

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THE PAST? GADAMER AND HEGEL ON TRUTH, ART AND THE RUPTURES OF TRADITION

THEODORE GEORGE

Some more recent scholarship that challenges received wisdom about Gadamer notwithstanding, it remains common to associate his hermeneutical approach to art and literature with forms of political and cultural conservatism. Charges of this sort have often come in response to Gadamer's conviction that encounters with art, like all hermeneutical encounters, depend crucially on the authority and transmission of prejudices (*Vorurteile*) from tradition (*Überlieferung*). Gadamer's positive assessment of these themes has given rise to apprehensions that his thought may be oriented by a conservative interest in the preservation of the status quo and the continuity of a cultural heritage. Such criticism, in turn, may have led some to wonder whether Gadamer's hermeneutics is fully compatible with more progressive political, cultural, and existential aspirations.¹ In this essay, however, I would like to argue that some of Gadamer's significant, but underappreciated, later essays on Hegel's aesthetics further support and nuance the rising recognition of Gadamer's concern for the human possibilities that stem from his sensitivity to the discontinuities, dislocations, and fractures that pervade any experience of the past.

As we shall see, Gadamer's confrontation with Hegel in these essays will focus on Hegel's familiar thesis that art is "a thing of the past" (*ein Vergangenes*) — that is, roughly, that art has lost its significance in modern times because it is no longer guided by a speculative need to present truth.² Although Gadamer will ultimately reject the finality of Hegel's thesis, he nevertheless recognizes a grain of truth in it that points to a decisive schism in the European tradition. Because of this, Gadamer's approach to Hegel's thesis may be seen to address the special hermeneutical difficulties faced in the present historical juncture, a time, which many believe to be increasingly alienated from its own heritage. As I wish to show, Gadamer believes this schism to signal not the end of Western art, but, rather, a liberation of art that releases novel possibilities for artistic practice and for the interpretation of art. In contrast with some kinds of conservatives, whose approbation of their own cultural heritage might lead to the flat denial or simple lamentation of such a rupture of tradition, Gadamer's take on the Hegelian thesis reveals Gadamer to acknowledge and even embrace the withdrawal of heritage as the very source of new meaning and experience.

Gadamer's hermeneutical approach to art is often held up as an attractive alternative to the formalism that prevails in current debates in aesthetics

because of the stress it places on the transformative power of art to lead to new understanding and present truth. In a *rapprochement* with recent scholarship that now calls Gadamer's alleged conservatism into question, Gadamer's critical approach to Hegel suggests that Gadamer's hermeneutics may retain its stress on this transformative power even in the absence of a unified cultural bequest. Gadamer's later pieces on Hegelian aesthetics contribute to his claim that the fragmentation of the current historical juncture places new demands on artists to produce intelligible works without recourse to customary cultural resources, and on spectators, listeners, and viewers, to grapple with art imbued with the unfamiliar, even the strange and foreign.

1. Truth, Art, and Tradition

Recent scholarship has begun to bring into question the critical contention that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics unfolds as a form of conservatism. For a number of these scholars, the charge that Gadamer wants to uphold prevailing conditions of life and, with this, to preserve a cultural heritage, derives from certain claims about Gadamer's concept of tradition. Gadamer betrays a conservative streak, so such a criticism might go, in his position that hermeneutical understanding is essentially conditioned by the inheritance of received views from the past, thus reducing every new understanding to a kind of continuation of beliefs found in the heritage out of which it emerges. However, in the past decade or so, many have called this picture of Gadamer's position into doubt. Scholars such as Günter Figal and Robert Bernasconi, for example, have recently suggested that Gadamer's conception of the role played by tradition in hermeneutical understanding undergoes a substantive shift in writings from the 1980s and 90s, focally in "Text und Interpretation" (1983). In this essay, Gadamer may be said to expand, even revise, his hermeneutical conception in order to address questions of language and alterity that arise from his engagement with contemporary approaches in continental European thought often referred to under the rubrics of deconstruction and post-structuralism.

Within this context, Figal, in a piece focused thematically on the ontology of language in Gadamer, suggests that later iterations of Gadamer's view in the 1980s and 90s associate hermeneutical understanding with a more radical and open conception of tradition. Here, Figal suggests, tradition confronts us not only with continuity and presence, but just as much with that which cannot be gotten behind (*das Unhintergehbare*) and that prior to which cannot be thought, the immemorial (*das Unvordenkliche*).³ Bernasconi, in a piece concerned to take stock of the capacity of Gadamerian hermeneutics to address questions of alterity, cultural difference, and ethical life, ultimately remains doubtful about the overall openness of Gadamer's vision of tradition.⁴ Still, Bernasconi recognizes that Gadamer's "Text and Interpretation," along

with other later essays, suggests a “change of mind,” in which Gadamer more readily addresses the decisive role of the other in hermeneutical dialogue.⁵ From this it is not a great leap also to wonder if Gadamer’s view of hermeneutical understanding might even point to a new openness to voices that challenge one’s own cultural heritage or even to voices that interrupt the continuity of cultural heritages at all.

