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INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HERMENEUTICS / INSTITUT INTERNATIONAL D'HERMÉNEUTIQUE

You Must Change Your Life!: Hermeneutics as Living Demand  
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ANALECTA HERMENEUTICA	ISSN 1918-7351

**YOU MUST CHANGE YOUR LIFE!: HERMENEUTICS AS LIVING DEMAND**  
**VOLUME 14.3 | 2022**

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ISSN 1918-7351

Volume 14.3 (2022)

## **You Must Change Your Life!: Hermeneutics as Living Demand**

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The intimacy with which the work of art touches us is at the same time,  
in enigmatic fashion, a shattering and a demolishing of the familiar.  
It is not only the impact of a “This means you!” that is disclosed in a joyous  
and frightening shock; it also says to us: “You must change your life!”  
—Hans-Georg Gadamer<sup>1</sup>

The theme of this volume of *Analecta Hermeneutica* follows the task set forth by Rilke’s “On the Archaic Torso of Apollo” by taking seriously the possibility of art as life changing. Presenting us with both what is familiar and what is alien, the work of art shows what is as well as what could be. Gadamer’s analysis of art moves us a step further by insisting that it is not only art, but hermeneutics as such, that issues such a task. Fundamental to hermeneutics is the idea that experiences of artworks, texts, and traditions inform and shape our being in the world, and that such experiences have aesthetic, ethical, and pedagogical impacts. If understanding requires openness to what remains to be said and the voice of the other, and if interpretation requires cultivation and formation, then hermeneutics is also an ethical and political project. Interpretation and understanding are not merely behaviors, but creative modes of existence. True to the to-and-fro motion of question and answer, this volume may be seen as a response to Volume 13’s theme, and task, of “For a Hermeneutics Yet to Come” by suggesting

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<sup>1</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Aesthetics and Hermeneutics,” in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings*, ed. Richard E. Palmer, trans. David E. Linge (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 131.

the answer to this question may lie in the further question, “What does it mean for hermeneutics to be a way of life?”

### Remembering for the Future

Before turning more concretely to how these questions are taken up in fascinating and provocative ways by the essays in this volume, I would like to explain some of the motivation for the theme. In the Fall of 2020, I taught Social and Political Philosophy at my small, all-women’s university. My students felt unmoored and overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic and 2020 presidential election. For that reason, I chose to focus the course around themes of utopia. If our current conditions are intolerable or, at best, dismaying, would it be possible to imagine better futures that we could craft together? If it is true that we must change our lives, in what ways can or should we change them?

At the end of that semester, we read Alexis Shotwell’s marvelous text, *Against Purity*. There, Shotwell wonders how to create new worlds out of the shell of our current one.<sup>2</sup> How should we respond to our current crises, such as environmental destruction, death and disease, and legacies of genocide? Some responses might be motivated by returning to a pure state of nature or moving on from shameful pasts. Classification, Shotwell explains, is one of the primary modes of purism. By classifying things, we are able to separate things into neat and tidy categories in such a way that the separation seems natural or commonsensical. Such classification covers over the fact that its distinctions are themselves contingent and that things are not as orderly as they seem. Shotwell argues that these attempts at purity and classification will fail because they are not responsible to history, so they cannot have the correct orientation to the past. There never was a pure state to which we can return. Shotwell argues that we should embrace impurity because it both confronts our current conditions as complicated and our own implication in such conditions, and it recognizes that there never was a pure state. We are always entangled with others, with our environment, with history. Thus, addressing our crises must come not from pursuing purity, but instead examining how unbearable pasts shape the present, crafting modes of response to that impossibly complex present, and shaping different worlds yet to come. The task, then, is remembering in order to open different possibilities for the present and

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<sup>2</sup> Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (U of Minnesota Press, 2016).

future. We take responsibility for the future through collective, relational unforgetting.<sup>3</sup> We find ourselves amid traditions and practices, yet we can continue to give shape to understanding and actions that prefigure better futures.

What would it mean to take responsibility for the past in ways that do not appeal to false purities? Shotwell contends that we do so by revisiting how we remember.<sup>4</sup> We attend to what we have forgotten and how to recover that. We aim to get the full story. Here, Shotwell draws on the work of Charles Mills to argue that much of the forgetting is a result of white ignorance that actively forgets implications in oppression. If I am ignorant of something, then I cannot be responsible for it. Unforgetting, though, reminds us of how the past shapes the present. Unforgetting sets a task not merely of acquiring better knowledge, but developing different ways of being in the world. Because we are not isolated, atomic individuals, the task of unforgetting is collective: “We should think of memory as a relation and situated process through which we collectively determine the significance of the past for the present as a form of forward-looking responsibility.”<sup>5</sup> An unforgetting of classification, then, would illustrate the classifications at play historically and presently, but would also direct those classifications toward collective memory and responsibility. Shotwell points to the community databases of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women as an example of this work. Organizations, such as Families of Sisters in Spirit, established databases to document and remember the names of women who have disappeared or killed, thus working against presuppositions that the women left voluntarily and insisting that such disappearances warrant investigation. Their work requires classifications, such as what counts as Indigenous, or what the responsibilities of the police and state are, but they place these classifications within the context of colonialism, pointing to the fact that the state has largely ignored the problem, and return the work of documentation to collective memory.<sup>6</sup> This collective remembering is a way of allowing memory to function in the present and of opening up more just futures.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, what exactly those futures look like remains fundamentally uncertain.

Shotwell concludes her work by paraphrasing Marx’s thesis on Feuerbach: “The point is not only to interpret the world, but to change it.”<sup>8</sup> We should be less

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<sup>3</sup> Shotwell, 39.

<sup>4</sup> Shotwell, 36.

<sup>5</sup> Shotwell, 48.

<sup>6</sup> Shotwell, 53.

<sup>7</sup> Shotwell, 63.

<sup>8</sup> Shotwell, 204.

concerned, she argues, with the merely epistemological problem of having the right language or analysis in our Twitter hot takes and more concerned with the ontological problem of opening spaces of shared freedom. Whereas a conspiracy theorist may always insist on more and better knowledge, the activist seeks out new worlds, provisional as they may be. Shotwell does clarify that interpretation and action are not so neatly separated: changing interpretation will also change our practices.<sup>9</sup> It is here that I think philosophical hermeneutics offers much to explain how interpretation is significantly transformative, and not merely in an epistemological sense. Instead, interpretation and understanding require a fundamental comportment toward and engagement with the other that cannot be merely cognitive. Moreover, such openness is also openness toward transformation. That is, if one takes seriously the task set by language, and the poetic word in particular, then we are already prefiguring the better worlds yet to come.

### **The Speculative Future of Language**

Shotwell's considerations seem to echo Paul Celan's discussions of memory and unforgetting as ways of opening new futures. He observes that after the "thousand darkneses of murderous speech," from out of the ashes of burned out meaning, what remains is language, and more specifically, poetry.<sup>10</sup> As the meridian crossing among past, present, and future, the poem bears witness both to what was and what has yet to be. Moreover, Celan's poetry similar rejects appeals to purity. Finding language that continues to speak is not a matter of appealing to reified, original meanings, but of becoming a "greyer" language.<sup>11</sup> That is, the poem holds singularity and universality, past and future, self and other, life and death together.

As holding open the space between these poles, the poem holds open a space of encounter. It speaks itself as it addresses us. And yet, as this space between, the poem is utopic, it is not yet anywhere definitive. The poet opens paths for prefiguring what is yet to come by speaking both what is familiar and what is not. In encountering the poem, we recognize the familiarity of ourselves as well as the foreign dimension belonging to all human existence.

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<sup>9</sup> Shotwell, 197.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Celan, "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen," in *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (New York: Routledge, 2003), 35.

<sup>11</sup> Celan, "Reply to a Questionnaire from the Flinker Bookstore, Paris, 1958," 15.

What I would like to suggest is that hermeneutics might complement Shotwell's project by showing that it is not only that we must remember the past to open new futures, but we must also remember who we are. Because poetry is a bearing witness to who we are, and because the poetic word moves between I and You, poetry bears witness to us as participating in a common life. Because the poem attends to particularity and singularity, then this common life is not a collection of generic individuals, but one that must be attentive to difference and vigilant to what remains unsaid.

For Gadamer, what allows for language to continue to speak is its speculative dimension. What is said moves back and forth, through mirroring, from the finite word spoken to "an infinity of what is not said."<sup>12</sup> Even everyday language, when we try to make ourselves understood, points both to itself as finite and to the totality of being. The poetic word, as an intensification of everyday speech, "represents the new appearance of a new world in the imaginary medium of poetic invention."<sup>13</sup> Again, this novelty is not fully separate from what has already been established. Rather, it is a reminder that even the most familiar cannot be fully known. If the rigor of hermeneutic experience is uninterrupted listening, then it requires remaining vigilant to what remains unsaid, to this constant struggle to speak, and to what is other.

Speculative thinking is an act of memory that moves us out of our everyday forgetful state toward deeper understanding. It reminds us of our own finitude. Because we become transformed through our encounter with the other and because meaning is always on the way, never fixed, remembering does not return us to an original state, but rather points us toward what has become.<sup>14</sup> As continuing to speak, meaning is always on the way. This movement is at once the despair of searching for words and the promise of new meaning. This promise of full meaning is utopic. It is not yet, but as we venture toward it, we are reminded of our finite common life. Because it is nowhere, this utopic movement reminds us that we are fundamentally in exile, that there remains something foreign in all familiarity.<sup>15</sup> The life in common, in which we find solidarity, is actually one of difference and strangeness.

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<sup>12</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2004), 464.

<sup>13</sup> Gadamer, 466.

<sup>14</sup> See Nicholas Davey, *Unquiet Understanding: Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 125.

<sup>15</sup> See also Donatella Di Cesare, *Utopia of Understanding: Between Babel and Auschwitz*, trans. Niall Keane (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2013). James Risser, *The Life of Understanding: A Contemporary Hermeneutics* (Indiana University Press, 2012), 48.

What hermeneutics shows us, especially in the case of poetry, is that memory is not only of the past, but also of who we are and who we have become. Hermeneutics, like Shotwell's approach, is against purity. A full story is impossible. There is no final word. Instead, a fuller story would be one that reminds us of our finitude while holding open the possibility of new meaning. In the example of disappeared and murdered Indigenous women, we might see that getting the full story is not a cognitive process of fact finding, but of preserving life where death is. For the communities whose language was destroyed through compulsory education, there remains the possibility of finding new words out of the ashes of burned-out meanings. It is to preserve and to be responsible to the singularity of those lost, not as numbers in databases, but as the very particular beings whose silences continue to speak.

If the aim is not merely to interpret the world, but to change it, then we must also see that to interpret is to change. To hold open space for an encounter with the other, to grant that another may be correct, to return to ourselves transformed is to create the conditions for those futures. When we engage in collective memory and unforgetting, our orientation to our present and future is transformed. Memory, then, is inherently political. As collective, it gives shape to the community that we are and are to become.

### **We Must Change Our Lives**

The following essays continue these conversations by considering, among many compelling themes, in what ways art demands transformation, how poetry continues to speak and bear witness to our finitude, how education returns us to ourselves, and in what ways death remains both familiar and foreign. In each, we find explorations not only of how hermeneutics sheds light on different aspects of life, but how hermeneutics itself is a way of life.

Early traces of a hermeneutic encounter between art and everyday life might be found, argues Rebecca Longtin, in the work of Wilhelm Dilthey. Art's transformative power lies in its surplus of meaning that shows us what is already aesthetic in everyday life and opens sites of imagination. The work moves continuously in between particulars and universals, and, in our encounter with the work of art, we do as well. William Konchak's work raises similar questions of how art enables us to encounter beauty and goodness, which extends to our own self-understanding and capacity for understanding.

That art and poetry open this space of encounter is well-established, but what of other aspects of life, such as the natural world? As humans, we are part of nature, and yet nature transcends us. Even in its transcendence, elements of nature remain intelligible. Annalee Ring, following Merleau-Ponty, extends hermeneutics to clarify the ways in which nature might teach us about itself through conversation that allows us to think along with, rather than merely across from, nature.

The educative capacity of everyday life as well as hermeneutics forms a bridge between foreign and familiar, self and other. We see this strikingly in Farzaneh Salehi's auto-biographical essay tracing the journey of self-formation and transformation in moving between the traditions of hermeneutics and Islam. Similarly, the question of tradition cannot be thought separately from that of authority. What authority does tradition have? Is it distinct from the authority of experts within a tradition? Giancarlo Tarantino raises the concern that traditional pedagogy risks conflating the authoritarian and the authoritative. Rehabilitating Gadamer's understanding of authority as granted through recognition by others rather than one's own self-assertion. Authority derives not from dogmatism, but from the willingness to grant that another may be correct. This holds as much for the teacher as for the pupil, which means that education at its core must be dialogic and self-reflective. The recognition of the possible correctness of another and the pursuit of understanding hold open both disruptive and unifying moments.

Implicit in Tarantino's account is that authority is a matter of trust. That is, we grant authority to those whom we trust rather than those who merely attempt to exercise power. Yet, if our experiences of art, poetry, and the other are all characterized by experiences of uncanniness or singularity, then what would be the basis of trust? Elena Romagnoli takes this question up by examining the role of the poet. Against the sort of mystical and prophetic figure we might find in Heidegger, the poet of hermeneutics, precisely because of the *unheimlichkeit* of poetry, has no more privileged position than that of the interpreter. The poet, as member of the community, speaks with the community. As we see in Alexander Crist's essay, the immanence and finitude of poet and poem are not a threat to trust, but the very basis of it. Without trust in language, there is no possibility for understanding at all. The task of the poet is to bear witness to language and reality itself. This trust in language is what allows openness to the alien and strange as well as a continued trust in a common language with others.

Finally, with Cynthia Nielsen, we find that the inexhaustibility of language and meaning come up against the exhaustibility of death. While I may be able to consider and remain open to the unintelligibility inherent in experiences of life, confronting the unintelligibility of death seems a different manner. How could I interpret my own

death when there is longer an I? Nielsen suggests that because death cannot be fully intelligible, we might actually come to a deeper understanding of our finitude. By witnessing the living-dying of others, we are turned outside of ourselves and returned to ourselves in self-understanding. Such experiences may motivate the recognition that, even as dying, we must change our lives.

Returning again to the background for this special issue, I would like to remember two individuals whose legacies continue to speak. Rudolf Makkreel, my mentor and generous interlocutor, embraced hermeneutics as a way of life in his love of art and keen attention to dialogue. Shawnee Daniels-Sykes, my colleague and friend, saw the liberatory potential of education and centered the voices and experiences of marginalized women at every turn. Their lives encouraged me to change my own, and I'm sure many others as well. I am grateful for the spaces of encounter they held, and the memories that continue to do so.

My gratitude also extends to the generosity of the editors of *Analecta Hermeneutica*, Ramsey Eric Ramsey and Donovan Irvén, for opening these conversations. This volume would also not be possible without Elise Poll, assistant to the editors, the many peer-reviewers, and, of course, the authors of the very fine essays within. My hope is that this volume continues to chart the futures we craft together and the community we are to become.

## Interpreting Life from Life Itself: Wilhelm Dilthey's Hermeneutical Aesthetics

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Poetry is a passion, not a habit. This passion nourishes itself on reality. Imagination has no source except in reality, and ceases to have any value when it departs from reality. Here is a fundamental principle about the imagination: It does not create except as it transforms. . . . Imagination gives, but gives in relation.  
—Wallace Stevens, Notes on “The Man with the Blue Guitar”<sup>2</sup>

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) is a well-known figure in the history of hermeneutics, although Dilthey scholars would argue that his contributions to hermeneutics are largely overlooked. There are several contributing factors to this issue. First and foremost, Dilthey's philosophy is often studied indirectly through *Being and Time* and *Truth and Method*, which means more prominent philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer have been responsible for his reception in hermeneutics.<sup>3</sup> Both Heidegger and Gadamer present their approach to hermeneutics in opposition

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<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to the memory of Rudolf Makkreel with gratitude for his encouragement and guidance. I am also grateful for the constructive criticism I received from an anonymous reviewer, which was very helpful in revising the framework for my paper's argument.

<sup>2</sup> Wallace Stevens, “To Hi Simons, Hartford, Connecticut, August 10, 1940,” in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 363–64.

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger describes his analysis of Dasein in *Being and Time* as “in the service of Dilthey's work” (GA 2: 404 / BT: 455). *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); *Sein und Zeit in Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 2, ed. F. W. von Hermann (Frankfurt, Germany: Klostermann, 1977). Gadamer critiques Dilthey's approach to hermeneutics in *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 53 – 61 and 214 – 235.

to Dilthey. Yet, as Dilthey scholars have demonstrated, Heidegger's and Gadamer's polemics often rest on misinterpretations or caricatures of Dilthey's philosophy and, moreover, do not fully acknowledge their indebtedness to his thought.<sup>4</sup> As a result, Dilthey is often misunderstood when he is acknowledged at all.

Perhaps a more interesting issue than determining philosophical debt is the fact that much of Dilthey's implicitly hermeneutical philosophy is not read as hermeneutics because he did not label it as such. Jean Grondin explains that while many of Dilthey's philosophical projects could be considered hermeneutics according to contemporary philosophical usage, Dilthey would not have understood his work this way because the term hermeneutics "was still too exotic for his time."<sup>5</sup> Dilthey was the first philosopher to adapt hermeneutics for philosophy. Previously, hermeneutics had been a theological project aimed at interpreting religious texts. This fact means that during Dilthey's time, philosophical hermeneutics was in its infancy and its full range of possibilities and applications had not been developed yet. By contrast, when Gadamer published *Truth and Method*, hermeneutics was a "suddenly fashionable term."<sup>6</sup> These shifts in the meaning and popularity of hermeneutics can make it difficult to place Dilthey within its history in a way that does justice to his insights. At the same time, Grondin points out that Heidegger's early existential hermeneutics fulfills Dilthey's goal to interpret life from life itself and Gadamer's *Truth and Method* takes up Dilthey's goal of articulating the way the human sciences understand life in ways that are distinct from the methods of the natural sciences.<sup>7</sup> For these reasons, Grondin suggests that Dilthey scholars "enjoy the hermeneutics of the

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<sup>4</sup> One of the most thorough accounts of Dilthey's influence on Heidegger is Robert Scharff, *Heidegger Becoming Phenomenological: Interpreting Husserl Through Dilthey, 1916–1925* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019). Theodore Kisiel also provides a detailed account of the "Dilthey Draft" of *Being and Time* (see *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993]). For analysis of Gadamer's misinterpretation of Dilthey, see Frithjof Rodi, "Hermeneutics and the Meaning of Life: A Critique of Gadamer's Interpretation of Dilthey," in *Hermeneutics and Deconstruction*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and Don Ihde (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 82–90. I argue for reinterpreting Dilthey's influence on Heidegger in Rebecca A. Longtin, "From Factual Life to Art: Reconsidering Heidegger's Appropriation of Dilthey," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 59, no. 4 (2021): 653–78.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Grondin, "Dilthey's Hermeneutics and Philosophical Hermeneutics," in *Interpreting Dilthey: Critical Essays*, ed. Eric S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 254.

<sup>6</sup> Grondin, "Dilthey's Hermeneutics and Philosophical Hermeneutics," 260.

<sup>7</sup> In his 1920 lecture course *Phenomenology of Intuition and Expression*, Heidegger explicitly takes up Dilthey's "ultimate philosophical motive: to interpret life from out of itself, primordially" (Martin Heidegger, *Phenomenology of Intuition and Expression*, trans. Tracy Colony [New York: Continuum, 2010], 119).

twentieth century for what it is, an impressive continuation and realization of the type of philosophy Dilthey envisioned and that can rightly be called a hermeneutics.”<sup>8</sup>

Dilthey’s philosophy thus presents us with the hermeneutical task of making the implicit more explicit. Reading Dilthey’s work through a contemporary perspective reveals that much of his philosophy can be read as hermeneutics, especially insofar as his main goal was to interpret life from life itself. To this end, I will outline some general features of Dilthey’s approach to aesthetics and explain how it could be interpreted as a hermeneutics. While some scholars have treated Dilthey’s aesthetics as peripheral to his philosophy, Rudolf A. Makkreel considers it to be vital in the development of his philosophy. Makkreel argues that Dilthey’s inquiries into art allowed him to reformulate and refine his philosophical approach over the course of his life.<sup>9</sup> Dilthey’s aesthetics thus provides a rich ground for unearthing his goals, theories, and methods as a hermeneutical philosopher.

The first section explains the historical impetus for Dilthey to revise aesthetic theory in a way that is implicitly hermeneutical. The second section outlines Dilthey’s concept of artistic creation as poetic metamorphosis, which grounds aesthetics in the dynamics of everyday lived experience. The third section explains how Dilthey’s descriptive psychology outlines a hermeneutic understanding of lived experience and artistic creation. The last section explains how Dilthey understands art as a mode of interpretation that articulates what is meaningful in life. Throughout this paper I will argue that what we find in Dilthey’s aesthetics is coherent with contemporary hermeneutical aesthetics. Namely, art is not simply an object for hermeneutics to interpret. Art is itself a powerful act of interpreting life.

### **New Forms of Life and the Need for New Aesthetic Theories**

The historical context for Dilthey’s aesthetic theory sets up the need to interpret art differently than philosophers had in the past. New art styles had emerged in the nineteenth century that challenged past traditions and norms for making, presenting, interpreting, evaluating, and understanding art. Dilthey’s aesthetics can be read as a hermeneutical response not only because it responds to the need for new modes of interpretation, but also because he understands the need to recontextualize art within history and culture and to critically examine inherited traditions. This section will give

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<sup>8</sup> Grondin, “Dilthey’s Hermeneutics and Philosophical Hermeneutics,” 265.

<sup>9</sup> Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies*, 3rd printing (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 15–17.

an overview of how Dilthey is situated in the history of art and aesthetic theory and explain its relevance for a hermeneutical approach to aesthetics that is grounded in life.

In *The Imagination of the Poet: Elements for a Poetics* (1887) and *Three Epochs of Modern Aesthetics and Its Present Task* (1892), Dilthey situates his approach to aesthetics in response to the profound discord between previous theories of art and the works of art of his time. Dilthey describes the artworld at the end of the nineteenth century as an *anarchy of taste* in which “the artist is forsaken by rules; the critic is thrown back upon his personal feeling as the only remaining standard of evaluation” (GS 6: 104 / SW V: 31).<sup>10</sup> This anarchy of taste is not simply pernicious to art theory or criticism, however; it also affects the status of art in society and the development of art in general. For Dilthey, the role of aesthetics is to support the status of art in society, clarify its purpose, and establish principles that encourage the development of “a lasting style and a coherent artistic tradition” (GS 6: 106 / SW V: 33). Aesthetic theory provides reflection on the significance of art and cultivates the intellectual attitudes that allow for artistic creation and art appreciation. For Dilthey, “art requires the thorough schooling and education of the artist and the public through aesthetic reflections if its higher aspirations are to be unfolded, appreciated, and defended” (GS 6: 106–107 / SW V: 33). For these reasons, the anarchy of taste at the end of the nineteenth century seemed particularly dangerous to the status of art. These works of art expressed the fact that artists “had developed an aversion to thinking about art, sometimes even to every kind of higher culture” (GS 6: 106 / SW V: 32). Artists’ aversion to theory and the democratization of taste seemed to deny any possibility for re-establishing a relationship between aesthetics and works of art. Yet Dilthey did not identify such a crisis as the end of art, like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. For Dilthey, such an “anarchy of taste always characterizes periods when a new feeling of reality has shattered the existing forms and rules, and when new forms of art are striving to unfold” (GS 6: 104 / SW V: 31). Dilthey understood the need for art to reflect the changes in society and new ways of thinking. Art movements that emphasize reality above theory, which Dilthey describes as *naturalism*, indicate such shifts in society. According to Dilthey, in “every such time of crisis, naturalism appears. It destroys the

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<sup>10</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *Poetry and Experience: Wilhelm Dilthey Selected Works* [SW], vol. V, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); *Die Geistige Welt: Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens. Zweite Hälfte: Abhandlungen zur Poetik, Ethik und Pädagogik*, in *Wilhelm Dilthey, Gesammelte Schriften* [GS], vol. 6, ed. Georg Misch (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962). Dilthey’s works are abbreviated according to the volume of the *Gesammelte Schriften* [GS] followed by the page number of the original German then the page number of the English translation from *Selected Works* [SW].

worn-out language of form; it attaches itself to reality, seeking to obtain something new from it” (GS 6: 285 / SW V: 220). At times it is necessary for art to break from previous aesthetic concepts, but this does not mark an essential dissonance between art and theory. Instead, the task for aesthetics is to respond to these new forms of art by revising its theory.

Dilthey outlines two main approaches to philosophy of art and art criticism, what he refers to as the Classicists and the Romantics, and explains how modern art rebels against both. The Classicists include eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century philosophers and art critics (e.g., Boileau, Gottsched, and Lessing) who adopt Aristotle’s *Poetics* as the model for art and approach art through general forms and rules about what art should portray and how it should do so. Since Aristotle thinks of art as mimesis, an imitation of what we observe in reality, Classicists approach art as a representation of the world. This concept of art gives formal rules that determine whether art is successful in representing reality. By contrast, for the Romantics, art does not imitate mundane reality, but instead transcends it. Romantics considered art to be the highest form of thought because it expresses the spiritual reality of the mind.

Artists at the end of the nineteenth century, however, were not interested in ideal representations like the Classicists or transcendence like the Romantics and came into direct conflict with the expectations of what art should be. In literature, Honoré de Balzac’s and Charles Dickens’ commonplace subject matters, urban settings, depictions of mundane details, and mass appeal contradicted traditional theories of art.<sup>11</sup> The lofty concepts of the Romantics with their emphasis on the sublime and art as the highest form of thought did not seem applicable to the realism of such novels. Similarly, the Classicists with their emphasis on traditional form, nature, and the idyllic became irrelevant as “soon as Dickens and Balzac began to write the epic of modern life” (GS 6: 104 / SW V: 31). In *Three Epochs of Modern Aesthetics*, Dilthey describes these new literary styles as an effort to “express the oppressive feeling that the structures of life in society have become old, senile, and untenable” (GS 6: 243 / SW V: 176). By emphasizing the mundane and commonplace, art attempted to overthrow these worn-out structures and rediscover the world in a genuine sense. As Dilthey describes, “It wants to manifest reality, as it actually is” (GS 6: 243 / SW V: 176).

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<sup>11</sup> For a more thorough explanation of Dilthey’s literary theory, see Kristen Gjesdal, “A Task Most Pressing: Dilthey’s Philosophy of the Novel and His Rewriting of Modern Aesthetics,” in *Interpreting Dilthey: Critical Essays*, ed. Eric S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 200–16; Kurt Müller-Vollmer, *Towards a Phenomenological Theory of Literature: A Study of Wilhelm Dilthey’s Poetik* (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1963).



Edouard Manet, *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (*The Luncheon on the Grass*) (1862–1863), oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France. Public Domain:  
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/edouard-manet/the-luncheon-on-the-grass-1863>.

In the visual arts, this conflict between art and theory is marked by a particular historical event: the *Salon des Refusés* (Salon of the Rejected). In 1863, nearly 3,000 works of art—about half of the submissions—were rejected by the Paris Salon's jury. In response to this unprecedented event and the protests of artists, Emperor Napoleon III formed an exhibition of the rejected art for the purpose of allowing the public, rather than the jury of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, to decide what was and was not worthy of being exhibited as fine art.<sup>12</sup> The exhibit of rejections was a success and introduced the public to artists such as Paul Cézanne, Camille Pissarro, and Édouard Manet, who subsequently shaped the artworld in profound ways. The works of art were rejected for a variety of reasons: risqué subject matters, unusual techniques, or both in the case of Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (*The Luncheon on the Grass*), which is

<sup>12</sup> The Emperor wrote that he wished to let the public judge the legitimacy of the Academy's decision: "laisser le public juge de la légitimité de ces réclamations," *Le Moniteur Universel*, April 24, 1863.

perhaps the most famous work of art that was rejected.<sup>13</sup> The French art critic Théophile Thoré-Bürger attended the exhibition and noted significant features shared among the variety of rejected works. As Juliet Wilson-Bareau summarizes, “Thoré-Bürger wrote perceptively about a quality that he perceived in the wide range of paintings at the Salon des Refusés: the sense of a new beginning in works that rejected mythology, history, and academic insistence on drawing and on finish in favour of modern subjects captured in their most striking, most unified effect; they might appear naïve, exaggerated, even brutal, but they had, Thoré felt, a vigour and sincerity that contrasted with the works in the official Salon.”<sup>14</sup> In general, the rejected artists rejected classical themes and traditional methods to paint common life with new intensity. While shocking, it expressed a new vibrancy. As Dilthey describes the style of this new art: “Painting has returned to color as its fundamental means of expression. It is seeking to do away with all traditional schemata of perception and composition, and to look at the world as though with new eyes” (GS 6: 245 / SW V: 178).

This event is significant for understanding a fundamental shift in the artworld. Saving the rejected works and displaying them to the public demonstrates a schism between works of art on one side and art theory and art criticism on the other side, which speaks to a radically new democratization of art. Moreover, the content and style of the works expressed a new sense of what art can and should express. These painters defied the traditional standards of art maintained by the Académie des Beaux-Arts by emphasizing the basic elements and medium of painting rather than symbolic meaning or ideals. While such expressive styles of painting have become commonplace, in 1863 they were revolutionary. Art historians consider the Salon des Refusés to “represent the most decisive institutional development in the progress of modern art.”<sup>15</sup>

Movements in literature, the visual arts, and theater at the end of the nineteenth century expressed the same trend: the rejection of traditional concepts of art. For Dilthey, these new art movements reveal that “a new feeling of reality has shattered the existing forms and rules” and “new forms of art are striving to unfold”

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<sup>13</sup> Art critics found the subject matter of Manet’s *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe* (originally displayed as *Le bain*) perplexing and scandalous. It was not clear who the nude women were or their relationship with the fully clothed men. Additionally, Manet’s technique was considered inconsistent, a “fusion of great ‘old’ art with modernity” that critics did understand. See Juliet Wilson-Bareau, “The Salon des Refusés of 1863: A New View,” *The Burlington Magazine* 149, no. 1250 (2007): 309–19; d’Arpentigny, “Exposition des Beaux-Arts,” *Le Monde* (13 June 1863), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson-Bareau, “The Salon des Refusés of 1863,” 317. Bürger, “Salon de 1863. IV. *Le Salon des Réprouvés*” *L’Indépendance belge* (11 June 1863).

<sup>15</sup> Albert Boime, “The Salon des Refusés and the Evolution of Modern Art,” *Art Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1969): 411.

in relation to this reality (GS 6: 104 / SW V: 31). This impulse towards representing the everyday made traditional aesthetic principles irrelevant and overthrew important theoretical distinctions that defined art.

In response to these dramatic changes in the artworld, Dilthey argued that the art critic and theorist must learn “to understand art in relation to its time” (GS 6: 275 / SW V: 210). As the art world continually changes and adopts new forms, aesthetic theory must have a sense of time and place—a sense of history. For Dilthey, “we must replace abstract theorems. . . with ideas acquired from an analysis of the living historical nature of art” (GS 6: 271 / SW V: 206). In appealing to the historical nature of art, Dilthey is not simply invoking art history, although he considers these historical considerations to be important in furthering aesthetic theory (GS 6: 246 / SW V: 179). The task for a new aesthetics must be historical in more than one sense. Aesthetic theory must adopt a more historical approach to address the insufficiencies of timeless principles in traditional approaches and must be able to account for the historicity of art and life. Dilthey acknowledges that there is something timeless in great art but also states that the human is “a historical creature,” which means that when “a new social order has been instituted and the meaning of life has changed, the poets of the preceding epoch no longer move us as they once moved their contemporaries” (GS 6: 241 / SW V: 173). Dilthey breaks from the aesthetic tradition and its tendency to fall into universal principles by addressing art’s relation to everyday life, which is fluid and dynamic, rather than unchanging, and can be understood only within historical and cultural contexts. His aesthetic theory is grounded in life.

### **Art as an Imaginative Metamorphosis of Everyday Life**

Not only is Dilthey’s aesthetic theory grounded in life in terms of its historical context, cultural traditions, and temporal dynamics, but he also based his approach to aesthetics on a descriptive psychology of everyday lived experience. Dilthey’s *Imagination of the Poet*—also referred to as his *Poetics*—outlines how art flows from and transforms everyday lived experience.<sup>16</sup>

Dilthey’s account of art is based on his understanding of everyday experience. For Dilthey, there are no fixed elements, no static points of perceptual data. Instead, experience is formed. It is shaped by the influence of feelings, the passing of time, and

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<sup>16</sup> Dilthey’s use of “poetics” here refers to a general theory of the arts, not just poetry. For this reason, I will often use “artist” instead of “poet” to convey the broader meaning of poetic imagination that Dilthey describes.

a network of associations that an individual acquires through their life. Experience is continually formed and transformed through a variety of processes. Without attempting to determine the entirety of these processes, an impossible task, Dilthey specifies three formative processes of imaginative metamorphosis: (1) *exclusion*, (2) *intensification or diminution*, and (3) *completion*. These formative processes shape and transform perceptual and representational images (*Bilder*).<sup>17</sup> For Dilthey, these images “interpenetrate one another” and are “equally near and equally far from one another” (GS 6: 141 / SW V: 70). This description serves to distinguish the qualities of our mental content and their interconnections from the external world with its spatial relations and physical causes that can be lawfully determined. For Dilthey, we cannot trace a line of associations or a trajectory of causation from single points of experiential data to the whole of consciousness. Rather, all images are conditioned by the entire network of our psyche—the acquired psychic nexus, which the next section will explain—as well as various processes, acts, interest, stimulation, and complex relations within the content itself. These qualities of our perceptions, as well as the overall nexus of our psyche, prevent abstract or logical simplifications and require a different understanding of the mind. These processes, moreover, are best exemplified by artistic imagination. In Dilthey’s explanation of these three functions of the imagination he articulates the way in which aesthetics relates to everyday experience as a “metamorphosis of reality” (GS 6: 138 / SW V: 67).

The metamorphoses Dilthey describes are not only relevant to art, but also to any mode of reflection on a lived experience. When we reflect on a particular experience, we do not retain it in all its particularity—we transform it through exclusion, intensification or diminution, and completion. We disregard what is accidental or insignificant, we intensify or diminish the emotional aspects, and focus on what is relevant and meaningful. Without these transformations, the particular experience remains confused, obscure, and opaque to our understanding. At the same time, we often do not reflect in our everyday experiences. Our everyday perception is shaped by immediate interests that preoccupy our attention. We think and act according to habitual practices and assumed givens. We experience a multitude of minute and mundane details. The artist reflects upon everyday experience and transforms it. In art, certain elements are excluded deliberately “for clarity and harmony in the constituent of images” (GS 6: 173 / SW V: 102). Not only would it be impossible to write a novel with as many details as lived experience, but it would be

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<sup>17</sup> Dilthey does not use the term “image” (*das Bild*) in the narrow sense of visual images but instead in the extended sense that applies to a great variety of mental contents.

overwhelming and difficult to locate what is important. All meaning would get lost in the details. Hence, Dilthey's concept of imaginative metamorphosis includes the notion of exclusion. Exclusion, however, is not enough to create a work of art—mere exclusion can only create “the superficial harmony of an empty ideal if other laws did not also operate in transforming images” (GS 6: 173 / SW V: 102). Images are not merely simplified for the sake of unity in the work of art; they are also *expanded* or *contracted* through the influence of feeling. Dilthey sees all experience as colored by feeling. Feeling can intensify and expand experience or dissipate and contract it. According to Dilthey, the artist is “set apart by a capacity to truly *enliven* images, and the attendant satisfaction gained from perception is *saturated with feeling*” (GS 6: 136 / SW V: 64). Dilthey uses the example of Dickens and other English writers to explain how images can receive a “nervous intensification of reality where things become larger than life. Cliffs become more steep and meadows more lush” (GS 6: 174 / SW V: 103). The artist's use of feeling is an intensification of the everyday.

Yet these processes of exclusion and intensification or diminution do not distinguish art from other experiences. Dilthey attributes similar effects to dreams or states of altered perception in which aspects of reality can fade or become exaggerated. Together exclusion and intensification are insufficient to transform everyday experience in a meaningful way. Dilthey explains, “An imagination which only excludes, intensifies or diminishes, increases or decreases, is feeble and attains only a superficial idealization or caricature of reality” (GS 6: 175 / SW V: 104). For this reason, he introduces the process of *completion*, an imaginative metamorphosis that draws out significant relations. He explains: “Images and their connections are transformed when new components and connections penetrate into their innermost core and thus complete them” (GS 6: 175 / SW V: 104). The process of completion involves relating a particular image to the whole of life. As Dilthey describes, art “restores the totality of lived experience” (GS 6: 177 / SW V: 106).<sup>18</sup> Art has a powerful effect on us because it lays bare our existence. Art does not simply present us with pleasant shapes, charming sounds, or interesting ideas. Art strikes us, captivates us, changes our minds, and pulls at our hearts. For Dilthey, these effects are the result of art's relation to life.

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<sup>18</sup> Dilthey's claim here prefigures Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics. In *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986]), Gadamer declares that “in any encounter with art, it is not the particular, but rather the totality of the experienceable world, man's ontological place in it, and above all his finitude before that which transcends him, that is brought to experience” (32–33).

We must note, however, that while the artist can transform experience, they do not create meaning or value from nowhere; meaning is already inherent within life and our everyday experience. To understand how art transforms lived experience through completion requires an understanding of Dilthey's concept of the totality of life, which he explains through his theory of mind in the *acquired psychic nexus*.<sup>19</sup>

### Lived Experience and the Totality of Life: Dilthey's *Acquired Psychic Nexus*

Dilthey's acquired psychic nexus (*erworbener seelischer Zusammenhang*) describes everyday lived experience as a process of continual transformation that is grounded in concrete historical, cultural contexts. Dilthey proposes the acquired psychic nexus to account for the coherent narrative structure of the psyche that is acquired throughout our lives and that shapes and gives meaning to every lived experience.<sup>20</sup> Within lived experience, an impression is neither isolated nor a set of mere associations. Instead, the "immediacy and simplicity of the impression is a psychological illusion. It stands in relation to the dim mass of representations, drives, and feelings of my acquired psychic nexus; it is oriented and conditioned by this nexus" (GS 6: 264 / SW V: 199). Dilthey's nexus describes the relational and historical nature of our existence and thought. Our perception is not a piecing together of sensory data and concepts, but a formative process shaped by the whole of our lived experience. The ideas, feelings, evaluations, and habits we acquire over time shape every perception, representation, evaluation, and act (GS 6: 143 / SW V: 72). As Makkreel notes, the "term 'acquired' [*erworbener*] indicates that the nexus or structuring of our experience is not abstract and inferred, but concretely 'possessed' through the individual's life history. The nexus is thus a system which is historically acquired and reveals the structural ordering of past experience."<sup>21</sup> It describes a complex relation between part and wholes that provides the coherence of every lived experience and life as a whole.

Dilthey notes that while the acquired psychic nexus is complex and ever changing, it continually "works as a whole on the representations or states on which

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<sup>19</sup> Although Dilthey introduces the acquired psychic nexus in his *Poetics*, it becomes a concept that is central to his descriptive psychology and his broader epistemological projects, such as providing a new ground for the human sciences and revising Immanuel Kant's critique of historical reason. See Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (GS 1 / SW I).

<sup>20</sup> David Carr discusses the idea of meaning in Dilthey's description of the temporal structure of lived experience as *Zusammenhang*, or coherence, in terms of narrative (*Time, Narrative, and History* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986], 61).

<sup>21</sup> Makkreel, *Dilthey*, 98.

our attention is focused” (GS 6: 143 / SW V: 72). The sense of nexus, *Zusammenhang*, expresses the coherence of a plurality of things that *hang together* (*hangen zusammen*) as a unity and express something meaningful through their interrelations. The nexus is a complex interweaving of relations and not simply mental content in the sense of data: “This nexus consists not only of contents, but also of the connections which are established among these contents; these connections are just as real as the contents. The connections are lived and experienced as relations between representational contents, as relations of values to one another, and as relations of ends and means” (GS 6: 143 / SW V: 72). The relations of value—ends and means—form a purposive structure that gives coherence to the totality of life. Dilthey emphasizes that this structure is characterized by *immanent subjective purposiveness*, not *objective purposiveness*. Objective purposiveness would involve an external telos or force that determines the individual. Subjective purposiveness is established by inner feeling. Moreover, as *immanent* these connections are not impressed upon the content of experience but are inherent within our experiences. As Jacob Owensby notes, Dilthey’s sense of “purposiveness refers to the manner in which the interrelation of psychic components—instinct, feeling, representation, and volition—promote an increasing articulation of the relation of individuals to their environment for the sake of enhancing or sustaining the value of life.”<sup>22</sup> As immanent, this purposiveness is proper to the life of the individual yet relates to the world in which the individual lives. “Dilthey stresses that psychic structure is formed in the interaction of agents with their world. Because individuals are situated in a socio-historical context and the acquired psychic nexus is formed through interaction with the milieu, the acquired nexus at least indirectly reflects the influence of such a context.”<sup>23</sup> As such, the nexus is not limited to pure mental content, private experience, or the isolated Cartesian “I,” but instead expresses the confluence of inner life and external reality: “there is a constant interaction between the self and the milieu of external reality in which the self is placed, and our life consists of this interaction” (GS 6: 143 / SW V: 72). This constant interaction relates to Dilthey’s notion of life, which is not simply biological but includes the plurality of contexts—social, political, cultural, and historical—that shape the individual. Dilthey’s aesthetic writings always consider artists, poets, and musicians within their social, political, cultural, and historical contexts because he considers the concrete reality of the artist’s lived experience, which is intersubjective and material in nature, to be essential for interpreting works of art and understanding art as an

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<sup>22</sup> Jacob Owensby, *Dilthey and the Narrative of History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 93.

<sup>23</sup> Owensby, *Dilthey and the Narrative of History*, 95.

expression of life. In this way, Dilthey's account of lived experience avoids the tendency of some approaches to contemporary everyday aesthetics to place the everyday in the individual's private sphere of experience as opposed to the public world. For Dilthey, we must understand them in terms of each other.

The nexus, moreover, as a coherent unity, does not simply provide an abstract framework or general background for experience; it *articulates* experience (GS 6: 143 / SW V: 72). The nexus articulates our experience by *orienting, bounding, determining,* and *grounding* it (GS 6: 143 / SW V: 72). We act and make decisions based upon the influence of our acquired experiences, ideas, and feelings—they orient us. Our perceptions and evaluations are bound and determined by what we have experienced in the past and what is made accessible to us through our acquired understanding. We find concrete ground for our feelings, thoughts, and actions in terms of who we are as a whole, which means looking at our existence in its historical rootedness and not in terms of definitions and abstract concepts. Dilthey's nexus attempts to account for every aspect of our experiences: "Through [the acquired psychic nexus] principles derive their certainty, concepts receive their sharp delineations, and our position in space and time obtains its orientation. Likewise, it is from this nexus that feelings receive their significance for the totality of our life. Finally, it is because of this same nexus that our will, which is usually occupied with means, remains constantly certain about the system of ends in which the means are grounded. These are the ways in which the acquired psychic nexus works in us, although we possess it obscurely" (GS 6: 143–44 / SW V: 72–73). The acquired psychic nexus expresses the totality of consciousness as a unified complex of interrelations and temporal development. The acquired psychic nexus references the unity of an individual's lived experience and as such provides coherence and the possibility of articulating meaning by connecting particularities to the whole of life. At the same time, *we possess it obscurely*—meaning we cannot grasp it immediately or fully as a determinate and unchanging conceptual framework due to the intricacies of its relations and their transformations over time. In this sense, the coherence of the acquired psychic nexus is distinct from the absolute system of consciousness put forward by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, and Hegel. Even though Dilthey sees every perception, thought, and feeling as connected in the acquired psychic nexus, we cannot grasp it as a whole. The totality of life provides a general structure in which we can articulate the significance of a particular image, but there is no absolute meaning that can be assigned to it.

The articulative role of the acquired psychic nexus allows us to understand the process of completion and its significance for the aesthetic qualities of everyday life and of art. As explained in the previous section, the processes of exclusion and

intensification are not sufficient for providing meaningful reflection on everyday experience, especially since we can experience such transformations in dreams or fits of strong emotion. It is only through completion—which relates the image to the totality of human experience, the nexus of life—that the transformations of images provide meaning and significance. Just as the acquired psychic nexus orients, determines, and grounds our perception, desire, values, actions, and beliefs by drawing together our representations, will, and feelings as a whole and as established through the course of time, so the significance of a particular transformed image requires reference to the complex network of relations to which it belongs—namely, life as a whole. For Dilthey, “we obtain from images and their connections what is essential about a state of affairs: what gives it its meaning in the nexus of reality” (GS 6: 175 / SW V: 104). It is not enough to simply relate images to each other, as such relations would lack necessity and meaning and appear superficial. The relation to the whole presents us with what is essential about a particular image and its connections to the whole of life. As Dilthey states, “fusion produces mere integration. *Only when the whole acquired psychic nexus becomes active* can images be transformed on the basis of it: *innumerable, immeasurable, almost imperceptible changes* occur in their nucleus. And in this way, the completion of the particular originates from the fullness of psychic life” (GS 6: 175 / SW V: 104). Completion thus requires this relation to the whole of life, to the acquired psychic nexus, in order for its transformation of an image to be essential and meaningful.

The image as it is present within everyday life is already in relation to the whole of life through our acquired experience, although this relation is implicit and indeterminate. The artist transforms these images from everyday life so that they express their relation to the whole more explicitly. As the relation is already implicit in our everyday experience, the artist’s transformation is not imposed or external to the image, but instead reveals the depth and breadth of relations that were already present. This connection to the whole allows the work of art to affect its audience. The shared meaning of human experience resonates with us. Moreover, just as the acquired psychic nexus is not a static structure for experience but formed and transformed through time, so the formation and transformation of images is not a single act. Dilthey describes the work of art as unfolding from its nucleus as if it is alive. The formation of images is “a living process” (GS 6: 176 / SW V: 105).

From these relations between the acquired psychic nexus—which describes the totality of our conscious experience, its processes of formation, and the metamorphosis of life—we can see the intimate relation between everyday life and art in Dilthey’s aesthetics. Dilthey does not separate artistic creation and aesthetic

experience from the processes of our everyday experience; instead, “the *substratum of poetic creativity* was sought in the processes that develop our sphere of experience” (GS 6: 185 / SW V: 115). Art thus bears witness to what is already aesthetic about life by articulating the inner transformations that constitute our experience and thought and drawing out their meaning. The acquired psychic nexus grounds and gives substance to the transformative power of imagination.

