TRANSMISSION AND CONSTRUCTION: GADAMER AND BENJAMIN ON THE POLITICS OF INTERPRETATION

By

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Abstract

In this thesis, I compare the theories of interpretation of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Walter Benjamin. Gadamer and Benjamin explicate the proper task of historical interpretation in opposition to historicism. Historicism, for them, is the view that historical interpretation must, in Ranke's well-known formulation, be true to history "as it really was." Historicists view the temporal distance which separates the present from the past as an epistemological gulf, necessitating the formulation of a method which recaptures historical reality.

In the first chapter, I discuss Gadamer's criticism of, and alternative to historicism, as explicated in *Truth and Method*. According to Gadamer, since the inquirer's understanding is formed by the same tradition that provides the context of significance in which the historical subject matter must be understood, there is a horizon of meaning that unites the inquirer and her subject matter. This horizon, tradition, sets limits which, though always open to revision and extension, constrain the range of legitimate interpretations, revealing a relatively stable historical world. Crucial to Gadamer's position is his view that the transmission of tradition's content is a process which liberates works from the particularity of their origins in specific conditions of production and reception, integrating them in the universalizing context of tradition. Thus, temporal distance is viewed as positive.

Benjamin challenges this view. In the second chapter of the thesis, I trace the development of Benjamin's theory of interpretation in terms of his increasing suspicion of transmission as a process that is controlled by interests that exclude some works and interpretations from tradition as it is handed down, in favour of those that

stabilize the self-understanding of the ruling class. For Benjamin, the process of transmission does *not* serve to reveal works in their universality, but rather continually reaffirms a complex of interpretations that serve *particular* interests. Benjamin's alternative is a procedure which uncovers the particular social origins of dominant interpretive frameworks, thus freeing the contents of tradition for new interpretations constructed from the perspective of those who are marginalized in the present. I conclude that Benjamin's critique of transmission reveals important political presuppositions in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

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Preface

To prevent misunderstanding, a prefatory note will be helpful. This thesis is a comparison of the views of two philosophers who share the belief that culture and consciousness are historically conditioned. In arguing that, even from within a culture conceived in thoroughly historical terms, it is possible to affirm its animating ideals and values, Gadamer makes the crucial assumption that one reason common ideals can be thus affirmed is that their creation and transmission is the product of the common work of the members of that culture. Benjamin questions this assumption and argues that those who have been excluded from participation in forming the content of tradition should not rely on it as a backdrop for the evaluation of historical interpretations. Both Gadamer and Benjamin presuppose the importance of a broadly-based participation in the formation of a culture's ideals; but, while the former assumes this participation has, to a significant extent, been a historical reality, the latter does not.

The thesis does not, therefore, deal with those who believe that the validity of a culture's ideals has nothing to do with their being formed through common participation. There are many who suppose that the understanding of ideals is the preserve of those with special insight into truth. Defenders of these kinds of cultural ideals may find in these pages another apology for the activities of politically correct hordes storming (or perhaps just trying to find their niche in) academia, leaving the destruction of "higher" values in their wake. To these defenders, I would point out that the confrontation between Gadamer and Benjamin involves two men who believe it important that ideals are the common product of a culture.

This thesis deals with the philosophical implications of accepting a questionable assumption about the historical reality of common participation in the transmission of culture. The appropriateness, or not, of members of any particular contemporary group calling themselves "marginalized," in the sense that I use the term here, is not discussed. And the concerns of those who believe that self-proclaimed oppressed groups are merely kicking up a lot of dust and obscuring the visibility of trans-historical ideals are certainly not addressed.

Finally, I make clear in the conclusion that there are good reasons to question the plausibility of some of Benjamin's presuppositions, so his views should not be identified with mine. My attempt to draw out implications of the views of one thinker, by contrasting them with the views of another is not an attempt to be politically "engaged."

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"The fact that there are works of art is a given for aesthetics. It tries to establish under what conditions this situation exists. But it does not raise the question whether the realm of art may not perhaps be a realm of diabolical splendour, a realm of this world, and therefore against God in its deepest core and unbrotherly in its utterly aristocratic spirit. Accordingly, it does not ask whether ~~their~~ there *should be* works of art."

- Max Weber, "Science as Vocation"

Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to explore common philosophical themes in the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Walter Benjamin. Central to the endeavours of both men is overcoming a Romantic-historicist view of history which yields "understandings" of the past at the expense of the latter's living connection with the present. The attempt to, in Ranke's famous formulation, reconstruct the past "as it really was" involves the historicist in a futile epistemological procedure in order to see a chimerical historical object unaffected by the interpreter's own situation. The most compelling link between Gadamer and Benjamin is their attempt to see beyond historicist methodological self-effacement. Both thematize the inescapability and productivity of the situation out of which the interpreter comes to any given past.

In the notes for his never-completed major work on the history of Paris in the nineteenth century, Benjamin quotes the following passage from the beginning of Honoré de Balzac's *Le Peau de chagrin*, in which the protagonist, Raphael, wanders into an immense four storey antique store. Benjamin reads the pathos of this passage as that of a historicist, for whom the past consists of a collection of cultural objects to be surveyed:

> The young stranger first compared . . . three rooms stuffed with civilization, with sects, with divinities, with masterpieces, with royalties, with debaucheries, with reason and with madness to a mirror of many facets, each one representing a world . . The sight of so many national or individual existences, attested by these human tokens which had survived them, in the end altogether numbed the young man's senses . . . The ocean of furniture, of inventions, of

> fashions, of works, of ruins, composed an endless poem for him . . . He clung to every joy, seized on every pain, took hold of every formula of existence and generously scattered his life and his emotions among the simulacra of this plastic and empty world . . . He was suffocating under the debris of fifty vanished centuries, he was sick with all these human thoughts, done in by all the luxury and art . . . If modern chemistry boils creation down to a gas, does not the soul just as capriciously concoct terrible poisons by the rapid concentration of its pleasures . . . or its ideas? Do not men perish under the devastating effect of some moral acid which has suddenly spread throughout their inner being?[1]

In contrast with this panorama of cultural objects preserved in their otherness from the present, whether in an incredible antique store or a museum, Gadamer and Benjamin want to transform the relation of past and present. The historicist problematic of interpreting so as to be true to the past is considered to be fruitless. In its stead is a concern with the *actuality of the past*. Not that historical explanation will no longer have its place. But if the task of understanding the meaning of the past is to be possible at all, then any historical explanation must occur in the context of an understanding of the explanandum's meaning for us, now. If historical explanation is delusively absolutized in order to get at some historical object in itself, then, while it may induce the vertigo of a browser in a many-roomed antique store, it will not yield any "pure" understanding. For all understanding, they argue, is situated understanding. Acknowledging the situatatedness of understanding, we can avoid suffocation under the weight of ever-newly unearthed and allegedly re-experienced world-views which remain, for the historicist, an unactualized proliferation of curiosities.

Gadamer explicates the connection between the past and the interpreter's situation in terms of the mutual implication of understanding – any understanding of anything whatsoever – and self-understanding. Here Gadamer follows Heidegger, whose analytic of *Dasein* in *Being and Time* is the basis of a revolution that breaks

with the Enlightenment foundationalism which continued to affect nineteenth century hermeneutics. Gadamer appropriates Heidegger's reconceived hermeneutical circle to effect a transformation of the self-understanding of the human sciences. And his interest in an understanding that proceeds from the lived context of *Dasein* leads Gadamer to his well-known rehabilitation of tradition.

The situation of the present interpreter is one that has come down from the past. But the past's determination of the present exceeds the interpreter's ability to thematize or explicitly understand that determination. Since he can never test all of the prejudices in the vast body of a tradition that has delivered the present, the interpreter must acknowledge tradition's prior authority. Criticism of tradition is possible, but not all of tradition can be criticized at once.

There is another significant aspect of the rehabilitation of tradition. Gadamer wants to harness the effectiveness of the present, which always shines its particular interpretive light on the past. But that does not mean that interpretation is surrendered to fleeting, subjectivistic whims. An acknowledgement of a situation as what has come down by the grace of tradition sets up a binding covenant between past and present. The continuity of transmission, with its consciousness-exceeding moment, implies that what has come down is sedimented with the valuations of those who have handed it down. And the process of the transmission of its content is part of what has made the interpreter who he is. Gadamer claims that this mediation of a value-laden past with the present forms an unfathomable substratum which unites a past object with an interpreter situated in the present. It is this sedimented substratum of transmission that replaces the Romantic-historicist dogma of an underlying expressive "life" as what ensures that interpretations are grounded rather than arbitrary.

If Gadamer's interest in hermeneutics derives from his philological activities

as a classicist, Benjamin's first formulations of an anti-historicist position are expressed in his doctoral dissertation on the early Romantic theory of art criticism. From this research, Benjamin salvaged and applied the concept of the "truth-content" of the work of art: that in the work which escapes the relativization of a historical explanation of its creation.[2] However, this still implied a metaphysical concept of truth which from the point of view of a historical consciousness must be seen as a regression. In Benjamin's later writings, the emphasis on the truth of art is largely displaced by a new orientation to the present: the relation to a given past from the interpreter's situation is the alternative to historicist explaining-away. This change was accompanied, and to a large extent precipitated by a broadening of Benjamin's object of study from primarily literature and other art, to the wider cultural field and its history.

His evaluation of what had become of culture and society as transmitted to his own time prevents Benjamin from setting up tradition as the common ground of interpretation. Rather, the excessive moment in the transmission of the cultural heritage, which forms present consciousness beyond possible self-consciousness of how it does so, becomes the site of a political confrontation with the past as it has been handed down. Sensitivity to the differences within what others monolithically designate tradition, as if the latter had a uniform epistemological-ethical function in the formation of consciousness, leads Benjamin to view the past as split. Historical being, as the product of the *transmitted* past, is for Benjamin a conception which threatens to assimilate the present, emptying it of the unique possibilities it raises. For Gadamer, assimilation and innovation are moments within the tradition. Benjamin, by contrast, decisively rejects the image of the past as that which is linked to the present by a continuum of effects. Instead, the work of the historian begins by destroying the ap-

pearance of continuity of the past with the present. A past is dislodged from its location in a spiritual substrate and becomes available for new constructions which give fresh insight into both that past as well as present reality.

The shattering of given contexts in favour of newly configured ones identifies the constructivist element in Benjamin. It can also be termed his allegorical impulse, which Benjamin discovered in the writings of German baroque playwrights. According to Benjamin, the allegorist is unable to form the finely created organic totalities of classical art; nor, as in the romantic symbol, does the transcendent appear in allegorical works. This artistic form is politicized in the later Benjamin in the service of a view of history which remains radically open to simultaneous revision of the past and discovery of new possibilities in the present. Thus, what Gadamer identifies as the most enduring impulse in his own thought, his "hermeneutical option for continuity,"[3] will be confronted in this thesis with Benjamin's allegorical/constructivist procedure: the draining of the tradition-bound significance of things in preparation for reconfiguration in a politically-charged interpretation.

