

Play, Festival, and Ritual in Gadamer: On the theme of the immemorial in his later works¹

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In the following, I intend to follow the sequence of play–festival–ritual in the development of Gadamer's aesthetics in order to sort out a central theme in his philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer began his aesthetics, as is well known, [with] the concept of play. Although Gadamer had already related this concept to the idea of festival in his major work, *Truth and Method* (1960), this relationship did not receive a full examination until his 1974 Salzburg lecture on "The Relevance of the Beautiful."² The same thought has lead Gadamer in his most recent works to the concept of "ritual," through which he attempts to approach a basic phenomenon of human existence, towards which his hermeneutics has been aimed from the beginning. Play–festival–ritual indicate, therefore, the constancy of a theme in Gadamer's work that I would like to characterize in a preliminary way as the immemorial nature of human rationality. I hope that my presentation will be able to clarify what could be meant by this unpalatable sounding philosophical concept.

Gadamer's impressive adaptation of the concept of play resulted from the context of an aesthetic contemplation that aimed at demonstrating the inappropriateness of the modernist concepts coming from Friedrich Schiller's aesthetics. Schiller's fundamental aesthetic category was clearly also play, which he effectively contrasted with the earnestness of theoretical science and practical acting. In play the subject was to be involved with himself alone and, so to say, freed from the pressures that assailed him in science and ethics. For Schiller the autonomy of the aesthetic was grounded on this free play of the subject within himself. Only in the aesthetic was the subject actually free, i.e. free from the rules of knowing and acting.

Gadamer, however, uses just the category of play to demonstrate the *limitations* of Schiller's concept and even those of all modern aesthetics. In the play of art, Gadamer argues, the subject is not restricted to himself, nor is he freed from his theoretical and practical expectations. Just the opposite holds: Play for Gadamer makes evident that the observer of an artwork is interwoven into an event, that he does not control and in which he cannot freely dispose of his normal horizons of experience and expectations. The reader of a novel, the opera listener, or the painting's viewer finds him or herself drawn into a place,

which is experienced as a “more excellent reality.”³ Who can say what happens, when one is taken in by a piece of music, a painting, a building, or a poem? Everything that one could express about this experience in a medium other than the work’s, affects us as terribly trite. What enchants us in a beautiful piece of music? We cannot rightly say. Clearly one may have recourse to a plethora of banal expressions: it is magnificent, masterly played and directed, with precision, better, played with soul, everything imaginable, but in order to understand it one must be there or have been there when the piece was played. One must, so to speak—and this is not a misplaced metaphor for Gadamer—“play along.” Art, Gadamer says as well, is a statement that resists transposition into another medium. Yet, it is also for him a statement, since it is a proposition that comes from the play of art. One needs only invoke any great artwork in order to know what is meant here. If I mention the names of Mozart, Kafka, Titian or Woody Allen, everyone will immediately perceive a whole world of “meaning” and “proposition” is intended. This is also the case, if, for example, one has not read a novel by Kafka in the last ten years. Something impresses itself upon us and in a mysterious manner is not forgotten, unlike the content of a philosophical lecture, perhaps, that is fully forgotten in ten minutes (if one was “there” at all when it was held – surely not often the case). How is it possible that an artwork can so speak to us, can be so much “truer,” than an academic argument? In a work of art there is, therefore, a statement, also a truth, that one can only understand, if one allows oneself to be lifted into its play.

This play is thus not to be thought of as an irresponsible, subjective playing with the work, but rather as the playing of the work with us. According to Gadamer, we are more players in the play, the ones spoken to, and in the happiest case, taken up. In playing we are not so much the ones playing, as the ones played, perhaps even the out-played. Who would say here that play is something purely playful? Is the contrary of play really, always and primarily, seriousness? Does the play of art mean nothing more than a disingenuous “diversion,” “entertainment”? No, answers Gadamer. In play, in every play, there is something like a “sacred seriousness.”⁴ This is true not only for art, but also for athletic games, child’s play, and also for the most trivial social games of all types.