Dilthey uses the acquired psychic nexus to explain the dynamics between the artist’s imagination and their lived experience, as well as the individual artist’s style and the larger cultural context and art movements to which they belong. In Dilthey’s *Poetics*, style is both an expression of the artist’s individual lived experience as well as the more general art movements of the time that manifest their socio-historical context. Style expresses art’s transformation of lived experience according to the individual artist. An artist may favor or emphasize one process of imaginative metamorphosis (exclusion, intensification or diminution, and completion) over another, which determines the style of their work (GS 6: 177 / SW V 106). Even in the same art movement, one artist might favor intensification to produce a powerful emotional and psychological tension while another artist might utilize exclusion to create a graceful subtlety. Dilthey describes an individual artist’s style as a habit that is particular to them (GS 6: 176 / SW V 105). Yet we also discuss style in more general terms, especially insofar as a style may be more relevant to certain cultures or time periods than others. Makkreel notes that “Dilthey was sure that his proposed descriptive psychology could do justice not only to the ability of the poet to transform images creatively but also to the historical framework within which the poet must work.”<sup>24</sup> Style is particular to the individual artist, yet we also evaluate the place of an artist’s style in broader cultural, social, political, and historical contexts. We can identify an artist’s style as belonging to a circle in a very specific geographical setting, to the tastes and values of society at that time, to a particular art movement in history, or to a certain period’s notion of art. The imaginative metamorphoses that characterize an individual’s tendencies towards certain stylistic transformations also make the transformed image more general, more typical, and thus more expressive of human experience. For Dilthey, style mediates between the limits of historical contingency and the universal import of artistic creation.

Dilthey’s descriptive psychology uses the acquired psychic nexus to articulate the hermeneutic relations between the parts and whole of human experience—

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<sup>24</sup> Rudolf A. Makkreel, “Toward a Concept of Style: An Interpretation of Wilhelm Dilthey’s Psycho-Historical Account of the Imagination,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 27, no. 2 (1968): 173.

between everyday experiences and the totality of one's life, and between individuals' lives and the broader scope of human life that is expressed in history and culture. Here we can see the strength of Dilthey's account of poetic metamorphosis: the acquired psychic nexus roots the individual in both the concrete particularity of lived experience as well as the larger contexts of social and historical values—and the largest possible context, life as a whole. The acquired psychic nexus provides an account not of isolated subjective experience but of the confluence between the self and world without reducing the concrete particularity of the individual's experience to their context.<sup>25</sup>

While many of the relational dynamics that Dilthey describes in his aesthetic theory could be considered a contribution to contemporary hermeneutics, he did not present his aesthetics this way. The following section will explain the timeline for his development of hermeneutics, how it intersects with some of his writings on art, and why his general approach to aesthetics should be interpreted through hermeneutics.

### **Art and the Interpretation of Life**

Dilthey did not fully perceive the possible connections between hermeneutics and aesthetics in his own work, although there are glimmers of recognition scattered across his writings. Dilthey's hermeneutical method was still in its early stages of development when he wrote his *Poetics* and *Three Epochs of Modern Aesthetics*.<sup>26</sup> In his *Poetics*, Dilthey notes that “[h]ermeneutics is also closely related to poetics” and explains that Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher had advanced hermeneutics “to the standpoint of the aesthetic contemplation of form” (GS 6: 124 / SW V: 52). However, Dilthey states that neither poetics nor hermeneutics had progressed very far because their formal analysis approached language as a fixed system rather than a living process (GS 6: 124–25 / SW V 52–53). Dilthey's later hermeneutic writings aim to overcome the limitations he found in Schleiermacher's formalism by connecting hermeneutics to life philosophy and exploring the interpretation of meaning across many different

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<sup>25</sup> As Charles R. Bambach explains, “Dilthey claimed that it is not the transcendental, transhistorical, and transcultural ‘self’ that experiences historical life but the vital, living, pulsating human being conditioned in its historical place and time” (*Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995], 149).

<sup>26</sup> Dilthey wrote *Schleiermacher's Hermeneutical System in Relation to Earlier Protestant Hermeneutics* in 1860 (GS 14 / SW IV), the first volume of the *Life of Schleiermacher* in 1870 (GS 13–14), and *The Rise of Hermeneutics* in 1900 (GS 5 / SW IV); however, he dramatically expanded the range of topics and methods of hermeneutics after 1900 in his *Drafts for a Critique of Historical Reason* (GS 7 / SW III).

manifestations (*Äußerungen*) and expressions (*Ausdrücke*) beyond language—including music, sculpture, painting, gestures, looks, actions, customs, and institutions.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, Dilthey's aesthetic writings continually present art as the great interpreter of life—a hermeneutic task in the contemporary sense of hermeneutics. In *Three Epochs of Aesthetics*, Dilthey declares that “the only real artist is one who can advance our ability to interpret reality” (GS 6: 276 / SW V: 211). *Fragments for a Poetics* (1907–1908), Dilthey's unfinished manuscript that was meant to revise his *Poetics*, demonstrates an attempt to redefine his earlier historical-psychological approach with one that is more oriented toward the meaning of art. As the translators explain in a footnote, “Dilthey intended to revise his *Poetics* to replace the subjective language of feeling and pleasure with the object-oriented language of lived experience, value, purpose, and meaning.”<sup>28</sup> In this manuscript, Dilthey argues that it is impossible to grasp lived experience in abstract concepts or categories, because life has its own inherent relations and meaning. “Lived experience generates its own expressions” (GS 6: 319 / SW V: 229). Throughout his aesthetic writings, Dilthey emphasizes that life requires interpretation and art helps us access its meaning.

Situating Dilthey's aesthetics within his life philosophy further draws out its hermeneutic dimensions because of the way he describes our relation to life.<sup>29</sup> For Dilthey, we are immersed in life and cannot extricate ourselves to look at it from the outside. Life has its own meaningfulness. In “Life and Cognition” (1892–1893), Dilthey explains that the “expression ‘life’ formulates what is most familiar and most intimate to everyone, yet at the same time something most obscure, indeed totally inscrutable. What life is remains an insoluble riddle. All reflection, inquiry, and thought arise from this inscrutable [source]. All cognition is rooted in this never fully cognizable [ground]” (GS 19: 346 / SW II: 72).<sup>30</sup> What is closest to us—life—is furthest from our understanding. As Dilthey puts it, *das Leben legt sich aus* (GS 19: 345 / SW II: 70), which Theodore Kisiel interprets as “Life lays itself out, it articulates itself,

<sup>27</sup> See Michael N. Forster, “Dilthey's Importance for Hermeneutics,” in *Interpreting Dilthey: Critical Essays*, ed. Eric S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 61–81.

<sup>28</sup> Footnote in Dilthey, “Fragments for a Poetics” in SW V: 228. Dilthey critiques his earlier psychological approach when he states that the “[gathering together and completing of lived experience] is more basic and more natural than the move to psychology. Lived experience obtains an expression, which represents it in its fullness: It brings out something new. It neither utilizes nor in any way requires psychological concepts” (GS 6: 317 / SW V: 228).

<sup>29</sup> See Jos de Mul, *The Tragedy of Finitude: Dilthey's Hermeneutics of Life*, trans. Tony Burret (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), especially 118–21.

<sup>30</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *Understanding the Human World* (SW II); *Grundlegung der Wissenschaften vom Menschen, der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte* (GS 19).

it interprets itself.”<sup>31</sup> This means that life must be interpreted from out of itself, rather than by applying concepts from the outside. Interpreting life from life itself is a hermeneutical task. Dilthey paints life as an “insoluble riddle” that resists clear and distinct concepts—the traditional philosophical methods that presuppose humans are a *res cogitans* that stands apart from the world as a detached spectator. Since we are wrapped up in the very thing we want to examine, we cannot understand it through abstract concepts or principles.<sup>32</sup>

Yet Dilthey thinks that life can be described. He explains that life’s “particular characteristic traits can be set in relief. One can trace, as it were, the accents and rhythms of the melody it arouses, but life cannot be analyzed into its factors. It is unanalyzable” (GS 19: 346 / SW II: 72). For Dilthey, reflecting on and understanding life in its depth will not lead to a definite meaning, but instead a sense of life (*Sinn des Lebens*).<sup>33</sup> We cannot pin down life with determined ideas or frameworks and instead must trace its contours like music. While music is a metaphor here, Dilthey frequently turns to artistic expression to understand life.<sup>34</sup> Art has a special role in the interpretation of life from life itself.

Throughout his aesthetic writings, Dilthey emphasizes the ability of the artist to interpret life and find expression for its meaning. Art makes life more tangible, more deeply felt, and more meaningful. As Richard Unger notes, “It is Dilthey’s premise that our fundamental experience of life is communicated most immediately and thus most accurately through art and especially poetry.”<sup>35</sup> Art has this power, moreover, because it cannot be reduced to concepts, ideas, or propositions. In his *Poetics*, Dilthey explains that a work of art “always contains more than can be expressed in a general proposition, and its gripping force comes from this surplus” (GS 6: 206 / SW V: 137). A work of art is never reducible to one impression or one interpretation. Like a lived experience, it has a surplus of meaning.<sup>36</sup> Dilthey states that “the lived experience of

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<sup>31</sup> Theodore Kisiel, “On the Genesis of Heidegger’s Formally Indicative Hermeneutics of Facticity,” in *Rethinking Facticity*, ed. François Raffoul and Eric Sean Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 43.

<sup>32</sup> Heidegger echoes this very dynamic and explicitly describes it as a hermeneutic circle in *Being and Time*.

<sup>33</sup> Makkreel, *Dilthey*, 377.

<sup>34</sup> For an explanation of music’s ability to express the rhythm of life, see Michael Batz, *Der Rhythmus des Lebens: Zur Rolle der Musik im Werk Wilhelm Diltheys* (Würzburg, Germany: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011).

<sup>35</sup> Richard Unger, *Friedrich Hölderlin* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 128.

<sup>36</sup> For a longer account of why excessive meaning is important to hermeneutical aesthetics, see Catherine Homan, *A Hermeneutics of Poetic Education: The Play of the In-Between* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020).

the poet and its unnerving symbols constitute a dramatic core that cannot be expressed in any proposition. . . everything comes together into a graphic, felt unity of the deepest life-experiences, and that is precisely the significance of poetry” (GS 6: 208 / SW V: 139). Like life, art must be experienced. For Dilthey, art has the same relational dynamics as life itself.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

Dilthey’s desire to ground aesthetic theory in historical and cultural contexts, the relational dynamics in his descriptive psychology, his revision of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics to include nonlinguistic expressions like music and the visual arts, and his understanding of art as a way of interpreting life from life itself all illustrate how his aesthetic theory can be read through contemporary hermeneutical aesthetics. Dilthey’s concept of poetic metamorphosis relies upon relating particulars to the whole of life, and yet individual lived experience remains significant and meaningful in and of itself. Art moves us because of its relation to our everyday lived experiences and to life as a whole. Thus, understanding art requires that we continually move from particulars to universals and back again. Dilthey’s descriptive psychology allows this possibility through the acquired psychic nexus, which articulates the hermeneutic dynamics that shape every aspect of lived experience. The acquired psychic nexus describes the individual’s life as a whole, while remaining grounded in singular life events, as well as the social, cultural, and historical contexts to which the individual belongs.

Like Heidegger, Gadamer, Eugene Fink, Paul Ricœur, and other figures in twentieth-century hermeneutics, for Dilthey the work of art opens a hermeneutic circle that speaks to our lives and human existence in general. In this way, Dilthey’s aesthetics can contribute to contemporary hermeneutics in terms of his articulation of the complex, paradoxical dynamics involved in the interpretation of everyday life.

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<sup>37</sup> I give a more thorough account of this aspect of art in Longtin, “From Factual Life to Art.” See also Giovanni Matteucci, *Dilthey: Das Ästhetische als Relation* (Würzburg, Germany: Königshausen & Neumann, 2004).

## **Beauty, Emergent Order, and Truth: Gadamer's Aesthetics and Its Platonic Resonances**

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### **Introduction**

In this article I present a brief overview of Hans-Georg Gadamer's aesthetics and consider the importance of Plato's notion of the beautiful and Platonic and Pythagorean conceptions of order that he draws upon. I examine the role of beauty, truth, harmony, and order that we find in Gadamer's aesthetics and consider his account of aesthetic truth and how this relates to self-understanding. Gadamer's hermeneutics and aesthetics have an important practical impetus that informs our being in the world. I explore the role that the beautiful plays in Gadamer's presentational approach to his aesthetics and briefly consider its connection to the good. I conclude that Gadamer provides a dynamic and practical way of applying Platonic and classical Greek perspectives in a contemporary context.

### **The Transition from Plato's Metaphysical Views to Aesthetics**

In "The Relevance of the Beautiful," Gadamer considers the background of the understanding of the beautiful in Greek thought. He explains that we should recall that "for the Greeks it was the heavenly order of the cosmos that presented the true

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<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by the Icelandic Research Fund, grant number 207185–051. I want to thank an anonymous reviewer of the journal and Catherine Homan for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of the article.

vision of the beautiful,” which he relates to the Pythagorean element in the Greek concept of the beautiful.<sup>2</sup> According to Gadamer, in the regular movements of the cosmos, in the periodic cycles of the year, and in the oscillation between day and night, there is a reliable experience of order that stands in contrast to the uncertainty and instability of human matters. Gadamer maintains from this point of view, especially in relation to Plato’s thought, the beautiful can shed significant light on the aesthetic issues that Gadamer is considering. He then goes on to recount Plato’s mythological account of the chariot race found in the *Phaedrus*, which involves a vision of true reality that is revealed at the vault of the heavens. As Gadamer explains, in contrast to our disorderly and changing world on earth, this is an experience through which “we perceive the true constants and unchanging patterns of being.”<sup>3</sup> Whereas the gods totally surrender to this sight of the true and eternal world, human souls become sidetracked because of their disorderly nature. Humans are only able to have a brief glimpse of this true reality due to sensuous desires clouding their vision and they then fall back to earth and have only a vague recollection of it. Gadamer goes on to highlight the point that these souls have figuratively lost their wings, as they are burdened by earthly concerns and so they are unable to ascend to the heights of truth. It is only the experience “of love and the beautiful, the love of the beautiful,” that will cause their wings to regrow so that they may ascend again.<sup>4</sup> Gadamer writes: “It is by virtue of the beautiful that we are able to acquire a lasting remembrance of the true world. This is the way of philosophy. Plato describes the beautiful as that which shines forth most clearly and draws us to itself, as the very visibility of the ideal. In the beautiful presented in nature and art, we experience this convincing illumination of truth and harmony, which compels the admission: ‘This is true.’”<sup>5</sup> Here we can see an example of the importance of Plato’s conceptions for Gadamer’s aesthetic thought. In this case the experience of an intensified experience of reality, which for Plato takes the form of a mythological metaphysical vision, now finds its way into aesthetic experience for Gadamer. In Gadamer’s view, aesthetics has taken over the role of metaphysics in contemporary thought, and this is an example of this transition within his own aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> I understand this to mean that art replaces metaphysics as an eminent form

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<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 15.

<sup>4</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 15.

<sup>5</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 15.

<sup>6</sup> Gadamer writes, “I believe that the arts, taken as a whole, quietly govern the metaphysical heritage of our Western tradition” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings*, ed.

of truth, so that, for example, rather than relating to an ideal and eternal truth that is found in another world,<sup>7</sup> the work of art or an eminent text in the humanities has a type of temporal permanency that is maintained through time and supports the intensified experience of truth in the here and now. This fosters the emergence of truth that is experienced more dynamically through the experience of art than through how metaphysics is traditionally understood. We could say that amid the everyday, works of art can potentially be beacons of truth and insight. According to Gadamer, the point of Plato's account is not that the essence of the beautiful lies somewhere other than in our reality, but rather that truth can be experienced within the midst of our disorderly reality with all of its imperfections and confusions. As Gadamer puts it: "The ontological function of the beautiful is to bridge the chasm between the ideal and the real."<sup>8</sup> Gadamer's point is that the beautiful appears within its presentations and is an experience of order and harmony in the here and now.<sup>9</sup> A work of art does not point beyond itself, but rather is a presentation of truth in its sensual abundance. Similar to his conception of a symbol, which for Gadamer is a fragment that provides a relation to a greater whole, the experience of the beautiful, especially in art, "is the invocation of a potentially whole and holy order of things, wherever it may be found."<sup>10</sup> According to Gadamer, the beautiful has its own light and radiance. What distinguishes it from the intangible good is that the beautiful is visible. The experience of the beautiful can expand our horizons, which Gadamer likens to a new light that is turned on.<sup>11</sup> Gadamer draws upon metaphysical understandings of the beautiful but

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Richard E. Palmer [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007], 195). Gadamer remarks that his interest in the humanities was based on how they engaged with art and their openness and sensitivity to it.

<sup>7</sup> This is a view often associated with Plato, but for Gadamer Plato is not a two-world Platonist.

<sup>8</sup> Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful," 15.

<sup>9</sup> Aryeh Kosman maintains that for Plato appearances are not separate from being, but rather present what is to subjects ("Beauty and the Good: Situating the *Kalon*," *Classical Philology* 105, no. 4 [2010]: 354). Thus, appearances are not inherently deceptive for Plato, but rather only if there is "a failure in uptake" (354). Kosman also points to the connection between beauty and appearances, and that beauty relates to what appears well. Note that "beautiful" is the translation of the Greek term *kalon*. Kosman provides an account of the differences between our modern notion of beauty and the Greek word *kalon* and the challenges of translating *kalon* and capturing the subtleties of it. *Kalon* has also been translated, for example, as "noble" and "fine," and has connections to the moral, the good, and the appearance of being. Of note, for Gadamer too, the beautiful reveals what is, and is not a mere appearance, both in his interpretation of Plato and how he applies the beautiful to his hermeneutics and aesthetics. The connection between being and appearances that Kosman and Gadamer find in Plato through the beautiful differs from traditional views of Plato as a disparager of appearances that are separated from reality.

<sup>10</sup> Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful," 32.

<sup>11</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 480.

distances his views from them to support a probabilistic notion of truth applicable to hermeneutical experience, one that is different from scientific notions of truth.<sup>12</sup>

### Order, Mimesis, and Tarrying

Let us further consider how Gadamer makes use of Greek conceptions of the orderly nature of the cosmos and Plato's mythological metaphysical vision of the true world and relates this to his own aesthetic views. In "Art and Imitation," Gadamer draws upon the Pythagorean conception of order, which involves the order of the cosmos, music, and soul. This imitation is based on the imitation of number, which Gadamer understands not as these things striving for numerical exactness, but rather as "simply the fact that there is a numerical order at work in all of them. For upon this depends every other kind of order. So it was that Plato made the correct observance and unadulterated preservation of musical order the basis for the order of human life in the polis."<sup>13</sup> When Gadamer turns to apply the ancient approach of order to his own aesthetic views, he asks "whether we do not in fact experience order in art of every kind, however extravagant its manifestations."<sup>14</sup> This is quite a striking contention, particularly given that Gadamer is considering modern non-objective art. Gadamer reflects on the difficulties of relating traditional aesthetic conceptions such as mimesis to modern non-objective art in which many of its outstanding representatives reject the expectations with which we approach art. Gadamer considers, for example, that whereas traditional art involves the imitation and idealization of nature, modern art moves beyond this.<sup>15</sup> Given the groundbreaking and experimental nature of modern art, this makes it challenging to understand it using traditional aesthetic notions. Nevertheless, despite such issues, Gadamer finds a role for mimesis and order in modern art. However, Gadamer disassociates this experience of order in modern art from the order of nature and the cosmos that previously served as exemplars, the mythological interpretation of our experience, and the familiar things of our world. In Gadamer's account, these are vanishing in our modern world, and he discusses the

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<sup>12</sup> Gadamer makes connections between the evidentness of the beautiful and the tradition of rhetoric to develop a conception in which "what is evident has not been proved and is not absolutely certain, but it asserts itself by reason of its own merit within the realm of the possible and probable" (*Truth and Method*, 479).

<sup>13</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Art and Imitation," in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 102.

<sup>14</sup> Gadamer, "Art and Imitation," 102.

<sup>15</sup> Gadamer, "Art and Imitation," 94–95.

impact of industrialization in relation to this. Nevertheless, Gadamer still finds that a notion of order is applicable to art: “Every work of art still resembles a thing as it once was insofar as its existence illuminates and testifies to order as a whole. Perhaps this order is not one that we can harmonize with our own conceptions of order, but that which once united the familiar things of a familiar world. Nevertheless, there is in every work of art an ever new and powerful testimony to a spiritual energy that generates order.”<sup>16</sup> In Gadamer’s view, it is not relevant whether art is objective or non-objective, but rather that “we encounter a spiritual and ordering energy in the work.”<sup>17</sup> For Gadamer, a work of art brings forth a new order and he understands mimesis as the presentation of order. Although Gadamer utilizes a conception of mimesis, this is not of the manner of an imperfect copy of an original, but rather is a dynamic presentation of truth that involves transformation.<sup>18</sup> As Gadamer understands mimesis, it “has nothing to do with the mere imitation of something that is already familiar to us,” but rather is represented in a manner “that it is actually present in sensuous abundance”<sup>19</sup> and brings out possibilities never seen previously.<sup>20</sup> Through mimesis we experience what is true and essential and understand ourselves in new ways. Mimesis involves the recognition of whomever is represented, and also involves self-recognition.<sup>21</sup> Although Aristotle is important for Gadamer’s account of recognition,<sup>22</sup> Gadamer associates recognition with grasping something in its essence, which he says is “the central motif of Platonism. In his theory of anamnesis Plato combined the mythical idea of remembrance with his dialectic, which sought the truth of being in the *logoi*—i.e., the ideality of language.”<sup>23</sup> Through recognition we experience the essential, leaving aside what is unessential.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Gadamer, “Art and Imitation,” 103.

<sup>17</sup> Gadamer, “Art and Imitation,” 103.

<sup>18</sup> See Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful”; Daniel L. Tate, “Transforming *Mimesis*: Gadamer’s Retrieval of Aristotle’s *Poetics*,” *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 13 no. 1 (2008): 185–208; Robert J. Dostal, “Gadamer’s Platonism: His Recovery of Mimesis and Anamnesis,” in *Consequences of Hermeneutics: Fifty Years after “Truth and Method”*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Santiago Zabala (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 45–65; William Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections: A Study in Hermeneutics, Theology, and Ethics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 36.

<sup>20</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Festive Character of Theater,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64.

<sup>21</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 113.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle is important for Gadamer’s account of mimesis and recognition (see Gadamer, “Art and Imitation,” 97–101; Tate, “Transforming Mimesis”).

<sup>23</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 113. Gadamer references *Phaedo* 73ff.

<sup>24</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 114.

For Gadamer, the experience of art is an intensified experience that is more real than our ordinary understanding and involves an “increase of being.”<sup>25</sup> However, the insight gained from such experience is still related back to our everyday experience and can transform us. This can be contrasted with aesthetic perspectives that understand the work of art as abstracted from the ordinary world and reality, which Gadamer criticizes. Gadamer is concerned about viewpoints that limit aesthetics to subjective and merely momentary experience, leaving the experience of art unrelated to the experiential flow of one’s life. For Gadamer, there is truth in the experience of art. It is not just a matter of subjective feeling or opinion. As we tarry with or contemplate a work of art, we may enter into a different sense of time than our ordinary practical and calculative notion of time based on having time to do something, time that is at our disposal and needs to be filled. Gadamer calls this empty time and explains that we can move between the extremes of boredom and frantic efforts to fill such time. Gadamer contrasts this with what he calls “fulfilled” or “autonomous” time, such as we experience at a festival, in which time becomes festive when the festival arrives. In such experiences our ordinary purposes are curtailed for a time and time passes differently. According to Gadamer, festivals arrest time and allow time to tarry, and our ordinary manner of disposing time comes to a standstill.<sup>26</sup> Gadamer transfers this understanding of time over to art more generally and each work of art has its own temporality that it imposes upon us. When we tarry with a work of art, new insights can arise, and Gadamer describes how tarrying in this manner is possibly the only way that we as finite beings have “to relate to what we call

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<sup>25</sup> In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer distinguishes between a mere copy that points back to an original and a picture or image through which an original appears and involves an “increase of being” (135, emphasis in original). The point here is that there is something productive and creative that occurs as new possibilities are elicited from the work of art through its presentations. Gadamer connects Plato’s views with a copy and the difference between a copy and the original and criticizes him for this, and so does not associate Plato’s views with an increase of being. Gadamer also criticizes Plato regarding notions of a copy that he finds in relation to Plato’s dialogue the *Cratylus* and language as well (406–17). However, this changes in his later thought. For example, according to Robert J. Dostal, Gadamer “implicitly aligns Plato with his own treatment of image (*Bild*) in *Truth and Method*, in which the presentation of mimesis is always at the same time a transformation” (“Gadamer’s Platonism,” 55). Dostal explains that Gadamer modulates the legacy of Plato and Aristotle, such as how mimesis is not merely reproductive but productive and involves a transformation, temporalizing Plato and Aristotle, prioritizing practice, and embracing Martin Heidegger’s notion of truth as revealing or unconcealing (58). See Dostal, “Gadamer’s Platonism,” for an account of Gadamer’s interpretation of Plato in relation to his notions of copy, image, mimesis, anamnesis, art, and tensions in Gadamer’s positions. See Tate, “Transforming Mimesis,” for an account of Gadamer’s notion of mimesis and the importance of Aristotle for it.

<sup>26</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 42.

eternity.”<sup>27</sup> However, for Gadamer this is an intensified form of temporal experience rather than an atemporal one, giving a modern take on the “eternal.” The experience of art is something we are absorbed in, and Gadamer explains: “It is more like a tarrying that waits and preserves in such a way that the work of art is allowed to come forth than it is like something we have done.”<sup>28</sup> In my view, although tarrying is not something we have done or a willful accomplishment, we still need to attune ourselves to tarry with an artwork, rather than, for example, being lost in our purposeful thoughts or inattentiveness. We need to work at being open to a work of art so that we can be receptive to what it has to say to us. According to Gadamer: “To tarry is not to lose time. Being in the mode of tarrying is like an intensive back-and-forth conversation that is not cut off but lasts until it is ended.”<sup>29</sup> Dialogue and language are two crucial aspects of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, and he has a broad conception of language that includes what is not literally spoken. Meanings arise dynamically within language as we engage and attend to a work of art, and new implications emerge as we contemplate and participate with a work of art and unfold some of its latent possibilities. Through this, we recognize ourselves in new ways. By becoming open to the otherness of a work of art and in the play between ourselves and the work, possibilities for meanings are opened up and we may transcend ourselves.

### **Transformation into Structure, Play, and the Dynamic Emergence of New Orders**

The experience of a work of art brings into focus something that is ordinarily hidden from view. As Gadamer explains his notion of transformation into structure, it is “transformation back into true being. In being presented in play, what is emerges. It produces and brings to light what is otherwise constantly hidden and withdrawn.”<sup>30</sup> An intensified truth is experienced through the work of art and stands within the work of art, and which may positively inform our everyday reality. This is an experience of truth that is not limited to conceptuality, and a work of art is not something we stand back from and view objectively, but rather participate in.

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<sup>27</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 45.

<sup>28</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 211.

<sup>29</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 211.

<sup>30</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 112.

Let us briefly turn to consider Gadamer's notion of play.<sup>31</sup> The experience of play is at one time serious and yet playful. We are immersed in a game that takes us beyond ourselves. When we encounter a work of art there is a play between us and the artwork, an experience that moves beyond the dichotomy of a detached subject facing an abstract aesthetic object. Rather, we are taken up in the play and game of the experience of a work of art. Play is undertaken for its own sake rather than for an outside purpose. For Gadamer, the experience of truth, which also applies to his aesthetics, is something that happens to us rather than being something that we consciously control; it is a dynamic event of being.

The reception of a work of art is a participatory experience of truth. Gadamer, drawing upon Plato's *Phaedrus*, remarks on the ecstatic state of being outside of oneself, which is not a form of madness, and which he relates to being completely with something else.<sup>32</sup> We step out of our ordinary experience and transcend ourselves. We experience other possibilities and come back to ourselves more authentically. The experience of art is a potentially transformative experience that involves self-recognition, through which we can expand our horizons. An artwork has an essential aspect that is removed from its contingent origins and persists through time and can inform different contexts. For example, Gadamer says that the play of art "has a claim to permanence and the permanence of a claim."<sup>33</sup> Art has a lasting claim to contemporaneity that can be concretized as needed. Gadamer also maintains that there is an "absolute presentness of art to all times and places," and that art has a "superiority over time, a superiority that defies all restrictions."<sup>34</sup> There is an ideal element in art to which we can orient ourselves. This can potentially inform our way of being in the world, and through artistic presentations and our interpretations we participate in and bring about the work's realization. Art helps us recognize something we know with fresh eyes, and through this we achieve insight and greater continuity with ourselves. However, for Gadamer, and in this he is following Martin Heidegger, the truth we experience in art will always involve a revealing and concealing.<sup>35</sup> The work of art will continue to shelter additional insights and mysteries, which may be brought out by subsequent interpretation, although understanding will never be complete. In Gadamer's view, we are finite beings and there are limits to our understanding, but through art we experience truth.

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<sup>31</sup> See Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful"; *Truth and Method*.

<sup>32</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 122.

<sup>33</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 123.

<sup>34</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 199, 200.

<sup>35</sup> Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful," 34.

Although Gadamer is inspired by ancient Greek conceptions of order, his emphasis is on the dynamic emergence of new orders, which stresses the productive aspect of this process. Rather than merely approximating or copying an existing order, measured and harmonious orders dynamically appear and emerge through the beautiful. Given the lack of common cultural mythology and symbols in the contemporary world, a work of art can potentially introduce new orders and meanings. According to Gadamer: “The artist no longer speaks for the community, but forms his own community insofar as he expresses himself. Nevertheless, he does create a community, and in principle, this truly universal community (*oikumene*) extends to the whole world. In fact, all artistic creation challenges each of us to listen to the language in which the work of art speaks and to make it our own.”<sup>36</sup> Here we can see that not only does the artist form a new type of community through their artwork, but that an important aspect of Gadamer’s aesthetics lies in how we each experience the work of art and apply it to ourselves. Given that, as we have seen, the essence of a work of art lies in its testifying to order, such an order is taken up and creatively extended in its reception. This can be seen as a variation of the overall importance of dialogue and the relation to a greater whole in Gadamer’s thought. According to John Arthos, for Gadamer, art manifests “the fullest realization of the reciprocity of self, world, being, and history.”<sup>37</sup> The experience of art is a dynamic experience of relationality that informs our being in the world. We will now turn to further explore Gadamer’s account of the creation of a work of art and its reception.

### The Creation of the Work of Art and Its Reception

Let us start by briefly considering how Gadamer understands the creation of a work of art. Gadamer highlights that the artist is a discoverer rather than a creator, yet also emphasizes the newness of the work of art: “The modern artist is less a creator than a discoverer of the as yet unseen, the inventor of the previously unimagined that only emerges into reality through him.”<sup>38</sup> Gadamer draws attention to the Greek word *poesis*, which he explains has a double meaning. The first sense is that it is to make or produce something that did not exist previously, which covers the realm of handicraft and industrial production. The work of art is different from being the product of a *techné*

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<sup>36</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 39.

<sup>37</sup> John Arthos, *Gadamer’s Poetics: A Critique of Modern Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), ix.

<sup>38</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Speechless Image,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 91.

such as this, and Gadamer points to a second sense of *poesis* that relates to the art of composing poetry, which he connects with what he calls the “making of a ‘text.’ In this making whole worlds are able to rise out of nothingness, and nonbeing comes to be being. This is almost more than making.”<sup>39</sup> Gadamer explains that making generally involves the use of concrete materials, which the craftsman uses. However, Gadamer says that “Mnemosyne [goddess of memory, mother of the nine Muses], however, does not need these.”<sup>40</sup> Whereas the pictorial arts need concrete material to make a picture, “poetry appears to exist only in the airy breath of language and in the miracle of memory.”<sup>41</sup> Gadamer explains that poetry and music are like they are not made from matter, and it is only secondary when poetry is fixed in writing and music becomes a score. It is necessary that the written texts come to be spoken and heard, and Gadamer notes that the German word *schöpferisch* (creative) signifies this, explaining that this word “retains an echo of the religious concept of the Creation, which was not making in the sense of making an object by hand. In the beginning was the word, the *verbum creans*—the creating word.”<sup>42</sup> Here we can see resonances of the religious and divine in relation to memory and the creative word that Gadamer associates with poetic creation, which almost seems to be a type of creation out of nothingness. For Gadamer, art takes on a quasi-religious role,<sup>43</sup> and he remarks that through artistic performance “we encounter the work itself, as the divine is encountered in the religious rite.”<sup>44</sup>

In contrast to handiwork (which is made for some purpose), the work of art is made by the artist “for itself and is there only to be contemplated.”<sup>45</sup> An artistic creation is not something that one makes per se, but rather something that comes through one, and what comes forth in a work of art cannot be captured by words. As Gadamer puts it, “‘it comes forth,’” which one has never experienced in exactly the same way before; for example, a portrait illuminates something new as if one had never

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<sup>39</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 201.

<sup>40</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 201, bracketed material in original.

<sup>41</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 201.

<sup>42</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 202.

<sup>43</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 15.

<sup>44</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 115. According to Donatella Di Cesare, “Gadamer evokes religious overtones when he describes the majesty or solemnity of art, the way in which art ‘emerges’ like the divine, the event that resembles that of worship, the contemporaneity that distinguishes it and the ecstatic immersion of those who are swept away by it, as well as the sacred communion that art founds” (*Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, trans. Niall Keane [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013], 62-63).

<sup>45</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 202.

seen the person in this way.<sup>46</sup> In art there is the presentation of something essential; this is not merely an imitation, but revelatory, a process in which aspects are left out and others heightened.<sup>47</sup>

Both the performance of a work of art and how viewers participate in it are important for Gadamer. The work of art reaches its fulfillment through its appearance or performance,<sup>48</sup> and participation in the experience of art. Gadamer resists approaches that objectify art and seek to excessively use scientific methodology, which in his view should remain secondary as it takes away from the encounter with a work of art.<sup>49</sup> According to Gadamer, the work remains the same work, even if we encounter it in new and different ways. He maintains that the work of art has a center akin to a living organism in that some things may be added or removed and changed, but a central aspect must be left intact and is an “internally structured unity” and has an “autonomous temporality.”<sup>50</sup> Gadamer points to what he calls the “hermeneutic identity” of an artwork and says that a work of art is something to be understood and that it “issues a challenge which expects to be met. It requires an answer—an answer that can only be given by someone who accepted the challenge.”<sup>51</sup> According to Gadamer, this is an answer that one must supply on one’s own and be taken up actively, so we become a participant in the play of art. Gadamer explains that we must learn how to see a work of art and hear music,<sup>52</sup> and that there is a type of leeway in the experience of art that each person needs to fill in themselves.<sup>53</sup> However, the possibilities that emerge are not merely subjective conceptions, but relate to the being of the work.<sup>54</sup> An example of the cooperative role we play in the experience of art is found in what Gadamer calls the “inner ear,” which is an experience of moving past the contingency of what takes place before us through a type of intellectual and spiritual effort that leads to an experience of an ideal creation.<sup>55</sup> Gadamer also gives an example of how the viewer of a painting seeks the correct distance from it, and the viewer of sculpture or architecture must go around it and view it from many different distances and viewpoints, to find where “it” comes forth, which is not one’s own

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<sup>46</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 216.

<sup>47</sup> See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 114.

<sup>48</sup> According to Gadamer: “Art has its ‘being’ in the *Vollzug*—the vital, living event of its appearing, or its performance” (*The Gadamer Reader*, 215).

<sup>49</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 219.

<sup>50</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 43.

<sup>51</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 26.

<sup>52</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 217.

<sup>53</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 26.

<sup>54</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 117.

<sup>55</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 44.

standpoint.<sup>56</sup> Here we can see that we need to attune ourselves to the work of art. He also relates learning to listen to art to the need to move beyond what he calls the “universal levelling process,” which in his view is encouraged by our culture, which sends forth progressively powerful stimuli that inhibit us from noticing anything.<sup>57</sup> New and unique insights and possibilities may arise when we listen to and experience a work of art. The work of art has the potential to be a vehicle for truth and self-transformation.

### Beauty, Order, and Harmony

As we have seen, the beautiful plays a role of bringing forth reality and the ideal into appearance, and in the *Phaedrus* myth, Plato mentions the difficulty of remembering the true world.<sup>58</sup> According to Plato, justice and self-control and other admirable objects are obscured to the senses, and it is only the beautiful that is radiant. In the material world, beauty is unique in that it can be grasped through the clearest of our senses, with vision being the sharpest (250b–d). In a similar manner, the beauty of the work of art can shine forth and lead us to transformative insight. According to Daniel L. Tate, the harmonious proportion and symmetry that is associated with beauty within ancient Greek metaphysics are in Gadamer’s view true of all beauty so that “even if we can no longer ground the concept of beauty in the teleological order of being, he [Gadamer] nonetheless maintains that measure, proportion, and harmony are integral to the phenomenon of beauty.”<sup>59</sup> Gadamer explains that it is “the unique shining-forth of the beautiful that is the magic of art, whether it be in our seeing or our hearing, in our experiencing of the sculpture, poetry, or music.”<sup>60</sup> Gadamer associates the beautiful and the experience of art as involving a suspension of purposefulness.<sup>61</sup>

According to Gadamer, in the late dialogues of Plato the beautiful, truth, and the good come to the forefront and are sought within seeking the good life rather than through mathematical exactness, and he notes that in the *Philebus* the good is found

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<sup>56</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 214.

<sup>57</sup> Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” 36.

<sup>58</sup> Plato, “*Phaedrus*,” trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), 506–56.

<sup>59</sup> Daniel L. Tate, “Renewing the Question of Beauty: Gadamer on Plato’s Idea of the Beautiful,” *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2015): 32.

<sup>60</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 215.

<sup>61</sup> See Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 223.

within a right mixture of being and through the beautiful.<sup>62</sup> Gadamer also remarks on how in Plato's *Statesman* there are two kinds of measure, the first related to quantity and mathematics, the second related to doing what is appropriate.<sup>63</sup> In Gadamer's reading, this second form of measure and the mixture of being can be understood as a process of emergent becoming in which new harmonies arise. For example, the appropriate measure can be related to finding the "right" word in a conversation, which involves going beyond what is pre-given,<sup>64</sup> and dynamic harmonious and proportional structures that emerge through aesthetic experience and more generally in our lives.<sup>65</sup>

A work of art has a connection with its culture and is a pledge of order, and in its reception new potentials can arise from the experience of the depths of the work in new ways, as different aspects and harmonious possibilities are brought forth that relate to the measure of the work of art. However, harmony does not necessarily mean easy, and it involves both radical change and sameness.<sup>66</sup> There is a creative and dynamic element to bringing forth such harmonies in our lives. Gadamer explains that a single wrong note in music or in human relations disturbs the harmony and agreement, and although we cannot know what would have been appropriate, we do know that what is inappropriate has caused a disruption in the harmony.<sup>67</sup> Different harmonious possibilities may be brought forth creatively, beautiful harmonies that are in some sense good and true.

As we have seen, Gadamer explains that for the Greeks the orderliness of the cosmos was an exemplar for the type of order that stood above the disorderly sphere of human affairs. Gadamer remarks: "One hears again and again in the narrative of the *Timaeus* that human beings should learn to order the motions of their own soul

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<sup>62</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 204–205. In relation to this, Gadamer mentions how in the *Philebus* the good takes refuge in the beautiful, and that the good is grasped through beauty, truth, and proportion, which he maintains shows the importance for Plato that the good is beyond being and both one and many. He also draws attention to "the important point that it is in the 'measured' character of appearances that beauty presents itself" (*The Gadamer Reader*, 205).

<sup>63</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 114, 205.

<sup>64</sup> See James Risser, "Gadamer's Plato and the Task of Philosophy," in *Gadamer verstehen/Understanding Gadamer*, ed. Mirko Wischke and Michael Hofer (Darmstadt, Germany: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2003), 98-99.

<sup>65</sup> See Jessica Frazier, "Beautiful Structures: Gadamer on Beauty, Love, Faith, and the Nature of Value," *Transpositions: Theology, Imagination and the Arts*, 13 April 2015, <http://www.transpositions.co.uk/beautiful-structures-gadamer-on-beauty-love-faith-and-the-nature-of-value/>.

<sup>66</sup> See Frazier, "Beautiful Structures."

<sup>67</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 205–206.

while regarding the order of the cosmos.”<sup>68</sup> Gadamer is clearly inspired by a cosmological conception of order, as it appears in numerous of his works, and in relation to artworks he emphasizes the dynamic emergence of order. As has been discussed, art takes on the role of metaphysics in contemporary thought. An artist can potentially help improve our common lifeworld by bringing forth an insightful work of art that may encourage order and beauty in the world. In this process, how we understand the world may be challenged and disrupted when it does not live up to the truth and the possibilities that are presented through a work of art. For Gadamer, self-understanding is an adventure and there is a risk, as we do not know beforehand what may be transformed.

### Architecture, Harmony, and Order

Let us further consider how beauty, order, and harmony can be manifested in artistic practice. For example, in *Gadamer for Architects*, Paul Kidder points to the powerful feelings that Gadamer had as a child in relation to the experience of a special wooden floor in the family home to show “how profoundly the qualities of designed space can educate one’s sensibilities regarding order and value in the whole of life.”<sup>69</sup> Moments of inspiration may inspire for years to come.<sup>70</sup> Kidder draws upon the writing of Bill Hubbard Jr. to point to the role of important experiences of inspiration and epiphanies for architects. Kidder explains:

A person who has made a life in the world of architecture is someone in whose imagination such experiences loom large. He or she has been moved—perhaps early in life—by the power of design to bring order, or peace, or fascination to life. In design the world that ordinarily seems so random and scattered, so fleeting and derelict, is brought into an exact unity that heightens the vibrancy of its sensuous presence. Such epiphanies have inspired this person to take the steps necessary to be one who produces things with that kind of power, steps that mean entering communities—first

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<sup>68</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 192–93.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Kidder, *Gadamer for Architects* (London: Routledge, 2013), 89; see 24–25 for further information about Gadamer’s experience of the floor as a child.

<sup>70</sup> Kidder refers to Stephen Holl’s descriptions of “archetypal experience” in relation to moments of inspiration that may last for many years and serve as points of reference for design possibilities (*Gadamer for Architects*, 89).

of fellow students, then of colleagues—formed around similar experiences and inspirations.<sup>71</sup>

With their designs, architects have the potential to bring order into the world to uplift. These are inspirations that inform the greater community, both through the power of architectural design and the architects' interactions with others. And presumably artists more generally may potentially inspire others with their works of art, as do critics and viewers of works of art as they engage with and interpret artworks. For Gadamer, artworks manifest truth and order, and help encourage us to see the world anew. And actually, it is quite possible that with Gadamer's overall approach of cultivating ourselves (*Bildung*) and learning to listen and enter into respectful and genuine dialogue with goodwill, we may not only cultivate self-understanding, but potentially inspire greater harmony and order in ourselves and the community at large.

Let us briefly consider Gadamer's account of architecture, as I think it provides a helpful bridge between aesthetic experience and the more tangible and purposeful experience of the everyday world. Gadamer explains that architecture is not pure art, as buildings serve purposes and are in the midst of our daily activities. However, Gadamer also says that buildings such as a church, city hall, or sometimes even a department store or railroad station can be called "architectural monuments."<sup>72</sup> According to Gadamer, architecture is different from other forms of art in that its purposefulness is built into it; as Gadamer explains: "A building has a pre-given connection with its surroundings with which it has to harmonize. The effect that will be caused by the space is co-intended."<sup>73</sup> I think buildings are interesting examples due to their "in-between" state between purposefulness and art, and their harmonization with the world around them. Gadamer explains how a building "emerges as an artwork only when, in the middle of its use, something wonderful shines forth, as with everything that is beautiful. This experience causes us to pause in the midst of our purposeful doing, for example in a room of a church, or in a stairwell, when suddenly we stand there and remain entranced."<sup>74</sup> In the middle of our everyday activities, we experience a sudden aesthetic insight. In Gadamer's account, this does not necessarily mean that our purposefulness is forgotten, but rather that such "an aesthetically significant staircase can play an enhancing role in the fulfillment of one's life."<sup>75</sup> Here

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<sup>71</sup> Kidder, *Gadamer for Architects*, 90, referencing Bill Hubbard Jr., *A Theory for Practice: Architecture in Three Discourses* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 9.

<sup>72</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 221.

<sup>73</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 222.

<sup>74</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 221.

<sup>75</sup> Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 221.

we can see that when our ordinary purposefulness is diminished, at least for a time, this can give way to a sense of intensified aesthetic experience that is potentially transformative and life-enhancing. An experience of the beautiful and aesthetic insight may suddenly come forth. We are moved beyond our ordinary purposefulness and sense of time and tarry with an artwork and its autonomous time. Whether this happens through going to an art museum or a festival, or even spontaneously appears through an experience of an aesthetically significant aspect of a building, there is a transition to a more contemplative and participatory state that transforms our self-understanding. Such experiences not only affect us, but presumably may inform our interactions with others. Art has the potential to emanate its influence into the everyday world. Art is not separate from the world but is a pledge of order that can inform the world, and through the experience of works of art we can bring new meanings and possibilities into the community.

### **The Beautiful, the Good, and Continuity with Ourselves**

Although the experience of art is a dynamic event of understanding that happens to us, we play a constructive role in such experiences. As we have seen in respect to cultivating our “inner ear,” we can move beyond the contingent towards the ideal aspects of a work of art. We have also considered how the beautiful relates to the good. The beautiful manifests itself aesthetically, but Gadamer’s understanding of beauty is not restricted to aesthetic considerations in a limited sense. Gadamer’s aesthetics involves a relation to the social world, and beauty is connected with truth and the good. Artworks have the possibility of opening up beautiful and good possibilities, which has practical and ethical implications. Artworks educate us and play an important role in forming our community.<sup>76</sup>

In Gadamer’s hermeneutics, he encourages listening to the other, mutual respect, and solidarity, and in his aesthetics relationality and the connection to a greater whole are important. Through recognizing our commonality with others, we learn something about ourselves. For example, Gadamer explains that the spectator’s experience of a Greek tragedy involves a recognition of themselves and their “own finiteness in the face of the power of fate.”<sup>77</sup> According to Gadamer, tragic pensiveness relates to the recognition of truth that is a type of self-knowledge, and such insights

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<sup>76</sup> For example, Catherine Homan explores the educative role of aesthetics in *A Hermeneutics of Poetic Education: The Play of the In-Between* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020).