It will be useful at the outset to formulate as directly as possible the conflict between the two modes of interpretation. What Benjamin would object to in Gadamer is the valorization of the ultimate unfathomability of transmission. Who chooses the objects, with their built-in valuations, that are to be handed down? On what basis are things excluded from the effective-historical context of tradition? Is not the image of the past that has come down to the present in this context a very partial one, an image that helps to stabilize the self-interpretations of current arbiters of the cultural heritage?

It is necessary to determine whether Heidegger's explication of the thrownness of *Dasein*, which Gadamer unfolds in terms of the primacy of tradition as the condi-

tion of understanding, can be further delineated by exposing the concrete, historical structures that effect the transmision of tradition.[4] Though it may be true that the excessive moment in transmission can never be *fully* explicated, it is not therefore the case that some nameless authority gives us the present.[5] Rather it is people, people whose determinate interest in stabilizing or destabilizing a given content of the cultural heritage identifies them as part of either a class that benefits from its mode of transmission, or a class whose productions are largely excluded from transmitted culture.

From the perspective of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, a series of questions can in turn be directed against Benjamin's project of recovering repressed elements of the past on the basis of their resonance with a particular present. Most importantly: Can an approach that locates the present as the necessary and productive standpoint of interpretation, while denying that the present is always and only the product of a transmitted past, really be an alternative to historicizing empathy? Is it not the case that such a procedure must either still set some elements from the inherited past against others and thus remain within the domain of philosophical hermeneutics, or else relapse into a subjectivism which leaves the past open to the whims of a de-situated and thus arbitrary present? Such an arbitrariness is what Georg Lukács termed a "jumble sale" view of history, which sees the cultural heritage as "a heap of lifeless objects in which one can rummage around at will, picking out whatever one happens to need at the moment . . . something to be taken apart and stuck together again in accordance with the exigencies of the moment."[6] Ultimately, for Gadamer, a radical questioning of tradition on a political basis, a "universalized emancipatory reflection,"[7] leaves interpretation with precisely that set of Enlightenment prejudices (against tradition) which led to the dilemmas of nineteenth century hermeneutics and

historicism.

Despite the fact that they struggled with the same problems and came to oppose some of the same predecessors, there is no evidence of any sustained engagement by Gadamer with Benjamin's writings. And even though Gadamer and Benjamin raise questions of the continuity and discontinuity in historical discourse that have become a major focus in contemporary discussions (Foucault, Derrida, Ricouer, and others), there is no significant comparison of Gadamer and Benjamin in the secondary literature.[8]

There are good reasons to be wary of the kind of compare-and-contrast work that I will pursue. On a stylistic level, the contrast between the writing of Gadamer and Benjamin is extreme. Gadamer's *Truth and Method* remains the central text of philosophical hermeneutics. His writing is mostly expansive and conversational in tone, and the general emphasis comes through clearly, though there are numerous opaque passages, sometimes on important details. Benjamin by contrast, presents greater hermeneutical difficulties. He has left no definitive exposition of a theory of interpretation from his later period. Most of his methodological observations occur in the context of reviews of the writings of others, or in notes to uncompleted works. Added to this, his writing is often elliptical and cryptic, and often seemingly contradictory. Thus any exposition, such as the one that I will present, which attempts to contrast a coherent Benjaminian "position" with the most established voice in twentieth century German interpretation theory risks oversimplification and distortion.

I begin the first chapter by reviewing the rise of historicist thinking as Gadamer presents it in *Truth and Method*. This is followed by a discussion of Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition. In the second chapter, I discuss Benjamin's treatment of the same complex of problems, and make explicit his implicit critique of Gadamer's

philosophical hermeneutics. And in the conclusion, I summarize the main point of opposition between Gadamer and Benjamin, and suggest that both of their positions suffer from a certain oversimplification of the efficacy of traditions in historical understanding and interpretation.

Notes to Introduction

1. Honoré de Balzac, quoted in Walter Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," trans. Leigh Hafrey and Richard Siebruth, in Gary Smith ed., *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 81.

2. Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," in *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 116-200. Only recently, Gadamer noticed important affinities of his own thought with early Romantic theory of art criticism, particularly that of the Friedrich Schlegel: "[O]n one issue that has for a long time especially occupied my attention – the issue of '*intentio auctoris*' or the intention of the author – I clearly am in much greater proximity to Schlegel than I had previously realized. This connection has primarily to do with the emphasis Schlegel puts on the concept of the work. On this point, I have long had to defend myself vehemently against the spirit of the times." Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Logocentrism," in Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer eds., *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* (Albany: State University of New York Press), p. 123. It is precisely this "concept of the work" that Benjamin had found valuable in Schlegel, and he makes use of it in his own defence "against the spirit of the times," notably in his polemic against Friedrich Gundolf, whose well-known critical work on Goethe attempted to read his literature in terms of his biography. See Benjamin's "Goethe's Elective Affinities," in *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, pp. 297-360, esp. pp. 320ff.

3. Gadamer, "Letter to Dallmayr," in Michelfelder and Palmer eds., p. 97.

4. Here I should not be accused of confusing the merely ontic with the ontological, since the point is that what Gadamer sees as the ontological function of tradition is infected with unexamined ontic presuppostions – particularly, political contingencies.

5. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second ed., trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 280. It is possible that the resonances of his claims regarding the namelessness of the authority of tradition are what prompted Jürgen Habermas's assertion that Gadamer "renders an account of being as tradition." *Philosophical-Political Profiles* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1983), p. 194. Gadamer admits, in an interview, that in the excessive moment in transmission, the outpacing of our consciousness by the formative power of tradition, "lies a kind of fatefulness," though he is quick to add that he opposes Heideggerian formulations like "Being sends," which Gadamer views as unnecessarily obscure. "Interview: Historicism and Romanticism," in Dieter Misgeld and

Graeme Nicholson eds., *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 128.

6. Georg Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," trans. Rodney Livingstone, in Theodor Adorno et. al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977), p. 54. The context of Lukács's comments here is a polemic against Ernst Bloch, who he sees as mired in modernist relativism. That Lukács would apply the "jumble sale" view of history charge against Benjamin seems likely since he elsewhere finds in Benjamin an exemplary theory of an aesthetic modernism that he, Lukács, opposes. See Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism," in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1963), pp. 17-46, esp. pp. 41ff, as well as the selection from his two-volume *Aesthetics*, translated as "On Walter Benjamin," where Lukács concludes, regarding Benjamin's theory of allegory, that "[w]here the world of objects is no longer taken seriously, the seriousness of the world of the subject must vanish with it." In Judith Marcus and Zoltán Tar eds., *Foundations of the Frankfurt School of Social Research* (New Brunswick, USA.: Transaction Books, 1984), p. 178. The objectivity that Lukács ascribes to history would no doubt be viewed by Gadamer as another (Marxist) historicism; nevertheless, they are united in the worry about the subjectivism that results from failing to take what has come down through tradition seriously enough.

7. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 42.

8. A partial exception is Sándor Radnóti's essay, "Benjamin's Dialectic of Art and Society" (in Smith ed., pp. 126-157), where Radnóti highlights some affinities and contrasts between Gadamer and Benjamin, though Gadamer is largely left behind after the first few pages of the essay. See also chapter 4, "Modernity, Eternity, Tradition" in Peter Osborne's *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 113-159, that includes separate, but not unrelated discussions of Gadamer and Benjamin, the upshot of which is that both are found wanting in crucial respects. Passing references to contrasts with Gadamer occur in three book-length studies of Benjamin: See Ranier Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1996), pp. 4-5, 17-20, 192-194, John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 290-300, and Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), pp. 52-54.

Chapter One: Gadamer's Spiritualization of Transmission

According to a view that has become widely accepted, modernity is a time of the increasing prevalence of historical consciousness. It is the reflexive consciousness that the social structures, political institutions, artworks, great texts – in short, all productions of a culture, including consciousness itself – are conditioned by the historical circumstances in which they are produced. Of course, many thinkers still believe that the developments of modernity do *not* imply that traditional philosophical questions – like those about the nature of man, and the political organization that best fits with this nature – have been relegated to the dustbin. They deny that the awareness of the efficacy of history requires the acceptance of a belief in a *radically* historical human world. But for Gadamer, historical consciousness is the inescapable starting point of any reflection on the proper mode of interpreting what has come down from the past.

It is but a short step from historical consciousness to historicism. Historicism, according to Gadamer, is the attempt to understand the past purely on its own terms. This goal sets up an epistemological dilemma: Since the reality of the past is different from that of the present, how can we understand it in its difference, if our own understanding is conditioned by other circumstances? How can we avoid projecting our own conceptions onto the past? Broadly speaking, and with numerous variations, historicism's programme for understanding the past entails leaving our own conceptions behind and thinking the past in its own conceptions. A crucial aspect of such an understanding is explaining the different circumstances that conditioned the con-

sciousness of actors and authors of the past. It is the step from historical consciousness to historicism that Gadamer wants to obviate. Philosophical hermeneutics is his alternative.

The central argument of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* defuses the historicist dilemma: Although the past is indeed different from the present, it is not wholly other. The past is still with us through the continuity of tradition. In fact, when a past object, such as a text, enters a context of transmission, it gains a freedom from its origins in a particular set of historical circumstance which actually increases its value for later interpreters. Thus a procedure oriented towards bridging the distance that allegedly divides the present from the past by inquiring into the circumstances which reveal the text in its unique otherness will not arrive at a true understanding. Such a procedure only places the text back in its historical context, occluding the possibility of the text challenging the present. Historicism merely explains the text away, allowing it to sink back into the context in which it was created. That is how the past becomes an unactualized collection of curiosities interesting only for what they can tell us about a different time.

The suffocation of Balzac's Raphael in the antique store has a counterpart in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel observes the consciousness that surveys the past world of antiquity, and that interprets the objects which have been left over as signs of a world that is gone forever. For this consciousness, the objects of antiquity are "beautiful fruit already picked from the tree, which a friendly Fate has offered us, as a girl might set the fruit before us."[1] Gadamer refers to this passage and cites what follows:

> But just as the girl who presents the plucked fruit is more than Nature that presented it in the first place with all its conditions and elements – trees, air,

> light, and so on – insofar as she combines all these in a higher way in the light of self-consciousness in her eyes and in her gestures, so also the spirit of destiny which gives us these works of art is greater than the ethical life and reality of a particular people, for it is the *interiorizing recollection* of the still *externalized* spirit manifest in them. It is the spirit of tragic fate that gathers all these individual gods and attributes of substance within one Pantheon, into spirit conscious of itself as spirit.[2]

Gadamer comments: "Here Hegel states a definitive truth, inasmuch as the essential nature of the historical spirit consists not in the restoration of the past but in *thoughtful mediation with contemporary life*."[3] A consciousness that considers the past, here antiquity, as an object that has forever vanished from the horizon of the present and can only be reconstructed is an unhappy consciousness which relates to the past "externally," at best recovering "the dead elements of their [the Greeks'] outward existence."[4] But a consciousness that sees the past, not as bound to its original conditions, but rather as it has been taken up in the subsequent course of history will relate to it as a spiritual reality that still addresses us today.

In Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, the spirit of history, here presented in the image of a servant girl, is recast in a finite version, as tradition: Gadamer rejects the possibility that the mediation of tradition could ever lead to Hegel's Absolute Knowledge. However, he is Hegelian insofar as the present is the site of mediation with a transmitted past that has itself been mediated back through time. In what follows, I provide an interpretation of *Truth and Method* with the intention of showing Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition as the decisive element of his surpassing of the historicist problematic.

1. The Historicist Problematic

According to Hegel, the community is the bearer of Spirit. That is also Gadamer's view, and he begins *Truth and Method* with a recovery of the humanist concept of the *sensus communis*, along with the related concepts of *Bildung*, judgment and taste in the first volley of his battle against the totalizing pretensions of scientific methodology. If the plausibility and resonance which these concepts once had can be shown, then their subsequent neglect or reduction in the Enlightenment might be questioned.

The untranslatable German term *Bildung* encompasses the implications of cultivation or self-formation which are the goals of humanistic education. Herder's definition, "rising up to humanity through culture" (quoted in TM 10), and Gadamer's own, "the properly human way of developing one's natural talents and capacities" (TM 10), give some sense of its resonances. But these formulations should not be taken as if the process has a goal external to it. Rather, it is its own goal: "*Bildung* is not achieved in the manner of a technical construction, but grows out of an inner process of formation and cultivation, and therefore constantly remains in a state of continual *Bildung*" (TM 11). Clearly, what Gadamer wants to preserve here is the idea of a mode of knowing which does not rely on a methodology based on general principles, aimed at repeatable results. Rather, when a properly cultivated human inquires into his world, he will employ a sense of "tact," a "tacit and unformulable" knowledge of what is appropriate (TM 16). And this sense of tact that all well-formed humans have links the process of *Bildung* with the *sensus communis* – the common sense for what is appropriate.

Of decisive importance for Gadamer is that the *sensus communis* is something that is produced and preserved by a historical culture in its existence through time. It

cannot be reduced to a set of formulas, nor does it refer to a capacity of the human mind:

> According to Vico, what gives the human will its direction is not the abstract universality of reason but the concrete universality represented by the community of a group, a people, a nation, or the whole human race. Hence developing this communal sense is of decisive importance for living. (TM 21)

In short, the *sensus communis* is a "communal sense for what is true and right" (TM 21) which goes beyond the written laws and forms the substantive connective tissue that binds people together. (Note, however, the ambiguity of the concept as Gadamer attributes it to Vico: does the common sense extend only to a group, or does it really encompass "the whole human race"?) The human sciences, too, claims Gadamer, must presuppose a substantive mutual understanding incorporating normative elements. It is this presupposed understanding, whose origin and scope by far predate and exceed the single self-consciousness of any particular inquirer, which forms the basis of sound judgments regarding matters human (TM 21).

The concept of taste also implies a link to the common sense: "The mark of good taste is being able to stand back from ourselves and our private preferences" (TM 36). This does not mean that an individual merely renounces his own judgment in favour of one which is presumed to empirically obtain in his community. Rather, showing good taste means that someone judges in accordance with the highest values that are actually embodied, however imperfectly, in the common sense that is also his own. Furthermore, taste is not confined to a narrowly conceived aesthetic realm. Rather, it is a universal sense for what is appropriate in a given situation (TM 38).

This universal scope and communal basis of the sense for what is appropriate is what most needs recovery, according to Gadamer, if the human sciences are to pass beyond the ultimately futile attempt, undertaken by the Enlightenment, to objec-

tively ground methodological conceptions. However, in good Hegelian fashion, Gadamer notes that the recovery of the humanist legacy is not a simple return to the past. Rather, it is only after the Enlightenment that we can thematize precisely those elements which humanism presupposed (TM xxxiv). Gadamer's account of a limited reflective relation to tradition is the result of that thematization. Before explicating this thematization, it is necessary to follow his account of the subjectivization of aesthetics and its consequences for the human sciences.

Kant appears as a major villain in Gadamer's construal of the subjectivization of aesthetics. While Gadamer does explain that there are elements in Kant's aesthetics that resist the trend toward subjectivization, it is precisely these elements that are subsequently occluded, particularly in Schiller. Of course, the subjectivization of aesthetics does not mean that, for Kant, an aesthetic judgment is merely a personal statement about one's attraction, or not, to a work of art. What Kant does argue is that when a person judges an object beautiful, he is not reporting his own inclination toward that object, but is claiming that everyone else who judges correctly will also find it beautiful. The judgment does not, however, imply that the object itself has the quality of being beautiful. This contrasts with empirical judgments about the world as objectively grounded in Kant's first *Critique*. Thus the *sensus communis* functions here as the conditional link between what is going on in the minds – i.e. the free play of the imagination and understanding – of various subjects, a link which facilitates the communication of aesthetic judgments.

The difference from the humanist concept of the *sensus communis* should be clear. The humanists did not radically separate the source of validity of aesthetic judgments from other judgments about the world. Aesthetic judgments operated in the same way as all other judgments: from the actually operative common bond in the

community. For Gadamer, the impoverishment of the concept of the *sensus communis* exemplifies the consequences of the Enlightenment's foundationalist project, with its orientation towards the natural sciences, for all those fields of inquiry that could not live up its rigorous standards of objective validity.

Another element of Kant's aesthetics that was highly influential is his concept genius. A genius is uniquely gifted by nature to furnish for himself new rules for artistic creation which go beyond the obtaining standards in a community. However, as Gadamer notes, Kant maintains that "taste is a necessary discipline for genius" (TM 55). The artist's innovations must not go so far that his works can no longer be appreciated. Yet insofar as he is innovating, there must also be something akin to genius of the artist in those who appreciate his work (TM 56). It is this implication of Kant's aesthetics which is subsequently expanded, far beyond the bounds of Kant's intentions, into the idea of *Erlebniskunst*.

In later thinkers, that which is akin to genius in the receiver becomes a general "feeling for life." The term *Erlebnis* comes to refer to a kind of intense, immediate, but fleeting experience which stands in contrast to the ordinary, and reveals something that transcends the course of everyday experience (TM 69). It is easy to see that in the formulation of this concept there is an implicit devaluing of the taste which domesticates this transcendent feeling. In the nineteenth century, this feeling starts to carry the freight of a protest against the rationalism of the Enlightenment and industrializing society in general (TM 62-63). It is ironic, of course, that the protest represented by an *Erlebnis* itself presupposes elements of the epistemology which devalues all knowledge claims outside of science.

Influential in this development is Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, in which Kant's concept of play is misinterpreted as an anthropological

category. Schiller recommends the cultivation of the play impulse as a corrective to the rationalization of society. The purpose of an aesthetic education is to cultivate that part of one's humanity which has become alienated. Yet since the object of this education, art, does not give any knowledge about the world, the consequence of Schiller's project is only to further entrench the opposition between the aesthetic and practical life (TM 82). As that which stands outside the objectivizing judgments of science, the aesthetic consciousness, freed completely from the structure of a taste that is communally formed, "no longer admits that the work of art and its world belong to each other" (TM 85).

The only commonality that remains is that by virtue of the feeling for life, all are equally free, at least potentially, from having to submit to any kind of communally-formed evaluative structure. But judgments freed of a substantive common sense are completely arbitrary, which, for Gadamer, means "hermeneutic nihilism" (TM 95). Gadamer quotes Valéry, who claimed of his poetry: "My verses have whatever meaning is given them" (cited in TM 95n183). Even when artists sought to challenge the concept of genius, as Valéry did, they remained trapped within its dominance, transferring responsibility for the work's greatness to the reception of the subject, rather than reconsidering the possibility that the work itself, as distinguished from the consciousnesses of its creator and receiver, is the locus of value. Detaching a work from the subjectivity of its creator and receiver is only possible if there is a common structure of evaluative frameworks in which works are understood, preserved and understood again through the mediation of tradition. But this option had been lost.

Gadamer points out that the Romantic aesthetic consciousness is essentially historicist. Having relativized aesthetic creation and reception as only subjective in character, the aesthetic consciousness regards all past works of art as so many expres-

sions of life. Thus the artist feels free to assimilate elements of any past work into his own. Gadamer gives the example of a the kind of architecture in which past stylistic features are incorporated at will (TM 86). The artist judges the appropriateness of his assimilation, not on the basis of the evaluative framework which still unites the present with the past object through the mediation of tradition, but rather on the basis that they are all expressions of life, which he is free to judge on the basis of his present feeling for life. He does not consider it his task to thoughtfully *integrate* the past and present. Under the levelling gaze that abstracts the work from the value-laden context with which it has come down, the challenge that might be presented by a work considered as bound together with the artist's own is obviated. This context is dismissed as extraneous to its aesthetic value. The procedure is then dogmatically supplemented with the assertion of a right to judge on the basis of an alleged universal anthropological characteristic.

The fundamental problem with the idea of *Erlebniskunst* is that it has forgotten the integrative continuity of the being of man: "Basing aesthetics on *Erlebnis* leads to an absolute series of points, which annihilates the unity of the work of art, the identity of the artist with himself, and the identity of the person understanding or enjoying the work" (TM 95). To this annihilation, Gadamer contraposes the programme of a hermeneutical understanding of art: "art imposes an ineluctable task on existence, namely to achieve that continuity of self-understanding which alone can support human existence, despite the demands of the absorbing presence of the momentary aesthetic impression" (TM 96). In other words, there *is* a disruptive moment in art, but "we sublate the discontinuity and atomism of isolated experiences in the continuity of our own existence" (TM 97). Understanding the integration of aesthetic experience into the continuous whole of our existence is the task of aesthetics.

Gadamer here follows Heidegger's analytic of *Dasein*, which he expands into an account of play as the being of the work of art. I will not explicate all of the details and consequences of this account. I restrict myself to following those threads of the argument which prepare for Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition.

Gadamer wants to free the concept of play from the subjectivist connotations it carries in modern aesthetics. Play properly refers not to something going on in the mind of someone standing before a work, rather it is "the mode of being of art itself" (TM 101). Here Gadamer relies on the resonances of the German word: *Spiel* means both game, in the sense of what the players are playing at, and the playing of the players. *Spiel* also means play as in drama, a sense also preserved in English. The meaning of play, or a game, cannot be determined by examining the consciousness of a player – it is not to be reduced to the free play of the imagination and the understanding. Rather, the player is caught up in the movement of a game which transcends him; the game "merely reaches presentation in the players" (TM 103). Play cannot be understood as if it had a ground in the player's mind, but is itself a structure in which the mind of the player is enmeshed (TM 107). What Gadamer is getting at is the idea that play must be understood as an autonomous structure that transcends both the self-consciousness any one participant, and the game considered as a static object, whose empirical features might be enumerated.

