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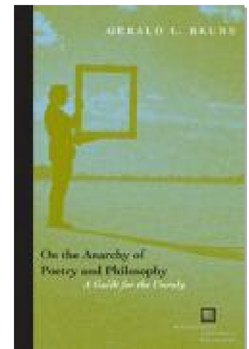

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Ancients and Moderns: Gadamer's Aesthetic Theory and the Poetry of Paul Celan

> I don't give a damn for aesthetic construction.
> —**Paul Celan**

The Play of the Artwork. Possibly there is a no more unlikely, or maybe even unwanted, commentator on modernism than Hans-Georg Gadamer, a classical philologist, distinguished Plato scholar, and author of *Wahrheit und Methode* (*Truth and Method*) (1960), the monumental articulation of philosophical hermeneutics, one of whose central chapters concerns the normative character of the "classical" or "eminent" text. (WM.269–75/TM.285–90). Nevertheless, it happens that Gadamer is also an accomplished art historian who thinks that the claim of the modernist work (one of Duchamp's Readymades, for example) is every bit as compelling as that of the classical work of art. In "Die Aktualität des Schönen" ("The Relevance of the Beautiful") (1974) Gadamer writes:

> How can we understand the innovative forms of modern art as they play around with the content [*das Spiel mit allen Inhalten*] so that our expectations [of meaning] are constantly frustrated? How are we to understand what contemporary artists, or certain trends of contemporary art, even describe as "happenings" or anti-art? How are we to understand what Duchamp is doing when he suddenly exhibits some everyday object on its own and

> thereby produces a sort of aesthetic shock reaction? We cannot simply dismiss this as so much nonsense, for Duchamp actually revealed something about the conditions of aesthetic experience [*den Bedingungen ästhetischer Erfahrung*]. (GW.8:113/RB.22)

What are these "conditions of aesthetic experience" that Duchamp (against all reason) is able to reveal? A first answer lies in Gadamer's critique of aesthetic consciousness in *Truth and Method*, where aesthetic consciousness is understood (following a certain reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*) as the disengaged contemplation of a formal object. Gadamer's idea, derived already from his reading of Plato's dialogues, is that the work of art is more of an event than it is an object, in which case the main question to ask about the work is not "Is it art?" or "What is it?" or even "How is it made?" but "How does it happen?" Gadamer's answer is that the work takes place in our encounter with it, that is, what is encountered is the coming-into-appearance of the work, which is not an event that merely reproduces an original production; it is the emergence, as if for the first time, of the original itself. As Gadamer says, "Presentation [*Darstellung*] is the mode of existence of the work of art" (WM.110/TM.115), that is, its mode of being consists in its being played like a theater piece or a work of music: "it is in the performance and only in it . . . that we encounter the work itself" (WM.111/TM.116). Again: "the presentation or performance of a work of literature or music is something essential, and not incidental to it, for it merely completes what the works of art already are—the being there of what is presented in them" (WM.127/TM.134). Performance is not something added to the work. It is not a rendition or version of it; it is the appearance (in the phenomenological sense of disclosure) of the thing itself.[1] The work exists in no other way. Its mode of coming-into-appearance is its mode of being. And the key point is that this primacy of performance applies to the modernist artwork as well as to the classic that comes down to us from the past.

This is very different from Adorno's idea that the work of music exists in its score. Yet I think it would be premature to say that there is a disagreement here between Gadamer and Adorno, for whom "the law of form" constitutes the work of art, quite apart from what anyone makes of it. After all, form for Adorno is not a concept of totality. Gadamer, too, places great emphasis on form, but Adorno would be the first to see that on Gadamer's theory it would be a mistake to think of the work as a self-contained formal object that simply

persists over time and receives its identity from the art historian or the curator of museums. Gadamer's "classic" is not confined to the museum, because for him the work of art is not (or not just) an inhabitant of a fixed time and space; it *travels*. As Gadamer sometimes expresses it, "the temporality of the aesthetic" is neither the timelessness of the museum, nor is it the Hegelian temporality of supersession in which the present subsumes the past and leaves behind what is merely over and done with (*Vergangen*). On the contrary, for Gadamer the work of art belongs to the temporality of the *festival* in which a singular event comes round again and again, without end and with no loss to its absolute singularity. In *Truth and Method* Gadamer writes:

> As a festival it is not an identity like a historical event, but neither is it determined by its origin so that there was once the 'real' festival—as distinct from the way in which it later came to be celebrated. From its inception . . . the nature of a festival is to be celebrated regularly. Thus its own original essence is always to be something different (even when celebrated in exactly the same way). An entity that exists only by always being something different is temporal in a more radical sense than everything that belongs to history. It has its being only in becoming and return [*es hat nur im Werden und im Wiederkehren sein*]. (WM.117/TM.123)

The festival is not a commemorative event but the occurrence of the once and future thing itself in its own "autonomous time" (GW.8.132–33/RB.42). It is the arrival of what has come to pass. Likewise our encounter with the work of art is an event in which what Gadamer calls "the hermeneutic identity" of the work shows itself in all of its singularity (GW.8.117/RB.26–27). Hermeneutic identity is not something to be construed like a meaning but something to be traced like a pattern or arrangement: it is a formal intelligibility. In *Truth and Method* Gadamer calls this event (perhaps less than felicitously) "transformation into structure [*die Verwandlung ins Gebilde*]" (WM.105/TM.110), a taking-shape in which the work materializes as the thing it is *in our experience of it*.[2] But what is it like to undergo this experience? And experience of what, exactly?

