

HANS-GEORG GADAMER

By Elena Romagnoli

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Hans-Georg Gadamer (Marburg 1900 – Heidelberg 2002), a pupil of Martin Heidegger and founder of philosophical hermeneutics, is one of the most important figures in 20th century philosophy.

Gadamer studied at the University of Marburg, starting with neo-Kantian philosophy (under the supervision of Nicolai Hartmann), and then moved to the University of Freiburg in 1923 to attend Heidegger's lectures. After returning to Marburg – where Gadamer followed Heidegger, who had been appointed as a professor – the two began to drift apart, partly due to Heidegger's severe judgment of Gadamer. During those years, Gadamer found "a solid ground" (Di Cesare 2013: 9) against Heidegger's overwhelming influence in the study of classical philology. He later completed the habilitation in philosophy under Heidegger's supervision – with whom he re-established his relationship – and wrote a dissertation published in 1931 with the title *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*. During the Nazi period, he worked as Associate Professor at the University of Marburg and then obtained a chair in Leipzig in 1939, without ever joining the party (Grondin 2003). After the fall of Nazism, he became the rector of the University of Leipzig and then a professor at the University of Heidelberg in 1949, where he remained for the next decades.

In 1960, Gadamer's hermeneutical approach to philosophy was condensed into his masterpiece *Truth and Method*, whose second edition (1965) would consecrate the success of "philosophical hermeneutics". Starting from the 1970s, his thought spread through the United States and Canada, also due to his many trips overseas, where Gadamer held numerous courses by invitation. The basic intention that animates Gadamer's thought is to show the universal scope of "understanding" at the basis of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. His philosophical path revolves around the questions of art, history, and language, considered within the horizon of the finiteness of the human being. The key word of his philosophy is certainly *dialogue*. After 1960, Gadamer returned repeatedly to many subjects, sometimes modifying and revising his own concepts with respect to *Truth and Method*. His works are collected in the ten volumes of the *Gesammelte Werke* (GW), which he edited from 1985 to 1995.

The centrality of aesthetic questions in Gadamer's philosophy emerges clearly from the first part of *Truth and Method*, which is entirely dedicated to art. Gadamer also dedicated numerous essays to the topics of

art and aesthetic experience, collected in volumes 8 and 9 of GW. The main themes of his aesthetics are, on the one hand, the critique of the subjectivism of the modern conception of art and its outcomes, and on the other, the recovery of art in a truthful sense as it emerges from the concepts of play, symbol, and festival. Gadamer's interpretations of poetic texts (Celan, Goethe, Hölderlin, and Rilke) are also fundamental as evidence of his hermeneutical praxis.

MAIN WORKS ON AESTHETICS

1.1 The Role of Art in *Truth and Method*

The first part of *Truth and Method* recalls Gadamer's dual intent which consists of a *pars destruens*, dedicated to putting into question the subjectivist conception of aesthetic experience – emblemized by the concept of *Erlebnis* (lived experience) – and a *pars construens*, dedicated to rethinking the truthful and ontological sense of art as *Erfahrung* (transformative experience).

Gadamer identifies the main turning point of subjectivism in Kant's separation of art from knowledge in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. According to Gadamer, nineteenth-century philosophy mostly developed an aesthetic of *Erlebnis*, based on the separation between subject and object. *Erlebnis*, indeed, is critically described by Gadamer as a process of abstraction that isolates the "pure work of art" by disregarding the "world" in which a work is rooted. Gadamer coins the expression "aesthetic differentiation" to define this phenomenon, in order to underline that the work of art becomes *detached* from its context, which means that what is not strictly aesthetic (i.e., every moral, cognitive, or social aspect) is separated and disregarded. The fundamental social consequence of this conception is that art becomes "art for art's sake" and is thus secluded from ordinary experience, as attested by the birth of museums and galleries.

To this subjectivist interpretation of art, Gadamer contrasts Hegel's lectures on aesthetics, which for him have been able to bring to light, in the experience of art, "a history of worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*), – i.e. a history of truth" (Gadamer 2013: 89). Gadamer aims to recover the truthful character of art based on the fundamental category of "play" (*Spiel*), which exemplifies an anti-subjectivist way of understanding art: in play, indeed, the focus is not on the subjectivity of the players, but rather on the movement, i.e. on the activity of the play itself. "The medial sense of play" enables Gadamer to relate it to the mode of being of the work of art, since in German (as in English), *Spiel* indicates the "play" as well as the artistic representation in the sense of "drama". In the case of art, the self-presentation of play does not remain isolated but opens up to an *audience*. In this sense, Gadamer's argument is based on the paradigm of the performing arts of theatre and music, which have their essence in representation (*Darstellung*) and execution (*Aufführung*). Indeed, art exists only in its enactment, being constituted each time by its interaction with a particular audience and situation. In this sense, the experience of art is characterized as a "transformation into structure" (*Verwandlung ins Gebilde*), which indicates "a transmutation into the true".