Hence, even when we are playfully concerned with something, we are also seriously there, with “sacred seriousness.” Only someone who does not play along is not serious about the play. One who observes the play with sovereignty from outside acts as a spoilsport, because exactly he does not play along. Playing behavior is a being engrossed in the play. With the metaphor of play, therefore, Gadamer criticizes the irresponsible, subjective understanding of art. The aesthetic experience is not, as Schiller meant, an experience of a sovereign subjectivity, who, all at once and playfully, enters into a completely foreign, imaginary (“aesthetic”) world, where one is freed from the pressures of everyday concerns. The experience of an artwork is rather one of falling into a play that overcomes us and, at the same time, pulls us into it, where our whole being is at stake. For Gadamer this is the true experience of the play: a being drawn into. The contrary to play is, therefore, not seriousness, because play is also something serious, but rather a not taking part [*Nichtdabeisein*].

The concept of play marks thereby the boundary of the objectifiable, that we know from the methodical sciences: “The mode of being of play does not permit the player to relate to the play as to an object. The player knows well what play is and that what he does is ‘only a game,’ but he does not know what he ‘knows’ here.”⁵ This passage emphasizes that the experience of art (and beyond that, as we will see, the experience of understanding, of being with one another, and of speaking with one another) is not a relating to an isolated object, which one could objectify. The play of art does not lie in the artwork that stands in front of us, but lies in the fact that one is touched by a proposition, an address, an experience, which so captures us that we can only play along. Who would want to clinically differentiate here between where the addressing and where the answering lies? Is it the work that places us in question, or is it we who recognize in the work, our questioning or our rhythm? What so fascinated Gadamer in the experience of art is that such an objectifying differentiation is out of place here, and yet that truth is still experienced, a truth to which we belong in an indirect manner.⁶

Therefore, a specific “temporality” belongs to the experience of art, the temporality of taking part for a time.⁷ The play of art will never be conceptually grasped; we may only participate in it to the extent that we allow ourselves to be moved by its magic. When we hear a musical work, we are at the same time inextricably invited to sing along and to dance. We cannot avoid an inner humming along, a tapping of fingers or foot, a following along, almost an accompanying “directing.” In any case, we play along when we hear music. The most authentic mode of execution for music is, therefore, to dance along. In just the same manner we recognize ourselves in a poem or painting; we are captivated by a novel or tragedy. It concerns us; it speaks to us. Gadamer’s thesis concerning the concept of play is that this going along with is not external to the work, but belongs to its statement: it is “art” only if there is this addressing. Every experience of art is one of answering to the address of the work. At the time of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer preferred to speak here, in an almost Neoplatonic manner, of the “representation” (*Darstellung*) that necessarily belongs to art. That means that there is not at first a work *and* in addition to it a representation that depends upon its particular production and context. Every work “exists” only in its representation, i.e. as a representation for someone and for awhile, which is the time of our temporal Dasein. Later Gadamer preferred to speak of completion (*Vollzug*), of a completing together, following a usage from the early Heidegger. Therefore, the volume that collects Gadamer’s aesthetic interpretations for his collected works is entitled *Hermeneutik im Vollzug* (Hermeneutics in Execution).⁸ A work of art always wishes to be executed in this manner, i.e. to be “gone along with.”

It is not surprising that Gadamer adopted the concept of the *festival* to express this going along with. He also endowed festival with paradigmatic meaning for his whole aesthetics, and beyond this, for our whole experience of the world. The reason is that a festival is characterized by a certain temporality into which we are enticed. It occurs at a given time and all who participate in the festival

are elevated to a festive state and, in the best case, are transformed into a festive mood. To the essence of the festival belong, therefore, a time or place that is festive. This essence is revealed in an exemplary fashion in the return of festivals. It is however not the case, as Gadamer rightly notes, that a festival is said to return because it enters a particular order of time, but rather the other way around—the ordering of time occurs due to the returning of the festival.⁹ In this manner our temporal being is given rhythm through festivals, whether we are expressively aware of it or not. In a festival it is clear that those who participate in it are embedded in a play that goes beyond their subjective choice, activity, and intending. Who would ever want to “objectify” a festive mood? It is simply there and we “share” it. A festival—as every work of art, yes, as every understanding—has its being in its accomplishment and the community, in which it is celebrated. Even though most festivals can be traced back to an enactment event or time, they exist only in their contemporary fulfillment by being celebrated. Take, for example, the Christmas celebration, which is called a *Fest* in German. Naturally it refers back to an enactment event, but the Christmas celebration, that is celebrated, is not simply the repetition of an event that happened 2,000 years ago. It concerns primarily the present: the celebration that takes place this year, 2001, and it is this celebration that puts us into a festive mood (or not, but then one speaks not of a celebration but of an obligatory visit to the in-laws). This intonation or attunement of the presence of the celebration happens, for Gadamer, in every experience of art, even of understanding. The celebration or festival fulfills itself only through this representation, in this temporal happening. In it the horizons of the present and the past “fuse.” In the return of the festival there lies a moment of the representation of the past, but also just as much in the re-*presentation* there is just as much a necessary relating to the present. So every festival represents a present *sui generis*. No celebration or festival is like another, also and especially, when the same festival or celebration returns periodically. One is taken up by something that is there, and affects us through its presence, and changes us.

