

HEIDEGGER, GADAMER, AND THE WORK OF ART

William H. Smith

The purpose of this paper is to think through some of the salient difficulties posed by Heidegger and Gadamer in their treatment of the work of art in "The Origin of the Work of Art" and *Truth and Method* respectively. Both thinkers hold that the work of art "works" for us, yet their understanding of the "time" of this work differs. Gadamer believes that the work of art is always accessible to the members of a tradition, that it can be mediated through a fusion of worlds that brings the past into a unity of understanding with the present. Heidegger, in contrast, believes in the possibility of total world-closure, that art from a different age can cease to speak to us because that world has closed. Both understand art as disclosure of truth, of understanding truth; however, is this truth always ongoing, always unfolding and becoming in the tradition, or does it have a birth and a death? My thesis is that, contrary to first impressions, Heidegger and Gadamer are not in total opposition with regard to the work of art. Instead, a better interpretative standpoint is to see Gadamer drawing out the hermeneutical element that is already present in Heidegger's thought. Rather than seek an absolute resolution, the goal of the paper is to pose a framework for interpretation, which in this case entails a reversal of initial appearances.

1. The Problem of World-Closure

Heidegger believes that worlds can be lost. For him, the artworks that stand in collections, that hang in museums, that are issued in critical and scholarly editions are no longer works of art, but objects of the art industry. They are works "made available for public and private appreciation" but the works have ceased to work for us (*OWA* 39). Their truth has not been preserved, but rather forgotten. We no longer let these works call into question our relation to the world and earth. Heidegger says they hang on the wall like a rifle or hat. He writes: "However high their quality and power of impression, however good their state of preservation, however certain their interpretation, placing them in a collection has withdrawn them from their own world" (*OWA* 39). Even if we return them to their original sites, Heidegger believes "the world of the work that stands there has perished" (*OWA* 40). The world the work once opened for a historical people is closed, past, mere history, never to function for us in the present as it did for that people. He believes this transformation is permanent:

World-withdrawal and world-decay can never be undone. The works are no longer the same as they once were. It is they themselves to be sure, that we encounter there, but they themselves are gone by. As bygone works they stand over against us in the realm of tradition and conservation. Henceforth they remain merely such objects. Their standing before us is still indeed a consequence of, but no longer the

same as, their former self-subsistence. This self-subsistence has fled from them. (*OWA* 40)

When the work ceases to be self-subsistent, when it is no longer preserved, the world of the work has passed, and it is never to be recovered. World-closings mark the end of eras.

It seems that Heidegger stands in direct conflict to Gadamer. Gadamer writes, "Art is never simply past but is able to overcome temporal distance by virtue of its own meaningful presence" (*TM* 165). Although a work of art has a temporal location, for Gadamer, the work can still speak to us. Understanding art requires historical mediation: the structure of play in art always puts up for decision the meaning of the work. The interpretation of the spectator brings the work into the present. In being mediated from its historical time, the work is given full significance once again, a repetition of the original work. What is recovered is not the original founding of the work, but a new interpretation of the old work. Despite temporality, the work can be understood. Gadamer writes:

The fact that works stretch out of a past into the present as enduring monuments still does not mean that their being is an object of aesthetic or historical consciousness. As long as they still fulfill their function, they are contemporaneous with every age. Even if their place is only in museums as works of art, they are not entirely alienated from themselves. Not only does a work of art never completely lose the trace of its original function which enables an expert to reconstruct it, but the work of art that has its place next to others in a gallery is still its own origin. (*TM* 120)

Even though works of art can be absorbed into historical consciousness, the work of art remains open for Gadamer. Historical or aesthetic consciousness alienates the sense of a work "being its own origin" replacing it with concerns about the work's "original function": what was it used for, what event was it made in celebration of, whose power did it allegorize, and so forth. However, that the work is an origin, an event in which truth happens, is not lost forever. The average spectator, happening upon the work in a museum, can mediate it, i.e., interpret the work, and integrate it with the present, i.e., let the meaning of the work open up a way to see the meaning of things in the present. Thus, the temporal dimension of art can be overcome.

Heidegger and Gadamer's apparent conflict over the problem of world closure is not absolute. On the contrary, world-closure seems to be an aspect of Gadamer's hermeneutical perspective. For Gadamer, aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics: the understanding of art must be seen as an event in which the meaning of things occurs within a tradition of meanings. Art is "no mere object of historical consciousness," nor can aesthetic consciousness bring it full into its truth: "every work of art must be understood like any other text that requires understanding, and this kind of understanding has to be acquired" (*TM* 164). The kind of understanding in question is hermeneutical consciousness. The task of hermeneutics is to restore the meaning of the work of art to the present, according the standards of correctness of this age, to once again let the work of art reveal the truth of what is.