In Gadamer's theory the experience of art is not a contemplative experience but an experience of *play* in which we are caught up and carried away in the self-presentation of the work. In other words, in contrast to a Kantian account of aesthetic experience, which presup-

poses a model of perception or regard, this self-presentation of the work is not something we stand apart from as observers but something in which we participate—and this is true whether the work is a Renaissance portrait or an avant-garde provocation. Indeed, the virtue of the model of play is that it emancipates the work of art, not to say ourselves, from universal concepts and art-historical periods. Here participation does the work of principles, rules, and ultimate foundations. When Duchamp sets up a snow shovel in his studio, pronouncing it his latest composition, he lays down a challenge that we may not know how to take up. What is the "transformation into structure" that turns the mere snow shovel into the avant-garde work? The temptation is to imagine some alchemical process that transforms base matter into significant form, since something like this surely occurs (what Arthur Danto calls the "transfiguration of the commonplace").[3] Gadamer's counsel is to hold to the model of the game. If we do not know how to respond to Duchamp's challenge, how do we go about learning to do so? No differently from the way one learns to play any game. As we know from Wittgenstein, it is not enough to learn rules or to follow explanations; one has to enter into the game as one enters a new horizon. (Recall Cavell's response to serial music: one has "to naturalize oneself to a new form of life, a new world.")[4] And this practical principle applies to our relations with both ancients and moderns.

Hermeneutical Experience. Indeed, one is tempted to say, tautologically, that what the experience of art requires is, basically, *experience*. Aristotle remarked that *phronesis*—practical knowledge—knowing what a situation calls for in the way of right action, is not a virtue of the young but is the condition of "being experienced" that comes from living through things themselves, like friendship, falling in love, or being a father. *Phronesis* is practical reason, which means finding one's way and not remaining fixed in position. Here stories rather than concepts and rules are more apt to provide access to the conditions that make experience possible, because they give us, in a way rules and concepts never can, the ground-level dimension in which experience actually takes place. Recall what Gadamer says in *Truth and Method* about the negativity of hermeneutical experience (*Erfahrung*)—experience that does not confirm but rather overturns what we had thought, a reversal that explains why experience can never be codified as science:

> Experience stands in an ineluctable opposition to knowledge and to the kind of instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge. The truth of experience always implies orientation toward new experience. That is why a person who is called experienced has become so not only *through* experiences but is also open *to* new experiences. The consummation of his experience, the perfection that we call "being experienced," does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself. (WM.338 /TM.355)

It follows that, on Gadamer's theory, the hermeneutical experience of art, whether classical or modernist, would not result in connoisseurship or expertise—nor, for all of that, in either philosophy of art, or art criticism, or the self-understanding artistry (*techne*) of the maker—but simply in a capacity for experiencing art that is free from the dogmatism that attaches as a matter of course to the sophistication of certain knowledge. Indeed it is not too much to see an internal coherence between hermeneutical experience and modernism itself, given that any experience of the modernist work at all presupposes the kind of reversal of consciousness (*Umkehrung des Bewußtseins*) that characterizes the emancipatory character of hermeneutical experience. "Every experience worthy of the name," Gadamer says, "thwarts an expectation. . . . [It] implies a fundamental negativity that emerges between experience and insight"—where insight (*Einfall*) "is more than the knowledge of this or that situation. It involves an escape from something that had deceived us and held us captive" (WM.338/TM.356).

It is this notion of the negativity of hermeneutical experience that opens up Gadamer's aesthetics, which is still essentially an aesthetics of the beautiful, to modernism's aesthetics of the sublime. In "The Relevance of the Beautiful," Gadamer, the classicist, takes up, among other examples of modernist art, a cubist painting, and he says that our relation to the work is a relation of "playing along with it"—entering into the "autonomous time" of the work, which is to say its

movement of self-presentation. This means tracing its construction piece by piece, playing along with the dissonance of its elements, experiencing its unity, even if this unity can no longer be understood in terms of an aesthetics of harmony (GW.8:118/RB.27–28). But for this to happen—and here Gadamer is close to Arthur Danto's position—the classicist must have already made himself at home in the culture of the avant-garde—must already have made this culture his own.[5] This seems a crucial point—understanding presupposes appropriation. To enter into the autonomous time of the work also means entering into the movement of the artworld in which the cubist work emerges as a work of art according to its own theory of what counts as art. Constructing the hermeneutic identity of the cubist work is not just an aesthetic or, let us say, "constructivist" process. One does not follow the design of construction in Duchamp's shovel as if it were a sculpture. The fact is there is no knowing beforehand, as if by an appeal to criteria, what makes Duchamp's thing a work. Vexation is perhaps part of the experience of the work. But how can there be any experience at all? Why not just blank indifference? Recall again the motto of art history: anything is possible even if not at every moment. For Gadamer, constructing the hermeneutic identity of the work would mean entering into the complex moment of its possibility in which the work itself gives the definition of art in defiance of prevailing markets or the history of taste. And this means, at the very least, opening oneself to new possibilities of experience and new concepts of art. Doubtless it is the task of aesthetic norms to define possibilities of experience. But aesthetic norms are never simply given. They evolve within the event or history of art itself in the way that, in everyday life, ethical norms [*Sittlichkeit*] evolve within the give-and-take of deliberation under the exigency of things needing to be decided. Norms are in any case *not* presiding universals; they emerge in the hermeneutic identity of the singular, irreplaceable work itself. It is in this respect that the experience of art should be thought of as a work of *phronesis*, a judgment based not on universals but on our understanding and responsiveness to the complex historical situation in which the work comes into appearance—a situation in which our schemes and categories almost certainly have to change if anything is to occur at all. Being historical in this event means being able to change—and isn't this what modernism teaches? As Gadamer says, "The work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it"

(WM.98/TM.102). The crucial point to mark is that this is not just a change in one's private outlook; it is a change in one's world.