<sup>77</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 128.

lead one away from collective illusions that everyone lives with.<sup>78</sup> For Gadamer, the experience of the theatre is not one of distantiation, but of participation. Here, in the experience of the tragic suffering, we recognize ourselves and our commonality with others, which has practical implications. In Gadamer's account such insight is not a mere adventure or intoxication, but rather this leads to more continuity with oneself.<sup>79</sup>

Let us relate this notion of continuity with ourselves to Gadamer's understanding of the close connection between measure, truth, the beautiful, and the good. We could say, for instance, that through the insight awakened by the experience of the tragic and the truth it engenders, we now have a different measure for ourselves, which is reflected in our self-understanding. Rather than basing our actions as we previously did (in common with others) on something illusory, we can now conduct ourselves in accordance with something true about ourselves. As we have considered above, with Gadamer's notion of transformation into structure, aesthetic experience involves insight into true being. According to Gadamer: "The being of all play is always self-realization, sheer fulfillment, *energeia* which has its telos within itself. The world of a work of art, in which play expresses itself fully in the unity of its course, is in fact a wholly transformed world. In and through it everyone recognizes that that is how things are."<sup>80</sup> Here, as with Greek tragedy, there is an insightful recognition of truth. Gadamer places priority on what is revealed in transformed structures, which he characterizes as a "superior mode of being."<sup>81</sup> He explains: "From this viewpoint 'reality' is defined as what is untransformed, and art as the raising up (*Aufhebung*) of this reality into its truth. The classical theory of art too, which bases all art on the idea of *mimesis*, *imitation*, obviously starts from play in the form of dancing, which is the representation of the divine."<sup>82</sup> Key for Gadamer is that such imitations are there in their presentations; the work of art or artistic performance does not point to another meaning outside of itself but presents its truth within itself. Truth emerges through

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<sup>78</sup> According to Gadamer, this is a recognition of "a metaphysical order of being that is true for all. To see that 'this is how it is' is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator, who emerges with new insight from the illusions in which he, like everyone else, lives" (*Truth and Method*, 128).

<sup>79</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 128. Such continuities should be understood dynamically. As Nicholas Davey explains: "For Gadamer, the meaningfulness of existence resides in its relationality, in how different aspects of being illuminate and inform others in ever-shifting patterns. It is not so much a particular symmetry that is significant but how changing relations establish and transform emergent continuities of significance" (*Unfinished Worlds: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics and Gadamer* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013], 73–74).

<sup>80</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 112.

<sup>81</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 112.

<sup>82</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 112–13, emphasis in original. Gadamer provides the following reference in a footnote: "Cf. Koller, *Mimesis* (1954), which proves the original connection between *mimesis* and dance" (*Truth and Method*, 163, fn. 17).

the experience of a work of art and informs the ordinary world. By experiencing art, we may recognize ourselves and our own possibilities. For Gadamer, aesthetic experience is one of participation, taking us outside of ourselves and potentially bringing us back to ourselves more authentically.<sup>83</sup>

Given the importance of finitude for Gadamer, aesthetic insight will never be perfect, and understanding is always a work in progress. Nevertheless, such insight involves truth and is better than the self-understanding one had previously. Through such insight we experience more continuity with ourselves, and I think we could also say more honesty with ourselves. And given the connections between truth and goodness, we arguably unlock our potential to be more beautiful and good to ourselves and to those around us. Rather than being distorted by illusions and having to sustain them and interpret the world and interact with others on this basis, we are freed to understand ourselves in more authentic ways. This arguably has important ethical implications. For example, Gadamer, considering the Greek notion of friendship, writes: “Someone who is not friends with himself, but at odds with himself, is just not fit for any devotion to anyone else, or for any solidarity.”<sup>84</sup> According to Gadamer, the ancient conception of friendship is a broad notion that covers the whole life of the community.<sup>85</sup> Gadamer says that someone “who does not *know* what friendship is obviously lacks both a constant supportive relationship to himself as well as the capacity to be constant and supportive in his relationship to others.”<sup>86</sup> If this is so, and friendship is a broad notion related to all our interactions with others in the community, then transformations in self-understanding have broader social implications. Friendship with oneself is the basis for solidarity with others, and being friends with oneself, others, and the community at large go hand and hand. As we have discussed, aesthetic experience can help foster a greater sense of continuity with oneself, which presumably could positively contribute to our possibilities for friendship and solidarity with others. When we have a greater continuity with ourselves, we may be better able to engender more mutual respect, friendliness, and perhaps even beauty and goodness in our dialogues and interactions with others.

Gadamer’s approach is suggestive rather than prescriptive. For instance, his notion of play is dynamic and fluid, and his understanding of harmony, beauty, and

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<sup>83</sup> For connections between the Greek conception of *theoria* and aesthetic participation in Gadamer’s thought, see William Konchak, “Gadamer’s ‘Practice’ of *Theoria*,” *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (2020): 453–65.

<sup>84</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, trans. Chris Dawson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 113.

<sup>85</sup> Gadamer, *Praise of Theory*, 110–11.

<sup>86</sup> Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic*, 10, emphasis in original.

goodness should be understood in a similar light. Despite the importance of order and harmony in Gadamer's thought, aesthetic insights are also unsettling; they disturb our complacency, and as we have seen above, collective distortions we hold together with others.<sup>87</sup> However, Gadamer's emphasis is on the possibility for harmony and beauty and working through such disruptions to find more authentic continuities with oneself and solidarity with others. This emphasis is important as it highlights the constructive possibilities for harmony, order, beauty, and goodness—themes from Plato's and ancient thought that Gadamer has drawn upon and dynamically developed in his aesthetics.

Gadamer associates Plato's notion of the good taking refuge in the beautiful with entities as they are in their own nature, and the beautiful with how an entity finds harmony and completeness with itself, which he also relates to the good.<sup>88</sup> In my view, this is suggestive of how the experience of the beautiful and good can bring us back to ourselves. According to Gadamer, "the good of human life. . . does not confront us as a norm located in the beyond, but as the beauty, measuredness, and truth of human being and conduct."<sup>89</sup> Beauty and goodness are manifested through appropriate actions and fostering harmonies in everyday life. For Gadamer, aesthetic and hermeneutic insights more generally are not merely in the abstract, but rather

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<sup>87</sup> Arthos maintains that Gadamer's poetics (Arthos's term for Gadamer's theory of artworks) is "tied too closely to a Platonic/Kantian conception of order and beauty, and does not take sufficient account of the artistic engagement with degeneration, disease, and disorder, leaving undeveloped the nihilistic dimensions of art that are present even within its own Heideggerian foundation" (*Gadamer's Poetics*, x-xi). This emphasis on beauty and order is a key part of Gadamer's thought, but I would maintain that Gadamer provides an important contemporary position that encourages the positive and dynamic possibilities of beauty, order, and goodness in a non-dogmatic manner. It should also be noted that Gadamer has been criticized for not sufficiently considering difference and otherness; see John D. Caputo, "Gadamer's Closet Essentialism: A Derridean Critique," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 258–64; Robert Bernasconi, "'You Don't Know What I'm Talking About': Alterity and the Hermeneutical Ideal," in *The Specter of Relativism: Truth, Dialogue, and Phronesis in Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Laurence K. Schmidt (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press), 178–94. Others have defended Gadamer against such criticisms; see James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Homan, *A Hermeneutics of Poetic Education*; Brice R. Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being: Gadamer's Post-Platonic Hermeneutical Ontology*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999). The impetus in Gadamer's thought to listen to the other, follow the subject matter, and revise our self-understanding (which may disrupt false senses of order we may have) would ideally promote mutually respectful harmonies that respect differences. Nevertheless, these concerns point to the need for vigilance to ensure respect for the other.

<sup>88</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Plato's Dialectical Ethics: Phenomenological Interpretations Relating to the "Philebus"*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 208–209.

<sup>89</sup> Gadamer, *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*, 209.

should be integrated into our self-understanding. Encouraging harmony within the soul and in the state are both important for Plato, and I think something similar can be said for Gadamer with respect to self-understanding and solidarity with others.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, Gadamer draws upon Plato's notion of the beautiful to support his conception of presencing truth. He also is inspired by Platonic and Pythagorean notions of order and develops a dynamic and emergent approach that has connections to his understanding of Plato's later dialogues. In my view, the way Gadamer incorporates the experience of beauty and harmony through his aesthetics to support his conception of emergent truth and order is a compelling way of applying Plato's thought in a manner suitable for our contemporary times. Key to this is that he presents the case that the beautiful matters, as does its connection to the good, and that while art has a different type of truth from that of science, it nevertheless reveals truth. The insights that are experienced through the work of art can inform our self-understanding and being in the world, potentially prompting change for the better. The creation and reception of the work of art is a dynamic interplay between artist, viewer, and world, a process through which new insights may arise and foster self-understanding and solidarity. This reminds us of the inherent possibilities of art for truth, and how both artists and interpreters play important roles in actualizing the potential of art to positively inform the greater community.

## The Art of Interpreting Landscapes: Nature Teaching Itself through Its Own Expression

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### Introduction

This paper responds to a set of interpretive problems in the philosophy of nature concerning our immanence to nature through developing Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of "philosophy of the sensible as literature" from his unfinished manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible*.<sup>1</sup> I argue that rather than speak *about* the world, we speak *with* the world, as seen in Merleau-Ponty's account of expression throughout his corpus. In *Part One* of this paper, I consider how we might express the experience of the reversibility of flesh in language, as seen in Merleau-Ponty's later work, while considering challenges of giving a linguistic account. In *Part Two*, I argue that a hermeneutic approach can help us resolve the difficulties encountered when giving a linguistic account of our experience of nature. I argue that hermeneutics provides resources for phenomenological accounts so that we might respect the transcendence of nature while still being *of* nature. This paper seeks to respond to the challenges in developing a philosophy of nature as beings immanent to nature through the resources of hermeneutic phenomenology. Phenomenology highlights the *prejudices* and *biases* involved in our understanding of nature, and when paired with hermeneutics, allows us to remain open to the alterity of nature and its transcendence to us. As the title

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 252.

suggests, I will argue that interpreting landscapes through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach allows for nature to teach itself through its own expression, answering a question I pose: How can a natural being understand nature naturally?

### Part One: Philosophy of Nature and Interpretive Problems

There are interpretive problems in philosophy of nature that Ted Toadvine succinctly sums up with the questions: “what does it mean to understand human beings as a part of nature and how can we think nature starting from our situation within it? How does our situation as immanent to nature compromise—or give us access to—the being of nature? . . . how can our understanding of nature respect its transcendence? In other words, is there a means of thinking nature that can take into account its excess over our projections and cultural stereotypes concerning it?”<sup>2</sup> These problems regard our immanence to nature, whether as a limitation or as our means to know it. They also regard our “particular cultural and historical situation that fits us with particular lenses for viewing the world,” acknowledging that there is not a “position from which to evaluate the mediating influences of history, culture, [or] language.”<sup>3</sup>

Given these problems about how we know nature through a particular vantage point, Toadvine points to phenomenology as a resource. Phenomenology “in its effort to describe and understand the *nature of experience*. . . is inevitably led to investigate the *experience of nature* and, in general, the relation between experience and nature.”<sup>4</sup> Phenomenological description and accounts of experiences of nature reveal the taken-for-granted relationships between ourselves and the more-than-human world surrounding us. These accounts can reveal cultural and historic habits of perception, unearth our assumptions about nature, and make us more aware of mediating influences. Toadvine especially relies on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature because Merleau-Ponty tries to “disclos[e] nature *on its own terms* [which] requires taking it up in an expressive gesture.”<sup>5</sup> *Expression* in Merleau-Ponty is more than just a human endeavor, it takes place “at the confluence of the body and the world.”<sup>6</sup> The perceiving

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<sup>2</sup> Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 7, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 19.

body for Merleau-Ponty is co-natural with the world. As Toadvine writes, “At a prereflective level, the body and the world are said to be ‘connatural’ (PP251/252); they engage in a ‘coition,’ a ‘symbiosis,’ or a ‘dialogue’ (PP 370/373).”<sup>7</sup> In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty articulates perception as a kind of communication, a dialogue, which occurs when we acclimate, or attune, our senses to our environment. He writes, “sensing is this living communication with the world that makes it present to us as the familiar place of our life.”<sup>8</sup> Perception as communication or as a dialogue is further developed in Merleau-Ponty as he writes, “the whole of nature is the setting of our own life, or our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue.”<sup>9</sup> The world is more than the setting for our lives; the world is in communication with us as we are with it.

This communication, this dialogue we have with “the whole of nature”<sup>10</sup> is *expression*, or the confluence of one’s perceiving body and the world around them. Toadvine writes, “the ‘dialogue’ between the body and nature is the event of their correlation, their entanglement in an ongoing process of expression.”<sup>11</sup> Perception of nature, although mediated, does not prevent contact with nature, but is “instead, the condition for anything whatsoever to appear, to be disclosed.”<sup>12</sup> Nature then “discloses itself *through* our expressive acts,” which for Merleau-Ponty is this confluence of perception and the world, or nature.<sup>13</sup>

Merleau-Ponty at times calls this confluence *style*, or, “nature’s own self-expression through embodied life.”<sup>14</sup> This allows us a way to read Merleau-Ponty’s interest in Paul Cézanne, as he writes, “the landscape thinks itself in me.”<sup>15</sup> We can see nature’s self-expression through perception in other moments of Merleau-Ponty’s work, one being the description of “our contemplation of the sky as the sky’s own self-contemplation within us.”<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty writes, “As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not *set over against* it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it ‘thinks itself within me,’ I am the

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<sup>7</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 51.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 52.

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 373.

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 373.

<sup>11</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 51.

<sup>12</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 60.

sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself.”<sup>17</sup> This exemplifies expression as the confluence between nature and perceiving beings, and nature as expressing itself through embodied life. This could seem anthropocentric, but it demonstrates the opposite: that the human being is but one being participating in nature. That is, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, instead of imposing our powers of expression or perception onto the world, “the body’s powers of expression are derivative from those of nature” so that rather than nature as “constituted by the expressive powers of the body, we find that the [perceiver] is a node within... nature’s own system of expression.”<sup>18</sup> As such, in Merleau-Ponty’s later work, nature is not constituted by the perceiver, but the perceiver is a being participating in nature expressing itself.

Merleau-Ponty’s idea of flesh in *The Visible and the Invisible* creates another space in which we can see nature’s expression through embodied life. The perceiver mutually participates in the sensible, as Merleau-Ponty writes, “If it touches them and sees them, this is only because, being of their family, itself visible and tangible, it uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs, because each of the two beings is an archetype for the other, because the body belongs to the order of things as the world is universal flesh.”<sup>19</sup> The human being is composed of the same flesh as the (natural) world around them. In flesh, perception is reversible, so that it is impossible to distinguish that which sees from that which is seen. Merleau-Ponty goes on to say that this distinction between the subject and object is ambiguous enough so as to make it impossible to differentiate; he writes, “the vision he exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things, my activity is equally passivity. . . the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen.”<sup>20</sup> The subject, as visible, is an object seen. This reversibility of flesh is what all beings participate in; it destabilizes the distinction between subject and object, and subject and world.

In sum, phenomenological descriptions of nature provide two things. First, the description of the *experience* of nature—the description of the confluence of perceiver and nature—reveals nature as expressive and the human being as a part of nature’s larger expression. Second, phenomenological accounts can highlight our traditions of perception and the very things mediating our relationship with nature, i.e., perception, history, culture, language, etc. Through these mediating influences we

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<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 248-49.

<sup>18</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 60.

<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 137.

<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 139.

connect with our world. In our confluence with nature and in nature's self-expression through us, we see that our perception of nature, although mediated, is access to nature itself. Toadvine answers his questions through Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of expression, especially nature as expressing itself through embodied life.

I will suggest that there is still a hermeneutic problem of giving an account of this experience. What is this nature that we experience expressing itself through our own perception? When I contemplate the sky or rather, when the sky contemplates itself through me, how do we come to understand this experience? How do we share this experience with others? When I feel looked at by visible things, that is, when trees look at me as I look at them, once I speak about it, I am not experiencing it anymore. There is the problem of putting this into language, into a description of experience, as Merleau-Ponty writes, "The visible things about us rest in themselves, and their natural being is so full that it seems to envelop their perceived being, as if our perception of them were formed within them. But if I express this experience by saying that the things are in their place and that we fuse with them, I immediately make the experience itself impossible: for in the measure that the thing is approached, I cease to be; in the measure that I am, there is no thing, but only a double of it in my 'camera obscura.'"<sup>21</sup> When I fuse myself with things I lose myself. But, when I keep hold of myself to express the experience, then I am not fusing with the things. Merleau-Ponty gives us a couple of clues as to how we might avoid this circularity. He writes in his working notes in *The Visible and the Invisible*, "the philosophy of the sensible as literature."<sup>22</sup> Phenomenology is a return to the sensible rather than intelligible world, and the sensible as literature is perhaps *how* this is done. Merleau-Ponty alludes to the necessity of writing, of giving accounts, in another section of *The Visible and the Invisible*:

Whereas the sensible is, like life, a treasury ever full of things to say for him who is a philosopher (that is, a writer). And just as each finds to be true and rediscovers in himself what the writer says of life and of the sentiments, so also the phenomenologists are understood and made use of by those who say that phenomenology is impossible. The root of the matter is that the sensible indeed offers nothing one could state if one is not a philosopher or a writer, but that this is not because it would be an ineffable in Itself, but because of the fact that one does not know how to speak.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 122.

<sup>22</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 252.

<sup>23</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 252.

This suggests that the writer, the philosopher, finds the world full of things to express because they know how to speak about things. There is a kind of art to speaking about things that would open the sensible world as literature. This world is one of narrative, of stories, of language in a rich sense.

I will add that if one is a participant within the sensible world, one must also be spoken about, as one would appear in the very world that is so potent with language, with stories. Further, I will argue that one speaks *with* the nature around them. The dialogue with the whole of nature as seen in *Phenomenology of Perception* alludes toward speaking *with* rather than speaking about. We can see speaking *with* in nature's expressing itself through embodied life, in which, as beings *of* nature, nature is speaking *through* us. Merleau-Ponty goes on to say, connecting with the idea of the sensible world as literature, that,

the whole landscape is overrun with words as with an invasion, it is henceforth but a variant of speech before our eyes, and to speak of its "style" is in our view to form a metaphor. In a sense the whole of philosophy, as Husserl says, consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience, which in particular clarifies the special domain of language. And in a sense, as Valéry said, language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests. And what we have to understand is that there is no dialectical reversal from one of these views to the other; we do not have to reassemble them into a synthesis: they are two aspects of the reversibility which is the ultimate truth.<sup>24</sup>

There is not a dialectical relationship leading to a synthesis between the landscape as a variant of speech and our own ability to express our experiences, to make meanings. There is not a synthesis between the things in the world having voices and our own voices—rather, this approach to nature—"philosophy of the sensible as literature"—respects the transcendence of nature while still acknowledging that we are *of* nature.<sup>25</sup> The world speaks to us, tells us things, creates meanings; and we too speak, we too tell others about things, we too create meanings. This is exemplary of the reversibility of flesh conveyed in a different way than when Merleau-Ponty describes perception as reversible; this is now language as reversible. If we combine this with perception as a dialogue from his earlier work, we can see how we are always in communication and

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<sup>24</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 155.

<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 252.

in dialogue with the world around us.<sup>26</sup> Nature has as much of a voice as we do, and if we consider that nature expresses itself through us as we are *of* it, this dialogue is between different expressions of nature belonging to the same, shared, fleshy nature.

## Part Two: Resolving Interpretive Problems with Hermeneutic Resources

So, how do we learn the art of how to speak about things—or, as I have argued, *with* things? How do we read nature like literature, like a book? If writers and philosophers see nature as expressive and know *how* to see the sensible world as literature, then how do we communicate this richness considering the circular problem we encounter; that is: when I fuse myself with things I lose myself, but, when I keep hold of myself, then I am not fusing with the things. The first problem exists in part because the dialogue we have with nature is pre-reflective. The perceptual communication we have occurs prior to reflection, prior to our ability to give an account of it. The second problem is a hermeneutical one regarding how we interpret our dialogue *with* nature. How do we interpret the landscape as an invasion of words, the voice of the waves, the voice of the forests? There are resources in hermeneutics to think through these problems, in a spirit inspired by Paul Ricoeur’s “graft[ing] the hermeneutic problem onto the phenomenological method.”<sup>27</sup> We can see a parallel between the questions this paper unearths and Ricoeur’s discussion of problems of historicity. Ricoeur writes, “how can a historical being understand history historically?”<sup>28</sup> Our question, stated in this parallel, is: how can a natural being understand nature naturally? Although our problems of understanding nature emerged in phenomenology, we may find that resources in hermeneutics can help us in our attempts to solve them.

While Merleau-Ponty did not explicitly present a hermeneutic theory, “the starting point for his analysis is the hermeneutical fact that through perception we always find ourselves already immersed in meaning.”<sup>29</sup> The kind of hermeneutics that we see in Merleau-Ponty’s work is implicit rather than explicit and emerges in part because embodied perception is always already situated in a particular cultural and

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<sup>26</sup> This reading of Merleau-Ponty is inspired by and deeply influenced by David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (London: Athlone Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” 5.

<sup>29</sup> Shaun Gallagher, “Introduction: The Hermeneutics of Ambiguity,” in *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics, and Postmodernism*, ed. Thomas W. Busch and Shaun Gallagher (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 3.

historic milieu. Further, following Merleau-Ponty, I argue that because the most important lesson of the phenomenological method is that it is necessarily incomplete, there is space left open for hermeneutic interpretation; that is, we cannot completely “rupture our familiarity with [the world.]”<sup>30</sup> We are thoroughly “related to the world” and cannot achieve a pure or complete phenomenology, which is one way that Merleau-Ponty is a thinker of ambiguity whose work contains an implicit hermeneutics.<sup>31</sup>

The impossibility of a complete reduction and our immanent relationship with nature is where my analysis complicates Toadvine’s claim of “disclosing nature *on its own terms*.”<sup>32</sup> If we follow Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of perception as always already situated and his claim that the phenomenological reduction is bound to be incomplete, we find we are limited in our attempt to truly, *purely*, disclose “nature *on its own terms*.”<sup>33</sup> We are thoroughly related to nature as natural beings participating in the flesh of the world; we are not separable from nature nor is nature separable from us. However, rather than our immanence to nature as natural beings preventing us from attempting to disclose nature naturally, I argue that this attempt is vital and that we must be even more attentive to the unavoidable prejudices and biases in order to respect nature’s transcendence to us. Even though we cannot *purely* disclose nature on its own, by further acknowledging our immanence and thorough relatedness *with* it, I will argue that we can learn the art of interpreting landscapes through nature teaching itself through its own expression. In order to do so, I will articulate a hermeneutic phenomenology by engaging with Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible* in conversation with his other works. One of the consequences of admitting this limitation—that we cannot purify our perception of mediating influences, including our immanence to nature—is that this ambiguity actually allows for the mystery and wonder of the natural world to emerge. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “The world and reason are not problems; and though we might call them mysterious, this mystery is essential to them, there can be no question of dissolving it through some ‘solution,’ it is beneath the level of solutions.”<sup>34</sup> Remaining open to the ambiguity and mysteriousness of nature rather than having a purified “nature *on its own terms*” admits the embodied, situated position from which we engage in this attempt.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxvii.

<sup>31</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxvii.

<sup>32</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxxv.

<sup>35</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 15.

Rather than this mysteriousness or the impossibility of purity preventing us from our attempts to understand nature naturally as natural beings, I will argue that hermeneutic phenomenology shows us that time spent with a landscape—learning from a landscape through long ongoing conversations—allows us to assimilate to the style of a particular landscape. As such, this paper will engage with hermeneutics, primarily through Hans-Georg Gadamer, who presents an explicit hermeneutics to draw out Merleau-Ponty’s implicit hermeneutics. Importantly, the kind of hermeneutics in Merleau-Ponty’s work differs from much of the hermeneutic tradition because it centers embodiment.<sup>36</sup> Regarding the hermeneutics that appears in Merleau-Ponty’s work, Shaun Gallagher writes that “the human body acts as both an interpretational constraint and an enabling condition.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, this paper will consider resources in Gadamer’s hermeneutics and then return to Merleau-Ponty’s framework of thought that centers embodiment to make explicit the implicit hermeneutics therein.

One hermeneutic resource that can help us approach the question, “how can a natural being understand nature naturally?” appears in Gadamer’s essay “On the Circle of Understanding,” in which he writes:

[In] learning foreign languages[, w]e learn that we can only try to understand the parts of a sentence in their linguistic meaning when we have parsed or construed the sentence. But the process of parsing is itself guided by an expectation of meaning arising from the preceding context. Of course this expectation must be corrected as the text requires. This means then that the expectation is transposed and that the text is consolidated into a unified meaning under another expectation. Thus the movement of understanding always runs from whole to part and back to whole. The task is to expand in concentric circles the unity of the understood meaning.<sup>38</sup>

The latent solution here is the task of expansion of one’s understanding, which is done through *time*. There are at least two ways in which time can be a solution. Outlining *temporal distance* from the material as vital for understanding, Gadamer writes, “Time is not primarily an abyss to be bridged because it divides and holds apart, it is rather in

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<sup>36</sup> Important outliers regarding this tendency in the tradition of hermeneutics to not consider embodiment in interpretation can be found in Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, ed., *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

<sup>37</sup> Gallagher, “Introduction,” 4.

<sup>38</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “On the Circle of Understanding,” in *Hermeneutics vs. Science? Three German Views*, ed. John M. Connolly and Thomas Keutner (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 68–78.

truth the supporting ground of the event in which present understanding has its roots. Thus temporal distance is not something to be overcome. . . . It is in truth a matter of recognizing the distance of time as a positive and productive possibility for understanding.”<sup>39</sup> Temporal distance from the material allows for the material to speak in a way in which “the true meaning of th[e] work” is revealed.<sup>40</sup> But there is another way in which time is vital to understanding, that is, time spent *with* that which one is trying to understand. Time spent *with* nature will be essential to the art of reading the landscape, of seeing the sensible world as literature, of hearing the voices of the forests and waves. Reading nature as literature is *earned* through time spent *with* nature.

This leads us to a response to the question, “how can a natural being understand nature naturally?”: *learning* through spending time with nature. With these hermeneutic resources in mind, we will return to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of language to uncover his account of learning and consider the implicit hermeneutics in his work. First, thought is accomplished through speech and is unthinkable without speech. Merleau-Ponty explains, “the thinking subject remains in a sort of ignorance of his thoughts so long as he has not formulated them for himself.”<sup>41</sup> Before expressing thoughts in speech or writing, the thought is ungraspable by the thinker. It is only through writing or speaking that they will learn what they think.<sup>42</sup> Merleau-Ponty writes that, “for the speaking subject, to express is to become aware of; he does not express just for others, but also to know himself what he intends.”<sup>43</sup> As such, “speech does not translate a ready-made thought; rather, speech accomplishes thought.”<sup>44</sup> Language births thought, brings it into being, as “a thought, content to exist for itself outside the constraints of speech and communication, would fall into the unconscious the moment it appears, which amounts to saying it would not even exist for itself.”<sup>45</sup>

Regarding the sensible world as literature and our perceptual dialogue with nature, it is only through perceptual dialogue that we are aware of our expression. Nature expresses itself through our own embodiment and this expression necessitates the confluence of embodied being and nature. That is, one cannot become aware of

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<sup>39</sup> Gadamer, “On the Circle of Understanding,” 76.

<sup>40</sup> Gadamer, “On the Circle of Understanding,” 76.

<sup>41</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 196.

<sup>42</sup> Merleau-Ponty writes, “my spoken words surprise me myself and teach me my thought” (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964], 88). One does not know exactly what one thinks before expressing it.

<sup>43</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 90.

<sup>44</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 183.

<sup>45</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 183.

nature as an interlocutor without perceiving nature, without spending time in nature.<sup>46</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, this happens naturally, as we are all participating in the reversible flesh through our embodiment. We can also think about this in regards to a particular landscape. If we do not deep-sea dive, we will not have actualized the conversation with the deep sea as expressing itself through us.

Further, meaning is not in the individual pieces of speech, “meaning is in the total movement of speech. . . our thought moves through language as a gesture that goes beyond the individual points of its passage.”<sup>47</sup> As such, Merleau-Ponty writes, “The meaning of language, like that of gestures, does not lie in the elements composing it. The meaning is their common intention, and the spoken phrase is understood only if the hearer, following the ‘verbal chain,’ goes beyond each of its links in the direction that they all designate together.”<sup>48</sup> Merleau-Ponty specifies that the meaning of a written work is not in its ideas but is given through an “unexpected variation of the modes of language, of narrative, or of existing literary forms.”<sup>49</sup> *Meaning* is understood through style, through how something is expressed. Merleau-Ponty writes, “I begin to understand a philosophy by slipping into this thought’s particular manner of existing, by reproducing the tone or the accent of the philosopher in question.”<sup>50</sup> The meaning in a philosopher’s writing is revealed through the form, accent, and tone. The particularity of speech, is, for Merleau-Ponty, “assimilated little by little by the reader.”<sup>51</sup>

The meaning of language is in its particularity, thus what one landscape communicates with us will mean something quite different from another landscape. If we assimilate to the style of the language of a high desert, this will be quite a different conversation than one we might have with a tropical rainforest. Thus, in the implicit Merleau-Pontian hermeneutics, understanding is found in attuning to or assimilating to the style and particularity of expression.

One objection may be that we are stretching the metaphor of dialogue, that Merleau-Ponty does not intend this dialogue literally. However, Toadvine writes that we should take this dialogue literally: “While it may seem easiest to interpret this notion

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<sup>46</sup> As Gallagher writes, “Merleau-Ponty proposed a hermeneutical theory that identifies the embodied subject as the seat of interpretation”; thus, the kind of hermeneutics that is present in Merleau-Ponty’s work “detour[s] from the hermeneutical tradition by showing that the human body acts as both an interpretational constraint and an enabling condition” (“Introduction,” 3–4).

<sup>47</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 43.

<sup>48</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 2004), 39.

<sup>49</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, 39.

<sup>50</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 135.

<sup>51</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, 39.

of ‘dialogue’ metaphorically, Merleau-Ponty indicates that this description is intended literally [especially seen when he writes]: ‘It can literally be said that our senses question things and that things reply to them.’<sup>52</sup> In our literal conversation with nature over time, we assimilate to particular styles of speech, we attune ourselves little by little, suggesting that the more time we spend assimilating and adjusting to the style of speech the more we can understand the meaning of what is said. This brings us back to the hermeneutic circle and the expansion of our understanding through learning and spending time *with* what we are trying to understand. The more time we spend with one landscape, the more accurately we can assimilate to its style of expression, and the more clearly we can understand the meaning of our conversation.

In Merleau-Ponty’s work, we learn from other people’s language use by taking up the particularities, assimilating to the styles of speech, and looking towards the common intentions therein. He writes, “through speech, then, there is a taking up of the other person’s thought, a reflection in others, a power of thinking according to others, which enriches our own thoughts.”<sup>53</sup> Upon following the intention or direction of the speech, we find the sense of the linguistic gesture, which can be completely new. Rather than possessing all possibilities of expression beforehand in order to translate meaning into words in an unambiguous manner, we are expressive beings, and as such, diverse attempts of expression reveal different styles of being, or, “particular manner[s] of existing” that we otherwise would not be able to perform.<sup>54</sup> Successful expression “installs [its] signification in the writer or reader like a new sense organ, and it opens a new field or a new dimension to our experience.”<sup>55</sup> Language, when successfully understood, opens a new way of being-in-the-world. It teaches us; we can use language to communicate, and further, to re-establish our way of being after new dimensions are revealed to us. That is, we transform. When we successfully understand a landscape, through stylistic assimilation to the particularities of its expression, and through following the holistic movement and direction of the expression, we can learn. We can enrich our own thoughts through learning from expression around us, from the dialogue of which we are a part, and develop new dimensions to our experience. Particular landscapes, with their different styles of expression, open us up to learn

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<sup>52</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 51. Toadvine is citing Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 369, 371.

<sup>53</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 184. Donald A. Landes writes of the genuine ability to learn from others: “we do not translate a speaker’s words into a language of ideas we already possess in our own minds, rather, when we understand and genuinely communicate, we grasp the sense of their speech” (Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression [New York: Bloomsbury, 2013], 8).

<sup>54</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 185.

<sup>55</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 188.

novel ways of being-in-the-world. Attuning to the style of a temperate rainforest opens a dimension of experience, a way of being-in-the-temperate-rainforest that is different from the style of wetlands, which in turn, when attuned to, would open a different dimension of experience, a way of being-in-the-wetlands.

Looking closely at Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature through drawing out his implicit hermeneutics provides a method to resolve our interpretive obstacles, i.e., learning through time spent in conversation. Our first problem is losing our self when we fuse with nature and not fusing with nature when we try to express this experience. Through time spent with a landscape, one can slowly assimilate to the style of the landscape and can understand the sense of what a landscape is saying through following its gesture. Time solves the problem of losing oneself through fusing, because one can regain oneself having learned something. Further, through losing oneself to fusion with nature repeatedly, one might be able to clearly understand what it is telling you; after a long period of time, one may be able to express this experience in such a way that this experience is not lost. Learning through time spent in conversation with a particular landscape, a particular place in nature, can be the solution to the first problem.

The second problem of how to interpret our dialogue with nature, how to interpret the landscape as overrun with words, how to interpret the voice of the waves and forests, can be addressed through this *learning* through dialogue with nature as well. Hermeneutics paired with phenomenology is necessary again because of the problem of prejudice in our attempts to understand. As previously discussed, the problem of an immanent account of nature is that there is no way in which to give an account of nature unmediated by our historical, cultural, or social, influences. Perception is thoroughly historical in Merleau-Ponty's thought.<sup>56</sup> Embodiment situates subjects in a particular milieu, in a context. This union with a milieu prevents the subject from being outside of history. However, as Gadamer's work shows, *prejudice or bias* is not necessarily problematic if they are thoroughly acknowledged and considered. Gadamer thinks that Martin Heidegger's "disclos[ure of] the fore-structure of understanding. . .

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<sup>56</sup> Merleau-Ponty writes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, "The body is the vehicle of being in the world and, for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein" (84). As he continues, the human being is "thus not foreign to history and somehow beyond the reach of history" (90.) Rather, "my life is made up of rhythms that do not have their reason in what I have chosen to be, but rather have their condition in the banal milieu that surrounds me" (86). Human lives are conditioned by a milieu not of our choosing. It is in this way that the subject "has an historical thickness, he takes up a perceptual tradition, and he is confronted with a present" (248).

was a completely correct phenomenological description.”<sup>57</sup> When we encounter a text, we project biases about our expectations, that which we have learned before, the historical/cultural influences we live in, etc. Gadamer thinks that this is how understanding works, and that it is not a problem so long as “we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. But this openness always includes situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it.”<sup>58</sup> Importantly, this remaining open is not achieved through a purification of all of our prejudices and biases, because that would be impossible.<sup>59</sup> As Gadamer explains, “a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither ‘neutrality’ with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings.”<sup>60</sup> If we are aware of our biases, the text can more forcefully present itself to us in its alterity; we are open to the text in a way that our mediation does not prevent access to its meaning. If we explicitly acknowledge our prejudices in our encounters with nature, nature can more forcefully present itself to us; we can be more open to what it might be saying, and we might understand its meaning, even if this is a seemingly infinite task. This seemingly infinite task is suggested by Merleau-Ponty himself as he suggests that philosophers are perpetual beginners.<sup>61</sup>

Importantly, although we fuse with nature, it is still an alterity, as Toadvine explains, “Perception is the discovery of a sense that is not of my making, the response to a demand placed on my body from the outside, a manner of being invaded by an alterity, which is why the figure of dialogue is appropriate.”<sup>62</sup> Because our expression is derivative of nature’s expression, because perception is a sense that we do not author, and because the dialogue happens pre-reflectively, nature is still an Other. Sometimes, dialogue with nature is difficult, or we cannot see nature as literature, we cannot hear the voices of things. Toadvine explains, “[nature’s] expressive capacity always exceeds the resonating powers of my body. While nature turns toward the body

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<sup>57</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. rev. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1995), 272.

<sup>58</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 271.

<sup>59</sup> As Gadamer writes, “The recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust” (*Truth and Method*, 272).

<sup>60</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 272.

<sup>61</sup> In the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes that “The unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoate style in which it proceeds are not the sign of failure; they were inevitable because phenomenology’s task was to reveal the mystery of the world” (lxxxv).

<sup>62</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 59.

a ‘familiar face,’ the sensible configuration to which our body may become attuned, it simultaneously withdraws or holds in reserve a depth that the human perceiver can never plumb.”<sup>63</sup>

Thus, we must acknowledge our prejudices and biases in our readings of nature and understand its transcendence to us. We can look at accounts of nature that enact two things. First, accounts that go through an (incomplete) hermeneutic phenomenological bracketing, in order to reveal our cultural and historic habits of perception; unearth our assumptions, biases, and prejudices about nature; and help us acknowledge mediating influences. Enacting a hermeneutic phenomenology reveals these biases and is sensitive to the alterity and transcendence of nature, allowing us to acknowledge the biases of one’s own mediating influences. This approach squares with Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “the most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction” and as such, if we start from a place of acknowledging this incompleteness we can take our prejudices seriously.<sup>64</sup> The second enactment would be keeping our attunement to the style of the landscape around us if that style has proven to be a way in which to understand the meaning of a particular landscape. This is earned through time spent with a landscape, and ongoing long conversations with a particular place; we are expressive beings and we give accounts of nature’s own self-expression through our embodiment.

### **Conclusion: Nature Teaching Itself through Its Own Expression**

This paper responds to a set of interpretive problems in the philosophy of nature concerning our immanence to nature through developing Merleau-Ponty’s account of “philosophy of the sensible as literature” from his unfinished manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible*.<sup>65</sup> This paper seeks to respond to the challenges in developing a philosophy of nature as beings immanent to nature through the resources of hermeneutic phenomenology. Because we are embodied beings without a vantage point outside of our social, historical, cultural, linguistic milieu—we perceive through our mediated lenses. Rather than mediation being a preventative obstacle disallowing us to know nature, mediation is the enabling condition to knowing nature. Enacting a phenomenology allows us to reveal the taken-for-granted relationships between ourselves and the more-than-human world surrounding us, to be aware of our cultural

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<sup>63</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 59.

<sup>64</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxvii.

<sup>65</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 252.

and historic habits of perception, to unearth our assumptions about nature, and to make us more aware of mediating influences. As such, phenomenology highlights the *prejudices* and *biases* involved in our understanding of nature, and when paired with hermeneutics, allows us to remain open to the alterity of nature and acknowledge its transcendence to us. Hermeneutics shows us that prejudices or biases are unavoidable but are not problematic if they are thoroughly acknowledged and considered.

I have argued that hermeneutic phenomenology shows us that time spent with a landscape, learning from a landscape through long ongoing conversations, allows us to assimilate to the style of a particular landscape. As such, this assimilation becomes a way in which to understand the meaning of a particular landscape—that is, the art of interpreting landscapes becomes nature teaching itself through its own expression. Thus, I have argued that interpreting landscapes through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s later work, allows for nature to teach itself through its own expression, answering the hermeneutic question I posed: “How can a natural being understand nature naturally?”

Importantly, understanding nature naturally is a vital endeavor in part because hegemonic cultural stereotypes concerning nature have significant political impacts, contribute to shaping our life-worlds, and influence our habits of perception. One of Toadvine’s questions, related to giving accounts of nature from our immanent positionality, concerns whether “there [is] a means of thinking nature that can take into account its excess over our projections and cultural stereotypes concerning it.”<sup>66</sup> Hegemonic cultural stereotypes concerning nature in the context of the North American continent include varied projections that nature is the sublime, the frontier,<sup>67</sup> the wilderness (in dualistic opposition to culture),<sup>68</sup> a wasteland, and/or full of resources for extraction.<sup>69</sup> There is also a cultural and historical context of feminizing and racializing nature.<sup>70</sup> As such, these are several of the prejudices and biases that we have to acknowledge as we attempt to interpret nature, as they contribute to our habits of perception. A hermeneutic phenomenology will deeply consider these prejudices and biases; phenomenology can reveal these naturalized assumptions and

<sup>66</sup> Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 7.

<sup>67</sup> William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996): 7–28.

<sup>68</sup> Val Plumwood, “Wilderness Skepticism and Dualism,” in *The Great New Wilderness Debate: An Expansive Collection of Writings Defining Wilderness, from John Muir to Gary Snyder*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 652–90.

<sup>69</sup> Traci Brynne Voyles, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>70</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993); Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

hermeneutics gives us resources to respect the transcendence and alterity of nature. Thus, the account of the “philosophy of the sensible as literature” that appears in Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible* provides a resource to enact a hermeneutic phenomenology of nature, a way to learn the art of interpreting landscapes, and a means of thinking *with* nature that responds to concerns regarding the development of a philosophy of nature given our immanence to nature.

ISSN 1918-7351

Volume 14.3 (2022)

## **Home, away from HOME: The Journey of My Self-cultivation and Inter-traditional Fusion**

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Figure 1. Naqsh-e-Jahan Square (View of the World/Half of the World Square), Isfahan, Iran, Persia.  
<https://www.itto.org/iran/attraction/Naghsh-e-Jahan-Square/>

*The first time that my mother took me to the kindergarten, at the time of farewell, I had a very strange feeling. For the first time, I was finding part of my being away from my HOME and I was missing my other part at HOME. It was a strange and profound feeling. . . so sad and so exciting.<sup>1</sup> The feeling grew in me as I grew up. It changed as I transitioned to different levels, academically and professionally, but it always had the same impact: it made me restless. I could never feel totally at home; I was always looking for my other parts. I could not see all parts of my being together, in one place, in one text. I found different parts of my being in different places, in different texts at different times at HOME. . . but some parts of my being were always obscure. . . missing. . . invisible. I had to move again, but this time, a big move. I needed a big transition. I couldn't see those parts at HOME.*

*Home, away from Home* is a theoretical paper on my Self-cultivation in an understanding journey in between hermeneutics and my native tradition in my PhD research. The paper involves the journey of my Self to my tradition in kinship with hermeneutic tradition after my transition to Canada. My *Bildung*, the process of my *self-formation* and becoming educated<sup>2</sup> in my philosophical journey, starts with some basic questions raised in reading the hermeneutic texts that moved me back to Persian, Islamic tradition. The underlying mystic basis of hermeneutic texts with echoes and traces from Persian, Islamic tradition evoked a spiritual and aesthetic sense in its core definitions and images of understanding (e.g., “circle of understanding” or “fusion of horizons”) that had a key role in my Self-understanding and exploration journey. In turning to my tradition, I revive the *invisible existence* within the text,<sup>3</sup> re-cognize the forgetfulness of language,<sup>4</sup> and turn to another mystic, rich, and ancient tradition on light and being to better know and understand my Self with Others in between the two traditions. In my transition and in this paper, I rely on my understanding of the common basis of all traditions, or the *transcendent unity* in Suhrawardi's illuminationist terms, and reconstruct hermeneutic tradition in light of Persian, Islamic tradition. In an illuminationist perspective, humans are united in being of the same essence and

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<sup>1</sup> My first memorable experience of existential understanding as joyous and frightening: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, trans. Richard. E. Palmer (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Jean Grondin, “Gadamer's Experience and Theory of Education: Learning that the Other May Be Right,” in *Education, Dialogue and Hermeneutics*, ed. Paul Fairfield (New York: Continuum, 2011), 5–20.

<sup>3</sup> Andrzej Wierciński, “Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Truth of Hermeneutic Experience,” *Analecta Hermeneutica* 1 (2009): 3–14.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” in *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects*, ed. Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1984), 54–65.

origin.<sup>5</sup> Others are essentially related to Self as descending lights from the “Light of lights.” Human *Bildung*—with mystical hermeneutic underpinnings of the man carrying the image of God in his soul and cultivating God in himself<sup>6</sup>—and Self-formation and elevation is humans’ Illumination and rise to the “Light of lights” in Suhrawardi’s ideology. Human *Bildung* involves approaching his original Self, his Self in unity with Others in its original nature. Self-cultivation and *Bildung* involves approaching Others and reducing the distance between the Self and Others. Others in this inter-traditional perspective are the lights to human Self: Others enlighten human Selves, approach humans to their Origin, and abate their uncanny sense of un-home-likeness. Understanding or the fusion of horizons involving the “unity and integrity with the Other”<sup>7</sup> moves human to his original Self, his Self illuminated in light of Others. The illuminationist idea of the unity between the knowing/understanding subject and object (Self and Other) involves Self-realization, a Self-realization that involves the unity of knowing and being, with the light of knowing with Others *transforming* and *illuminating* the being of human.<sup>8</sup>

The existing global tensions and misunderstandings of Islamic tradition reinforced my steps in using hermeneutics in dialogue with Persian Sufism and Islamic tradition. I aimed at reviving deep connections and the old familiarity and intuited kinship between the two worldviews<sup>9</sup> as a step for philosophical fusion and reconciliation, and hopefully, for real-life manifestations and positive impacts in education. Illuminating the rooted connections, despite current, apparent distance between the two traditions, my paper conveys philosophical and pedagogical implications for generating a wider and more inclusive inter-traditional perspective in educational contexts to create more peaceful academic and social relations between individuals of diverse traditions, more specifically, between the people of Muslim and non-Islamic traditions. The hermeneutic texts mainly used in education did not discuss the origin and nature of human beings and the *telos* of existence and the significance for human education and peace. Mere philosophical texts, disconnected from other traditions, could barely serve the *Bildung* and educational purpose of philosophy. In

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<sup>5</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*, ed. Mehdi Amin Razavi (Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 83.

<sup>8</sup> Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*.

