and utterances than what is intended, where the unintended "extra" may be psychological or social or linguistic.[7] *Thus, Gadamer concurs with the Chladenius, who wrote that "men cannot be aware of everything their words, speech and writing can mean ... that they themselves did not intend to say or write" (WM 172; TM 183). In order to explain how a text's language can contain more than the author intended, let me say something about what I call the porous nature of language.*

Language — that is "natural" as opposed to "artificial" language — is famously inexact, both in its connotative associations and its denotative scope. If I tell a person at a party to fetch from the other room all the ashtrays s/he can find, it may not be clear whether I mean to include under "ashtray" a plastic cup with a couple of cigarette butts in the remains of a drink. Not only is the word "ashtray" imprecise, but my intended use of the word is probably not fully determinate. I haven't already canvassed in my mind all possible "ashtray-candidates" and come to a decision about whether the abandoned cup counts as an ashtray. In other words, mental intentions underdetermine linguistic meaning. So language is porous (and intentions are incomplete). This gives us another reason to think that textual meaning encompasses more than was originally intended by the author. Intentionalism runs into trouble from both ends, texts can mean both less than and more than what their authors had in mind.

7 *See both the "psychological" and "grammatical" sections of Friedrich Schleiermacher's Hermeneutik und Kritik, (1977) as well as the reference to J.G. Droysen's Historik in Gadamer's Truth and method, WM 200; TM 213.*

*3) **The text has the character of ideality**. If a text's meaning is always possibly more or less than its author intends, then meaning must be detachable from the author and the circumstances of utterance. This is where the notion of ideality comes in — a term and idea Gadamer borrows from Husserl.[8] Husserl explains the concept by distinguishing the "material," psychological content of an expression (e.g. your thought of a dog, my thought of a dog), which varies from act to act, from its "ideal", logical sense (the thought or idea of a dog), which remains identical in the manifold of expressive acts. As Husserl says, to call expressions ideal in this sense should not suggest that they "exclude reality"; rather, they underlie real acts and enable them to have meaning. Thus, the meaning of a linguistic item is separable from the utterer's intention as well as its meaning in a particular context of utterance. Its ideal aspect or sense is that which transcends, unites and makes possible all specific instances in which a linguistic item occurs. The words "sky", "horse", "dignity" or "imagine" mean something distinct from and greater than any particular intended use of those words. Let me forestall two possible misunderstandings here. First, this notion of ideality has nothing to do with idealism in Plato's sense or in Berkeley's sense. Second, neither should it be associated with a deconstructionist commitment to the idea that linguistic meaning is constituted solely by the interrelatedness of signifiers without any appeal to the signified, i.e., the world outside of language. The important point is that Husserl's and Gadamer's notion of ideality says that meaning is not reducible to any actual psychological acts. As Gadamer writes: "It is the ideality of the word that raises everything linguistic above the finitude and transience that characterize the rest of past human existence." (WM 368; TM 390) This does not mean that a word can mean anything, but that it always means more than was intended in a particular instance. It is the ideality and autonomy of linguistic meaning that underlies the preceding two arguments that textuality is less than and more than the original intention.*

*4) **The text is relationally constituted**. Gadamer argues, as we have just seen, that verbal meaning has "... detached itself from the contingency of its origin and its author and made itself free for new relationships" (WM 373; TM 395, my emphasis). The point is not just that a text can and always will develop new relationships to other texts, historical events, differently situated readers,*

8 *See Edmund Husserl, Logische Untersuchungen, Vol. 2, sections 31-32, "Der Aktcharakter des Bedeutens and die ideal-eine Bedeutung" and "Die Idealität der Bedeutungen [ist] keine Idealität im normativen Sinne," pp. 99-102.*

etc., but that textual meaning, as grasped, is always thoroughly relational. What is a text after all? It is more than marks on a page. Granted, it springs from the mind of an author. But it employs language whose meaning and usage comes from outside itself, from the public. And it refers to a world beyond the text. We already have three relationships — to the author, to the public language, to the world about which it speaks. Should or can we stop there at the point of its creation? According to Gadamer, try as we might, we cannot. Gadamer devotes a key section of Truth and method to a novel treatment of temporal distance (Zeitenabstand):