Appropriation. Appropriation means: the original can only come into being *when I make it my own*. This means encountering the thing as a kind of epiphany—but also conceivably as a *crisis*—within my own historical and cultural environment. The fact that appropriation conditions the event of art and makes it possible is the reason why, to borrow Jean-Luc Nancy's expression, "art can never be addressed from the [transcendental] horizon of a *kosmos* or a *polis*" but only from below at the level of the singular and irreducible.[6] Appropriation is also why art can never be for us, as for Hegel, "a thing of the past" (*ein Vergangenes*). The work that is merely over and done with is just lost until someone recovers it in experience. The transcendence of art is always here and now, but this transcendence is our responsibility. This is what Gadamer means when he says, "The work of art cannot simply be isolated from the 'contingency' of the chance conditions in which it appears, and where this kind of isolation occurs, the result is an abstraction that reduces the actual being of the work. It itself belongs to the world to which it presents itself. A drama really exists only when it is played, and ultimately music must resound" (WM.111/TM.116). Appropriation lifts the work out of its afterlife so that even in a museum it is no longer a museum-piece (WM.115/TM.120).[7] In this respect it makes sense to say that we are responsible for the life of the work.

The difficulty lies in being able to articulate clearly what this means. Appropriation does not mean taking possession of the thing as if at an auction. Paul Ricoeur thinks of appropriation as a task in which I take up the work as a projection of my ownmost possibilities.[8] The work breaks open a new world for me to inhabit. But precisely for this reason it calls into question my world as it is given. Thus for Adorno the work is always essentially critical of the world in which it makes its appearance. Gadamer would say that the experience of the modernist work is hermeneutical rather than strictly aesthetic because of the way the work changes the horizon of the present and requires us to engage in exploration of new territory. This in fact is how the history of art moves, not toward an end but toward an indeterminate or always receding horizon. Duchamp's Readymades are simply a lucid and radical instance of this movement, which exposes us to the insufficiency of our reasons (or as Gadamer would say, to our finitude). In terms of aesthetics what

we experience is the fact that we may no longer know what art is.[9] For Gadamer, this is not a privative condition; it is freedom from dogmatism.

As if the experience of art disengaged us from our aesthetic concepts—in fact this is a main thesis of "The Relevance of the Beautiful." Modernism, Gadamer says, interrupts the history of art by "making all previous art appear as something belonging to the past in a different and more radical sense [than Hegel's]" (GW.8:97/RB.6). Gadamer says that we cannot avoid "the fact that when we visit a museum and enter the rooms devoted to the most recent artistic developments, we really do leave something behind us" (GW.8:100/RB.8–9). "A new social force [*gesellschaftliches Agens*] is at work in the claim of the modern artist" (GW.8:101/RB.10). Modernism entails the thesis of historical difference and epistemological break. Yet it is precisely this thesis that defines the historical and cultural environment to which we belong. It is an event in *our* history, it confronts *us*, and the confrontation conditions and shapes our self-understanding in the nature of the case. This is the whole idea of *Wirkungsgeschichte* as an exigency of self-understanding.[10] There is no question of understanding ourselves and our world unless we come to terms with this event. So the idea is to renew the history of art by means of acknowledgment and appropriation. Gadamer puts this by saying that "historical consciousness and the new self-conscious reflection arising from it combine with a claim that we cannot renounce: namely, the fact that everything we see stands before us and addresses us directly as if it showed us ourselves" (GW.8:102/RB.11). Gadamer's idea would be that modernist or avant-garde art requires us to come to terms with the present world that we actually inhabit. (This indeed is what is entailed in Gadamer's term, *Aktualität*: not so much relevance as realization.) This is not an easy assignment, as one can see from Heidegger's "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes" ("The Origin of the Work of Art"), which characterizes the *work* of the work of art in explicitly modernist terms of "starting history all over again." Yet the work that Heidegger takes as his example is the Greek temple—a work whose time has passed and whose work no longer has any force in our world, since our temporality is no longer defined by the work of art but, or so Heidegger thinks, by technology. Certainly at the time of writing and revising "The Origin of the Work of Art" Heidegger thought that art history was a history of the decline of art (see his Nietzsche lecture on "Six Basic Developments in the History of Aesthetics").[11] Heidegger (following Hölderlin)

seems to have created for himself an imaginary world of the Greeks. But this is just where Gadamer thinks Heidegger was mistaken. Indeed, "The Relevance of the Beautiful" is clearly written against Heidegger's rejection of modernism. As Adorno thought, what defines our culture is not rationalization and technological control but the opaque modernist work, whose resistance to conceptualization and the rule of identity opens up an alternative social space within the rationalized world—not a space of aesthetic differentiation but an alternative mode of being (for example, an artworld set apart from the mainstream). It is just the possibility of such an alternative that motivates Gadamer's aesthetics, with its emphasis on the festive and performative experience of the work of art. In his essay on "Das Spiel der Kunst" ("The Play of Art") (1977) Gadamer writes: "Insistence on the opposition between life and art is tied to the experience of an alienated world" (GW.8:92/RB.30). But unlike Adorno, Gadamer does not set the modernist work against the world. On the contrary, appropriation and actualization mean working out a place for the work within the situation in which we find ourselves. If this means reshaping the world so as to overcome the opposition between art and life, or between then and now, or between the familiar and the strange, then we must count this task as just what the experience of art finally requires.

