

The Remembrance of Language: An Introduction to Gadamer's Poetics

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*My dear Degas, one does not make poetry with ideas,
but with words.*

—Mallarmé

*The continual pausing for breath is the mode most
proper to the process of contemplation.*

—Walter Benjamin

At first glance Gadamer's commentary on the "Atemkristall" of Paul Celan seems unprepossessing: a deeply personal but slender and mildly impressionistic response to a thin sheaf of very short poems. This is certainly what it is, and as such it lacks the sweep and dramatic gesture of *Schibboleth*, Jacques Derrida's text on Celan that has come to have such a strong influence on the reception of Celan, particularly in the United States. Nevertheless, for all of its simplicity, and possibly because of it, *Wer bin Ich und wer bist Du?* is the centerpiece of Gadamer's most important philosophical project since the publication of *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960). Put simply, the purpose of this project is to address the claims of aesthetic modernity. How are we to understand Marcel Duchamp's provocation when he exhibits a snow shovel in his studio and declares it to be his most recent composition? Why isn't this just nonsense? How is it that a movement like Cubism, for example, or Schoenberg's twelve-tone music, or the hermetic lyric inaugurated by Mallarmé's *poésie pure*, can exert a claim on us as powerful and authoritative as that of the classic or traditional work of art, or what Gadamer likes to call

“the eminent text”?¹ What is the nature of this claim, and how can one who is no longer a modernist—or who perhaps has never been modern, say a classical philologist—respond to it? What sort of response is called for?

I would like to engage this question in some detail. Part of what is at stake is certainly the famous “hermeneutical claim to universality.” In “Ästhetik und Hermeneutik” (1964) Gadamer says that “The hermeneutical perspective is so comprehensive . . . that it must even include the experience of beauty in nature and art” (GW8.1/PH96). It follows that it must include aesthetic modernity as well. But modernist art is a considerable challenge to hermeneutical universality because so much of it—Duchamp’s readymades, for example—is outside the “experience of beauty.” It is even outside art and, to all appearances, outside intelligibility. What makes Gadamer’s project interesting is that the issue here is not just the logical problem of making hermeneutics coherent with itself. He understands, as perhaps Heidegger (for example) did not, that the claims of modernity cannot be brushed aside with a superior gesture. He seems genuinely fascinated by Duchamp. But both the claims of twentieth-century art and our responsibility to it are in need of clarification, and this is the purpose of Gadamer’s project, part of which includes, of course, a reconceptualization of aesthetics (and of beauty) to include what cannot be comprehended within the limits of intelligibility.

The Corporeality of Language

One can make these matters conceptually more precise. Gadamer’s writings on poetry and aesthetics since 1960 are an attempt to come to philosophical terms with the radical thesis of modern poetry—what Gadamer thinks of as *lyric* modernity—namely the idea that a poem is made of words, not of images or meanings.² The classic defense of this thesis perhaps belongs to Paul Valéry, to whom Gadamer frequently refers and whose characterization of poetic language seems to some extent decisive for him. In an essay on “The Poet’s Rights Over Language” (1927), for example, Valéry writes:

Ordinary spoken language is a practical tool. It is constantly resolving immediate problems. Its task is fulfilled when each sentence has been completely abolished, annulled, and replaced by the meaning. Comprehension is its end. But on the other hand poetic usage is dominated by personal conditions, by a conscious, continuous, and sustained musical feeling.

Here language is no longer a transitive act, an expedient. On the contrary, it has its own value, which must remain intact in spite of the operations of the intellect on the given propositions. Poetic language must preserve itself, through itself, and remain the same, not to be altered by the act of intelligence that finds or gives it a meaning.³

A poem is made of language but is not a use of it, that is, it is not constituted by any of the things that language can be used to produce—concepts, propositions, intentional fulfillments, descriptions of the world, expressions of subjectivity, and so on. However one figures it, the language of poetry is irreducible or excessive with respect to its function. In poetry language is no longer (or no longer simply) a form of mediation. However possible it is to analyze a poem or a work of art according to semantic or representational categories—and, of course, we hardly know what else to do—one very quickly encounters a limit, as if the poem were withdrawing into its words. The poem, Gadamer says, is “language-bound [*sprachgebunden*],” in contrast to “intentional speech [which] points away from itself” (GW8.21/RB69). But what does this mean, exactly? Gadamer says that the whole effort of his thought has been “directed toward not forgetting the limit [*Grenze*] that is implicit in every hermeneutical experience of meaning” (GW2.334/DD25). What sort of limit—or “limit experience”—is this (as if it were just one)?⁴

In order to understand, not just Gadamer, but what Gadamer is getting at, we need to discriminate among several answers to this question. According to structuralist poetics, for example, poetry is defamiliarized, foregrounded, or self-referential language.⁵ This is not wrong, but it is not always carefully understood. Jürgen Habermas, for example, thinks of poetry as a foregrounding

of the “rhetorical elements” of language at the expense of the “normal,” problem-solving mechanisms of communicative action.⁶ Habermas wants to retain the Kant-like idea of the poem as an aesthetic object set apart from science, morality, and everyday life. The task of criticism and, at a higher level, of philosophy (conceived once more as “the guardian of rationality”) is to translate poetry back into the practical discourse of the lifeworld.⁷ But it is precisely the possibility of such a translation that the radical thesis of modern poetry calls into question. What is the meaning of poetry’s resistance to such translation? Is this resistance merely “aesthetic” in the sense in which Habermas understands this term—namely, the expression of the autonomy of the work of art with respect to the social, political, and ethical demands of everyday life? Is poetry simply a species of sealed-off linguistic formalism?

