

# The New Creative: On Gadamer and Poetic Gestures

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**Abstract:** With the growing influence of the hard sciences, and the shift of emphasis from classical and literary texts as sources to truth to the scientific method, comes the critique of Continental philosophy on the sciences' rigid and limiting picture of reality. In a crude overview, analytic philosophy that takes its cue from this scientific rationality, believes that language represents reality. Thus, one must seek truth in language the way hard sciences do in quantifiable and testable set-ups. And yet for continental philosophy, the experience of language and art are not mere experiences of a representation of reality. Hence the experience of the richness of language and art are experiences that cannot be read and understood using the methods of science. Offering his *Truth and Method* and his idea of the philosophical hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that reality naturally spills over any constructed method of understanding the world. This means that Truth can never be completely and accurately captured. Truth then, must be redefined as a constant and evolving dialogue of interpretation. However, the scientific rationality—aided by the close link of art production to technology—has become pervasively influential even in the art world. The romantic emphasis on ambiguity in language and artistic expressions was replaced by

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clear-cut display of artistic intentions in art production. Metaphors that represent the superabundance of meaning in language was replaced by poetic gestures: bold actions that respond to an already naked world stripped of ambiguity. Nonetheless, poetic gestures, as banal as they may seem compared to metaphysical metaphors, are images of actions that still demand understanding and interpretation. This paper aims to problematize Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as response to new artistic devices, specifically, poetic gestures.

**Keywords:** philosophical hermeneutics, art, poetic language, ambiguity

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The rush of steam-emotion will burst the steam-pipe of the sentence, the valves of punctuation, and the regular clamp of the adjective. Fistfuls of basic words without any conventional order. The narrator's only preoccupation: to render all the vibrations of his "I."<sup>1</sup>

## GADAMER'S PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

The epistemological debate between rationalism and empiricism represented in philosophy what to the sciences was a demand for methodology. The historical shift from the authority of the Church to the authority of science, especially, empirical evidence, ushered not merely a change in philosophy, but also, an in-depth way of dealing with scientific questions. In philosophy, this historical shift became a new-found interest in epistemology—the need to purify ideas, and refine ways of knowing. Whereas during the Middle Ages, there is a general acceptance of the *capacity* to know, and grasp reality, and that debates focused more on whether man has the capacity to understand God's ways, the secularization and modernization happening in Western civilization greatly affected the epistemological preoccupations of the modern world. This is also evident in what is considered as scientific during the time. A heavy reliance on faith and Church doctrines was no longer considered as a valid starting point in philosophy. This means that in science, there is a need to re-evaluate what was before perceived as a natural connection between metaphysical and/or abstract ideas to empirical evidence. Before, Alchemy was considered a scientific discipline, almost equivalent, if not the first rocky foundation of Chemistry. There was no distinction between Astrology and Astronomy. Imagine then, the effect of Immanuel Kant's anti-metaphysical claims. Alchemy's quest for the immortal substance becomes nothing more than a

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<sup>1</sup> F.T. Marinetti, "Destruction of Syntax—Radio Imagination—Words-in-Freedom," in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 145.

spectacular story on sorcery. Astrology's fixation on mapping events patterned after stars and constellations is now considered a subculture, if not a pastime.

However, this development in the hard sciences brought about different repercussions in how we would view thought. Taking after Kant's noumenon and phenomenon dichotomy, and attempting to extend David Hume's radical empiricism, the Logical Positivists' goal to completely distinguish science from certain metaphysical assumptions led them to treat language as purely representational. This means to them that the expressive use of language was akin to the baseless metaphysical assumptions they were trying to distance scientific theories from. So, even after the decline of Logical Positivism, this preoccupation towards precise language that points to a referent, was considered as the language of truth. Severing the parallelism of the humanities and the sciences meant that there will always be a constant struggle between the two, as we started prioritizing one over the other—in education, policy-making, management, and so on. And the hard sciences' seemingly faster-paced generation of visible and quantifiable results made a stronger claim to truth. The expressive use of language associated with the classical and literary texts were considered as an excess, an aristocratic preoccupation, a detached and hubristic ivory tower excuse of a philosophical practice.

