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Gadamer's Aesthetics
The Overcoming of Aesthetic Consciousness and the Hermeneutical
Truth of Art

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Hans-Georg Gadamer's basic conception of aesthetics obeys a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, he offers a sharp criticism of what he terms “aesthetic consciousness” that he sees as a hollow and disastrous modern abstraction. Yet, on the other hand, his entire project follows the lead of something like the aesthetic experience of truth when it undertakes to liberate the meaning of understanding and truth, as it is lived for instance in the human sciences and in our everyday practical judgments, from the straitjacket of the scientific, methodical model of truth. This might appear confusing: a severe rebuttal of aesthetics (which many aestheticians might deem excessive) coupled with a decisive reliance on the aesthetic experience of truth (which will, this time, anger most epistemologists). Actually, the two movements go hand in hand: according to Gadamer, it is only by destroying the modern notion of an “aesthetic consciousness” that one can hope to rediscover the truth-meaning function of art or aesthetic experience. We will try to sketch in broad strokes this twofold, yet unitary attitude towards aesthetics by focusing first on aesthetic consciousness and secondly on the aesthetic truth Gadamer wishes to lay bare.

1. The Overcoming of Aesthetic Consciousness

It is well-known that the idea of “aesthetics” is a specifically modern phenomenon. Of course, the Ancients also had a notion of *aisthesis*, from which our idea of “aesthetics” is derived, but for them this notion covered the entire realm of sensory perception which did not necessarily have an artistic or “aesthetic” value, as we would say today. They also reflected on the idea of beauty, but nothing indicates that they viewed it as an “aesthetic” affair, that is as an experience that would somehow be different or isolated from the realm of

our cognitive and moral concerns.

It is precisely this idea that there is an “aesthetic” realm, an “aesthetic” beauty and so on, which is specifically modern. The first to use the notion in this sense was most probably the German philosopher Baumgarten who hoped to dampen the rationalist rage of his time by developing the notion that there would be something like an “aesthetic” cognition which would somehow also embody the rationalist ideas, yet without following the syllogistic ways of pure reason. There is reason in the senses, as it were. They provide a form of cognition which supplements and even enlarges the scope of reason. The first major philosopher to draw on this idea was Immanuel Kant. In his *Critique of pure reason* of 1781, indeed in its very first section, he distanced himself from Baumgarten's enterprise and the meaning he gave to the notion of “aesthetics”. In matters of taste, Kant argued, there is no such thing as *a priori* or rational principles. Here, everything is rather a matter of subjective judgment. This is why he discouraged the use of “aesthetics” for this realm, believing at the time that no science of it was possible. “Aesthetics”, he contended, could only be the science of the *a priori* conditions of human receptivity. And this receptivity is by no means “aesthetic” in any modern sense of the word, it is rather purely cognitive, obeying the fundamental conditions of space and time. Aesthetics is thus for him the theory of the conditions of our cognitive receptivity. There is no such thing as a science of aesthetic taste, because here every judgment is precisely just a matter of taste and inclination.

Kant's attempt to hijack, as it were, the new-found notion of aesthetics didn't fly. In fact, in his *Critique of Judgment*, written nine years later, Kant resorted to the use of the word “aesthetic” that was common at his time, but that he had earlier condemned. He now spoke of “aesthetic judgment” as a specific form of judgment that would start off with individual instances (*aisthesis* had always been aimed at the particular) and try to find the universal concept that corresponds to it, without however really succeeding. It is this “play” of the human faculties, Kant likes to say, which produces something like an aesthetic pleasure, the sentiment of beauty or of the sublime. The details of Kant's complex analysis, which launched the career of aesthetics, cannot interest us here. What is important - and for Gadamer of momentous consequences - is that according to Kant this aesthetic judgment remains devoid of cognitive value. One can communicate and thus hope to share an aesthetic feeling, but there is no real objectivity to it, meaning by that a binding logical universality. Objective knowledge always follows this pattern of a universal

judgment, or law, that determines the individual instances. In aesthetic judgment, which results from a play of our faculties, only the particular is given and the universal is only sought after and never reached. This is perhaps what delights us in aesthetic experience, but such a play does not amount to objective, hard knowledge, the one that can be gained in science, but also, and most importantly for Kant, from the evidence of moral consciousness.