Structuralist poetics tends to flatten out the radical thesis just to the extent that it thinks of poetry as an aestheticization of language. But aestheticization of language is not how most poets think of it. In *Spring and All* (1923), to take an illustrious example, William Carlos Williams summed up the radical thesis as follows: “Of course it must be understood that writing deals with words and words only and that all discussions of it deal with single words and their associations in groups.”⁸ However, Williams (under the direct influence of Duchamp, but also perhaps that of Gertrude Stein) interpreted this thesis in an explicitly non-aesthetic way, one that has become foundational for some of the most important contemporary movements in North American and European poetry. Valéry, following Mallarmé, thinks of poetic language as separate from ordinary speech, whereas the Williams tradition thinks of poetry as internal to the discourse of everyday life, as if there were nothing unpoetic about the ordinary.⁹ The poet is simply one who listens to the language of his or her environment and responds to it—doesn’t try to reduce it or objectify it as so many surface structures or speech acts, so much *parole* or *Gerede*. In *Kora in Hell* (1920) Williams writes:

That which is heard from the lips of those to whom we are talking in our day’s affairs mingles with what we see in the streets and everywhere about us as it mingles

also with our imaginations. By this chemistry is fabricated a language of the day which shifts and reveals its meaning as clouds shift and turn in the sky and sometimes send down rain or snow or hail. This is the language to which few ears are tuned so that it is said by poets that few men are ever in their full senses since they have no way to use their imaginations. Thus to say that a man has no imagination is to say nearly that he is blind or deaf. But of old poets would translate this hidden language into a kind of replica of the speech of the world within certain distinctions of rhyme and meter to show that it was not really that speech. Nowadays the elements of that language are set down as heard and the imagination of the listener and of the poet are left free to mingle in the dance. (Imaginations, p. 59)

The “hidden” language that the poets bring out into the open is not a transcendental language of the gods; it is not anything occult, subterranean, or otherworldly (not Walter Benjamin’s “pure language—which no longer means or expresses anything but, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages”).¹⁰ It is only the quotidian speech of ordinary mortals, language in all its human facticity, the word in everyone’s mouth. Poetry—in particular, *modern* poetry—is not the speaking of an aesthetically differentiated language. Possibly one could say it is not a kind of speaking at all but a kind of listening or attunement to the linguisticity of human everydayness: “*language set down as heard.*” “A poem can be made of anything,” Williams says (*Imaginations*, p. 70)—even of newspaper clippings, as if a poem (like a work of art by Duchamp) could be found ready-to-hand. The poem is in this sense non-aesthetic; it doesn’t have to be “poetical” to be poetic.¹¹

This conception of poetry as a listening to the language of the everyday environment—to language as a *social fact*—is a basic principle of contemporary European and North American poetics. The American poet Ron Silliman puts it as bluntly as one can: “there is no useful distinction between language and poetry.”¹² Poetry is language—language which hasn’t been tuned out, repressed, forgotten, or processed by the semantic, propositional, or

representational operations of the spirit. As Silliman likes to say, poetry is unconsumed and unconsumable language.¹³ Gadamer has grasped this principle exactly: “what makes understanding possible is precisely the forgetfulness of language [*Sprachvergessenheit*], a forgetting of the formal elements in which the discourse or text is encased” (“Text und Interpretation,” GW2.342/DD32). Whence it follows that poetry is simply *the remembrance of language*. The truth of poetry consists in this remembrance.

Notice what this means. The radical thesis is that poetry is an event that takes place at the limits of intelligibility defined by the remembrance of language. It is *not* a thesis that poetry is unintelligible. In an essay on “Philosophy and Poetry” (1977), Gadamer asks about “the ontological constitution of poetic language” (GW8.235/RB134). As the limiting case of *poésie pure* shows, poetic language is not a form of mediation but 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.” In poetry “the word speaks as word” (GW8.49). The poetic word is self-standing [*Selbstständig*]: it withdraws from its function as a sign. It is constituted (not just formally but ontologically) by its materiality—or, as Gadamer prefers, its “corporeality [*Sprachlich-Leibhaftig*]” (WM153/TM160). Materiality or corporeality here need not be restricted to sonority; as Maurice Blanchot says of poetic language: “Everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of ink, the book.”¹⁴ In any event the point, as Gadamer says, is that poetic language is still language: the “logico-grammatical forms of intelligible speech” are not replaced by non-words (GW8.235/RB135). It is only that these forms no longer annihilate the corporeality of language in order to achieve the purity or transparency of the sign. Hence the appeal of Valéry’s idea that “the value of a poem resides in the indissolubility of sound and sense” (*The Art of Poetry*, p. 74). In poetry, language, as Gadamer says, stands on its own and does not give way to anything else: it is irreducible to its signification. “The consequent ambiguity and obscurity of the text may be the despair of the interpreter, but it is a structural element of this kind of poetry” (GW8.235/RB135).

