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The Hermeneutics of the Eulogy

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Abstract

In this paper I attempt to elucidate the hermeneutical experience of the formal eulogy. I hope to demonstrate how the specific activity of the formally delivered eulogy brings together the entire manifold of hermeneutical experience and manifests the whole scope of hermeneutical life: the openness to the Other, tradition and the text, the priority of the question, translation as interpretation, conversation, and the understanding of meaning. Beginning with the Thou that is the text, I will consider the crisis of remembering and interpreting a life and the significance of "the conversation we ourselves are"—even from the other side of death. I will show how the eulogy, as a peculiar and particular hermeneutical moment, reminds us of our shared hermeneutical plight: it is only our finitude and mortality that allows us to belong to and understand one another in a meaningful way.

Keywords

Gadamer, eulogy, death, Thou, translation, language, understanding, conversation, meaning

In the following, I hope to elucidate the hermeneutical experience of the eulogy. To be clear, I am specifically interested in the discrete activity of preparing, producing, and performing the ritual remembering of a loved one during a formal ceremony. While the informal remembering of those who have passed on also exhibits an important and truly profound hermeneutical task, those moments of remembering will not be under consideration here. Instead, my focus will be on the ritual exercise of the communal eulogy. This is because, I argue, the specific activity of the formally delivered eulogy brings together the entire manifold of hermeneutical experience unlike any other. Therefore, in what follows, I will articulate how the eulogy manifests the whole scope of hermeneutical life: its openness to the other, tradition, the priority of the question, translation as interpretation, conversation, and of course, the understanding of meaning. I will

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suggest that there is something peculiar at work when we remember the dead, something that reminds us of our common and shared hermeneutical plight: it is only our finitude and mortality that allows us to belong to and understand one another in a meaningful way.

Birth Pangs and Beginnings: Thou, Tradition, and the "Text"

> "The understanding of something written is not a repetition of something past but the sharing of a present meaning." (Gadamer, 2013, p. 410)

Let us begin at the beginning. In the Forward to the Second Edition of *Truth and Method,* Gadamer places the experience of the Thou at the very center of his hermeneutic philosophy, claiming that the experience of the Thou is decisive for all self-understanding:

> The section on experience takes on a systematic and key position in my investigations. There, the experience of the Thou throws light on the concept of historically effected experience… [and] also manifests the paradox that something standing over against me asserts its own rights and requires absolute recognition; and in that very process is 'understood.' (2013, p. xxxii)

Gadamer, goes further however, and then insists that within these paradoxical encounters,

> . . . what is so understood is *not the Thou* but the truth of what *the Thou says* to us. I mean specifically the truth that becomes visible to me only through the Thou, and only by my letting myself be told something by it. (p. xxxiii)

The significance of Gadamer's twofold claim is striking: 1) Hermeneutical experience *begins primordially with* and *belongs preeminently to* the I-Thou relationship; and 2) what is "understood" in this encounter is *not* the Thou, but something else—something ulterior in what the Thou *says* to us. I will have more to say about second claim later, but for now, I want to point out the significance of the first claim—namely, that hermeneutic experience begins in the most common, shared, and mundane domain, in our encounters, interactions, and relationships with one another.

Gadamer writes, "It is clear that the experience of the Thou must be special because the Thou is not an object but is in relationship with us" (p. 365). Despite humanity's greatest efforts, our experience of the Thou refuses any attempt at objectification. This is the beginning of hermeneutical life: it is an opening up, a posture, a way of being-with-others-in-the-world. "In human relations, the important thing is . . . to experience the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e. not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us" (p. 369). Gadamer's entire hermeneutic philosophy begins here: we must allow ourselves to become *open* to the Thou.

This openness to one another creates the conditions for tradition and belonging—both of which become embodied and enacted in the ritual of the eulogy, where the continuity of memory (tradition) is handed down and shared (belonging) in the remembering and grieving of the deceased. Tradition may at first seem like a lofty concept, suggesting the grand movements of an abstracted human-historical-narrative, but in its simplest form—one that Gadamer seems particu-

larly fond of—tradition is simply that which is handed down among persons. Scale is quite irrelevant. Tradition, however, is not whatever is "left over" after a person has died, a mere residue. It is what is "given to us, told us" (p. 408). It is the handing down of a shared commonality, the memory of togetherness. Tradition is both the offspring of past life and the midwife of tomorrow's history. But, if we do not remain open to it, tradition will simply pass away into oblivion, destroying any chance for genuine human community. "Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond. Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another" (p. 369). The eulogy concentrates this relation, takes in the entire vista of a person's life and tries to remain open to whatever that life might "say" as it carries along a given tradition. By borrowing Mirlea Oliva's remarks on hermeneutical experience and art, we can sum up what we have said thus far while locating the eulogy's place in our common life. That is, the eulogy is similar to art in that it,