The Claim of Modernism. Here perhaps is the place to put the question: What is it to be addressed—to be put under a claim—by a modernist or avant-garde work of art? What form could this address take?

For Gadamer the claim of the modernist work has an ethical as well as aesthetic dimension, that is, a dimension of responsibility in which I take up the work as a task in relation to my time and place (and, indeed, to those around me). As I said earlier, the work is not simply a cultural product available for our consumption in the marketplace of the artworld and which we can pick up or not as we choose. Nor is it (*pace* Danto) simply a philosophical problem of aesthetics that one can work out through conceptualization and theory. Gadamer's idea is that the claim of the artwork is deeper than any claim upon our taste or aesthetic interest, deeper than our profession of values or philosophical outlook. Gadamer's way of formulating this deeper claim is to understand the work as addressing us as a Thou, that is, as an Other whose approach to us is transcendent, that is, outside our conceptual scheme and irreducible to the forms and

expectations in which things make sense to us. The work addresses *me* not as a logical subject who responds to the work through the mediation of ready-made concepts; it addresses *me* as a "who," that is, someone situated here and now—someone not interchangeable with others—whose task is to bring the work into being in this here and now by making it my own. Making the work mine is not a project in which I develop principles that transform my relation to the work into a judgment of universal validity. On the contrary, in this event my relation to the work is one of proximity rather than one of theory. There is no engaging the work at a distance or at the level of what is universal and necessary. In order to experience the work at all I must take responsibility for it, taking it upon myself and staking myself on its claim. In this event the work can be said to expose me to my world and to others in it.

Recall Stanley Cavell's idea (in "Music Discomposed") that the possibility of fraudulence is internal to the experience of the modernist work. Cavell writes: "In emphasizing the experiences of fraudulence and trust as essential to the experience of art, I am in effect claiming that the answer to the question, 'What is art?' will in part be an answer which explains why it is we treat certain objects, or how we *can* treat certain objects, in ways normally reserved for treating persons" (MW.189). Of course, the work is not a person or any sort of subjective expression. The issue here is rather *how we are with the work* (one could call it a relation of being-with [*mitsein*]): we can in any case no longer address it as an object in a relation of disinterestedness or aesthetic judgment. Cavell's thought is, remarkably, that we put ourselves up as hostages to the work, as if our relation to the work were one of accepting it, taking it upon ourselves, without being able (try as we might) to justify our action on the basis of concepts or criteria. As if my relation to the work now had to take the form of responsibility—what Cavell likes to call, "taking responsibility for one's experience":

> This seems to be to suggest why one is anxious to communicate the experience of such objects. It is not merely that I want to tell you how it is with me, how I feel, in order to find sympathy or to be left alone, or for any other of the reasons for which one reveals one's feelings. It's rather that I want to tell you something I've seen, or heard, or realized, or come to understand, for the reasons for which *such* things are communicated (because it is news, about a world we share, or could). Only I find that I

> can't tell you; and that makes it all the more urgent to tell you. I want to tell you because the knowledge, unshared, is a burden—not, perhaps, the way having a secret can be a burden, or being misunderstood; a little more like the way, perhaps, not being believed is a burden, or not being trusted. It matters that others know what I see, in a way it does not matter whether they know my tastes. It matters, there is a burden, because unless I can tell what I know, there is a suggestion (and to myself as well) that I do *not* know. But I *do*—what I see is *that* (pointing to the object). But for that to communicate, you have to see it too. Describing one's experience of art is itself a form of art; the burden of describing it is like the burden of producing it. (MW.192–93)

One speaks not from above but from below on the basis of intimacy and as if passing along something to be shared, and which, in the nature of the case, could be rejected. But in this event what would be refused would be an experience, not a judgment; or, by extension, it would be the refusal of life.

Paul Celan's Poetry: A Limit-Experience. A good example of what Cavell is getting at would be Gadamer's encounter with Paul Celan's *Atemkristal.*[12] Gadamer's *Wer bist Ich und wer bist Du? Ein Kommentar zu Paul Celans "Atemkristall"* (*Who am I and Who are You? A Commentary on Paul Celan's "Atemkristall"*) is a volume of close readings—what used to be called "immanent criticism"—that bear witness, Gadamer says, to his long acquaintance with these gnarly, recondite poems. In these readings, scholarly research, theoretical procedures, and appeals to authorial intention give way to what Gadamer calls "listening"—attentiveness to each word of the poem and a search for ways in which the words may be said to come together or interact as a unity despite their fragmentary arrangements. Gadamer thinks that this kind of immanent reading is necessary precisely because of the laconic, dissonant nature of Celan's poetry:

IN DEN FLÜSSEN nördlich der Zukunft	IN THE RIVERS north of the future
werf ich das Netz aus, das du	I cast the net, which you
zögernd beschwerst	hesitantly weight
mit von Steinem geschriebenen	with shadow stones
Schatten. (GWC.2:14)	wrote. (B.61)

Here the world of our experience—time and space, words and things, substance and shadow, I and you—has been broken down

and reassembled in heterogeneous, incongruous combinations. The baroque style comes to mind. But, as Gadamer says:

> [Celan's] is nothing like baroque poetry, whose statements are contained inside a uniform frame of references and occupy a common mythological, iconographic, and semantic foundation. Celan's word choices venture upon a network of linguistic connotations whose hidden syntax cannot be acquired from anywhere else but the poems themselves. This is what prescribes the path of interpretation; one is not transported by the text into a world of meaning familiar in its coherence. (GW.8:431/GC.131)

In other words, Celan's poems seem to be contextless—imagine the considerable white space that surrounds each poem expanding indefinitely so that the poem is literally without a horizon. The poems defeat (as Adorno saw) the traditional idea of the hermeneutical circle—the movement back and forth between part and whole, text and context, that brings out the intelligibility of the work. Meaning, after all, just means belonging to a context. Hence the temptation to assemble background information by interrogating the poet as to his intentions, as Peter Szondi did, or by providing the poems with a cultural history, as Otto Pöggeler did with his investigations into Jewish mysticism.[13] However, as Derrida says in his monograph on Celan, there is no privileged entry into a Celan poem, which is singular and irreducible (like a date). Derrida writes: "Folded or refolded in the simplicity of the singular, a certain repetition thus assures the minimal and 'internal' readability of the poem, even in the absence of a witness, of a signatory or of anyone who might have some knowledge concerning the historical reference of the poetic legacy." The key word here is "internal readability": "The poem speaks," Derrida says, echoing Gadamer, "even should none of its references be intelligible."[14] This includes the pronomial references—"I," "you," "we"—which, as Gadamer emphasizes, "are pronounced in an utterly direct, shadowy-uncertain and constantly changing way [*schatttenhaft-unbestimmt und in beständig wechselnder Weise*]" (GW.9:384/GC.69). And it includes the recurrences that form something like Celan's own distinctive lexicon, his own "poetic diction": snow, stones, sand, shadows, ashes, streams, sky, stars, trees, flowers, eyes, ears, hands, mouths, memory, breath, blood, wounds, names, words, syllables, letters, mirrors—and beetles:

ENGHOLZTAG unter	NARROWWOOD DAY under
netznervigem Himmelblatt. Durch	netnerved skyleaf. Through
großzellige Leerstunden klettert,	bigcelled idlehours clambers, in
im Regen,	rain,
der schwarzblaue, der	the blackblue, the
Gedankenkäfer.	thoughtbeetle.
Tierblütige Worte	Animal-bloodsoming words
drängen sich vor seine Fühler.	crowd before its feelers. (B.123)
(GW.2:46)	

In the absence of external contexts, one has only the words themselves—but what words! *Engholztag, Gedankenkäfer, Tierblütige Worte.* Celan's poetic diction is full of impossibilities. Gadamer says: "Fragments of meaning seem to be wedged together [*Sinnfragmente sind wie ineinandergekeilt*]" (GW.9:431/GC.131). The poem seems to have been materialized into a sound-text, that is, into an acoustical (rather than lyrical or musical) experience—what Maurice Blanchot would call "a non-dialectical experience" of speech whose meanings are juxtaposed in ways that elude our attempt to grasp them.[15] Such speech is not nonsense—not insignificant—but its meanings are too much for us, outside our control, as if setting limits to our mastery of language.

In an essay, "Philosophie und Poesie" ("Philosophy and Poetry") (1977), Gadamer poses the central question: "How can a whole be formed out of configurations of sound [*Klangfiguren*] and fragments of meaning?" (GW.8:236/RB.135). One has to start, he says, by recognizing "the inseparability of the linguistic work of art and its original manifestation as language [*Spracherscheinung*]" (GW.8:235/RB.134). Following Paul Valéry, whom he cites, Gadamer says that the poem is constituted ontologically by the materiality of its language. In ordinary speech, the word points beyond itself as in an exchange of word and thing; it is a form of mediation. In poetry, however, the word stands on its own: "The structuring of sound, rhyme, rhythm, intonation, assonance, and so on, furnishes the stabilizing factors that haul back and bring to a standstill the fleeting word that points beyond itself. The unity of the creation is constituted in this way" (GW.8:235/RB.134). Nevertheless, the language of the poem is still language: the materiality of the word does not deprive it of its semantic resonance. "This means that the other logico-grammatical forms of intelligible speech are also at work in the poem, even though they may recede into the background in favor of

the structural moments of creation that we have just listed" (GW.8:235/RB.134–35). So part of the play of the poem includes the interplay of sound and sense, materiality and meaning. This is so even in the hermetic poetry of literary modernism, where the temptation is to abandon any semantic interest in the poem. However, to abandon this interest would be a mistake, Gadamer says,

> for the unity of sense is retained wherever speech exists. But this is concentrated in a complex fashion. It almost seems as if we cannot perceive the 'things' named, since the order of the words can neither be accommodated to the unity of a train of thought nor let themselves be dissolved into a unified image. And yet it is precisely the force of the semantic field, the tension between the tonal and the significative forces of language as they encounter and change place with one another, that constitutes the whole. Words evoke images, which may well accumulate, intersect with one another, and cancel one another out, but which remain images nevertheless. There is not a single word in a poem that does not intend what it means. Yet at the same time, it is set back upon itself to prevent it slipping into prose and the rhetoric that accompanies it. This is the claim and legitimation of *poésie pure*. (GW.8:236/RB.135–36)