For Gadamer, Schleiermacher's notion of hermeneutics, where the project of interpretation is to "rediscover the nodal point of the artist's mind that renders the work fully intelligible" (*TM* 166) is precisely what hermeneutics should not do. He says:

If we acknowledge that the work of art is not a timeless object of aesthetic experience but belongs to a "world" that alone determines its full significance, it would seem to follow that the true significance of the work of art can be understood only in terms of its origin and genesis with that "world." (*TM* 166)

This seems to be a paraphrase of Heidegger's position as well. The work of art is not timeless, but tied to an opening set up by a world. When the truth of that world is no longer preserved, the world closes forever. The full significance of the truth of the work can only be understood in terms of its primal founding, in its origin and preservation, all of which passes away when it is made an object of the art world.

The task of hermeneutics, for Gadamer, cannot be to reconstruct the original meaning of the art. "Ultimately," he says, "this view of hermeneutics is as nonsensical as all restitution and restoration of past life. Reconstructing the original circumstances, like all restoration, is a futile undertaking in view of the historicity of our being" (*TM* 167). This kind of work does not resuscitate the original, only its cultural derivative. These projects become tourist attractions; they hand down only dead meaning. "The search for occasional circumstances that would fill out the significance of works of art cannot succeed in reconstructing them. They remain fruit torn from the tree. Putting them back in their historical context does not give us a living relationship with them but rather a merely ideative representation" (*TM* 168). On the contrary, hermeneutics should be about integration. Gadamer notes Hegel believed that the work of art was greater than the reality of a particular people; for Hegel, art was the interiorizing recollection of the still externalized spirit manifest in them. The truth of art was therefore meant to be collected in a greater self-consciousness, in a heightened self-awareness that went beyond the limitations of the people of the past. Gadamer affirms Hegel's insight. For Gadamer, "the essential nature of the historical spirit consists not in the restoration of the past but in the *thoughtful mediation with contemporary life*" (*TM* 169). The task of hermeneutics is to integrate the truth of the work of art with one's self-understanding and understanding of the world.

Although Heidegger argues that the world of the work can close, Gadamer seems to hold the same position. For example, following Heidegger, it would be impossible for us to know the work of the Greek tragedy in its full significance as the Greeks themselves knew it. But this is precisely the point of hermeneutics for Gadamer. He deters us from seeking some "original" meaning in reconstructive hermeneutics because that work cannot work for us like it worked in its "original" sense for its historical people. That world is closed, as Heidegger saw. Gadamer recognized this world-closure, and for him, to seek out this "original" meaning—to mete out *exactly* the original experience of the art, down to the most infinitesimal detail—would be to make art a matter of historical consciousness, historical reenactment. As he says, this hands down only dead meanings. Instead, Gadamer urges, the task now is to integrate the meaning of that work with the present, to

decide again on the meaning-structure that the work of art presents to us. Gadamer essentially domesticates Heidegger's absolute world-closure within the project of hermeneutics. In fact, if we look closely, it seems Heidegger does not deny us the possibility of understanding the work of the past, that is, the possibility of reinterpreting it; what he denies us is the possibility of experiencing its living meaning, i.e., living its meaning as those who founded the work lived it. This idea needs further explication.

II. The Problem of Recovering the Meaning of the Work of Art

Clearly, for Gadamer, the phenomenon of art has a kind of historical continuity that is shaped by a tradition of interpretation: it is meant to be made contemporaneous over and over again, i.e., to be reinterpreted. The work of art never really ceases to work for us; it is continually open, it recurs, it is meant to be performed again. The work of art has the same temporal structure as *the festival*. The festival returns each year and is never the same, yet it is always the same festival. Like the festival, the being of the work of art lays claim to the spectator, but is not exhausted in a single moment: it is something lasting, something permanent. It is meant to return and to demand the attention of the spectator again. In order for the festival to be present the spectator must celebrate it; it is the spectator that brings the festival and the work of art into the present. Thus, the work of art is made contemporaneous by the spectator: it speaks to us.

Heidegger, however, seems to privilege the idea of art as origin. He says that it is "by nature an origin," a setting-into-work, the becoming and happening of truth (OWA 75). He writes:

Art lets truth originate. Art, founding preserving, is the spring that leaps to the truth of what is, in the work. To originate something in to being from out of the source of its nature in a founding leap— this is what the word origin (German *Ursprung*, literally, primal leap) means. (OWA 75)

But where does this truth come from? What makes art-as-origin, art-as-primal leap possible? Heidegger's answer: through language. Heidegger says that *all art is essentially poetry*. By poetry, Heidegger means not something whimsical but an "illuminative projection" (OWA 70). Poetry is the opening through which the truth emerges, the light in which the self-closing nature of the earth is revealed in the world. Through naming, language creates this opening for the first time; it brings "beings to work and to appearance" (OWA 71). This naming that takes place in language brings "what is" out of concealment and into the opening of unconcealment (truth). It is a projective announcement. All poetry is this kind of projective saying for Heidegger: "the saying of world an earth, the saying of the arena of their conflict and thus of the place of all nearness and remoteness of gods. Poetry is the saying of the unconcealedness of what is" (OWA 71).