The consequence of Kant's treatment of aesthetic judgment was thus to create an independent realm for aesthetics, one which would be strictly separated from the spheres of knowledge (that of theoretical reason) and morality (practical reason). Whether Kant was responsible for this new invention of the aesthetic is a moot point. He could not have imagined the currency that the celebration of the artistic *per se* would enjoy in the next two centuries. Moreover, the evidence of his texts seems to show that he was also well aware of the moral underpinnings of any aesthetic judgment. Consequently, Gadamer's critique of the autonomy of aesthetic consciousness seems to waver somewhat in pinning the responsibility on Kant. In *Truth and Method* (1960), Kant seems to be the immediate culprit, but in later works, for instance in the 1980 essay on *Anschauung und Anschaulichkeit* (now published in the all-important 8th volume of his *Gesammelte Werke*), one has the feeling that Gadamer is very sympathetic to Kant's moral understanding of the aesthetic experience, so that the responsibility for the isolation of an aesthetic consciousness must fall on his immediate romantic successors.

Be that as it may, it cannot be denied that it was something like the Kantian paradigm that dominated the ensuing treatment of aesthetics for the next two centuries. According to Gadamer, the tacit presupposition was that aesthetic judgment had no cognitive import, it was “merely” aesthetic. One can of course see that as a good thing. It did in fact bestow “autonomy” (that is self-regulation) upon aesthetic experience, thus liberating it for itself. Ever since this autonomy has been conquered, and its conquest remains a constant struggle for most artists and philosophers, it has been possible to judge works of art independently (or so it seems) from the requirements of science or morality. An art work does not aim at enlarging the scope of our knowledge, it is neither true nor false, neither right nor wrong in any narrow moral sense. It is a “piece of art” and must thus be judged by its own standards that are alleged to be intrinsically aesthetic.

While Gadamer does not really want to revoke this autonomy, which is a modern fact which cannot be wished away, he does question whether it can

be total. For him, the idea of a separate “aesthetic” consciousness is an abstraction because there is no such thing as an aesthetic experience which would disregard the *truth claim* raised by a work of art. An art work always has something to say, it speaks to our cognitive and moral sensibilities and brings them into play. It is this truth claim that Gadamer will promise to sort out in his own theory of art. He will even have the tendency to extend it to our larger experience of truth, that of cognitive truth.

But before we get to this “positive” aspect of Gadamer's aesthetics, one must grasp the far-reaching consequences of his genetic interpretation of aesthetic consciousness. For Gadamer, aesthetic experience did not spring out of itself, it did not emerge out of the immediate contact with art works. Rather, it was imposed by modern science itself in its exclusive claim on all matters of truth. For modernity, as it understands itself and as Gadamer also reads it, truth can only be ascertained by a methodical enquiry that remains the domain of science. Outside science there is no truth, and if there is, this truth must become the object of scientific confirmation, which only underscores the universality of scientific truth.

In this context, art and aesthetic experience had lost every cognitive legitimacy or purpose. It could only defend its legitimacy by relinquishing any sort of truth claim or purpose. The hegemonic claim of scientific truth had painted the aesthetic experience in a corner. It was confined to the margins of truth and science and could only define itself through this predicament imposed upon it by modern science. The “inferiority complex” of the aesthetic actually amounted to an “exteriority complex”, since it was excluded from all matters of truth. It had to recognize that its predicament was “merely aesthetic”, but it tried to put a positive twist on things by celebrating this aesthetic dimension as such. From now on, there would be such a thing as an independent aesthetic consciousness, with its own logic, requirements and institutions. Indeed, art and aesthetics actually prospered once their autonomy was acknowledged (even if it was actually imposed upon them by science). In the 19th and 20th centuries, every respectable city had to have its “Arts centers” where one would bundle together museums and concert halls in order to create a space where one could enjoy and feel “aesthetically”, a space which would be sharply demarcated from the rest of the “real” world, dominated by the hard logic of science and economy. Soon, every newspaper would also have its “art section” and every government its “art department” which would handle this allegedly distinct sphere of human activity. The premise of it all remains that this autonomous

sphere has little to do with the real outside world, that it might to some extent seem superfluous and frivolous, but it's there and its unidentifiable autonomy requires to be confined to some distinct places and institutions: an Arts center, an Arts section, a museum, and their specialists, etc. These institutions have become so evident to us that we might believe they are natural. They aren't. As Gadamer reminds us, before the 19th century, what we call art works were for example usually found in temples or churches where they were not works of art but of worship, secular paintings were mostly held in private collections, theater was not carried out in "city museums", but by traveling groups, and so on. Gadamer's point is that art is never separated from the world, it is always part of the world out of which it nurtures itself and which it helps understand in return. "Aesthetic consciousness" is thus for Gadamer the result of an aesthetic separation or differentiation (of art and world, which is simply a false abstraction, and furthermore, one which was imposed on art by methodical science). It is no wonder that this kind of aesthetic experience constantly has to struggle with this model of science when it seeks to define, and even fund itself. Gadamer thus calls into question the very premise of aesthetics, namely the notion that there is something like an aesthetics.