> . . . has a definite immediacy which makes it unique and irreplaceable; although it reflects the totality of life, it has its own particular significance. The uniqueness of [the eulogy] consists in its ambivalent relation with life. On the one hand, it is removed from all connections with actuality . . . However, although it extrapolates us from our life context [it] also relates us back to the whole of our existence and makes us live our life from a higher perspective. (Oliva, 2018, p. 534)

Furthermore, what the eulogy hands down is paradigmatically relational (as with the I-Thou) because, unlike the historian or biographer who may or may not know the person they write about, the eulogy is crafted and curated by someone with an intimate familiarity of this person: a family member or a close friend. This lends the eulogy a certain characteristic that Gadamer prizes: that of prejudice. While prejudice is often maligned, Gadamer takes a counterintuitive approach. He instead argues that prejudice can be *productive* not destructive. Our prejudices allow us to see things—to hear things—that others might overlook. In other words, our prejudices do not inhibit our capacity to realize meaning, but instead enable it—especially in the experience of the Thou:

> A person who does not admit that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what manifests itself by their light. It is like the relation between I and Thou. A person who reflects himself out of the mutuality of such a relation changes this relationship and destroys its moral bond. A person who reflects himself out of a living relationship to tradition destroys the true meaning of this tradition in exactly the same way. (2013, p. 369)

Very rarely in life is this more apparent than in the eulogy. It is our intimate relationship with this person that allows us a certain perspective and enables us to "hear" what their life might be "saying" as it resounds in memory and is handed down as "tradition," even if this tradition is limited to a single family's heritage or ancestry. Therefore, only a relationship with the departed, with *this* particular Thou, can open up the space for a eulogy and allow the meaning of a person's life to come into view, which in turn can then be handed down in a tradition—and it is only the openness of both the author of the eulogy and those who hear it spoken that allows anything like tradition to get under way. Before we wrote history books and literature, we eulogized the dead.

The better we knew the person while they were alive, the larger the stockpile of memories available to us while we attempt to construct a coherent account of their life. In fact, the eulogy is almost entirely an experience of memory. The person has deceased, they are no longer physically present; thus, our experience of them is now bound to our memory of them. However, this distinction is not as stark as it first appears to be. Theodore George, in his reflections on "grief as a limit situation" reminds us of the ubiquitousness of memory in finite, historical life, "our efforts to understand are thus really nothing else than efforts to recollect, to collect again, always in new and different manners, meaning that remains available to us from the past" (2017, p. 2). Thus, if we stop and think about it for a moment, we realize that even when a person is still alive our experience of them is of such a kind that it spills over and beyond their physical and/or temporal presence. Certainly, there is a difference between speaking with someone who is present and remembering the same conversation; but, as hermeneutical beings, these instances are hardly discreet moments, marked off as separate or detached from one another. Such interactions blend and blur into each other, and our experiences and interpretations of one another come with us, even when we are no longer physically present to one another. In a certain sense, *we only ever know one another in our memory.* As James Risser has pointed out:

> There is a certain obviousness to the fact that human life and memory are inseparable. Human life, qua human, does not simply pass; it remains in memory . . . It is no exaggeration to say that memory happens everywhere in human life . . . memory is nothing less than a mode of transmission, carrying out not the sheer passing of life, but the *passing on* of life. (2012, p. 5)

So then, while there is a difference in degree between the eulogy and our everyday experience of one another, it is not however, a difference in kind. "Memory happens" everywhere and with everyone. In a certain sense, our experience of one another sometimes (mistakenly) suffers from the same problem that Gadamer critiques in Schleiermacher's hermeneutics: the idealization of contemporaneity (2013). Gadamer asks, where does one draw the line of contemporaneity? What, or more precisely *when,* does contemporaneity begin and end? Likewise, where do I draw the line of when my spouse's influence begins and ends in my life? Is it only when she is physically present to me? I should hope not.