Art is play. More specifically, art is a play *for someone*: it necessarily refers to a receiver who is caught up in its structure. Thus art must be distinguished from those games that do not have an audience (TM 108-109). In fact, the player "experiences the game as a reality which surpasses him" (TM 109) – he is but the vehicle of the play's coming to presentation for an audience. But again, the audience is also only experiencing art insofar as it too is caught up in the play: "in being played the

play speaks to the spectator through its presentation" (TM 116). Though Gadamer's account of art as play is vague at times, the polemical point is clear enough: Art can only be adequately understood if the priority of the work to the subjectivity of a receiver is acknowledged. Play is not an anthropological impulse that is cultivated when the world is viewed aesthetically, it is a fundamental structural quality of certain experiences – experiences that are, phenomenologically, as basic as those that justify empirical judgments.

Gadamer tries to explain the event-character of the experience of art by referring to Kierkegaard's idea of the contemporaneity of Christian salvation (TM 127-128). The redeeming act of Christ is not a historically fixed event to be understood by reference to the circumstances of his times. Rather, though it has a certain priority in relation to any human consciousness, the redeeming act must be made present and re-actualized in the consciousness of the believer. So also the work of art is not historically bound to its origin, but is an autonomous structure of value that is actualized every time it is experienced. In being thus actualized, the encounter with the work, like the encounter with the message of salvation, disrupts the consciousness of the receiver, but then returns him to his life context with a heightened understanding. The experience is an *event*, in the sense of a sublation: it preserves what has been experienced in a transformed understanding.

Gadamer explains how various art forms, including painting and architecture, share in the general mode of being of art as play in that they too exist by being brought to presentation and experienced as an event. Then Gadamer comes to text-bound art, literature, bringing him into the traditional domain of hermeneutics. Even here, claims Gadamer, the work depends for its being on coming to presentation: "being read belongs to literature by its nature" (TM 161). Again, the reader does not

primarily read the literary text for what it can tell her about a lost past world. She expects that it will have something to say to her. The world that the text brings to life is not an other to be externally observed, but a difference that challenges her previous understanding. She only experiences it as literature insofar as she is caught up and addressed by it.

The problem of aesthetics thus becomes part of the general hermeneutical problem. The experience of art has the character of an event which challenges our understanding. The literary work addresses us so directly that in reading texts we can "achieve the sheer presence of the past" (TM 164). This felt immediacy is undoubtedly part of the experience of some past works. As yet, however, we have no account of why these works can challenge us so directly. Furthermore, it is necessary to distinguish the claim that art has its being only in coming to presentation from Valéry's position that art depends on the receiver for its meaning. It was precisely this position that Gadamer criticized as violating the work's identity through time and the continuity at the core of our being.

There must, first of all, be a structure that mediates the felt immediacy with which the work challenges us. But if Gadamer's position is different from the historicist architect who sees any past stylistic element as available material to incorporate however he chooses, this structure cannot be an aesthetic feeling for life. Secondly, there must be a structure which supports the identity of the work through time. The structure that performs both of these functions is tradition.[5] Tradition makes the past present, without, however, merely making it available to us to use as we wish. The transmitted past addresses and makes demands of us. That means we cannot make it say whatever we might want it to say, and that we must respond to its challenge.

The discussion of the literary text marks the transition in *Truth and Method*

from specifically aesthetic matters to the general hermeneutical problem. Modern hermeneutics has its origins in the Reformation and the humanist rediscovery of antiquity. In the battle against the Church monopoly on the understanding of Scripture, the reformers came up against the problem of how an understanding liberated from that monopoly is possible. Earlier Renaissance humanists faced a similar problem of retrieving the authenticity of classical literature. Luther introduces the hermeneutical principle that the interpretation of individual passages is to be guided by an understanding of the whole of Scripture. This whole is in turn only understandable on the basis of a cumulative understanding of passages (TM 175). By the nineteenth century, the idea that there is a determinate sense to the whole of Scripture had come to be viewed as dogmatic. Parts of Scripture came to be viewed as individualities that could only be understood by reference the world(s) out of which the documents came. Similarly, the humanists' assumption of antiquity as a normative ideal was questioned, once again producing the need to understand the creations of antiquity in terms of the specificity of the ancient world. This in turn created a need for a unified understanding of history as a whole (TM 176-177).

The early development of modern hermeneutics thus sees its scope widening from the meaning of texts to human history as a whole. However, at the same time, because of the disruption of an authentic context of transmission for these texts in the Middle Ages, there is a growing tendency to see historical reconstruction of the lost world of texts *as opposed to* the meanings with which they have come down.

Schleiermacher addressed the new task of hermeneutics for humanist and theological interpretation from the context of Romanticism, particularly the aesthetics of genius. The disruption of an authentic relation to the world of antiquity and Scripture was generalized. Misunderstanding was viewed as a universal problem that occurs

just as much in ordinary conversation (TM 185-186). Schleiermacher overcomes the problem of the necessarily imperfect efforts at reconstruction, claims Gadamer, through a "divinatory moment" in which the interpreter grasps the "inner origin" of the work as an "expression of life" (TM 187). This divinatory moment is based on the idea of the receiver as genius, which allows the inquirer to stand outside a rule-governed process in order grasp the work directly, on the basis of "a kind of con-geniality" which still unites the interpreter and his object (TM 189). Thus, according to Gadamer, the identity of the interpreter with his object is made possible for Schleiermacher by the adoption of ideas from the discourse of *Erlebniskunst*.

Gadamer notes that in addition to universalizing the scope of hermeneutics – everything can be potentially understood as an expression of life – basing hermeneutics on the ideas of *Erlebniskunst* also gave Schleiermacher the insight that interpretation is not tied to the intentions of the author. Insofar as the interpreter has a superior feeling for life, he may understand the production of the author better than the author understood it himself (TM 192-193). Yet these insights are based on the dogmatic assumption that an expressive life underlies and ultimately unites all of the productions of mankind. Apart from being dogmatic, this assumption prevents a relation to works in their truth, that is, as presenting a direct challenge to the interpreter's world-view; instead, works are relativized as a rich variety of historical expressions.

The subsequent development of hermeneutics by Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey is, in part, an attempt to leave behind the dogmatic elements in Schleiermacher, above all the presupposition that history is a product of *Geist*. Schleiermacher ultimately saw all of human history as the result of a divine production which holds in a unity the finite expressions of individual geniuses. In its Hegelian version, history became the progressive spiritual manifestations of its idea.

Ranke viewed this so-called *Geistesgeschichte* as concealing an illegitimate a priori teleology. But if Ranke wanted to dispense with a priori teleology, he nevertheless saw the continuity of historical life through change as its very nature. He located the determinant of historical continuity in a criterion of "success:" that which goes on to have an effect will determine the significance it will have when viewed by later historians (TM 203). Thus power becomes the basic category of meaning in history. Significantly, however, power was not narrowly conceived in terms of powerful men who make history. Rather, power was viewed by Ranke as a transmitted potentiality that precedes and transcends individual consciousness (TM 206-207). Ranke further viewed the history of Western culture as a unified whole, to be understood as the large-scale product of the interplay of powers from era to era. But how, asks Gadamer, does the mere interplay of powers produce the unity of the West as a whole? Why not just see history as just so many *different* manifestations of power with no overarching unity (TM 207)?

Gadamer argues that Ranke missed the opportunity to view the idea of the interplay of powers in terms of the mediating activity of tradition. There *is* a continuity of the West, but only insofar as its cultural heritage is transmitted across the generations. Gadamer suggests that perhaps Ranke did not recognize this because he would have conceived of the mediating activity of tradition as implying the a priorism of *Geistesgeschichte* (TM 209-210). But despite Ranke's rejection of a spirit structuring history as a whole, he remains within the presuppositions of Romantic hermeneutics. The criticism of a priori teleology did not prevent Ranke from maintaining a certain kind of spiritualism. If Ranke's assertion that all historical periods are equally close to God implies a critique of Hegel's progressive unfolding of history, it nevertheless retains a religious self-understanding.

The ability to see the value in all things in their transience is viewed by Ranke as analogous to God's ability to see the real redemptive meaning behind the actions of a fallen mankind. "The re-establishment of the immediacy that existed before the fall does not take place through the church's means of grace alone. The historian has a share in it too, in that he makes mankind, which has fallen into history, the object of his study, and knows mankind in the immediacy to God which it has never entirely lost" (TM 210-211). According to Gadamer, this re-establishment of immediacy reveals the meaning of Ranke's concept of empathy. Through historical study aimed at a knowledge of a given past in its unique, indestructible value, the historian attains a God's-eye-view, dissolving his subjective preconceptions in a true understanding of history.

But how can the historian be sure that he has left behind his preconceptions to understand history as it really was? Here we see that Ranke did not really overcome Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. Historical understanding is "sympathy, co-knowledge of the universe" (Ranke, cited in TM 211). Ultimately, Ranke remains within an idealistic framework. Even if historical events are no longer viewed in terms of a particular overarching teleological interpretation, understanding, for Ranke, still involves a transparency of history to itself on the basis of a life shared by all consciousnesses (TM 211).

J.G. Droysen attempted to deepen Ranke's empirical orientation. He rejects the latter's category of empathy, admitting that historical understanding can only be a matter of research which enables the historian to transcend his particularity toward an approximate image of the past. Droysen explains how the historian is able to do this is by filling out Ranke's conception of power. While Ranke himself conceived of the effective powers that produce history as transcending the individuality of great

individuals, he did not go much beyond "vague reflections" on how it does so (TM 213). Droysen conceives the effective powers of history as "moral powers," summarized by Gadamer: "The individual, in the contingency of his particular drives and purposes, is not an element in history, but only insofar as he raises himself to the sphere of moral commonality and participates in it. The movement of these moral powers, which is achieved through the common work of humankind, constitutes the course of things" (TM 213-214). In other words, the isolated power of an individual must be mediated by ethical, i.e. universal goals, to make history. New innovations must be accepted by the community in order to be preserved in the future.