<sup>9</sup> David W. Jardine and Rahat Naqvi, “Learning Not to Speak in Tongues: Thoughts on *The Librarian of Basra*,” *Canadian Journal of Education* 31, no. 3 (2008): 639–66.

transition from hermeneutics to my home tradition, while experiencing various interhuman tensions, I found hermeneutics used in education as a half-opened book where I could see the middle but not the beginning and end of the text. While hermeneutics, and mainstream philosophical thoughts, talk about Self and Other, and their fusion of horizons, they do not explain how cooperative understanding of Self and Other or their fusion of horizons can re-connect humans and improve their relations; and especially, how knowing and educating about the origin and nature of human existence, human understandings, and the *telos* of education can help in reconciling disconnected traditions and humans in tension. Integrating hermeneutics with Persian and Islamic Wisdom, I investigate the origin and nature of human being and the *telos* of the existence, and human education, for the impacts on human understandings and relations. The implications for teaching philosophy and traditions and education in general are elaborated throughout the paper and at the end.

### **A Note on Home, away from HOME**

*Home, away from HOME* is used in its original existential sense of understanding as self-understanding- the excursion of my Self to the Other tradition and my reunion as a more fully, transformed Self (as an alienated spirit visioned by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel<sup>10</sup>). This existential, spiritual sense echoes the inner way of understanding and fusion of Self and Other presented in Persian Wisdoms of Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra.

The understanding metaphor, *Home, away from HOME*, also implies my physical transition from my homeland Iran (HOME) to Canada (Home). It represents “homecoming” in my philosophical exploration through reviving my forgotten ancestors and re-cognizing their contribution to the world wisdoms and current state of knowledge. For my strong captivation to the place of my birth, place of my origins and ancestors, I distinguish between the two homes by capitalizing my birth land. HOME represents place of my birth, Iran, Isfahan, at an initial level, and ultimately refers to the Original abode of our longing souls beyond this world. The opening picture (Figure 1) from the famous Naqsh-e Jahan Square (or Half of the World), in my hometown Isfahan, stands for “home, away from HOME.” It presents a faraway perspective of the whole square from one focused point of view that is home but also

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<sup>10</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer and Hermeneutics: Science, Culture, Literature*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (London: Routledge, 1991).

away from HOME. This figure metaphorizes the phenomenon of understanding in various degrees of closeness to the text/object of understanding. The picture represents how a text of understanding, or a scene, might look and mean differently, from different standpoints, and in different eyes—the way it is viewed differently by one inside my hometown (my past), in the inner context of the town, and one outside and within a broader horizon (my outside Iran perspective exploring hermeneutics in dialogue with Persian Wisdoms). The view presents my growing Self-understanding and my Self-transformation as I move beyond my country and see my tradition in a far perspective; as I see my Self connected to my ancestors in reading hermeneutics, finding the two traditions as parts of my being, as descending sun rays from the Light of lights.

Here is the journey of my transition and philosophical *Bildung*, the cultivation of my soul and my Self-education,<sup>11</sup> in between the Oriental and Western worlds, my learnings and transitions in encounter with the two traditions and fusion of the past and present:



Figure 2. Si-o-se-pol River (Thirty-three Bridges), Isfahan, Iran, Persia.  
<https://iranianholiday.com/top-most-beautiful-bridges-in-iran/>

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<sup>11</sup> Grondin, “Gadamer’s Experience and Theory of Education.”

## Isfahan, away from Isfahan: My Home Forefathers of the Hermeneutic, Existential Philosophy

### *My Traditional Fusion: Transition to My Ancestral, Persian Islamic Treasures*

Reading Western hermeneutic, existential philosophy, I was captivated by the sections on human liminal state in this world, the infinitude of human understanding and interpretation<sup>12</sup> and humans' constant feeling of un-home-likeness, or "*unheimlichkeit*."<sup>13</sup> The existential sections on our transformation and self-understanding through excursion toward Others and reunion with ourselves as more fully Selves,<sup>14</sup> and understanding as something that "happens to us over and above our wanting and doing"<sup>15</sup> highly resonated with my lifelong feelings of not being fully at home and my deep, intimate feelings for Others as parts of one Self—an understanding ingrained in my culture—which echoed the big, ever-present existential mysteries in my mind. Facing other quotes on humans, however, as having no essence, such as Nicholas Davey's note on our new self-understandings: "precisely because we have no essence that we must endeavor to move on,"<sup>16</sup> I found things somehow contradictory. In my readings of hermeneutics, I was haunted by two fundamental questions. The first question enquired the reason for our constant feeling of *unheimlichkeit*, or in my lifelong understanding, the feeling of homelessness. What was that feeling for? And what was the reason for the infinitude of our understanding? My second question was how does excursion to Others, who are different from us, illuminate our Selves to us? How do our encounters with Others and knowing about Others cultivate, refine, and complement our Selves? Or, in Gadamer's metaphor, how does our "fusion of horizons" lead to a more "fully" Self, which is both new and familiar? And create and a new self-understanding through the "unity and integrity of the other"?<sup>17</sup> Also, how could understanding be (fundamentally) possible if there would be no essence to our Selves? All these questions were related to the key

<sup>12</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1975).

<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 233.

<sup>14</sup> Joel Weinsheimer, "Gadamer's Metaphorical Hermeneutics," in *Gadamer and Hermeneutics: Science, Culture, Literature*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (London: Routledge, 1991), 181–201.

<sup>15</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroads, 1986), xvi.

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Davey, *Unquiet Understanding: Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 57.

<sup>17</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2004), 83.

questions of “Who we are” in relation to each Other, “How we understand,” and “Where we are going/moving on in our understandings.” Or, “What is the *telos* of our understandings, the *telos* of our education and our existence?”

Reading hermeneutics, many times I was reminded of some main Islamic principles that I had read, lived, and was raised with in Iran and I was tortured by their absence many times after my transition from Iran—the great emphasis on the Other as the one realizing our Self-understanding, Others as external lights to our being and our inner side, detachment and keeping a distance from our dominant Self, and accepting Others as illuminating our Selves—what I highly relished was echoed in hermeneutic texts but I was disappointed to find practical manifestations in academia and society oftentimes. The beauty and poetic style of the existential texts of hermeneutic philosophy—which dimly echoed rich Persian literature, art, philosophy, and mysticism deep-rooted in my cradle city of art, Isfahan, and in Iran and Persia—made me more restless to dig into my own tradition. I aspired to explore old connections in two vastly far-apart world perspectives. Hermeneutics seemed like a *humane* approach that considered the Other as significant. Islamic philosophy, including mysticism as the fruit of Islamic philosophy,<sup>18</sup> with its delicate and beautiful imprints on Persian culture, art, literature, and philosophy, places a special emphasis on the Other. In Islam, the Other is considered even before the Self and emphasis on Self and “I”ness, or self-centeredness, is considered a “fault” of humanity and a sign of being far from a true human. Humans, as is beautifully put in the masterpiece *Bani Adam* by esteemed Persian poet Sa’di Shirazi (1210–1292), are considered as parts of the same body who belong to each other and share the same pains and joys: “*Adam’s sons are body limbs, to say; For they’re created of the same clay.*”<sup>19</sup> One Self, or a body member, separate from Others, has no real existence or meaning. That is the way human beings, and all beings in the universe, are pictured in Persian philosophy. Self-sacrifice is another key concept in Islamic philosophy that reveals the high status of the Other and the significance of brotherhood and unity in this sacred tradition.

Reading an amazing book, *Pedagogy Left in Peace*,<sup>20</sup> I became more inclined and considered it my responsibility to delve back into the Persian, Islamic sources of my upbringing. Chapter ten of the book, “Learning Not to Speak in Tongues,” points to the ancient ancestors of current Western philosophy, the “hidden,” “silenced,” “tabooed,” even “hated” forefathers of current modern science and philosophy. The

<sup>18</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* (New York: Longman, 1975).

<sup>19</sup> Sa’di Shirazi, *Golestan*, 1258 AD, chapter 1, story 10.

<sup>20</sup> David W. Jardine, *Pedagogy Left in Peace: Cultivating Free Spaces in Teaching and Learning* (New York: Continuum, 2012).

chapter involves an introduction of an allegorical, true story of *The Librarian of Basra*, Alia, who took 30,000 books, including ancient books such as the 700-year-old biography of prophet Mohammad(s), from the library in Basra, Iraq, to her “home” and “heart,” to her friends’ homes at the time of the invasion of Iraq by America. The story is followed by a review of the Dark Ages in the West (roughly 476–1000 CE) when the great wisdoms of ancient Greece, Persia, and Rome were lost in the West and Muslim countries experienced The Golden Age of their intellectual growth. The chapter refers to Islamic heritage as “our *shared* Islamic past,”<sup>21</sup> referring to the great Islamic scholars, including the Persian sages, their contribution to knowledge in the Dark Ages, and their influence on Christian scholarship. The chapter recalls Persian sages such as Farabi (c. 870–950), or “the Second Master” after Aristotle, Ibn Sina (L. Avicenna) (c. 980–1037), the celebrated polymath, my since-childhood hero, and the father of modern medicine, and Ghazali (1058–1111), whose impact on Vico (1668–1744) for his work on imagination and *sapientia poetica*<sup>22</sup> as a source of knowledge creation later affected Gadamer’s formulation of philosophical hermeneutics.<sup>23</sup> *What a magnificent moment!* I could trace the thread of my passion for hermeneutics in my own ancient Persian ancestors.<sup>24</sup> What I had intuited in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics were the echoes of the divine doctrines original to the philosophy of Ancient Iran, Persia, Zoroaster, Greek philosophy, and later Islamic philosophy. I found another secret for my gravitation to Gadamer’s philosophy.

My shift to my ancient home philosophy, my home tradition and history, is presented in Figure 2. The picture presents the famous bridge in my hometown Isfahan—Sio se pol River (Thirty-three Bridges)—with reflections of the bridge in the river. My shift to the past, the mirror image of the bridge in the water, revealed the past as the root and the key to the present; it revealed the present as echoing tradition, as reflecting the Other, which is a root tradition and an ignored Other. The picture mirrors the hidden past that I felt and traced from my Persian tradition in Western hermeneutics.

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<sup>21</sup> Jardine, *Pedagogy Left in Peace*, 205.

<sup>22</sup> Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. and ed. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

<sup>23</sup> Jardine, “Youth Need Images for Their Imaginations and for the Formation of Their Memories,” in *Pedagogy Left in Peace*, chapter 8.

<sup>24</sup> Similar to my notice of the traces of Persian art in Roman historical sights.

*My shift to my tradition was illuminating more invisible parts of my existence; I found my Self moving in between the mirror image of the past and current philosophy, in between my Home tradition and the echoes of my Home tradition in hermeneutics.*

David W. Jardine reminds us of ALL of our past ancestors—Greek, Persian, and Muslim—and highlights their contribution to the current state of knowledge.<sup>25</sup> He describes the “mutuality” within which East and West became what they are,<sup>26</sup> and views our current tradition as existing in the “multifariousness” of all our voices.<sup>27</sup> Jardine refers to the mass pillage of over 170,000 items from the Iraq museum by American troops in 2003,<sup>28</sup> which somehow reveals the inhuman transfer of knowledge from ancient Persia to America, a recurring pillage of Persia since very ancient times.<sup>29</sup> The picture of Islam depicted by the chapter and the book is a true image of Islamic tradition that does not match the popular, televised image that is known, and many times followed blindly, in the West.<sup>30</sup>

Finding the reasons for my intuitive understanding of the closeness of Gadamer’s philosophy to my Persian, Islamic tradition, and the chain of connections between my chosen research philosophy and my ancestors’ philosophical orientation, the absence of key Muslim and Persian philosophers and scholars in most current scientific and philosophical texts (as the hidden roots mirrored in the river); and more importantly, my suffering for some academic and societal tensions, injustice, lack of attention and support, and the global clashes with the Muslims, Iranians, and the Muslim world, I deemed it my duty to delve down into my own background, my own past, and our Collective Self for my research, and for our awareness. I embarked on exploring some past roots for the present (Figure 2) and reconciling the two far apart mother-and-son traditions in my research.

In the following, I summarize part of a “shadowed” treasure that I explored in my transition, which directed my Self-cultivation and provided answers to my basic hermeneutic and existential questions. The final goals for answering my questions and re-connecting the two traditions in my research and paper have been to encourage

<sup>25</sup> Jardine, *Pedagogy Left in Peace*. (Ancient Iran was still missing.)

<sup>26</sup> David Geoffrey Smith, “‘The Farthest West Is but the Farthest East’: The Long Way of Oriental/Occidental Engagement,” in *New Horizons in Curriculum: Eastern Thought, Educational Insights*, ed. Claudia Eppert and Hongyu Wang (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006), 1–34.

<sup>27</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), 284.

<sup>28</sup> Jardine, *Pedagogy Left in Peace*, 210.

<sup>29</sup> A reminder of historical lootings and fires of Persian libraries during wars with Greeks, Moghuls, etc.

<sup>30</sup> Jardine, *Pedagogy Left in Peace*, chapter 3.

inclusion and inspire further reconciliatory approaches in education for creating peace, in theory and practice, in academic and social contexts.



Figure 3. Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Naqshe-Jahan Square, Isfahan, Iran, Persia.  
<https://www.persiaadvisor.travel/attraction/sheikh-lotfollah-lotf-allah-mosque/>

### **Illuminationist Tradition: Suhrawardi and the Doctrine of the Primacy of Essence**

Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (1154–1191), known as Shaikh al-Ishraq or the master of illumination, revived the hidden, ancient Iranian wisdom or theosophy, much of which was destroyed during the invasion of ancient Iran by Alexander, the Moguls, and others.<sup>31</sup> Suhrawardi largely replaced Ishraq for the peripatetic philosophy, which was already criticized by Ghazali.

Suhrawardi's works have not been translated into the Western world until recently by a few scholars including Henry Corbin. The school of Ishraq, hence, has

<sup>31</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Suhrawardi, Ibn 'Arabi* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1964).

remained almost unknown outside Iran. Suhrawardi's masterpieces include *The Theosophy of the Orient of Light* and *Hikmat al-Isbraq*, with Ishraqi doctrines in Arabic, and *Partaw-nameh* (Treatise on Illumination) in Persian. The term Ishraq itself is an Arabic term associated with both the East and the world of light, or illumination. Following Avicenna, Suhrawardi uses the sacred geographical base of Ishraqi doctrine and its inherent symbolism of direction with horizontal dimension of Orient–Occident converted into a vertical one. Orient is thus used to refer to the world of pure lights or archangels devoid of matter and darkness and invisible to mortal eyes beyond the visible sky. Middle occident refers to visible astronomical heavens where light is combined with darkness, and Occident refers to the earthly existence, or the world of matter or darkness. It is within this geographic symbolism that the language of Suhrawardi can be understood in his visionary narratives. In his *Tale of the Occidental Exile*, a spiritual vision adopted from Avicenna's Hayy Ibn Yaqzan, the exile of the man in the West (the terrestrial prison) is visioned as his fall into a bottomless well, the dark abode of ignorance, which is located in the far West. The man, seeker of Truth, embarks on his vertical trip to the celestial abode, aspiring his ascension from the shadows of the well, the dogma of the contingent world, to the sight of the Sun in his original home, the Orient of Lights.<sup>32</sup>

The basic tenets of Ishraqi school are mentioned in *Hikmat al-Isbraq* (532–1186), a book of remarkable literary style that begins with logic and reasoning and ends with spiritual union and ecstasy. Unlike Avicenna and the Aristotelians who assumed essence as dependent on primary existence, Suhrawardi considered essence as primary and viewed existence as an accident added to essence. Suhrawardi's view of the principality of essence (*isalat al-mahiyat*) was later criticized by Mulla Sadra who again substituted a metaphysics of existence for metaphysics of essence. Suhrawardi criticized Aristotle for not following "Platonic ideas" and the belief in the world of archetypes and higher orders of being.<sup>33</sup> Similar to Avicenna, Mulla Sadra, and Plato, under the influence of the wisdom of ancient Iran (*Hikmat Khosravani*), Suhrawardi sees *intuition* as a divine gate to the unseen and the things that reason is not able to immediately achieve. He calls inner intuition *Ishraq*, complementing the rational wisdom. Suhrawardi's angelology, concerning the angelic substances between this shadowy world and the Supreme Light, plays a key part in Ishraqi doctrine. Human being has his guardian angel who resides in the angelic world. Suhrawardi considers a previous existence for each soul in the angelic world before man descends in the domain of the

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<sup>32</sup> Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*.

<sup>33</sup> Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*.

body. Upon descending in the domain of body, the soul of man, which is immortal and of angelic core, is divided into two parts, one remaining in heaven and the other descended into the dungeon of the body. Human's distance from his angelic soul is the cause of his wander, as a lost child or *alienated spirit*,<sup>34</sup> in the complex labyrinth of his terrestrial abode in search of his angelic half in celestial abode.<sup>35</sup> The image of Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque from Naqshe-Jahan Square (Figure 3) of the sunbeams illuminating the art, spiritual colors, and the words of the interior resonate the Illuminationist tradition that enlightens human's uncanny feeling of un-home-likeness, or *unheimlichkeit*, the constant existential feeling of yearning of human soul in departure from his angelic half and his aspiration for ascension from the dogma of the contingent world to the Light of lights.

*The Illuminationist tradition enlightened my human Self, illuminated the root for my constant, unsettling feeling of being away from HOME. The sunbeams to my angelic Self illuminated my far-apart mortal Self in my worldly structure, the dungeon of my body seeking the lost light of its existence. I surrender my Self to the lights, to the beams leading to my Origin, to my place of peace, my celestial abode.*

The Ishraq school is the treasure house of Islamic wisdom, comprising symbols from many traditions including Zoroastrianism, Pythagoreanism, Platonism (influenced by Zoroastrianism and ancient Persian Wisdom), and Hermeticism added to Islamic symbols and *Qor'anic* evidences. Suhrawardi often turned to the wisdom of ancient Persia, whose sages were direct inheritors of the wisdom revealed to Hermes. In his symbolism of light, Suhrawardi relies on Zoroastrianism while not following the esoteric teachings of the Zoroastrians. Suhrawardi identified himself as a reviver of the hidden tradition in the Zoroastrian community that believed in the Divine Principle. Through the universality of Islamic philosophy, Suhrawardi integrated many diverse elements from different forms of traditional wisdom, revealing the *transcendent unity* underlying different versions of Truth. This integration is crucial for revealing the underlying unity and the unified basis of different philosophical thoughts and traditions. The often-missed attention to the underlying transcendent unity of different traditions reflected in Suhrawardi's Illuminationist tradition, unlike hermeneutics and most modern Western traditions of divine basis, can lead to re-deeming the lost unity in between far-apart traditions and humans.

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<sup>34</sup> Hegel in Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2014).

<sup>35</sup> Hegel in Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2014).

Considering himself as the unifier of ancient Divine Wisdom, Suhrawardi believed that Divine Wisdom is universal and perennial, and existed in different forms among the ancient Persians, Hindus, Babylonians, and Greeks up to the time of Aristotle who put an end to this tradition by limiting philosophy to its rationalistic dimension. According to Suhrawardi, like many other medieval authors, wisdom, or theosophy, was revealed to man by Hermes, or Idris the father of philosophy, who was known as the founder of philosophy and science in the Middle Ages. Hermes's Wisdom was divided into two branches, one came to Persia and the other to Egypt, and then from Egypt into Greece. Finally, the wisdom from Persia and Greece entered into Islamic civilization. Suhrawardi considered the early Sufis as his most immediate predecessors in the Islamic world. The master of Ishraq unified the wisdom of Zoroaster and Plato, which were inter-rooted and once issued forth from the same source.<sup>36</sup>

Dating to the pre-Aristotelian period when intellectual intuition existed and philosophy was not fully rationalized, Ishraq offers an assembly of discursive reasoning and intellectual intuition,<sup>37</sup> a philosophy that synthesizes rational intuition with intuitional reason and considers both as the two eyes required for elevated positions in society.<sup>38</sup> Connected to Figure 3, Suhrawardi redirected the beams into the sun-deserted house of reason. The existential and spiritual aspects of hermeneutics, another tradition of mystical and theological underpinnings—involving the feelings of homelessness or *unheimlichkeit*, and *Bildung* or human cultivation of God as an *alienated spirit*<sup>39</sup> in this world—resemble the intuitional aspects of understanding. Tapping into deep essential and existential understandings of humans, these traditions transcend the rational aspects of human understanding. It remains a key task in education to unravel and apply the intellectual intuitional knowledge ingrained in traditions and encourage reflection on this ignored knowledge for general application, addressing some essential needs of humans and re-connecting fragmented individuals.

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<sup>36</sup> Hegel in Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2014).

<sup>37</sup> Hegel in Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2014).

<sup>38</sup> Muhammed Kamal, *Mulla Sadra's Transcendental Philosophy* (London: Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> Hegel in Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2014).

## The Light of Lights and Ontology

In Suhrawardi's school, light, in various degrees of intensity, composes all reality. Everything is made evident by light and nothing is more clear and evident than light.<sup>40</sup> Light for Surawardi is not just the sensible and physical light. Light in Suhrawardi's experiential philosophy implies "to see, to experience and to know",<sup>41</sup> light is imagination, perception, any new understanding, and mind is the highest light before the Light of lights who is the pure light that illuminates all other lights. The greatest manifestation of light wisdom is in the *Holy Qor'an* with highest recommendation and emphasis on human reasoning and contemplation. Reasoning and reflection are considered the key tools for understanding the existence and Being in the *Holy Qor'an*.<sup>42</sup>

In Suhrawardi's terms, the pure light is the *Light of lights* (nur al-anwar), whose intensity blinds the eyes, which is the Divine Essence. The universe merely consists of degrees of light and darkness with the Supreme Light as the source of all existence. The ontological status of all beings, then, depends on their degree of proximity to the Supreme Light, or their illumination.<sup>43</sup> All beings are an outflow in a descending order of waning intensity from their Origin, their Origin that is not affected by their multiplicity and gradation of light.<sup>44</sup> The signs of the Light of lights, or His "vice-regents," are manifested in every domain, the Sun in the sky, fire (as a form of light) among the elements, and the lordly or *signeural* light (al-nur al-ispahbadi) in the soul of man.<sup>45</sup> Human's *Bildung* or rising to the universal, and the Light of lights, requires the individual's openness to others' views.<sup>46</sup> Human task of universality and *Bildung*, approximating to the Supreme Light and ascension to their Origin, entails Otherness; it demands devotion of self through sacrificing the individuality, moving beyond the rational side and alienating oneself from immediate desires and personal needs and interests.<sup>47</sup>

The soul of man, in whatever the degree of perfection, is "seeking the Supreme Light at each moment of his life," he is involved in cultivating his Self and *Bildung*, even if he is not aware of the goal of his endeavor.<sup>48</sup> Illumination or the rise of man to

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<sup>40</sup> Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*.

<sup>41</sup> Kamal, *Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy*, 17.

<sup>42</sup> Ebrahimi Dinani, n.d.

<sup>43</sup> Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*.

<sup>44</sup> Kamal, *Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy*.

<sup>45</sup> Kamal, *Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy*.

<sup>46</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2014).

<sup>47</sup> Hegel in Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2014).

<sup>48</sup> Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 76.

the sight of “Light” involves Self-refinement, reducing the distance between the self and the Light of lights (Other). This *Bildung* and proximity of lights or the essences to the Essence or the Light of lights entails “knowledge by presence” (ilm al-huduri) that is an immediate and intuitive mode of cognition and understanding.<sup>49</sup>

As the sunbeams extend from the Light of lights (Figure 3), the rays enliven and animate the words and architecture. They illuminate the mind of the artist, and the cultivating being of the artist, to the eyes of the beholder; they refine and educate the being of the beholder.

*Decrypting the artistic codes under the pure light, my Self glorifies: the light penetrates my being. . . in dialogue with the illuminating words, my Self rejoice in fusion and animating unity with the artist and the illuminating Light.*

*My alienated spirit is approaching home. . . in circular structure of my Bildung,<sup>50</sup> in my excursion from home and familiarity into the strange and unfamiliar, in my reunion in becoming home in the alien, I am becoming my Self, I am re-understanding my Self, seeing more of my Self, within a broader horizon.*

### ***Echoes of “Fusion of Horizons” and Understanding as Self-understanding***

The illuminationist method of understanding is based on intuitive knowledge with an immediate grasp of the object (of understanding) by the subject (what is called *agkhhinoia* by Aristotle<sup>51</sup>). This involves a special mode of perception, with the psychological state of the subject—the man’s mood of being—as a key determinant in obtaining the intuitive knowledge. This mode of understanding thus involves the unity of knowing and being, with the light of knowing *transforming* the being of the man.<sup>52</sup> The transforming fusion of the sunbeams with the soul of the art (Figure 3), the fusion of the sunbeamed artistic structures with my Self, changes my being. Unravelling the sacred, enlightened ciphers, re-meeting the other in the language of art,<sup>53</sup> my being illuminates in light of perceiving the codes, my unknown being is enlightened.

<sup>49</sup> Kamal, *Mulla Sadra’s Transcendental Philosophy*.

<sup>50</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2014).

<sup>51</sup> Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*.

<sup>52</sup> Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*.

<sup>53</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 235. See also Gadamer, *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*.

The view of knowledge as “the form of the thing in the mind,” which is the same as its form in sense perception,<sup>54</sup> where the borders between the mind and sense blur, is a fundamental principle in the philosophy of illumination.<sup>55</sup> The illuminationist method of obtaining knowledge through the unity between the subject and object (Self and Other) involves Self-realization. Self-realization in knowing an object and gaining knowledge, or “the unification of the knower and the known and the mind,” is a central concept highlighted by Suhrawardi and also the main figures of the School of Isfahan including Mulla Sadra,<sup>56</sup> which are introduced next. The fusion of the horizons of the being of the knowing subject and the object (text) of understanding involves developing the spirit of dialogical openness to the Other, to the text, and any object of understanding. Understanding or fusion of horizons involves respecting other than personal expectations and preferences.<sup>57</sup> Knowing an object, or understanding and fusion of horizons, requires a willingness to open ourselves to other viewpoints. Understanding and Self-educating requires *reconciling* our view with the Other’s view on the subject matter. In knowing an object, in knowing an Other, we integrate our Self with the Other and understand our Self through integrating and understanding the Other.<sup>58</sup>



Figure 4. Naqsh-e-Jahan Square, Isfahan, Iran, Persia.  
<https://www.iranroute.com/sights/452/naqsh-e-jahan-square>

<sup>54</sup> Suhrawardi, *Opera II*, 73–74.

<sup>55</sup> Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*.

<sup>56</sup> Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*, 639.

<sup>57</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2014).

<sup>58</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2004).

### School of Isfahan

The School of Illumination, advocating the primacy of essence, thrived in Persia, especially in Isfahan during the Safavid dynasty (1501–1736). The combined philosophical (mystical) and rational orientation of Safavid sages—including Mir Damad, entitled as the “Third Teacher” following Aristotle and Farabi, Mir Findiriski, and Shaykh Baha’i—marks the intellectual tradition of the School of Isfahan.<sup>59</sup> The three sages considered intuitive knowledge superior to discursive or rationalistic knowledge,<sup>60</sup> the way that the great poet Molana (Rumi) saw doomed the battle of eyes of the head with the eyes of the inner:

*The eyes of the head with the eyes of the inner secret quarrelled.*

*No need to prove that the eyes of the inner secret became victorious.*

چشم بر با چشم سرد جنگ بود      غالب آمد چشم سر حمت نمود

The picture of Naqshe-Jahan Square (Figure 4), the key place in Isfahan, represents Isfahan involving the School of Isfahan in a wider perspective of its rational and intuitional sides. The harmonic structures represent the rationality and the light overspreading the whole square and the structures embodying the encompassing light of intuition. A shadowed structure on one side symbolizes lightless rationality, which is artistic but not as intelligible. While displaying the magnitude of the square, the picture presents the artistic, mystical, and philosophical merits of the city of Isfahan.

*The enlightened square, the unity of the light and harmonic structures within a widened perspective is my enlarged horizon, the horizon of my being, my full being of body and soul, reason and intuition. Getting closer to my Self, learning more about my deserted soul, I feel the lightness of my enlightened Self, I feel the outflow of my being levitating freely as the waterdrops of the free fountain in the square, dancing in the air under the shining, enlightening sun.*

<sup>59</sup> A fresco in the ruins of Safavid royal building in Isfahan nicely reveals the three forms of discourse in a story on friendship of the three thinkers. See Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*.

<sup>60</sup> Ghazali and thinking heart, as an organ for both discursive and intuitive knowledge (Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). See also Kamal, *Mulla Sadra’s Transcendental Philosophy*.

*In my road of Bildung, the highest and most harmonious development of [my] powers to a complete and consistent whole,<sup>61</sup> I find my Self harmonized in accord of the artistic structures, under the illuminating light, the light harmonizing my profound experience of encounter with the enlightened art, with an ancient and (un)familiar part of my Self. . . celebrating my endless fusion, the formative process of my reconciling<sup>62</sup> with the harmonious art, with the artistic square, with the whole world around me, with Others.*

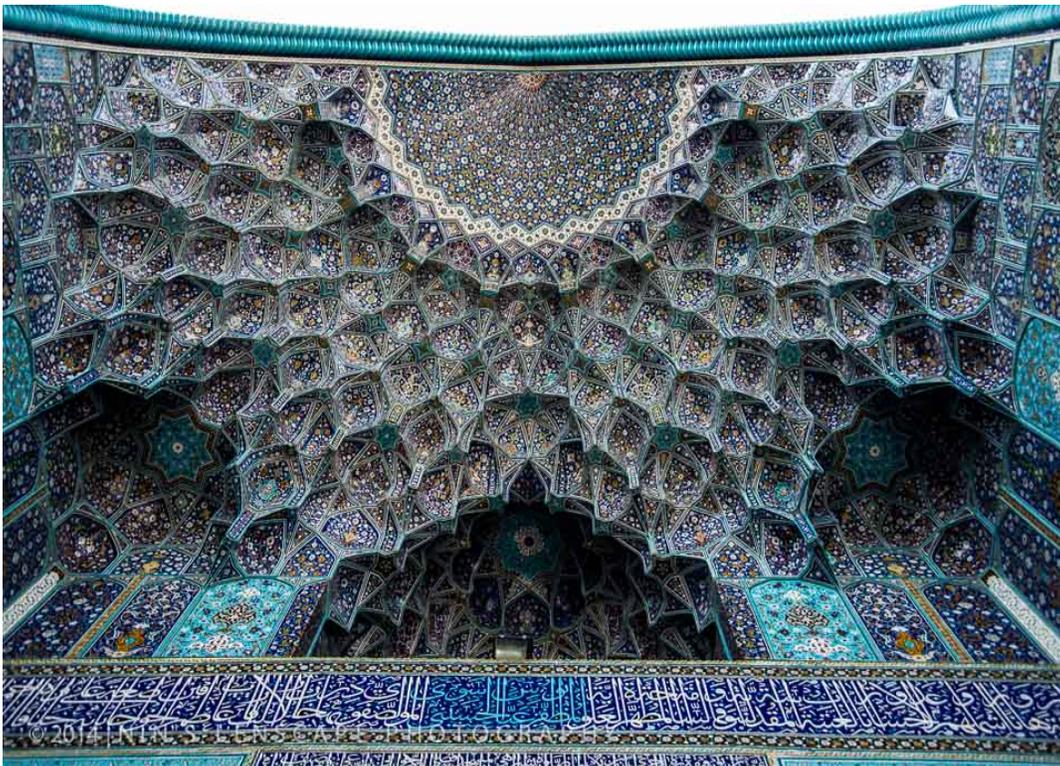


Figure 5. The Grand Entrance to Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Isfahan, Iran, Persia.  
<https://www.iranasia.com/sheikh-lotfollah-mosque/>

### **Mulla Sadra: The Doctrine of the Primacy of Being**

Sadr al-Din Shirazi or Mulla Sadra (1572–1640) is the foremost, celebrated philosopher of post-Avicennan Islamic philosophy and Safavid Persia (1501–1722). Mulla Sadra

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<sup>61</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action* ed. John Wyon Burrow (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1993).

<sup>62</sup> Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*.

represents the full maturity of Islamic philosophy.<sup>63</sup> The grand entrance to Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque in Naqshe-Jahan Square of Isfahan (Figure 5) represents the innovation, complexity, and magnitude of Mulla Sadra's comprehensive philosophy. Mulla Sadra's philosophical school, called *Transcendent Wisdom* or *Theosophy* (al-hikmat al-muta'aliyah: higher Wisdom) introduced a number of new concepts and formulations, some of which were considered revolutionary and highly innovative within the broad Islamic tradition. His most significant contribution to Islamic philosophy is the study of Wujud (existence) and its applications in different fields. Mulla Sadra epitomizes a "paradigm shift from the metaphysics of fixed substances proposed by Aristotle (which created numerous problems for Muslim Peripatetics) to the analysis of existence as the ultimate ground and dynamic source of all things."<sup>64</sup> Wujud in Mulla Sadra's philosophy composes the reality and truth of beings and a key for a proper philosophical analysis to begin and end with. The idea of dynamic existence somehow corresponds to the concept of Self-transformation and *becoming* theorized in hermeneutic phenomenology. Similar to hermeneutic phenomenology, Mulla Sadra defines Wujud or existence as being dynamic. He also considers Wujud/existence as being a dynamic and multifaceted reality. By reality (*baghibat*) of existence, Mulla Sadra does not mean its concept (*mafhum*), which is the mental representation of existence, but the reality by which all things come to exist, an existence beyond mental representation, one that is "dynamic, continuous, self-renewing, and self-effusing."<sup>65</sup> Existence involves three different modalities: of intellect, of soul, and of dark with no perception. All modalities involve hierarchies, from One to the many, with one single reality travelling through the whole existence, leaving infinite shades and modes, named as "unity in plurality" (*al-wahdah fi al-kathrah*) by Ibn Arabi. Wujud for Mulla Sadra is the fundamental reality that composes all the things.<sup>66</sup> Besides the reality of existence, the key aspect of hierarchies and shades in modalities of existence distinguishes Mulla Sadra's philosophy of existence from the existential philosophy of being proposed in hermeneutic phenomenology.

Mulla Sadra rationalized and perfected existentialism in Islamic philosophy. Compared to existential hermeneutics, there is a special place for human, among other beings, in Mulla Sadra's philosophy of existence. As the miniature of other beings,

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<sup>63</sup> Mulla Sadra, *Metaphysical Penetrations: A Parallel English–Arabic Text*, trans. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed. Ibrahim Kalin (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2014).

<sup>64</sup> Mulla Sadra, *Metaphysical Penetrations*, xvii.

<sup>65</sup> Mulla Sadra, *Metaphysical Penetrations*, xviii.

<sup>66</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Happiness and the Attainment of Happiness: An Islamic Perspective," *Journal of Law and Religion* 29, no. 1 (2014): 76–91.

man is considered as the door to knowing other beings: upon man's creation the Source of Being praised Himself as the best of creators: "Blessed is God the best of creators."<sup>67</sup> Beings reach perfection in human existence as the highest form of Being in the realm of multiplicity beneath the realm of unity.<sup>68</sup> Man's involvement with the beings, though, has many times distracted him from his sublime status among all other beings and from the Source of his existence.<sup>69</sup>

Mulla Sadra proposes a dynamic cosmology of gradational ontology—different from Aristotle's metaphysics of a static world and fixed substances—that conceptualizes the whole world as a living being. Mulla Sadra used his novel, well-known concept of "substantial motion" (*al-harakat al-jawhariyyah*), which considers all existing beings including substances in constant change towards their ultimate goal or *telos* (ghayah).<sup>70</sup> In this perspective, every moment, human being is changed into a new Self<sup>71</sup>:

*After thousands of 'I's and 'we's      I'm surprised at who I am!!*  
(Molana, *Divan-e Shams*, Ode 1397)

Gadamer's reference to the theological undertones of *Bildung* of humans as beings "in motion," creatures whose essence resides in ceaseless negotiation and transformation,<sup>72</sup> echoes the "substantial motion" in Mulla Sadra's conceptualization of human being and existence. The major distinction of Mulla Sadra's philosophy of existence is the recognition of the ultimate goal or *telos* for the substantial motion of existence. The identification of the end goal of the "substantial motion" of existence, including interconnected human beings, highlights and gives substantial meaning to life and education with and through others. Education of a *telos* for human *Bildung* and Self-cultivation reinforces the necessity of openness to others in our life journey and for achievement of our final goal. This again can strengthen human ties in their educational and life journeys towards their original status.

Mulla Sadra proposes a deeper conceptualization of existence. He defines changing substances in terms of "degrees of existentiating" and conceptualizes various levels and planes of Wujud (existence). Mulla Sadra's "cosmological vitalism" is based

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<sup>67</sup> *Holy Qur'an*, 23:14.

<sup>68</sup> Mulla Sadra, *Al-Asfar al-Arba'a*, vol. 1 (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1999).

<sup>69</sup> Ebrahimi Dinani, n.d.

<sup>70</sup> Nasr, "Happiness and the Attainment of Happiness: An Islamic Perspective."

<sup>71</sup> Ebrahimi Dinani, n.d.

<sup>72</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1989), xxx.

on his understanding of existence as the creative Act of God. Accordingly, all that exists shares the “vital qualities” of existence: life, intelligence, volition, and goodness, in a hierarchical order: “The abode of existence is one, and the whole universe is a big living being. Its dimensions are conjoined with one another. . . . All existence, from its highest to the lowest and from its lowest to the highest. . . all things are united in spite of their external diversity. . . *the whole universe is one single animate being* (*‘hayawan wabid’*) just like a single soul.”<sup>73</sup> This fundamental idea of the interconnectedness of all existence despite the external diversity necessitates an openness to others for sustained substantial motion and attainment of *telos*. Speaking of human beings, practicing openness to others is a spiritually transformative phenomenon. Becoming open to others involves re-unifying our Selves with Others in our external diversity. In our reunion with one-an-other, with humans and other beings, we expose ourselves to our highest growth; we approach our greatest *Bildung* and cultivation of our Selves in our journey to our realm of unity with Others. The spiritually transformative and Self-cultivating experience of reunion with other humans, and other beings, can relieve our painful sense of un-home-likeness, or *unheimlichkeit*, in our confused and in-between stage in this world.

Mulla Sadra’s fundamental conceptualization of the universe as one animate being seems a most significant point of divergence from existential hermeneutics. It draws attention to the substantial interconnectedness of our beings and the significance of our openness to diverse others and other traditions not only for our Self-growth and perfection, but also for our survival and relief from our ever-present, painful existential feelings of this world. The inclusion and application of this key, universal aspect of our being in education (philosophical pedagogy and education in general) can fundamentally enlighten many biased and Self-centered perspectives, which ultimately can bring about an overall healing experience for everyone troubled by human tensions and fragmentation. In philosophical pedagogy, such enlightenment demands a shift towards an inter-traditional education of philosophical thoughts and traditions. Enriching philosophical education by fundamental and valuable concepts from other neglected traditions can reform and elevate education and unify humans of diverse, inter-rooted traditions. Mulla Sadra’s existential proposal of one reality travelling through the entirety of existence re-affirms the interconnectedness of human beings and the elevating and relieving outcomes of similar education for human beings.

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<sup>73</sup> Mulla Sadra, *Al-Asfar al-Arba’a*, 342–50, cited in Nasr, “Happiness and the Attainment of Happiness”.

Mulla Sadra regards Wujud/existence as the most manifest of all evident things through presence.<sup>74</sup> The Necessary Being is perfect and emanates upon all other beings or contingent and deficient essences—existences whose Wujud (existence) depend upon the Necessary Being as their origin and end.<sup>75</sup> The Necessary Being is hidden for its pervasive presence but is seen through the contingent beings that are illuminated by His light.<sup>76</sup> All beings are contingent essences of different grades of perfection and deficiency that find their full completion with Necessary Being. The relation between Necessary Being and contingent beings is similar to the relation between the rays of the sun that are dark in themselves and become illuminated by the sun (as the sun illuminating the art in Figures 3 and 4). The contingent beings, different in their proximity and distance from the Necessary Being, are all unified in proceeding from the Necessary Being.<sup>77</sup> Similar to the rays of the sun, contingent beings are not Being, but at the same time are nothing but being. Being and its multiple modalities belong together. Unity and multiplicity are two different aspects of the same reality. Mulla Sadra refers to this identity between Being and beings as *tashkik al-wujud*,<sup>78</sup> or the systematic ambiguity of Being. All beings are of the same essence, light; they also are multiple and represent different shades of light in their proximity to the Sun. Every being is thus both identical and different, eternal and temporal.<sup>79</sup>

In proceeding from the Necessary Being, we contingent humans are unified. In moving together, we regain peace in our original unity. Being dark and unknown in ourselves and without our interdependencies, together we reach our full potential, our full light and universalized Self. Our Again, our *Bildung*, and Self-elevation depends on our interconnectedness and being receptive to others. With others as multiple modalities of our being, as enlightening parts of our being, we reach the fullest version of our Self. In our dialogical integration with others, we re-cognize our Selves with initially alien Others and develop a universal point of view that makes us feel at home in difference and plurality.<sup>80</sup> In our circular movement of understanding from familiar Self to the alien Other, we end in reunion with our Self and becoming home in the

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<sup>74</sup> Nasr, “Happiness and the Attainment of Happiness.”

<sup>75</sup> Nasr, “Happiness and the Attainment of Happiness.”

<sup>76</sup> Mulla Sadra considers Being as possessing letters that are the keys to the invisible world, from their combinations results “the book of existence” (kitab al-wujud) (Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*). Similarly, the whole world is viewed in Ibn Sina’s works as a sacred text (Jardine, *Pedagogy Left in Peace*) that is written and given existence by the Necessary Being. See also Ebrahimi Dinani, n.d.

<sup>77</sup> Nasr, “Happiness and the Attainment of Happiness.”

<sup>78</sup> Mulla Sadra, *Al-Asfar al-Arba’a*, 35.

<sup>79</sup> Kamal, *Mulla Sadra’s Transcendental Philosophy*.

<sup>80</sup> Hegel in Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2014).

alien.<sup>81</sup> In fusion of our horizons with Others, we identify a new, *unrecognized* possibility of our Self<sup>82</sup> and approach a fuller version of our Self.

### Temporal Origination of the World: Process of Perfection of Essences as Substantial Motions

Inspired by several *Qor'anic* verses such as: “Thou seest the mountains and thinkest them to be firmly fixed; but they shall pass away as clouds pass away,”<sup>83</sup> or “If He so will, He can remove you and put [in your place] a new creation,”<sup>84</sup> Mulla Sadra suggests the key theory of *substantial motion and incessant renewal of the world*. In Mulla Sadra’s theosophy, the whole world including all corporeal things—celestial or elemental, body or soul—have temporal and renewable existence.<sup>85</sup> The world (or Jahan in Persian meaning jumping and moving forward) is always restless and in motion. Human as a being among all other beings is in “a permanent state of change, flow, renewal, rupture, cessation, and destruction.”<sup>86</sup> It is through this incessant renewal that the temporal and eternal are connected: Wujud (existence) of nature, which is gradual, subsists in its generation, and its stability lies in its renewal. The Being who possesses permanence and stability is the One who originated human beings among other beings whose essence and ipseity<sup>87</sup> are in “incessant renewal.”<sup>88</sup> It is through this incessant motion and understanding that man ascends to its original divine status. Understanding, involving mind and soul, involves becoming divine, or homecoming. Our *Bildung* and Self-perfection happens through our ceaseless self-renewal in dialogue with Others, in fusion of our horizons with Others<sup>89</sup> towards our original status.

Mulla Sadra’s theory<sup>90</sup> of incessant, substantial motion of the world and the ipseity of man as in motion revives this verse from the *Holy Qor'an*: “Did We fail in

<sup>81</sup> “Alien” and “strange” are used interchangeably for “unfamiliarity.”

<sup>82</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2014).

<sup>83</sup> “Al-Naml,” *Holy Qor'an*, 27:88.

<sup>84</sup> “Ibrahim,” *Holy Qor'an*, 14:19.

<sup>85</sup> Nasr, “Happiness and the Attainment of Happiness,” 88–89.

<sup>86</sup> Nasr, “Happiness and the Attainment of Happiness.”

<sup>87</sup> Ipseity involves selfhood: both nature and self, involving self, identity, nature, and essence all at the same time (Merriam Webster).

<sup>88</sup> Nasr, “Happiness and the Attainment of Happiness.”

<sup>89</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2004).

<sup>90</sup> It is much relevant to the world I am situated in as a Muslim researcher, related to my understanding of what is Islam as modernity and the common false understanding of Islam; how Islam deeply embraces a full version of becoming; and the concept of temporal and dynamic understanding and self-understanding.

the first creation? But they are in confusion over a new creation,”<sup>91</sup> which views the ever renewal and creation of man as the act of Supreme Being. Islamic philosophy or theosophy, hence, represents modernity. There is no oldness involved in Islamic philosophy, which attests to the incessant creation and the constant renewal of human mind. The world is always new for those who reflect, as is advised in the *Holy Qor’an*. In Mulla Sadra’s theory, Islam defines modernity. It defines and encourages thinking, innovating, and moving forth. False, modern propaganda on the contradiction between Islam and modernity reveals the prevalent ignorance of the true nature and modern substance of Islam. Mulla Sadra’s theory provokes man to learn constantly and be prepared to face new things. The famous verse “He is the first and the last”<sup>92</sup> reveals the novelty of Being manifested in each renewal and creation of beings and the timelessness of His presence,<sup>93</sup> as beautifully composed by Molana:

*One deep inside thought of the man would overturn worlds of hundreds*

Through constant renewal of Wujud, origination is realized gradually (through our deep and gradual understandings). *Bildung* and continual evolutionary change and illumination of man (along all other beings) towards perfection and Light happens in gaining a sublime understanding that glorifies his passage to the world of Light and the Source of being: “The true life is in the Abode of the Hereafter.”<sup>94</sup>

The substantial motion and incessant renewal of Wujud is a process of perfection of contingent essences. This world of incessant motion is thus a temporal abode for transferring the contingent essence of human beings through constant motion. It is not a permanent abode or home of fixed substances to stabilize. This world is a station on the man’s circular road of understanding and perfection towards his Origin.<sup>95</sup> The sense of un-home-likeness, or *unheimlichkeit*, exists in worldly excursion of human towards his original abode of peace. In his excursion from his Self and circle of his Self-understanding, human re-unites with his original Self with the Other, ascends to a Self in union with Others and resumes his Collective Self.

The soul of human as a contingent being is created for subsistence and not annihilation. Human soul, as a stranger imprisoned in his mortal body, subsists in

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<sup>91</sup> *Holy Qor’an*, 15:50.

<sup>92</sup> *Holy Qor’an*, 57:3.