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer particularly emphasized the element of participation in the essence of the festival. Whoever celebrates a feast or joins in, is there, is along with, is immersed or included. In his 1974 Salzburg lecture, he placed the communicative side of taking part and being addressed in the forefront, since the celebrating of a festival includes a potential commonality. One cannot celebrate alone. Gadamer writes in “The Actuality of the Beautiful”: “The festival is a commonality and is the representation of commonality itself in its consummated form.”¹⁰ For, whoever participates in a festival wants to communicate. Communicating means, however, not necessarily an exchange of words, but rather more a being with one another, involvement in others. Being and coming together is more important than agreeing about this or that.¹¹

Even an academic conference can be understood as such a festival. The participants are all there because it is important to them to be there and to be with one another, and not just because they want to be taught something by the lectures. Of course, they are also here because of the papers (this vanity may be granted to the speakers), but much more is at play in the taking part in a

conference or a festival. Although a conference may be very much aimed at research results, there is still something of the character of a play and a festival in it. The word symposium, taken from the Greek, still expresses this: beyond all the perfect organization, beyond all the precise and soon forgotten statements, speeches and results, perhaps the essential aspect is that one is with one another (and eats and drinks), that one encounters others and becomes involved with them in this being together. Even a conference is a returning festival, and this returning has its importance. It has something festive, celebrative and ritualistic. But what returns, what comes over us and occurs, comes from perhaps further away than we can imagine and know, and has in itself something of the reverential stature of the ritual. We may be thankful for such a festive community, which has grown so seldom in our increasingly anonymous world.

It is the same in other festivals: religious, secular, and family festivals. The solidarity of being together that they promise means much more to us than the particular content, which may also be shared. Festivals are so: taking part is everything. In Salzburg one naturally thinks about the return of the "*Festspiele*." Particular attention should also, in my opinion, be given to the beautiful German expression "*Festakt*" that has no real equivalent in the Latin languages or English. It indicates that the festival is itself an act and this is most essential. I have a vivid memory of the *Festakt* in Heidelberg for Hans-Georg Gadamer's ninety-fifth birthday on 11 February 1995. The jubilee was celebrated and honored by many commemorative speeches, but also by music and flowers. I have completely forgotten the content of the speeches. The festival, the *Festakt*, remains for me unforgettable, and to such an extent that I can hope a *Festakt* will occur for his hundredth birthday. That will be a festival! And taking part will be everything. A retention of the perishable lies in the communicative essence of the festival. This, as well, belongs to the temporality of the festival. A festival always celebrates the enduring in the perishing, but in such a way that the enduring as well as the perishing are contemplated at the same time. When we celebrate a person, Christmas, this year's Schubert anniversary, soon a Goethe anniversary, we commemorate the enduring, but this includes a consciousness of the disappearing. When we participate in such a festival, we ask ourselves often with a mixture of gratitude and anxiety, "How many more Christmases will we celebrate together?" The festival always marks a self-collecting of time over itself, a wish to retain the moment, which we also know does not allow itself to be held. So every festival contains a consciousness of human frailty. Every festive joy, yes, every joy, is perhaps the other side of an inexpressible, unutterable.

In this context, Gadamer speaks of the "unique time" of the festival. The time of the festival is a "fulfilled" time, a festive one, where calculating time, that one usually controls, is brought to a standstill.¹² But the time with which we usually calculate and which Gadamer calls "empty" time, is a self-forgetting temporality. It is the time to do something, time for something. Only in the festival do we become aware of time itself, namely as the gift that we are.