Others have furthered this sort of challenge to the picture of Gadamer as cultural conservative such as Robert Dostal, James Risser, and Hans-Helmut Gander. In rejoinder to Figal and Bernasconi, Dostal argues, for example, that “Text und Interpretation” represents not a revocation or departure from Gadamer’s position in *Truth and Method*, but rather a deepening of it. Because of this “Text und Interpretation” may be seen to shed light on Gadamer’s sensitivity to the discontinuities, fragmentation, and fissures of tradition even in this earlier writing.⁶ Risser asserts that the portrait of Gadamer as a conservative derives above all else from common confusions about his notion of tradition itself. For, Risser explains, some mistakenly suppose that Gadamer

identifies tradition with cultural tradition, i.e., a specific lineage or history organized around a single continuing conversation, as is the case when speaking of the humanist tradition or the liberal tradition in American politics.⁷

Gadamer does not privilege the notion of tradition to keep up conservative pretences of a continuous cultural heritage. Instead, Risser continues, Gadamer’s point is to remind us that the specifically human form of understanding is essentially limited in its scope by its relation to history.⁸ Gander, in a piece that seeks to differentiate Gadamer’s hermeneutics from both historical relativism and ahistorical scientism, states that in Gadamerian hermeneutics, experience of the past “does not proceed in a linear course or evenly across its surface, but rather as a history of breakdowns and fractures, of the forgotten and subterranean paths.”⁹

Even in view of such scholarship, however, questions about Gadamer’s hermeneutical approach to understanding — and whether and to what extent it is dependent on a conservative emphasis on the continuity and coherence of tradition — remain. Some of the most prescient criticism of Gadamer’s conservatism focuses on the closeness of Gadamer’s conception of tradition to Hegel’s view of history.¹⁰ Thus, any attempt to defend Gadamer will have to take up his relation to the Hegelian view of historically unfolding spirit. If Gadamer’s consideration of art may be taken to form paradigms for hermeneutic experience, as Gadamer suggests,¹¹ the question of Gadamer’s proximity to Hegel may be seen to reach a summit in Gadamer’s engagement with Hegel’s aesthetics and thesis on the pastness of art.

Commentators have observed that Gadamer’s debts to Hegel are extensive, and that even Gadamer’s most pointed criticisms of Hegel often arise from deep sympathies with implications of his project. Gadamer’s interpretive

engagement with Hegel's thesis on the pastness of art is no exception. Gadamer's disavowal of Hegel's thesis itself rests on an overall vision of art that shares much with the view developed in Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Although Gadamer's discussions of art of course also rely on themes from Heidegger, the Greeks, and the humanist tradition, it is often Gadamer's appropriation of terms from figures in German Idealism, such as Hegel, that comprise the lodestones of his approach.

Foremost among these terms, Gadamer endorses, with some important qualifications, the conviction that our encounters with art answer to what Hegel referred to as a speculative need to present truth.¹² Gadamer, like Hegel before him, opposes formalism and focuses instead on the special power of art to present substantive truths about our condition and ourselves. "The universal need for art," in Hegel's words, is "the rational need that the human being has to lift the inner and outer world to spiritual consciousness as an object, in which he recognizes his own self."¹³ Much of Gadamer's approach may be discerned, in fact, in the sense Hegel gave to the concept of speculation itself. Jacques Taminiaux notices that the first thematic employment of the term in modern philosophy appears in Kant, and he suggests that Hegel's positive use of the word might in part form a rejoinder to the pejorative sense Kant often ascribes to it. But, Taminiaux goes on, Hegel's reliance on the word also makes much of the connotations of its Latin origin *speculum*, a reflective surface, or mirror. If the purpose of art is bound up with its capacity to present truth, then to associate speculation with art is to portray it as a medium that allows us to reflect on the subject matter it brings forth.¹⁴

From this angle, Gadamer would see the greatness of a work of art not foremost in, say, the pleasures induced in us by its harmonious proportions, but, rather, by the occasion it affords us to reflect on its subject matter. In the case of an archaic Greek statue, an exemplary form of art for Hegel, Gadamer's focus would be not on the formal relations of the outlines of the figure, but, rather, the substantive insights it provides into the Greek human being and its condition. Gadamer is just as interested, in turn, in the new demands placed on us by these insights. One thinks, for example, of Rilke's exhortation at the end of "Archaic Torso of Apollo," a poem of special significance to Gadamer: "...You must change your life."¹⁵

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer associates the presentation of truth with an experience of art that culminates in what he refers to as 'transformation into structure,' the fulfillment of an interpretive event that implements and brings the significance of an artist's work into focus in its spectators, listeners, or viewers.¹⁶ For Gadamer, this fulfillment is reached in the moment that the encounter with art gives us to understand something new, indeed, a transformative insight. Gadamer argues that the achievement of this moment requires a 'total mediation,' in which a spectator's encounter with art

supercedes external conditions for the presentation of the work of art.¹⁷ As Jean Grondin puts it,

Gadamer expresses this implication of the spectator in the presentation of a work with the help of the Hegelian notion of mediation (*Vermittlung*)...Gadamer speaks of 'total mediation' because the work of art has being – *Vollzug*, a mode of execution – only in its interpretation, which Gadamer assimilates – perhaps rather quickly – to the interpretation of the spectator himself, who is taken up in the game of art...¹⁸

Gadamer's employment of the (Hegelian) notion of 'total mediation' leads to the idea that the consummation of a spectator's interpretation of an artwork turns on surmounting all impediments to understanding it. Gadamer's approach may be said to emphasize, as Hegel did, the negation of the material conditions of the work — the Greek statue, for example, comes to be recognized as a human figure in the negation of the stone as stone. In Gadamer, though, the negation of such impediments may also be seen to focus on unquestioned assumptions, or prejudices, that initially condition a spectator's interpretive relation to an artwork: the spectator's interpretation of a work requires her to overcome all prejudices that foreclose access to its meaning.