But perhaps it were better to say simply that in poetry the uncanniness—the strangeness, the exteriority—of ordinary language brings us up short, *even in the moments of its plainness and unmistakable intelligibility and meaning*. It is not that poetry renders language ambiguous, obscure, or unintelligible in itself (as if turning it into gibberish or nonsense—Gadamer is particularly wary of reducing poetry to word-play or the rhetorical manipulation of words: Mallarmé is not Edward Lear). Rather it is that poetry alters our relation to language. Poetry is an event—Gadamer calls it a “speculative” event—in which language interrupts our attempts to reduce it conceptually and instrumentally; it takes itself out of our hands.¹⁵ The poet Michael Davidson gives us a very simple, straightforward, undramatic and unambiguous account of this basic poetic phenomenon (an event, as Davidson tells it, that makes the poet):

I have a kind of naive idea of what a fact is. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, it's a point of departure for further investigation. I think it began with my interest in lists. At one point the idea of a list was a sort of ultimate autistic construct, because it would create the illusion of a random series that would relate immediately to my life. I would be able to go through my day and check off items on the list. They were words after all, but the syntax of the list was my activity [i.e., my daily life]. In that sense, it was a hermeneutic of reading the list. And then I began to realize that I wanted to tell stories; I wanted to describe events. And the problem, of course, occurred in the first few words: as I began to describe the event I was faced with my own language staring me back in the face. I simply couldn't describe. I found myself involved in the forms of mediation that were constantly coming up in front of me.¹⁶

One can fruitfully compare this to Stanley Cavell's analysis of ordinary language, apropos of Edgar Poe's story, “The Imp of the Perverse,” a text strangely (if unobviously) overloaded with what Cavell calls “imp-words”—“*impulse* (several times), *impels* (several times), *impatient* (twice), *important*, *impertinent*, *imperceptible*,

impossible, unimpressive, improvised, and, of course, *Imp*. Moreover *imp*, is an abbreviation in English for *imperative, imperfect, imperial, import, imprimatur, impersonal, implement, improper, and improvement*.” What is it to experience “word imps”?

“Word imps” could name any of the recurrent combinations of letters of which the words of a language are composed. They are part of the way words have their familiar looks and sounds, and their familiarity depends upon our mostly not noticing the particles (or cells) and their laws, which constitute words and imps—on our not noticing their necessary recurrences, which is perhaps only to say that recurrence constitutes familiarity. This necessity, the most familiar property of language there could be—that if there is to be language, words and their cells must recur, as if fettered in their orbits, that language is grammatical (to say the least)—insures the self-referentiality of language. When we do note these cells or molecules, these little moles of language (perhaps in thinking, perhaps in derangement), what we discover are word imps—the initial, or it may be medial or final, movements, the implanted origins or constituents of words, leading lives of their own, staring back at us, calling upon one another, giving us away, alarming—because to note them is to see that they live in front of our eyes, within earshot, at every moment. (*In Quest of the Ordinary*, pp. 124–25)

Communication theory teaches us to tune out word imps as so much noise; psychotherapy warns us of madness.¹⁷ But poetry, whatever else it is, is an attentiveness or attunement, an openness or receptiveness to the strangeness or otherness of words of just the sort that Cavell is describing here. One could as well say that poetry is a response to the uncanniness of ordinary language, where (again) what is uncanny is not simply the corporeality of language as such but the way in which this corporeality reorients our relation to language (not to say the world) by turning us into listeners rather than speakers. In poetry the corporeality of language addresses us.

With somewhat greater sublimity, and solemnity, Heidegger calls this phenomenon "having an experience *with* language," which is what occurs when "language brings itself to language."¹⁸ It is what happens when language suddenly deprives us of subjective control, that is, when it takes us out of our role as speaking subjects and situates us outside itself in the position of respondents. Michael Davidson says: "I was faced by my own language staring me back in the face"; Cavell calls our attention to "words, leading lives of their own, staring back at us, calling upon one another, giving us away, alarming—because to note them is to see that they live in front of our eyes, within earshot, at every moment." As if my own language were not my possession but something outside my linguistic competence (as if the whole idea of linguistic competence were a subjectivist conceit). Imagine being face-to-face with language, language as exteriority, language that cannot be done away with by speaking or deciphering it: imagine this, and you are on the way to language, or to poetry.¹⁹ Poetry is, let us say, a responsibility toward language, an unforgetting or acknowledgment—more or less in defiance of logic, linguistics, and philosophy of language—of the irreducibility of our speech to the status of an object, code, system, conceptual scheme, paradigm, prisonhouse, ideology, superstructure, or form of rule-governed, monological behavior.

Just so, in *Les mots et les choses* (1966) Michel Foucault goes so far to locate the origin of modern poetry as a response to the twofold effect of the Enlightenment to objectify language and to deploy it as an instrument of a subject-centered rationality that seeks to bring all that is, including language, under conceptual control: "at the beginning of the nineteenth century, at a time when language was burying itself within its own destiny as an object and allowing itself to be traversed, through and through, by knowledge, it was also reconstituting itself elsewhere, in an independent form, difficult of access, folded back upon the enigma of its own origin and existing wholly in reference to the pure act of writing." The term, "pure act of writing," derives from Maurice Blanchot's conception of *écriture* as an event in which literature comes into existence, not as the product of a writer's genius, imagination, consciousness, or mastery of language, but (on the contrary) as an interruption or reversal of consciousness that

turns subjectivity inside out, deprives it of rational control, exposes it to whatever is otherwise (the Outside, the Neutral, the Unknown). As writing, Foucault says,

literature becomes progressively more differentiated from a discourse of ideas, and encloses itself in a radical intransitivity; it becomes detached from all the values that were able to keep it in general circulation during the Classical age (taste, pleasure, naturalness, truth), and creatures within its own space everything that will ensure a ludic denial of them (the scandalous, the ugly, the impossible); it breaks with the whole definition of *genres* as forms adapted to an order of representations, and becomes merely a manifestation of a language which has no other law than that of affirming—in opposition to all other forms of discourse—its own precipitous existence.²⁰

Literature in this sense (poetry made of words: the *es gibt* of language) confronts the modern subject as a radical exteriority that announces the limits of cognitive mastery. Poetry is language that refuses to become an object; it is the withdrawal of language from the world or, more accurately, from our grasp of the world by means of concepts. Poetry is the original critique of the subject, one might say the original critique of reason. Plato understood as much.