From festivals we become aware, therefore, that we stand in time and thereby *nolens volens* in traditions, in which past, present, but also future are intimately

wedded. We like to imagine that we are sovereign over traditions: oh, Christmas, oh, the Schubert jubilee, how does that concern me? Like rulers, we act as if we were the free fabricators of our fate. We so willingly imagine ourselves to be self-conscious, autonomous beings, who control their time and direct their life. In this we forget how much a sending, how much tradition and not-knowing, belong to our fate. We live in a time when one apparently can objectify everything and so control it. There are statistics and prognoses for everything. One can control everything: especially time, naturally the economy, soon the weather, in any case what one eats and so one's appearance, births and finally even the genes, from which we are woven. Before, these were all the results of fate, that occurred and one had to accept. Certainly we can now control much for our own good, but are we not deceiving ourselves in our addiction to control? We control everything as if we were gods. But perhaps, the insanity lies just in this, that we forget our own temporality and mortality. According to Gadamer's hermeneutics we stand much more in traditions than we are ready to admit due to our puritanical drive to control. The return of festivals reminds us of this standing in traditions,¹³ in which we live but continually only in the fleeting presence of our scintillating present.

With this point in mind, Gadamer has spoken of the forgotten ritual character of life in his latest works.¹⁴ What does ritual mean here? It means the totality of our acting, thinking, and speaking that is carried through through mutual agreements, morals, and customs. The correctness of our actions is not always based on laws, proven norms, or formal steps of reasoning. Much of what we do, say, and are, is supported in its correctness by an *ethos*, which, in its hidden effectiveness, is more practiced, and applied, than actually known consciously. This can be established quite clearly, for example, in the trivial forms of greeting and civility, that determine our interaction. We do not really know from where they come and often wonder whether they are not superficial, but we find it all too painful when they are ignored. Against what does one offend if a greeting is overlooked or a word slips out that causes dissonance? The conviction of the later Gadamer is that the arena of rituals in our lives is far more encompassing than what science and even language can objectify. What is not all eclipsed, when an objectification is undertaken? How much of ritual does not enter into our forms of education, of being together and speaking with one another? Does it always concern the objectifiable and expressible content, of which we can become conscious, or rather, are there not at work here other forms of human living that carry and support us?

There are, for example, such immeasurable forms of living that differentiate a Spaniard, from an Indian or an English woman. What is different here? Not so much life, not only biology, but rather ritual, the way and manner of how one lives, without one being able to—or having to—objectify this otherness. One can also consider the difference between the sexes and the rituals of approaching one another. Modern phraseology likes to speak about “culturally” conditioned “roles,” as if we could simply step out of them and could refuse them at will. However, these are not just roles that we play, but there are also forms of life that constitute our being beyond our willing and thinking.

With this concept of the ritual, of the ritualistic in every accomplished understanding, Gadamer continues, if I am correct, his contemplation of the essence of play and the festival, radicalizing and extending, however, its anthropological meaning and range of application. Knowing and correct acting are not dissolvable into objectifications. The effective realm of what obliges and holds us together, stretches far beyond the narrow area of that which is susceptible of an express justification. Therefore, the concept of the ritual, and the silent reverence that it implies, would then replace tradition in Gadamer's philosophy and would at the same time make the concept of tradition more able to be understood. Gadamer's hermeneutics is not a defense of the inherited as such, what one could easily, as has often happened, devalue as a traditionalism, but rather concerns the boundaries of the objectifiable as such. Human understanding, acting, feeling, and loving (for we relate ourselves to the world not only and perhaps not primarily epistemologically) have less to do with planning, control and being consciously aware, and much more to do with a subcutaneous fitting into the rituality of life, in forms of tradition, in an event that encompasses us and that we can grasp only stutteringly. Gadamer's fundamental idea, however, is that this hidden¹⁵ ritual, into which life enters, represents less the boundary of, and more the enabling possibility for human reasonableness and freedom. It is the dream of a freedom aimed *against* the forms of play in tradition and in ritual life, that perhaps embodies a modern and ominous abstraction. The foundation of our reason, our thinking and feeling, is something, to speak with Schelling, "immemorial."¹⁶ It hides "behind" our reason in two senses, i.e. as what reason can never encompass, but at the same time, as what makes reason possible. The later Gadamer is on the way to this "immemorial" character of our experience of the world, when he pursues such untimely categories as those of play, the festival, and the ritual, and follows in this the lead of the experience of truth in art.

¹ This paper was given at a symposium "Der spielende Mensch" held at the University "Mozarteum" in Salzburg, Germany and published in their collection, *Fest und Spiel: Homo Ludens--Der Spielende Mensch* (Musikverlag Bernd Kätzbichler, München/Salzburg, 43-52. [Tr.]