It is poetic saying that for Heidegger is the origin of truth in the work of art. "Art, as the setting-into-work of truth, is poetry" (OWA 72). The language of poetry is a projection into being, a founding, a primal leap, a new origin. It is through this founding that art attains a historical grounding.

Whenever art happens—that is, whenever there is a beginning—a thrust enters history, history either begins or starts over again. History means here not a sequence in time of events of whatever sort, however important. History is the transporting of a people into its appointed task as entrance into that people's endowment. (*OWA* 74)

Art as founding, therefore, is essentially historical—it has a beginning in time, with respect to a particular people. The people of this time are meant to preserve this founding in order to keep the world the work discloses open. “In the work, truth is thrown toward the coming preservers, that is, toward a historical group of men” (*OWA* 74). The genuine poetic projection, Heidegger believes, opens up and discloses the world and the earth to this historical people; it provides them with their truth, their measure, their means of setting up a holy precinct. What is at stake in the work is nothing other than the battle between old gods and the new. The linguistic artwork of tragedy, for Heidegger, does not present the speech of the people, that is, what people think about their gods. Rather tragedy forces people to think about what they believe, it transforms the speech of the people such that “every living word fights the battle and puts up for decision what is holy what unholy, what great and what small, what brave and what cowardly, what lofty and what flight, what master and what slave” (*OWA* 42). Every word spoken becomes a decision about what is holy and profane.

In the end, it seems Heidegger does not privilege *origin*, but rather *speaking*, i.e., poetic saying. Moreover, this speaking has a historical component: every origin is a thrust into history. It is here that Heidegger's notion of world-closure opens itself to hermeneutics. It seems that Heidegger's account of the historicity of art dovetails with Gadamer's notion of reinterpretation. Heidegger writes:

. . . art attains to its historical nature as foundation. This foundation happened in the West for the first time in Greece. What was in the future to be called Being was set into work, setting the standard. The realm of beings thus opened up was then transformed into a being in the sense of God's creation. This happened in the Middle Ages. This kind of being was again transformed at the beginning and in the course of the modern age. Beings became objects that could be controlled and seen through by calculation. At each time a new and essential world arose. At each time the openness of what is has to be established in beings themselves, by the fixing in place of truth in figure. At each time there happened unconcealedness of what is. (*OWA* 73)

For Heidegger, the original founding of the work of art occurs not once but several times, a kind of transformation of the primordial leap. In fact the work of art as founding recurs throughout history; the re-founding of the work, i.e., a new origin, marks each new age. Gadamer says something very similar: although the work of art is performed repeatedly, it is not the original meaning that is presented in the repetition, but instead a new origin of the same structure of the work. The work has a different meaning each time it is presented. Its nature is to be different each time it returns, even though its structure of play is the same. The history of the work, the biography of the artist, the actor and spectator involved in the play—although pertinent, do not have exclusive bearing on the emergence of the work in the present.

As spectators, "what unfolds before us is so much lifted out of the ongoing course of the ordinary world and so much enclosed in its own autonomous circle of meaning that no one is prompted to seek some other future or reality behind it" (*TM* 128). The repetition of the work is fully original; the decisions and interpretations that inhere in it are fully contemporaneous. Gadamer writes:

Thus contemporaneity is not a mode of givenness in consciousness, but a task for consciousness and an achievement that is demanded of it. It consists in holding on to the thing in such a way that it becomes "contemporaneous," which is to say, however, that all mediation is superseded in total presence. (*TM* 127)

The mediation of the spectator brings about a total presence of the work. It is original, an emergence of a new meaning, and yet also tied to a certain kind of tradition. Re-interpretation as primal founding is essential to hermeneutic consciousness for Gadamer. Heidegger's position on the historicity of the work of art seems to fit within this framework as well.

3. Conclusion

I have tried to show that Heidegger and Gadamer are not in total opposition with regard to the work art. Rather, I contend that Gadamer draws out the hermeneutical element that is already present in Heidegger's thought. My argument is that Gadamer essentially domesticates Heidegger's absolute position within the project of hermeneutics. Gadamer makes Heidegger's insights more conservative in that he brings them into line with an understanding of tradition. I tried to show that Heidegger's position in *The Origin of the Work of Art* was already open for hermeneutics. When we looked closely at Heidegger's notion of world-closure, it seems he eliminates the possibility of experiencing the living meaning of the work of art, not the possibility of reinterpreting its meaning. For Gadamer, this position is compatible with hermeneutics. Gadamer makes the same point when he discourages the search for some "original" meaning in reconstructive hermeneutics; the work cannot work for us like it worked in its "original" sense, for its historical people. With regard to the problem of recovering the meaning of art, I tried to show that both Heidegger and Gadamer emphasize *speaking*. For Heidegger, the original quality of the work of art was located in a poetic saying. For Gadamer, the mediation of the work into the present, like the mediation of the festival, is a kind of conversation, a play that occurs between the spectator and the work, which ends in a decision, i.e., an interpretation of the meaning of the work. Lastly, I tried to show that Heidegger's account of the historicity of art fits within Gadamer's notion of reinterpretation and hermeneutics.

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