Gadamer emphasizes this poetic critique when he speaks of “the poetic work as a corrective for the ideal of objective determination and for the hubris of concepts” (GW8.237/PA190). In particular, Gadamer has in mind the tendency of philosophical language to become a fixed, technical vocabulary—a scholasticism. “The great Greek thinkers protected the fluidity of their own language when they undertook to fix concepts in their thematic analyses. But in opposition to this, there has always been scholasticism—ancient, medieval, modern, contemporary. It follows philosophy like a shadow, and it is almost possible to determine the status of an attempt at thinking in terms of how far it is able to break out of the petrification of handed down philosophical language” (GW2.506/PA190). This is why philoso-

phy likewise needs a poetic or speculative experience with language—why it always needs poetry in its way as a “remembrance of language.”

The language of philosophizing was not made for philosophizing. Philosophy entangles itself in a constitutive language-need [*Sprachnot*], and this language-need becomes all the more palpable the more the philosophizing person gets out in front of himself in his thinking. In general it is the sign of the dilettante that concepts are arbitrarily constructed and enthusiastically ‘defined.’ The philosopher stirs up the observation powers of speech, and every stylistic boldness and act of violence has its place and succeeds in penetrating into the speech of those who would think-with and think-further [*mitdenken und weiterdenken*]. This means shaking up, extending, and throwing light on the horizon of communication [*Verständigung*]. (GW2.507/PA191)²¹

Imagine philosophy as—quite as much as poetry—an event at the limits of intelligibility!

The Aesthetics of Refusal

In his letter to Fred Dallmayr Gadamer says that “it is precisely the new trajectories in thought opened up by the *later* Heidegger—drawing into the hermeneutical dimension the themes of the artwork, the thing, and language—that have guided my way, or better confirmed my own path of thought” (DD94). What characterizes the artwork, the thing, and language is that each is in its way self-secluding, ungraspable, resistant to conceptual determination. In “Der Ursprung des Kuntswerkes” (1933–35), Heidegger speaks of the way the thing resists our attempts to turn it into an object. “The unpretentious thing evades thought most stubbornly. Or can it be that this self-refusal [*Sichzurückhalten*] of the mere thing, this self-contained independence, belongs precisely to the nature of the thing. Must this strange

and uncommunicative feature [*Befremdende und Verschlossene*] of the nature of the thing become intimately familiar to thought that tries to think the thing? If so, then we should not force our way to its thingly character" (GA5.17/PLT32). This cautionary statement applies equally to the work of art and to language, which are thinglike in their "strange and uncommunicative" nature.

For Heidegger, the structure of the work of art is ontological rather than formal. This means first of all that the work of art is not an aesthetic object but an event that can be characterized phenomenologically in terms of disclosure or coming into the light of being: the *work* of the work of art is an opening up of the world to time and history (GW5.32/PLT45: "The work as work sets up a world. The work holds open the Open of the world"). But this opening of the world is not the whole story of the work of art. The work cannot be reduced to "phain aesthetics." The world is not brought into the open as such; rather, this event occurs within the limit or horizon of the earth, where the earth is that which remains undisclosed, outside the world and resistant to it. This resistance of the earth is as much the work of the work of art as is the disclosure of the world. "In setting up a world, the work sets forth the earth. . . . The work moves the earth itself into the Open of the world and keeps it there. *The work lets the earth be an earth*" (GA5.32/PLT46).

The earth is a figure of radical finitude, of pure exteriority, which Heidegger elucidates by way of the density or impermeability of a stone, which withdraws from our efforts to break it open and lay it bare. One might think of this refusal as the stone's testimony to the way the earth speaks. The earth, Heidegger says,

shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained [*unentborgen und unerklärt*]. Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate into it. It causes every merely calculating importunity upon it to turn into a destruction. This destruction may herald itself under the appearance of mastery and of progress in the form of the technical-scientific objectivation of nature, but this mastery nevertheless remains an impotence of the will. The earth appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that

which is by nature undisclosable [*Unerschliessbare*], that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up. (GA5.33/PLT47)

But this closure is not formal. It is important not to think of the resistance of the earth as a form of negation or as if the earth were an autonomous entity sealed off in a region of aesthetic differentiation. Our ready-to-wear critical concepts conceal the way in which earth and world are exposed to one another. Heidegger thinks of their relation as a conflict or strife (*Streit*) that calls upon each to be what it is. It is a productive antagonism of mutual belonging rather than the more familiar dialectical struggle where opponents aim at overcoming and mastery of the other. The exteriority of the earth, for example, is what puts into play the historicity of the world. Think of the earth as anarchical in the etymological sense of being on the hither side of the world's principle of unity. Another way to put this would be to say that the alterity of the earth is its exteriority, its irreducibility to the world's concepts and categories. This after all is what the *materiality* of the work of art bears witness to. "The self-seclusion of earth . . . is not a uniform, inflexible staying under cover, but unfolds itself in an inexhaustible variety of simple modes and shapes." Heidegger singles out the sculptor, the painter, and the poet, each of whom works in what we call a particular medium, but the word "medium" is a misleading concept. The sculpting of the stone is not a use of it. Likewise the poem is made of language but is not a use of it. As if he had read Valéry, Heidegger says: "To be sure, the poet also uses the word—not, however, like ordinary speakers and writers who have to use them up, but rather in such a way that the word only now becomes and remains truly a word" (GA5.34/PLT47–48).