> *The tacit presupposition of historical method, then, is that the permanent significance of something is only objectively knowable when it belongs to a closed context — in other words, when it is dead enough to have mere historical interest... [But] temporal distance obviously means something other than the extinction of our interest in the object. It lets the true meaning of the object emerge fully... [T]he discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process. (WM 282; TM 298)*

Actually, the last line of this passage puts the point less strongly than Gadamer puts it elsewhere in arguing that it is not just the discovery of the text that is unfinished, but in a sense, the text itself. For elsewhere Gadamer speaks of the text, and the object of research more generally, as a "phantom" and as something that in itself "clearly does not exist at all" (WM 283, 269; TM 299, 285). Texts do not exist in themselves; they are what they are partly as a result of their relation to other things, whether contemporaneous texts and events or later ones.[9] *For this reason, the author's intention does not lock the text into a particular meaning once and for all.*

5) ***The text concerns the truth about some subject-matter****. This claim would strike most intentionalists as bewildering — bewildering because it seems obviously true but just as obviously irrelevant since it does not seem to impugn intentionalism as such. After all, intentionalists will say: "Of course, the text is about something or other and the meaning of the text is simply what the author intended to say about that something." For Gadamer, however, that the text aims at the truth about some subject-matter (die Sache) is a crucial*

9 *For a more detailed argument, see my "A new defense of Gadamer's hermeneutics" (Weberman 2000).*

point and one that deflects from the focus on intention. In reading a text, Gadamer says, what one understands is not just "an unfamiliar opinion; it is always a possible truth" (WM 372; TM 394). Consider, for the sake of contrast, the idea of trying to get into an interlocutor's state of mind without any regard whatsoever for the truth set forth by that person. The example that comes to mind is that of a psychiatrist seeking to understand a delusional patient whose claims about the world cannot be taken at all seriously. Here utterances are symptoms, not candidates for truth. But a text's meaning is not a mere symptom or sign of the mental life of its author; it is a discourse, in some sense, about the world. The act of understanding texts actually has a triadic structure, a structure with three poles: the reader; the text created by an author; and the subject-matter addressed by the text. This subject-matter (Gadamer's Sache) is extra-mental and extra-linguistic and, in some sense, prior to and causative of both our mental states and our linguistic utterances. When we grasp the text, we do so not so much by speculation about the author's psychology, but by a tacit appeal to what it would make sense to say given our logic and our prior understanding of the world. If the world were altogether different, a text would have to mean something else as well or perhaps lose its meaning altogether. Thus textual meaning is weltbezogen, i.e., not so much about expressing mental life, but making claims about the world.[10]

6) ***Our deeper interest typically is directed at the text, not the author's psychology****. So far we have encountered reasons for thinking that the meaning of a text is different from the author's intention. Gadamer has not shown that there is no such thing as the author's intention or that we cannot, to some extent, come to know it. This means that, if the preceding argument has been successful, there are two different objects of research: i) the meaning(s) of the text as portrayed above and ii) the author's intended communication, which despite its vagueness still has some degree of determinacy. Now, what is to stop a person from regarding the author's intended meaning as the real textual meaning and according the meaning as portrayed here some place on the back burner (or ignoring it altogether)? Which of the two possible objects of attention deserve our study? Intentionalists such as Hirsch argue that the author's intention gives us a single, stable standard for correctness in interpretation without which we are at sea in a multitude of meanings. Yet they fail to*

10 *These arguments for the ideality and subject-matter-relatedness of meaning and against a pyschological and intentionalist position run parallel to Putnam's contention that "meaning just ain't in the head." See Hilary Putnam 1975.*

recognize two assumptions built into this argument. First, they assume that it is always preferable to have a single standard and that this preference trumps all others. Second, they take for granted that where a single meaning is unavailable no criteria at all exist for distinguishing right from wrong interpretations. They fail to consider that porosity and relationality do not entail the total absence of guidelines since the text itself and its certifiable relations can still serve as touchstones.