To be sure, there is something like an "anti-aesthetic" in Gadamer's philosophy.¹ But one can only be against something if one can provide a better description for what it covers up. Gadamer will turn the table on aesthetic consciousness by claiming, in the simplest terms, that the experience of art is at its root an experience of truth. Not only is it one experience of truth among others, it is an experience which can also help us discover what truth is all about. It is this experience that methodical science expatriated when it grounded truth on method.

2. The Hermeneutical Understanding of Aesthetic Truth

It can be argued that Gadamer focused mostly on the critique of aesthetic consciousness in his magnum opus *Truth and Method*. He did promise to reconquer a concept of truth out of the experience of art, but many critics, such as Käte Hamburger, have found out that his book did not really provide a persuasive account of this truth claim. In a recent critique, one of Germany's leading epistemologists, Karl Albert, wrote: "However one may judge

¹It is in this sense, which can easily lend itself to misinterpretation, that I have used the expression in the essay *Zur Komposition von Wahrheit und Methode*, jetzt in *Der Sinn für Hermeneutik*, Darmstadt 1994.

Gadamer's inquiry into the 'experience of art' (...), it did not achieve a clarification of the question of truth to the extent that art is concerned by it, nor did it demonstrate that it represents a specific mode of knowledge that would bring about any kind of 'essential knowledge'".¹

There is some justification to these criticisms. Even if there is an important systematic ("positive") section devoted to art in *Truth and Method*, it is striking that it hardly discusses the issue of truth in art. That is all the more disappointing since Gadamer had clearly promised to "liberate" the notion of truth through the experience of art in order to extend it to the human sciences and the entire realm of human understanding. In order to shed light on this most important, even crucial issue, we can now rely on a precious recent collection of texts by Gadamer devoted to the question of art and aesthetics. It was published in 1993 as the 8th volume of Gadamer's Complete Works edition under the title *Kunst als Aussage*. Almost all of its 36 essays were written after *Truth and Method*. One can contend that it contains the most definitive formulation of Gadamer's positive aesthetics which supplements the critique of aesthetic consciousness set forth in 1960. Out of this new book, one of the finest in the *Gesammelte Werke* edition because of this originality, one can also illuminate the aesthetic understanding of truth Gadamer aimed at or presupposed in *Truth and Method*. It should also be noted that there are two volumes of the 10 volume-Complete edition that are devoted to aesthetics. Whereas volume 8 is concerned with philosophical or theoretical accounts of art experience, volume 9 offers for the most part concrete interpretations of art works. Under complete disregard for arithmetics, Gadamer published volume 9 before volume 8. No doubt, he wished to convey in so doing the idea that the experience of the work of art precedes and overwhelms theoretical reflection on aesthetics.

The concise title of volume 8 already reveals its intention: "*Kunst als Aussage*": art speaks, it addresses us in the sense that it has something to say in a way no other medium can approximate. What Gadamer aims at here is a truth which is experienced like an event of meaning that overwhelms us and in which we only participate. This might sound mysterious, but what Gadamer describes here corresponds to a basic experience we make when we are

¹Hans Albert, *Kritik der reinen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen 1994, 41: "Wie immer man die Gadamersche Untersuchung zur 'Erfahrung der Kunst' im einzelnen beurteilen mag (...), eine Klärung der Wahrheitsfrage, soweit die Kunst davon betroffen ist, wurde in ihr ebensowenig erreicht wie der Nachweis, daß sie eine Erkenntnisweise eigener Art repräsentiere, durch die irgendeinen Art von 'Wesenserkenntnis' zustande kommen könne."

confronted with a work of art. Something overcomes us, strikes us, makes us rethink, rediscover our experience, yet we cannot perfectly say what it is. Yet, it was convincing, and much more so in fact than a mere truth statement that could be objectively verified and isolated.

Why is it then that an art work can be more convincing than a philosophical or scientific argument? A novel, an opera, a poem, a movie leave an imprint on us and remain in our subconscious memory in a way that no arguments can equal. The names of Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Mozart immediately mean something to us, they speak to us, revealing an infinite world of experience. This also means, of course, that we learn something from them, but what it is cannot be reduced to a specific message, expression or argument. It even suffices to evoke their names to know what I am talking about. Why is it so? The work of art does not really argue, it makes us see, it opens our eyes, in more ways than one (sensually, intellectually, attentively).