What is it for a word to be "truly a word"? Here one must imagine a word that is not exchangeable for something else: the word as pure exteriority. Likewise the work of art cannot serve as a substitute for whatever is not itself. It portrays nothing. As Heidegger likes to say, the work of art, before everything else, *is*. The fact that it is, is all that can be predicated of the work of art. This means that the work cannot be made a part of anything else. It is uncontainable within any totality.

The conflict or rift of world and earth constitutes the structure of the work of art and helps to explain the ontological exteriority of the work to the world. If the work works to hold open the Open of the world, the work itself withholds itself from this event and remains on the hither (an-archic) side of the world, as if it were excessive with respect to its own ontology, or as if there were no room in the world for works of art. To be sure, it seems at first as if the work of art—the Greek temple, for example—presides over the world as its centerpiece, the shrine around which everything is gathered into a unity. But the work is never part of the world's furniture; rather it holds in place the finitude of the world. Consider the fate of the work of art in view of the world's temporality. What happens to the work once the world is established? The temple after all is merely a ruin, a fragment from an incomplete time. It is, as Heidegger says of the work with respect to the world, self-standing, severed from all human ties, estranged from its surroundings. The work *is*. Its being is not a being-as but rather is non-identical in the manner of the *es gibt* or the *il y a*. "The more essentially the work opens itself, the more luminous becomes the uniqueness of the fact that it is rather than is not. The more essentially this thrust comes into the Open, the stranger [*befremdlicher*] and more solitary the work becomes" (GA5.53/PLT66).²² This strangeness is not anthropological, that is, merely unfamiliar or exotic. The work is not otherworldly, existing in a domain of its own; it is non-worldly, not a being-in-the-world but earthly (dark and reserved: stone-like) in its createdness, excessive with respect to the world, but intimately, inescapably so. As such, it works as an intervention in the space of the world, exposing the world to what is not itself or to its outside. This intervention, this exposure to the outside, is the truth of the work, where truth is not correspondence or self-sameness but, strangely, untruth vis-à-vis the law of identity. In truth, the self-sameness of the world is interrupted (perhaps one could say: temporalized) by the work.²³ The work is a refusal of self-identity.²⁴ In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger characterizes this interruption or refusal of the same by the name of poetry (*Dichtung*), where "in the midst of what is, art breaks open an open place, in whose place everything is other than usual" (GA5.59/PLT72).²⁵

Where is this "open place," where the non-identical comes into play? This, as it happens, is Paul Celan's question; it is the question of poetry.

A Poetics of Intimacy

"The objection is often made," Gadamer says in his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art," "that the basic concepts of Heidegger's later work cannot be verified" (GW3.258/HW105). But Gadamer thinks that, nevertheless, there is a deep internal kinship between Heidegger's thinking and modern poetry's radical thesis that "the work of art is language" (GW3.261/HW109). But it is only in Gadamer's work, and specifically in his encounter with Celan, that this kinship is brought to realization.

The thesis that the work of art is language leaves open the question of what language is. But on this question Gadamer has never hesitated to say: "Language . . . is always the language of conversation" ("Letter to Dallmayr," DD99). The importance of Paul Celan to Gadamer's thinking is that Celan's writings situate the radical thesis explicitly within the context of the main question of philosophical hermeneutics: What is it to be addressed? Language is not simply the medium of something that happens, of speech or dialogue or understanding; it is the event itself.

Gadamer frequently refers to Celan's famous words from his Bremen speech in 1958:

Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through [*hindurchgehen*] its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darkneses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface, 'enriched' [*angereichert*] by it all.

In this language I tried, during those years and the years after, to write poems: in order to speak, to orient myself, to find out where I was, where I was going, to chart my reality.

It meant movement, you see, something happening, being *on the way* [*Ereignis, Bewegung, Unterwegssein*], an attempt to find a direction. Whenever I ask about the sense of it, I remind myself that this implies the question as to which sense is clockwise [*dass in dieser Frage auch die Frage nach dem Uhrzeigersinn mitspricht*].

For the poem does not stand outside time. True, it claims the infinite and tries to reach across time—but across, not above.

A poem, being an instance of language, hence essentially dialogue [*und damit seinem Wesen dialogische ist*], may be a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea with the—surely not always strong—hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on a shoreline of the heart. In this way, too, poems are *on the way* [*unterwegs*]: they are headed toward.

Toward what? Toward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you [*auf ein ansprechbares Du*], perhaps, an approachable reality.