Gadamer's association of the speculative vocation of art with 'total mediation' places him, moreover, in a close, though still critical, relationship with Hegel's notion of the absolute. Gadamer recognizes that by absolute knowledge, Hegel did not have in mind a comprehensive knowledge of the laws of nature or an exhaustive grasp of all things. Rather, as Gadamer points out, Hegel associates the 'absolute' above all with the sovereignty that guides speculative reflection: "the word means nothing other than 'the absolved,' and stands in classical Latin as the antonym of 'the relative.' It indicates independence from all restrictive conditions."¹⁹ In Hegel's idealism, speculative reflection is the positive knowledge of spirit that results from the complete mediation of its historical unfolding.

Gadamer is convinced, by contrast, that all historically inherited meaning is inexhaustible in its indeterminacy — it would be a form of what Hegel named the 'bad infinite.'²⁰ Because of this, it would for Gadamer be impossible to achieve any finality in the results of our interpretations. Instead, Gadamer's approach suggests that even the interpretive understanding achieved in the event of a total mediation would culminate in only one standpoint or aspect on an object of interpretation — and one that remains subject to indefinitely many revisions. Nevertheless, like Hegel, Gadamer associates the fulfillment of interpretation with a mediation that absolutely overcomes the exteriority operative in the distance between an interpreter's prejudices and the substantive meaning that guides the artwork being interpreted. In Gadamer, this proximity to the Hegelian notion of the absolute results in the view that the legitimacy of an interpretation turns on criteria immanent in the work itself; for Gadamer, the work is its own authority.²¹

There would not seem to be much distance from this claim to the worry that for Gadamer, the very possibility of any successful interpretation is dependent on a unified, or, at least, recognizably coherent, cultural heritage. If successful interpretation requires us to absolve all of the salient exteriority we encounter in a work, then its significance cannot be so foreign as to be unreachable on the basis of our own prejudices. In other words, it would have to belong to, or be similar enough to, the heritage from which our prejudices emerge in the first place. Gadamer's insistence on the indeterminacy of historically inherited meaning leads him to acknowledge the polysemic and revisable character of the interpretive understanding we reach in our encounters with art. Yet Gadamer's association of successful interpretation with a total mediation that overcomes exteriority might raise the question of whether even this rather open vision of interpretation rests on prior proximity, familiarity, and coherence.

This potential problem reaches a summit, I would submit, in Gadamer's comparison of the encounter with art to the appropriation of myths and legends. Indeed, his comparison may at first even come as a surprise. For in it, Gadamer, despite the critical distance he wishes to maintain from Romantic hermeneutics, nevertheless evokes a notion of mythic consciousness that hearkens right back to some of the Romantics themselves. Gadamer writes,

The work of art is an expression, which, though it forms no proposition, is nevertheless the utmost expressive. It is like a *mythos*, like a legend, and, in fact, precisely because it just as much holds back what it says as it at the same time holds it in store....²²

Here, Gadamer makes an analogy between the experience of art and the appropriation of a cultural heritage's traditional myths and legends. It is true that in this analogy, Gadamer seeks to underscore his conviction that the hermeneutic potential of artworks worthy of the name can never be exhausted. Still, his comparison of art to myth and legend nevertheless raises the concern that Gadamer believes the experience of art to flow from and depend on the inheritance of a continuous and perhaps even hegemonic cultural heritage.

In order more fully to address this concern — of whether Gadamer's thematic focus on total mediation, myth, and legend reveal him to adhere to a form of conservatism — it shall prove helpful to consider Gadamer's approach to the experience of art at the present historical juncture, a time, by Gadamer's own lights, which is characterized precisely by the withdrawal of its own cultural legacy.

2. From Subjectivization to Pastness

Much light may be shed on Gadamer's conception of the experience of this withdrawal in the present age by considering his engagement with the Hegelian thesis on the pastness of art. Gadamer's work on Hegel's thesis comes to the fore first in a number of his later essays. However, it must be seen

to grow from his lifelong concern for what might broadly be referred to as the aesthetic alienation of the current historical juncture. It is perhaps Gadamer's hermeneutical commitments to the interrelation of truth and art that animate much of his attention to this issue in particular. Not unlike an extensive range of other figures in twentieth-century continental philosophy, however, Gadamer discerns that the present time, at least in Europe, or the West, has fallen victim to a radical disassociation of our interest in truth from our interests in the aesthetic, the devaluation of artistic practice and art, and their marginalization from any prominent or integral place in our intellectual, political, social, and ethical life.

Questions about aesthetic alienation are of central importance to Gadamer throughout his productive life, and, not unlike many contemporaries in continental thought, his approach to it suggests that he believes its origins to lie in the transitional phase of European life around the close of the eighteenth century. In *Truth and Method*, much of Gadamer's discussion of the rise of this problem centers on what he refers to as the 'subjectivization of the aesthetic,' as well as on the related themes of 'aesthetic consciousness' and 'aesthetic differentiation,' and he directs the brunt of his diagnosis against Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Gadamer's notion of the 'subjectivization of the aesthetic' serves to describe the emergence of new prejudices that art and aesthetic experience concern not general truth, but, instead, merely inward — in the extreme, even merely personal or private — pleasures and passions.

Jean Grondin reminds us that it is of course not Gadamer's claim in *Truth and Method* that Kant's third *Critique* completely dislocates our theoretical and practical interests from the sphere of the aesthetic.²³ Instead, Gadamer indicates that Kant's third *Critique* represents a world in transition, and "indicates not only the termination of one tradition, but, at the same time, the introduction of a new development."²⁴ It might be that Kant's aesthetics draws on themes in eighteenth-century humanist thought that point to the interconnection of theoretical, practical, and aesthetic life. His transcendental critique, however, not only establishes different grounds for these themes, but thereby transmogrifies them, and so prepares the way for new sensibilities about the significance of the aesthetic. This 'subjectivization,' we might suggest, comes to receive a fuller voice as early as the Romantic Movement, and then gains momentum in the twentieth century, galvanizing around mottos such as the 'autonomy of the aesthetic,' and 'art for art's sake.'