If it is not the priority of memory that distinguishes the eulogy from ordinary experience, then what makes it of particular hermeneutical importance? Lawrence Schmidt, commenting on Gadamer's analysis of the I-Thou relation, points us towards a possible answer:

> One grants the other the freedom to speak as an equal *and presupposes the preconception of completion*, which means to take seriously the coherence and truth of what is said. The I is self-critical and listens to the other. This alone creates the openness of the hermeneutic conversation. (2000, p. 369)

The eulogy then, differs from ordinary experience because it considers a *complete* life—not a fragment, not a moment, or a series of interactions, but an entire, whole, and complete life. This completion was only conceptual before, but in death it becomes actual and concretize. Paradoxically, death *embodies* completion. Which, if we allow it, creates further openness in the I-Thou relationship.

In this way, the eulogy is fundamentally different from how we experience one another ordinarily. Rather than a glimpse, we are given a complete work. Hermeneutically, this is of the utmost importance. In his discussion on tradition and written artifacts Gadamer makes clear that the kinds of texts that can hand down a tradition, must come to us unified, intelligible, and whole. In other words, fragments, indecipherable scribblings, and meaningless inscriptions do not carry "history." "Texts," Gadamer writes, "always express a whole" (2013, p. 408). Likewise, when we remember and speak of those who are no longer alive, we experience them in a fundamentally different way than we did when they were alive precisely because we are experiencing a unified whole, a completed life. This is what gives the eulogy a peculiar significance for hermeneutics and allows the eulogy a certain coherence as it gives voice to the dead.

But how is it that the dead can speak at all? How does the eulogy enact the "speaking" and give "voice" to the departed? The eulogy has a unique function in the life of a family or community because it invites both its author and its hearers to consider the deceased in a rather unusual way: *The eulogy asks us to encounter the life of the dead as a written text.* Thus, for the remainder of this paper, I invite the reader to let each instance of "text" or "writing" also mean "*a* life." To be clear, I am not suggesting that "text" should be substituted for the abstraction of "life itself," or the vague notion of a "life philosophy," and not even the "life" of someone close to you who is still living. Rather, I invite the reader to consider the completed life of *someone in particular* who has already passed on—as a unified, intelligible, whole. With this explicit metaphorical device of "life and text," we remain much closer to the literal sense of Gadamer's prose, while also allowing the meaning of his language to "go beyond its author" (2013, p. 307). For example, consider how the following passage discussing texts and tradition, both of which we have already mentioned above, suddenly illuminates the activity of the eulogy, if we deploy such a metaphor:

> A written tradition is not a fragment of a past world . . . It is not this document, as a piece of the past, that is the bearer of tradition but the continuity of memory. Through it tradition becomes part of our own world . . . a past humanity itself becomes present to us . . . That is why our understanding remains curiously unsure and fragmentary when we have no written tradition . . .Texts, on the other hand, always express a whole. Meaningless strokes that seem strange and incomprehensible prove suddenly intelligible in every detail when they can be interpreted as writing—so much so that even the arbitrariness of a corrupt text can be corrected if the context as a whole is understood. Thus, written texts present the real hermeneutical task. (Gadamer, 2013, p. 408)

In the eulogy, often for the first time, we come to a better understanding of this other person. (Not an absolute understanding, because this is impossible and annihilates the I-Thou relationship from which hermeneutic experience originates). Events and circumstances that confused us before, suddenly come to make sense as we reflect on the entirety of this person's life. What once may have appeared fragmented and out of place, now surprises us with a fecundity of meaning and coherence. This is no Archimedean vantage point, but it does open up new meanings and allows for the "context as a whole" to be grasped.

While certainly less explicit than the present context, John Arthos's reflections in "The Humanity of the Word" seems to be gesturing towards the metaphor of "life and text" that I have just suggested. There, he points out the posture of our encounters with one another,

> My relation to a book begins with the easy familiarity of the words of our language, of ideas that are part of our makeup, in the same way that my perception of the other is at first sight perception of the gestures and behavior belonging to "the human species." But if the book really teaches me something, if the other person is really another, at a certain stage I must be surprised, disoriented. If we are to meet not just through what we have in common but in what is different between us—which presupposes a transformation of myself and of the other as well—then our differences can no longer be opaque qualities. They must become meaning. (2006, p. 491)

All of what we have considered so far makes but a beginning. Openness to the Thou, belonging to a tradition, the ubiquity of memory, and allowing the life of the dead to speak as a written text only account for the birth pangs of the eulogy. The full hermeneutical experience of the eulogy requires the labor of an author who dares to attempt the scandalous act of articulating the meaning of the life of the departed and bringing it, once more, into the world through language by writing it down.