Still, why not devote oneself chiefly to reconstructing the author's intention? The author's psychology can sometimes be fairly well pieced together on the basis of the text, diaries and letters, interviews, the author's milieu, etc., so why not do so? Gadamer's point is that to study the psychology and intention behind the text is separate from and subordinate to the deeper motivation we have in reading texts, namely, to discover truths about the world and ourselves. As Gadamer puts it, "The task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning" (WM 276; TM 292). This is what reading and grasping texts is finally about (besides the intrinsic pleasure we derive from the activity). Biographically oriented scholars are devoted largely to reconstructing authorial intentions. Readers, by and large, are not. We misrepresent the act of reading and the nature of textual meaning if we take as our model the scholar's or biographer's efforts at getting into the state of mind of his/her creative subject. This process is sometimes worthwhile, but it is a rarified exercise that does not capture the more typical experience of reading a text. Scholarship serves reading; it is done at its behest. We should not think that it is the other way around.

II.

If meaning is not determined by intention, what then is meaning? One might say that meaning resides in the work itself, singular, fixed once and for all. Gadamer, on the other hand, holds that texts and works have multiple possible meanings. We have already seen a few reasons for being pluralistic about meaning (such as the porosity of language and the relationality of meaning), but more needs to be said about its underpinnings. Much depends on the object of understanding. What kind of object or text is at issue? The arguments for pluralism will differ according to the object domain under consideration.[11]

11 *See my "Is hermeneutics really universal despite the heterogeneity of its objects?" (Weberman 2003).*

In one of Gadamer's text, he suggests that literary texts (and, by implication, artworks in general) belong in a special category. From his remarks, it would seem that their meaning is uniquely detachable from intention and paradigmatically multiple in meaning. In this part of the paper, we will see why Gadamer thinks so. In the next part, we will go beyond Gadamer's own writings to examine the notion that literary texts or artworks are underdetermined in meaning.

In his 1983 essay "Text and interpretation," Gadamer distinguishes literary texts from other texts such as scientific writings, personal letters, conversational utterances, protocols, business contracts, stenographic transcriptions, military commands and written laws. In his analysis of such texts, he frequently alludes to the purposes of the writer. He regards these texts as instances of message-conveying (Kundgabe) and the interpreter's job as that of extracting and reaching agreement with the author about the meaning of the message (Kunde) (TuI 345, TaI 35).[12] *But then he writes:*

> *Now the goal of this entire discussion is to show that the connection between text and interpretation fundamentally changes when dealing with so-called "literary texts." In all cases so far ... the so-called text itself was subordinated to the event of reaching agreement in understanding (Verständigung) ... The interpreter has no other function than to disappear completely into the achievement of reaching agreement in understanding ... (or) entering into communication so as to dissolve the tension between the horizon of the text and that of the reader. I have called this a fusion of horizons. ... But then there is literature! ... The literary text exercises a normative function that does not refer back either to an original utterance or to the intention of the speaker but is something that originates in itself, so that in the fortune of its success, a poem surprises and overwhelms even the poet. (emphasis added) (TuI 350-52; TaI 40-42)*

This passage is remarkable on two counts. First, Gadamer here seems to say something different from Truth and method about the meaning of nonliterary texts: the author's purpose is now central to that meaning and the interpreter's job is to disappear! Second, in Truth and method, our encounter with art serves as a model for human understanding in general, while here art or literature is

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12 *"Text und Interpretation", in Gesammelte Werke, I (1986-1993); translated as "Text and interpretation" in Dialogue and deconstruction (1989b). References to this text will be given in parentheses as "TuI" for the German text and "TaI" for the English.*

set off sharply against other texts as categorically different and untypical of human understanding. The sharp line drawn between literature and nonliterature appears to violate the alleged universality of hermeneutics. Has Gadamer simply abandoned the universality claim? No, because from the outset of this same essay he re-asserts that hermeneutic understanding applies universally to all things.[13] *Can this formidable divide between literature and nonliterature be bridged within a theory that has universal aspirations?*

It seems to me that Gadamer is saying this: In both cases, literature and nonliterature, understanding is a fusion of horizons because the interpreter's horizon interacts with the object at hand. The fusion is different, however, with respect to the idea of reaching agreement in understanding (Erzielung der Verständigung) (TuI 350, TaI 41). With nonliterary texts, the message-conveying nature of the text means that we have a certain concern, perhaps even a responsibility, for the intention or purpose of the message. Even so, there is fusion — a point to which we will return shortly. But literature is different, Gadamer says, because understanding it is not at all a matter of "referring to an already spoken word" (TuI 351, TaI 42), but "a new way of letting the text speak" ("[ein] neu[es] Sprechenlassen des Textes") (TuI 351, TaI 41) .