Droysen ascribes an important function to tradition. The historian's research must be aimed at transcending his own particularity toward the universality embodied in the common productions of a historical culture. His only link to that past commonality is through the mediation of tradition, which preserves the meanings of a common culture through time, down to the present. However, since he still conceived the historian's task in terms of revealing the past in its otherness, Droysen also viewed tradition as necessarily obscuring the true image of the past: as tradition hands us the past, it also conceals the past (TM 216-217). Droysen's solution is twofold: Firstly, since the historian's object never comes into view as it is in itself, his knowledge can only be approximate. Secondly, even though he sees the past, as it were, "through a glass darkly," he need not fear that he is only projecting present conceptions onto an obscured past, for there is still a basic "congeniality" of all consciousnesses across time. Gadamer quotes Droysen: "With respect to men, human utterances, and forms, we are, and feel ourselves to be, essentially similar and in a condition of mutuality" (TM 217). The dogma of the congeniality of expressions is retained.

Note, once again, that it is a suspicion of the past as it is handed down that

necessitates the distinction between this transmitted past, and the past as it really was. The latter is for Droysen the historian's object. Note as well, the stubborn persistence with which the historicists cling to a dogmatic assumption in order to "overcome" the putatively obscuring effects of tradition.

By Wilhelm Dilthey's time, the rise of neo-Kantianism provided a new challenge. History, for the neo-Kantians, was constituted by a set of facts of experience, woven together by the subjective valuations of a participant or observer. To this Dilthey contraposed the study of history based on "the inner historicity of experience itself" (TM 221). Just as the past consists of structures of meaning, so also all experience of life in general occurs as part of a meaningful structure. Dilthey's project, then, is to make life an epistemological category, rather than a dogmatic assumption, by relating the experience of life to the experience of history. However, in order for the life structure to enable the historian's study of historical structures, the historian must assume that history as a whole has a meaningful structure. Only if there is an affinity between the life structure and an overarching history that embraces *all* structures can the historian avoid projecting, arbitrarily, categories of one structure onto another. Clearly though, as Gadamer notes, the coherence of the whole of history, unlike that of the life structure, is something that no one has experienced (TM 224).

Under the influence of Husserl, Dilthey further developed the idea of structure as a pattern of significance that determines the experience of all objects (TM 225-226). In other words, everything is always already interpreted; even the past as it really was experienced by those of its time occurs within an interpretive framework. Thus historical research is set the task of understanding the interpretations of the past as a variety of expressions of historical life – it is "life understood by life" (Dilthey, cited in TM 229). Yet Dilthey remained preoccupied with achieving an

objectively true understanding of the past, worried that life understanding life merely conceals an arbitrariness of historical interpretation. Gadamer asks: "[I]f life is the inexhaustible creative reality that Dilthey thinks it, then must not the constant alteration of historical context preclude any knowledge from attaining to objectivity" (TM 231)?

Dilthey argued that the historian was to overcome the merely local and time-bound prejudices of his understanding by widening his "sympathy." This, claims Gadamer, amounts to accepting Ranke's recommendation of the self-extinguishing of the historian into his object (TM 231). Dilthey tried to surpass Ranke's position by explicating the commonality of past and present worlds in terms of a general tendency towards structure evident in all life, a tendency which comes to paradigmatic objectivity in the fixed forms of meaning created in a community. Immersion in these shared structures frees the historian from his subjective particularity, making an objective understanding possible (TM 235-236).

This brings Dilthey very close to recognizing the productive role of tradition. But because of his fundamental Enlightenment presuppositions, the notion of rising up to a commonality which the past shares with the present took the form of an antinomy: While the fixed, transmitted forms of a historical culture are the culmination of a tendency to structure evident in all life, it is nevertheless precisely the process of transmission which obscures the past as it was in itself. A *transmitted* commonality still, for Dilthey, does not solve the problem of the relativism of historical understanding. If Dilthey could have accepted that the stabilities toward which life tends are themselves only "relative stabilities," he might have been able to accept that the transmission of objects through time, in which inherited structures are worked over and restructured, points to the only kind of objectivity available in the

human sciences (TM 239).

Despite the fact that Dilthey wants to use the concept of life against the "intellectualism" of neo-Kantianism, his rejection of merely relative stabilities is the consequence of an orientation which, in inquiring behind the transient structures of meaning that evolve as they are transmitted, seeks to complete the Enlightenment's project of emancipation from historical partiality (TM 238-239). True knowledge would thus require an ahistorical standpoint which grasps each past in its objective meaning. This position, which contradicts the fundamental starting point of a historical consciousness, is for Gadamer the conflictual culmination of an understanding which tries to grasp the past independently of its transmitted continuity with the historian's present.

Husserl developed the concept of life in a direction that ultimately made it possible to go beyond the antinomy of historicism. This development is articulated most productively in his late concept of the life-world. The concept of the life-world was, in part, the yield of Husserl's investigations into the experience of temporality. The nature of any experience is that it has to be understood in terms of implicit horizons of before and after. This already implies a criticism of a hermeneutics based on *Erlebnis*. The single, intense experience, in which the interpreter transcends his historical conditionedness, for example through empathy, is impossible; for it is in the nature of every experience to be integrated into a temporal continuum (TM 245).

However, the full significance of an individual's experience cannot be understood by reference to a consciousness which reflectively examines the whole temporal context. Thus it is necessary to understand the individual's experience in terms of a larger world horizon that transcends the individual and is "pre-given" to her. Gadamer explains: "The all-embracing world horizon is constituted by a fundamentally

anonymous intentionality – i.e., not achieved by anyone by name" (TM 246). The "all-embracing" life-world even transcends the extant shared understanding of a historical culture (TM 246), presumably because it was "pre-given" to this culture as well: it did not found that understanding, but preserves it as it comes down from the past.

Unfortunately, as Gadamer explains, Husserl attempts to ground the concept of life, which is always already assumed by the ordinary understanding in its operation, in the subject. Even though Husserl's transcendental subject refers to an "I" which precedes the individual consciousness, he still tries to derive this "primal I" from the data of consciousness (TM 249-250). While he saw that the self-conscious subject is merely a set of relations that rises and passes away in the temporal flow, he did not follow this insight to a more thoroughgoing rejection of the epistemological predicament in which Dilthey, too, remained entangled. Just as Dilthey viewed the historical past as an other to be understood only through the development of sympathy, so Husserl's basis in the data of consciousness led him to the view that the other of consciousness, i.e. another individual, does not appear in consciousness and thus can only be grasped as an individual through empathy (TM 250).

Here is where Count Yorck makes a significant contribution, the insight that leads into Heidegger's revolution in hermeneutics. Yorck saw that any self-reflection of the subject is formed in the context of a web of significance, or life-world, which precedes the subject *and to which the subject's reflection returns*. If one follows Husserl's insight into the temporal context of all experience further than Husserl did himself, then the subject himself must be conceived in terms of temporality, rather than unfolding temporality out of a prior subject, however "primal" (TM 251-254).

Thus life, a concept that emerged in the misunderstandings of the aesthetics of genius, is finally freed of its dogmatic status in Romantic hermeneutics. It no longer

refers to a transcending of the historical conditionedness of understanding, but rather articulates precisely how understanding is historically conditioned. Gadamer deepens this insight, returning the historian's understanding, the activity of the artist and receiver, and experience as such to their proper context which, for Gadamer, is tradition.

2. The Rehabilitation of Tradition

It must be emphasized that Gadamer's appropriation of Heidegger is not a solution to the problems of historicism, rather, it dissolves the problematic by recasting the task of understanding. When Heidegger reconceives the being of *Dasein* as time, this does not mean that there is an affinity between the historian and his object which would justify an empathetic grasp of that object: "[T]he coordination of all knowing activity with what is known is not based on the fact that they have the same mode of being but draws its significance from the *particular nature* of the mode of being that is common to them" (TM 261). That common mode of being is historicity. That *Dasein* is constituted in the historical situation into which it is always already "thrown" means that the self-grounding of a transcendental subject (as conceived in German idealism) is impossible. *Dasein* cannot take up a universal point-of-view on its situation, for it is nothing but the product of its historically contingent situation.

This radical contingency of human existence already suggests that the historicist task of understanding the past as it really was is a futile endeavour; for it would require that the subject be able to step outside his historical conditionedness. In effect, the implication of the historicity of *Dasein* is only the result of thinking the concept of historical consciousness to its conclusion. However, the nineteenth-century historicists were unwilling to take this step because they posed the question of

historical understanding in an Enlightenment framework, and in such a framework, accepting thrownness would make the task of historical understanding impossible. Yet for Gadamer, it is precisely this thrownness that is viewed as positive, enabling historical understanding rather than occluding it.

Historicity, as the nature of the affinity between the historian and his object, is described by Gadamer as a "belongingness" (TM 262-264). This is not the belonging-together of the inquirer and his object through an expressive life which underlies them. Rather, the interpreter belongs together with his object because the same context that gives the object its meaning has delivered that object, with its context, down to the present, by the mediation of tradition. It is in the very nature of the interpreter's object to be mediated through the transmission of a historical culture which unites the horizon of the present with the horizon of the past. This is a positive unity because in bringing the past to the present, tradition delivers an object to an inquirer who always already sees the object in terms of the tasks which his own situation requires him to address. At the same time, by acknowledging that the past is still a living presence, the past can address him with a directness which calls his present understanding into question. From this perspective, the question of what the past is like aside from its relation to a situated present simply drops out.

Heidegger's term "*Dasein*" is a protest against the concept of a subject that can transcend its radical historicity. For Heidegger, human understanding is always ineluctably situated. His recasting of the hermeneutical circle explicates the operation of this situated interpretive understanding. In general, the hermeneutical circle describes the whole/part structure of understanding, which had already been appreciated by Luther, and indeed, goes back to classical rhetoric. An interpreter comes to any object with a largely implicit complex of interpretive schemas. Starting with

these, he begins to understand a text, forming an initial interpretation based on a projected meaning of the whole. When he encounters parts of the text which do not fit with his initial projected whole, he may have to revise it, calling into question elements of his understanding that provided his starting point.

In Schleiermacher, the hermeneutical circle was a method to lift the interpreter out of his historical situation, to achieve a psychologically conceived identity with the author of the text he was attempting to understand. In *Being and Time*, by contrast, the hermeneutical circle describes how *Dasein* always achieves understanding in the situation that it is thrown into:

> What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way. This circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may move; it is the expression of the existential *fore-structure* of Dasein itself. It is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. To be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves.[6]

To this well-known passage from Heidegger, Gadamer provides the following gloss:

> A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there. (TM 267)

But how can we know that we have not been led astray by arbitrary fore-conceptions

and have really understood what is there? Gadamer answers that we must be sensitive to the text's alterity. This sensitivity amounts to being aware of the prejudices with which we approach a text, so that they can be thrown into question by a text which does not conform to our customary understandings (TM 268-269).

Obviously, however, Gadamer cannot be arguing, as Ranke did, that the inquirer must lift himself out of his situatedness in order to approach the text, or any historical object, with neutrality. In the Heideggerian recasting of the hermeneutical circle, understanding is only possible because we already come to a text with an understanding, i.e. with prejudices. The willingness to suspend prejudices can never be unconditional or complete, for not all prejudices can be foregrounded. It is enough that, insofar as it is possible, we are willing to risk those accepted beliefs which might be called into question. Gadamer's original contribution to hermeneutics is to make sense of the productivity of prejudices and how, nevertheless, the interpreter can have a critical relation them. His re-evaluation of the role of prejudices in understanding uncovers the Enlightenment prejudice against prejudice.