Such realities are, I think, at stake in the poem. I also believe that this kind of thinking accompanies not only my own efforts, but those of other, younger poets. Efforts of those who, with man-made stars flying overhead, unsheltered even by the traditional tent of the sky, exposed in an unsuspected, terrifying way, carry their existence into language, racked by reality and in search of it. (GW3.186/CP34–35)²⁶

Poetry is, again, the unforgetting of language, in which we are reminded, first of all, that language is not a formal system; it is what philosophers call natural language—but perhaps one should use the older philological expression, *living* language: language whose mode of existence is the event, a language of *Erfahrung* that lives through or undergoes the experiences of all those who speak it and hear it, and which is therefore never self-identical but always on the way, *unterwegs*²⁷—

what is it called, your country
 behind the mountain, behind the year?
 I know what it is called.
 Like the winter's tale, it's called,
 it's called the summer's tale,
 your mother's threeyearland,
 that's what it was,
 what it is,
 it wanders everywhere, like
 language. (PPC219)

wie heisst es, dein Land
 hinterm Berg, hinterm Jahr?
 Ich weiss, wie es heisst.
 Wie das Wintermärchen, so heisst es,
 es heisst wie das Sommermärchen,
 das Dreijahreland deiner Mutter, das war es,
 das ists,
 es wandert überallhin, wie
 die Sprache. (GW1.285)

Celan (Paul Antschel, later Ancel) was born into a German-speaking Jewish community in Bukovina, which was once part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, later was (and somewhat still is) part of Romania, then later was part of the Soviet Union, and now is (more or less) part of the Ukraine. What is it called, indeed! (Celan once referred to this region as “a victim of historylessness”).²⁸ Not many maps bother to identify it. In 1941 the Jews of Bukovina were removed to concentration camps, where Celan's father died of typhus and where his mother was murdered. Celan survived the war in work camps. His first book of poems, written in German, was published in Vienna in 1947. Later he made his way to Paris, but he continued to write his poetry in German—but a non-identical German: a German outside of German.

Celan's German is "deterritorialized" in the sense in which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari use this term in reference to Kafka, whose language was a German spoken in the Jewish community of Prague. Prague German is a language outside of language, a "nomad" language, where words leave behind the space of their meanings. Kafka's German is "reterritorialized" in Prague, where its sounds enter into a space that neutralizes their sense. Kafka intensifies the neutralization of German. He takes German into the space of Yiddish, where "he will make it cry with an extremely sober and rigorous cry. He will pull from it the barking of the dog, the cough of the ape, and the bustling of the beetle. He will turn syntax into a cry that will embrace the rigid syntax of this dried-up German. He will push it toward . . . an absolute deterritorialization, even if it is slow, sticky, coagulated. To bring language slowly and progressively to the desert. To use syntax in order to cry, to give a syntax to the cry."²⁹

As in one of Celan's late poems:

ST
 Ein Vau, pf, in der That,
 schlägt, mps,
 ein Sieben-Rad:
 o
 oo
 ooo
 O (GW3.136)

Imagine this *O* as the basic unit of Celan's poetry.

Celan's work gives special meaning to the corporeality and exteriority of poetic language; it brings these limit-concepts together in a unique way. In "Der Meridian," his famous speech on the occasion of receiving the Büchner prize in 1960, Celan asks whether there is any sense to the question, What is art?—which is a question that is raised in Büchner's writings, where art is figured in terms of puppets, monkeys or the monkey-shape (*Affengestalt*: gorilla-suit?), automatons, and Medusa heads (GW3.187–88/CP37–38).

"It is easy to talk about art," says Celan. "But when there is talk of art, there is often somebody who does not really

listen”—that is, someone who hears but who doesn't understand. This is not an altogether bad thing. Imagine “someone who hears, listens, looks . . . and then does not know what it was about. But who hears the speaker, ‘sees him speaking,’ who perceives language as a physical shape, and also . . . breath, that is, direction and destiny [*Der aber den Sprechenden hört, der ihn ‘sprechen sieht,’ der Sprache wahrgenommen hat und Gestalt und zugleich . . . auch Atem, das heisst, Richtung und Schicksall*]” (GW3.188/CP39). Someone who cannot see through things, who remains on this side, on the skin or fleshly side, of discourse, where language is still visible, or (more intimately) where it can be felt as a breath, where it is an event occurring just now, just this one time, to you.³⁰

Celan's reference in this context is to a character in Büchner's *Dantons Tod*, Lucile, “who is artblind [*Kunstblinde*], for whom language is tangible and like a person [*für die Sprache etwas Personhaftes und Wahrnehmbares hat*]” (GW3.189/CP40). At the end of *Dantons Tod*, Lucile, at the guillotine, cries out (absurdly), “Long live the King.” Celan calls this a *Gegenwort*: “It is an act of freedom. It is a step” (GW3.189/CP40).

Celan wants to give this *Gegenwort* the name of poetry: the discourse of the *Kunstblinde* who perceive language as something on the hither, exterior, fleshly side of the world of the spirit. But “discourse” is not the right word, or at all events not Celan's word. Celan is explicit that poetry is non-aesthetic, that is, it is not a work or process of art. Its mode of being is not that of the *oeuvre* but of *désœuvrement*, worklessness.³¹ Its movement is not toward a point of being finished but a ceaseless, open-ended movement of indeterminacy toward what is always elsewhere, a pure exteriority. Imagine poetry as a name of this elsewhere. Not a movement of the true but of freedom.