<sup>93</sup> Ebrahimi Dinani, n.d.

<sup>94</sup> *Holy Qor’an*, 29:64.

<sup>95</sup> Ebrahimi Dinani, n.d.

passage from one abode to another.<sup>96</sup> Having lost his Origin in this world, for his special spiritual status among other beings, human is wandering for his true place of sublimity, a place free of contradiction and plurality, a home of unity.<sup>97</sup> As Rumi says in his *Masnavi Manavi* “We were one gem like sunshine”:

*We are from above and above we go to,                      We are from ocean to ocean we go to.*  
(Molana, *Divan-e Shams*, Ode 1674)

The opening figure of the grand entrance to Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque (Figure 5) symbolizes Mulla Sadra’s comprehensive philosophy that was the fruit of his study of thousands of years of theosophy back to Ibn Sina and earlier ancient Iran/Persia. The picture represents full maturity of Islamic philosophy, and the complex interconnectedness of beings, their ceaseless motion and fusion of horizons with Others, their constant Self-renewal in their incessant motion towards unity and oneness.

*The grand entrance of Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque reflects the complexity of my Self-understandings in encounter with Others in different places before and after my transition. My Self-understandings in between my HOME tradition and hermeneutics are approaching their common roots, creating joyful emotions of unity between my two Selves before and after leaving Home, unity of my Self before my excursion from Home and my Self after reunion with my Home tradition in encounter with hermeneutics, my Selves being cultivated in transforming fusion with the Other. In my ongoing fusion with the Other and my incessant Self-renewal, parts of my Selves are approaching one another, they are uniting outside my Homeland. I am approaching my “Home, away from HOME.”*

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<sup>96</sup> Nasr, “Happiness and the Attainment of Happiness.”

<sup>97</sup> Ebrahimi Dinani, n.d.



Figure 6. Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque (Interior), Naqshe-Jahan-Square, Isfahan, Iran, Persia.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Sheikh-Lotfollah-Mosque-in-Isfahan-Iran-under-protection-of-UNESCO-built-in-the\\_fig3\\_43336273](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Sheikh-Lotfollah-Mosque-in-Isfahan-Iran-under-protection-of-UNESCO-built-in-the_fig3_43336273)

### Home, away from HOME

### Isfahan, away from Isfahan

*My hard, curious departure from Home, to a new wonderland, made me see my Home in a brighter light, I feel closer to my Home. . . my journey unraveled the secret to my mysterious being, my familiar and unknown Self, my restless being. My journey made me see my restlessness everywhere, as in all Others. I felt the universal, shared pain of homelessness, the common restless motion of all beings. I could see the restlessness of the whole world, this entangled world. . . everywhere.*

### The Restless World of Beings “In Motion”

Back from a long, exciting, and endless journey of exploration of my Self, our world, and our being, I feel joyful to have found answers to my moving questions after reading about my home philosophy. Reading about my tradition, I have a clearer

picture of my human Self: “Who I am” and “Where I am going,” the two basic questions whose answers map the way that we exist, feel, and understand together as human beings. The Wisdom of Suhrawardi directed me to our light essence, our immortal core, after its descent from the celestial world we could not feel belonging in a terrestrial world. Our restless, in-between, homeless state, our un-home-likeness, or *unheimlichkeit*, in our worldly life is rooted in our distance from our original core and abode, in our distance from our original Self. Figure 6 from the inner space of Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque illustrates my understanding or my “home, away from HOME” from a different, inner perspective. It symbolizes the complex labyrinth of my terrestrial wandering towards my angelic core, a labyrinth being gently illuminated in my excursion in between hermeneutics and my Persian tradition:

*My Self excursion outside Home is terminating in reunion with my inside, in re-meeting the dark sides of my existence in light. . . I am approaching the dark corner of Self, the unknown, ending spot in the labyrinth of my existence.*

The picture of Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque (Figure 6) retells my home emotions, it shows my way to revive home by reviving my hidden ancestors in my philosophical and existential journey, a darkened and hidden core, my Persian Wisdom and our *shared ancestors*.<sup>98</sup>

After the long and old exploration journey of my Self and existence, I am as much enlightened as I am astonished by the connection of our incessant renewal and understandings to the permanent and substantial flow of the whole universe, the connection of the temporality of our understandings to the temporality of the whole of existence, connection to our substantial motions, our temporal abode, and the entire “in motion” of existence. Re-viewing the hermeneutic conception of understanding, the fusion of the horizons of Self and Other,<sup>99</sup> finds a deeper meaning and significance as we approach our original Self in our re-union with Others. Others are the integral parts of our existence and our substantial motion towards our Self.

I am astonished by finding all beings as one single reality, one animate being, which retells the necessity of human intimate interrelations and unity with others, to see more of our selves and to feel more at home in our journey towards our original Self. I am delighted by finding our Selves as parts of this whole restless world, the world of beings “in motion,” seeking our home of peace and no contradiction and

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<sup>98</sup> Jardine and Naqvi, “Learning Not to Speak in Tongues.”

<sup>99</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2004).

plurality together, seeking our abode of unity together. I am enlightened and delighted by re-finding ourselves in our *unifying* flow, in knowing and re-cognizing our Selves with and through Others in our collective transition into more perfect beings in our journey.

My journey illuminated me with this deep understanding from Mulla Sadra's key notion of *substantial motion* that we all "subsist" in our Self-perfecting understanding motion with Others, that we subsist in our ceaseless Self renewal in our understandings together, in our ongoing fusion of horizons with Others, and our endlessly transitioning self-understandings in our fusion with Others. I am enlightened that our differences and pluralities make us stronger waves in our collective flow, that they speed up our restless, understanding motion towards ALL Understanding and Light. After reading about my tradition and deep reading of mystical hermeneutics, I reply to Davey's saying "precisely because we have no essence that we must endeavor to move on,"<sup>100</sup> that precisely, we are *substantially* and essentially (in essence) in-motion beings, that precisely we *subsist* in being in motion and exist and survive in our ceaseless transitioning and understanding motions, and that our dynamic being and all our essential and substantial motions directing us to our *telos* are rooted in *ambiguity* of our being and the multiplicity and unity aspects of our existence.<sup>101</sup>

The Wisdoms of Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra enhanced and illuminated my reading and interpretation of hermeneutics. They highlight the role of Other rays in our Self-illuminating motion, in the expansion of our horizons and our collective understandings towards Light. The whole picture of the ultimate goal for our incessant renewal makes me think of ourselves as special beings of high status, much beyond what we can achieve in a finite, worldly life of contradictions, or within a narrow worldly perspective. Presenting a whole picture of a philosophical thought, including the mystic and theological underpinnings on the common core and origin of humans and the *telos* of our being and our worldly journey, can unite fragmented humans in their diversity. It also can reveal the common basis of all traditions and lead to the integration and unity of diverse traditions. Relevantly, reflection on fundamental questions on our existence, including the essence of our being and our essential connections, can encourage humans to re-think of Others as parts of their collective being and as their essential co-travelers in their motion toward their higher goals of their creation. We, as the sun rays of the same essence, represent *multiplicity in unity*. Our excursion to Others enables us to see ourselves, to know more, and to approach

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<sup>100</sup> Davey, *Unquiet Understanding*, 57.

<sup>101</sup> Mulla Sadra, *Al-Asfar al-Arba'a*.

our Light. *Bildung* in hermeneutics takes a similar view on human becoming and human transformation and ascent through the fusion with Others.<sup>102</sup> There is an ultimate goal and destination to all our becoming which is connected to our existential sense of homelessness, our way of understanding, and our essential connections and relations with Others. Our essential and existential *telos* reveals how our liminal existential feelings are related to the nature of our being and the nature of our understandings, and what all our understandings could imply for peaceful human relations, education, and a peaceful global life in our multiplicity and tensions. Our current COVID-19 pandemic era highly demands such deep and critical thinking and reflections on the essential inter-human connections and the human roots of such universal miseries. This pandemic and human misery is a given chance to rebuild our Selves and revisit our relations with Other humans at academic, local, and global levels. The distance from Other humans, the complementary parts to our existence and the lights to our being and understandings, in our current Self-made individual cells, demands a true re-consideration and amendment of our relations with Others. Alas, that reflection is mainly ignored, even in the worst historical reprimands. Reflection for Self-education, and for education, is indispensable in our critical era. It is highly recommended in various verses of the *Holy Qor'an* about many similar stories of man-made miseries throughout history with humans' ever ignorance of reflection and Self-education.<sup>103</sup>

The connection of Self to Others and even to the whole universe implied in Gadamer's view of education as Self-education,<sup>104</sup> and in Illuminationist view of humans as rays of the sun or Mulla Sadra's notion of contingent beings, reveals the potential for universal change and education. Self-education and Self-knowledge happen through knowing Others. It is only the knowing human who is able to know and re-cognize Other beings in the universe, and it is through knowing Other beings that human approaches his more perfect Self.<sup>105</sup> Humans, as letters in the sacred book of existence, give meaning to the entirety of existence and can make sense of the book of creation all-together.

The answers to the two key questions of "Who we are" and "How we understand" shape the way that we define understanding and consider our Selves and

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<sup>102</sup> Dating back to the ancient mystical tradition, *Bildung* refers to the man who carries the image of God in his soul, is shaped after God, and must cultivate Him in himself. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2014); *Truth and Method* (1989).

<sup>103</sup> For example, *Holy Qor'an*, verse *ʾFajr*, *Araf*, *Ghafer*, etc.

<sup>104</sup> Andrzej Wiercinski, "Hermeneutic Education to Understanding: Self-Education and the Willingness to Risk Failure," in *Education, Dialogue and Hermeneutics*, ed. Paul Fairfield (New York: Continuum, 2011), 107–23.

<sup>105</sup> Ebrahimi Dinani, n.d.; Gadamer, *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*.

Others in our understandings. Ignoring or underestimating these questions entails disregarding the vital aspects of our existence as sublime and connected beings in our understandings, which leaves us helpless in our contradictions. Attending to our higher human aspects of understanding as beings of a common, sublime essence humbles us to reconcile our Selves with Others in our differences as we understand our unity.

Our restlessness, our insatiable thirst for knowing, and our universal restless motion is nothing but “love”—love for our lost part, the love for the Other, love for our Origin and our haven of peace—that is here and there, hidden and present, temporal and eternal, which is the source and balm to our deep and familiar pain. And our love for our Origin is nothing than love for all companions, Other parts of our being, Other travelers in our journey, and the illuminating rays to our Selves in our road towards Light and Perfection.

*Pulled between familiarity and strangeness,<sup>106</sup> my excursion towards the Other, the Western philosophy, revealed my older Self, my ancestors, our older Self and Collective Self, the ones who made us who we are. Western philosophical texts made me aware of my Self. I found my Self in fusion of the past with the present, in fusion of philosophies, fusion of logical and intuitive knowledge, fusion of reason and heart/ soul, the complementary eyes of our Selves. I found myself in a deep-rooted, hidden voice behind the Western words. They revived some old emotions, the same emotions that arise in my passage through the ancient, delicately decorated arched architectures and mansions in my historical city of art, Isfahan, the nicely painted architecture integrating the artistic, philosophical, and geometrical minds of the Islamic, Persian scholar architects who were inspired by the depth of the beauty, harmony, and the elegance of All Beauty. I could feel a deep joy that would never arise without awakening the “silenced” voice within the Western texts.*

Ending with the Divine in my philosophical exploration made me feel more certain, clear, and strong. I feel I have moved from a shallow river to the depth of an endless ocean. The invisibility of Muslim philosophers in current Western philosophy, one big part of the whole chain of philosophy and knowledge, was upsetting; philosophers whose influence and undertones moved me to my tradition. In my philosophical adventure, I was reminded of Nasr’s reference to the profound, permanent needs of the inner nature of man and Western interest in Oriental metaphysics and spirituality, of the big gap in the life of the modern man.<sup>107</sup> I was reminded of Jardine’s “The

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<sup>106</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1975).

<sup>107</sup> Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, 47–66.

Sickness of the West,” and David Geoffrey Smith on the dilemma of the West for living without the securities of the old science and the spiritual resources that the old science supplanted.<sup>108</sup> I was reminded of William E. Carroll, who regarded Avicenna’s faithfulness to Greek metaphysics<sup>109</sup> and the ancient Iranian Wisdom, and who shared my feeling of clarity in transitioning to traditional texts:

The contemporary world can learn a great deal from mediaeval analyses of the relationship among physics, metaphysics, and theology. In fact, to go from Stephen Hawking to Avicenna is, in an important sense, to go from confusion to clarity.<sup>110</sup>

### Moving on

The mystic and aesthetic overtones of the hermeneutic texts tapped into my old, deep-rooted being. It created a transforming path in immersing my Self in hermeneutic texts and imagining and reviving my home traditions in between the lines of the texts. In my existential and philosophical journey, following Suhrawardi, I attempted to unify two inter-rooted, far-apart world wisdoms. I admit that my trial stands within my limited horizon and within my temporal, existential reading and interpretation of hermeneutics. In my readings and reflections, I relied on the interiority of meaning and understanding that I intuited as a key uniting feature in reading both hermeneutics and Sufism. Figure 6 from the inner space of Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque highly represents the intuited interiority of meaning in my understandings of traditional texts and my inner Self. My *traditional* reading of hermeneutics revealed and expanded the horizon of my understanding of hermeneutic tradition in a more universal and inter-traditional perspective. It provided a new space to see the deep kinship and the fundamental connections between the two Oriental and Western traditions.

Re-experiencing my Self in reading the hermeneutic texts and my Self-formation in re-viewing my Persian Islamic tradition in between the lines of

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<sup>108</sup> David W. Jardine, “Foreword: The Sickness of the West,” in *Cross-Cultural Studies in Curriculum: Eastern Thought, Educational Insights*, ed. Hongyu Wang and Claudia Eppert (London: Routledge, 2008), ix–xv; David Geoffrey Smith, “Identity, Self and Other in the Conduct of Pedagogical Action: An East/West Inquiry,” *Counterpoints* 15 (1999): 11–25; *Pedagon: Interdisciplinary Essays in the Human Sciences, Pedagogy, and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

<sup>109</sup> Roger Penrose and Stephen Hawking, *The Nature of Space and Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), cited in William E. Carroll, “God and Physics: From Hawking to Avicenna,” *Islamic Philosophy Online* (2004): 1–13, <http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/sina/art/gpa.doc>.

<sup>110</sup> Carroll, “God and Physics,” 1.

hermeneutics involved finding my inter-traditional voice in the voice of Other tradition. Hermeneutics provided me a space to be my Self, to re-find my Self, and to educate my Self in between the said and unsaid words of a tradition,<sup>111</sup> a tradition that was different, but also very familiar. My *traditional* reading provided a space to learn and teach myself, ourselves, and our students to rely on our connections and the unifying aspects of our traditions. Finding my Self and my inter-traditional voice in a multicultural context, I deem it worthy to suggest applying hermeneutics beyond our Selves: to apply it to our multi-traditional educational contexts and read hermeneutics in between various “silenced” traditions, to provide the free space for our students to experience *traditional* readings of hermeneutics (and other mainstream philosophical thoughts and traditions) and revive silenced traditions; and so, to perform the existential task of Self-cultivation and building a culture of participation with Others that can contribute to transformation of our Selves and the world.<sup>112</sup>

Applied to my related field in education, my Self-transition and education in my inter-traditional fusion and exploration teaches me, as a second language educator, to offer a similar space for my multi-traditional students and to let them experience their academic texts in their own traditional ways of being and thinking with others, and to welcome Others’ traditional readings and ways of understanding. I firmly believe that inter-traditional ways of reading texts (philosophy and beyond) and applying them to our conducts and relations with Others as educators in academic contexts can contribute to creating peace and unity in our fragmented educational contexts, and ultimately can positively impact our societies and the world.

Considering the hermeneutic circle of understanding as a dialectical movement between the parts and the whole text, understanding the whole texts of human beings and their traditions as the objects of understanding<sup>113</sup>—with the contingent nature of human beings as interconnected beings carrying their cultural traditions—is not possible without knowing about other humans and their traditions. Selective learning and education of traditions and philosophical thoughts will leave dark spots in the chain of our knowledge and our understanding of the existence and the whole being of human.

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<sup>111</sup> Jean Grondin, *Sources of Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), x; Nancy J. Moules, “Hermeneutic Inquiry: Paying Heed to History and Hermes an Ancestral, Substantive, and Methodological Tale,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 1, no. 3 (2002): 1–21.

<sup>112</sup> Wiercinski, “Hermeneutic Education to Understanding.”

<sup>113</sup> Tina Koch, “Implementation of a Hermeneutic Inquiry in Nursing: Philosophy, Rigor, and Representation,” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 24, no. 1 (1996): 174–84.

In this paper, rooted in unhappy academic experiences, I examined the connections between the two philosophical traditions for potential positive and reconciliatory impacts in education and everyday life. Exploring deep connections between other traditions, especially between dominant and ignored traditions, can foster positive educational contexts for readers—educators and learners—of diverse traditions. It can re-create a sense of deep kinship and promote friendship between diverse individuals in academic and social contexts. Reforming the pedagogy of philosophy and other educational subjects through re-uniting traditions and humans of diverse traditions, we can change our academia, our societies, and ultimately our world in a positive way. Considering the great impact of education on reforming humans and societies, priming the common basis of all traditions or the *transcendent unity* in Suhrawardi’s illuminationist terms<sup>114</sup> in my education, a reminder of Gadamer’s assertion “*that the other might be right*,”<sup>115</sup> I deem it our duty as educators to use and practice inter-traditional approaches in our research and education to abate human tensions in our collective academic and life journey.

Re-viewing hermeneutic philosophy, which is mainly presented as being based in Greek and Western philosophy, our forgotten knowledge of the ancient, long-lasting relations between the Greeks and Persians,<sup>116</sup> the great impacts of Persians on Greek and Western knowledge, philosophy, religion, politics, music, art, etc.,<sup>117</sup> and the role of dialogue in the emergence of knowledge including philosophy—the “mutuality” within which East and West traditions became what they are<sup>118</sup>—I find it essential to focus on the commonalities of Eastern and Western philosophical traditions in education as a pedagogical tool to re-connect fragmented traditions and humans.

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<sup>114</sup> Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*.

<sup>115</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1993), 109.

<sup>116</sup> For example, *Cyropedia* by Xenophon in 370 BC.

<sup>117</sup> For example: Abbas nejaty, “Cyrus the Great,” *YouTube*, 30 September 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knTzxMAYiV4>; Getty Museum, “The Cyrus Cylinder,” *YouTube*, 16 October 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRMzrz0wRw>; BBC, “Cyrus Cylinder: How a Persian Monarch Inspired Jefferson,” *bbc.com*, 11 March 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-21747567>; TED, “Neil MacGregor: 2600 Years of History in One Object,” *YouTube*, 20 February 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpmsftF2We4>; “Introduction: The School of Athens,” *Before Newton: Explorations of Pre-Modern Science, Medicine and Technology* (blog), n.d., <https://beforenewton.blog/daily-readings/august-19/>; Manototy, “مستند سرگذشت موسیقی ایران از چغامیش تا چهل ستون,” *YouTube*, 24 August 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GI79GQmMZNA>.

<sup>118</sup> Smith, “The Farthest West Is but the Farthest East.”

Finally, focus on the essential, forgotten connections of humans in pedagogy of traditions and philosophies can help in re-constructing human relations in its original Self and Other relation. It can create pure and reconciliatory relations that fulfill the ultimate goal of philosophical pedagogy, and human education in general, which is becoming more *humane* in our relations with Others, not as separate human Selves but as parts and members of the same body, as the poet Sa'di Shirazi says, as One Self of one integrated tradition. Again, full education of philosophy including the mystical and theological underpinnings related to the common Origin and the *telos* of human beings and their incessant motion, understandings, and transitions can illuminate many biased eyes and misled hearts and promote solidarity and friendship among diverse humans.

As we can see, modern human, and human education including education of traditions, brimmed with knowledge and theories. How knowledge, theories, and philosophies are presented in full; how/if they can create and enhance human *Self-awareness* and *Self-understanding* in relation with Others; how they illuminate the *inside* of humans (which is the door to connecting to Others)—these are the questionable aspects of modern presentation and education of most knowledge and traditions. Education of traditions in full—with the roots related to human nature, goals of creation of humans, and the nature of essential human relations—can enhance *Self-awareness* and rescue modern humans.

## **Authority in the Philosophy Classroom: The Critical Potential of Gadamer's Rehabilitation of Authority**

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Philosophy teachers at higher education institutions appear to wield significant authority over their courses.<sup>1</sup> We issue commands and coerce behavior when we require students to purchase specific books, put away cell phones, complete specific tasks in particular ways within a specific timeframe, arrive to class at a certain time, and so on. We may police behavior by requiring students to upload their work to plagiarism-monitoring software such as the for-profit Turnitin, which collects student data without their consent.<sup>2</sup> We unilaterally set expectations for students when we create our syllabi, design particular assignments in particular ways, practice a particular form of pedagogy, and choose particular philosophical content, questions, and problems to present to students; and we make judgements that have genuine consequences for students' academic and financial lives through the practice of grading and weighting some assignments more than others. In short, to organize and to teach a class at all, involves a form of authority. We may do all of this in a rather friendly manner, but the amount of authority that is held over a course remains robust. Furthermore, such authority can be both omnipresent and yet merely implied when, despite being a major feature of a course, it is rarely discussed openly with students.

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<sup>1</sup> Although this paper has in mind specifically teaching philosophy, much of what follows is relevant across academic disciplines.

<sup>2</sup> Sean Michael Morris and Jesse Stommel, "A Guide for Resisting EdTech: The Case against Turnitin," in *Critical Digital Pedagogy: A Collection*, ed. Jesse Stommel, Chris Friend, and Sean Michael Morris (Washington, DC: Hybrid Pedagogy Inc., 2020), 29–42.

The result is a kind of mutual pretense on the part of students and teachers together not to acknowledge one of the most significant features of a course.<sup>3</sup> Do these manifestations of authority—that is to say, the power to issue commands, coerce behavior, set expectations, and render judgments within the context of an implied agreement not to talk about such authority—have a legitimate place at all in the contemporary philosophy class?

Simultaneously occurring alongside this dimension of authority is the expertise (more or less) held by a philosophy teacher. Usually credentialed by an institution, philosophy teachers are clearly recognized by a wider community of peers and institutions as an expert—i.e., an *authority*—on some area of the discipline (Hegel’s political philosophy; bio-medical ethics; classical Chinese ethics, and so on). How does this dimension of disciplinary expertise entangle with the dimension of authority presented above? In particular, how do these two dimensions of authority—the authoritarian and the authoritative—show up in our classrooms where we work with students who are not already experts in philosophy, and thus seemingly not in a position to judge our disciplinary expertise?<sup>4</sup> Can the authority we wield as teachers legitimately safeguard lack of recognition as an expert—authority due to biases around social identities? Relatedly, does philosophical expertise actually justify all of the authority we wield as teachers? If it does not, how might philosophy teachers relinquish some authority or control over their classes, or at least experiment with ways to transform it or channel it in other directions?

To the extent that we do not think critically about the matter of authority in education, we are likely to teach much that we would prefer students would not learn: how to submit to authorities, how to play along with unspoken power dynamics through a form of mutual pretense, or the belief that genuine freedom lies outside of the philosophy classroom and not within it, and so on. In this paper, I argue that Hans-

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<sup>3</sup> Given the general lack of teacher training that philosophy teachers often receive in graduate school, this last point is unsurprising. For an overview of the lack of robust teaching training within the discipline of philosophy, see Melissa Jacquart and Jesse Wright, “Teaching Philosophy Graduate Students about Effective Teaching,” *Teaching Philosophy* 40, no. 2 (2017): 123–60; David W. Concepción, Melinda Messineo, Sarah Wieton, and Catherine Homan, “The State of Teacher Training in Philosophy,” *Teaching Philosophy* 39, no. 1 (2016): 1–24; James Campbell, “The Ambivalence toward Teaching in the Early Years of the American Philosophical Association,” *Teaching Philosophy* 25, no. 1 (2002): 53–68.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the problem of how non-experts assess the reliability and trustworthiness of experts, see Alexander A. Guerrero, “Living with Ignorance in a World of Experts,” in *Perspectives on Ignorance from Moral and Social Philosophy*, ed. Rik Peels (London: Routledge, 2016), 168–97; Elizabeth Anderson, “Democracy, Public Policy, and Lay Assessments of Scientific Testimony,” *Episteme* 8, no. 2 (2011): 144–64; Johnny Brennan, “Can Novices Trust Themselves to Choose Trustworthy Experts? Reasons for (Reserved) Optimism,” *Social Epistemology* 34, no. 3 (2020): 227–40.

Georg Gadamer's account of authority offers a series of conceptual distinctions and arguments that can be used to clarify some of the complex dynamics of authority that frame our teaching contexts. Further, I argue for a particular pedagogical orientation that is more aligned with a form of "genuine authority," and I suggest several ways to ameliorate some of the features of "illegitimate authority" even where they cannot be entirely rejected. My aim is a pragmatic one: not to develop a Gadamerian account of education or to resolve all the problems that his account of authority may involve, but rather to offer some aid to philosophy teachers who would like to wrestle with the challenge of engaging with the dynamics of authority in a humane and philosophical way.

In light of my claim that Gadamer's account of authority provides a helpful orientation that ought to lead to a transformation of traditional teaching practices and assumptions, this paper also offers an implicit counter to views arguing that Gadamer's rehabilitation of authority is necessarily "conservative" or that it, in principle, lacks any "critical" bite vis-à-vis one's own tradition or the status quo. The more radical potential of Gadamer's concept of authority has been underappreciated and underdeveloped both by those in basic agreement with and those opposed to his analysis. Gadamer's account of authority, I argue below, holds profound implications for our teaching practice, as well as utility for thinking critically through many all-too-common assumptions about teaching philosophy.

In section one of this paper, I briefly survey the present state of literature on the topic of Gadamer's philosophy of education and his account of authority. While much useful work has already been done, there remains a need to grasp just how central the concept of authority is to Gadamer's thinking about education, or to consider what concrete consequences this concept may hold for our pedagogical work. In section two, I outline the main lines of Gadamer's concept of authority, paying particular attention to those places where he explicitly connects the concept to educational contexts. Finally, in section three, I outline ways in which Gadamer's work facilitates critical reflection on ourselves as philosophy teachers, and challenges common assumptions about authority and pedagogy.

## Scholarship on Gadamer's Philosophy of Education

Although scholarship exploring what Gadamer's work might entail for education is increasing, it remains minimal.<sup>5</sup> This, despite the fact that Gadamer's own interest in the matter was not a marginal concern.<sup>6</sup> In this section, I survey the scholarship touching on Gadamer's view of education, noting the (very few) places where scholars address the dimension of authority. The goal here is not to offer a full literature review, but simply to frame precisely where scholarship stands at present on the issue of Gadamer's concept of authority in its application to the realm of education.

In general, the majority of the focus from scholars has been on Gadamer's account of concepts such as *Bildung* (education, formation), dialogue, self-education, the role of experience, and the modern conflict within higher education between what Gadamer calls "genuine education" and the social-institutional requirement of professional training for jobs. While this work is illuminating and important, few scholars have highlighted how important the concept of authority is for Gadamer's work on education or its implications for our concrete practices of teaching philosophy. In short, good work has been done, but there are many more features of Gadamer's philosophy of education to pursue.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> At present, the following comprise the main body of literature: Paul Fairfield, ed., *Education, Dialogue and Hermeneutics* (New York: Continuum, 2011); Shaun Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1992); Jon Nixon, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: The Hermeneutical Imagination* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017); Peter Elias Sotiriou, *Teaching and Learning in the Humanities: How Hans-Georg Gadamer Speaks to Students, Teachers, and Scholars* (Champaign, IL: Common Ground, 2015). Articles on the topic include Paul Fairfield, "Hermeneutics and Education," in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander (London: Routledge, 2015), 541–49; "Hermeneutics and Education," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Niall Keane and Chris Lawn (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 513–19; Peter Elias Sotiriou, "The Question of Authority in the Composition Classroom: A Gadamerian Perspective," *Writing Instructor* 13, no. 1 (1993): 7–20.

<sup>6</sup> See especially the following: Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, eds., *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Education Is Self-Education," trans. John Cleary and Pádraig Hogan, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 35, no. 4 (2001): 529–38; "Authority and Critical Freedom," in *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*, trans. Jason Gaiger and Nicholas Walker (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 117–24. The explicitly and implicitly relevant sections of Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New York: Continuum, 2006) are too numerous to single out.

<sup>7</sup> Although Gadamer nowhere explicitly lays out a systematic "philosophy of education," his work on the topic is substantial enough that it is a useful term for reference.

Paul Fairfield, Jon Nixon, and Peter Sotiriou have arguably done the most to reconstruct an overview of Gadamer's philosophy of education.<sup>8</sup> All three scholars have produced essays and monographs that show how Gadamer's work, implicitly and explicitly, offers a robust, relevant, and attractive understanding of education, both within and without institutional settings. Despite subtle differences between them, they are aligned in orienting Gadamer's philosophy of education primarily via the concepts of dialogue, *Bildung*, and tradition.

Neither Fairfield nor Nixon however consider ways in which Gadamer's analysis of authority would relevantly challenge or alter the depiction of such concepts. For example, Fairfield argues that "the concept of dialogue becomes a false idealization when it is either overtly politicized, as one may well say of Freire, or turned into an empty catchword."<sup>9</sup> He goes on to note four conditions that ought to hold in order to keep the concept of dialogue from being a merely empty catchword, such as "an intellectual environment in which students and professors are maximally free to pursue whatever topics they choose and to proffer opinions, criticism, and questions without fear of censure, including especially when those opinions are at odds with intellectual fashion."<sup>10</sup> Without addressing the dimension of authority that professors have over their classes, however, it is not clear how this condition avoids turning dialogue into an empty catchword. How are we to understand what "maximally free" means if the concept of freedom has not been placed in relation to authority?<sup>11</sup> What can, and should professors do in order to cultivate this condition?

Fairfield's excellent edited volume of essays written by Gadamer scholars on the topic of education offers another example of both a reluctance to engage with specific questions of practice as well as a lack of recognition of ways that authority may challenge or change the work presented.<sup>12</sup> Admittedly, concepts such as *Bildung*, intellectual humility, dialogue, self-education, and so on that are discussed so well by scholars may be just as if not more central to Gadamer's thinking about education than the concept of authority. However, there remains a danger in mischaracterizing and misapplying those concepts when they the dimension of authority is not brought to the foreground. In other words, the broad dimension of authority in the modern

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<sup>8</sup> See Fairfield, "Hermeneutics and Education"; Nixon, *Hans-Georg Gadamer*; Sotiriou, *Teaching and Learning*.

<sup>9</sup> Fairfield, "Hermeneutics and Education," 543–44.

<sup>10</sup> Fairfield, "Hermeneutics and Education," 544.

<sup>11</sup> See especially Gadamer, "Authority and Critical Freedom."

<sup>12</sup> Fairfield, *Education, Dialogue and Hermeneutics*.

university classroom needs to be addressed to make better sense of “the rest” of Gadamer’s philosophy of education.

Shaun Gallagher and Peter Elias Sotiriou are two scholars who have seriously engaged with Gadamer’s concept of authority as it relates to education.<sup>13</sup> Both Sotiriou and Gallagher offer important considerations of the relation between education and authority as Gadamer understands it, with Sotiriou focusing on the practice of reading texts within literature and composition classes, and Gallagher focusing on what he calls the hermeneutical *aporia* between authority and emancipation as it pertains to the fundamental orientation of education.<sup>14</sup> Their work complements one another nicely. Sotiriou shows how Gadamer’s work on authority can concretely transform the way that teachers invite students to approach texts and writing, whereas Gallagher uncovers more abstract philosophical tensions involved between the ineliminable dimension of authority and the emancipatory goals of education. Nevertheless, the features of their work that complement one another are also the features that limit their usefulness in addressing the questions and concerns about authority raised at the beginning of this paper.

Sotiriou’s consideration of authority in education is weakened by remaining fixed to the realm of books and writing. This exclusive focus on the textual dimension obscures the most essential feature of Gadamer’s own account of authority inasmuch as his analysis of authority—as I argue below—is not primarily concerned with the hermeneutical realm of texts. Much more to the heart of Gadamer’s concern are the relationships between living persons interacting in contexts where authority (whether legitimate or not) plays a major role: student–teacher, doctor–patient, or state–citizen relationship, and so on. By immediately framing all consideration of the student–teacher relationship into one centered entirely around reading and writing, Sotiriou shifts our attention away from all other expressions of authority. As a result, the noble desire to facilitate students’ critical engagement with texts as potentially genuine authorities will continue to ring somewhat hollow if authority is wielded uncritically in all other aspects of the student–teacher relationship. While Sotiriou’s work remains very generative, a deeper and broader awareness of the manifestation of authority in education is required.

By contrast, Gallagher does not at all limit his account of authority to the dimension of texts and writing: “When students enter a classroom, or open a book, or when they are shown how to perform some task in the field, they are confronted by

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<sup>13</sup> See Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education*; Sotiriou, “Authority in the Composition Classroom.”

<sup>14</sup> See Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education*, 15–19, and chapter 8 in particular.

authority. . . . Many times manifest, but most of the time latent, authority is embedded in every educational experience.”<sup>15</sup> By keeping this much broader awareness of authority in view, Gallagher is able to place his philosophical *aporia* between authority and emancipation on a deeper basis than Sotiriou can offer. For Gallagher, the primary question that must be considered is to what extent do “educational *practices* and institutions promote or prevent domination by the authority of traditional social structures and ideologies?”<sup>16</sup> Yet, instead of exploring this question about *practices*, Gallagher remains aloof, stating that his work is “not directly practical in the sense of offering prescriptives about educational practices. . . . I do not, for instance, say what is wrong or right about educational practices.”<sup>17</sup> Gallagher then goes on to frame his basic approach to authority in terms of the Habermas–Gadamer debate surrounding the role of tradition and the (in)capacity that humans have for critical reflection on the traditions that shape that very capacity.<sup>18</sup> This more abstract approach, as well as Gallagher’s quickness to circumscribe Gadamer’s analysis of authority in Habermasian terms, thus leaves us without an awareness for the more radical potential that Gadamer’s work on authority may hold for our concrete pedagogical practices.

Building on the fecund work of all the scholars mentioned above, then, it may be helpful to start afresh, asking simply, what is Gadamer’s understanding of authority and how does he apply that understanding to the practice of teaching and learning? In the following section, I reconstruct the main lines of Gadamer’s view of authority, paying close attention to those places where it intersects with the realm of education.

### Gadamer’s View of Authority in Relation to Education

Two of the most central texts for understanding Gadamer’s view of authority are his 1983 article “Authority and Critical Freedom,” and a section of *Truth and Method* titled “The Rehabilitation of Authority and Tradition.”<sup>19</sup> Both texts share much in common, beginning by splitting authority into two types—legitimate and illegitimate. Gadamer

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<sup>15</sup> Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education*, 96.

<sup>16</sup> Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education*, 26, emphasis mine.

<sup>17</sup> Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education*, ix–xi.

<sup>18</sup> Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education*, chapter 8. For an introduction to the issues more broadly, see Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> Gadamer, “Authority and Critical Freedom”; *Truth and Method*, 278–85. Also important is Hans-Georg Gadamer, “On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 18–43.

renders this distinction in terms of “authoritative” vs. “authoritarian” manifestations of authority, and then argues for a set of features that set the former apart from the latter. Further, in both Gadamer avoids begging the question—e.g., simply presupposing that there is such a thing as legitimate authority—by putting his own distinction immediately into question. Recognizing that a lasting truth of the Enlightenment is the charge to think for oneself (*Sapere aude*)—i.e., to not be carried along uncritically by state or religious authorities—Gadamer sets himself the task of showing how his view of authority in fact *includes* this very insight. The duty to think for oneself remains a duty for Gadamer even after he critiques the naïve pretension to not rely on any authority beyond one’s “own reason.” A fundamental philosophical question for Gadamer thus becomes, how does (genuine) authority relate to the free critical use of one’s own reason?

Gadamer respond to this guiding question by arguing for three features that, when taken together, explain how a genuine form of authority includes a genuine form of freedom at its basis. In this section, I provide a brief overview of these three features while highlighting how Gadamer connects this view of authority to education throughout.

1. The first main feature of Gadamer’s view of authority concerns its essential purpose or function. Contrary to a common assumption, legitimate authority for Gadamer is not simply power used well, just as illegitimate authority is not simply power misused. Putting the matter this way obscures the relationship between power and authority, making it appear as though authority were synonymous with power, and that the primary issue is to identify the proper use and abuse of an originally neutral form of power. Against this, Gadamer attempts to show that any genuine authority must be divorced from *potestas* (power). Legitimate authority has in principle nothing to do with the ability to issue commands, render judgments, or set expectations, and is in this sense powerless. Whether or not one is an expert—an “authority”—on some matter has nothing to do with whether or not one wields power over others; and still less with the question of whether one wields that power well or poorly. For Gadamer, it is possible to be a powerless authority,<sup>20</sup> just as much as an authoritarian expert.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> As we see from the powerlessness of medical experts to use their authority to sway citizens to take basic healthcare precautions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>21</sup> As when a doctor overrides a patient’s autonomy by pressuring them into undergoing a procedure that is admittedly the best course of action. The point is that this power is in principle separate from their expertise. A fact that also makes it possible for non-experts (e.g., parents) to wield power over others’ healthcare.

It is this separation of (genuine) authority from *potestas* that allows Gadamer to claim that authority is an epistemic condition; that is to say, authority has to do with knowledge and not, strictly speaking, power, however interrelated the two can become in a given case. Gadamer's working definition of genuine authority thus sounds more like a definition of expertise: "Genuine authority is recognized as involving superior knowledge, ability and insight."<sup>22</sup> What makes someone an authority is their greater knowledge, or, as Gadamer emphasizes more in the section of *Truth and Method* on authority, their having accrued a greater experience with some matter.<sup>23</sup> The overriding point here is that greater experience or superior knowledge or ability is only accidentally related to the power to coerce behavior, issue commands, or render judgements. A genuine authority might be *given* (or seize) such power, but they just as well might not.<sup>24</sup> Instead, the essential function of genuine authority is simply to be capable of offering aid or advice about some matter. For Gadamer, it is telling that whereas the Roman republic senate had the dignity of being called the authority, it did not have real power, *potestas*, which instead lay with the consul.<sup>25</sup> We seek out genuine authorities for advice, help, or insight when we find ourselves in a situation that is in some relevant way beyond us.

A key term to notice in Gadamer's working definition of genuine authority is the "superiority" of knowledge, insight, or ability. Superiority in this sense is relational, a term that only gets its real sense within a particular situation between persons, one of whom can be said to have greater knowledge, ability, or insight about some matter than the other. To speak absolutely of "my superior" (i.e., "my boss") may obscure the relational grounding of any legitimate authority and again conflates the relative superiority of knowledge or experience with power over another. Staying focused on this relational ground leads Gadamer naturally to a second key feature of authority, which concerns who it is that recognizes an authority or "a superior."

2. The second main feature of Gadamer's view of authority is his insistence that genuine authority—consonant with its powerlessness—cannot be taken, won, or achieved, but rather is *given* through an act of recognition by others, primarily by those others who seek out an authority on some matter. A legitimate authority therefore arises only situationally when called on to offer some help: the sick person who seeks

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<sup>22</sup> Gadamer, "Authority and Critical Freedom," 121.

<sup>23</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 281.

<sup>24</sup> It may even be more likely that a genuine authority will not be given power. We can think of the lament behind Plato's claim that it is only when philosophers are kings that real justice will be present in a state.

<sup>25</sup> Gadamer, "Authority and Critical Freedom," 121.

advice from someone who has more medical knowledge or is capable of helping them, or the student who leans on the expertise and experience of a teacher to help them develop their own abilities and insights in some area.

It is worth noting that by taking examples from the doctor–patient and teacher–student relationship, Gadamer clearly has in mind the recognition of another’s authority by someone who does not have the same level of knowledge, ability, experience, or insight. In other words, Gadamer does not attempt to legitimate authority through recognition by a “community of experts.” Precisely because authority is recognized as a kind of educational achievement, the conferral of the title “doctor,” or the adoption into a professional community as “one of us,” or any “rights and privileges” associated with a professional title do not add anything beyond a critical check: “Anyone who is tempted to play on the institutional force of their authority rather than on genuine argument is always in danger of speaking in an authoritarian as opposed to an authoritative manner.”<sup>26</sup> The critical benefit of a community of experts is that it places an institutional and professional check on the snake oil salesman who claims superior knowledge or insight but fails when tested against the rigor of a genuine authority. It is only by being placed in a wider social context where there are others who seek out such authorities for help or advice that such a community of experts gains its real purpose.<sup>27</sup> Whether or not someone with a professional title is a genuine authority will always depend on the context, and whether they are capable of offering any superior knowledge or ability to someone else for some purpose. For example, even within the community of philosophy PhDs, for example, we recognize that no one is an authority absolutely. One philosopher may be an authority on Kant’s critical philosophy relative to another who is an authority on contemporary environmental philosophy. Both will likely be authorities on philosophy in general relative to a first-year student who has not studied any philosophy before. In each case, the key point always remains the recognition by someone who is not themselves an authority.<sup>28</sup>

With that said, if genuine authority manifests only through an act of recognition by someone who is not themselves an authority on the relevant matter, a common anxiety around making mistakes arises: how are we to be sure we have correctly recognized a genuine authority? On this issue it is vital to frame the question

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<sup>26</sup> Gadamer, “Authority and Critical Freedom,” 124.

<sup>27</sup> Note that this is true even within the community of experts. If I have to teach a new class, I may seek advice from someone—a fellow philosophy PhD—who is more of an authority than I am.

<sup>28</sup> What is occurring at the “highest level” when two genuine authorities seek out one another for help on a matter which they are roughly equally authorities on is a wrinkle I leave untouched here.

well. A common contemporary version of this question concerns how a non-expert is supposed to evaluate an expert's knowledge in order to recognize correctly *that* the expert is the genuine article. The problem is obviously that non-experts are precisely not in a position to evaluate an expert's expertise, and so it seems that they would be unable to tell the difference between a legitimate or illegitimate expert authority on some matter.<sup>29</sup>

To frame the matter in this way, however, forces Gadamer to answer a question he is not quite asking. The problem of how experts can be recognized as genuine experts by non-experts who are obviously not in a position of "authority" to evaluate someone's expertise misses the critical pragmatic and self-reflective point for Gadamer. By once again *solidifying* authority into a kind of absolute possession that stands alone, independently of a relational, pragmatic context, the relativity of authority is obscured. The touchstone of genuine authority, which can be rationally considered and recognized by a non-expert, is the capacity to help someone who needs help, to offer good advice to someone who seeks it, or to train someone in a skill to the point where they can do it on their own. To this extent, Gadamer's understanding of genuine authority is not simply identical to someone's being an expert on some matter—i.e., having the most up-to-date knowledge, or the best skill sets, and so on. The concept of a genuine authority is not synonymous with official expertise. This is an especially important insight for those matters about which any expertise is a dubious claim, but for which one may still seek out an authority, such as in ethical situations.<sup>30</sup>

By sticking close to the concrete, practical, and relational contexts where authority is often expressed—e.g., the doctor–patient or teacher–student relationship—Gadamer is able to claim that those who are not authorities are the ones who recognize another as a legitimate or illegitimate authority. For someone who is not an authority is still capable of critical *self-reflection* and *self-insight*. That is to say, they are capable of knowing themselves to the extent that they know that they need help, advice, or guidance on some matter because they cannot meet the situation's demands on their own. It is this pragmatic orientation that gives clarity to Gadamer's consistent reminders of the finitude of human existence in relation to authority. Recognizing that

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<sup>29</sup> For an introduction to the issue, see Note 5 above. While I cannot take the time to explore that matter here, this problem may also have bearing on the Habermasian challenge to Gadamer's view of authority (see Warnke, *Gadamer*, 134–39).

<sup>30</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Aristotle and Imperative Ethics," in *Hermeneutics, Religion, and Ethics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 142–61. Here too Gadamer shows consistency in his approach to authority when speaking about the concept of respect: "Respect is not being blindly subject to the will of another. It is rather participation in the superiority of a knowledge that is recognized to be authoritative" (153).

there are times when critical reflection on received tradition or the prior acceptance of authorities is indeed demanded, Gadamer notes that “Tradition is no proof and validation of something, in any case not where validation is demanded by reflection. But the point is this: where does reflection demand it? Everywhere? I would object to such an answer on the grounds of the finitude of human existence and the essential particularity of reflection.”<sup>31</sup> Precisely through our ability to recognize that I myself cannot meet the demands of the present situation, I can recognize that another person has a greater knowledge, experience, or ability than I do, and so may be consulted as an authority. This does not mean that the authority is an expert *tout court*, or even that they have been recognized by a professional community of experts. It simply means that I recognize that they stand in a position of superiority on the relevant matter, and for that reason I can rely on their authority for help, guidance, advice, insight, or training. It is exactly this that makes adults occasionally recognize and consult children as authorities on some matters.

Furthermore, this recognition of authority for Gadamer is not a one-time occurrence, but rather a continual conferral that precisely depends on the non-authority using their own, admittedly limited, freedom to critically reason about the extent of another’s authority in some area. For Gadamer, any authority “wielded” or asserted as though it were one’s “own” possession is in principle illegitimate: “Anyone who has to invoke authority in the first place, whether it be the father within the family or the teacher in the classroom, possesses none.”<sup>32</sup> And again, “the capacity to criticize includes and is a precondition both of our own recognition of the superior authority of others and of others’ recognition of our own authority. There is, in truth, no real opposition between authority and critical freedom but, rather a deep inner interconnection.”<sup>33</sup> Genuine authority only gains its legitimacy through *the free, critical use of reason* by non-authorities who are capable of knowing themselves in their limitations as well as recognizing the relative superiority of another on some matter, even up to the point that the non-authority eventually becomes equal in knowledge and insight to the authority.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Gadamer, “On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” 34. Note that this paragraph frames the discussion of authority in terms of Gadamer’s “presentation in *Truth and Method* of the teaching and learning process”—i.e., once again connecting authority to the realm of education (“On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” 34).

<sup>32</sup> Gadamer, “Authority and Critical Freedom,” 119, emphasis mine.

<sup>33</sup> Gadamer, “Authority and Critical Freedom,” 122.

<sup>34</sup> A point emphasized more heavily in the *Truth and Method* section on authority: “acknowledging authority is always connected with the idea that what the authority says is not irrational and arbitrary but can, in principle, be discovered to be true” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 281).