(In the next section it will, therefore, be necessary to maintain a clear distinction between 1) the *writing* of the eulogy and 2) the "*written text*" of the person's life for whom the eulogy is given. I will try to make this as clear as possible, but it does occur to me that, even in a less metaphorical example of hermeneutics—writing in response to something read—this distinction is also rather complicated. Where does interpretation end and writing begin? Surely these are not discrete activities but rather various stages of the same phenomenon: *understanding*.

Mid-Life Crisis and Middles: The Life-in-Question, Writing, and Translation

> "It is true that a text does not speak to us in the same way as does a Thou. We who are attempting to understand must ourselves make it speak." (Gadamer, 2013, p. 385)

The task of writing and delivering a eulogy is an honor and a privilege. It is also sacred. To write a eulogy is a daunting task that requires its author to take seriously not only the gravity of the eulogistic task itself, but even more importantly, to take seriously the life of which it is meant to speak well. This presents the eulogizer with a crisis. How do I do justice to such a sacred task? How will I adequately express the uniqueness and particularity of this person's life? How could I ever possibly say all that there is to say? How do I speak charitably about a person who, like everyone else who has ever lived, was not always charitable themself? How can I summarize an entire life in such a short time, especially a life that I only knew in part? I wasn't there for all of it! As confounding as such questions may seem, they at least begin with *the priority of the question*, which as Gadamer tells us, is the way in which we open ourselves to hear the voice of the "text" in order to be able to write or say anything about it at all.

By contrast, if we expect the life of the deceased to address us with the certitude of a statement, of some determinate, conclusive 'information,' we will not be surprised or disoriented, but

disappointed. Worse still, if in our remembering we only attend to facts and chronologies, mere data and information, we can be sure that this is a symptom of closedness, and anything we might say about them will be our own machinations, rather than a participation in or recapitulation of the particularity of their life. Merely remembering a person's life by recounting facts and events is *not* a eulogy. This is an obituary at best or a journalistic report at worst, but it is not a eulogy. Because these bits of information are only answers to predetermined questions: "Where did this person grow up? How many children did they have? How old were they when they died?" However, answering such questions does not bring forth anything substantive about the person who has died. To borrow Aristotle's terms, these are merely accidents, but do not get at the substance of the person's life—they are, in effect, non-answers to non-questions. Such questions are 'dead' because what we understand in them "is precisely that there is no question" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 383). The eulogy should remain open through inductive questioning and aspire to convey, above all else, the *meaning* of this person's life; it is not the process of logical deductions that can be litigated as either true or false statements. It, of course, should be *true,* but in a much deeper way than mere correspondence. *What we are after in the eulogy is meaning and significance.* We shouldn't be surprised by this at all. Mere 'facts,' even among the living, do not constitute what we find eternally and uniquely valuable in each other—such information is the stuff of "small talk," it does not make for *lively conversation*, and is certainly not the Good Word of the eulogy.

When we begin to write a eulogy, we realize that what this person's life has left us with is not a litany of facts but rather *live questions.* Of course, the eulogy should give some account of the facts of a person's life, but its principal task is to allow the *life-in-question* to address us—that is, *for the deceased to speak once more*. Which means the eulogy should also implicate us in its telling; it should raise questions.

> The voice that speaks to us from the past—whether text, work, trace—itself poses a question and places our meaning in openness. In order to answer the question put to us, we the interrogated must ourselves begin to ask questions. We must attempt to reconstruct the question to which the traditionary text is the answer. (Gadamer, 2013, p. 382)

The first-time eulogizer may mistakenly set out to interrogate the life of the deceased, only to realize rather quickly that the interrogation moves in both directions. Here again we touch on the origins of the hermeneutic experience: speaking and listening with one another through verbal speech. The eulogy is no different, it should attempt to further the "conversation that we ourselves are" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 386). Therefore, allowing the "text" of this life-in-question to speak and giving voice to what it might have to say to us requires a certain back and forth, the dialectic of question and answer, the play of speaking and listening in *conversation*.