In Celan's text the relationship between poetry and art is marked out in part by two characters in Büchner's writings: Lucille, the *Kunstblinde*, and Lenz, the artist, a self-forgetting *I*, one “whose eyes and mind are occupied with art” (GW3.193/CP44). Lenz, who says that “One would like to be a Medusa's head” in order to grasp what is natural, not so much to make it unnatural as to situate it differently as something fixed and self-identical, possessing objectivity and value—but therefore

something no longer human, since what is human cannot be fixed or objectified without cost.³² Art perhaps pays the price by “going [Celan says] beyond what is human, stepping into the realm which is turned toward the human, but *uncanny*—the realm where the monkey, the automatons and with them . . . oh, art, too, seem to be at home [*Das ist ein Hinaustreten aus dem Menschlichen, ein Sichhinausgeben in einem dem Menschlichen zugewandten und unheimlichen Bereich—denselben, in dem die Affengestalt, die Automaten und damit . . . ach, auch die Kunst zuhause zu sein scheinen*]” (GW3.192/CP42–43).

Art is estrangement, self-estrangement (causing self-forgetfulness) but also estrangement from the human. Art is incapable of intimacy. Art is uncanny in the sense of monstrous, the not quite or no longer human, the almost- or once-human. Poetry is different from this, from art, but not in the way the familiar is different from the strange or the human from the almost-human. Poetry is also uncanny, but differently so, with another sort of strangeness (GW3.195/CP47): not uncanny in the way of art but in the way things are strange when they are no longer subject to our concepts and categories, when they escape us. Imagine things freeing themselves from the meaningful, becoming, not meaningless, but anarchic and non-identical.

This is how it is with poetry in Celan’s text, where the poem is never in place or in view as something self-identical but always something *unterwegs*: on the way, that is, not becoming or in process as if moving toward repose or definition or the objectivity of the aesthetic work but nomadic, traversing meridians, encountering space as a radical exteriority outside the categories of inside and outside. In his Bremen address Celan spoke of poetry (or of the poem) explicitly in Heidegger’s vocabulary: *Ereignis, Bewegung, Unterwegssein* (GW3.186/CP34). These are the terms in which Heidegger tries to clarify the question of thinking. Thinking for Heidegger is not a species of reasoning; it is not a conceptual movement or movement of systematic construction. It is an event of language that is irreducible to the propositional style of philosophical discourse. So, like poetry, thinking can and needs to be situated outside of discourse. In *Was heisst Denken?* Heidegger emphasizes that thinking is responsive rather than assertive, paratactic (and therefore fragmen-

tary) rather than syntactic and unifying, wayward rather than progressive—incessantly wayward, always on the way, restless even in the moment of pausing, always called out (as if by poetry?) into a place where everything is otherwise.

The poem for Celan belongs to this ontological condition of *Unterwegssein*: always on the way. “Perhaps—I am only speculating,” Celan says, “—perhaps poetry, like art, moves with the oblivious self into the uncanny and strange to free itself again. Though where? In which place? how? as what? [*vielleicht geht die Dichtung, wie die Kunst, mit einem selbstvergessenen Ich zu jenem Unheimlichen und Fremden, und setzt sich—doch wo? doch an welchem Ort? doch womit? doch als was?—wieder frei?*]” (GW3.193/CP44). Open questions: how to keep them open?

Clearly *Unterwegssein* is not a discursive or productive movement of *poiesis*. Poetry is on the hither side of discourse and art, the side of corporeality and exteriority, as when Celan says: I believe that I have met poetry in the figure of Lucile, and Lucile perceives language as shape, direction, breath [*nimmt Sprache als Gestalt und Richtung und Atem wahr*].” To which Celan adds: “I am looking for the same thing here, in Büchner’s work. I am looking for Lenz himself, as a person [i.e., not as a character in a text but as himself, walking through the mountains on the 20th of January], I am looking for his shape: for the sake of the place of poetry, for the sake of liberation, for the sake of the step [*als Person, ich suche seine Gestalt: um des Ortes der Dichtung, um der Freisetzung, um des Schrittes willen*]” (GW3.194/CP45).

Atem, Ort, Freisetzung (releasement), *Schritt*: an odd vocabulary for a poetics.

Perhaps the most famous line in “Der Meridian” is: “*Dichtung: das kann eine Atemwende bedeuten*” (GA3.195/CP47).³³ A turning of the breath (if that is what *Atemwende* is) can answer to the name of poetry; or, perhaps, vice versa: this event, this breath, is what poetry responds to. Poetry is perhaps this response or responsiveness, this responsibility for the side of speech that resists reduction or the turning of a breath into a mediation or expression. Possibly the poem is as much the taking of a breath as the expulsion of it (“A breath for nothing,” says Rilke, breathing freely, without constriction, not having to speak); or perhaps, as in Levinas’s account of *le dehors* in *Autrement qu’être*,

freedom is breath, “the breathing of outside air, where inwardness frees itself from itself, and is exposed to all the winds.”³⁴ Here breathing is non-subjective: it means taking in the air that belongs to “an outside where nothing covers anything, non-protection, the reverse of a retreat, homelessness, non-world, non-inhabitation, layout without security” (AE275–76/OTB179). As if there were a link between breath and exile.