3. To ask for help, to require teaching, to depend on an authority is thus not at all to abdicate the truth of the Enlightenment's dictum to think for oneself. Rather, it requires a constant engagement in self-reflection and the self-recognition of one's own abilities and limitations. This move by Gadamer results in the third and final major feature of his view of authority, which works as a kind of corollary to the second feature. It is not only the non-authority who must know themselves in their limits vis-à-vis the superiority of another's knowledge or skill. It is vital that the authority themselves also use their critical reason to recognize the limits of their own authority vis-à-vis the situation at hand.<sup>35</sup>

Because authorities are recognized by others who may seek them out or come to rely on them for help, advice, or education, there is a danger that the authority will have *too much* authority or power pressed upon them in expectation of some help, cure, or solution. The parent who brings a sick child to the doctor may rightly recognize the doctor as a genuine authority to be sought out, but they may also bring an expectation that the doctor use their *power* to cure the child, or at least not to make any mistakes. The legitimacy of the doctor's authority then depends also on their own ability to recognize their own limits—for example, when there is no cure, or the matter is beyond their abilities, or they have made a mistake.<sup>36</sup> Gadamer is insistent here: "Doctors must also confront the temptation of wanting to play the authority, not only on account of the superior scientific knowledge and medical experience which they do enjoy, but also through the pressure of the patient's need for their authority."<sup>37</sup> In this way, Gadamer's analysis of genuine authority simply further highlights his well-known philosophical emphasis on human finitude, and the existential and epistemological complexity involved in recognizing that it is exactly our limitations that sustain our living and our communal and historical bonds, including the legitimacy of authorities: "It seems to me that the best way of preserving the proper use of one's authority lies in the critical freedom to make mistakes on occasion and to be able to recognize this fact."<sup>38</sup>

Having sketched an overview of the main features of Gadamer's view of authority, I conclude this section by taking note of some ways in which he directly connects this analysis to the domain of education. When discussing each of the major features of his view of authority, Gadamer is consistent in turning to examples drawn from education. For example, Gadamer notes that the legitimacy of the authority of

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<sup>35</sup> Gadamer, "Authority and Critical Freedom," 123–24.

<sup>36</sup> For more on this, see Gadamer, "Authority and Critical Freedom," 119–20.

<sup>37</sup> Gadamer, "Authority and Critical Freedom," 123–24.

<sup>38</sup> Gadamer, "Authority and Critical Freedom," 124.

“the teacher” depends on the condition that what the teacher says is “not irrational and arbitrary but can, in principle, be discovered to be true.”<sup>39</sup> For Gadamer, this holds even though we will never rid ourselves entirely of the education that has shaped our very ability to put it to the test: “even though, in the case of education, the educator loses his function when his charge comes of age and sets his own insight and decisions in the place of the authority of the educator, becoming mature does not mean that a person becomes his own master in the sense that he is freed from all tradition.”<sup>40</sup>

Clarifying the initial distinction between authoritative and authoritarian forms of authority, Gadamer notes that “When we say that a teacher has no authority, we know that we are referring to something indispensable for the practice of teaching in the classroom. And inversely, we could not speak of anti-authoritative as opposed say to anti-authoritarian teaching. This would make no sense whatever, so indispensable is [genuine] authority to the whole practice of teaching.”<sup>41</sup> In order to emphasize this claim that genuine authority has to do with knowledge and not power, Gadamer uses the example “of my own teacher. . . Paul Natorp” whom Gadamer says lacked the power of a strong, commanding voice (“he had a weak voice and lacked a particularly impressive appearance”), but “was clearly an authority” of the Marburg philosophical school.<sup>42</sup>

Further, when introducing the critical need for non-authorities as well as authorities to reflect on the limitations of the authority figure’s superiority, Gadamer notes that “the desire to recognize authority, also expresses itself in relation to teachers. My five-year-old daughter was listening to a conversation at table in which the head of the Marburg Gymnasium said, concerning some matter or other, with surprise, ‘I do not know anything about that at all.’ At which my daughter leant over to me and whispered in my ear, ‘Funny, that a teacher does not know.’”<sup>43</sup> The point here is that the genuine authority of a teacher is dependent on their ability to admit their limits to others. Although I return to this again in the following section, it is noteworthy how much emphasis Gadamer places on the recognition and admission of one’s own limits—i.e., saying “I don’t know”—for teachers to handle the frequent desire by students to recognize them as authorities too quickly and to too great a degree.

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<sup>39</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 281.

<sup>40</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 281–82.

<sup>41</sup> Gadamer, “Authority and Critical Freedom,” 118. The implied point is that we rightly could advocate for an anti-authoritarian form of teaching. I return to this in the subsequent section.

<sup>42</sup> Gadamer, “Authority and Critical Freedom,” 119.

<sup>43</sup> Gadamer, “Authority and Critical Freedom,” 120.

Even when we turn away from the primary texts presenting Gadamer's view of authority, and turn to his explicit writings on education, we find many of the same concerns in play. Both in "The University of Leipzig 1409–1958" and the very late "Education Is Self-Education," Gadamer demonstrates by example this third feature of genuine authority—i.e., the capacity of the genuine authority both to recognize and publicize the limits of their authority. For example, by placing the university classroom within the wider context of education "by the home and the school, which form the youth during the actually pliable ages, by the living community, which surrounds the students in cooperative groups, [and] in the dorms," Gadamer is able to offer a consistently modest view about what actually occurs through a university classroom education.<sup>44</sup> The educational outcomes of a philosophy class that actually take place within the students are, in the end, not a part of the teacher's authority, despite the official institutional "course outcomes" statements often required on syllabi.

Gadamer also clearly keeps his key distinctions between the authoritative and authoritarian manifestations of authority in view when he writes about education more generally, as well as the role that reflection on our own limitations plays in legitimizing authority. For example, the freedom of the very "free space" required to "live with ideas"—a concept that Fairfield rightly emphasizes in his overview of Gadamer's philosophy of education—is consistently set against the authoritarian pressures of the state, church, and even the university itself as a modern institution.<sup>45</sup> The legitimacy of the university as an institution devoted to the pursuit of truth and genuine education depends on its ability to navigate the tension between its relative, limited freedom from the wider society and the pressures set upon it by state or religious authorities, which can become quite authoritarian.

Gadamer, who lived through the capture of the German university system by National Socialism, as well as later the University of Leipzig by the USSR, is always well aware of the authoritarian dimension of authority in the realm of education.<sup>46</sup> The *power (potestas)* of political authorities to coerce university institutions is thus understandably at the front of Gadamer's mind. In other words, when writing

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<sup>44</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The University of Leipzig 1409–1958: A Former Rector Commemorates the 550th Anniversary of Its Founding," in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 34–35. I leave untouched here whether Gadamer is right about this.

<sup>45</sup> Fairfield, "Hermeneutics and Education."

<sup>46</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Interview: The German University and German Politics. The Case of Heidegger," in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 3–14; "The University of Leipzig, 1409–1959."

specifically about education, Gadamer gives more focus to the dangers of authoritarianism, broadly construed. It is perhaps for this reason that he did not clearly sketch out, however vaguely or heuristically, some of the implications that his view on genuine authority has for the actual *practices* of teaching and learning. In the following section, I return to the specific situation of teaching and learning in the modern university philosophy class and offer some ways that philosophy teachers might approach the matter of authority as it manifests therein. For it is by engaging in just this kind of self-reflection that we might responsibly inhabit any genuine authority that we have been given by students.

### **Inhabiting Authority Differently in the Classroom**

In this section, I draw out ways in which Gadamer's analysis of authority challenges entrenched assumptions about teaching philosophy and is suggestive of a rather different orientation vis-à-vis the pedagogical status quo. Conventionally entrenched pedagogies often manifest conventionally entrenched assumptions about authority; assumptions that Gadamer's view does not share. Thus, Gadamer's analysis may provide some aid for philosophy teachers who hope to reflect on the role that authority plays in their classes. That is to say, the critical potential of Gadamer's view of authority lies primarily in the way that it facilitates self-reflection about entrenched assumptions and practices within our tradition of teaching philosophy.

One such assumption about teaching upended by a Gadamerian approach to authority is the natural belief that teachers *have* authority, grounded by their expertise, and for which they must take responsibility. In other words, philosophy teachers ought to learn to use responsibly the authority they have earned through their expertise. A problem with this assumption, for Gadamer, is that it leaves untouched the difference between the authoritative dimension of authority that is based in the recognition of another's expertise, and the authoritarian dimension of authority that is based in the ability to wield power over another. For Gadamer, philosophy teachers do not "possess" any authority outright—at least none that is automatically legitimate. When a philosophy teacher walks into class on the first day of a semester, it may be the case that they are quickly recognized by students as a legitimate authority—i.e., an expert—on the subject of the class, but it is not automatic.<sup>47</sup> Despite the speed with which

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<sup>47</sup> A clarifying word on the expertise of philosophy teachers: Philosophical expertise does not primarily reside in the "content knowledge" we have about a particular philosophical topic, subfield, historical thinker, and so on. Rather, philosophical expertise lies in the skills we use to learn

teachers are recognized as authorities, however, for Gadamer this moment of recognition is what is at stake.

The importance of such a moment of recognition comes to the fore when we ask the question, *who* are the teachers quickly recognized as authorities? Gadamer's analysis of authority is clarifying especially for those cases wherein a teacher is *not* recognized as a legitimate authority by a particular student (or students)—for example, due to age, gender, or racial bias, or due to epistemic hubris. A philosophy teacher whom some students do not recognize as an authority nevertheless remains the authority in another sense—i.e., insofar as the institution has given them power to assign tasks, set expectations, codify judgements about student work, and so on. A consequence of this may be that the student feels the authority, the power or *potestas*, wielded by the teacher is illegitimate or ungrounded and unfair. Further adding to the complication is the general tendency that a student's lack of recognition will be mixed together with the recognition of legitimate authority granted by other students in the class. For this student, at any rate, the teacher is not a legitimate authority, and it is this precise fact that generates the tensions, frustrations, awkwardness, anger, harm, and disappointment that the teacher will bear the burden of navigating throughout the semester.<sup>48</sup>

Such circumstances reveal a dimension of authority that, for Gadamer, remains the case even when a teacher does not encounter such a complicated mixture of mis- or non-recognition within the classroom. For the legitimate authority of a teacher is set alongside a large degree of power that operates independently of any recognition of authority by the students. Given that these dimensions can be separated—as the above example shows—philosophy teachers will need to consider how to handle the coercive powers that they do automatically bring to the classroom whether or not students recognize them as a legitimate pedagogical authority about the discipline of philosophy.

In other words, there are limits to a philosophy professor's legitimate authority in terms of the difference between their expertise and the institutional power they wield over students. I am suggesting that, for Gadamer's view, a philosophy teacher's

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philosophically, whatever the domain or topic may be. It is just this capacity for *learning philosophically* that makes the discipline so wide-ranging. The fact that it is possible to write a philosophy of internet cat memes is not because internet cat memes are a type of philosophical content strictly speaking, but rather because no matter what content is set before a philosopher, they are capable of engaging with it *philosophically*—i.e., by making use of the specific skills they have cultivated over time.

<sup>48</sup> For further treatment of this particular issue, see Melisa Jacquart, Rebecca Scott, Kevin Hermsberg, and Stephen Bloch-Schulman, "Diversity Is Not Enough: The Importance of Inclusive Pedagogy," *Teaching Philosophy* 42, no. 2 (2019): 107–39, especially 114–20.

expertise in, say, ancient Greek ethics, does *not* provide a legitimate ground for the authority to assign grades or coerce attendance and engagement in some way. *What to do with the difference between any legitimate authority recognized by students and the institutional authority that we possess regardless of any such student recognition, is the question to which our pedagogies will answer.* This more precise framing of the problem is what Gadamer's analysis of authority helps to generate, and it allows us to avoid the too facile recommendation simply to "use power responsibly," which is as obviously true as it is unenlightening.

How then should we respond to this problem? Gadamer's primary mode of response is to council others to engage in self-reflection on the problem rather than to offer a specific pedagogical strategy that would alleviate the burden of self-reflection. In other words, grasping the question of authority correctly and reflecting on it oneself just is the primary way to respond to the matter before and beyond making any concrete pedagogical recommendations. Nevertheless, with the rest of this paper I push the matter forward slightly by offering a few heuristic recommendations as starting points for further reflection on our concrete practices.

One concrete response to the problem of authority as I have framed it above is for philosophy teachers to actively give up, reject, or try to transform any illegitimate authority they may come to possess by placing such authority in the common light of dialogue with students. Some students, educated already by systems that reward subservience to authorities and do not facilitate the critical engagement or testing of the limits of those authorities, may arrive to a philosophy class with the implicit assumption that questioning the professor's authority is too risky, and that, conversely, almost total subservience will be a promising strategy for success. We might think, for example, of the first-year students who ask for permission to use the bathroom, who write highly self-deprecating *mea culpa* emails for missing a class, or who send pictures of themselves in the hospital to prove that they are in the midst of a medical emergency. In what way does our engagement with the dimension of authority in the classroom reinforce or reject the assumptions that are at the root of such tendencies? In what ways are we "ruly" with our classes, thus bolstering the sort of assumptions about authority that Gadamer's analyses expose as illegitimate?<sup>49</sup> In what ways do we create clear opportunities for students to try out a different way of interacting with authority in the classroom? Given just how entrenched some assumptions are,

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<sup>49</sup> See David Concepción, "Learning to Teach," in *Philosophers in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching*, ed. Steven M. Cahn, Alexandra Bradner, and Andrew P. Mills (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2018), 20–33. Concepción is referencing Marilyn Frye, "White Woman Feminist," in *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism, 1976–1992* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1992), 147–69.

professors and students will need to find ways to continually practice a new approach to authority throughout the course in order for such a discussion not to appear as mere lip service. Giving up or rejecting such authoritarian manifestations of authority may involve simply an honestly collaborative, ongoing, discussion about course norms and expectations.<sup>50</sup>

Granting that there will always remain tensions, confusions, and muddied waters in the mixture of legitimate and illegitimate manifestations of pedagogical authority, Gadamer's second feature of legitimate authority offers a more robust way of responding. For it is not simply the distinction as such, or the self-understanding of limits on the part of the teacher that is needed. Students themselves must also actively engage in self-reflection on their own limitations as well as the limitations of the teacher. This means that taking Gadamer's analysis of authority seriously shows that it is not primarily the teachers who will have to arbitrate such tensions and muddy waters, but rather the students; or rather, the students and teacher in collaboration. How far this is possible is thus not something that can be decided in advance but requires teachers to actively experiment with their course design, in-class pedagogies, and assessment practices, and in this sense may move Gadamer closer to pedagogies associated with thinkers such as Paulo Freire or bell hooks.<sup>51</sup>

Even when it is just not possible to reject or give up all illegitimate forms of authority, Gadamer's analysis is suggestive of a way forward. For example, even if the practice of assigning grades—which have consequences for students' financial and professional lives—may be an illegitimate form of authority, the present structural context of higher education makes it mostly impossible to outright reject or give up that practice. In such cases, the best that we may be able to do is to facilitate student reflection on the matter by formulating it as a question of authority. Exposing such forms of authority that we have, placing them on the table to discuss with students, at least demonstrates to the students that we are aware of the limits of our legitimate authority and that we are committed to taking seriously its entanglement with the institutional forms of power we have been given.

One subtle way of thinking that reinforces inadequate assumptions about authority concerns the metaphors we rely on to describe our pedagogical orientation.

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<sup>50</sup> For example, one might consider using Maureen Eckert, "Competing Visions," in *Philosophers in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching*, ed. Steven M. Cahn, Alexandra Bradner, and Andrew P. Mills (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2018), 17–19 during the first week as a jumping off point for such a discussion. I owe this suggestion to Alexandra Bradner.

<sup>51</sup> See Catherine Denial, "A Pedagogy of Kindness," in *Critical Digital Pedagogy: A Collection*, ed. Jesse Stommel, Chris Friend, and Sean Michael Morris (Washington, DC: Hybrid Pedagogy Inc., 2020), 215ff.

Plato's *Apology* presents the dramatic courtroom scene in which Socrates attempts to defend himself against accusations of impiety and corrupting the youth. Throughout, Socrates's defense is a mixture of irony, sincerity, and provocative—even inflammatory—rhetoric: positioning himself as the philosophical gadfly needed to rouse the sluggish, dull Athenian horse that is his fellow citizens.<sup>52</sup>

An odd application of this image, however, has occurred in the realm of teaching philosophy. As Stephen Bloch-Schulman has noted, there is a recurring and pervasive tendency of teachers to view themselves as Socrates and their students as Socrates's interlocutors, or to position themselves in the role of gadfly in relation to the sluggish class body.<sup>53</sup> Viewing students as Athenian rubes, or the class as a sluggish horse in need of prodding clearly assumes a particular view of the teacher–student relationship and a particular purpose of the teacher's authority. Such a view is only then reinforced during “water-cooler conversations” about how to handle particular “problem students,” or lamenting the subpar, disengaged atmosphere of a class. Relying on such metaphors renders any properly Gadamerian commitment to dialogue with students hollow inasmuch as it presumes a view of authority that is precisely at odds with that commitment. If philosophy teachers are to be serious about the Gadamerian concept of dialogue, they will also have to be serious about the Gadamerian concept of authority. To do so requires pedagogical practices that view dialogue as a form of *collaboration* as opposed to the half-ironic and hierarchic form of the Socratic gadfly. That is to say, it will require reflecting on both content and teaching practices alongside students.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, it will require supporting students beyond the classroom, fostering collaboration across campus, and supporting students when they meet resistance to such collaborative engagement in other parts of campus.<sup>55</sup>

When we neglect attending seriously to the dimension of authority, we risk not only teaching philosophy without any legitimate authority, but also that students will

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<sup>52</sup> The image is introduced at Plato, *Apology*, 30e.

<sup>53</sup> Stephen Bloch-Schulman, “The Socratic Method: Teaching and Writing about Philosophy's Signature Pedagogy,” in *Exploring More Signature Pedagogies: Approaches to Teaching Disciplinary Habits of Mind*, ed. Nancy L. Chick, Aeron Haynie, and Regan A. R. Gurung (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2012), 15–26.

<sup>54</sup> For an example of how to do this, see Stephen Bloch-Schulman and Maggie Castor, “I Am Not Trying to Be Defiant, I Am Trying to Be Your Partner: How to Help Students Navigate Educational Institutions that Do Not Value Democratic Practice,” *Partnerships: A Journal of Service-Learning and Civic Engagement* 6, no. 1 (2015): 161–80.

<sup>55</sup> Admittedly, this requires both time and a more personal student–teacher relationship. See Gadamer's comments on these two dimensions in Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Idea of the University—Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow,” in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 52–54.

learn—or persist in—a superficial and twisted view of freedom. For example, when they are told to think for themselves and to ask good questions, but are not given the opportunity to take responsibility for collaborating in their own education, or are required to exempt the teacher from any critical reflection on the limits of the very authority that is structuring their learning environment.

Gadamer’s infamous rehabilitation of the concept of authority has not often been viewed as fomenting socio-political change or fostering critical reflection on our own traditions. Furthermore, its importance for his philosophy of education has gone mostly unnoticed. These tendencies, I have suggested, are mistaken. When situated within the frame of his writings on education, Gadamer’s analysis of authority holds profound implications for the practice of teaching philosophy vis-à-vis traditional pedagogies and assumptions about the relation between teaching and authority. Beyond romantic descriptions of a dialogic classroom still largely premised on “sage on the stage” lectures, brief “class discussion” moments, and the persistence of a host of unexamined assumptions about the dimension of authority, Gadamer’s work on the concept of authority challenges philosophy teachers to engage students-as-partners in teaching and learning in ways that are sufficiently broad (e.g., in the design of course syllabi) and deep (e.g., through metacognitive discussions about authority and education).<sup>56</sup>

Rehabilitating Gadamer’s rehabilitation of the concept of authority involves sticking close to the concrete, day-to-day ways in which authority may play a role in our classes and critically reflecting on our practices, assumptions, and habits together with others who may be impacted by expressions of authority. In order to ameliorate the lack of reflection on authority and teaching philosophy, Gadamer’s work may thus be of use to philosophy departments that provide tools to graduate students for thinking about teaching philosophy as itself a site for philosophical inquiry. A deeper understanding of the role authority plays in the philosophy class, facilitating the self-awareness of students about their own limitations in relation to a philosophical text, question, or problem, and the explicit discussion of our own limitations as philosophy

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<sup>56</sup> For some examples of this kind of work, see Rebecca Murphy, Sarah Nixon, Simon Brooman, and Damian Fearon, “I Am Wary of Giving Too Much Power to Students’: Addressing the ‘but’ in the Principle of Staff–Student Partnership,” *International Journal for Students as Partners* 1, no. 1 (2017): 1–16; Tanya Lubicz-Nawrocka, “From Partnership to Self-Authorship: The Benefits of Co-Creation of the Curriculum,” *International Journal for Students as Partners* 2, no. 1 (2018): 47–63; Anthony Weston, *Teaching as the Art of Staging: A Scenario-Based College Pedagogy in Action* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2019); Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich, “Teaching Thinking: Moral and Political Considerations,” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 35, no. 5 (2003): 19–24; Betsy Newell Decyk, Michael Murphy, Deborah G. Currier, and Deborah T. Long, “Challenges and Caveats,” in *Engaging Student Voices in the Study of Teaching and Learning*, ed. Carmen Werder and Megan M. Otis (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2010), 49–65.

teachers with students can only serve, ultimately, to foster the expression of more legitimate forms of authority and critical freedom on the part of teachers and students.

## Rethinking Gadamer's Aesthetics: The *Unheimlichkeit* of Poetry between Singularity and Iterability

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Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics has often been stigmatized as anti-modern or reduced to a mere methodology for reading texts.<sup>1</sup> In reality, if we set aside some misleading interpretations, we can see that hermeneutics reveals itself as capable of adequately addressing contemporary problems<sup>2</sup> and, as an heir to Socratic-Platonic philosophy, indicates a new ethical-political reading of society.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly evident in Gadamer's conception of art, which constitutes a fundamental element of his thought. If we don't limit ourselves to *Truth and Method*, but rather also focus on his subsequent texts, we can highlight the emergence of a paradigm of art as the experience of the *Unheimlichkeit*, a non-repeatable event (situated in a specific moment of personal and common history) that is nevertheless intrinsically repeatable.

<sup>1</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, "Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik," in *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*, ed. Karl-Otto Apel (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1973), 121–59; Odo Marquard, *Abschied vom Prinzipiellen* (Stuttgart, Germany: Reclam, 1981), 130 ff.

<sup>2</sup> See Lorenzo C. Simpson, *Hermeneutics as Critique: Science, Politics, Race, and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021); Stefano Marino, *Gadamer and the Limits of the Modern Techno-scientific Civilization* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> See James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Monica Vilhauer, *Gadamer's Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2010). See also, as a fundamental reassessment of Gadamer's philosophy, Jeff Malpas, and Santiago Zabala, eds., *Consequences of Hermeneutics: Fifty Years Gadamer's "Truth and Method"* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010); Theodore George and Gert-Jan van der Heiden, eds., *The Gadamerian Mind* (London: Routledge, 2021).

This conception allows hermeneutics to account for contemporary artistic phenomena and is a key for understanding the connection between art practice and Western societies. Moreover, focusing on this rethinking of art, hermeneutics opens up a fruitful dialogue with some of the most fundamental philosophical currents of the twentieth century, such as deconstruction. Jacques Derrida and his followers often accused hermeneutics of remaining within the horizon of metaphysics as well as offering nothing but “interpretative totalization.”<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, I claim that the peculiar reading adopted by Gadamer in relation to poetry shows a path that intersects with Derrida, one that emerges in their respective readings of Paul Celan.

Moreover, the conception of art as repetition that Gadamer and Derrida appear to share—as I will try to underline—implies a reconsideration of the social role of the poet, which becomes a figure capable of speaking to the community in a democratic fashion, no more the mystical and isolated figure that in some way emerges from Martin Heidegger’s reading of Friedrich Hölderlin. In contrast to the exegetical tradition that considers Gadamer an epigone or mere commentator on Heidegger’s doctrine,<sup>5</sup> I believe it is necessary to reassert the autonomy of thought that Gadamer develops. Starting from the path of his teacher, Gadamer proceeds autonomously in the direction of philosophical hermeneutics, which stresses the social status of art in its openness to the historical other.

In this paper I will first underline the peculiarities of Gadamer’s conception of art, focusing on his reading of Celan’s poems. Then I will outline how this conception exhibits an overlooked consonance with Derrida’s reading of poetry. Finally, I will draw the implications for the role of art in society that emerge from Gadamer’s and Derrida’s conception, able to overcome some of Heidegger’s unresolved issues—although both authors were strongly influenced by Heideggerian thought.

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<sup>4</sup> See Jaques Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 26. Along similar lines, see Robert Bernasconi, “Bridging the Abyss: Heidegger and Gadamer,” *Research in Phenomenology* 16 (1986): 1–19; John D. Caputo, “Gadamer’s Closet Essentialism: A Derridean Critique,” in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer–Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 258–64.

<sup>5</sup> On this line of interpretation, see Bernasconi, “Bridging the Abyss: Heidegger and Gadamer”; Francis J. Ambrosio, “Gadamer on the Ontology of Language: What Remains Unsaid,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 17, no. 2 (1986): 124–42. Ambrosio has criticized the absence of a theory of truth in Gadamer. For a justification of the absence of a theory of truth as a positive claim in Gadamer’s thought see Jean Grondin, *Le tournant herménétique de la phénoménologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003).

### Art as Repetition of Readings: Gadamer Listening to Celan's Voice

Gadamer is undoubtedly influenced by Heidegger in the aim—present in the first part of *Truth and Method*—of rethinking art as *Erfahrung* as opposed to *Erlebnis*.<sup>6</sup> As is well known, according to Heidegger the conception of art as *Erlebnis* is strongly criticized as connected to metaphysics, which considers art as the object of the artistic experience of the subject.<sup>7</sup> Gadamer focuses on this point, analyzing the “aesthetics consciousness” as the phenomenon that emerged between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. This is the tendency towards the “aesthetic differentiation,” connected to the atemporal conception of “simultaneity” the work of art is considered devoid of bonds, as a moment of suspension of everyday life.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Gadamer wants to stress the continuity of artistic and everyday experience: “The work of art is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead, the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it. The ‘subject’ of the experience of art, that which remains and endures, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it but the work itself.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite this clear influence of Heidegger's philosophy, I claim that Gadamer elaborates an autonomous and original position on art. Gadamer's masterpiece articulates a paradigm based on the concept of “picture” (*Bild*) returning to the centrality of the sacred picture. The picture perfectly expresses the being of the work of art as presentation (*Darstellung*): the depicted thing undergoes an “increase in being”<sup>10</sup> and the proper content of the image is ontologically defined as “emanation of the original.”<sup>11</sup> The picture (*Bild*) is much more real than the original (*Urbild*) it presents. Such an aspect recurs primarily in the first part of the work and is confirmed by the mention of beauty at the end of *Truth and Method*. There, the focus is not artistic

<sup>6</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), 56–61. For a general vision on Gadamer's reception of Heidegger, see Grondin, *Le tournant herméneutique de la phénoménologie*.

<sup>7</sup> See Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 15–87.

<sup>8</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 74.

<sup>9</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 103. In this direction it is noteworthy the similarities with a different philosophical tradition (e.g., American pragmatism), in particular John Dewey's main claim to rethink art in connection to everyday life (see *Art as Experience: John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 10: 1934, ed. Jo Ann Boydston [Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987]). On this topic see David Vessey, “Dewey, Gadamer, and the Status of Poetry among the Arts,” in *John Dewey and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Paul Fairfield (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 161–73.

<sup>10</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 135.

<sup>11</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 135.

beauty per se, but rather the concept of beauty understood “ontologically” as “light.”<sup>12</sup> Gadamer explicitly refers to the Platonic-Plotinian conception of beauty as the mediation of intellection and perception, a view that persists up to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s aesthetics, according to Gadamer.<sup>13</sup>

This paradigm appears in some ways inadequate for explaining contemporary artistic phenomena that are not connected to the structure of the sacred picture and to the Plotinian conception of art as emanation. However, far from seeing in Gadamer an old-fashioned conception of art, it is possible to point out in Gadamerian thought a parallel paradigm of art based on the concept of *iterability*, already present in *Truth and Method* and further developed in a later and relevant essay called “The Relevance of the Beautiful.” In the latter, artistic phenomenon is analyzed in light of the concepts of play and festival (and that of symbol).<sup>14</sup> The main characteristic of play is the self-presentation (*Selbstdarstellung*) of play itself, where play has a primacy in relation to the player. Gadamer writes: “All playing is a being-played. The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players.”<sup>15</sup> Analogously the audience is directly involved in the artistic experience. The concept of play is connected to that of festival,<sup>16</sup> something that exists only at the moment of its celebration and is both identical and different in each re-enactment, as Gadamer claims: “The festival changes from one time to the next. For there are always other things going on at the same time. Nevertheless, from the historical perspective it would still remain one and the same festival that undergoes this change. It was originally of such and such a nature and was celebrated in such and such a way, then differently, and then differently again.”<sup>17</sup> The fact that the festival is itself only when celebrated does not imply, as Gadamer clarifies, that it has a subjective character, subsisting in the subjectivities of the celebrants. On the contrary, the very being of the audience is determined by attending the celebration and participating in it.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ff.

<sup>13</sup> On this point see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982). See also James Risser, “In the Shadow of Hegel: Infinite Dialogue in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics,” *Research in Phenomenology* 32 (2002): 86–102.

<sup>14</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3–53.

<sup>15</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 106.

<sup>16</sup> See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 120.

<sup>17</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 121.

<sup>18</sup> See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 121.

This paradigm of art as both a unique and repeatable event fully emerges in the analyses on poetry developed by Gadamer in the texts of the 1970s and 1980s, where poetry (and literature in general) acquires a primacy that was not present in Gadamer's masterpiece.<sup>19</sup> Poetry indeed represents the supreme form of art on account of its connection to language and constitutes the artistic complement of hermeneutical dialogue. A crucial difference between dialogue and poetry, however, is that in the former, single words vanish in the flux of conversation, whereas in the latter, the word "stand[s] by itself" (*steht in sich da*), thus acquiring normative value. Gadamer understands poetry as the *refrain* of a melody, as what remains stable in its repetition.

Poetry is the emblem of the dynamic of iterability intrinsic to every work of art. This stems from Gadamer's specific understanding of the prerogative of art in its "presentation." In the case of poetry, this consists in the prerogative of being readable multiple times without exhausting its meaning. As Gadamer writes, "that explication is essentially and inseparably bound to the poetic text itself, precisely because it is never to be exhausted through explication. No one can read a poem without penetrating ever more into understanding, and this includes explication. Reading is explication, and explication is nothing but the articulated fulfilment of reading."<sup>20</sup> The repetition of several readings does not imply an impoverishment of its truth value. This relates to the privileged relation with the word, which is understood to be an inexhaustible value in itself. Repeated acts of reading are not independent from the content of the poem but rather enrich it.

This is even more evident in the analysis that Gadamer devotes to Paul Celan's work, an emblem of contemporary poetry, which, despite being devoid of any immediate reference, discloses a meaning.<sup>21</sup> In his fundamental text "Who Am I and

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<sup>19</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth," in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 105–15.

<sup>20</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Eminent Text and Its Truth," *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 13, no. 1 (1980): 6.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of Gadamer's reading of Celan, see Gert-Jan van der Heiden, "An 'Almost Imperceptible Breathturn': Gadamer on Celan," in *Philosophers and Their Poets: Reflections on the Poetic Turn in Philosophy since Kant*, ed. Charles Bambach and Theodore George (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 215–37.

Who Are You?”<sup>22</sup> as well as in several following essays,<sup>23</sup> Gadamer shows that Celan’s poetry still has a message to communicate, even though the latter manifests itself in the privative form of avoidance. The allusive style of contemporary poetry and its infinite regress of meanings might appear to lead to the nihilistic impossibility of finding sense. Gadamer challenges this view, understanding even hermetic poems like Celan’s as a multiplicity of references that are still able to talk to the reader.<sup>24</sup> This by no means entails a form of univocity of meaning on Gadamer’s part: the meaning of the poem is always *polyvalent*. Indeed, he devoted to Celan another essay—“Meaning and Concealment of Meaning in Paul Celan”—which underlines that contemporary poetry does possess a fundamental unity of meaning, despite its tendency to follow the “gravitational pull of words”<sup>25</sup> without being subjugated by the logical and syntactical rules of grammar. According to Gadamer, “it is a mistake to think that because the semantic associations are not unambiguous one can understand nothing of the poem. Moreover, it is a mistake to think that the unity of speech-intention is missing.”<sup>26</sup>

Contrary to the accusations levelled against him (e.g., Otto Pöggeler accused him of reading Celan by using Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s poems as parameter<sup>27</sup>) Gadamer is perfectly aware that contemporary poetry cannot follow the “naturalness” (*Natürlichkeit*)<sup>28</sup> of Goethe’s age. However, this does not imply that poets remain silent. In other words, for Gadamer it is not true that contemporary poets are destined to silence; rather, they speak with a sort of “discretion,”<sup>29</sup> through hints whose

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<sup>22</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Who Am I and Who Are You?” in *Gadamer on Celan: “Who Am I and Who Are You?” and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Richard Heinemann and Bruce Krajewski (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 67–165. It is a commentary on Celan’s poem “Breath Crystal” (1965), published by the poet and then inserted in the collection *Atemwende (Breathturn)* (Frankfurt, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1967).

<sup>23</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Ästhetik und Poetik II: Gesammelte Werke*, vol. IX (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Im Schatten des Nihilismus,” in *Ästhetik und Poetik I: Gesammelte Werke*, vol. VIII (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 367–82; “Phänomenologischer und semantischer Zugang zu Celan?” in *Ästhetik und Poetik I: Gesammelte Werke*, vol. VIII (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 461–68.

<sup>25</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Meaning and Concealment of Meaning in Paul Celan,” in *Gadamer on Celan: “Who Am I and Who Are You?” and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Richard Heinemann and Bruce Krajewski (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 167.

<sup>26</sup> Gadamer, “Meaning and Concealment of Meaning in Paul Celan,” 167.

<sup>27</sup> See Otto Pöggeler, *Spur des Wortes: zur Lyrik Paul Celans* (Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany: Karl Alber, 1986).

<sup>28</sup> Gadamer, “Meaning and Concealment of Meaning in Paul Celan,” 176.

<sup>29</sup> This is the leading topic of the interesting essay “Verstummen die Dichter?” in Gadamer, *Ästhetik und Poetik II*, 362–66. In particular, Gadamer refers to Rainer Maria Rilke’s conception of “discretion”

intelligibility rests on the reader. This is the answer that Gadamer tries to elaborate to the vexed question of the “past-character of art.”<sup>30</sup>

Celan’s poetry represents a *pendant* of dialogical experience; in fact, Gadamer reads it as a “message in bottle,” a question left open for a philosophical other.<sup>31</sup> In particular, what Gadamer pinpoints in “Who Am I and Who Are You?” already emerges in the title, intentionally formulated as a question: who’s the I and who’s the You in the poem? It is a banalization to think of the I as the poet and the You as the reader: the experience of the poem does not consist merely in the experience of the poet but includes that of every reader. This is a fundamental claim of Gadamer’s thought: the reader of the poem must not necessarily be “scholarly, or especially learned,” but “he must simply try to keep listening.”<sup>32</sup> The reader is the one who listens to the poet’s voice.

In particular, for Gadamer, the first stanza of “Breath Crystal” already shows the meaning of the entire cycle in the metaphor of the passage from the summer to the winter snow, perceived as something positive provided by a You that opens the collection: “This poem is a genuine poem, and as in musical composition, it establishes the key for the whole with the very first tone.”<sup>33</sup> Here he identifies a reference to language, or rather to silence—represented by the snow—that is received as something positive after so many words (the summer). The leading thread of Gadamer’s reading follows a path that, in the end, leads to the fundamental phenomenon of “breath-turn” (*Atemwende*) as the moment that characterizes the essence of poetry itself. As Gadamer says, it is “the sensuous experience of the silent, calm moment between inhaling and exhaling.”<sup>34</sup>

Gadamer sees a connection between the crystal of snow, as the symbol of the winter season and its stillness, and “the true word.”<sup>35</sup> Even in this hermetic poem that considers the topic of silence, Gadamer seems to privilege the word that emerges and

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in order to extend its scope as a prerogative of the modern poet, which is a perfect way of explaining Celan’s poetry (363).

<sup>30</sup>To the Hegelian thesis of the “past-character of art” Gadamer dedicated two specific essays in *Ästhetik und Poetik I*: “Ende der Kunst?—Von Hegels Lehre vom Vergangenheitscharakter der Kunst bis zur Anti-Kunst von Heute” (221–31) and “Die Stellung der Poesie im System der Hegelschen Ästhetik und die Frage des Vergangenheitscharakters der Kunst” (221–31).

<sup>31</sup>This reading can be harmonized with Celan’s conception of poetry as the openness of the dialogue with a “you.” See Paul Celan, “Appendix: The Meridian,” in Jaques Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 173–85.

<sup>32</sup>Gadamer, “Who Am I and Who Are You?” 67.

<sup>33</sup>Gadamer, “Who Am I and Who Are You?” 73.

<sup>34</sup>Gadamer, “Who Am I and Who Are You?” 73.

<sup>35</sup>Gadamer, “Who Am I and Who Are You?” 74.

speaks. It is worth noting that he attenuates the bleakest aspect of Celan's poetry in favor of a dialogical interpretation. Poetry leaves a glimmer of hope for the possibility of speaking to the other despite the inexpressibility of experience.

In this respect, Gadamer's reading of Celan matches perfectly with his conception of the poetic word as what "is in itself," the crystal of breath, as what, despite all difficulty of expression, is capable of disclosing a meaning. Gadamer himself affirmed his intent to be in front of the poem just like any other reader. Only the repeated reading of the poem makes it possible to penetrate its meaning. Reading is the way a poem is presented, and it enables the poem to become both unique and universal, namely, as capable of addressing different readers.

### The Uninterrupted Dialogue with Derrida

The abovementioned conception of Celan constitutes a key to demonstrating an unexpected convergence between Gadamer and Derrida. The Gadamer–Derrida debate, which moves from the famous and complicated encounter of 1981 in Paris—where Derrida appeared less inclined than Gadamer to open a dialogue—has provoked a large number of contributions and discussions.<sup>36</sup> The scholarly tradition that stems from Derrida has considered hermeneutics and deconstruction irreconcilable,<sup>37</sup> accusing hermeneutics of being an attempt to exhaust meaning, in contraposition to dissemination.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, hermeneutical scholars such as Jean Grondin, James Risser, and Donatella Di Cesare have stressed relevant

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<sup>36</sup> For an overview of the different position among American scholars, see Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer, eds., *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer–Derrida Encounter* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

<sup>37</sup> See Robert Bernasconi, "Seeing Double: *Destruktion* and Deconstruction," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer–Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 251–57; Caputo, "Gadamer's Closet Essentialism"; Herman Rapaport, "All Ears: Derrida's Reponse to Gadamer," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer–Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 199–205. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the fundamental texts devoted to a global reading of Derrida say nothing on (or minimize) the importance of the relation with Gadamer. See in particular Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). In this text there is no reference to the 1981 encounter. Analogously, for the volume Jacques Derrida and Antoine Spire, *Au-delà des apparences* (Latresne, France: Le Bord de l'eau, 2002).

<sup>38</sup> See Zoran Jankovic, "Le texte éminent et Schibboleth," *Le Cercle Herméneutique* 2 (2004): 93–115.

commonalities between the two philosophers,<sup>39</sup> a perspective I share. This does not mean an overlapping between the two philosophies, which have different positions and backgrounds in respect to the history of philosophy, language, and interpretation. Without delving into the specifics of Derrida's position, here I aim to highlight that—despite their different backgrounds—the idea of the irreconcilability between the two currents is based on an erroneous reading of hermeneutics.

Moreover, it is important to consider that Derrida, always reticent to dialogue with hermeneutics, devoted an important text to Gadamer: “Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue—Between Two Infinities, the Poem,” read in Heidelberg on the occasion of Gadamer's death. In that essay he manifests an unusual openness to Gadamer's philosophy as well as deep knowledge of Gadamerian texts by using the expressions “uninterrupted dialogue” and “inner dialogue,”<sup>40</sup> arguing that the interruption itself (the famous interruption or misunderstanding of the 1981 encounter) paradoxically made the dialogue with Gadamer possible. Now, with the definitive interruption of death, the dialogue can really gain strength: this is summarized by Derrida with Celan's verse “*Die Welt ist fort ich muss dich tragen.*”<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, the concept of inner dialogue is coupled with that of *unheimlich*<sup>42</sup>—a notion that has great relevance in relation to Derridean readings of Celan and of poetry in general. Indeed, the term is capable of expressing the peculiar strangeness of the encounter, fundamentally mixed to a familiarity “at once intimate and unsettling, sometimes disquieting, vaguely spectral.”<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the use of that German word—which has no equivalent in French, as Derrida himself remarks—shows the common sensitivity of the two philosophers towards translation. Derrida mentions the relation between translation and poetry, restating the primacy ascribed to the latter as something capable of making possible an impossible phenomenon. Derrida also recalls Gadamer's connection between the poem (*Gedicht*) and dialogue (*Gespräch*),<sup>44</sup> underlining that, throughout their common reference to poetry, he could continue his dialogue with Gadamer, moving from an inevitable interruption: “At that time, indeed,

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<sup>39</sup> See Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, Grondin, *Le tournant herméneutique de la phénoménologie*, Donatella Di Cesare, “Hermeneutics and Deconstruction,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Niall Keane and Chris Lawn (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 471–80.

<sup>40</sup> Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 136.

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 40.

<sup>42</sup> Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 137.

<sup>43</sup> Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 137.

<sup>44</sup> Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 138.

I called for a certain *interruption*. Far from signifying the failure of the dialogue, such an interruption could become the condition of comprehension and understanding.”<sup>45</sup>

In sum, Derrida admits that he began a silent dialogue with hermeneutics that now, after Gadamer’s death, he develops by appealing to Celan’s mediation. Despite their different backgrounds, it is precisely in light of their respective interpretations of Celan’s poetry that it is possible to show a relevant commonality in their conceptions of art and its ethical status of openness to the other.

Just like Gadamer, Derrida deems art a fundamental point of his thought. Derridean texts do not consider art a specific object to be discussed, with the scope of aesthetics or philosophy of art, but rather he extends the whole field to visible and tactile things.<sup>46</sup> Here I cannot reconstruct Derridean thought in detail.<sup>47</sup> However, it is relevant that, far from explicating the essence of poetry, Derrida focuses on single works of art in order to show the aspects they share with deconstruction itself.<sup>48</sup> In particular, he sets to surpass Heidegger’s conception, which concerns the essence of the poetry in Hölderlin, and elaborates the concept of “poematic” as an alternative to “poetry,” as what refuses every destinal interpretation.<sup>49</sup> This consideration emerges in his reading of Celan, which represents the event of singularity that opens to the other by negating itself.

Derrida devotes a fundamental work to Celan, “Shibboleth.”<sup>50</sup> The implicit starting point of Derrida’s discourse is circumcision, which is an event that happens a single time and thus is both initial and final. This ambivalence of a uniqueness that may be so only by being made (in a certain sense) repeatable is at the basis of poetry: “I will speak, therefore, at once of circumcision and of the one-and-only time, in other words, of what *comes down to* marking itself as the one-and-only time: what one sometimes (*parfois*) calls a *date*.”<sup>51</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 139.

<sup>46</sup> See Jean-Luc Nancy, “Eloquentes rayures,” in *Derrida et la question de l’art: Déconstruction de l’esthétique*, ed. Adnen Jdey (Nantes, France: Cécile Defaut, 2011), 428 ff.

<sup>47</sup> For a comprehensive reading of Derridean thought, see Zeynep Direk and Leonard Lawlor, eds., *A Companion to Derrida* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014). In relation to art and literature in Derrida’s philosophy, see Jean-Michel Rabaté, ed., *After Derrida: Literature, Theory and Criticism in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>48</sup> As Randolphe Gasché, *Invention of Difference: On Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) has underlined, Derridean deconstruction is not at all a method of readings of artistic texts, but rather it entails a philosophical confrontation with them.

<sup>49</sup> As Gadamer, also Derrida is influenced by Heidegger’s conception of art. In particular, see Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), wherein he discusses Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art.”

<sup>50</sup> Other essays that Derrida devotes to Celan are also collected in Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*.

<sup>51</sup> Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 2.

For Derrida, the emblem of Celan's poetry consists in the date: both that of the writing of the poem (which Celan erased before publication, as stressed by Peter Szondi<sup>52</sup>) and those to which the poem refers (the fundamental dates of the events of nineteenth-century history, which emerges in Celan's poems). The date represents what is structurally both unique and repeatable and constitutes the leading thread of Derrida's reading of poetry. The enigma of art rests in the fact that the poem, despite its uniqueness, is able to talk to the other. The peculiar feature of poetry, in particular the kind of modern poetry represented by Celan, is a sort of oxymoronic non-repeatable exemplarity that can deconstruct the "historical building" of literature.

It is worth noting that, in "Shibboleth," Derrida aims to show the ethical status of poetry, which, despite being situated in a specific moment (at a specific date), is still able to communicate a message. Thus, Derrida's reading goes in the same direction as Gadamer's, underlining the residual hope and openness to the other that Celan's poetry brings within itself. Moving from Celan's affirmation "*Aber das Gedicht spricht ja!*"<sup>53</sup> Derrida can affirm: "What does this *but* [*aber*] mean? No doubt that *despite* the date, in spite of its memory rooted in the singularity of an event, the poem speaks: to all and in general, and first of all to the other. The *but* seems to carry the poem's utterance beyond its date."<sup>54</sup> The *shibboleth* is what avoids a complete interpretation, remaining partially undeciphered and secret. Nevertheless, it can communicate.

Derrida returns to this point in the eight and tenth sessions of the first volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign*,<sup>55</sup> which can be considered two independent thematic unities. There, the focus is the political and philosophical issue of "majesty" connected to Celan's poetry. Derrida argues that the determinate situation of the poem has to do with the other, referring to the topic of dialogue (an aspect that was picked up also by Gadamer). Derrida affirms that "the poem is thus a speaking of two (*Gespräch*, a speaking together), a speech of more than one, a speech whose now maintains more than one in it, a speaking that *gathers* more than one in it."<sup>56</sup> This leaving one's time to the other has nothing to do with a passivity or an abandonment of the other, but is rather something active that makes the event of the other possible.