Gadamer's examination of Kant's contribution to the subjectivization of the aesthetic ranges over a number of issues from the third *Critique*. However, for purposes of this essay, Gadamer's critical relation to Kant may be measured by Kant's assertion of the independence of our cognitive power of aesthetic judgment. Now, Kant does not quite argue for the complete autonomy of aesthetic judgment: in the third *Critique*, we recall, Kant tells us that as a form

of reflective judgment aesthetic judgment is heautonomous, not autonomous; it legislates over no domain of objects even though it is governed by cognitive rules irreducible to either theoretical or practical judgment.²⁵ Nevertheless, Kant holds that the cognitive rules of aesthetic judgment neither interdict in, nor are subject to, the cognitive functions of theoretical or practical judgment. This marginalization of the aesthetic, Gadamer's discussion may be seen to suggest, cannot but invite a depreciation of artistic practice and experience.

Gadamer's concern for the problem of aesthetic alienation remains strong, perhaps even intensifies, after the appearance of *Truth and Method*. Some of his later essays from the 1980s and 90s, however, appear to represent an important and illuminating shift of emphasis in his approach. Whereas his *Truth and Method* strategy focuses much of its attention on the 'subjectivization of the aesthetic' illuminated by themes from Kant's third *Critique*, his later discussion, I would submit, turns more to Hegel's thesis on the pastness of art. This transition needs not be read as a substantive change in Gadamer's overall concern for aesthetic alienation, however, but as an effort to expand on and deepen the implications that emerged from his confrontation with Kant in *Truth and Method*.

Gadamer outlines the central themes of his interpretive engagement with Hegel's thesis already in essays from the 1970s, such as "Verstummen die Dichter?" (1970) and "Die Aktualität des Schönen: Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest" (1974). However, Gadamer may be said to draw out some of the more radical implications of his approach to Hegel in further essays written around the time of "Text und Interpretation," especially in "Ende der Kunst? Von Hegels Lehre vom Vergangenheitscharakter der Kunst bis zur Anti-Kunst von Heute" (1985), "Die Stellung der Poesie im System der Hegelschen Ästhetik und die Frage des Vergangenheitscharakters der Kunst" (1986), and also in "Wort und Bild – 'so wahr, so seiend'" (1992).

That Gadamer casts his eye toward Hegel's thesis on the pastness of art is instructive. Gadamer's turn to Hegel's thesis does not run contrary to the idea that aesthetic alienation rises in the decades that surround the turn of the nineteenth century. Rather, his heightened interest in Hegel's thesis suggests that he wishes to deepen his understanding of the historical character of this shift itself.²⁶ In his engagement with Kant in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer focused his approach to aesthetic alienation on issues such as aesthetic differentiation, which center on the reception and experience of art. In Hegel, by contrast, Gadamer confronts a figure who frames the problem of aesthetic alienation itself as an historical one. Gadamer's confrontation with Hegel's thesis on the pastness of art, then, implicates Gadamer in an examination of the very historical conditions that first gave rise to experiences such as aesthetic differentiation at all. Thus, Gadamer's confrontation with Hegel not only sheds further light on the significance of art at the present historical

juncture, but further will force Gadamer to consider what it means to enter into an interpretive relation with art in an age that has been cut off from its heritage.

3. *From Pastness to Liberation*

What is Gadamer's interpretation of Hegel's thesis on the pastness of art? What, specifically, does Gadamer take Hegel's thesis to mean? Hegel's thesis on the pastness of art expresses perhaps above all his belief that it is only in philosophy, and not in religion, or art, that this authoritative knowledge is reached without qualification. Hegel places his view on a historical matrix, such that philosophy is said to reach its apotheosis in modernity, and in particular, in the culmination of German Idealism in his own system. — As Gadamer wonders at it, "Hegel, this courageous Swabian, claimed to have grasped, in his own thought, the completion of the entire history of mind and soul in the West, no, of human history as a whole."²⁷ At any rate, as Hegel has it, religion, for its part, reaches its height in Christian Europe; and art in ancient Greece. Even though all three forms are governed by the same drive, it is finally only in philosophy that this need is satisfied fully.²⁸ Philosophy, he tells us, culminates in systematic and rigorous science (*Wissenschaft*), whose legitimacy turns on the perfection of reason, itself independent of all restrictive conditions. Religion and art, by contrast, remain inadequate. For although it is the same theoretical interest that governs them, religion and art result not from complete and direct conceptual expression, but rather only in incomplete, restricted forms of expression wedded to sensation and image.²⁹

Hegel maintains that once the education of spirit reaches its fruition in the modern period in philosophy, religious practice and the work of art lose their authority as occasions for speculative reflection. In the modern age of philosophy, in Hegel's view, it is no longer the highest drives of spirit that direct our interest to religion and art. "However much we would like to find the Greek divine images pertinent, or to see the Holy Father, Christ, and Mary reverentially and consummately presented," Hegel tells us, "it does not matter, we of course no longer bend our knee."³⁰ By the time Hegel gives his lectures on aesthetics, "art no longer holds as the highest manner, in which truth achieves existence."³¹ With the ascension of philosophy in the modern period, religion and art lose their status as the highest sources of meaning for spirit.³² Philosophy supercedes religion and art as a touchstone for our knowledge of what and who we are. As a consequence, under the reign of philosophy in the modern period, religion and art are reduced to a speculatively secondary and derivative status and so become a thing of the past.