Nicholas Davey's comments on "the other side of writing" help us here. Read in the context of a eulogy his insight takes on a double meaning; it runs in both directions and speaks to both the "written text" of the life-in-question *and* the actual process of writing the eulogy itself.

> . . . writing, it has been held, lies in the desire to set down important events and agreements which by being recorded can be protected from the idiosyncrasies of personal memory. Yet though the impulse towards the written record may have been borne of a

> desire to fix understanding and meaning, the act of writing produces a text that is by its very nature possessed of an infinite capacity for dissolving any fixity of meaning, which is to say, the text has an infinite capacity for meaningfulness. The attempt to fix meaning in a text produces a text of infinite meaning. (2000, p. 81)

The eulogy then, even as it attempts a "fixity of meaning," turns out to be *the opening up of possibilities*. Carolyn Culbertson, in the middle of a brief comment where she explicitly comments on the writing of eulogies clarifies what we are up to here: "we are compelled to work through such losses with words . . . [because] In writing, we find determinacy and meaning where previously there was none" (2019, p. 50). Both the life-in-question and the written eulogy enact something like a triumph over death, a kind of resurrection. That is to say, the eulogy opens up possibilities *precisely where possibility seems to have been closed off* by allowing itself to be addressed by the life of the *de-ceased*. Even in the middle of death life continues to speak.
This opening up of possibilities, I suggest, finds a parallel in the task of translation and provides an opportunity to describe the task of eulogizing in greater detail. Because, insofar as the life of the deceased is conceived and received as a "text," it must then be translated by the eulogy's author so that it can read aloud and spoken to others. This turns out to be an experience *of translation.* This refers back to what we have just asserted regarding meaning and the opening up of possibilities.

> [T]he translator must translate the meaning to be understood into the context [of the eulogy]. This does not, of course, mean that he is at liberty to falsify the meaning of what the other person says. Rather, the meaning must be preserved; however, since it must be understood within a new language world (i.e., the eulogy), it must establish its validity within it in a new way. Thus, *every translation is at the same time an interpretation*. (Gadamer, 2013, p. 402)

This interpretative aspect of the eulogy poses the eulogy's author an extremely difficult task and is responsible for the litany of questions that introduced this section. It is, in fact, the cause of the crisis that I mentioned before. Here, Gadamer's insights into translation help clarify the eulogizer's task:

> [N]o one can doubt that the translation of a text, however much the translator may have dwelt with and empathized with his author, cannot be simply a re-awakening of the original process in the writer's mind; rather, it is necessarily a re-creation of the text guided by the way the translator understands what it says. (2013, p. 404)

No matter how close we may have been with this person, no matter how intimate, no matter how involved we may have been in their life, the eulogy—as an act of translation—necessarily requires us to re-create something about this person, which means we will be faced with interpretative decisions which will inevitably cause "a new light" to fall on this person's life.

> However faithful we try to be we have to make difficult decisions. In our translation if we want to emphasize a feature of the original that is important to us, then we can do so only by playing down or entirely suppressing other features. But this is precisely the activity

> that we call interpretation. Translation, like all interpretation, is a highlighting. (Gadamer, 2013, p. 404)

The serious eulogizer will almost immediately and intuitively recognize the dilemma that he is faced with. He will not be able to re-present this person's life fully and adequately. This is due to the fact that the miracle of the human life is incalculably meaningful; and therefore, the task of comprehensively accounting for *all* of the meaning of a person's life is—literally and technically—*ineffable.* Sunsets, starry nights, and mountain-scapes do not have a monopoly on the sublime. And while it cannot be fully elaborated on here, Gadamer's entire section on translation perfectly describes the experience of writing a eulogy. It also, I believe, clearly articulates something fundamentally constitutive of any creative endeavor. That is, all creativity—in whatever medium—insofar as it is an interpretation, is also a translation.

As Davey puts it, "the 'open secret' of the authentic text is . . . such a text is always in excess of its interpretation" (2000, p. 84). Thus, the eulogizer and the translator are given the same ultimatum:

> he must resign himself . . . since he is always in the position of not really being able to express all the dimensions of his text, he must make a constant renunciation. Every translation that takes its task seriously is at once clearer and flatter than the original . . . The translator is often painfully aware of his inevitable distance from the original. (Gadamer, 2013, p. 404)

Since a eulogy cannot say everything, whatever it *does say,* will be highlighted and held up as particularly important and significant—that is, meaningful. In writing a eulogy, these decisions begin as a translation—literally, to carry over, bring across—and manifest as an interpretation; they clarify and expound. This ultimately means, that the eulogy's author, by definition, *contributes to what is said*. This may seem so painfully obvious that to even mention it here feels unnecessary. And yet, however obvious this observation may be, it has some surprising implications.