To the notion of play, Gadamer adds that of "festival", which conveys the temporality of the work of art. A festival, in fact, exists only if it is every time identical (the same celebrated event) but also different (the

different celebrations). Similarly, every artistic representation is at the same time identical (the same represented text) but also different (the different representations of the work). This paradigm is explicated in the example of Ancient Greek tragedy, highlighting the continuistic and social basis of art, conceived as a communal event. For Gadamer, the temporality of festivals allows to take into account the processuality of art and its relationship with tradition, emblemized in the concept of “contemporaneity” of art, which is opposed to the mere “simultaneity” and immediacy of aesthetic consciousness.

Gadamer’s challenge, therefore, is to show how this paradigm of art as representation is applicable not only to the strictly performative arts, but also to the figurative arts. Here, Gadamer’s intent is not aesthetic but ontological. Gadamer relies on the concept of “picture” (*Bild*) which, by leveraging the etymological meaning of German, can explain the aesthetics of the figurative arts (*bildende Künste*), including sculpture. He reassesses the relationship between copy (*Bild*) and original (*Ur-Bild*), seeing in the copy – understood as a picture, as opposed to the mere mirror-copy – an enrichment with respect to the original: the picture is characterized by “an increase in being”. By explicitly referring to the neo-Platonic tradition, the content of the picture itself is ontologically defined by Gadamer as an “emanation of the original”. At the end of the third part of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer returns to the concept of beauty, understood in an ontological sense as appearance (*Vorschein*); namely, following Plato, as an event that has value in itself.

In the last paragraphs of the first part of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer extends this aesthetic paradigm to the so-called “decorative” and “occasional” arts, as well as to the literary arts. As for the former, they were traditionally considered secondary, based on the exceptionalist criterion of the “Great Art” of genius. The concept of “occasionality” is at the center of Gadamer’s analysis. He emphasizes the artwork’s rootedness in the situation and in the world to which it belongs. In this context, Gadamer recovers the aesthetic value of architecture that opposes a separatist interpretation of art, inasmuch as architecture always has to do with the world in which it is placed, as well as with its function. As for the literary arts, in *Truth and Method* only one paragraph is devoted to “the borderline role of literature”. Here Gadamer emphasizes that the essence of literature also consists in representation, conceived as “reading”, both aloud and silently. Reading is the enactment of the work, thus expressing a shared and social value, since the concept of literature necessarily implies that of the “reader”.

The part of *Truth and Method* dedicated to art ends by contrasting two ways of understanding aesthetic experience: “reconstruction” (Schleiermacher) – criticized by Gadamer for overlooking the “historical distance” – and “integration” (Hegel) which, instead, leads to consider the work of art as the result of a mediation between the past and the present, thus being assumed as the key criterion of philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer introduces the famous (and often criticized) idea that “aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics” (Gadamer 2013: 164), although he also adds that hermeneutics, in turn, must define itself in such a way as to essentially account for the experience of art.

1.2 Art as *Vollzug*: Essays after *Truth and Method*

After the publication of *Truth and Method* Gadamer dedicated numerous essays to art and aesthetics. In some of these writings he revisited fundamental themes by focusing on contemporary art forms and

questioning their social role. A fundamental essay is *The Relevance of the Beautiful. Art as Play, Symbol, and Festival* (1974), where Gadamer aims to find a common concept that allows to hold together the great art of the past and contemporary artworks. In this direction, Gadamer also introduces a participatory criterion of art that aims to overcome the distance between the spectators and the work of art. The role of contemporary art is interwoven with Gadamer's reflections concerning the famous Hegelian thesis of the "past-character of art", to which he also dedicates two specific contributions (Gadamer 2022: 65-85). Gadamer understands the pastness of art as a presence of the past. The Hegelian thesis thus reflects the condition and relevance of contemporary art in its constant attempt to build a social commonality.

Furthermore, in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* the concepts of play and festival are revisited, together with that of "symbol". Gadamer stresses here the *anthropological roots* of the ordinary experience of play, that is now considered as "transitional" phenomenon between human and animal life. The concept of festival is also taken up, emphasizing its social and democratic aspect, since "the festival is for everyone". Finally, and contrary to the idealistic tradition, the symbol, as an emblem of art, does not stand for, or refer to, something else, but on the contrary, the referent of the symbol is present in the symbol itself.