The primary object of the Enlightenment's critique of prejedice was the religious authority of Christianity, but this was expanded to a total or near-total questioning of extant beliefs. "In general, the Enlightenment tends to accept no authority and to decide everything before the judgment seat of reason" (TM 272). In their attempt to formulate a reason that would substitute for inherited authority, they set an impossible goal to the project of Enlightenment. Gadamer's slogan, "[h]istory does not belong to us, we belong to it" (TM 276), represents an emphatic rejection of that project. Reason cannot build up its criticism from scratch, but must always start from the pre-given point furnished by the socially embodied knowledge on which our everyday understanding depends. "The self awareness of the individual is only a flicker-

ing in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being*" (TM 276-277). According to Gadamer then, the historicity of *Dasein* implies that the individual will always live in a historical reality constituted by prejudices.

Thus it is necessary to formulate a positive model of submission to authority. While the distinction between blind obedience and a self-aware, critical relation to authority is necessary, that does not imply that authority cannot be a source of truth. Gadamer starts with the model of acknowledging the personal authority of someone who is more competent than oneself, and then envisions the relation to the impersonal authority of tradition on the basis of this model. First, the acknowledgment of another's authority is not a blind submission; rather, it is a recognition of the other's superior insight (TM 279). It depends on experience of the other's reliability. Gadamer goes further: "Even the anonymous and impersonal authority of a superior which derives from his office is not ultimately based on this hierarchy, but is what makes it possible" (TM 279-280). We are justified in accepting, it seems, that even when we are dealing with a bureaucracy, the authority of our "superior" is not groundless, but rests on his acknowledged ability to perform the functions of his office. Otherwise he would not have been given the office. Tradition is precisely such an anonymous authority, though on a much larger scale:

> That which has been sanctioned by tradition and custom has an authority that is nameless, and our finite historical being is marked by the fact that the authority of what has been handed down to us – and not just what is clearly grounded – always has power over our attitudes and behavior. (TM 280)

Thus it is the first task of reason itself to preserve what has been handed down: "preservation is an act of reason, though an inconspicuous one" (TM 281).

It is his insistence on the acknowledgement of the rational authority of tradition that marks Gadamer's distance from the Romantic valorization of tradition against Enlightenment reason. Gadamer argues that while Romanticism played a positive role in defending tradition, this defence was ultimately vitiated because it was based on an acceptance of the Enlightenment's antithesis between tradition and reason. German Romanticism merely reversed the valuation: the traditional is good, whereas reason is destructive (TM 273, 281). The binding quality of tradition is placed so far beyond the individual that the latter's relation to tradition could only be one of submission. This amounts, argues Gadamer, to viewing tradition as if it were nature (TM 281). For Gadamer, by contrast, the individual submits to tradition because he recognizes that what has come down is dynamic: it is the sedimentation of valuations of generations of interpreters, who do not pass on dead objects whose meaning is secure. Rather, the content of tradition is always open to further extension and revision. Furthermore, tradition is not univocal: there are "many voices" that speak to us out of what has come down (TM 284). So while the subject cannot transcend tradition as a whole – he always remains a "flickering in the closed circuits of historical life" – he nevertheless relates to tradition as open-ended: tradition constrains his understanding, but does not predetermine it at every point.

In nineteenth-century historicism, the opposition between reason and an aesthetic feeling which transcends its restrictive bounds and makes possible the re-experiencing of a past world is just a further consequence of the acceptance of the Enlightenment dichotomy. Since they were unable to conceive of the positive role of tradition, the historicists merely set a re-experienced past world against the present, as a treasure to be contemplated. Rather than relying on a dubious feeling for life, Gadamer suggests how tradition permits us to encounter the past, not with nostalgia,

but as something which still can challenge us, and something that we can always integrate into our present understanding.

It is already obvious, but worth re-emphasizing, that in order to take a positive relation to authority, we must also recast the task of understanding. It cannot be the self-certainty of a subject who has eliminated all possible sources of error. Rather, the task of understanding must be viewed from the perspective of a relation to authority as *productive*. Thus error is accepted as a constant risk. What remains to be examined in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics concerns how a critical relation to tradition is maintained, and how the situatedness of the interpreter in tradition effects an integration of the present and the transmitted past.

In his discussion of "the classical," Gadamer explicates a kind of inner-historical universality formed by the highest achievements of a tradition, which remain permanently valuable. Historically, "classical" had a stylistic, a historical and a normative sense. Gadamer insists on the primacy of the normative sense. Though classicism began as a study of historical antiquity, it also had normative implications. The achievements of antiquity were thought to be of exemplary value. However, with the increasing sovereignty of historical consciousness, the classical was more and more identified only with a particular era and its particular style, losing its significance as a universal standard. This development was understandable. For even the normative element of the concept of the classical does, necessarily, have a temporal quality: "the norm is related retrospectively to a past greatness that fulfilled and embodied it" (TM 288). In fact, it is only the experience of a decline from a high point of a culture that makes those in the culture aware that something in the past was truly great (TM 288-289). It is not the ineradicable retrospective quality of classicism that is objectionable, but the assumption that only one epoch, or a particular style embodies what

is essential to the normative element.

The normative sense of the classical refers to the permanent value of a work. Classical art, for instance, speaks to each subsequent era directly, as if it were created specifically for that era. Yet that does not mean that it is ahistorical:

> [T]he classical is a truly historical category, precisely because it is more than a concept of a period or of a historical style, and yet it nevertheless does not try to be the concept of a suprahistorical value. It does not refer to a quality that we ascribe to particular historical phenomena but to a notable mode of being historical: the historical process of preservation [*Bewahrung*] that, through constantly proving itself [*Bewährung*], allows something true [*ein Wahres*] to come into being. (TM 287)

The classical speaks with an authority that presents a challenge and demands the acknowledgement of each new generation: "[T]he classical is something that resists historical criticism because its historical dominion, the binding power of the validity that is preserved and handed down, precedes all historical reflection and continues in it" (TM 287). It is easy to see what Gadamer means by considering an example. The power of Plato's *Republic* does not depend on a reconstruction of the context in which it was written; rather, it addresses every present. Throughout all historical change it retains this power. *The Republic* thus rises "above the vicissitudes of changing times and changing tastes" (TM 288).

Gadamer describes this timelessness in a number of ways: He writes that the classical is "contemporaneous with every other present," and thus is "immediately accessible" (TM 288). What is so significant about the classical's mode of being historical? The classical is the exemplar of how, by acknowledging the past, we set up a "shared world" between the past and the present (TM 290). The present can only share a world with the past insofar as the past is preserved in the present: "[T]he

classical epitomizes a general characteristic of historical being: preservation amidst the ruins of time. The general nature of tradition is such that only the part of the past that is not past offers the possibility of historical knowledge" (TM 289).

It is possible to attribute the status of a classic to a work only once it has achieved a certain detachment from its origins in a particular time and place and has proven its ability to speak to subsequent eras. This means that what is important in the past runs contrary to what the historicists thought. The truth of the past does not consist in explaining the context that made a work possible. Rather, the truth resides in the universalizing medium of transmission, which, in its sedimentation of valuations, frees the work from precisely this particular past context and makes it visible in its universal aspect. The classical is paradigmatic of this universalization through transmission because it is quite clear that these works still retain their power to speak directly, and thus testify most strongly against their historicization. They reveal that the primary task of the interpreter is to preserve the power of these works by transmitting them to the future, so that they may speak as powerfully to future generations. In assuming this task, the interpreter continues the work of the sharing of past and present, on which a culture depends. Gadamer concludes: "*Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition*, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated" (TM 290).

Some important aspects of the process of transmission come to light in Gadamer's discussion of the classical. We do not fulfil the hermeneutical task by trying to free ourselves from historical circumstances, but by interpreting the work from within our historical circumstances and thus *freeing the work* from the circumstances of its origins. Thus the primary attitude of the interpreter is listening to what the work says to her own present. In listening to what speaks in tradition from within her own present,

she participates in the task of selecting and re-evaluating what will be transmitted. Thus every interpreter plays a part, however small, in constituting the tradition that in turn will be received and re-integrated in each subsequent present. Implied in this process, as is seen in Gadamer's demarcation of the enduring as "the part of the past that is not past," is that there is also a part of the past that *is* past. These are the cultural productions which owe their force only to the particularities of the epoch of the work's origin, or the immediately succeeding period. In time, these parts of tradition will be re-evaluated in terms of their enduring aspects, or they will be left behind, in "the ruins of time." The substratum of transmission which unites past and present allows *what is universal* in the past to speak to the present.

Thus, the classical, in revealing immediately the universality of its content to later interpreters, helps reveal the task of interpretation in general: to participate in the uncovering of the past's universal content by interpreting it in new contexts, while holding one's own particular prejudices open to challenge. Gadamer's discussion of the classical introduces the general significance of temporal distance for hermeneutics.

Here I must return again to Heidegger. The latter's recasting of the hermeneutical circle cannot be confined to a method for understanding texts; rather, it describes the operation of the situated understanding in general. Gadamer's hermeneutics is an explication of how this understanding can be pursued in a more conscious way in the human sciences. When we interpret we always bring along the tradition out of which we interpret. Drawing on this tradition, and the expectation that the object we are interpreting has something to say to us, we form "transcendent expectations" of meaning (TM 294).

We also acknowledge that the encounter with the text may challenge some of the prejudices of the tradition. Thus we acknowledge that we have a "bond to the

subject matter" (TM 295). But this bond is not an "unquestioned unanimity," rather, we experience in our subject matter "a polarity of strangeness and familiarity" (TM 295). This is the productive tension always implicit in any substantial temporal distance. On the one hand, the strangeness of the material might challenge our prejudices; on the other, we may find that the strangeness of the material is due to past contingencies which are no longer relevant in the present situation. Whatever the case, our task is to integrate that work in the present by overcoming the strangeness with which it confronts us.

This approach to understanding contrasts markedly with historicist methodology, where the primary task was to overcome temporal distance in order to understand the past on its own terms. For Gadamer, it is precisely temporal distance that allows works to leave the contingencies of the author's situation behind. Temporal distance "is not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us" (TM 297). It is not necessary to recover past contingencies because the enduring meaning of the work is preserved in the context of transmission that has also formed the interpreter. But this context is always moving into the future, so the task of the interpreter is to understand the text from within his present situation, which is different from that of the work, but is nevertheless united with it. That is the inquirer's role: to participate in tradition by helping to reveal the universal aspect of the subject matter.

