

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.¹ In reality, if we set aside some misleading interpretations, we can see that hermeneutics reveals itself as capable of adequately addressing contemporary problems² and, as an heir to Socratic-Platonic philosophy, indicates a new ethical-political reading of society.³ 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.

¹ 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.

² 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).

³ 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.”⁴ 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,⁵ 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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*.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.”⁹

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”¹⁰ and the proper content of the image is ontologically defined as “emanation of the original.”¹¹ 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

⁶ 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*.

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

⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 74.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 135.

¹¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 135.

beauty per se, but rather the concept of beauty understood “ontologically” as “light.”¹² 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.¹³

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).¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ Analogously the audience is directly involved in the artistic experience. The concept of play is connected to that of festival,¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

¹² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ff.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 106.

¹⁶ See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 120.

¹⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 121.

¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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."²⁰ 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.²¹ In his fundamental text "Who Am I and

¹⁹ 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.

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

²¹ 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?”²² as well as in several following essays,²³ 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.²⁴ 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”²⁵ 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.”²⁶

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 parameter²⁷) Gadamer is perfectly aware that contemporary poetry cannot follow the “naturalness” (*Natürlichkeit*)²⁸ 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,”²⁹ through hints whose

²² 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).

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

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ Gadamer, “Meaning and Concealment of Meaning in Paul Celan,” 167.

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

²⁸ Gadamer, “Meaning and Concealment of Meaning in Paul Celan,” 176.

²⁹ 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.”³⁰

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.³¹ 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.”³² 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 proem, and as in musical composition, it establishes the key for the whole with the very first tone.”³³ 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.”³⁴

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

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

³⁰To 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).

³¹This 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.

³²Gadamer, “Who Am I and Who Are You?” 67.

³³Gadamer, “Who Am I and Who Are You?” 73.

³⁴Gadamer, “Who Am I and Who Are You?” 73.

³⁵Gadamer, “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.³⁶ The scholarly tradition that stems from Derrida has considered hermeneutics and deconstruction irreconcilable,³⁷ accusing hermeneutics of being an attempt to exhaust meaning, in contraposition to dissemination.³⁸ On the other hand, hermeneutical scholars such as Jean Grondin, James Risser, and Donatella Di Cesare have stressed relevant

³⁶ 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).

³⁷ 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).

³⁸ See Zoran Jankovic, "Le texte éminent et Schibboleth," *Le Cercle Herméneutique* 2 (2004): 93–115.

commonalities between the two philosophers,³⁹ 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,”⁴⁰ 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.*”⁴¹

Moreover, the concept of inner dialogue is coupled with that of *unheimlich*⁴²—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.”⁴³ 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*),⁴⁴ underlining that, throughout their common reference to poetry, he could continue his dialogue with Gadamer, moving from an inevitable interruption: “At that time, indeed,

³⁹ 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.

⁴⁰ Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 136.

⁴¹ Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 40.

⁴² Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 137.

⁴³ Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 137.

⁴⁴ 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.”⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶ Here I cannot reconstruct Derridean thought in detail.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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.”⁵⁰ 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*.”⁵¹

⁴⁵ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 139.

⁴⁶ 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.

⁴⁷ 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).

⁴⁸ 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.

⁴⁹ 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.”

⁵⁰ Other essays that Derrida devotes to Celan are also collected in Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*.

⁵¹ 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 Szondi⁵²) 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!*"⁵³ 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."⁵⁴ 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*,⁵⁵ 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."⁵⁶ 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

⁵² See Peter Szondi, *Celan Studies*, trans. Susan Bernofsky with Harvey Mendelsohn (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁵³ Celan, "Appendix: The Meridian," 180.

⁵⁴ Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 7.

⁵⁵ 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).

⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ 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,”⁵⁸ I claim that these two positions should not be considered opposite.⁵⁹ 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

⁵⁷ 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.

⁵⁸ 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.

⁵⁹ 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.”⁶⁰ 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.”⁶¹

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

⁶⁰ Gadamer, “On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth,” 115.

⁶¹ 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.”⁶² 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.”⁶³

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.”⁶⁴ 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.”⁶⁵ 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.”

⁶² Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*, 134.

⁶³ Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*, 299.

⁶⁴ Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 48.

⁶⁵ 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 *Kebr*e 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 France⁶⁶—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*.⁶⁷ 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”⁶⁸ 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.”⁶⁹

It is here that Gadamer makes a step beyond Heidegger, even though he does not declare this too explicitly in *Truth and Method*⁷⁰: the “fore-structure of understanding” we find ourselves in coincides with “prejudice.”⁷¹ It entails a

⁶⁶ 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).

⁶⁷ 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).

⁶⁸ 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.

⁶⁹ See Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*.

⁷⁰ 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).

⁷¹ See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 274–85.

reevaluation 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.⁷² Gadamer’s reinterpretation of Heidegger moves from within the theoretical perspective of the latter. In other words, as Di Cesare has highlighted,⁷³ 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”⁷⁴—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.”⁷⁵ 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.”⁷⁶

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

⁷² See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 335 ff.

⁷³ See Donatella Di Cesare, *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, trans. Niall Keane (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), 335 ff.

⁷⁴ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “*Die Wahrheit des Kunstwerkes*,” in *Neuere Philosophie. Gesammelte Werke*, vol. III (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 249–61.

⁷⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), 52.

⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ 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.”⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹

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.⁸⁰ 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,”⁸¹ 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

⁷⁷ 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.

⁷⁸ Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, 68.

⁷⁹ See Alberto L. Siani, “Hope and Silence: Heidegger and Celan on the Subject of Poetry,” *Studi di estetica* 47 (2019): 175–90.

⁸⁰ 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*.

⁸¹ Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*, 137.

of sound and meaning upon which reading is built, so the interpreting word also remains a unique utterance.”⁸²

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.”⁸³ 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).⁸⁴

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.

⁸² Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*, 147.

⁸³ 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.

⁸⁴ 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.