By insisting that the author of a eulogy contributes to what is said, we do not mean merely the artifact that is produced in its writing. "What is said" refers not only to the literal words on the page or spoken in the eulogy; rather, "what is said" is that which is given voice in the interpretation of the departed's life—it is the meaning of their life that is brought forth and comes into language via the ritual of eulogizing. As Gadamer's further comments on translation and interpretation clarifies,

> the translator's task of re-creation differs only in degree, not in kind, from the general hermeneutical task that any text presents . . . [because] Texts are 'enduringly fixed expressions of life' that are to be *understood*; and that means that one partner in the hermeneutical conversation, the text, *speaks only through the other partner, the interpreter*. Only through him are the written marks changed back into meaning. (2013, p. 405)

Here, Gadamer describes what actually takes place in the process of translation: *it is an activity of understanding*—the very center of hermeneutical experience. However, to understand the

meaning of a text, or a life—however incomplete or inadequate that understanding may be—means to participate in that meaning, to have a share in it. "Understanding and interpretation are ultimately the same thing" (2013, p. 406).

For further clarification of this point, let me restate this observation as vividly as possible. This person is dead; they can no longer speak for themselves and can no longer give voice to the meaning, whatever that may be, of their particular life. Therefore, whatever meaning that may be brought forth in the eulogy will be inextricably dependent on the translation and interpretation of their life by the eulogizer. And, insofar as "one intends to understand the text itself …this means that the interpreter's own thoughts too have gone into re-awakening the text's meaning" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 406). In other words, the eulogy's author is a mediator. She is what stands between this person's life and the eulogy's hearers—a medium, the *Mitte*, which bridges the gap between past and present, living and dying, life and death. This is what was meant when, at the opening of this section, I referred to the eulogy as sacred. It is a high calling to speak well of the dead.

This becomes especially clear when we consider what Gadamer says about writing in particular. In his discussion on language Gadamer briefly mentions what he calls "the weakness of writing." Referring to Plato, Gadamer says, "the specific weakness of writing [is] that no one could come to the aid of the written word if it falls victim to misunderstanding, intentional, or unintentional" (2013, p. 411). Gadamer then goes on to say that this is "obviously an ironic exaggeration," and clarifies that the same weakness, though admittedly to a lesser extent, can also be attributed to speech: "writing and speech are in the same plight" (2013, p. 411). The spoken word too, in its own way, has no one to defend it either. Once spoken, every utterance, for better or worse, rightly or wrongly, *has a meaning and is understood* by its hearer, who in the very act of understanding, contributes to its meaning by way of interpretation; and this side of understanding—the side of the interpreter—is beyond the reach of the speaker. To a degree, *every utterance is unending*, so to speak. The speaker's only recourse is to continue the discourse, across time, in an attempt to arrive at a shared understanding as to the meaning of what is being spoken about.

But this does not mean that writing has no difference from the spoken word. The key difference is that the written text must be converted (translated) back into the spoken word if it is to be understood. In other words, because "writing is the abstract ideality of language" it requires a reader, translator, or interpreter who can give voice to its meaning and to speak its meaning once more (Gadamer, 2013, p. 410). This is what is really meant by the metaphor between "text and life" that we have deployed thus far: in the discrete activity of writing a eulogy, the explicit task is, fundamentally, to give voice to the meaning of a life, to bring a person's life *into language* once more. We accomplish this by writing and speaking, preparation and performance, discernment and discourse. The eulogy in its writing and delivery, brings together the written and spoken manifestations of the hermeneutical experience while remaining especially attentive to the relational nature of human life and relationship. This, as we have already seen requires a certain sensitivity; one must remain open in order to hear whatever the life-in-question might be saying. Yet, we do not listen to the voice of this life as a mere curiosity of the past, as an historical artifact, but as something—*someone*, a Thou—with present relevance, significance, and meaning. That is, we continue to understand them as a participant in "the conversation that we ourselves are," *even in death* (Gadamer, 2013, p. 386).