Gadamer emphasizes this productivity of temporal distance by pointing to the comparative difficulty of interpreting contemporary works:

> Obviously we approach such creations with unverifiable prejudices, presuppositions that have too great an influence over us for us to know about them; these can give contemporary creations an extra resonance that does not corre-

> spond to their true content and significance. Only when all their relations to the present time have faded away can their real nature appear, so that the understanding of what is said in them can claim to be authoritative and universal. (TM 297)

Gadamer clarifies the point. He does not mean that with the passage of time we can come to grasp the truth of the work that then remains self-identical through history. This is ruled out because the passage of time means that the works will always be interpreted in new situations and thus differently:

> [T]he discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process. Not only are fresh sources of error constantly excluded, so that all kinds of things are filtered out that obscure the true meaning; but new sources of understanding are continually emerging that reveal unsuspected elements of meaning. The temporal distance that performs the filtering process is not fixed, but is itself undergoing constant movement and extension. And along with the negative side of the filtering process brought about by temporal distance there is also the positive side, namely the value it has for understanding. It not only lets local and limited prejudices die away, but allows those that bring about genuine understanding to emerge clearly as such. (TM 298)

There is a kind of progress in interpretation, insofar as the particularities of the work's origin are shaken off, but this progress cannot be construed as moving toward a endpoint that will reveal the work's truth once and for all. It is in this sense that "it is not too much to speak of the genuine productivity of the course of events" (TM 297).

This is the proper perspective in which to understand Gadamer's oft-quoted statement that "understanding is not, in fact, understanding better" and that "we understand in a *different* way, *if we understand at all*" (TM 296-297). When Gadamer makes this claim, he is specifically combating the Romantic conception of understanding an author better than she understood herself (by making conscious what

remained unconscious in her). We do not understand better than the author because our understanding is not to be evaluated against her's at all. Compared to her understanding, which we cannot in fact recover, the only thing that can be said is that we do indeed understand differently. Her present is no longer our present, and we receive her work only as it has been transmitted to us in tradition. Thus the point about understanding differently is made against an historicism which seeks to directly compare present understanding, which is viewed as *merely* contingent, with the understanding of the author, in whom the truth of the work inheres (even if we must understand her better than she did herself). On the other hand, the point about the productivity of temporal distance which allows us to understand with an increasing universality, uncovering the "real nature" of the work, refers to the general enabling conditions of historical understanding. We always interpret differently, yet it can also be said that we can interpret more universally than our predecessors.

The fore-grounding of present prejudices becomes the proper hermeneutical task. The interpreter must be aware of the difference of the subject matter in relation to our own situation, and determine whether that difference is due to past contingencies that have been left behind, or whether the work is a challenge that should throw our present understanding in question. Gadamer's well-known concept of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*, or effective-historical consciousness, is an attempt to explicate the interpreter's critical and productive relation to tradition.

Tradition mediates our relation to the past. This means that the past is never wholly other to the present, and it also means that our image of the past always takes on the determinant character that a context of transmission has given to it. Our history "determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation, and we more or less forget half of what is

really there – in fact, we miss the whole truth of the phenomenon – when we take its immediate appearance as the whole truth" (TM 300). While elsewhere Gadamer emphasizes the positive, enabling character of the interpreter's situatedness, here he is accounting for the threat of a direct assimilation of the past. The task cannot be to lift ourselves entirely out of our thrownness, for that is impossible. It is neither possible nor necessary to understand in terms of the author's conceptions, but it is possible, from within a present situation, to be aware enough of the particularity of that situation in order to respect the past's difference. This partial awareness of the effect of our own tradition-mediated situation on our consciousness is what Gadamer terms effective-historical consciousness.

Foregrounding the prejudices with which we approach the past to heighten awareness of our situation does not mean that we consider all of our prejudices as arbitrary; for we are nothing apart from the contingencies that make us what we are. In fact, the very incompleteness of this foregrounding reveals the nature of tradition as continuity through change. Foregrounding always presupposes a background of prejudices which are not, and cannot be made fully conscious. When we modify elements of our understanding after prejudices that have been foregrounded are challenged, we participate in tradition's (unending) task of filtering out the particular, and bearing what is universal into the future.

Gadamer employs the metaphor of a horizon to describe the range of vision which circumscribes the interpreter's situation (TM 302). It is indeed a hermeneutical task, when faced with texts or works of the past, that we try to understand the horizon within which they were formed. In order to understand that past horizon's difference, we must have some grasp of the specificity of our own horizon. Only thus can we gain that measure of distance from the past which prevents us from naively

subsuming it under our own conceptions. It should be emphasized that the metaphorical nature of Gadamer's language here is not intended to convey a thought of inordinate complexity. What he means is quite straightforward. In fact, any interpreter must be familiar with the imperfect struggle to try to distinguish in as precise a way as possible what is unique in a given past from our own present. The strength of Gadamer's point becomes clear when we recognize that his construal of the effort to do justice to the past is directed polemically against historicism. This point emerges when Gadamer explains that understanding does not culminate in an imperfect differentiation of the past and present, but in what he calls a fusion of the horizons of past and present.

The interpreter's task is to gain awareness of his horizon, i.e. to mark some of the particularities of the present, only as a preliminary step on the way to re-integrating the two horizons by thinking the past's difference from within his own horizon. "The call to leave aside the concepts of the present does not mean a naive transposition into the past. It is, rather, an essentially relative demand that has meaning only in relation to one's own concepts" (TM 397). By distinguishing the past horizon from that of the present, we allow it to challenge us, to change our present understanding, thus transforming our situation. It is in this transformation of the present situation, and not in an empathetic dissolution into the other's situation, that we truly do justice to the past:

> Transposing ourselves consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other. (TM 305)

Transformed understanding in the present is the goal of all interpretation. Thus Gad-

amer describes the hermeneutical task in terms of the general character of the process of transmission: leaving particularity behind, rising to the universal. Such hermeneutical foregrounding is only a heightening of the relatively unselfconscious mode of handing down traditions, a process in which valuations do not remain impervious, but are held open to change: "In tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new are always combining into something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other" (TM 306).

Thus the distinguishing of the past horizon from the present's own does justice to the experience of alterity which characterizes an authentic encounter with the past. Yet, to repeat, the foregrounding of prejudices that effects this distinction of a past horizon is a step taken by the interpreter: a distinct horizon of the past is "only something superimposed upon continuing tradition, and hence it [the past horizon] immediately recombines with what it has foregrounded itself from in order to become one with itself again in the unity of the historical horizon that it thus acquires" (TM 306). It is precisely the historicist mistake to absolutize the past horizon. The mistake is twofold, for it assumes that we could determine the difference of the past with an exhaustiveness which is simply not available, and secondly, it insulates the present from the challenge of the past. Gadamer insists that "as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded" (TM 307). Importantly, the German word rendered as "superseded" by Gadamer's translators is *Aufhebung*,[7] once again indicating that Gadamer views the transformed understanding of fused horizons as possessing the character of rising to a higher universality, preserving the essential, leaving behind the particular.

The preceding explication of Gadamer's view of tradition makes clear how it is possible to be concerned with the actuality of the past from within a present situa-

tion. A tradition always forms the interpreter far beyond his ability to be conscious of precisely how it does so. Nevertheless, through the foregrounding of prejudices, he can grasp the difference of the past from inside a tradition which always unites the past and present in advance. Tradition always gives us the past. But there is enough ambiguity within that tradition to allow every present to interpret differently. Thus, every new interpretation remains situated in the same tradition insofar as it starts from its unity with the past and returns to that unity on the higher plane of a transformed understanding.

Since I have emphasized the Hegelian element in Gadamer's thinking, it is worth clarifying the relation. Gadamer's Hegelianism consists in his construal of the process of hermeneutical understanding as a transformation of an extant pattern of thinking into a new one through an encounter with something that challenges that pattern. In Hegelian terminology, this is the encounter with the "negative" which confronts the subject, challenging him to overcome its otherness. The assimilation of otherness, however, is only possible if there is a kind of historical continuity between them. It is precisely Hegel's project in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* to combat the view that modernity has lead to an irrevocable disintegration of consciousness into incommensurable patterns or world-views. Similarly, Gadamer views the hermeneutical task in relation to the otherness of the past horizon in terms "alienness and its conquest" (TM 387). Thus Gadamer agrees that the task of understanding is to see the other as an aspect of oneself in the sense of an integration of historical otherness in a transformed understanding.

However, for Gadamer, the historical continuity between different world views is established by tradition, which he wants to distinguish from Hegel's self-unfolding Spirit that eventually absorbs *all* otherness. In accordance with the Heideggerian

emphasis on historicity, Gadamer insists that the finite subject could never integrate all of the past into a perfect understanding; for the past's conditioning of present always exceeds self-consciousness. Thus the individual himself contains an ineradicable negativity (TM 356). That is why Gadamer argues that while the process of transmission prevents the past from congealing into incommensurable historical world-views by freeing its essential content for the future, this liberation nevertheless does not achieve a definitive image of the past. Time always pushes us into new situations before hermeneutical foregrounding could result in a complete recollection of the past.

The productive counterpart of the subject's negativity is that every new present provides the opportunity for a different interpretation. Thus, while Gadamer's hermeneutics situate interpretation in tradition, it must be understood that the situated inquirer always encounters her tradition in relation to her own present. Gadamer clarifies the relation between the inquirer's present and her tradition by reestablishing the concept of application as integral to hermeneutics. The method of Romantic hermeneutics was oriented solely toward understanding the past in its otherness from the present, and thus application was jettisoned as extraneous to understanding. For example, theological interpretation came to be seen as something quite distinct from "preaching," having nothing to do with how an interpretation might actually relate to the life of a believer (TM 308). This distorted self-understanding of historicism must be overcome, argues Gadamer, through a recovery of the humanist approach: "[F]ormerly it was considered obvious that the task of hermeneutics was to adapt the text's meaning to the concrete situation to which the text is speaking" (TM 308).

Interpreting the past from "the concrete situation" of the present – the true task of hermeneutics – does not imply that the inquirer will detach the work to be interpreted from its context in a tradition. Rather, since the work always confronts the

inquirer as it has been handed down, sedimented with the re-evaluations of previous inquirers from her tradition, and since, by foregrounding her prejudices, she allows the past work to appear in its difference, the process of integration in the present always remains an extension of tradition, not a break with it. For Gadamer, only a Romantic conception of tradition as thing-like would lead one to think that interpreting in light of the present means a break with tradition.