Most Continental philosophers like Gilles Deleuze, Theodor Adorno, etc., would emphasize the rigid structure of the hard sciences, the tyrannical dangers of scientific rationality, and the tendency of its practitioners to dilute truth to the standards of the scientific method. Like the other continental philosophers, Hans-Georg Gadamer also agrees with the importance of the humanities, creativity, poetic language, and so on. However, in his book *Truth and Method*, instead of pointing out the deficiencies and/or dangers of scientific rationality, he highlights humanities' difference from the hard sciences, which provided him a gateway to present his philosophical hermeneutics. In another collection of

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essays, however, he is more firm in distinguishing the representational use of language from the expressive use of language. He writes:

everyday language resembles small change which, like our own paper money, does not actually possess the value that it symbolizes. The gold coins ... on the other hand, actually possessed as metal the value that was imprinted upon them. In a similar way, the language of poetry is not a mere pointer that refers to something else, but like the gold coin, is what it represents.<sup>2</sup>

Like most Continental philosophers, Gadamer finds in the experience of the work of art, and in the poetic use of language, a multilayered reality and meaning. Echoing Gadamer, Chris Lawn writes:

Art is a form of truth about the world and not a heightened state of individual feeling. Art is not an innocent diversion and amusement but a crucial point of access to fundamental truths about the world and what it is to be human. Art uncovers truths about ourselves that no amount of scientific endeavour can reveal.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the strong language, this is not to completely ignore the sciences. What Gadamer emphasizes was merely the fact that the humanities and the hard sciences have different methods, and must therefore be judged differently. If the sciences' priority of empirical evidence leads them to emphasize quantifiable and testable set-ups, the humanities' more expressive and more ambiguous process reveals a different kind of truth or reality. Gadamer enumerates the four guiding

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<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 132.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Lawn, *Gadamer: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2006), 87.

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principles that govern the humanities: *Bildung*, *sensus communis*, *judicium*, and taste.<sup>4</sup>

Note, however, that Gadamer's attempt to define the method of the humanities led him to affirm that the phenomenon of hermeneutics is not a problem of method at all. For him, the phenomenon of understanding precedes the idea of a method. Taking after Martin Heidegger's concept of *verstehen* as a mode of being, and criticizing the idea of man as merely a rational animal, and now shifting towards the idea of man as a *Dasein* embedded in time and the materiality of the world, Gadamer argues that the phenomenon of understanding is worth studying because we no longer see knowledge as one-to-one correspondence of idea and the object of reality. Gadamer follows Heidegger's idea of truth as *alatheia*. Understanding the world and reality from the standpoint of a temporal, corporeal *Dasein* requires an endless interpretation, because the way reality reveals itself also requires endless concealment and unconcealment, a discovery.

It is interesting, then, that Gadamer looks at poetic language as a gateway to truth, but that also, this, too, requires hermeneutics. According to him, "Aesthetics must be swallowed up in hermeneutics."<sup>5</sup> Understanding works of art is a matter of interpretation. But it seems that for Gadamer, at least in the humanities, understanding is akin to a more artistic and more creative grappling with of the strange as well. "The hermeneutic art is in fact the art of understanding something that appears alien and unintelligible to us."<sup>6</sup> Aesthetics is essentially hermeneutics. But understanding and interpretation, as anchored in the four guiding principles of humanities, is also a form of artistic expression.

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<sup>4</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 8-31.

<sup>5</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer in Conversations: Reflections and Commentary* (USA: Yale University Press, 2001), 69.

<sup>6</sup> Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful*, 141.

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## ART AS PLAY<sup>7</sup>

Gadamer also allots a space for his discussion of play as an ontological clue to hermeneutic knowledge. Against Kant's and Schiller's subjective view of art, Gadamer argues that play is the "mode of being of the work of art." He anchors the definition of the play to a goalless "to-and-fro movement." For him, it is not nature that mimics man when he plays. "Man, *too*, plays." It is man who mimics nature. Hence, the *play* of lights, or wind, or leaves is not a metaphorical play, but the very movement of nature.

Moreover, "all playing is a being-played." Despite the element of fun, Gadamer notes that play "contains its own sacred seriousness," that is, it has its own set of rules that a player must follow. Within the game, the player must submit himself to the play. But this is not just about the player. As an audience of a game, watching the play unfolds makes sense only when the audience participates in the game, too. This means that play pre-imposes to the players and to the audience a temporary arrest of disbelief. The spectator is also aware of the stakes of the game even if in the end, it is just a game. In the same manner, Gadamer also argues that art is play. An experience of the work of art requires a "sacred seriousness" and a suspension of disbelief. The play and the work of art demands from its participants—the artist and the spectators—a kind of participation wherein there exists an engagement, a "to-and-fro movement" between the work of art and the artist and/or the spectator. What art gives is a form of reflection that speaks back to us. This, of course, is very similar to how Gadamer looks at interpretation. The impossibility of gaining access to the mind of the author is partly due to our embedded-ness in the world, which means that how we understand works of art or literary texts are related to how these texts figure in our lived experiences, how they speak to us. For example, I can understand Sylvia Plath's or Virginia Woolf's works, not merely because I have read their biographies or I have looked into their social

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<sup>7</sup> From Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 102-110.