One recalls Gertrude Stein's rejection of Jabberwocky or mere nonsense: "She tried a bit inventing words but she soon gave that up. The English language was her medium and with the English language the task was to be achieved, the problem solved. The use of fabricated words offended her, it was an escape into imitative emotionalism."[16] Likewise nowhere does Gadamer concede that the modernist poem is meaningless. Poetry is made of the language that we speak; a completely unintelligible poem would not be made of words, and so would not be a poem. (Celan is reported to have said: "A language that no one *speaks* is anti-poetic.")[17] But Gadamer's concern here is with a form that preserves the materiality of language *as part of the whole*, not an excess to be eliminated, as in propositional form, but rather that which allows the poem to stand on its own as a work of art. As Gadamer says in "Dichten und Deuten" (1961) (translated, perhaps a bit too loosely, as "Composition and Interpretation"), "Compared with all other art forms, the poetic work possesses as language [*als sprachliches*] a specific, open indeterminacy [*eine spezifische, offene Unbestimmtheit*]. The unity of form [*Gestaltenheit*] that is so characteristic of the work of art, as it is of every other kind, is

sensuously present, and to that extent cannot be reduced to a mere intention of meaning" (GW.8:21/RB.70: translation slightly altered). This "open indeterminacy" is, so to speak, the hermeneutical field of play—"Every work leaves the person who responds to it a certain leeway [*einen Spielraum*], a space to be filled in by himself" (GW.8:117/RB.26). But, as we have seen, play is not the same as exegesis: it is how one experiences the formal intelligibility of the poem.

Still, this leaves open the question of how to read Celan's poetry. Gadamer's position is that there is no one way to read these poems. In any event, it is clearly the case that his own readings are speculative, improvisational, questioning, and characterized chiefly by the rejection of his own first thoughts and his refusal to have the final word—all of this circumscribed by his assertion that "I believe that I have more or less understood these poems"—which, he adds, "I find less likely than some of his later poems to sink into the indecipherable" (GW.9:428/GC.128). Here is the opening poem of *Atemkristall*:

DU DARFST mich getrost	YOU MAY confidently
mit Schnee bewirten:	regale me with snow:
sooft ich Schulter zu Schulter	as often as I strode through the summer
mit dem Maulbeerbaum schritt durch den Sommer,	shoulder to shoulder with the mulberry tree,
schrie sein jüngstes	its youngest leaf
Blatt. (GW.1:11)	shrieked. (B.55)

Gadamer begins by marking the fundamental contrast between winter and summer, snow and the flourishing mulberry tree—"Unlike other shrubbery, the mulberry tree produces fresh leaves not only in the spring, but throughout the entire summer" (GW.9:386/GC.71). But the contrast is puzzling, because Celan reverses the typical valences of winter and summer: here the one is welcoming, whereas the other seems dissonant. Gadamer addresses this puzzle by asking how far the poem's wordplay extends—is there a pun on *Maul*, "mouth," as if *Maulbeerbaum* were an echo of *Maul des Wortes*, "loudmouth"? In fact Gadamer rejects this reading as extravagant and unnecessary: the mulberry tree must be taken for what it is. Even so, the serenity of winter still seems preferable to the busyness of summer with its claims upon our senses, our labor, our responsibility—"shoulder to shoulder" suggests solidarity, but solidarity is a response to the need for concerted action (GW.9:387/GW.73). And then there is the

screaming of the mulberry tree's "youngest leaf," a figure Gadamer doesn't hesitate to identify with the claims of the newborn. So the offer of snow seems like an offer of relief—"the stillness is welcome," Gadamer says (GW.9:387/GC.73). In the end, the poem is (for Gadamer) about the "readiness for death" (GW.9:387/GC.73).

This is fair enough. To my ear the scream of the mulberry's leaf has more horror in it than Gadamer's reading allows. (Celan: "Have we not wanted to hear screams, our own screams louder than ever, more piercing?")[18] Gadamer said that he undertook his commentaries on "Atemkristall" because of his disappointment with the critical and scholarly work on Celan that was available to him in 1973. It seemed to him that the possibility of meaning in these poems had been written off prematurely (GW.9:427–28/GC.127–28). And so his commentaries aim at elucidation, occasionally at the expense of the strangeness of Celan's verse. In any case, Gadamer's position is that, when it comes to poetry—particularly Celan's—no one can do your reading for you. The rejection of any scholarly apparatus, critical method, or theoretical superstructure as a way of coping with these poems—the effort to address the poems at the level of individual experience—is an argument for a hermeneutics of proximity in which the reader of the poem is as irreplaceable as the poem itself—and, who knows?, perhaps this is the moral of the indeterminacy of the "I" and "You" in Celan's poetry. "There is," Gadamer says in his epilogue to the revised edition of *Wer bist Du?* "no hermeneutic method." "Hermeneutics," he says, "means not so much a procedure as the attitude of the person who wants to understand someone else, or who wants to understand a linguistic expression as a reader or listener. But this always means: understanding *this* person, *this* text" (GW.9:447/GC.161). There is no understanding at a distance.