For Gadamer, literature, and more generally art, is different in that it is autonomous and open. It is autonomous because its meaning is not at all dependent on the intention of the writer or artist. The work of art or literature breaks loose from its original creation to stand on its own. It is open in that its meaning is indeterminate. Gadamer says that the poetic artwork possesses as language a characteristic indeterminacy ("eine offene Unbestimmtheit").[14] *As a result, it invites a plurality of interpretations. Several particularly good illustrations of this autonomy and openness in artworks can be found in Gadamer's essays on Paul Celan's poetry. For example, Gadamer notes that Celan's poem "Flower" was inspired by Celan's son, though the poem makes no mention of a child. Gadamer goes on to say that the image of the flower is not tied to that of Celan's son, but has a more universal and open-ended meaning:*

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13 *See the following passage: "... understanding and interpretation not only come into play in what Dilthey called 'expressions of life fixed in writing,' but they apply to the general relationship of human beings to each other and to the world... In this respect the universal claim of hermeneutics is beyond all doubt." (TuI 330, TaI 21)*

14 *"Dichten und Deuten," Gesammelte Werke 8, 21; translated as "Composition and Interpretation" in The relevance of the beautiful and other essays (Gadamer 1986:70). Although Gadamer says that this indeterminacy is characteristic of poetry because of its language, it seems that other forms of art are indeterminate in their own ways, even if to a lesser degree. A novel may be less indeterminate than a poem due to its more clearly referential language. A nonlinguistic artwork such as a painting would seem to be indeterminate in its own way.*

> *[T]he poem does not bring to language a specific, unique occurrence known only to witnesses or those enlightened by the poet directly. This means that every reader can respond to what the language gesture conjures up, as if it were an offer. All readers must supplement what they can perceive in a poem on the basis of their own experience. This alone is what it means to understand a poem.*[15]

So, we see that given art's openness, the object of understanding is underdetermined in that it requires supplementation from the interpreter's own horizon. If this is so, then understanding art is a particularly robust case of hermeneutic understanding strongly conceived.

Where does this leave nonliterary or nonart works? By implication, it would seem that if art is open and in need of supplementation, nonart is neither of these things. Does this mean that hermeneutic arguments do not go through for nonart texts and objects? Let us return to the passage in "Text und Interpretation" from which I quoted before. In the case of nonliterary or nonart texts, Gadamer says (here I quote the passage more fully):

> *... interpretation, like the so-called text itself, [is] subordinated to the process of reaching agreement in understanding. This corresponds perfectly to the literal meaning of the term interpres, which refers to someone who speaks in-between and therefore has first of all the original function of a translator... The interpreter steps in and speaks only when the text (the discourse) is not able to do what it is supposed to do, namely be heard and understood on its own. The interpreter has no other function than to disappear completely into reaching agreement in understanding. The discourse of the interpreter is therefore not itself a text; rather it serves a text. (TuI 350, TaI 40f.)*

This makes it sound as if the understanding subject is wholly outside of an already fully constituted text. But then Gadamer goes on:

> *This does not mean, however, that the contribution of the interpreter, in this way of listening to text, has completely disappeared. ... The interpreter's help in reaching agreement in understanding is therefore not limited to the purely linguistic level, but reaches into mediating the subject-matter itself ... When the interpreter overcomes what is alien in the text and thereby helps the reader to an understanding of the text, his/her own stepping back is not a disappearance in a negative sense;*

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15 "Wer bin Ich und wer bist Du," Gesammelte Werke b9, 433; translated as "Epilogue to Who am I and who are you?" (Gadamer 1997:134).