Gadamer's interpretive approach to Hegel's position should not be read as a straightforward refutation or objection. Rather, Gadamer maintains an ambiguous relation to Hegel's thesis, and Gadamer's treatment of Hegel's position unfolds as an interrogation that aims to discover its inner significance.

More than all else, it might be submitted, Gadamer conceives of Hegel's thesis as an incisive statement of the extensive changes of his own age that had begun to dislocate art and aesthetic experience. Yet even as Gadamer finds much insight in the Hegelian view he rejects Hegel's belief that the rise of German Idealist philosophy is responsible for the dissipation of our speculative need for art. Instead, at a number of junctures in some of his later essays, Gadamer suggests that the ties that bind truth to art began to unravel as a consequence of sweeping social, cultural, and economic transformations of the industrial age, and, with them, radical changes in the rhythm of the life world. Gadamer writes, "in principle, it is the demise of educated society and its aesthetic culture, which necessitates our question [of the end of art] in the industrial age of our day."³³ For Gadamer, these changes challenge, among other things, the familiarity of the relation of truth and art: the Hegelian conception of the pastness of art is really a sign of the transition from a long established European cultural milieu to a very different world, characterized by new and foreclosing conditions of both communal and individual life.

Gadamer, in a terminology as well suited to his contemporaries as it is to Hegel's talk of Christianity and antiquity, captures what he believes to be at stake in the demise of the European heritage: "it was the end of the great familiarity of the Christian-humanist tradition. What was lost with this was the *mythos* common to all."³⁴ For Gadamer, this epochal shift signals a catastrophe for the European heritage, insofar as *mythos* is "that which one can recount, without the question ever occurring to anyone of whether it is true. It is the truth that binds everyone, in which all understand themselves."³⁵ Under Gadamer's interpretive lens, Hegel's position on the demise of religion and art points to a larger onset of a crisis and loss of meaning. In the postmodern intellectual climate in which Gadamer's writings emerge, it is a crisis which might be said to unleash equally the danger of nihilism on the one hand, and that of nostalgia for the sustenance once provided by Christian and humanist beliefs on the other. Gadamer's engagement with Hegel's thesis on the pastness of art in fact suggests that the present age, in one decisive respect at least, is pervaded by a breakdown that results in the evisceration of the significance we ascribe to the aesthetic.

Gadamer not only appropriates the Hegelian position to illuminate his own view of the epochal shifts that lead to the collapse of traditional *mythos* and to the dislocation of art, however. He furthermore begins to develop a response to this collapse in reference to an implication that Hegel draws from his thesis. Perhaps due in part to the influence of Heidegger's celebrated Epilogue to the "Origin of the Work of Art," Hegel's claims about the demise of any 'speculative need' for art in our times are well known. In this Epilogue, we recall, Heidegger recognizes the challenges posed to his own approach to art by Hegel's thesis. In the "Origin," Heidegger had developed his conception of

the relation of art to truth as unconcealedness. In the Epilogue, he addresses Hegel's claim that the relation of truth and art — even if Heidegger conceives of truth differently from Hegel — no longer obtains in the modern period. Setting the stage for much subsequent scholarship, Heidegger neither accepts nor rejects Hegel's thesis, but recasts it as a pressing and still undecided question: "Is art still an essential and necessary way in which that truth happens which is decisive for our historical existence, or is art no longer of this character?"³⁶

While Gadamer's overall approach to Hegel's aesthetics surely takes much of its orientation from Heidegger's question, Gadamer may be seen to develop his own critical response to Hegel based on claims Hegel himself makes in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*. For, as Gadamer recognizes, Hegel not only argues that the modern age sees the demise of any speculative need for art, but, crucially, further claims that this demise leads to a new release of artistic imagination. In Gadamer's approach to Hegel, what matters most is not Hegel's lamentable verdict that the speculative need for art belongs to an epoch of the past. Rather, Gadamer's focus is on Hegel's suggestion of new possibilities for artistic practice opened up by this epochal shift. In the epochal highpoint of its speculative importance — in Hegel's grand narrative of history, in the classical age of Greece — the production of art remained constrained by the directive that it provide authoritative knowledge of spirit. Because of this, Hegel at one point characterizes the great artist as a "vessel" of spirit.³⁷ However, as Gadamer stresses, Hegel further believes that once the creation of art becomes absolved of this task, artists become freed for new subjective expression.³⁸

For Gadamer, building on Hegel, the age of the pastness of art is, then, just as much a certain age of liberation. Yet for Gadamer, even though Hegel associates this new conception of artistic creation with romanticism, Hegel's claim really speaks, in essence, to the birth of avant-gardism and experimentation in art. As Baker puts it, "Gadamer's own post-Hegelian thesis is that art's becoming a thing of the past, its so-called death is simultaneously its release into a new mode of being and signification."³⁹ On this view, Hegel's insight into this new freedom signals

altogether the release of artistic energy, the complete untethering of the pre-givens of substantial content, with respect to which the artist earlier had no free choice. ... Art is no longer confined to present only that, with which it is at a certain level absolutely at home, but, instead, to present everything that the human being at all has the capacity to inhabit.⁴⁰

Gadamer rejects Hegel's conclusion that philosophy comes to supersede religion and art, yet he believes that the collapse of the Christian-humanist mythos indicated by Hegel's thesis suggests a release of art that expands its vocation, no more constrained by the call to reflect the basic beliefs and values of a cultural heritage, but now freed to confront the incalculable possibilities of the human condition.

4. Challenges and Prospects

Up until this juncture Gadamer has proved to endorse, albeit from a divergent vantage point and with important qualifications, Hegel's belief that in late modernity our speculative relation to art underwent a decisive transformation. Gadamer also appropriates, albeit creatively, Hegel's further insight that the dissipation of this need meant not only an end, but also a certain liberation of the artist. Yet in contrast with Hegel, who appears to conclude that there is thus no real speculative future for art, Gadamer is led to believe that the present historical juncture opens up a new future for our relation to art, and with it new challenges and prospects.