The concept of art as representation is further developed in the concept of *Vollzug* (translatable as "performance"), as it emerges in *Music and Time. A Philosophical Postscript* (1988). Here, the essence of music is conceived as intrinsic movement and temporality (Gadamer 2021: 475-476). The centrality of this notion also emerges in the essay *The Artwork in Word and Image: 'So True, So Full of Being!'* (1992), where Gadamer, stressing the practical character of art, rethinks the relationship between literary and figurative arts. *Vollzug*, along with *Zeitlichkeit*, is understood as fundamental character of art, since "art has its 'being' in the performance" (Gadamer 2007: 215). Moreover, in *On the Reading of Buildings and Paintings* (1979), Gadamer explicitly applies the process of reading as representation as the criterium that is also at the basis of figurative arts, since we read a picture like a text (Gadamer 1998: 27). Indeed, in Gadamer's later essays, reading is conceived in a performative sense and acquires a universal value: indeed, all our experience is reading.

1.3 Hermeneutics and Literature

The central paradigm of *Truth and Method* was based on the performing arts, on the one hand, and on the figurative arts, on the other, whereas in his later works it is rather literature that acquires a fundamental role. This is evidenced by the large number of essays dedicated to the interpretations of poets. Gadamer discusses the centrality of the poetic word in numerous essays, including *On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth* (1971). Using a metaphor from Paul Valéry, Gadamer emphasizes how the poetic word is like a "gold coin" that has value in itself and, for this reason, it "stands in itself" (Gadamer 1998: 108; transl. mod.). The common word, instead, is like a "coin of exchange" and, therefore, dissolves itself in the flux of dialogue. The poetic word thus acquires a predominant role in the search for truth.

Alongside these considerations is the continuous practice of interpreting poetic texts. In particular, Gadamer dedicates to Paul Celan the fundamental book *Who Am I and Who Are You?* (1969), consisting of an interpretation of Celan's *Breathcrystal* cycle. In this poem Gadamer sees an expression of the role of

contemporary poets who, instead of being destined to remain silent, tend to speak with a “discretion”, to which it is up to the readers to listen. In fact, even in Celan’s poems, we find the poetic word identified in the light “crystal of breath”, as a perfect but also fragile moment that distinguishes the experience of the poet as well as that of the reader. Indeed, reading is the sole criterion of poetic experience, which places the poet and the public on the same level. The work of art is transformed and enriched by its different readings, giving rise to new aesthetic experiences. The poet’s word – even in its most “hermetic” form – is “the word common to all” (Gadamer 1997: 164).

DIALOGUE WITH CONTEMPORARIES

The ability of Gadamer’s hermeneutics to dialogue with the most diverse interlocutors is one of the main reasons for its success – up to the point of becoming a cultural *koine*, as stated by Gianni Vattimo in the 1980s. At the same time, however, this is also one of the main reasons for its misrepresentations. For example, Gadamer was accused by Emilio Betti of proposing an undefined concept of hermeneutics and excluding the principle of *mens auctoris*, and by Eric D. Hirsch of failing to provide valid criteria for the determination of the interpretative act. Heidegger also engaged with Gadamer’s thought, distancing himself from the concept of “historically effected consciousness”.

As for the influence of Gadamer’s hermeneutics in the field of aesthetics, the development of the *aesthetics of reception*, starting from Hans-Robert Jauss (later also carried on by Wolfgang Iser), has been particularly fruitful. This theory takes up many of Gadamer’s concepts, including the centrality of the interaction between work and audience, and applies them to the case of literature. In the Italian context, the legacy of Luigi Pareyson’s hermeneutical work is particularly relevant. Pareyson emphasized the centrality of “interpretation” by placing the dimension of art at the center of his approach, while attenuating the historical character of hermeneutics in favor of a more “ontological and personal” reading.

One of the most famous critical debates led by Gadamer was certainly the one with the *critique of ideology* (represented at the time by Jürgen Habermas), whose central points did not directly focus on aesthetics but would have anyway a strong influence on the further reception of Gadamer’s conception of art. Habermas criticized Gadamer’s concept of “tradition”, giving rise to the tendency to interpret his hermeneutics as a form of conservative thinking, and also accused Gadamer of promoting an “idealism of language”, which would reduce every human experience to the linguistic dimension. This latter criticism will lead to the diffusion of a wrong conception of Gadamer’s aesthetics as only limited to literary arts and texts: in this context, Odo Marquard critically spoke about the movement “from being-towards-death to being-towards-text”. Habermas later coined the famous and emblematic expression of the “urbanization of the Heideggerian province”, which influenced the dismissal of Gadamer’s hermeneutics as a mere simplification of the concepts expressed by Heidegger.