> *rather, it is an entering into communication so as to dissolve the tension between the horizon of the text and that of the reader. I have called this a fusion of horizons. (TuI 350f., TaI 41)*

Gadamer may be conceding too much here when he speaks of the interpreter's job as one of eliminating only occasional obscurities, a view that stands opposed to the one advanced in Truth and method. He also accords the author's purpose or intention a more central role here than in earlier works. But he insists, importantly, that the idea of the interpreter's disappearance is not to be taken as a reality, but only as a surface appearance. The interpreter continues to mediate both linguistically and in terms of content. Consider, for example, what it means to understand a philosophical text. (For Gadamer, it seems clear, philosophy is not literature; the experience and interpretive aims are different because philosophy does not invite readerly creativity in quite the same way as literature.) The author of a philosophical text hopes to convey a message about some subject-matter. Given what Gadamer has said in "Text and interpretation," the reader aims at reaching agreement in understanding with what the author has said. This does not mean the reader will or should agree with the author's views, but only that the reader wants to fairly construe the message the author wants to convey. But the hermeneutic point is that the message is not altogether fixed. The words need to be given specific meaning and the intention of the author cannot ultimately decide the specific meaning because it is not available to us and because the author's state of mind only reaches so far.[16] As a result the reader must bring the message to full concretion and does so in light of his/her relation to the subject-matter.

So we see that on Gadamer's account our understanding of both art and nonart involves a fusion of horizons but art especially so. We have seen that Gadamer thinks so. But questions remain. Let us test it against a theory that holds the opposite.

III.

Many, if not most, analytic philosophers working on aesthetics hold that artworks have one meaning. Some of these philosophers hold that the meaning is in some sense bound to the author's actual or postulated intention, others

16 *See my "Gadamer's hermeneutics and the question of authorial intention," (Weberman 2002), especially 48ff.*

hold that the meaning can and does diverge from that intention. In his recent book Interpretation and construction: art, speech and the law, Robert Stecker defends the single meaning view (though with an important modification, as we will see).[17] *Stecker's theory is particularly useful not only because it is one of the best dissussions of the interpretation of art but also because it deals with the issue of indeterminacy — an issue that underlies Gadamer's pluralism. In what follows I leave aside Gadamer's own arguments to confront the relevant problems independently.*

On first blush, Stecker might not look like a single meaning theorist. He holds that artworks are interpreted with different aims thus allowing that there is "a plurality of good or acceptable interpretations of a given work" (p.52). Yet Stecker's pluralism is based on a distinction between what an artwork "could mean" and what it really "does mean" (p.58). While an artwork could mean any number of different things depending on the interests, framework and creative input of the interpreter, there is only one thing an artwork really does mean and this is what the author intends. And when it comes to what the artwork does mean, there is, according to Stecker, only one "single, correct, comprehensive interpretation" (p.53). Despite Stecker's generosity in recognizing the value of alternative interpretations of what the artwork could mean, he clearly gives a certain privilege to the single intended meaning that the one correct interpretation would give us. This privilege is indicated by the weight of the phrase "does mean" in contrast to the conciliatory phrase "could mean" as well as his statement that "could mean" interpretations "sacrifice accuracy" for other artistic values (p. 68). A strong pluralism, such as Gadamer's, would not be satisfied with the acknowledgement that it is acceptable to interpret artwork in the spirit of innovation and variation, it rejects the idea of a single meaning in the first place. So our task here is to examine Stecker's defense of a single "does mean" meaning to artworks.

I will not rehearse the above arguments against intentionalism though it is central to Stecker's position. Rather I want to turn to the issue of the determinacy or indeterminacy of artworks. The issue of indeterminacy arises for Stecker because the theories he is arguing against — the theories that say that the artwork's meaning changes or depends on the "construction" of the interpreter — often appeal to the notion that the meaning of the artwork is,

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17 *Stecker 2003. (At the time of writing, this book was available to me in manuscript form. The page numbers now correspond to the published volume.) References to this book will be given above in parentheses.*

partly or wholly, indeterminate. Stecker denies that there is any indeterminacy in artworks. On the face of it, it would seem that artworks contain a great deal that is underdetermined. Fictional artworks such as novels only say what they say; they do not spell out all the details that might be relevant concerning their characters and events (nor could they). Here Stecker argues:

> *It is of small matter that we are left in the dark about the exact length of Hamlet's fingernails. It would be more important to us if what motivates Hamlet were left, to some extent, indeterminate. ... (But) (t)he inevitable fact that fictional entities represented in a work are indeterminate does not show that the work itself is. In fact, for any property you like, it is compatible with fictional indeterminacy that there is a yes/no answer to whether the work has the property. For example, from the fact that the length of Hamlet's fingernails is left indeterminate by the play, it follows that Hamlet has the property of not representing the length of its protagonists's fingernails. (p. 136)*

So the idea is that artworks have no indeterminacy because they determinately specify whatever it is they say and what they do not say is not indeterminate but simply not a part of the artwork.