Yet, as Gadamer says, Celan's poems are, like *poésie pure,* a "limit-case" (*Extremfall*) for understanding (GW.8:236/RB.136). Indeed, they constitute what Blanchot would call a "limit-experience" in the sense that they call into question the one who tries to make sense of them.[19] The poet Charles Bernstein has said that in Celan's poems "things are never what they appear to be. The poems avert representation: *they are anti-representational*. Anti-representational poetry is marked by its struggle with representation, its questioning of reality, its refusal to be satisfied with description, its nausea in the face of the given, and its evisceration of the settled order of things."[20] This is particularly so in those poems in which the given is dismembered and recombined into unrecognizable forms:

WEISSGRAU aus- geschachteten steilen Gefühls. Landeinwärts, hierher- verwehter Strandhafer bläst Sandmuster über den Rauch von Brunnengesängen.	WHITEGRAY of shafted, steep feeling. Landinwards, hither drifted sea-oats blow sand patterns over the smoke of wellchants.
Ein Ohr, abgetrennt, lauscht.	An ear, severed, listens.
Ein Aug, in Streifen geschnitten, wird all dem gerecht. (GW.2:19)	An eye, cut in strips, does justice to all this. (B.71)

"The vulgar images [*Kraßheit der Bilder*] of the cut-off ear and the eye cut into strips," Gadamer says, "give this poem its unique character. One must and should feel a kind of revulsion at these vulgarities, which challenge the reader to subdue them by understanding" (GW.9:406/GC.97). So the "struggle with representation" is passed along to the reader. What impresses Gadamer is that eye and ear are still alive, even attentive, to what little remains of a living world, bearing witness perhaps to something increasingly grotesque and unpresentable.

ABENDS, in Hamburg, an unendlicher Schuhriemen—an ihm kauen die Geister— bindet zwei blutige Zehen zusammen zum Wegschwur.(GW.2:68)	EVENING, in Hamburg, an endless shoestring—at which the ghosts gnaw— binds two bloody toes together For the road's oath. (B.169)

One is reminded of the distinction between the body and flesh: the body is Greek and is a figure of mastery, strength, and achievement, whereas flesh is Jewish and is a figure of weakness, disfigurement, exposure, and suffering. Achilles is the perfection of the Greek body, except for his heel, which is made of flesh. Celan's poetry is a poetry of flesh, even on occasion ludicrously so:

IN DER EWIGEN TEUFE: die Ziegel- münder rasen.	IN THE ETERNAL DEPTH: the brick- mouths rave.
Du brennst ein Gebet ab vor jedem.	You burn off a prayer before each.

Buchstabentreu, auf dem Notsteg,	Letterfaithful, on the emergency trail,
stehen Hinauf und Hinunter,	stand Up and Down,
Den Mischkrug voll blasigen	the mixing bowl full of bubbly
Hirns. (GW.3:118)	brain. (T.43)

The Greek body is the centerpiece of classical aesthetics, the incarnation of the beautiful; the flesh in Celan's poetry articulates an aesthetics of the sublime—as does Greek tragedy, as when the heroic body of Agamemnon crosses Clytemnestra's threshold for the last time. The action of tragedy is a metamorphosis of body into flesh: think of the dismemberment of Pentheus in the *Bacchae*.

Gadamer's Sublime. The sublime is not really a concept in Gadamer's aesthetics, but he does think that the task of art theory is to reconceptualize the beautiful so as to develop an aesthetics for artworks that are no longer beautiful in any traditional sense. In "Anschauung und Anschaulichkeit" ("Intuition and Vividness"), Gadamer says that "art theory must address art both before it understands itself as 'art' and equally after it ceases to understand itself as such. What is it that allows pictures, statues, buildings, songs, texts, or dances to appear beautiful, and, if 'no longer beautiful,' as art nonetheless? 'Beauty' does not mean the fulfillment of a specific ideal of the beautiful, whether classical or baroque. Rather, beauty defines art as art: namely, as something that stands out from everything that is purposively established and utilized. Indeed, beauty is nothing but an invitation to intuition. And that is what we call a 'work'" (GW.8:193/RB.161). That which makes a work "stand out" as such is its "vividness"—a feature that belongs not only to representational art but equally to abstract forms and to works of language: "The vividness that we praise in a narrative text . . . is not that of an image that could be reproduced in words. It is much closer to the restless flux of images that accompanies our understanding of the text, but that does not finally become a stable intuition, as some kind of result. It is this capacity of the 'art' of language to arouse intuitions in the imagination that establishes the linguistic work of art in its own right and makes of it a 'work'—like a kind of self-giving intuition—so that such discourse is capable of canceling or forgetting any reference to reality that discourse normally has" (GW.8:194/RB.163). So the work is no longer entirely transparent, even if it is a work of narrative, because it is also and equally a work whose "art" of language is no longer a function in behalf of something else—for example, "reference to real-

ity." The vividness of the work allows, as in the case of poetry, a free play of imagination "that points beyond the realm of the concept, and hence beyond the realm of the understanding" (GW.8:197/RB.166)—"beyond anything that we are given in experience" (GW.8:198/RB.166). To which Gadamer adds: "Kant's phrase, 'the beautiful representation of a thing' [*Critique of Judgment*, §48] is . . . too narrow to express this" (GW.8:198/RB.166). What is necessary is to "incorporate the aesthetic of the sublime [*der Ästhetik des Erhabenen*] into the theory of art, in a way Kant did not fully accomplish himself" (GW.8:199/RB.167). Like the sublime of nature, the modernist artwork "is the occasion for the elevation of the mind to its supersensible vocation [*übersinnlichen Bestimmung*]" (GW.8:199/RB.168).