There is no doubt that relevant differences exist between the two authors when it comes to the notion of art. Derrida cannot accept Gadamer's vision of art as

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<sup>52</sup> See Peter Szondi, *Celan Studies*, trans. Susan Bernofsky with Harvey Mendelsohn (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>53</sup> Celan, "Appendix: The Meridian," 180.

<sup>54</sup> Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 7.

<sup>55</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>56</sup> Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 119.

“mimesis,” which he considers the residue of a metaphysical point of view, whereas Gadamer would accuse Derrida’s interpretations of being excessively formalistic. Such differences derive from the distinct backgrounds that gave rise to the two philosophers: biblical hermeneutics and German classical philosophy for Gadamer, structuralism and Nietzsche’s philosophy for Derrida—just to mention some of the most relevant sources.<sup>57</sup> However, beyond undeniable differences, I claim that, considering what has been said so far, Gadamer and Derrida share the interpretation of the poem as a singular and irreducible event, capable of preserving memory, something that both authors consider a peculiar characteristic of the work of art. This is clear in their respective readings of Celan.

This point can be schematically reduced to the topic of the *meaning* connected to the poem: for Derrida—as it emerges in his reading of Celan—meaning is structurally *disseminated* as *shibboleth* and can never be solved; on the other hand, for Gadamer, every poetic word has a *polyvalence* of meaning. Going beyond Derrida’s move away from Gadamer with his accusation of “interpretative totalization,”<sup>58</sup> I claim that these two positions should not be considered opposite.<sup>59</sup> They rather show a fundamental commonality in overcoming a univocal conception of meaning and in their intrinsic openness to the other. It is possible to say that the two readings represent two sides of the same coin. This does not mean to reduce the two positions to one, but rather to show the intrinsic dialogicity present in both philosophies. Derridean dissemination does not entail stillness: it leaves a door open to the other. Analogously, Gadamer’s notion of polyvalent meaning stresses the impossibility of grasping the totality of meaning. Polyvalency does not indicate a multiplicity of meanings that are available to the use of readers; it rather represents the infinite possibility of the finite to relate with otherness.

Hermeneutics, far from any attempt at a total comprehension of meaning, shares this radical openness to the other with deconstruction: iterability guarantees the openness of an event that, while maintaining its singularity, does not become inaccessible. For Gadamer the concept of familiarity stands at the basis of art, he

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<sup>57</sup> Gadamer and Derrida disagree in their readings of tradition and language. Gadamer understands tradition as the dialogue with the past—tradition is intended as *Überlieferung* and not in a monolithic and conservative way as *Tradition*. For Derrida, tradition is characterized by the predominance of the phono-logocentrism of metaphysics and for this reason must be deconstructed, in order to let the *différance* emerge. However, they are receptive of Heideggerian philosophy, and this common legacy makes it possible to claim a dialogue between the two philosophies.

<sup>58</sup> Derrida distancing himself from the concepts of comprehension and interpretation, accused of being mere appropriation, derives from his Nietzschean background. This leads him to criticize hermeneutics, as it emerges in Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 26.

<sup>59</sup> See Jankovic, “Le texte éminent et Shibboleth.”

focuses on the *heim* of the *Unheimlichkeit*. The poet makes us familiar with the experience of language, and we naturally feel at home: “the word of the poet does not simply continue this process of *Einhausung*, or ‘making ourselves at home.’ Instead it stands over against this process like a mirror held up to it.”<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, familiarity is always connected to an impact (*Stoß*) that every encounter brings forth as a form of *Unheimlichkeit*. In this respect, Derrida stresses the topic of the *un* of the *unheimlich* of artistic experience as the fundamental element of art, whose possibility “is a link that leads to the encounter (*Begegnung*), to your encounter, to the encounter of you, to the nomination of Thou, by which he will more than once have named the poem and the present of the poem.”<sup>61</sup>

In particular, Gadamer’s concept of celebration (and presentation) and Derrida’s notion of the date exhibit an important similarity connected to the fact that they both conceive of poetry (and of aesthetic experience in general) in connection to its natural repeatability, which does not limit art’s possibility of speaking to our contemporary world. Moving from this point of view, it is possible to see beyond a mere contraposition between Derrida’s dissemination and Gadamer’s polyvalence of meaning. For Gadamer, in fact, in every text (of which poetry represents an eminent example) and, in general, in every relation, mankind must face the polyvalence of meaning that can never be exhausted. For Derrida, on the other hand, every human fact has to do with the intrinsic dissemination of meaning that can never be reduced to an origin. However, just as Derrida’s philosophy does not entail the impossibility of communication with the other, Gadamer’s conception does not exhaust meaning by interpretation. Rather than a mere appropriative exhaustion, Gadamerian reading is able to show the openness of a poem, the counterpart of the infinite possibility of dialogue, always open to interlocutors.

### **The Social Role of the Poet from His Spatial and Temporal Situation**

The peculiar conception of art as repetition, shared by Gadamer and Derrida, holds that a unique event (the work of art) is capable of talking to the other on account of its intrinsic iterability. This conception shows the problematic status of art, its *Unheimlichkeit*, which represents a *Stoß* for the audience, who is called to question its

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<sup>60</sup> Gadamer, “On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth,” 115.

<sup>61</sup> Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 115.

previous assumptions. The possibility of repetition does not erase the specific situation where the work of art is inevitably situated.

This point is connected to the fact that spatial and temporal determinations cannot be eliminated: they constitute the work of art in its specificity without hindering the possibility of communication. In this direction, Gadamer affirms: “No reader can understand without specialties, and yet every reader understands only when the specialty of the occasion is sublated by the universality of occasionality. . . . It 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.”<sup>62</sup> This aesthetic conception represents an echo of the fundamental Gadamerian notion of “hermeneutic situation” developed in *Truth and Method*. Every event is historically determined; however, this does not mean the impossibility of understanding other historical periods. Gadamer elaborates this theory, focusing on the relevance of “temporal distance” in contrast with the historicist’s pretenses of overcoming it and placing themselves above history: “Real historical thinking must take account of its own historicity.”<sup>63</sup>

The reference to the hermeneutical “situation” is fundamental for Gadamer’s philosophy. It is worth noting that Derrida makes use of that term in “Shibboleth” specifically: “A date discerns and concerns a place, it is a situation.”<sup>64</sup> Analogously, Derrida also asserts that circumcision—a metaphor of *shibboleth*—has to do with a determination. This finitude does not entail mere arbitrariness, but rather the fact that the poem approaches the other from the singularity of its determined position. Moreover, Derrida as well stresses the value of the spatial and temporal specificity represented by the date. This relates to the topic of iterability as it emerges from his book on Celan, where Derrida affirms that the date, namely the poem, must nullify itself to reach the other, despite maintaining its peculiarity: “Annulment is at work everywhere a date inscribes its here and now within iterability, when it consigns itself to losing sense, in self-forgetfulness, thus succeeding only in effacing itself.”<sup>65</sup> Despite this dissemination of meaning, a trace remains that makes the poem itself possible. Derrida underlines the absolute impossibility of distinguishing the date in its original identity—the commemorated date, which constitutes the “constative value”—and its repetition, the return of the date in the celebration namely the “performative value.”

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<sup>62</sup> Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*, 134.

<sup>63</sup> Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*, 299.

<sup>64</sup> Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 48.

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 40.

It is possible to affirm that both Gadamer and Derrida develop the reference to the specific situation wherein the poet is inevitably placed making use of insights coming from the early phase of Heidegger's thought in order to go beyond Heidegger himself. In fact, after the famous *Kehre* of the 1930s, Heidegger partially renounced the centrality of temporal and spatial determinations related to the work of art—maybe to avoid the existentialist readings that were becoming dominant in France<sup>66</sup>—and preferred to highlight the figure of the poet as he who discloses the “essence of poetry.” Both Gadamer and Derrida go beyond the critique to the subjectivism of poetry, valorizing the specific situatedness of both the poet and the reader without thereby assuming an arbitrary or merely biographical understanding of poetry. On the contrary, they both underline the primacy of the text vis-à-vis the author, without excluding the specificity of the situation wherein the author is located.

In particular, Gadamer inherits the conception of the historicity of every experience, elaborating the Heideggerian concept of “*Faktizität*,” presented for the first time in Heidegger's Freiburg courses, attended by Gadamer, in particular the one titled *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*.<sup>67</sup> This concept was later reassessed by Heidegger in *Being and Time* as the *Geworfenheit* of *Dasein*. In particular, the Heideggerian concept of the “fore-structure of understanding”<sup>68</sup> that characterizes *Dasein* is developed by Gadamer in the direction of stressing the fundamental historicity of understanding and its consequences: it constitutes the relation with the other and the context where the latter is situated. This entails the necessary reevaluation of the tradition, understood as the “voice of the other.”<sup>69</sup>

It is here that Gadamer makes a step beyond Heidegger, even though he does not declare this too explicitly in *Truth and Method*<sup>70</sup>: the “fore-structure of understanding” we find ourselves in coincides with “prejudice.”<sup>71</sup> It entails a

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<sup>66</sup> See Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings: From “Being and Time” (1927) to “The Task of Thinking” (1964)*, 2nd rev. and exp. ed., ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 213–65. See also Tom Rockmore, *Heidegger and French Philosophy: Humanism, Antihumanism and Being* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>67</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, trans. John van Buren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 11 ff. See also Jean Grondin, *Hans George Gadamer: A Biography*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>68</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 134 ff. See also Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*, 268 ff.

<sup>69</sup> See Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*.

<sup>70</sup> Gadamer affirms: “Heidegger entered into the problems of historical hermeneutics and critique only to explicate the fore-structure of understanding for the purpose of ontology. Our question, by contrast, is how hermeneutics, once freed from the ontological obstructions of the scientific concept of objectivity, can do justice to the historicity of understanding” (*Truth and Method*, 268).

<sup>71</sup> See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 274–85.

revaluation of the latter, in contrast with the negative connotation ascribed to it by the illuminist theories (and shared by both romanticism and historicism). This conducts to the famous concept of the “historical effected consciousness” (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) as the inevitable historical background that every understanding brings with itself and that, at the same time, it contributes to create.<sup>72</sup> Gadamer’s reinterpretation of Heidegger moves from within the theoretical perspective of the latter. In other words, as Di Cesare has highlighted,<sup>73</sup> the fundamental Heideggerian heritage in Gadamer’s thought consists in the centrality of the *finitude* that characterizes *Dasein*, the impossibility of disregarding *specific* contexts. Gadamer rethinks Heidegger’s conception of the role of poet, making use of the categories developed by Heidegger himself in the abovementioned *Ontology* and *Being and Time* with respect to the issue of the “hermeneutical situation.”

In sum, despite the fundamental influence of Heidegger’s philosophy—Gadamer also authored a preface to Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art”<sup>74</sup>—it is important to highlight that Gadamer is able to overcome the impasses of his teacher’s conception. In his famous conference *Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry*, Heidegger described Hölderlin as the emblem of poetry against the subjectivism of aesthetics: “Hölderlin’s poetry is sustained by his whole poetic mission: to make poems solely about the essence of poetry. Hölderlin is for us in a preeminent sense *the poet’s poet*. And for that reason he forces a decision upon us.”<sup>75</sup> According to Heidegger’s well-known reading, human beings should listen to Hölderlin’s poetry, the only form of art capable of describing the contemporary situation of humankind living in the time of the absence of the gods, suspended between the “great art” of the past and a potential “new beginning.”<sup>76</sup>

Here I do not aim to delve into the details of Heidegger’s argumentation on poetry. However, it is relevant to highlight how his conception appears to leave behind the specific context in which a poem is situated, the spatial and temporal determinations that characterize each poem, in order to avoid the subjectivism of metaphysics. Heidegger presents a destinal and epochal reading of poetry. I do not want to belittle the innovative aspects of Heidegger’s reading of Hölderlin, but we

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<sup>72</sup> See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 335 ff.

<sup>73</sup> See Donatella Di Cesare, *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, trans. Niall Keane (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), 335 ff.

<sup>74</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “*Die Wahrheit des Kunstwerkes*,” in *Neuere Philosophie. Gesammelte Werke*, vol. III (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 249–61.

<sup>75</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), 52.

<sup>76</sup> Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, 52.

cannot overlook the communal and political risks implied by the idea of seeing the poet as a mystical and prophetic figure.<sup>77</sup> As Heidegger claims, for instance: “Thus the essence of poetry is joined to the laws which strive to separate and unite the hints of the gods and the voice of the people. The poet himself stands between the former—the gods—and the latter—the people. He is the one who has been cast out—out into that *between*, between gods and men.”<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Heidegger’s interpretation of Hölderlin ultimately conceives of the poet as a nationalistic figure, a conception that holds political consequences: the poet represents the “German spirit” and acquires the characteristics of a mystical figure. The community should be asked to listen to the guide of a single individual, with the potential for political absolutism that comes with it. Furthermore, Heidegger’s position is aporetic in that it implies a circularity: human beings should have already been saved in order to be capable of listening to Hölderlin’s salvific voice.<sup>79</sup>

Going back to the intention expressed in the introduction of this paper, I claim that, contrary to the accusation of being a conservative theory, Gadamerian hermeneutics is intrinsically capable of displaying the fracture at the basis of the correspondence with the other, and more precisely, with the work of art, to display a “democratic” relation between the poet and the community.<sup>80</sup> Gadamer’s main claim is that every reading of the poem has an intrinsic connection to the poem itself, thus increasing the meaning of that work of art. Each reader engages in this process, moving from the specific situation he finds himself in. The fact that both the poem and the reader are always situated does not threaten the capacity of poetry to reach out to the audience. From this point of view, according to Gadamer, “the text ultimately holds authority over the poet,”<sup>81</sup> thus making the poet’s (or more generally the author’s) interpretation *one among many* readings that compose the meaning of the poem (the work of art). This hermeneutical criterion places the poet on the same level as the interpreter, opening the possibility of a true dialogue between poetry and philosophy: “Just as the poem is a unique utterance, an incomparable and untranslatable balance

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<sup>77</sup> See Cristoph Jamme, “‘Dem Dichten Vor-Denken’: Aspekte von Heideggers ‘Zwiesprache’ mit Hölderlin im Kontext seiner Kunstphilosophie,” *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 38, no. 2 (1984): 191–218.

<sup>78</sup> Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, 68.

<sup>79</sup> See Alberto L. Siani, “Hope and Silence: Heidegger and Celan on the Subject of Poetry,” *Studi di estetica* 47 (2019): 175–90.

<sup>80</sup> On the social and democratic shades of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, see Darren Walhof, *The Democratic Theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Simpson, *Hermeneutics as Critique*.

<sup>81</sup> Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*, 137.

of sound and meaning upon which reading is built, so the interpreting word also remains a unique utterance.”<sup>82</sup>

The artistic phenomenon consists in a constant dialogue with the tradition, even though it modifies the very structure of its relation with the tradition itself. Every work of art—even in its most extreme forms, like the avant-garde—preserves some relation to the *Wirkungsgeschichte* in which it finds itself and which it modifies. The understanding of art as repetition shows that the hermeneutical conception has nothing to do with a nostalgia for “the great art of the past.”<sup>83</sup> On the contrary, hermeneutics constitutes a key for interpreting contemporary art in all its manifestations, which can be traced back to the dynamic of iterability and uniqueness (e.g., film series, installation art, body art).<sup>84</sup>

In this respect, the accusations of appropriation levelled against hermeneutics are part of erroneous readings, often shared by deconstruction. On the contrary, both philosophies have the possibility of pointing to a path of openness towards the other, starting with their relation to artistic phenomena. The experience of the poet represents the experience of each individual. In this way Gadamer is able to rethink the conception of the poet not as a prophetic voice but as one interpreter among many. The poet is not an isolated figure to whom the community must lend an ear, being situated within the community itself. Thus, the poet contributes to extending the message of the work of art, reminding us of its democratic basis.

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<sup>82</sup> Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*, 147.

<sup>83</sup> This emerges in opposition to Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volume I: The Will to Power as Art*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 80.

<sup>84</sup> See Cynthia R. Nielsen, “Gadamer on the Event of Art, the Other, and a Gesture toward a Gadamerian Approach to Free Jazz,” *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* 2016, article 6 (2016): 1–17.

## A Hermeneutics and Poetics of Trust: Gadamer and Domin on Trust and Language

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While Gadamer rarely discusses trust (*Vertrauen*) in explicit terms as a philosophical concept important for his project, there is no doubt that trust or confidence is operative in his philosophical hermeneutics. For instance, we can easily see how in *Truth and Method* trust is a necessary condition for Gadamer's notion of conversation as a model for hermeneutic interpretation and understanding. Partners in a genuine conversation must have confidence in each other, such that each attempt to come to an agreement about the subject matter at hand, and concomitantly, that each attempt to find each other in a common language. It is such a trust or confidence that allows one to "fall into" the conversation, that is, for an individual to be led by the conversation instead of one leading the conversation.<sup>1</sup> This is in line with what Robert J. Dostal has argued about Gadamer's hermeneutics when he calls it a hermeneutics of trust or good will.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, reference to a hermeneutics of trust in Gadamer is often raised in opposition to the hermeneutics of suspicion, a phrase coined by Paul Ricoeur.<sup>3</sup> While a hermeneutics of suspicion attempts to interpret a meaning that is hidden, latent, or perhaps unconscious to what a text or another person says, a hermeneutics of trust is a disposition that favors openness and readiness to receive

<sup>1</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 401.

<sup>2</sup> See Robert J. Dostal, "The World Never Lost: The Hermeneutics of Trust," *Philosophy and Phenomenology Research* 47, no. 3 (1987): 413–34; "Gadamerian Hermeneutics and Irony: Between Strauss and Derrida," *Research in Phenomenology* 38, no. 2 (2008): 247–69.

<sup>3</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Man and World* 17 (1984): 313–24.

what the text or the other has to say. It does not presume a latent or more “meaningful” meaning hidden behind the words or what is spoken. Furthermore, a hermeneutics of trust allows one’s own prejudices to be put into play in the dialogic event of understanding.

In this essay, I want to contribute to this discussion of Gadamer’s hermeneutics of trust by focusing on one of his often-overlooked essays on the poet, Hilde Domin: “*Hilde Domin, Lied zur Ermutigung II.*”<sup>4</sup> This essay is not only a rare moment in which Gadamer focuses specifically on trust, but it also sheds new light on the importance of trust in his overall hermeneutic project. I claim that Gadamer’s analysis of trust in Domin’s poem indicates a trust that cuts to the core of this debate surrounding the hermeneutics of trust/good will and the hermeneutics of suspicion. As I will show, Gadamer’s concern with trust in Domin’s poem shows us that trust is a matter of language itself, or, the linguisticity of hermeneutic experience. Language or linguisticity has always been at the foundation of Gadamer’s hermeneutic project as the condition for the possibility of interpretation and understanding. We cannot talk about language or linguisticity without a necessary trust or confidence in language. Gadamer’s essay on Domin is a diagnosis of what happens when this trust begins to fail, when a breakdown in the trust in language leads to a breakdown in the possibility of understanding the world and each other, when language becomes confused, distorted, or even tyrannous to the point that one is forced to flee or run away from language, and when trust in language has been altogether lost or forgotten. If we recall Gadamer’s well-known assertion, that “Being that can be understood is language,”<sup>5</sup> then a failure in the trust in language threatens the very possibility of understanding to take place at all. All of these considerations speak to issues at the phenomenological grounding of Gadamer’s hermeneutics and ultimately offer a further response to philosophical scholarship that affirms a hermeneutics of suspicion. As I will show, Gadamer’s reading of Domin brings to bear not only certain political and ethical implications of trust and language, but ultimately it shows us the ontological stakes involved in affirming a hermeneutics of trust. Without a trust in language, we lose the capacity to disclose ourselves to each other and the possibility for the phenomenological-hermeneutical event of understanding to take place.

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<sup>4</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hilde Domin, *Lied zur Ermutigung II.*,” in *Ästhetik und Poetik II: Hermeneutik im Vollzug, Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 9 (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 320–22. He discusses Domin and her work on at least two other occasions. In 1971, he provides an encomium for her work when she received the Droste-Preis, entitled “*Hilde Domin, Dichterin der Rückkehr.*” In 1988, Gadamer also writes an essay on the topic of Domin’s *Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen*, entitled “*Die Höhe erreichen.*” These are available in Gadamer, *Ästhetik und Poetik II.*

<sup>5</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 490.

The first part of this essay reads through Gadamer's own analysis of Domin's poem in order to draw out this ontological claim about trust and language in Gadamer's works. Above all, I focus on Gadamer's own emphasis on trust as "the most difficult ABC" as it appears in Domin's poem.<sup>6</sup> This leads him into a reflection on how easy it is to lose or forget one's trust in language and the world, while at the same time, the great difficulty in being able to learn or relearn this trust. The ABC of trust indicates, for Gadamer, how rudimentary and foundational trust is for us in our relationship to the world and others, and that this relationship is grounded in our trust in language. While this kind of trust can be threatened and put at great risk, Gadamer will ultimately claim that trust is never truly an impossibility or something that can be annihilated. Even in the most extreme circumstances, Gadamer will claim that trust is perhaps hidden and imperceptible, but is nevertheless available for anyone to take up at any point. The second part of this essay then focuses on Domin's own self-interpretations of her poem and on what I call her own "poetics of trust" in her writings. A poetics of trust concerns both the ethical demand to rectify a language that has been abused, distorted, and falsified, as well as an act of resistance as a "nevertheless" (*Trotzdem* or *Dennoch*) in the face of catastrophe. Both aspects of this poetics of trust ultimately call for courage to resist all lies, deception, and dishonesty and to preserve our trust in language. In so doing, we may preserve our trust in each other and in the world. Here, I claim that Gadamer and Domin find common ground in their respective positions on trust and language. The relationship between a hermeneutics of trust and a poetics of trust is grounded in a trust in language, whereby the poem is itself an act of trust. Ultimately, I claim that Gadamer's reading of Domin is not a minor digression in Gadamer's thought. Instead, his essay discloses an existential truth about the limits of hermeneutic experience and points to the crucial role of the poet as a guarantor of our trust in language.

### **Gadamer's Reading of Domin's "Lied zur Ermutigung II"**

Gadamer's biographical and intellectual relationship with Domin and her works has received little attention in Gadamerian scholarship over the decades with a few rare exceptions.<sup>7</sup> Gadamer and Domin were friends and carried on a correspondence. It

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<sup>6</sup> Gadamer, "Hilde Domin, *Lied zur Ermutigung II*," 320.

<sup>7</sup> One of these exceptions is a brief section in James Risser, *The Life of Understanding: A Contemporary Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), which refers to Gadamer's text on Domin as a poet of return in a discussion about Martin Heidegger and Gadamer on the topic of poetry and

would also be Gadamer who provided the laudatory remarks on the occasion of Domin's reception of the Droste-Preis in Meersburg, Germany, in 1971, in which he famously refers to her as a "poet of return" (*Dichterin der Rückkehr*). Gadamer's comments on trust appear in an earlier essay from 1966 in which he offers a reading of the second poem in Domin's series of poems entitled, "Lied zur Ermutigung" (Song of Encouragement). Given their friendship, it should come as no surprise that this particular essay on Domin first appeared alongside Domin's own self-interpretation of her poem in a volume edited by Domin entitled, *Doppelinterpretationen: Das zeitgenössische deutsche Gedicht zwischen Autor und Leser*. The poem, "Lied zur Ermutigung II," reads as follows:

Lange wurdest du um die türelosen  
Mauern der Stadt gejagt.

Du fliehst und streust  
die verwirrten Namen der Dinge  
hinter dich.

Vertrauen, dieses schwerste  
ABC.

Ich mache ein kleines Zeichen  
in die Luft,  
unsichtbar,  
wo die neue Stadt beginnt,  
Jerusalem,  
die goldene,  
aus Nichts.<sup>8</sup>

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homecoming (35–36). While I argue that Gadamer scholars should start to take both his short essays on Domin and Domin's own poetry and essays more seriously, it is unclear as to why this has not yet been done. One reason could simply be that Gadamer only offers three brief, untranslated essays on her work, and that this pales in comparison to his substantial engagement with poets such as Friedrich Hölderlin, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Paul Celan.

<sup>8</sup> Gadamer, "Hilde Domin, *Lied zur Ermutigung II*," 320.

Long were you chased around the doorless  
walls of the city.

You flee and scatter  
the confused names of things  
behind you.

Trust, this most difficult  
ABC.

I make a small sign  
in the air,  
invisible,  
where the new city begins,  
Jerusalem,  
the golden city,  
from out of nothing.<sup>9</sup>

The poem itself was written by Domin in the winter of 1960/61 in Spain shortly before her return home to Germany after a long exile.<sup>10</sup> After leaving Germany in 1932, she would travel to Italy, then England, and finally land in the Dominican Republic in 1940. From 1954 until 1961 she would split her time between Spain and Germany, and then would finally call Heidelberg her home from 1961 until her death in 2006 at the age of 96. It is for this reason, along with the ever-present sense of loss, exile, and returning in her poems, that Gadamer refers to Domin as a poet of return. This is precisely what Gadamer reads in Domin's poem, especially pertaining to the word and theme of *Vertrauen*. For Gadamer, the first part of the poem describes the loss of trust, or a trust that is in exile, and the second part of the poem describes the beginning of a return to trust. The two lines that occupy the middle of the poem, "Trust, this most difficult/ABC," name, for Gadamer, the central theme and context of the poem. I quote Gadamer here at length:

One immediately asks: does one have to initially learn trust? Can one learn it in the way one learns to write? As if one could live at all without trust. Is not

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<sup>9</sup> This poem, as well as future quotations from Domin's work, are my own translations into English.

<sup>10</sup> Hilde Domin, "Zur Lesepraxis," in *Das Gedicht als Augenblick von Freiheit: Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen 1987/1988* (München, Germany: Piper, 1988), 92.

all of our speaking sustained by trust: trust in the other, who understands, trust in the words, which we all know, trust in the world, which is there in these words? And yet, here trust is named as something that one must learn, completely from the beginning. How must it have gotten lost, that which is the simplest thing that underlies all abiding in life and speech, the ABC. Can one simply learn it again? As something not yet known or as something forgotten? Are not the walls, along which one searches, without doors? In actuality: It is the most difficult ABC—that one again and again forgets, that one again and again loses. How should one learn it?<sup>11</sup>

Gadamer here understands what is at stake in Domin's emphasis on trust, namely, that trust is necessary for life and necessary for speech or language. If we have indeed lost trust, this most rudimentary and yet most difficult ABC, what are the possibilities for learning or relearning this trust? The stakes of these questions are also made vivid in Domin's image of an individual being chased around the city walls. An image, which of course reminds Gadamer of one of the most dreadful scenes from the *Illiad* in which Hector is chased by Achilles around the city walls of Troy. Dreadful, perhaps, because Hector is supposed to be the bravest character of them all, yet even he runs away in fear of his own death at the hands of Achilles. However, Gadamer notes two crucial aspects in Domin's poem that heighten the fear or dread that we encounter in this scene. First, he notes that the city walls in the poem do not have doors that merely happen to be locked or happen to be unreachable for the one being chased, but that there are no doors at all. We search for the doors that would allow us to seek refuge into what Gadamer identifies in the poem as the "city of trust," or, "the trusted world," and there are none to be found.<sup>12</sup> Second, unlike in the *Illiad*, no one comes to the aid of the one being chased to waylay one's fear of death and offer encouragement to stand one's ground against their pursuer. But here in Domin's poem there is also no clear pursuer or enemy against which one can raise their weapons. In fact, as Gadamer notes, "The one here being chased has thrown away all weapons. For he has tossed the names of things behind him because they are 'confused' and are no longer any good. This gives the entire image of the chase its initial radical meaning. The confusion of the names of things signifies the greatest danger and the utmost defenselessness."<sup>13</sup>

In order to bring this great danger and defenselessness to light in relation to the distortion of language, Gadamer refers to Thucydides, who, according to

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<sup>11</sup> Gadamer, "Hilde Domin, *Lied zur Ermutigung II*," 320–21. All quotations from this essay are my own translations into English.

<sup>12</sup> Gadamer, "Hilde Domin, *Lied zur Ermutigung II*," 321.

<sup>13</sup> Gadamer, "Hilde Domin, *Lied zur Ermutigung II*, 321.

Gadamer, describes the transformation of the meaning of words as a part of the destruction of the plague of Athens. However, we may also refer to Thucydides's description of the violent revolution that occurred in the city-state of Corcyra, in which he describes this parallel between a violent revolution within a city and a revolution of word meaning: "Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal ally; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question inaptness to act on any. Frantic violence, became the attribute of manliness; cautious plotting, a justifiable means of self-defence."<sup>14</sup> For Thucydides, this change in words that accompanies revolution leads to a distrust in each other: "Thus every form of iniquity took root in the Hellenic countries by reason of the troubles. The ancient simplicity into which honor so largely entered was laughed down and disappeared; and society became divided into camps in which no man trusted his fellow. To put an end to this, there was neither promise to be depended upon, nor oath that could command respect; but all parties dwelling rather in their calculation upon the hopelessness of a permanent state of things, were more intent upon self-defence than capable of confidence."<sup>15</sup> After his reference to Thucydides, Gadamer makes a general comment about the "monstrous corruption" of language that is usually brought about by the great demagogues (*Volksverführer*) in history, an allusion to Hitler and the Nazification of the German language under the Third Reich.<sup>16</sup> In all of this, Gadamer brings the seriousness of the distortion or loss of language into view for us and relates this directly to a loss of trust. When the names of things, that is, when the words or languages that were once familiar to us have become confused, distorted, or bewildered, they can become powerless or no longer suited to the situation or community we find ourselves in. In this, we lose our sense of at-homeness and general orientation in the world. For Gadamer, this is precisely the experience that accompanies us in the collapse of trust: "The one who is no longer encompassed by the protection of trusted words no longer understands the world."<sup>17</sup> Trust and language go hand in hand. A breakdown in language is a breakdown in trust. Without a trust in language we cannot understand the world, but more importantly, we cannot come into and understanding with others. Here, I claim,

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<sup>14</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley (London: Dent, 1910), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0200>, 3.82.4.

<sup>15</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 3.83.1–3.83.2.

<sup>16</sup> Gadamer, "Hilde Domin, *Lied zur Ermutigung II*," 321. Domin herself discusses this particular example when she offers one of her self-interpretations of "Lied Zur Ermutigung II." I discuss this later in this article.

<sup>17</sup> Gadamer, "Hilde Domin, *Lied zur Ermutigung II*," 321.

Gadamer indicates for us the great violence and devastation that can occur in a community as a result of the collapse of trust we have in language. Ultimately, without a trust in language, we cannot come into a conversation with the world and others, and therefore cannot understand each other.

Gadamer's commentary here is sparse and does not develop any concrete examples of a society that has lost its trust in language and in each other. Yet his allusion to the corruption of language under the Nazi regime allows us to consider some of the basic social and political conditions of a society in which there has been a breakdown in trust. At a general level, these conditions involve severe political turmoil, strife, or revolution, as well as the polarization, alienation, and atomization of the members of that particular society. To be more specific, we may refer to Hannah Arendt's discussion of "totalitarian movements" and the dissolving relationship between language and reality in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.<sup>18</sup> As she notes, one of the hallmarks of any society that undergoes a totalitarian movement is mass propaganda and ever shifting lies and falsehoods disseminated by the state that must be consistently affirmed by members of the movement. More than this, falsehood and fiction always triumph over what is true and real: "The outstanding negative quality of the totalitarian elite is that it never stops to think about the world as it really is and never compares the lies with reality. Its most cherished virtue, correspondingly, is loyalty to the Leader, who, like a talisman, assures the ultimate victory of lie and fiction over truth and reality."<sup>19</sup> We may also think here of Arendt's famous description of the many "language rules" or "language codes" that were used by Hitler and the upper echelons of the Nazi regime, whereby the word for "killing" became "evacuation" or "special treatment," and "deportation" became "change of residence."<sup>20</sup> In both instances, language has become confused and corrupt, such that one is seemingly defenseless and unable to articulate or bear witness to what is true and real.

Gadamer reads the third stanza of Domin's poem as a sign of a possible resolution to this crisis of trust and language. But first, he marks an important temporal shift between the past tense of the first stanza and the present tense of the second. This hunt or chase around the inaccessible city walls of trust, as well as the casting off of language, started a long time ago and is still going on in the present moment. For Gadamer, this tells us that a return to trust will not emerge in a single moment or event: "the chase from disappointment to disappointment does not come to an end

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<sup>18</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin Harcourt, 1968), 323.

<sup>19</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 385.

<sup>20</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report of on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 85.

with a single blow. It continues on wherever understanding and trust fail.”<sup>21</sup> Yet Gadamer is hopeful, and tells us that while we do not learn, relearn, or recover trust in one moment or instant, trust is always there and even indispensable for our lives. Even when it appears broken and shattered, it is always there as a possibility that one must attempt to learn again. This is much in line with how Gadamer would think about language. Language and the possibility of interpretation and understanding in a world with others is never truly lost, even in the most troubling times. But this is not to say that the relearning of trust is an easy new beginning after all disappointment and despair has run its course. It is not a new beginning in which we can be assured that all is going to be okay, or that we can relearn the ABC of trust in the same step-by-step manner we learn the alphabet. This is to say, there is no verifiable method, no certified lesson plan for the relearning of trust. Instead, trust is “a venture” that is “hidden, unnoticed, unacknowledged.”<sup>22</sup> This is manifest, for Gadamer, in the German phrase “*Vertrauen zu fassen*,” a trust or confidence that requires us to grab hold of or pick up for ourselves. This is a trust or confidence that is not grounded on proof or evidence by which we may verify, authorize, or validate such trust. Amidst all failure, all disappointment, all despair and deception, trust is still there, perhaps hidden, yet quietly returning to those willing to take it up.

This, for Gadamer, is prominent in the second half of the poem. Trust is an invisible “sign in the air,” and it is from out of what is imperceptible, out of the nothing, that the new city of trust will be built. The radical meaning of the breakdown of language that Gadamer identifies in the first part of the poem leads Gadamer to identify a radical notion of trust at the end of the poem, namely, a trust that is not built on a well-grounded and verifiable foundation. But perhaps what appears radical here is just a reminder of what trust really is to begin with. Trust is not a matter of being secure in one’s reasons or grounds for trusting. If we have to trust but verify, then we are not really trusting at all. Trust is no longer trust if it requires an initial verification or evidence for this trust. We either trust or we do not.

Gadamer’s reading of trust in Domin’s poem shines a light on the ABC of trust at the heart of the linguisticity of hermeneutic experience. For Gadamer, to understand someone or something is not a matter of “transposing” oneself into another person’s life or historical era of a text, but is much more a matter of “participation” with another person or text.<sup>23</sup> This means that to understand is really a coming into an understanding with the other about the subject matter at hand. For

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<sup>21</sup> Gadamer, “Hilde Domin, *Lied zur Ermutigung II*,” 322.

<sup>22</sup> Gadamer, “Hilde Domin, *Lied zur Ermutigung II*,” 322.

<sup>23</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 401.

Gadamer, this process or event of understanding takes place within language: “Language is the medium in which substantive understanding and agreement take place between two people.”<sup>24</sup> Gadamer’s model for this process of understanding is a conversation in which individuals participate together in allowing the subject matter to emerge in full. This requires an openness towards the other or a text such that we are able to accept what is spoken by the other or the text. This sense of openness is very much in line with a hermeneutics of trust as a hermeneutics of good will, in which we assume the possibility that the other person’s position is right or true. This kind of trust as openness is grounded, however, on a trust in language itself as the very medium of hermeneutic experience. Before we can trust what is spoken to us by the other or a text, we must trust our ability to hear and speak in language. More importantly, as Gadamer shows in his analysis of interpretation and understanding in translation, trust in language is a constant readiness or willingness to find a common language with the other: “Reaching an understanding in conversation presupposes that both partners are ready for it and are trying to recognize the full value of what is alien and opposed to them. If this happens mutually, and each of the partners, while simultaneously holding on to his own arguments, weighs the counterarguments, it is finally possible to achieve—in an imperceptible but not arbitrary reciprocal translation of the other’s position (we call this an exchange of views)—a common diction and a common dictum.”<sup>25</sup> Trust is then not a passive disposition that one has towards the other or a text, but an active readiness for an engagement in language itself as the condition for the possibility of understanding in the first place. Trust is a participation in developing the common language that allows us to come into understanding with the other about the subject matter at hand.

This means that trust in language is not only necessary for interpretation and understanding, but it can also take place even in extreme circumstances of understanding in which meaning is perhaps uncertain or obscure, or in which all possibilities for understanding appear lost. Understanding is always a possibility as soon as we recognize the appeal or address that the text or another individual makes on us to understand. In this moment of recognition, the linguisticity of understanding comes into play for us. A trust in language is a trust that the text or the person has something to say to us, and a confidence in the other that shines a light on the belongingness we have to each other or that we have to a traditionary text. In this

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<sup>24</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 402.

<sup>25</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 405.

sense, to trust in language it is to be entrusted with the other or with a text in a way that is foundational for hermeneutic experience.

This foundational trust in language for hermeneutic experience speaks to Gadamer's great concern about the loss and relearning of trust in Domin's essay. A breakdown in this trust would be a breakdown in language, a breakdown in interpretation and understanding, and ultimately a breakdown in hermeneutic experience as such. This is why trust is the most difficult or the most burdensome ABC because it speaks to what is fundamental and often forgotten about hermeneutic experience, namely, that it is grounded in those painful and disappointing experiences of human finitude. In Gadamer's discussion of hermeneutic experience and the person of experience in *Truth and Method*, experience is considered in its negative quality. This is to say, true experience is marked by a transformative confrontation with what is strange, alien, or different from what we already know or are familiar with. This means that experience is never a confirmation of what we already know, but a change in our own knowledge about the subject matter we encounter. Experience is always new experience, and the experienced person is one who has developed a proper disposition towards new experience: "Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them."<sup>26</sup> Gadamer discusses this kind of experience as that from which no one is "exempt" and from which no one, not even our own children, can be spared.<sup>27</sup> Gadamer's point here is that genuine experience is not something that is always pleasant or enjoyable, but rather it "involves many disappointments of one's expectations" and that "refers chiefly to painful and disagreeable experiences."<sup>28</sup> In reference to Aeschylus, Gadamer tells us that experience is a "learning through suffering," in which what we learn is not a particular piece of knowledge, but our very limitations as human beings: "Real experience is that whereby man becomes aware of his finiteness. In it are discovered the limits of the power and the self-knowledge of his planning reason. The idea that everything can be reversed, that there is always time for everything and that everything somehow returns, proves to be an illusion. Rather, the person who is situated and acts in history continually experiences the fact that nothing returns."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 364.

<sup>27</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 364.

<sup>28</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 364.

<sup>29</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 365.

A trust in language is to accept this truth of hermeneutic experience, while at the same time, it is to not withdraw into a pessimistic or nihilistic disposition about the world and others. If language is the medium of hermeneutic experience, and a trust in language is not only a readiness or openness to hear what is spoken but is more importantly an active participation in the development of a common language for what is spoken to emerge linguistically, then a trust in language grounds the very possibility of hermeneutic experience. As we just saw, however, what is central to hermeneutic experience is the painful and disagreeable encounter with our own finitude. A return to the trust in language, then, is an inevitable return to this truth of hermeneutic experience. To relearn the ABC of trust in hermeneutics is to relearn that hermeneutic experience is painful. It is to recognize that what is inherent in this trust are those experiences that challenge this very trust, namely, those experiences that overwhelm us and shake our confidence in language and in each other. The task of hermeneutic trust, cast in this light, is a constant affirmation of this trust precisely in those dreadful moments when all seems lost, when we are cast out of the city walls without doors, chased, and defenseless. Trust is not a one-time action, but must constantly be renewed and rehabilitated in our conversations with others in which we try to come into understanding with each other.

While trust and hermeneutic experience reveal this difficult truth about human finitude, Gadamer's analysis of trust is ultimately a message of hope and possibility. Gadamer's reading of Domin's poem tells us that trust is never truly destroyed. At the very end of this essay, Gadamer reminds us that we simply cannot live without trust, that is, without some level of intimacy and familiarity (*Vertrautheit*) with the world around us.<sup>30</sup> Our trust in language goes all the way down to a grounding trust that we have with ourselves, a trust that Gadamer explains allows us simply to say the letter and the word "I" and allows us to "be" an "I" to begin with.<sup>31</sup> This need for trust and familiarity is echoed in some of Gadamer's later work when he emphasizes the impossibility of enduring life without hope. For instance, in his 1998 essay, "*Wissen zwischen gestern und morgen*," Gadamer describes hope (*Hoffnung*) as a "fundamental structure of our living consciousness, without which we could scarcely endure the burdens of life."<sup>32</sup> Gadamer's comments here indicate the extent to which hope and trust play a pivotal role in hermeneutic experience. The "burdens of life" may refer, on the one hand, to a deeply personal experience, such as recovering from an illness,

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<sup>30</sup> Gadamer, "Hilde Domin, *Lied zur Ermutigung II*," 322.

<sup>31</sup> Gadamer, "Hilde Domin, *Lied zur Ermutigung II*," 322.

<sup>32</sup> Gadamer, "*Wissen zwischen gestern und morgen*," in *Hermeneutische Entwürfe: Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 218. This is my own translation into English.

mourning the death of a loved one, or experiencing the betrayal of a friend or family member. On the other hand, the “burdens of life” could include a broader and more expansive socio-political context, such as the failure or breakdown of institutions, war, and as we saw earlier, political movements towards totalitarianism. However, Gadamer’s point about hope and a grounding trust in language is that even in these most dire and catastrophic times, when we seem unable or unwilling to trust language and trust our own reality, or when trust seems lost or long ago forgotten, trust is still always there, perhaps quiet and hidden, perhaps imperceptible, but always as a possibility guiding us along in an indispensable way.

### **Domin on *Vertrauen* and the *Dennoch* of Poetry**

To further understand this hermeneutic trust in language that emerges in Gadamer’s reading of Domin’s poem, we should look to Domin’s own essays and interpretations of her own poetry. In turning to Domin’s work, we can draw out a “poetics of trust” that emerges in her own comments on trust (*Vertrauen*) and the “nevertheless” (*Dennoch*) of her own life and poetry. In fact, in the foreword to her *Gesammelte Essays*, she tells us that *Vertrauen* is the *Hauptwort* of her life story that always speaks to a “nevertheless” in her life.<sup>33</sup> As someone who lived a life in exile, trust is and was always a trust in the help and generosity of others, as well as a trust in the different language worlds in which she would find a home. For Domin, what could not be lost in her experience of a “permanent flight” in exile was language itself: “For me, language is that which could not be lost [*das Unverlierbare*] after everything else had proved itself capable of being lost. The final, irremovable home. Only the cessation of the person (brain death) can take it away from me.”<sup>34</sup> While language can never be lost in exile, it is certainly in a crisis, and a crisis in language, for Domin, is a crisis of belonging: “We certainly live in a crisis of belongings [*Zugehörigkeiten*]. Also in a language and speech crisis. The communication crisis, the identity crisis. In the not-home [*Nicht-Heimat*].”<sup>35</sup> Domin’s entire life and poetic project is a resistance to this crisis in language and belonging. Language is that which she will defend to her last breath and for which she

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<sup>33</sup> Hilde Domin, “Vorwort,” in *Gesammelte Essays: Heimat in der Sprache* (München, Germany: Piper, 1992), 11.

<sup>34</sup> Hilde Domin, “Heimat,” in *Gesammelte Essays: Heimat in der Sprache* (München, Germany: Piper, 1992), 14, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Domin, “Heimat,” 16.

will stand, like Luther, without exception: “I can simply do no other.”<sup>36</sup> This, as we will see, is the spirit of her trust that is always a “nevertheless” or a “still yet.” A poetics of trust is to always continue to salvage a trust in language even amidst a crisis in language.

In 1966, Domin offers her own self-interpretation of the poem “Lied zur Ermutigung II.” She first notes that what emerges in the poem is a kind of dire reality: “The crisis in trust, the crisis in language, mendacity that has already become constitutional after the shattering of belongings.”<sup>37</sup> Here, as in Gadamer’s own reading, the crisis in trust, confidence, or a belonging with each other is a crisis in language and in the falsification of language. It is a crisis of mendacity, *Verlogenheit*, that has taken root in a language that has undergone many distortions under Hitler’s Germany. But, she says, “something livable suddenly appears or is held out before us from out of the unlivable, a nonetheless [*ein Trotzdem*].”<sup>38</sup> In this self-interpretation, about six years after writing the poem, she is now able to consider whether that which is livable that emerges from the unlivable is the poem itself, namely, that the word and language of the poem is precisely the “city from out of nothing,”<sup>39</sup> or in Gadamer’s interpretation, the new city of trust. The poem, for Domin, is the ever possible “nevertheless” in the face of the distortion or falsification of language. Amidst the sentiment of someone like Theodor W. Adorno, for whom poetry after Auschwitz would be something barbaric, Domin holds on to poetry as that which affirms hope for a return to trust and language.

In *Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen 1987/1988*, Domin provides another self-interpretation of “Lied zur Ermutigung II” and returns once again to the idea of poetry being a “nevertheless.”<sup>40</sup> Here, Domin provides more contour to what she was thinking as she was writing this poem. What Gadamer identifies as the “city of trust” that contained no doors, Domin tells us she was thinking about her home country, Germany. Those who were being chased around the city walls are those who were chased and hunted down across Europe by the Nazi regime. Those who wanted to save themselves ran from their homeland and “fled to the edge of the world.”<sup>41</sup> They had to remove themselves not only from Germany but also from the German

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<sup>36</sup> Domin, “Heimat,” 16.

<sup>37</sup> Domin, “Lied zur Ermutigung II: Selbstinterpretation,” in *Gesammelte Essays: Heimat in der Sprache* (München, Germany: Piper, 1992), 388–89.

<sup>38</sup> Domin, “Selbstinterpretation,” 389.

<sup>39</sup> Domin, “Selbstinterpretation,” 389.

<sup>40</sup> Hilde Domin, *Das Gedicht als Augenblick von Freiheit: Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen 1987/1988* (München, Germany: Piper, 1988).