Death and Ends: Language, Meaning, and the Conversation We Are

> We know how putting an experience into words helps us cope with it. It is as if its threatening, even annihilating, immediacy is pushed into the background, brought into proportion, made communicable, and hence dealt with. (Gadamer, 2013, p. 469)

What does it mean that "we are a conversation?" (Gadamer, 2013) Trying to define and explain such an enigmatic statement always leaves something out, something missing. We feel like we always come up short. As I have already tried to make clear above, this is the same experience of trying to write a eulogy. We hardly ever find the right words and often feel guilty for our part in the interpretive process. In this brief, final section I want to suggest that our investigation into the hermeneutics of the eulogy have actually prepared us to better understand what Gadamer might mean by "the conversation that we ourselves are." In fact, we have already been working within an understanding of "the conversation that we ourselves are" in our use of the metaphor of "text and life." Insofar as we have accepted the eulogy as an act of translation-interpretation and understanding in response to the "text" of the deceased person's life, we already have some understanding of ourselves as a conversation. Because, like death itself, *conversation too is enigmatic*. Conversation, by definition, resists definition and explanation. As George writes,

> . . . in conversation—that is, in conversation, at least, worthy of the name—we find ourselves always and again at a loss for words, in search for the word that might allow us to reach one another in a novel manner, for the first time. (2017, p. 350)

As difficult as it may be to hear, it is often only in death that the other finds the right words to reach some of us.

We can elaborate on conversation further if we recall Gadamer's commitment to the linguisticality of the human being, that "man's being-in-the-world is primordially linguistic" (2013, p. 459). In other words, our very experience of the world is linguistic, which means that language, therefore, is the medium of all experience, "language is the record of finitude . . . the event of language corresponds to the finitude of man . . . It is from *language as a medium* that our whole experience of the world, and especially hermeneutical experience unfolds" (p. 473). But, to have a language at all, Gadamer tells us, means to be involved in conversation, "for language is by nature the language of conversation; it fully realizes itself only in the process of coming to an understanding" (p. 463).

We have considered the eulogy as a particular reading or interpretation of the life-in-question as a "text." We can now narrow this metaphor even further. Indeed, we may even wonder if it remains a metaphor at all. Every life manifests not only as a text but comes into being in the same way that individual words do in verbal speech. A word begins with the first hint of its sounding—the plosive of the lips, the vibration of the air—as it is conceived from the words that preceded it. Its syllabic structure then unfolds in whatever accidental configuration has been ascribed to it as each phoneme and morpheme resonates across time and space. Until, at the closing of the mouth or the end of the utterance, the word completes itself, as the air that helped sustain its audibility runs out; it is finished. All of this happens in time as an event. The sound of this word comes into the world for a brief moment before it is no longer heard. It is transient and

contingent but that does not change the fact that this entire resonance reaches into the world *as meaning.* One word appears then disappears; more precisely, one word speaks and then speaks no more, while another word is already being spoken. Each word is spoken into a contextual relationship with every other word, in varying degrees of interdependence, giving and receiving meaning; and *in the very act of being spoken,* every word has meaning.

> [E]very word breaks forth as if from a center and is related to a whole, through which alone it is a word. Every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole world-view that underlies it to appear. Thus every word, as the event of a moment, carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and summoning. The occasionality of human speech is not a casual imperfection of its expressive power; it is, rather, the logical expression of the living virtuality of speech that brings a totality of meaning into play, without being able to express it totally. (Gadamer, 2013, p. 475)

This is the human life: 'the word made flesh.' Gadamer even comments on the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, writing, "The greater miracle of language lies not in the fact that the Word becomes flesh and emerges in external being, but that that which emerges and externalizes itself in utterance *is always already a word*" (2013, p. 437). We can apply this further: *the miracle of human life is that each person's particular life, as a word, always, already has a meaning.* This explains why we remember and memorialize the dead in the first place. Because, just like every word spoken *as* language, *the end*—in both senses—of human life *is meaning*. The eulogy then, lives up to its name: the gathered, recollected, "*good word"* of a human life—as a particular space and interval of *meaning-fullness*. As Grondin reminds us, writing what might be called a eulogy of hope for his teacher, "the meaning which our understanding seeks, which in fact our life seeks . . . is primarily a sense of direction, a hope in meaning, without which human life cannot find completion" (Grondin, 2004, p. 289). In other words, we already understand ourselves as inherently meaningful, as contributing to and participating in the "conversation that we ourselves are;" we cannot do otherwise. Each of us carries within us the present meaning of past life, the intimations of the dead, and it is perhaps not merely hyperbole to say that our very life depends on it.