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milieu but primarily because their works speak to me in a unique way, unique from how another reader from another historical time will probably understand them. Gadamer writes:

All poetic discourse is myth, that is, it certifies itself through nothing more than its being said. It tells a story or speaks of deeds and yet gains credence—but gain it it does—only to the extent that *we ourselves are the ones who encounter ourselves in these actions and sufferings of gods and heroes. That is why, right down to the present, the mythical world of the ancients stimulates poets ever anew to revitalize it for the purpose of contemporary self-confrontation* ... In all such cases the principle of understanding is founded on an inversion; what presents itself as the action and suffering of others is understood as one's own suffering experience.<sup>8</sup>

In an encounter with the work of art, there is a tension, or struggle, or a form of tarrying then.—a push and pull, a to-and-fro movement. There is reversal, a transformation. This is what Gadamer calls “a transformation into the true ....”<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Davey explains that “philosophical hermeneutics therefore invokes neither a psychological nor an emotional empathy with a work but invites a dialogical empathy.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Mythopoetic Inversion in Rilke’s Duino Elegies,” in *Hermeneutics versus Science: Three German Views*, ed. by J. M. Connolly and T. Keutner (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) 122.

<sup>9</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 112-113.

<sup>10</sup>Nicholas Davey, *Unquiet Understanding: Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics* (USA: SUNY Press, 2006), 64.



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## ART PRODUCTION AND TECHNOLOGY<sup>11</sup>

However, in today's society, in present reality, the pace of ticking time and the space of imploding boundaries blur, and hinder epistemological shifts. Binary categories, weaving and interweaving, through reality, congests and saturates to the point of the impossibility of creativity. The speedy shape-shifting of appearances, the birth and rebirth of objects, the cloning of commodities, over and over and over, brands stamped on everything indiscriminately—from objects to values, from social institutions to psychological malaise—trivialize art, meaning, and metaphors. Changes and creativity are downplayed, are reduced to brands. Imagination is nothing but an innovation of a product. Transcendence, and mysticism, and the belief in an *Other*, in a *beyond*, if not mocked, become lifestyle choices. Everything in the postmodern society numbs man's propensity for critical impulse. The old triggers of critique—art, reactionary movement, social suffering—are celebrated as banners of thought, but do not in themselves trigger thought. Man drowning in capitalist-re-appropriated creativity makes this absorption, this osmosis impossible. In the postmodern society, there is only the intake of regurgitated media opinions. Thought and difference are nothing but a capitalist vomit. This is a wasteland of shiny new things, where humans are no longer humans, and real shit is the only real human thing left.

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" provides an alternative historical account of art production patterned after the different emerging technologies during his time. According to Benjamin, means of production affect the way we produce images. Before the invention of paper, we had to content ourselves to using cave walls. With time, we could use better paints and canvasses to immortalize the aristocrats in portraits. The once cultic or magical position images held became secularized. But with the invention of photography, the reproduction of images became faster and easier, and at the same time, closer to the original. A few years after and new technologies could also capture movement, time. The function and responsibility that art could perform is widened. Even man's definition of art changed through time. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), 219-253.

It is no longer even about signs tied a little too tight to their referents, but a system of signs in an eternal tangle, knotted to other signs, and further re-appropriated by techno-capitalism. Other than something to be commodified, signs are nothing but shiny empty cans, clanking for meaning. And in this society, man, too, clanks for meaning. The very saturation of meaning in today's society has in itself emptied reality of meaning.

Because this commodification of culture drowns man's reality, man has been conditioned in a different way. Now, he thinks in terms of differential signs that will enable him to personalize his own personality. Narratives and metaphors are not created but are fashioned, that is fashioned after and beyond last year's new black. The creativity in language is no longer a creativity that is spontaneous, that respects life's surplus of meaning. The creativity in language has become creative just for the sake of being different. The way everything is read is also tainted with consumerism. Reading takes place only if reading can differentiate one from the uncultured hoi polloi. In this kind of society, it is not that creativity lost its power. Creativity has been re-appropriated. It is not that we have lost the capacity to envision a utopia. It is that this utopia of economic and technological progress is forever in our rational dreams. And man's creative power is gagged by capitalist ideals.