But what we see here is something that sees us too. What is experienced in a work of art - and which can be called truth since it reveals something that is there - is also a self-encounter, an encounter with oneself (or with one's self?). This is a precious indicative of the truth experience art can help us rediscover. We are always intimately concerned by the truth which occurs in a piece of art. An art work with no truth is one that doesn't speak to us, and many clearly don't, for whatever reasons. This hint is precious because it runs counter to the prevailing model of truth heralded by science for which truth is something that is independent from the observer, where our subjectivity does not come into play. While this type of truth might be applicable in some spheres where objectivity is attainable (in the knowledge of nature for instance), it is clearly out of place in the realm of art and in questions that pertain to meaning, where truth functions like an answer to questions in which we are immersed.

So the experience of truth is one which implies our questioning selves. No metaphysical self is implied here, of course, only the notion that we are for ourselves a question, to use Augustine's justly famous phrase. Art is the privileged happening of this self-encounter. It speaks, it addresses us, it elicits a response. An art work thus requires participation, a response (imposed art, say, an obligatory visit to a museum or corporate season tickets for a concert series, will always be dreadful). This response is what Gadamer calls "reading" (*Lesen*). There is also here a richness of meaning in the German verb *Lesen* which cannot be perfectly conveyed in English. For in German, *Lesen* also has the connotation of harvest, vintage, gathering. At the root of *Lesen* lies the idea

that a collection or recollection is taking place. This notion of recollection will enable Gadamer to bestow new meaning on the notion that art is a matter of *mimesis* or “reproduction”. Yet, no “imitation of nature” is implied by this *mimesis*, rather the notion that this reproduction actually takes place in our reading or re-reading selves (The similarity of this notion with the theory of *mimesis* developed by Paul Ricoeur in his three-volume work *Time and Narrative* (1983-85) is particularly striking. It also enables us, and perhaps for the first time, to discover the common hermeneutical ground shared by Gadamer and Ricoeur). Such reading is requested for all forms of art, not only for literary works. To read a painting is to follow in one's own dialogue the lines it only sketches, the world it makes us enter into. To read a piece of music is to let oneself be carried by its rhythm. Its movement has something repetitive, but its unfolding seems to lead somewhere. Where this goes, no one can tell, but it takes us along. But we also read architecture when we walk through a building or a temple and thus get a grasp of its presence, of its giving of space to those who partake in its world.

To read is also, and primarily perhaps, to hear, to let the presence of the work resound in our inner ear. This notion of the inner ear was unfortunately absent from the aesthetics of *Truth and Method*, but it is essential to the understanding of aesthetic or hermeneutical truth. Truth is always something that also goes through our inner ear, where it resounds and comes to be applied to our situation and our questions, that is, basically, to the question that we are for ourselves. One can say, we exist in this world through this capacity of reading or hearing which is never only a taking up of something which is there independently of its being read or heard. It is the reading of the inner ear which confers truth to the encounter provided by the art work. To read or to hear, is, in Heidegger's terminology, to be “there” when truth occurs.¹ Where does this truth take place? A false dichotomy would constrain us to locate it either in the object or in the subject. Nothing of the sort is evident here. The truth can neither be situated in the objective sphere, because it is only there when it is read, applied, heard, strided through like we go through a dance or an architectural masterpiece. It is not subjective or “merely” subjective either because it is what is there, whatever it may be, which compels us to read, to listen and to read further.

In his very latest essays on the truth of art, such as “Word and Image -

¹Vgl. Jean Grondin, "Das innere Ohr", in *Denken der Individualität*. Festschrift für Josef Simon zum 65. Geburtstag (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter Verlag, 1995, 325-334.

so true, so being” and “On the Phenomenology of Ritual and Language” (1992) Gadamer steadfastly relies on the simple and almost tautological notion that in art, “there's something there”, that “it comes out”: *so ist es, es kommt heraus*, he writes, without ever specifying what this neutral “it” amounts to. It is there, this truth of art, yet only if we are also there. There is something reminiscent of Heidegger's fascination with expressions like *es weltet, es gibt* (“world is there”, “there is”) in those eloquently silent formulations of the later Gadamer, *so ist es, es kommt heraus*. It is in such nakedness, with such truth and objectivity that art addresses us, so much so that we don't know anymore who does the speaking and who does the reading.

The ancient notion of “contemplation” can also help to describe what is holding us here. We only have to hear out the notion of “temple” that is at the very heart of the event of contemplation. When we contemplate, we come to see or hear something in a state of awe, but that we can only read if we enter in its space and participate in its unfolding of meaning, one that we can never totally grasp.

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