Gadamer, while writing on the limits and boundaries of language also seems to associate the spoken word with the human being's own limitations and boundaries, the fact of our mortality.

> What reaches the other through language, what has been said in words, is always less than has been meant or was intended. An unstilled desire for the appropriate word—that is what constitutes the true life and essence of language. Here a close relation appears between the inability to satisfy this desire . . . and the fact that our own human existence dissipates in time and before death. (2000, p. 17)

This points to the fact that language and human beings share in a peculiar mode of being. Because "what comes into language *is something different* from the spoken word itself. But the word is a word only because of what comes into language in it. Its own physical being exists only in order to disappear into *what is said*" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 491). It is here that we discover

something about the eulogy that may surprise us: *the eulogy is not about the person who has died.* This, I think, probably requires explanation.

Let us now recall the passage concerning the I-Thou relationship that I quoted in the very beginning. Gadamer writes,

> what is so understood is *not the Thou* but the truth of *what the Thou says to us*. I mean specifically the truth that becomes visible to me only through the Thou, and only by my letting myself be told something by it. (2013, p. xxxiii)

Gadamer's insight is two-fold: 1) Hermeneutical experience begins primordially with and belongs preeminently to the I-Thou relationship, and 2) what is "understood" in this encounter is not the Thou, but something else. I can now return to the second of these claims, which I suggest, clarifies an important aspect of the conversation that we are. As Arthos writes, "the hermeneutical relation [conversation] is one in which the issues that are always arising between us are a part of the identity we negotiate and share discursively, part of our being-in-community-with-one-another" (2006, p. 488). Precisely because it is always *about something,* conversation is the process of coming to an understanding about some particular *subject matter*. The goal of conversation is not,

> based on transposing oneself into another person [or] on one person's immediate participation with another. To understand what a person says is . . . *to come to an understanding about the subject matter*, not to get inside another person and relive his experiences. (Gadamer, 2013, p. 401)

Similarly, the eulogy is not about the person who has died. This is because *they are a participant in the conversation.* Their life speaks about a particular subject matter, whatever it is that is being considered in the back and forth, to-and-fro of dialogue and in the common medium of language. The eulogizer who interprets what *this life says*, does so in the same way a translator translates a text from one language to another. The point is not to translate this person into a new language, but to translate *what they have said*. As Culbertson points out, "we are not attempting to substitute a set of remarks . . . for the person we have lost, but we are attempting to find them in a new form and through a transformed mode of relation" (2019, p. 50). That is, in the eulogy, we are reminding ourselves that even on the other side of death the life-in-question does not stop contributing to the "coming to an understanding" that *is* the conversation we are.

But what is this conversation about? What is under discussion? What is its subject matter? If the eulogy is not about the person who has died, then, *what is it about?* This question, in a certain sense, is ultimately unanswerable. I cannot tell you what a eulogy will mean for its hearers or its author. Its meaning cannot be anticipated ahead of time, because, as a kind of conversation, no one knows in advance what will come out of it (Gadamer, 2013, p. 401). Moreover, it may surprise us that the eulogy itself is not responsible for whatever comes out of it. Rather, it is the life-in-question that draws our understanding towards something *particular* and *uniquely* meaningful, opening up for us an *unrepeatable hermeneutic horizon*. This is because eulogies are not concerned with the abstract "meaning of life" but instead, "the meaning of *a life*." This does not mean that the eulogy—in its writing or hearing—is purely subjective or makes no truth claim.

Indeed, any eulogy worthy of the name will certainly place a claim upon us that is beyond mere subjectivism: a eulogy *is true* due to the fact that each of us will encounter something meaningful in its hearing as a new light shines on the beauty and goodness of the life we have in common. Because the eulogy is a profound act of belonging where a community of hearers find themselves addressed by a tradition, a continuity of memory. The meaning of this conversation may not be prescribed or given in advance, but it is nonetheless "given." It is the gift of this person's life, what they have passed down to us. Death, in the end, is a paradox of conversation: while this *particular* conversation is forever interrupted, *the conversation we are* somehow begins again. Therefore, a good eulogy is like a good conversation: where all involved "come under the influence of the truth . . . and are thus bound to one another in a new community . . . being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 387).

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