For Hegel's part, his characterization of the history of absolute spirit suggests that due to the rise of speculative philosophy the future holds no chance for the recuperation of ties between truth and art. Indeed, for Hegel it is not just the production of new art that has no speculatively significant future; his approach moreover seems to admit of no speculatively significant future for new interpretations of artworks from the past. Later in his career, Hegel appears to worry that the loss of our speculative need for art might cause the history of art to fall into neglect. Hegel's concern reaches its height during the time he lived in Berlin in the 1820s, and may be seen to express itself at least as visibly in his practical affairs as they do in his lectures. As Andreas Grossmann explains, Hegel came to call for the preservation of the world history of art, not as representations of authoritative knowledge, but rather as artefacts of the past, a *monumenta nationum historica*.⁴¹

Gadamer by contrast draws a very different lesson from his critical engagement with Hegel's thesis. Gadamer concludes that the pastness of art need not be taken to indicate the end of art, but rather only to outline the challenges artists and audiences will face in the future. Perhaps in part because he rejects Hegel's claim that philosophy supercedes art, Gadamer sees no reason to deny the relation of truth and art even in our times. Gadamer's protest is impassioned: "There will not be an end of art, an end of the restless formative will of human dreams and longings, as long as human beings at all form their own lives."⁴² Rather, he asserts, "the pastness of art ... in no way ... means the end of art, but, rather, only concludes that art henceforth performs its function within a higher truth claim."⁴³ For Gadamer, the interpretation of art remains an ineluctable source of truth no less today than in any other time.

What are the lineaments of this higher truth claim? Much of Gadamer's answer may be discerned in his conviction that the present historical juncture, in the aftermath of the collapse of the traditional mythos, places new demands on artists. These demands do not call on artists simply to exercise an unconstrained range of creative potential, but, moreover, to create art that might prepare the event of understanding even after the collapse of Christian-humanist Europe. In fact, Gadamer appears to suggest that, in the absence of

an inheritance of a monolithic cultural myth, the artist's charge is to forge a post-mythic, communally shared sense of meaning in a new way. In "Relevance of the Beautiful," Gadamer had indicated that the artist's task turns on the creation of art, which sets into work "a new solidarity...a new form of communication of all with all."⁴⁴ In this way, Gadamer may be seen to retain a thematic interest in total mediation, myth, and legend, yet to do so with a critical distance from the forms of conservatism often found in romanticism.

Indeed, in the later "Ende der Kunst?" Gadamer elucidates the radical difficulty of such a task at the present historical juncture. Gadamer writes,

A current artist, of whichever of the arts, has to struggle against a tide that blunts all sensitivity. Precisely for this reason all current artists must summon alienations in order that the power of their form to compel us comes across and that the alienation may form back into new indigenoussness. The pluralism of experimentation has thus become unavoidable in our epoch. Alienation up to the limit of unintelligibility is the law, under which the formative power of art is most honestly fulfilled in an age such as ours.⁴⁵

If the speculative need of art is to be satisfied in the present age, it no longer suffices simply to reiterate received beliefs and values which are no longer sustaining. This may not spell the end of art, but it forces on artistic production new requirements of experimentalism and compels it to address new questions. In light of Gadamer's later efforts to address issues in deconstruction and other contemporary movements of thought, we might even wonder if, at the limit, the assignment of the artist today may also implicate her in the task of giving voice to the foreignness, absence, and loss that characterize the current historical situation: in short, to make palpable the crisis of the present time and to provide transformative insight into it.

Gadamer in fact argues that the challenges posed by the present historical juncture place new demands not only on the artist, but also on the audience of her work. In elucidation of the relationship between the artist and the audience of a work of art, Gadamer at one point speaks of a reciprocal endeavor, in which "it is obviously a task for both sides, for the artist, who seeks the legible script, and for the reader, who has, so to speak, to read into the script and what it says."⁴⁶ The presentation of an original idea in art requires effort from both artist and audience — from the former, to form a novel insight in terms familiar enough to be understood; from the latter, to stretch beyond previously held prejudices and beliefs in order to be receptive to the new.

From this standpoint Gadamer may be seen to argue that the relation of truth and art can prevail even in the present age. Further, he continues to hold on to the conviction that the understanding, which arises from art, is conditioned by the inheritance of the past. Yet if it is a hallmark of conservatism to desire to preserve a self-same, unified cultural heritage, then Gadamer's approach cannot be said to take shape under a conservative aegis. Rather, he seems to say that in the West, at least, it is now part and parcel of the artist's task to create meaningful art from out of the wreckage left over

from the European heritage's collapse. In this context, the prospect of the new — of new art — in fact elicits, as one of its conditions, the collapse of the Christian-humanist tradition. It is true that many late modern and recent artists usually identified as culturally conservative also recognize the need for artistic practice to come to terms with the erosion of the European or Western cultural heritage. In Gadamer, however, the decidedly non-conservative stress is placed on a call to affirm and embrace this erosion, not simply because it must be accepted as an irremediable fact (though this may be so), but rather because it is nothing short of a condition of our very capacity to attain new meaning at the present historical juncture.⁴⁷

Indeed, if recent scholarship has brought into question the allegation of conservatism, which is supposed to come from Gadamer's emphasis on the continuity of tradition, then perhaps his critical approach to Hegel's thesis on the pastness of art actually highlights an important radicality and openness of Gadamer's view. In his engagement with Hegel's thesis, Gadamer recognizes the positive possibilities that arise from the break of the historical present with the past. For far from retreating to a nihilistic or nostalgic view of the dissipation of a self-same and unified tradition in the West, Gadamer sees the demise of traditional European culture as nothing less than a decisive impetus for the production of artistic meaning in our time.