² GW 8, 94-142. Translation in Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful and other essays*, Tr. Nicholas Walker (New York; Cambridge University Press, 1986) [Tr.].

³ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, GW 1, 115.

⁴ GW 1, 107.

⁵ GW 1, 108.

⁶ Concerning this "hermeneutic truth," for which it is constitutive that the one who understands must belong to it, compare my essay "Zur hermeneutische Wahrheit: Heidegger and Augustine," in E. Richter (ed.), *Die Frage nach der Wahrheit* (Frankfurt a. M., 1993), 161-173.

⁷ "Das Dabeisein für eine Weile" [Tr.]

⁸ GW 9, *Aesthetik und Poetik II: Hermeneutik im Vollzug*, Tübingen, 1993. It follows the theoretical volume on aesthetics and poetics, entitled *Kunst als Aussage* [Art as *Proposition*] (GW 8). This last title means that art announces a message, a truth, a proposition, that can only be experienced in an executing, that is, only when one

accepts the work's offer of a conversation. One is reminded further of the title of Gadamer's earlier interpretations of poetry: *Gedicht und Gespräch* [Poem and Conversation] (Frankfurt a. M., 1990).—Concerning Heidegger's understanding of the festival, compare the exceptional dissertation of Alfred Knödler, *Heideggers seinsgeschichtliche Wesensbestimmung des Festes im Ausgang und Abstoß von der Tradition*, Philosophy Faculty, Albert-Ludwigs-University Freiburg, Germany, 1997.

⁹ Die Aktualität des Schönen, GW 8, 132.

¹⁰ GW 8, 130.

¹¹ See GW 8, 416: "It is exactly the distinction of the festive, not that one is in good conversation, but that everyone is involved, for example, through music or through celebratory speeches. If it is not a festival of joy, for example a funeral, it is still similar."

¹² GW 8, 133.

¹³ See GW 8, 138f.: "As finite beings we stand in traditions, whether we know these traditions or not, whether we are conscious of them or so blinded as to believe that we begin anew. This does not affect at all the power of tradition over us. However, it does make a difference if we face the traditions in which we stand and the future possibilities that they preserve for us, or whether one conceitedly imagines that one could turn away from the future into which one is living and program and constitute ourselves in a new way. Clearly tradition does not mean mere conservation, but rather a passing along, but this include that one does not leave things unchanged and merely conserved, but that one says anew and learns to grasp anew something old."

¹⁴ One thinks especially of his essay from 1992: "Wort und Bild—'So wahr, so seiend'" and especially "Zur Phänomenologie von Ritual und Sprache," in GW 8, 373-440. See further the intimations in the conversation at the end of *Gadamer-Lesebuch*, Tübingen, 1997.

¹⁵ This dimension of the "hiddenness" of our most evident experience of the world, constitutes an important motif for the later Gadamer. Recall here the title of his book *Über die Verborgeneheit der Gesundheit* (Frankfurt a. M. 1993) [*The Enigma of Health*, tr. J. Gaiger and N. Walker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996)] as well as the subsection title, with which his recent study "Zur Phänomenologie von Ritual und Sprache" begins: "The hiddenness of language" (GW 8, 373).

¹⁶ For Gadamer's reference to Schelling's thinking of the immemorial, see GW 2, 103, 334; GW 3, 236; GW 8, 366; GW 10, 64. But it also concerns here a relatively late adaptation of the concept of the immemorial, which is missing in *Truth and Method* (concerning this see my essay on "Die späte Entdeckung Schellings in der Hermeneutik," in I. M. FEHÉR und W. G. JACOBS (Hg.), *Zeit und Freiheit : Schelling – Schopenhauer – Kierkegaard – Heidegger*, Akten der Fachtagung der Internationalen Schellinggesellschaft Budapest, 24. bis 27. April 1997, Budapest, Ketef Bt., 1999, 65-72). In *Truth and Method* Gadamer spoke of the "substantiality," that lies behind every "subject." See the later exposition on the concept of substantiality in GW 8, 327: "Substance means here that supporting that does not come forth, that is not raised to the light of reflective consciousness, that never completely expresses itself, but that is yet necessary so that the light, consciousness, expression, communication, and the word that reaches can be. Substance is the 'spirit that may bind us together'. Rilke's phrase that I quote here indicates that spirit is more than each individual knows and knows of himself."