Gadamer's sublime can be elucidated by comparison (or, more exactly, contrast) with what the theologian, Jean-Luc Marion, has called "the saturated phenomenon," where (as in Kant's third critique) there is such an excess of intuition over any concept that no language can ever comprehend it and make it intelligible:

> Kant formulates this excess with a rare term: the aesthetic idea remains an "inexposable [*inexponible*] representation of the imagination." We can understand this in the following way: because it gives "much," the aesthetic idea gives more than any concept can expose; to "expose" here amounts to arranging (ordering) the intuitive given according to rules; the impossibility of this conceptual arrangement issues from the fact that the intuitive over-abundance is no longer exposed within rules, whatever they may be, but overwhelms them; intuition is no longer exposed within the concept, but saturates it and renders it overexposed—invisible, not by lack of light, but by excess of light.[21]

A saturated phenomenon is anarchic: it is one that can never be constituted as an object of consciousness; it is in excess of intentionality. Marion offers a number of examples of this: (1) a historical event, which can never be comprehended all at once or once and for all but is open to continuous interpretation; (2) the painting (in Marion's parlance, the "idol") that can never be exhausted by my looking at it; (3) our own bodies, or more exactly, our flesh, "which is so rich and so overwhelming that we need new words—literature and poetry—to make sense of it"; (4) the face of the other (the "icon"), which, as in Levinas's ethical theory, is not just outside of but depletes my powers of cognition; (5) and, finally, God, whom, as we shall see in chapter 6, below, treating Lyotard, reveals himself to us

across a distance that we can never traverse.[22] In "L'idole ou l'éclat du tableau" ("The Idol or the Radiance of the Painting"), Marion develops in detail the example of the painting that is paradoxically invisible because of its inexhaustible visibility: "The painting cannot be seen in a single instance; it must be reseen in order to appear, because it appears according to the phenomenality of the saturated phenomenon. The museum, decried a little thoughtlessly as a tomb of art's dead, offers perhaps also a social structure appropriate to this necessary return to the image, this free looking back on vision that the painting silently demands."[23]

What is interesting, however, is that Marion seems to be more comfortable with paintings that have a good deal to look at—lines, colors, arrangements, but most of all objects. One could argue that the problem of modernism is not that it saturates intuition, but that it starves it, which is what seems to happen in much of modernist art, particularly with recent monochromatic and minimalist works—Ad Reinhardt's "Black Paintings," Donald Judd's "Specific Objects," Fluxus "events," and Conceptual Art come readily to mind.[24] The problem here is that, as Marion himself admits, there is not enough to see.[25] However, Paul Celan's poems, particularly the austere later works, are paradoxical in this respect, because they are brief fragments whose neologisms nevertheless overarticulate language in ways that defeat the syntactical arrangements that try to contain them. Here is a poem from *Fadensonnen* (1968):

DIE HERZSCHRIFTGEKRÜMELTE Sichtinsel mittnachts, bei kleinem Zündschlüsselschimmer.	THE HEARTSCRIPTCRUMBLED vision-isle at midnight, in feeble ignition key glimmer.
Es sind zuviel zielwütige Kräfte auch in dieser scheinbar durchsternen Hochluft. Die ersehnte Freimeile prallt auf uns auf.(GW.2:174)	There are too many goalcrazed powers even in this seemingly starstudded highair. The longed for freemile crashes into us. (T.159)[26]

Of course, it isn't clear whether for Marion a poem of any sort could count as a "saturated phenomenon," but the complexity of Celan's poetic diction overwhelms any effort to reduce his poem to an intentional object. Marion suggests repeated visits to a museum piece because it "cannot be seen in a single instance." This would be

consistent with Gadamer's idea that a poem, like any work of art, should be approached as an event rather than as an object, where the event is conceptualized on the model of the festival, whose essence is "always to be something different," however familiar it becomes to us over time. Just as the poem requires multiple translations, so the poem is always new in one's (anyone's) repeated readings of it. So, far from being a hermetic work, it is a distinctive example of what, in modernist poetics, is called an "open poem"—a poem that, in defiance of Hegel's famous thesis, opens onto the future instead of receding into the closure of the past.

Let me close by citing a slightly more radical and subversive form of this notion of a poem made new by each new reading of it. This from an essay by Lyn Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure":

> For the sake of clarity, I will offer a tentative characterization of the terms *open* and *closed*. We can say that the "closed text" is one in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it. Each element confirms that reading and delivers the text from any lurking ambiguity. In the "open text," meanwhile, all the elements of the work are maximally excited; here it is because ideas and things exceed (without deserting) the argument that they have taken into the work. . . .
>
> The "open text," by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive. The writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive. The "open text" often emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent composition by readers, and thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material and turn it into a product; that is, it resists reduction and commodification.[27]

The "closed text" is, whatever else it is, transparent: its intelligibility is self-evident. The "open text" by contrast is underdetermined but paradoxically is therefore capable of generating an endless surplus of meanings. I think this applies very well to Celan's poetry, and to the modernist work in general—and perhaps, as Gadamer would argue, to the artwork as such, whether ancient or modern. The work of art, as Gadamer says, not only invites but requires "participation." But

Lyn Hejinian pushes this idea from Gadamer's waters into Adorno's: "All artworks," says Adorno, "even the affirmative, are a priori polemical. The idea of a conservative artwork is inherently absurd. By emphatically separating themselves from the empirical world, their other, they bear witness that that world itself should be other than it is; they are the unconscious schemata of that world's transformation" (AT.264/AeT.177). Aesthetic anarchism, if I read Hejinian correctly, is implicated in a wider anarchism that aims at the undoing of what Adorno calls the "administered" world: "The more total society becomes, the more completely it contracts to a unanimous system, and all the more do artworks in which this experience is sedimented become the other of this society" (AT.53/AeT.31).

Gadamer might not disagree with this. But his aesthetic theory, as I think I have shown, has an ethical rather than political resonance. One could call it an "aesthetics of responsibility," in which the work calls upon me to change; but, as Gadamer makes clear, this is not merely a subjective change but also a change in the way one inhabits one's world. And in this event there are many paths to follow.