5. *Burn Marks* (Brandflecken)

Gadamer's later essays that take up Hegel's aesthetics, no less than *Truth and Method*, may be said to characterize the sense of understanding achieved in our encounters with art as an event culminating in a mediation between an artist's work and its audience. Gadamer's hermeneutical conception of understanding reminds us that this event is dependent on and sustained by tradition, both for the artist, whose art relies on substantive themes inherited from the past, and by its audience, whose interpretive relation to the piece is inaugurated by the common ground that these themes provide. Further questions may still need to be asked about the limitations of Gadamer's hermeneutic approach in aesthetics for, say, the interpretation of art from foreign cultural milieus, or from a past so lost to time as to be unrecognizable. Yet Gadamer's confrontation with Hegel's thesis reminds us that in the present age in the West, given the breakup of its European cultural mythos, our efforts to understand art rely on a tradition as it were without tradition.

In "Wort und Bild" Gadamer cites a turn of phrase from Schleiermacher that helps to bring the point home. Of course, in his larger treatment of the historical development of hermeneutics, Gadamer criticizes Schleiermacher's reduction of hermeneutics to a doctrine of art, and, in turn, the characterization of hermeneutics as a methodology aimed at the achievement of correctness of interpretation.⁴⁸ Gadamer's citation of Schleiermacher in this later essay may

nevertheless help to illustrate the current condition of art indicated by Hegel's thesis. "Schleiermacher once said," Gadamer tells us, "that a religious picture of a past century, which we admire in a museum, always has burn marks on it, as if it had been rescued from a conflagration."⁴⁹

Both Gadamer and Hegel would agree that the interpretive relation we bring to art in the present time has been profoundly altered by a kind of conflagration of the European heritage. Gadamer's engagement with the Hegelian thesis suggests, however, that Schleiermacher's observation should not be occasion only for sadness or nostalgia. For Gadamer, of course, the challenges posed by the collapse of what he calls the Christian-humanist *mythos* cannot amount to a question of the complete jettisoning of the past. More to the point for purposes of this paper, though, neither does Gadamer respond to the demands placed on us in the present age with the conservative desire to reconstitute or reconstruct our lost continuity with the past. Rather, Gadamer's interpretive approach to Hegel's thesis on the pastness of art suggests that our prospects to forge new meaning in our time require us to confront, remain cognizant of, and even embrace the fragmentation of the present, to breathe new meaning into these fragments, to graft them together in new ways, and thereby to anticipate the growth of new meaning.

Texas A&M University

References

1. Charges against Gadamer's conservatism, which are often traced to Habermas' criticisms of Gadamer, are well known. For a good discussion of this debate—and, so, some of the origins of such criticism—see Ingrid Scheiber, *Gadamer Between Heidegger and Habermas* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). It should of course also be noted that not all commentators who see strands of conservatism in Gadamer find fault with him for this reason. See, for example, Dieter Misgeld, "Poetry, Dialogue, and Negotiation: Liberal Culture and Conservative Politics in Hans-Georg Gadamer's Thought," in *Festivals of Interpretation: Essays on Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Kathleen Wright (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 161–181. Gadamer discusses the concepts of authority, tradition, and prejudice in, for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, in *Gesammelte Werke* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), Vol. 1, "Zweiter Teil." Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, revised trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2003), "Part Two." Translations that appear in this essay are my own, except when I expressly mention that I have used or consulted other English translations. When English translations of cited passages are known to me, I have provided references to both the original and the English translation.
2. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I*, in *Werke in zwanzig Bände*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), Vol. 13, 25. Cf. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. F. P. B. Osmaston, (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1975), Vol. 1, 13.
3. See Günter Figal, "The Doing of the Thing Itself: Gadamer's Hermeneutic Ontology of Language," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, edited by Robert Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 102–125. See in particular, Figal, "The Doing of the Thing Itself," 122–123.
4. Robert Bernasconi, "You Don't Know What I'm Talking About: Alterity and the Hermeneutical Ideal," in *The Specter of Relativism*, ed. Lawrence Schmidt (Evanston:

- Northwestern University Press, 1995), 178–194. See in particular, Bernasconi, “You Don’t Know,” 194.
5. *Ibid.*, 191.
 6. See Robert Dostal, “The Development of Gadamer’s Thought,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 34, no. 3 (October 2003). See in particular pages 257–259.
 7. James Risser, “Our Time: The Time of Modernity as the Time of Tradition,” *Kinesis* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 13–14.
 8. *Ibid.*, 14.
 9. Hans-Helmut Gander, “Between Strangeness and Familiarity: Towards Gadamer’s Concept of Effective History,” trans. Ryan Drake, *Research in Phenomenology* 34 (2004): 126.
 10. See, for example, John D. Caputo, “Firing the Steel of Hermeneutics: Hegelianized versus Radical Hermeneutics,” in *Hegel, History, and Interpretation*, ed. Shaun Gallagher (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 59–70.
 11. Robert Pippin writes, for example, “Gadamer is forever returning to examples of art as paradigmatic problems of understanding ...” Robert Pippin, “Gadamer’s Hegel,” in *Gadamer’s Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, eds. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsperg, and Jens Kertscher (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 222.
 12. For a careful treatment of Gadamer’s speculative approach to poetic art, see J. M. Baker, “Lyric as Paradigm: Hegel and the Speculative Instance of Poetry in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics” in *Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 143–166.
 13. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I*, p. 52. Cf. Osmaston, Vol. 1, p. 42.
 14. Jacques Taminiaux, “Speculation and Judgment,” in *Poetics, Speculation, and Judgment: The Shadow of the Work of Art from Kant to Phenomenology*, trans. Michael Gendre, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 1–2.
 15. Gadamer refers to “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” the lead poem in the second part of the *New Poems*, in “Ästhetik und Hermeneutik,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 8, 8. Cf. Gadamer, “Aesthetics and Hermeneutics,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 95–104. For my translation of Rilke I have consulted Edward Snow. See Rainer Maria Rilke, *New Poems, the Other Part, A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Edward Snow, (New York: New Point Press 1998), 3.
 16. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 116 ff. Cf. Weinsheimer and Marshall, 110 ff.
 17. *Ibid.*, 125. Cf. Weinsheimer and Marshall, 120.
 18. Jean Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, trans. Kathryn Plant (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), 44.
 19. Gadamer, “Wort und Bild – so wahr, so seiend,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 8, 375. Cf. Gadamer, “The Artwork in Word and Image: So True, So Full of Being!,” in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings*, ed. Richard Palmer (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 197.
 20. Gadamer’s relation to Hegel’s notion of the ‘bad infinite’ has been taken up by a number of commentators. See, for example, Pippin, “Gadamer’s Hegel,” 222.
 21. Baker treats this issue in “Lyric as Paradigm.” See, for example, Baker, “Lyric as Paradigm,” 150.
 22. Gadamer, “Wort und Bild,” 388. Cf. Palmer, 212.
 23. Jean Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, 28. Indeed, it should really be noted that despite Gadamer’s explicit critical relation to Kant, many of Gadamer’s deepest insights into art and aesthetic experience may nonetheless be seen to flow from insights into Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. See Dennis Schmidt, *Lyrical and Ethical Subjects: Essays on the Periphery of the Word, Freedom, and History* (Albany: State University of New York, 2005), 9.
 24. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 46. Cf. Weinsheimer and Marshall, 40.
 25. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in *Die Werke Immanuel Kants in zwölf Bände*, Vol. 10 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 95, B XXXVII/A XXXV. Cf. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, (Cambridge: Cambridge

- University Press, 2000), 72. Jean Grondin notes that Kant's position cannot be said to assert the complete 'autonomy of the aesthetic,' in Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, 33.
26. Baker, "Lyric as Paradigm," 154.
 27. Gadamer, "Ende der Kunst? Von Hegels Lehre vom Vergangenheitscharakter der Kunst bis zur Anti-Kunst von Heute," in *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 8, 206.
 28. See Robert Wicks, "Hegel's Aesthetics: An Overview," in *Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 352.
 29. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I*, 139 ff. Cf. Osmaston, Vol. 1, 139 ff. See also Wicks, "Hegel's Aesthetics," 351.
 30. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I*, 142. Cf. Osmaston, Vol. 1, 142.
 31. *Ibid.*, 141. Cf. Osmaston, Vol. 1, 141.
 32. Günter Figal, *Sinn des Verstehens, Beiträge zur Hermeneutik* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1996), 48.
 33. Gadamer, "Ende der Kunst?," 207. Cf. *ibid.*, 217, 219.
 34. *Ibid.*, 209.
 35. *Ibid.*
 36. Heidegger, "Nachwort," to "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes," in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2003), 68. Cf. Heidegger, "Epilogue" to "The Origin of the Work of Art", trans. Albert Hofstadter, (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 80. I use Hofstadter's translation here.
 37. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Werke* 3, 515. Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 426 / § 703.
 38. See, for example, Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik II*, in *Werke* 14, 238 ff. Cf. Hegel, *Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. F. P. B. Osmaston (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1975), Vol. 2, 396 ff.
 39. Baker, "Lyric as Paradigm," 158.
 40. Gadamer, "Die Stellung der Poesie in der Hegelschen Ästhetik und die Frage des Vergangenheitscharakters der Kunst," in *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 8, 229–30. This last passage, as Gadamer cites, is invoked from Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Cf. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik II*, 238. Cf. Osmaston, Vol. 2, 396.
 41. Andreas Grossmann, "Hegel, Heidegger, and the Question of Art Today," *Research in Phenomenology* 20 (1990): 199 ff.
 42. Gadamer, "Ende der Kunst?," 220.
 43. Gadamer, "Die Stellung der Poesie," 229.
 44. Gadamer, "Aktualität des Schönen, Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest," in *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 8, 101. Cf. Gadamer, "Relevance of the Beautiful: Art as Play, Symbol, and Festival," in *Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 10.
 45. Gadamer, "Ende der Kunst?," 219f.
 46. *Ibid.*, 216.
 47. It may be that notions of political and cultural conservatism are more polyvalent than can be adequately defined and treated within the confines of the current essay. One may think of T. S. Elliot, for example, as a cultural conservative, and, as has insightfully been pointed out to me, there may be important resonances between Gadamer's view of the challenges faced by artists in our time and Elliot's efforts in "The Wasteland", which may be seen to concern the recovery of meaning from the fragments of tradition. While this complication certainly warrants further consideration, it remains the case that critics of Gadamer's conservatism characteristically level criticisms against his purported view of the continuity of the past with the present and the preservation of cultural heritage. Gadamer's focus on the need to embrace the fragmentation he sees at the present historical juncture, I think, does much to call into doubt charges of conservatism in this sense.
 48. Eric Nelson, "Schleiermacher on Language, Religious Feeling, and the Ineffable", in *Epoché* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 299.
 49. Gadamer, "Wort und Bild", 378. Cf. Palmer, 200.