<sup>41</sup> Domin, “Zur Lesepraxis,” 93.

language, a language that had become distorted and falsified. Much like Arendt's analysis in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Domin recalls that the word "imprisonment without trial" became "protective custody," and "murder" became "special treatment."<sup>42</sup> As Domin tells us, this kind of warping or distortion of language left behind a mistrust in the German language as a language that had proven itself to be so corruptible. Furthermore, she claims that the language continues to be abused through an increased exposure to technology and industrialization, which leads to a "process of dehumanization."<sup>43</sup>

In response to this falsified and distorted language, the poet must take up a kind of language-ethos (*Sprachethos*) that she finds in a passage from chapter XIII in Confucius's *Analects*. Here, in response to a question regarding what is of the greatest importance in governing a city, the master tells us: "The rectification of names."<sup>44</sup> There is a close relationship between language and reality in this passage, such that, "If names aren't rectified, speech doesn't follow from reality."<sup>45</sup> The consequences that follow from not rectifying the names of things, for Confucius, is an inability to maintain justice in a community. What is proper for the noble-minded, then, is to be "anything but careless in speech."<sup>46</sup> Domin finds this passage in Confucius as crucial for the task of the poet, for whom the proper naming of things is an ethical task that maintains a strong association between language and reality. A constant displacement between a word and its intended reality "destroys orientation and makes truthfulness impossible from the outset."<sup>47</sup> The poet is precisely the one who "renews" and maintains a vitality in language such that we can continue to find our place in a reality that "relentlessly withdraws itself."<sup>48</sup> This renewal of language is a renewal of trust in language. This is why trust, *Vertrauen*, is called for after the chase scene depicted in the first stanza of the poem. The poet must reinstate this trust in language, a trust that is at the same time both "that which is the most difficult and the simplest thing."<sup>49</sup> To reinstate this trust in language is a return to the beginning of language, namely, the ABC: "Trust should be in every letter. Here, it is demanded and also presupposed. Every child learns the ABC. Trust is nevertheless [*dennoch*] what is called for. And then

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<sup>42</sup> Domin, "Zur Lesepraxis," 93.

<sup>43</sup> Domin, "Zur Lesepraxis," 93.

<sup>44</sup> Confucius, *Analects*, trans. David Hinton (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2014), XIII, 3; Domin, "Zur Lesepraxis," 93–94.

<sup>45</sup> Confucius, *Analects*, XIII, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Confucius, *Analects*, XIII, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Domin, "Zur Lesepraxis," 94.

<sup>48</sup> Domin, "Zur Lesepraxis," 94.

<sup>49</sup> Domin, "Zur Lesepraxis," 95.

it is described how this trust is conjured up, as it were. (Trust between human beings, as well as the trust in language).<sup>50</sup> If we read the poet as the subject of the third stanza of the poem, then the trust that the poet must reinstate in language is something that is, as Gadamer notes, imperceptible or unnoticed. It is a small, invisible sign in the air, from out of nothing, in which the new city of trust will emerge: “It is this nevertheless [*dies Dennoch*], this rising confidence [*Zuversicht*] from out of the nothing—the moment of freedom, as I’ve named it—, which the poem gives to the author and the reader. Forever and always.”<sup>51</sup>

Domin’s commentary on the “nevertheless” of poetry resonates with another German-language poet who lived in exile during and after WWII, Paul Celan, and whose own commentary can provide clarity on the poetic relationship between language, trust, and reality.<sup>52</sup> In his often-cited Bremen speech from 1958, Celan discusses the existential crisis of language during the years of the Third Reich: “Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface, ‘enriched’ [*angereichert*] by it all.”<sup>53</sup> What is crucial to note here is that while language was not ultimately lost, it returns or resurfaces for Celan as something that has undergone a transformation. It is in this “enriched” language, Celan tells us, that he wrote his poetry during and after the war as a search for reality: “In this language I tried, during those years and the years after, to write poems: in order to speak, to orient myself, to find out where I was, where I was going, to chart my reality.”<sup>54</sup> For Celan, this reality is something uncertain and always a matter of “movement,” of “being *en route*,” and “an attempt to find a direction.”<sup>55</sup> Celan’s trust in language and his own version of the “nevertheless” of poetry is in the way he describes poetry as a “letter in a bottle thrown out to sea” in the hope of approaching this reality.<sup>56</sup> For both Domin and Celan, as poets of exile,

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<sup>50</sup> Domin, “*Zur Lesepraxis*,” 95.

<sup>51</sup> Domin, “*Zur Lesepraxis*,” 102.

<sup>52</sup> See Gadamer’s own extended engagement with Celan’s work in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan: “Who Am I and Who Are You?” and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Richard Heinemann and Bruce Krajewski (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). It is also worth mentioning that Domin had a correspondence with Celan.

<sup>53</sup> Paul Celan, *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY: Sheep Meadow Press, 1986), 34.

<sup>54</sup> Celan, *Collected Prose*, 34.

<sup>55</sup> Celan, *Collected Prose*, 34.

<sup>56</sup> Celan, *Collected Prose*, 35.

the search for reality in their poetry is not a matter of simple referentiality between word and thing or object.<sup>57</sup> Celan's poetic works, for instance, are notoriously difficult to interpret and demand rigorous attention to linguistic, philological, philosophical, historical, religious, biographical, and literary references. This is to say, Celan's reality is incredibly complex, always in movement, and always underway. With this, we may gain some insight into Domin's reference to the language-ethos she finds in Confucius. The rectification of language, or the proper naming of things, is not a return to what is old, nor an attempt to speak in an unambiguous or transparent language about a given, stabile, clear reality. Instead, the "nevertheless" of the poetic task is to constantly renew, revitalize, or transform language in the poet's search for truth and reality that is always *en route*.

This sense of renewal and revitalization of language is present in Domin's discussion of the 'nevertheless' of poetry as a matter of resistance and a transformation of reality. In her fifth lecture of *Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen 1987/1988*, she calls upon the figure of Sisyphus as a metaphor for the "nevertheless" of her poetry, which for her is a "metaphor of resistance."<sup>58</sup> The "nevertheless" of Sisyphus, for Domin, is the possibility for a change that only remains a possibility so long as one maintains a constant effort to transform reality by attempting to make this reality "livable."<sup>59</sup> This kind of resistance in the "nevertheless" of poetry is also found in Domin's essay, "*Zivilcourage: ein Fremdwort*," in which the poet must have the courage not only to use their own judgement, but also to make sure "that one does not strangle the voice of their own conscience."<sup>60</sup> Most importantly, however, a poetic resistance of the

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<sup>57</sup> See Hilde Domin, *Wozu Lyrik Heute: Dichtung und Leser in der gesteuerten Gesellschaft* (München, Germany: Piper, 1968), in which she offers several remarks on the relationship between poetry and reality, as well as the dangers of the "objectification" (*Verdinglichung*) of reality (11–14). In one particular footnote, she clearly wants to distance her comments on poetry and reality from any kind of simple realism or referentiality: "In order to avoid any misunderstanding, I am not speaking here about realism in art in the technical sense of the word, that is to say, not about the reproduction [*Wiedergabe*] of reality but about the relationship between poetry and reality" (12). See also Margret Karsch, *das Dennoch jedes Buchstabens: Hilde Domin's Gedichte im Diskurs um Lyrik nach Auschwitz* (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript Verlag, 2007), 86–99. Here, Karsch provides a much more substantial and nuanced discussion of Domin on the relationship between the poetic word and reality. While my interpretation focuses on a collection of Domin's essays and lectures on poetry, Karsch's analysis focuses on a handful of Domin's poems, including "Linguistik" (1961) and "Wort und Ding" (1969). In this discussion, Karsch likewise refers to Celan's Bremen speech in relation to this question of language and reality in Domin's works.

<sup>58</sup> Domin, "*Sisyphos: die tägliche Anstrengung, das Unmögliche zu tun*," in *Das Gedicht als Augenblicke von Freiheit: Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen 1987/1988* (München, Germany: Piper, 1988), 106.

<sup>59</sup> Domin, "*Sisyphos*," 116–17.

<sup>60</sup> Domin, "*Zivilcourage: ein Fremdwort*," in *Gesammelte Essays: Heimat in der Sprache* (München, Germany: Piper, 1992), 233.

“nevertheless” requires the courage to “call things by their name and to misrepresent [*umzuliügen*] nothing for the sake of expediency.”<sup>61</sup> Here again Domin refers to Confucius, for whom finding the correct word is a matter of avoiding dishonesty and deception in one’s own conscience. Poetic resistance involves the courage to exercise one’s own understanding, to listen to one’s own conscience, and to stand up against all attempts to distort or subvert the proper naming of things. Such a courage is one that preserves the trust in language. If *Zivilcourage* is a strange or foreign word, as Domin claims, then poetic resistance is to make such strange words familiar again through our own actions: “*Fremd-Worte/ heimisch zu machen im Tun.*”<sup>62</sup> Poetry is a kind of “training in truthfulness” that affords human beings the capacity for *Zivilcourage*: a capacity to not only resist conforming to a dangerous authority and *Gleichschaltung* of a community, but also promote solidarity with others in the face of hate, denunciation, and intimidation.<sup>63</sup>

What I am calling a poetics of trust in Domin’s work is a responsibility to language itself. Each poem, down to letter and word, is an attempt to restore the ABC of trust from out of distortion or falsification. A poetics of trust is an ethical demand for the poet to rectify the names of things, which is to name things as they are without deception and dishonesty. This ethical demand has ontological stakes, such that to restore the trust in language is to restore a sense of belonging to reality itself. Being and language are so intertwined that a distortion in language is a distortion of one’s own reality or orientation in the world. A poetics of trust is to always affirm the “nevertheless” of poetry that resists the distortion of language and constantly takes up the ethical task of making something livable out of the unlivable. In the face of all catastrophe and devastation, when both reality and language have run amuck, when we no longer trust ourselves and trust each other, the poem is a “nevertheless” or a “still yet” that resists and says otherwise. It is a *Dennoch* or *Trotzdem* that refuses to conform to the way things are. The poet and poem demand an uncompromising commitment to reality and to the proper naming of things. A poetics of trust requires courage to uphold and continue to search for what is true in a world saturated by untruth. As a training in truthfulness, a poetics of trust then holds fast to what is true by affirming and preserving a trust in language.

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<sup>61</sup> Domin, “*Zivilcourage*,” 233.

<sup>62</sup> Domin, “*Zivilcourage*,” 233.

<sup>63</sup> Domin, “*Zivilcourage*,” 238.

### **Conclusion: A Hermeneutics of Trust. A Poetics of Trust.**

Gadamer's essay on Domin not only shines a new light on the crucial role of trust in Gadamer's hermeneutics, but also brings philosophical hermeneutics and poetry together in their shared responsibility and commitment to language. Gadamer's reading of Domin's poem brings to bear an obvious but often overlooked role of trust in his philosophical hermeneutics. Trust is foundational to the linguisticity of hermeneutic experience, such that without a trust in language there is no possibility for understanding to occur. Without a trust in language we cannot enter into a conversation with the world and others. Furthermore, a reflection on trust in language reminds us of another truth about hermeneutic experience, namely, that it necessarily involves those painful and disappointing experiences that confront us with our own finitude as human beings. To trust in language is to be open to new experience regardless of its often strange, alienating, and even painful character, as well as to constantly affirm this trust in every conversation and attempt to understand. This is why Gadamer can be hopeful about trust even in the darkest of times in which trust seems all but lost and forgotten. In learning that trust is not something we come to based on any set of conditions or process of verification, we come to understand that real trust seemingly appears out of nothingness or is something imperceptible. But it is precisely for this reason that trust is always a possibility we can take up in any moment in order to find ourselves and find each other in the world. A trust in language is the possibility of finding and developing a common language with each other. The task of a hermeneutics of trust is a constant and active affirmation of this trust in even the most distrusting of times.

This hermeneutics of trust that emerges in Gadamer's reading of Domin is complimented by what I am calling Domin's poetics of trust that emerges in her own work. Here, we see that Gadamer and Domin, philosopher and poet, share the same task in attending to the trust in language. More specifically, we can read Domin's poetics of trust as an instantiation of a hermeneutics of trust, whereby the poem is itself an act of trust that attempts to rectify a language that has become distorted. Insofar as the poem is an attempt to name the subject matter honestly and without misrepresentation, it is an attempt at developing a common language by which everyone can enter into a conversation with each other. The poem, as an act of trust in language, demonstrates the responsibility of the poet to language itself. To trust in language is to recognize that language is itself entrusted to the poet, and it is in language that we are all entrusted to each other. A poetics of trust is likewise a resistance to a language and reality that has become corrupted by distrust and dishonesty. The poem

as an act of trust is a “nevertheless” or a “still yet” in the face of this corruption. The poem as an act of trust is an act of courage to avoid dishonesty and to name things as they are. In so doing, the trust of the poem is an appeal to others to join in this trust. Like Gadamer, Domin’s “nevertheless” of poetry is one of hope, such that even in the throes of a city in revolt, as in Thucydides’s description of Corcyra, the poem sets out to build a new city of trust seemingly out of nothing.

## Gadamer on Death's Unintelligibility and the Overflow of Life

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### Introduction

In his short 1975 essay entitled “Death as a Question,” Hans-Georg Gadamer offers rich, contemplative reflections on death that encourage one to spend time puzzling over the phenomenon of death and to accept and even embrace the unintelligibility of death. Given death’s unintelligibility, there will always be more questions than answers when dealing with this topic, which is not to say that one cannot fruitfully *think* about death. Gadamer’s thinking about death and his conclusion regarding death’s unintelligibility is in many respects indebted to Martin Heidegger, especially the latter’s reflections on anxiety and death. Since key aspects of Gadamer’s own position on death become evident—to the extent that death’s intelligibility can be made clear—in his dialogue with Heidegger, the penultimate section of this essay focuses on a Gadamerian reading of “What Is Metaphysics?” The final section turns to what I call the living-dying I in living-dying others, which, I argue, is a theme that Gadamer develops in his commentary on *Der Gevatter Tod* by the Brothers Grimm. In his reflections, Gadamer emphasizes both our individual lives and the fact that our lives are always and ever lived in relation to others. Similarly, death is experienced and, in so far as it can be understood, is likewise understood in relation to others. Stated otherwise, the living-dying I is recognized through living-dying other(s).

## Death as a Question

In light of the significant loss of life worldwide due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, not to mention the time many people have spent socially distanced or isolated in lockdown, a dialogue with Gadamer's essay on death is both fitting and, as I hope to show, life-enhancing. That is, thinking alongside Gadamer about death and coming to a better understanding of it enriches our life, as we come to see and accept death as integrally tied to life and yet that which always involves mystery. Underscoring death's connection to life, Gadamer writes, with a nod to Rainer Maria Rilke, death is "the other side of life. Just as the moon has an unilluminated side that still belongs to the totality of its being, so death would belong to the being of the living. . . . If we only possessed the same equanimity toward death as we display when contemplating any other life process!"<sup>1</sup>

Even so, for all that we think we know about it, "[d]eath remains a question," to which we have no adequate answer.<sup>2</sup> That is, we cannot fully comprehend death and its meaning. That we might *be* no more, swallowed in non-existence, seems unintelligible in light of our daily experience of our own self-consciousness. We know, however, that we will die and that ultimately we cannot avert death. Death is inescapably bound with life, and yet we recoil from death, longing to avoid what is inevitable. Why such resistance to death? Why are we haunted by the thought of living no more, of losing our life? The expression "to lose one's life" implies that life is something valuable and worth holding on to. When one's life is lost through death, one is overtaken by an unrepeatable event—an event that ultimately each individual must *as an individual* be "taken up in." I cannot die your death and you cannot die mine, even though someone might choose to die in my place or on my behalf. Even so, someday *I* must die—that is, I must enter into *my own* death; I must lose *my* life.

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<sup>1</sup> Gadamer, "Death as a Question," in *Hermeneutics Between History and Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Pol Vandavelde and Arun Iyer (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 59. Gadamer acknowledges early on that his reflections about death will be limited by his own historical situatedness within the Western intellectual tradition and will especially draw from his familiarity with the Ancient Greek and Christian traditions.

<sup>2</sup> Gadamer, "Death as a Question," 59.

### Burial Practices and Death's Concealment

Turning first to ancient civilizations and then to Christian and Islamic practices, Gadamer discusses their emphases on human rituals for burying the dead. He marvels at the emotions, thoughts, and creative energy invested in burial practices. Commenting on Viking grave-ships, Egyptian pyramids, Christian graves marked with crosses, and geometrically ornamented Islamic graves, he wonders whether these elaborate practices and magnificent expressions of art and artisanship actually answer the question: what is death? His musings on human burial practices seem to give rise to more questions than answers. For instance, he raises the following questions: “What do all these graves tell us? Are they answers to the question of what death is? Or is it the case that the answers to this question want to proclaim that death is not or should not be? Is it that these answers do not want to acknowledge death? But death is. What is it? And yet we know death from where and how?”<sup>3</sup>

He goes on to ask, what does knowledge of death mean? He even speculates that to know death is for humans as essential as our ability to think.<sup>4</sup> Do we only know of death, as he puts it, “from the outside”—that is, from our experiences of losing a loved one, or of knowing a friend who has lost someone dear to them? Not just adults but children seem to have knowledge of death thus understood. (This is a point to which he returns at the end of his essay and to which we will return in the final section of the present essay.) Yet, such knowledge of death is, nonetheless, incomplete and marked with unintelligibility. Continuing his inquiry, Gadamer asks: “Does anyone among us know what one knows when one knows that one must die? Is our question about death not always and necessarily a concealment [*Verdecken*] of what we know, a concealment of something unthinkable, of non-being?”<sup>5</sup> If death means that we *are* no more, then are we no-thing or a non-being? But how can we make any sense of being a non-being? Yet, our wrestling with the question of death is more than a philosophical abstraction, and Gadamer, of course, recognizes that our puzzlement with death is a deeply existential, embodied, cultural, social, and personal matter. For example, although he continues to grapple with whether burial rituals manifest their own acts of concealing when it comes to death, he acknowledges that human traditions—

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<sup>3</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 60.

<sup>4</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 60–61.

<sup>5</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 61; “Der Tod als Frage” (1975) in *Gesammelte Werke* Bd. 4 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 163.

especially religious traditions—*hope* to be reunited with loved ones who have died. We hope to see “again those to whom we belong.”<sup>6</sup>

Is this longing to see again those who have died just another attempt to conceal or obfuscate the reality of death? Gadamer cites Plato, who draws upon the earlier Greek tradition’s notion of Hades. In Hades, one could see again those who had been lost. Gadamer reminds us that in the *Apology*, Socrates eagerly anticipated a conversation about true virtue with the departed heroes in Hades. The Christian tradition also proclaims that we will see again our departed loved ones. Again, Gadamer wonders whether this longing to see again in both Greek and Christian stories and teachings is just another way of covering over death’s reality—or to put it more philosophically, “of not wanting to think non-being.”<sup>7</sup> Turning again to Plato, and this time to his doctrine of *anamnesis*, Gadamer considers whether our puzzlement with death might be understood within the framework of recollection, remembering, or recalling. First, he offers a concise definition of philosophy or rather its objective—namely, “the task of philosophy is to want to know what we know without knowing that we know it.”<sup>8</sup> Thus stated we find obvious resonances with Plato’s *anamnesis*, which Gadamer describes as “a bringing out of the interior and a raising to consciousness.”<sup>9</sup> So our task at hand is to ask what it is that we know, without knowing that we know, when we know (about) death. For Gadamer, this means that we consider what key figures and movements in the Western philosophical and religious traditions have said about death.

### Greek and Christian Reflections on Life and Death

Gadamer points to two Greek words, *zōē* and *bios*, both of which are translated into English as “life”; however, while in certain respects their meaning overlaps, they also describe life in different senses. *Zōē* indicates what is living and is set in opposition to what is not living. For the ancient Greeks, that which is living is animated with *psuchē* (soul) and is distinguished by self-movement; however, *zōē* does not designate individuality; rather, it specifies that which is alive as opposed to that which is dead or lifeless. *Bios*, in contrast, denotes “a being in the specific manner of its being animated.

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<sup>6</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 61.

<sup>7</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 61.

<sup>8</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 62.

<sup>9</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 62.

This is so in all the instances where we mean a specific mode of life.”<sup>10</sup> According to Gadamer, human beings are the only living beings who know themselves as living beings—that is, humans are aware that they are alive and not dead; consequently, they find themselves in a unique relationship “to their own animatedness,” which manifests in the particular choices they make (both consciously and unconsciously).<sup>11</sup> *Bios*, thus, speaks of the “life that people lead and through which they distinguish themselves from everything else that is also alive, through their mode of living and in particular through their own life history and their own life destiny.”<sup>12</sup> With the concept of *bios*, we move into the realm of self-knowledge and the desire to know. More importantly, we enter into a kind of thinking that elevates the knowledge of one’s own life and death over knowing of *zōē*—that is, knowledge of being animated as opposed to being dead. However, just as, perhaps, the Homeric shades signal the unintelligibility of death, our thinking about *bios* ultimately hits the same brick wall and is incapable of making non-being intelligible—especially *our own* non-being or death.

Having provided a sketch of Homeric and Presocratic views on life and death, Gadamer offers a brief commentary on Plato. Plato’s Ideas and his teaching about *nous*, which “is constantly present and represents,” builds on this earlier Greek understanding of “‘being animated’ on the basis of self-knowledge.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, for all its progress, Gadamer intimates that Greek philosophical thought—chiefly with Plato in mind—missed the mark when it comes to death and what, for us humans, is most important about it. In the *Phaedo*, Plato has Socrates present several proofs for the soul’s immortality. Cebes, whom in the dialogue is depicted as a skeptic, responds to Socrates’s rather sardonic quip that he was caught up in childish fear about death. Cebes, perhaps with a little sarcasm of his own, says that we each have a “child in us who has these fears” and that Socrates’s task, should he be up to it, is to calm these fears.<sup>14</sup> Gadamer intimates that the “skeptical” Cebes was on to something and should not be so easily dismissed. No alleged proof for the immortality of the soul gives us the knowledge that we seek about death—that is, to quote Gadamer: “none of the proofs for the immortality of the soul that we find in Greek thinking is even close to being able to tell us what we want to know when we want to think death from what

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<sup>10</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 62.

<sup>11</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 62.

<sup>12</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 62–63.

<sup>13</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 63.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, in *Plato’s Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), 77e.

we know as *our own* life. The child in the human being is right and Greek philosophy fails before the question of what death is.”<sup>15</sup>

Christianity, Gadamer says, rather than providing an answer to the question of what death is, offers a promise—that is, a promise of life after death. Here the idea is that death is not the final word and that from death, or rather through the passage of death, one can receive new life. But again, Gadamer asks, does this “transformation of death into life” fail to adequately think what death *is*? In his “Hymns to the Night,” the poet Novalis presents this transformed view of death. As Gadamer explains, “in Novalis there is a new valuation of the night, which is not the withdrawal, the darkening of the bright pleasurable day, but the ground and origin of a higher and more spiritual brightness.”<sup>16</sup> The darkness of the night is not final nor completely separate from the brightness of the day, but instead there is a Light, which is the source and origin of all that lives and moves and has its being, whose blinding brightness is for us an impenetrable darkness. Yet, in the Christian account, the passage through death, for those who believe, brings with it a better—albeit always incomplete—grasp of these intermingled aspects while, nonetheless, affirming that Life and Light, as metaphors for the Christian God, are ultimate and ultimately conquer death and darkness.

Still questioning whether with the Christian no less than the Greek account we are actually thinking death properly and taking it seriously as its own phenomenon, Gadamer muses on two metaphors—sleeping and dreaming—both of which serve as metaphors of death that offer insights worth lingering upon. Thinking, for example, is often associated (figuratively or otherwise) with being awake, in control, and self-consciousness. In contrast, sleeping and dreaming “impose themselves on thinking.” When considered “from the standpoint of the inner certainty proper to waking self-consciousness, sleep is as little intelligible as death.”<sup>17</sup> The sleeper’s distance or absence from us—that is, their “unreachability,” foreshadows “the ultimate unreachability with which the dead terrify us.”<sup>18</sup> The metaphor of dreaming seems to be tied to the concerns, hopes, and longings with which we fill our waking hours. Here the analogy intimates that just as the state of dreaming takes us out of daily life and into another world, so too we can fill our waking life with “the images of our imagination and of our worldliness that the question of the nothing, the question that goes beyond our

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<sup>15</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 63. Italics added.

<sup>16</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 64.

<sup>17</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 64.

<sup>18</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 64.

own certainty of living, can longer be asked.”<sup>19</sup> Gadamer’s point is not that our longings, imaginings, and concerns are frivolous and to be avoided, but rather that they can so consume our time and thinking and distract us that we fail to think seriously about death.

He brings his excursion on dreaming and sleeping to a close by pointing out that both are connected with the idea of being awake. He goes on to add that these two metaphors of death, in being linked with our waking life, have a similar structure with a notion of life as *zōē*, which is thought in conjunction with death. Thus, we have an emphasis on the ongoing cycle of life and death as found in the reproduction of living beings. Gadamer appears to have Plato’s *Symposium* in mind with this allusion. That is, in the *Symposium*, we read of different senses of immortality, the lowest or least sophisticated is that of the reproduction and the continuation of the species, in which both humans and non-humans engage. If death must be understood in connection with an ongoing cycle of life and reproduction, then once again Gadamer wonders whether this (Greek) philosophical thinking is “nothing more than a not-willing-to-admit death.”<sup>20</sup>

### Prometheus’s Fire and Celan’s “Tenebrae”

Drawing again upon the riches of Greek thought, Gadamer turns to the myth of Prometheus as depicted in Aeschylus’s drama, highlighting and riffing on those parts of the myth that relate to our present topic. Prometheus, as Gadamer recounts and interprets the story, rebelled against Zeus and gifted human beings with fire stolen from the heavens. Explaining further, he adds: “It is not exactly how it is said, but everybody knows this and, at any rate, he taught human beings how to use fire. The use of fire is without question one of the unequivocal distinctions of human beings among the things that live.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, as Gadamer underscores, the context in which Prometheus proclaims his accomplishments is his self-defense against his critics—that is, he declares his “infinite merit among human beings” because “he has made it so that they do not know about their own death. Clearly, what is meant is that they do not know when they must die. And now Prometheus continues: with this I have transformed their whole life to the extent that I have taught them to observe the stars,

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<sup>19</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 64.

<sup>20</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 65.

<sup>21</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 65.

to the extent that I taught them numbers, craftsmanship, and techniques, and so on.”<sup>22</sup> For Gadamer, the question that the myth raises is how ought we make sense of these two claims—namely, that Prometheus has, on the one hand, hidden or concealed the knowledge of death from humans, and on the other hand, gifted them with craftsmanship, techniques (technology), and the like? In other words, what is the connection between the concealment of the knowledge of (one’s own) death and the revelation of new technologies? Does technological progress involve a kind of ongoing concealment of death, not only our own but also particular people groups (e.g., the poor, marginalized, etc.), non-human animals, and ecosystems? Or is there a more hopeful note to be found in this “curiously enigmatic mythical overcoming of the certainty of death through a belief in the future?”<sup>23</sup> Here Gadamer begins to make explicit the direction his thinking will take by way of an insight that he discovered in Georg Simmel’s work—namely, “the transcendence of life,”<sup>24</sup> which means that human life is characterized by excess; the nature of human life is to exceed itself. As Gadamer puts it: “Is the life of human beings in the truest sense of the word not a constant overflow, such that the source of life, which any individual is, overflows?”<sup>25</sup>

Another way to think of this overflow and transcendence of life is the example of a sacrificial death, and Gadamer is especially interested in the case of martyrs who die for their faith. Rather than interpreting such acts as nothing more than the ultimate expression of nihilism, Gadamer highlights the ambiguity that characterizes sacrificial death, which can be understood both as an expression of the excess of life as well as an escape from life. At this point, Gadamer brings Paul Celan’s poem, “Tenebrae,” into the dialogue. The poem is, on Gadamer’s reading, a provocative and profound reading of the story of Jesus’s suffering on the cross. The “we” referred to multiple times in the poem—for example, in the repeated line “we are near”—points to a solidarity of humans with Christ and one another in the experience of suffering and in feeling abandoned and left to die alone. Explaining this point, Gadamer writes, “This is precisely what ‘we’ are. The suffering of death is already granted to everyone. Here we see an intrinsic link between the weakness of human beings and the experience of death. The fact that Jesus feels abandoned on the cross is, as it were, the pre-figuration

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<sup>22</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 65–66.

<sup>23</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 66.

<sup>24</sup> See Georg Simmel, *The View of Life: Four Metaphysical Essays with Journal Aphorisms*, trans. John A. Y. andrews and Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), esp. 1–18.

<sup>25</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 67.

or paradigm of the abandonment felt by all human beings. The anxiety of life and the anxiety of death are thus intermingled.<sup>26</sup>

In Celan's poem, the unintelligibility of death is allowed to stand; the genuine sense of abandonment that Jesus experiences on the cross and which he expresses in his anguished cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46) is an archetype of what every individual human being, in varying degrees, must suffer when they suffer death—namely, they must die their own death and in so doing come to realize that no one can save them from what must come to pass. Jesus himself exhibits anxiety about his death, and this experience of anxiety, rather than an instance of "thinking death away," points us to what Gadamer calls a "more appropriate manner of thinking about death"—namely, a mode of thinking that recognizes "anxiety itself as thinking."<sup>27</sup>

### Death and Anxiety

This anxiety in relation to one's own death, of course, recalls Martin Heidegger's reflections in *Being and Time* as well as his essay "What Is Metaphysics?" For Heidegger, anxiety is a mood (*Stimmung*) that discloses one's world as a whole in a particularly poignant way. Yet, while moods, no doubt, involve emotions, they are more than our subjective emotions and speak of different ways in which we are oriented to the world. Moods, as it were, disclose our situation holistically and affect how the world and entities within the world appear to us; that is, moods color our experiences of the world and are all-pervasive, like an atmosphere. In "What Is Metaphysics?" Heidegger discusses three moods: boredom, joy, and anxiety. When I experience, for example, profound boredom or boredom as a mood, the world as a whole is disclosed to me *as* boring. Moods are neither chosen by us nor can we make them happen; rather, they overtake us such that we find ourselves in a profound mood of boredom, joy, or anxiety.

Although Heidegger discusses boredom and joy as moods that disclose the world, he claims that anxiety alone discloses the nothing. Anxiety, as the fundamental or most profound mood, should not be identified with fear, which, for Heidegger, is always about something—that is, fear has a particular object to which one can point and identify. For example, one might have a fear of snakes or heights. Profound

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<sup>26</sup> Gadamer, "Death as a Question," 68.

<sup>27</sup> Gadamer, "Death as a Question," 69.

anxiety, in contrast, has no particular object but is rather an experience of anxiety in which, as Heidegger explains, “‘one feels ill at ease’ [*es ist einem unheimlich*]. What is ‘it’ that makes ‘one’ feel ill at ease? We cannot say what it is before which one feels ill at ease. As a whole it is so for one. All things and we ourselves sink into indifference.”<sup>28</sup> Not only do we experience the indeterminate, or better, the nothing in anxiety, but we also have a sense of being *unheimlich*, which we can also translate literally as “homeless” (*Heimat* in German means “home,” and here the prefix *un-* signifies a lack of “being at home”). So what is it about this profound anxiety that makes one feel *unheimlich*, ill at ease, or homeless? In the experience of anxiety, beings as a whole recede and slip away. In other words, they are now disclosed to us *as* meaningless or without significance. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that normally things in the world such as equipment—for example, tools—are understood within a referential totality or what he calls “significance” (*Bedeutsamkeit*). Thus, we understand what a hammer is in relation to nails, saws, sandpaper, wood, and a carpenter’s workshop. The workshop forms a referential whole or totality and each item gets its meaning in relation to the other items and the workshop as a whole. However, in anxiety this significance is lost, and we are, as Heidegger puts it, left hanging. Describing our lack of “hold on things,” Heidegger says: “in this very receding things turn toward us. The receding of beings as a whole that closes in on us in anxiety oppresses us. We can get no hold on things. In the slipping away of beings only the ‘no hold on things’ comes over us and remains.”<sup>29</sup>

This “slipping away of beings” does not mean that beings are annihilated; rather, they are nihil-ated or nothing-ed. In slipping away and receding they are disclosed to us *as if* absent—that is, they are no longer present to us as meaningful in the way in which we normally experience them, yet they are there. This lack or absence of meaning is, as a result, felt as a kind of oppressive presence because the beings are there but are experienced *as* meaningless, as *nihil-ated*. Thus, in being overtaken by the profound mood of anxiety, we experience this ill-at-ease homelessness—this a lack of grounding and rootedness as the world and things in it become *unheimlich*. As the nothing is disclosed to us in anxiety, we likewise sense our very selves as slipping away. Describing this loss of self, Heidegger writes: “Anxiety reveals the nothing. We ‘hover’ in anxiety. More precisely, anxiety leaves us hanging because it induces the slipping away of beings as a whole. This implies that we ourselves—we humans who are in

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<sup>28</sup> Martin Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1993), 100–101.

<sup>29</sup> Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?” 101.

being—in the midst of beings slip away from ourselves. At bottom therefore it is not as though ‘you’ or ‘I’ feel ill at ease; rather, it is this way for some ‘one.’ In the altogether unsettling experience of this hovering where there is nothing to hold on to, pure Dasein is all that is there.”<sup>30</sup> For Heidegger, it seems, in this “hovering” and “homelessness” of anxiety, we lose the sense of ourselves as individuals and are left only with the experience of our sheer existence, of being-there but not being-there as a particular, unique, individual. But what does it mean to be there in this de-worlded, non-individualized way? After all, *I* must die my own death, not *das Man*.<sup>31</sup>

As Gadamer reads Heidegger, the experience of anxiety moves one out of oneself and creates the necessary distance from our immersion in the world so that we can begin to truly think about death. Toward the end of “What Is Metaphysics?” Heidegger goes on to say that the experience of the nothing in profound anxiety is distinctive of Dasein and brings Dasein to itself: “Only in the nothing of Dasein do beings as a whole, in accord with their most proper possibility—that is, in a finite way—come to themselves. . . . Only because the nothing is manifest in the ground of Dasein can the total strangeness of beings overwhelm us. Only when the strangeness of beings oppresses us does it arouse and evoke wonder. Only on the ground of wonder—the revelation of the nothing—does the ‘why?’ loom before us.”<sup>32</sup> The nothing disclosed in anxiety allows us to articulate what, for Heidegger, is a fundamental metaphysical question: “Why are there beings at all, and why not rather nothing?”<sup>33</sup> The disorienting de-worlding that one experiences in the grip of profound anxiety creates the possibility for wonder at the mystery of existence and, especially in Gadamer, for one’s own existence.

This movement beyond beings and oneself that Heidegger describes when one is overtaken by the nothing signals, for Gadamer, human freedom, which is intimately tied to our thinking and interpreting activities. As one thinks through and tries to make sense of a profound experience of anxiety, one can come to an acceptance of death as a mystery, as that which cannot be fully thought or grasped—an unknown at the core of our understanding of who and what we are. Here Gadamer offers his thesis: “the freedom of thinking is the true ground for the fact that death has a necessary

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<sup>30</sup> Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?” 101.

<sup>31</sup> Gadamer’s reflections here and throughout his essay have certain resonances with passages from Søren Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: NJ, Princeton University Press, 1992). See especially Climacus’s musings on “*what it means to die*,” 165–70. Many thanks to John James for drawing my attention to these connections.

<sup>32</sup> Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?” 108, 109.

<sup>33</sup> Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?” 110.

unintelligibility. It is the freedom that consists in the fact that I can and must think beyond myself, that I can and must think myself away.” And yet, he acknowledges that we are still baffled with how to think our death or not-being: “how should I understand the fact that I, an I in which now in this moment there is a thinking activity, one day will not be? Thus, the fact that we are thinking beings seems to be the ground for the unintelligibility of death and, at the same time, seems to include the knowledge of this unintelligibility.”<sup>34</sup>

In the experience of anxiety, humans as interpreting beings experience a world-collapse in which its meaningfulness is nihil-ated. According to Gadamer, such an experience, even though painful and disorienting, opens up a space for us to think about the mystery of existence as well as our own existence, of our life and death and the intimate interconnection between the two. In this thinking birthed from world-collapse, the I that thinks about its own possible non-existence is confronted with the unintelligibility of death—that the one who *can* think about their own non-existence and can *think* themselves away and thus think beyond themselves—can, at the same time, never fully grasp their own non-being. But this is not a mere intellectual exercise to demonstrate the principles of logic. Rather, in our inability to make death fully intelligible, we come to a deeper understanding of our finitude. The freedom of thinking allows for the possibility of thinking death *as a mystery* and life as a gift; the interconnection of the two is made manifest even as death eludes us. Death is an ever-haunting specter animating life, whose absent-presence is felt—and even in rare moments thought—but never fully known or grasped. That death’s unintelligibility can be revealed as such presupposes the human capacity for “the freedom of thinking.”

### Discovering the Living-Dying I in Living-Dying Other(s)

As we recall, earlier in his essay, Gadamer states that each of us must die their own death, and as we have seen, this claim resonates to a certain degree with early Heidegger. At the end of his essay, Gadamer returns to and develops this point by way of a brief commentary on one of the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales, “The Godfather Death” (*Der Gevatter Tod*). The fairy tale attempts to teach children about death through the image of candles burning. In the story, a poor man whose thirteenth child has just been born is seeking a godfather for his son. The man eventually settles on Death,

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<sup>34</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 69.

personified as a withered yet powerful figure, to be his newborn son's godfather. He chooses Death over both God and the Devil because Death is the great equalizer, favoring neither poor nor rich, old nor young. The boy eventually becomes a famous physician, because Death had promised to appear before his patients and to signal whether the patient would live or die, depending upon whether Death stood at the head or foot of the bed. If Death stood at the foot of the bed, the patient would live when given a special herb by the physician. If Death stood at the head of the bed, the patient would die.

Toward the end of the story, the physician begins to test Death and devises a way to rob Death of those for whom he has come. He does this by reversing the position of the person lying in the bed as soon as Death begins to appear. Death is, of course, infuriated and warns his godson the physician not to tempt death or he will be his next victim. However, the godson becomes infatuated with one of his patients—a beautiful princess—whose father, the king, has promised both riches and her hand in marriage to anyone who was able to cure her. After the physician saves her life, Death, keeping his word, appears to him. Enraged, Death seizes his godson by the neck and takes him to an underground cavern, where he shows him thousands of candles of various sizes, flickering and burning at different rates and producing varied amounts of light. The fairy tale depicts the scene as follows: “There the Physician saw thousands upon thousands of [candles; *Lichter*] burning in immeasurable rows, some large, others small, and others yet smaller. Every moment some were extinguished, but others in the same instance blazed out, so that the flames appeared to dance up here and there in continual variation.”<sup>35</sup> Death then turns to his godson and explains that these lights are the “life-lights” of human lives (*die Lebenslichter der Menschen*). While, generally speaking, the large flames belong to children, the medium flames to middle-aged people, and the smallest flames to the elderly, he quickly adds that some children and younger people have small flames.

As Gadamer recounts the fairy tale, he notes that the burning of each candle represents the extinguishing of an *individual* life. Gadamer's emphasis conflicts with ancient Greek views and similar modern variants—whether of Spinoza or Hegel—which present human beings as modes of the Divine or participants in the Divine who, upon death, become one with the Divine in such a way that individuality and

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<sup>35</sup> Brothers Grimm, “The Godfather Death,” in *Household Stories. Collected by the Brothers Grimm*, trans. and illustrated E.H. Wehnert, 132–33. London: David Bogue, 1857. [<https://ia800207.us.archive.org/28/items/householdstories01grim/householdstories01grim.pdf>]. I have slightly altered the English translation from “lamps” to “candles” in order to be consistent with Gadamer's essay. The German word is *Licht* (plural, *Lichter*), which literally means “light.”

personhood are obscured or obliterated. Instead of describing humans as participating in or being consumed by one flame, Gadamer stresses that we each have our own light—that is, our own life; yet our lives are always and ever lived in relation to others. We are living (human) beings intimately connected with other living (human) beings—which, I would add, includes both human and non-human animals. In recognizing that our own light, like the other candles around us, is growing dimmer, we are gripped with anxiety, as the physician was when Godfather Death in the underground cavern pointed to his godson's small, barely flickering flame. That recognition comes about when an individual burning candle realizes that it is surrounded by other burning “life candles” and is then moved to reflect on their own “life candle.” Commenting on the fairy tale and referring to those who, by Death's force are taken to the underground world, Gadamer says that those who go there “look around themselves, astonished and afraid, [and] eventually also ask about their own life candle—and are struck with terror.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, when one observes the other candles' flames with their varied sizes and strengths burning and flickering at different rates, one is overcome with *Angst* and is compelled—as the physician in the fairy tale was—to ask “Death” about one's own life. Such an experience discloses the reality of one's own death through witnessing the living-dying of others. Put otherwise, the living-dying I is recognized through living-dying other(s). Through seeing the flame's light and flickering—which signifies self-movement and movement through life-stages—and feeling its heat, our own sense of being alive is palpable and perhaps even intensified; but that same flame by which we come to see and feel that we are alive likewise makes us aware that we are finite and dying—that is, with each passing day we move closer to death, just as the burning, flickering flame, in its burning slowly brings about the candle's demise. Self-understanding—even the limited, spectral self-understanding we have when it comes to death—is attained always-and-ever for the hermeneut through dialogical engagement with others.

Just as Gadamer's essay begins with death's incomprehensibility, it ends on a similar note with the claim that “the unintelligibility of death is the brightest triumph of life.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, the kind of serious existential questioning that our questioning about death involves—questioning which never yields a final, definitive, certain answer and always gives rise to more questions—can motivate living a more full, appreciative, and thankful life, one that does not take anything for granted and increasingly recognizes and takes to heart the fragility, brevity, and wonder of the

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<sup>36</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 70.

<sup>37</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 70.

living-dying I through engagement with living-dying others who comprise both the lights and shadows of our world. In contemplating death and the ongoing interplay of *Lichter* and *Tenebrae*, of revealing and concealing, the mystery of being is disclosed and made palpable—namely, that there is something rather than nothing as well as the mystery of *my* being and the unintelligibility of what it might mean “to be” no more.

ISSN 1918-7351

Volume 14.3 (2022)

## **Book Review**

### ***Keinmaleins: Texte zu Celan***

**By Werner Hamacher; Preface by Jean-Luc Nancy  
(Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2019)**

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The poetry of Paul Celan (1920–1970), the German-speaking author of Jewish descent, who had fortuitously fled the fate of his numerous, innumerable compatriots, of his parents perishing in the Holocaust, has attracted—and to this day continues to do so—dedicate and detailed attention of many contemporary philosophers belonging to—re-turning to it from—different, occasionally contradictory and conflicting traditions of thought. At the same time, the opaque movement of its discrete, secretive language, of its subtle, delicate voice, the complex composure comprising the inter-linking of opposing counter-currents—the re-appropriating self-alienation of the own and the re-alienating self-appropriation of the foreign—, through—amidst and across—idiomatic dialect(ic)s, (by) itself also often (cor)responds to—and re-sounds—the intense interest for philosophy, of which the poet was an avid reader. The multifaceted character of Celan’s poetic creativity that has not only, through commentaries, significantly contributed to, but is already, at its core, carried by the conversation between poetizing and thinking, thus, re-presents a specific hermeneutic challenge, which perhaps transports and deports

all efforts of understanding—each and every attempt at it—towards their very limits, towards its in-(de)termination.

The German literary theoretician, philologist, and philosopher, Werner Hamacher (1948–2017), who became—himself being crucially influenced by the endeavor(s) of Jacques Derrida—one of the foremost internationally acclaimed proponents of post-structuralist deconstruction, regularly wrote about and devoted several treatises to Celan’s enigmatic oeuvre. The posthumous publication entitled—with a hardly translatable, with an almost untranslatable word—*Keinmaleins* gathers—in the chronological order of conception—Hamacher’s texts on Celan, which the author, in the form of essays, articles, or lectures,—with the exception of one remaining as yet unpublished—separately presented to the public between the years 1999 and 2014. The six studies of the volume offer profound, both philologically meticulous as well as philosophically insightful interpretations of select poetic works by Celan that (predominantly) bear witness to the poet’s encounters with thinkers, whose writings—to a certain degree, albeit sometimes merely *per negationem*—fundamentally co-constituted the development of his auto-poet(olog)ic self-understanding.

Although the brief sketch of a review can only procure an inadequate, a cursory summary of Hamacher’s opulently knowledgeable and deliberately cogent book, it can, nonetheless, be said that at the center of the author’s discussions lie the—forever fragile, ever fragmentary—links connecting Celan’s poetry with some of the most important philosophical personalities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas the first five studies consecutively contemplate upon the poet’s creative reception—the poetic trans-figuration, even trans-mutation of a potential “influence”—of the principal precepts—of theory, but also of practice—of Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and, finally, (Heidegger’s) Parmenides—or, vice versa, (Parmenides’s) Heidegger—, the last one—a sort of a recapitulation through the prism of a contemporary’s memoirs, of a friend’s memory—focuses on the fateful reverberations of Celan’s traumatic experiences as reported—on the basis of walks and talks shared together—by the French poet and translator Jean Daive. However, Hamacher’s highly attentive approach to Celan’s poetry, denoted by a keen hearkening to the intertwining of the (con)notated nuances of meaning as well as to the breaks, the ruptures and the pauses, the silences transpiercing its sense, does not content itself with recounting the (im?)possible inter- and cross-sections in the—tenuous and strenuous—relation between poetry and philosophy, but, taking account of the conversation that they themselves, that we ourselves are—striving, therefore, to take it a few steps further—, seeks—through the con-text(s) of Celan’s

language—to dis-close its opening—or to open its dis-closure?—towards the other, towards an( )other other. The—*an?*—encounter—and, with it, the poetry of encounter—is (not)—only?—change, *Veränderung*, but (also)—not?—, as Hamacher repeatedly intimates, *Veränderung*, an—*the?*—othering.

Werner Hamacher's book on Celan compellingly and convincingly, through the encounters it discusses with passion and with patience, at all stations it halts at, pursues the path-way—as such it maybe is not of interest merely to the scholars of the poet, but may attract the amply heterogeneous readership concerned with the continuation of the n/ever-ending, n/ever-beginning conversation between poetizing and thinking, between poetry and philosophy—towards that, which warrants, within phenomenality itself, a glimpse into the—un-?noted? un-?not(ice)able?—abyss of the aphenomenal, towards that, which maintains itself—at odds with what is (not), against *all* odds—as, as one of Celan's poems pronounces, a “singable remnant,” *singbarer Rest*.