Now there is an obvious plausibility to the claim that fingernail length is not so much an indeterminate aspect of Shakespeare's play, but rather not a part of the play at all. Yet the problem of indeterminacy is hardly eliminated with that move. Stecker's treatment of the issue is unconvincing for two reasons. First, Stecker has chosen an obvious irrelevancy, fingernail length in Hamlet, to serve as an example for a supposed irrelevancy. Of course, philosophers often rely on plain examples to make their points clearer. But here the choice of example makes a difference to the argument. To pick out an indeterminate irrelevancy and argue against its presence in the work does not show that there is no indeterminacy in the work but only that irrelevant properties have no place in our discussion of it. Stecker himself admits as much when he says that if Hamlet's motives were to turn out to be indeterminate, this would be important. So the question remains: Are there (relevant) aspects of an artwork that are indeterminate?

Stecker goes on to argue, in the passage quoted, that while entities in the work (fictional characters) can be indeterminate, the work itself is not, because it determinately has the property of not representing whatever it does not represent (e.g., fingernail length). It is peculiar to say that entities can be indeterminate while the work that they are a part of is not. But even if we

were to accept that idea on some new theory of the relation between a whole and its parts, the argument overshoots the mark. Steckers's argument actually shows that nothing can be indeterminate because whatever might be thought to be indeterminate has the determinate property of not or only vaguely representing the property in question. Suppose that I say "do the best you can" or suppose that a rule book says "the player forfeits the game when he fails to make a move after given a reasonable amount of time." According to Stecker's logic, these instructions have no indeterminacy because they determinately have the property of being unspecific or vague. But then it would seem nothing can be indeterminate and we have defined away the term. And Stecker's conclusion here seems to entail that artworks are not indeterminate because nothing is indeterminate. This is counterintuitive and actually inconsistent with Stecker's own position since he later argues that laws are indeterminate as to how they should be interpreted and applied.[18]

Stecker also discusses the argument made by some that artworks in need of performance (such as music and drama) are indeterminate because they do not and cannot exactly specify everything about how the work is to be performed (i.e. how fast the music is to be played or where on the stage the actors should stand). Stecker answers this point in a manner similar to his reasoning above. Peformance works are not indeterminate, Stecker says, but simply vague and this means that "it is false, not indeterminate, that they have more precise properties (p. 137). Yet what is gained by the claim that artworks have no indeterminacy but only vagueness? Stecker might say that without indeterminacy, interpreters do no run up against the problem that there are questions about the artworks that allow for a plurality of answers. As for this or that vagueness, this is something that a correct interpretation will have to let stand as being one of the properties of the work. But the difficulty is this: Whether one calls it vagueness or indeterminacy, this quality is typically not at the periphery but at the center of artworks. It concerns not the fingernails of characters, or even only, the exact tempo of a musical performance, but the core features of artworks — from the motivation of characters to the meaning of key events, and the purpose and function and relation of the parts to the whole. It is the reason we have so many different interpretations.

I would argue that "indeterminacy" is a better word than "vagueness" for this quality of artworks. The word "vague" suggests falling short of an ideal of

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18 *Stecker devotes an interesting chapter of his book to law, where he explicitly acknowledges that law, unlike art, centrally involves indeterminacy. See Chapter 7.*

exactitude. It is pejorative. The word "indeterminate", on the other hand, suggests an openness. Actually, because artworks and their properties do not mean whatever one wants, I think the better word is "underdeterminedness". To say that an artwork is underdetermined means that it is determined to some degree but, in many respects, it leaves things open. This openness is not a defect. It seems to be the very life of art, maybe, the very reason that we take pleasure in engaging with art. D.H. Lawrence once put the point in this way: "Now a book lives as long as it is unfathomed... once it is known and its meaning is fixed or established, it is dead."

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