The debate with *deconstruction* is also fundamental, stemming from the “fateful” meeting with Jacques Derrida in 1981. Since then, Gadamer has returned to the relationship with deconstruction several times, broadening his perspective on the relationship between voice and writing. The most general criticism that

Derrida addressed to hermeneutics consists in the concept of “understanding” as an “interpretative totalization”, which aims to exhaust the other and to provide a univocal reading. However, in a later text entitled *Rams* (2003) and written by Derrida after Gadamer's death, the common thread of Celan's poetry offered the possibility of reopening the “uninterrupted dialogue” between the two thinkers, emphasizing the common path of hermeneutics and deconstruction (see Derrida 2005). This debate influenced the reception of Gadamer's thinking in the French context, as it emerges in Paul Ricoeur's developments of hermeneutics.

Finally, a decisive dialogue is the one with Richard Rorty's *neopragmatism*, who recovered the anti-foundationalist value of hermeneutics, in addition to the Gadamerian concepts of *Bildung* (interpreted as “edification”) and *Wirkungsgeschichte* (understood in a utilitarian direction closer to pragmatism). In the field of aesthetics, Richard Shusterman took up many of Gadamer's concepts – including that of historicity – to define his “pragmatist aesthetics”, emphasizing the anti-elitist meaning of the hermeneutical notions of play and festival.

CRITICAL DEBATE

In the broad reception of Gadamer's aesthetics, four main threads can be identified.

- 1) The *postmodern or post-metaphysical* reading emphasizes the anti-foundationalist basis of hermeneutics and stresses its break with the question of “truth”. This interpretive tendency can be seen in Vattimo's (1991) pioneering readings of Gadamer's thought (as well as, from a different perspective, in Rorty's pragmatist reading). This strand typically focuses on *language* as the human being's unsurpassable horizon. On the one hand, such interpretations have played a decisive role in disseminating Gadamer's thought; on the other, however, they have often resulted in a relativistic and nihilistic conception that tends to overlap Vattimo's “weak thought” with philosophical hermeneutics.
- 2) The *metaphysical* reading stresses the deep roots of Gadamer's philosophy in the Greek and Medieval tradition, thus reinforcing the centrality of the concepts of truth and tradition, as it is evident in Jean Grondin's (2019) works. Such a line of enquiry, represented also by Gaetano Chiurazzi, aims to answer the dismissive criticism of hermeneutics as mere textualism, stressing the *ontological* paradigm of the artistic phenomenon as appearance, linked to Neoplatonic philosophy. John Arthos (2009) emphasizes the role of the Augustinian concept of “*verbum interius*” in relation to the literary arts.
- 3) The *realist or objectivist* reading moves from Günter Figal's (2010) proposal of bringing the “work” of art back to the center as truly *objective*. This interpretation distances itself from a performative conception of art (accused of subjectivism) and focuses particularly on the visual arts. By developing these ideas, Theodore George (2023) also refers to a “realist hermeneutics”. This project is present, in different senses, in the “new realism” of Maurizio Ferraris and Markus Gabriel (2022), who attributes to Gadamer a realist ontology of the “objects” of understanding. Along this line, Brice R. Wachterhauser has stressed the presence of a form of “perspectival realism” in Gadamer's thought.

4) The *performative* reading is based on a dynamic and processual interpretation of art, characterized by the interaction between the audience and the author. This strand aims to distance itself both from postmodern reading (with its relativist outcomes) and from the metaphysical one (emphasizing the “a-metaphysical” nature of hermeneutics). The performative reading mostly focuses on the *social* aspects of Gadamer’s aesthetic conception (rather than on its ontological aspects), thus leading to reassess it as a “performative aesthetic”, and centered on the concept of *Vollzug*, as in Marcello Ruta (2018), James Risser (2022), Cynthia R. Nielsen (2023), and Elena Romagnoli (2023).

This last reading includes the reflections of authors such as Alessandro Bertinetto (2022), Daniel M. Feige, and Sam McAuliffe (2024), linked to the aesthetics of “improvisation”. Stefano Marino (2011) focuses on the link between aesthetics, practical philosophy, and the social role of hermeneutics, and Niall Kean (2022) investigates the connection between art, temporality, and festival. As for other specific Gadamerian aesthetic topics, Nicholas Davey (2013) focuses on visual art, while Gert-Jan van der Heyden (2022) privileges the point of view of poetry. The heritage of idealistic aesthetics in Gadamer has also been a central topic, investigated by Kristin Gjesdal (2009). The rethinking of Gadamer’s aesthetics (also in a critical key, as for Georg W. Bertram) has recently been taken up by Marino and Romagnoli (2025).

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