Celan perhaps gives us a glimpse of this “outside” in “Gespräch im Gebirg” (1959), where two Jews (called “windbags” [*Geschwätzigeln*]) encounter one another on alien ground. Levinas himself remains deeply suspicious of this region, which he associates with the *il y a* and what he takes to be Heidegger’s dehumanized ontology. To the openness of the Open, the open place where everything is strange or non-identical, he opposes the openness of the face, whose breath is “the wind of alterity”:

In human breathing, in its everyday equality, perhaps we have to already hear the breathlessness of an inspiration that paralyzes essence [i.e., self-identity], that transpierces it with an inspiration by the other, an inspiration that is already expiration, that “rends the soul”! It is the longest breath there is, spirit. Is man not the living being capable of the longest breath in inspiration, without a stopping point, and in expiration, not to thought.³⁷

But the poem is also an event of language (*Ereignis*), as in modernity’s radical thesis:

The poem speaks. It is mindful of its dates, but it speaks. True, it speaks only on its own, its very own behalf [*immer nur in seiner eigenen, allereigensten Sache*].

But I think—and this will hardly surprise you—that the poem has always hoped, for this very reason, to speak also on behalf of the *strange* [*auch in fremder*]*—no, I can no longer use this word here—on behalf of the other, who knows, perhaps of an altogether other* [*gerade auf diese Weise in eines Anderen*].

Sache zu sprechen—wer weiss, vielleicht in eines ganz
Anderen Sache]. (GW3.196/CP48)

Poetry speaks not as a medium but on its own, self-standing and reserved—the way a person speaks. At the same time, and perhaps precisely because of its withdrawal from the language of mediation, it speaks for another, or perhaps for the other of all others (*eines ganz Anderen Sache*), an otherness more Blanchovian than Levinasian, not just that which is otherwise than being, the ethical, but that which is neither one nor the other, outside even the ethical relation in which an I is turned inside out before the *Autrui*.

A pure exteriority: a freedom for which we have no words.

In modern tradition freedom is Kantian: it is the free subject, the self-regulating, self-same ego over and against which nothing is free but is rather subject or subjected to cognition and the laws of identity. For Celan, as for Maurice Blanchot, freedom is the outside, the region of the other, of others near and far, of foreignness itself. The movement of poetry is toward this region, or toward “the ‘otherness’ which it can reach and be free [*auf jenes ‘Anderes’ zu, das es sich als erreichbar, als freizusetzen*], which is perhaps vacant and at the same time turned like Lucile, let us say, turned toward it, toward the poem” (GW3.197/CP48).

“Movement,” however, is a questionable term. Celan’s text is not a narrative of a journey or a quest; the poem is not an alter ego but an event of releasement—one could do worse than borrow Heidegger’s word, *Gelassenheit*, letting-be or letting-go, which is not a performative that an agent might or might not take up but a condition of openness toward what is outside and uncontainable within our discursive fields. Heidegger calls it *die Offenheit für das Geheimnis*, where *das Geheimnis* is usually translated as “mystery,” but which is perhaps better understood topologically as that which is set apart, elsewhere, outside, not what we have made our own but that which is self-standing and alone like the thing.³⁸ For Heidegger *Gelassenheit* is not a cognitive movement of thinking but the ethical responsiveness of thinking to what withdraws from the world, a responsiveness that is no less ethical for being a *Gelassenheit zu den Dingen*: a releasement turned toward things and not just toward other people.³⁹

At all events, when Celan speaks (strangely) of the self-assertion of the poem—*Das Gedicht behauptet sich* (GW3.197/CP49: Rosemarie Waldrop translates this as “The poem holds its ground”)—this event is as much a movement of displacement as of definition. The text reads like a parody of definition or the positioning of an object: “the poem asserts itself on its own margin [*das Gedicht behauptet sich am Rande seiner selbst*].” Imagine the place of poetry as something other than a position to be occupied.⁴⁰ Celan in fact deliberately mixes his metaphors, displacing space into time (and back again), in order to confound any thought of fixing poetry in its place: “*es ruft und holt sich, um bestehen zu können, unausgesetzt aus seinem Schon-nicht-mehr in sein Immer-noch zurück*” (GW3.197/CP49: the poem, as Waldrop translates, “calls and pulls itself back . . . from an ‘already-no-more’ into a ‘still-here’”). Put it that the poem’s presence is not a self-presence; it never coincides with itself in a moment of self-identity. *Immer-noch* is not a point in which something asserts itself as such; it is rather like the point where the thing, in Heidegger’s formulation, stands on its own, alone in its “self-containment” (*Insichruhen*: as if reposing in itself [“Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes,” GA5.11/PLT26]). The poem is singular, not objective but thinglike insofar as it is outside the alternatives of subject and object; or, in other words, free.

A poetics of non-identity is in Celan’s language a poetics of *Entsprechung* (GW3.197/CP49), where *Entsprechung* is something like a condition of attunement in which one is turned toward the other in an event of listening. *Entsprechung* describes very well Lucile’s response to language as the breath and flesh of what is singular or external to the space that discourse otherwise opens up for our habitation, namely the world of talk and action where things are taken up in the movement of concepts or taken in hand through clarification and description. The poem frees language from this logical domain. It is, in Celan’s words, “language actualized, set free under the sign of a radical individuation which, however, remains as aware of the limits drawn by language as of the possibilities it opens [*Sondern aktualisierte Sprache, freigesetzt unter dem Zeichen einer zwar radikalen, aber gleichzeitig auch der ihr von der Sprache gezogenen Grenzen, der ihr von der Sprache erschlossenen Möglichkeiten eingedenk bleibenden Individuation!*” (GW3.197/CP49).