The proliferation of signs banalizes signs. The sacred symbolic relation of reality and language has been breached by the illusion and the attempt of language to replace reality. The object and its mirror reflection switched places. The problem is no longer that the structuralist concept of language does not account for the creativity of reality. The problem is that now, it does. "The modern work of art reveals that everything has been reduced to undifferentiable standing-reserve."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art* (USA: Indiana University Press, 1990), 237.

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And yet this critique follows a different approach that looks at language as completely independent from, and exists in a different plane from its referents. Gadamer writes:

We cannot look at the things referred to and criticize the words for not correctly representing them. Language is not a mere tool we use, something we construct in order to communicate and differentiate. We cannot ... start from the existence and instrumentality of words and regard the subject matters as something we know about previously from an independent source.<sup>13</sup>

## **GADAMER ON THE NEW CREATIVE**

Hope lies then in the very root of the problem. The very link of language to reality makes the creation of metaphors also a constant evolution. This means that metaphors and narratives, while lending themselves to technocapitalist creative re-appropriation, could also be used by reactionary movements, by the marginalized other, to speak and squeak a message. Hope lies in the subversion and reversion of language-reality dichotomy. Metaphors and narratives are easily re-appropriated because time catches up to them, and in the postmodern society, time speeds past this creativity. Recognizing this, postmodernists could only find joy and hope in speeding up this capitalist re-appropriation through parodies and upfront recycling, cutting and pasting without apology, without guilt, without sentimentality. Today, it is this sentimentality associated in creativity and metaphors that cripples the very creativity of language because it ties language down to a specific reality, it makes the idea of the creation metaphors a scar peeled layer after layer until clothes are stripped, revealing the skin, revealing epidermis, revealing flesh and bones, revealing a malnutrition of meaning.

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<sup>13</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 407.

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Metaphors are not only made of roses; there are thorns too. And metamorphoses are not always about caterpillar to butterfly transformations. Sometimes, and more often than not, they are a Gregor Samsa turning into vermin.

Futurists like Marinetti insist that:

Images are not flowers to be chosen and gathered with parsimony ... they constitute the very lifeblood of poetry. Poetry should be an uninterrupted flow of new images, without which it is merely anemia and green-sickness. The vaster their affinities, the more images will retain their power to astound. One must—people say—spare the reader an excess of the marvelous. But we should worry instead about the fatal corrosion of time, which destroys not just the expressive value of a masterpiece, but its power to astound. Too often stimulated to enthusiasm, haven't our old ears perhaps already destroyed Beethoven and Wagner? It is imperative, then, to abolish whatever in language has become a stereotyped image, a faded metaphor, and that means nearly everything.<sup>14</sup>

The point is that this kind of sentimentality associated with creativity is what fossilizes the creation-destruction dichotomy. Metaphors are change, but this change in itself changes. The enduring metamorphic character of metaphors is a recognition that reality can never be reduced to language, nor can it be replaced by language. The creativity in metaphors is not merely a series of creation, one on top of the other, but a process of destruction as well, a process of clearing away old and dead metaphors.

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<sup>14</sup> F.T. Marinetti, "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature," in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 120-121.

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Gadamer's phenomenological background allows him to look at language's embedded-ness in this world too. Perhaps despite accusations that Gadamer is too traditional for the postmodern age, one might find comfort in this: Gadamer affirms that, "something is a poetic structure when everything pre-structured is taken up into a new, unique form ... as if it were being said for the first time to us in particular."<sup>15</sup> Metaphors are not plucked out of the sky, off of an invisible tree. As informed and conditioned by this world, and having its own temporality, it must mean that even "standards" for metaphors and works of art also change. What perhaps, to the classicist is an emptying of meaning could also be construed as a new form of creating language for the world, that is, compounding the seemingly meaningless and shallow grave of today's "poetic language" in order to reverse it, take it apart, invert meaning inside out.

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<sup>15</sup> From his *Collected Works*, 62 written in German and translated and quoted by Nicholas Davey in "Gadamer's Aesthetics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Winter 2016), ed. by Edward Zalta, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/gadamer-aesthetics/>>.

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