I have explained that the tension between present understanding and a given past is resolved through an integration which presupposes a continuity through change. But how exactly does the situatedness of a present inquirer in the context of tradition prevent interpretation from becoming arbitrary, given up to the whims of the present moment? Gadamer answers: "there is a standard by which the understanding is measured and which it can meet: the content of the tradition itself is the sole criterion" (TM 472). Interpreting from a situation does not make the claim to validity of the interpretation relative to specific, "occasional" purposes; rather, "every interpretation includes the possibility of a relationship with others" (TM 397). What Gadamer is trying to articulate here is that tradition provides a shared context between present interpreters, and the decision as to the best interpretation will appeal to the criteria embedded in the shared context that has come down. Of course, Gadamer allows "that the court of tradition can pronounce no sure and unequivocal verdict" (TM 562). However, given the historicity of our being, "[t]here cannot . . . be any single interpretation that is correct 'in itself'" (TM 397). Though it does not yield certainties, tradition provides the background against which all new interpretations must be evaluated.

Again, the uncertain but not groundless interpretations of an inquirer situated in tradition contrast with the Enlightenment ideal, which cannot be realized: "there

is no possible consciousness, however infinite, in which any traditionary 'subject matter' would appear in the light of eternity" (TM 473). Criteria of interpretation, too, must be adapted to new situations, and about these future situations we can say that they will no doubt understand differently. And yet, to repeat, new situations will still display their continuity with the past because everything new is constrained by what is past, by tradition. Thus Gadamer argues that in denying that interpretation has its goal in an accurate reconstruction of a given past, he is not opening the door to arbitrariness. For in recognizing the evaluations of a context of transmission as binding, the inquirer's present is a situated extension of that context. It is rather the comprehensive questioning of tradition, the attempt to inquire behind the process of transmission, that de-situates interpretation and makes it arbitrary, even as it tries to recover what has allegedly been lost in that process. Given the universalizing power of a context of transmission, anything that has been lost must be considered a mere particularity, which, in any event, cannot be recovered.

The distinction between the transmitted past that is the true object of hermeneutical inquiry and the past that has not been taken up in a context of transmission is made somewhat clearer when Gadamer discusses the primacy of written texts. The discussion presupposes Gadamer's account of language. Briefly, Gadamer rejects an instrumentalist account of language according to which words merely facilitate the communication about, and manipulation of things. Rather, things are what they are only in language (TM 446). Language is the pre-given medium in which our thoughts move. There is no knowable physical reality that exists wholly apart from language (TM 475). Gadamer construes this intrinsic connection between language and reality as a retrieval of the Greek and medieval view according to which the mind always already moves in the same sphere as its reality, and only on the basis of this original

belonging-together is it possible for the individual to have knowledge of the world (TM 458). Gadamer's (Heideggerian) slogan, "language speaks us, rather than that we speak it" (TM 463), brings the anti-instrumentalism of his view of language in relation to the anti-subjectivism and emphasis on finitude in his rehabilitation of tradition, where the slogan was: "History does not belong to us, we belong to it."

The important relation between tradition and language is more specific. Though the whole reality of any historical culture is constituted in language, it is only insofar as that culture consciously hands down written texts that it comes within the domain of later hermeneutical inquirers. A culture leaves behind all kinds of traces of its existence, but not all of these can be understood by posterity. Gadamer gives the example of cultures that leave behind monuments, providing at best an unsure basis for piecing together its world-view (TM 389). Even oral cultures present a problematical basis for someone trying to relate such a past culture to his own present. For while oral cultures obviously do pass on their understandings, the continuously changing stories that form the basis of those understandings do not provide a fixed, common source of meaning that would provide a relatively determinant point of reference, or set of standards for later interpreters. Gadamer argues that "written texts present the real hermeneutical task" because a culture that passes on its texts has preserved its historical reality in an ideality that makes possible a relation by later inquirers to its reality that is "[n]o longer dependent on retelling" (TM 390). Thus, instead of relating to a particular "fragment" of the past, or depending on the very unsettling mediation of storytelling, the inquirer who works on the basis of written texts has "free access" to that past (TM 390).

The important aspect of a written tradition is not so much the mere fact of being written down. Rather, when a text enters a context of transmission, a continuum

between past and present comes into existence, a framework for a living relation to that past:

> It is not this document, as a piece of the past, that is the bearer of tradition but the continuity of memory. Through it tradition becomes part of our own world, and thus what it communicates can be stated immediately. Where we have a written tradition, we are not just told a particular thing; a past humanity itself becomes present in its general relation to the world. That is why our understanding remains curiously unsure and fragmentary when we have no written tradition of a culture but only dumb monuments, and we do not call this information about the past "history." (TM 390)

The fixity of writing establishes the element of continuity that provides the reference point for later inquirers, though this reference point does not remain changeless, but itself evolves through the sedimentation of successive interpretations. On the other hand, a culture that has not fixed its "general relation to the world" in writing is dissolved into the flux of change, providing no enduring points of reference for later inquirers.

The hermeneutical relation to the past can thus be contrasted to what might be called (though Gadamer does not use the term) an archaeological relation to the past. A culture that has left behind only traces in non-discursive artifacts can at best be imperfectly reconstructed; for no substratum unites it with the present in a living relation. "[O]nly a written tradition can detach itself from the mere continuance of the vestiges of past life, remnants from which one human being can by inference piece out another's existence" (TM 391). Such piecing together might be appropriate to the archaeologist who deals with prehistory, but hermeneutics always depends on "a present involvement in what is said" by a text that has come down (TM 391). The mistake of historicism thus becomes clearer: they mistake their task for that of the

archaeologist. But hermeneutics is not reconstruction.

The decisive point here is that the continuity of memory in a written tradition, which raises a culture's meanings "beyond the finitude of transience" (TM 390), is not an accidental development in the transition from prehistory into history. Rather, it depends on a conscious decision. Gadamer claims that "it is historically legitimate to say with Hegel that history begins with the emergence of a will to hand things down" (TM 391). The will of those who transmit the texts of a culture inaugurates the mediating substratum of tradition in which "a past humanity itself becomes present in its general relation to the world." Only insofar as there is a successful will to transmit is it possible to have a genuine understanding of a culture. Such a will to transmit lifts the image that the present has of a past culture out of a fragmentary relation to mere traces.

Gadamer construes the liberating character of the will to transmit in terms of raising the merely particular to a higher level of universality:

> [W]riting is central to the hermeneutical phenomenon insofar as its detachment both from the writer or author and from a specifically addressed recipient or reader gives it a life of its own. What is fixed in writing has raised itself into a public sphere of meaning in which everyone who can read has an equal share. (TM 392)

Here Gadamer reveals a significant component of the process of universalization by transmission. The will to transmit which emerges with a written tradition enables the whole community to participate in the process of handing down which emancipates its tradition from the mere particularity of isolated productions. A new communicability of its productions has been facilitated by writing which will ground the understanding of future members of the community, providing the common standards by

which interpretations will be judged. Again, of course, these standards will evolve, nevertheless a dynamic evaluative structure has been furnished through which each present can relate itself to a common past.

This part of Gadamer's argument provides the link between his retrieval of the humanist conception of the *sensus communis* and the rehabilitation of tradition. The tradition which unites the past and the present in a living relation is at every point the product of a community. The "continuity of memory" is a collective memory. Of course, once again, not everything survives in this memory. A relation to the texts of the past will be mediated by the sedimentation of interpretations in a community's existence through time, and this means that some interpretive schemas will be left behind, and some texts will be relegated to the periphery on the basis of the negative evaluations of successive generations of inquirers. But since written texts are by their nature universally communicable and this, Gadamer has argued, implies the participation of the whole community, the evaluative structures which emerge and evolve will be the creations of the whole community.

It is now possible to see how the claim that a context of transmission liberates a culture's productions is ultimately grounded. Particularity is left behind not just because the author's interpretation of his work does not remain the only one. The importance of tradition does not inhere in the mere increase in the number of interpretations. There is also the emergence of an evaluative structure which judges the adequacy of interpretations. The crucial aspect of the leaving behind of the author's intentions through a context of transmission is that new interpretations come to be formed around a common, evolving evaluative structure. And this structure is, as mentioned, formed through the participation of all. That is why the emancipation of a text from the author's intentions can be described qualitatively, in terms of univer-

salization. It is not that there are *more* interpretations than that of the author. Rather, the successive interpretations that are evaluated in terms of a structure which provides the criteria for the selection, rejection and re-evaluation of interpretations are produced by the participation of the whole community.

In accordance with Gadamer's concept of effective-historical consciousness, this participation of the community cannot be construed as a fully conscious agreement – some kind of social contract – on the validity of interpretations. Historical determination of consciousness means that we can never be aware of the content and origins of all elements of our interpretive schemas. But this was already implicit in the humanist concept of the *sensus communis*. The standards that form the connective tissue of a community can never be exhaustively formulated by its finite members.

That his argument regarding the enabling function of tradition ultimately depends on an agreement of the members of a community on the content of the tradition is confirmed by Gadamer himself:

> All coming to understanding in language presupposes agreement not just about the meanings of words and the rules of spoken language; much remains undisputed with regard to the "subject matter" as well – i.e., to everything that can be meaningfully discussed. (TM 567)

Thus Gadamer preserves the productive moments in the work of Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey. They had begun to formulate a method of interpretation which required the inquirer to transcend individual particularity through a relation to, or immersion in what has been communally produced. But since they still clung to the prejudice against tradition, they were unable to give this transcendence of individual particularity an unambiguously positive evaluation. They still worried that what was lost in a context of transmission necessitated overcoming this context through a more certain relation

to the past, formulated in terms of their various conceptions of an underlying expressive life. Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition first of all supplies a corrective insistence on the historicity of human existence which dispenses with the idea of an endpoint of interpretation in which an ahistorical truth about the past is grasped once and for all. His complementary emphasis on the positive value of the context of transmission is ultimately aimed at overcoming the doubts about the obscuring effects of a context of transmission by viewing that context as purifying: Through the ceaseless participation of the community in the handing down of what is truly valuable, the essential content of tradition is always preserved.

The individual had become self-alienated through the subjectivization of aesthetics, divided into an empirical aspect which retained a grounded relation to a prosaic physical reality, and a transcendent aspect in which he was thought to intuitively grasp the higher spiritual dimensions of art and historical humanity. These aspects remained unreconciled, resulting in the emergence of the peculiarly modern and always unsuccessful protest of spirit against "rationalism" and "industrial society." Gadamer returns the subject to himself by arguing for the primacy of a spiritual continuity which alone makes the totality of our various modes of relating to the world possible. Although this finite, thoroughly historical subject always contains an ineradicable moment of negativity in that he can never be totally present to himself, he nevertheless achieves a re-integration with his historical community, whose preservation through time assures him that the alienation particular to modernity is only the result of an epistemological error.

Notes to Chapter One

1. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 455.

2. Hegel, quoted in Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 168. Cf. Miller translation, p. 456.

3. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 168-169. All further references to *Truth and Method* will appear in the text as TM, followed by the page number.

4. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 455.

5. In his account of the being of art as play, Gadamer's main interest is to provide a phenomenological description of the experience of art, and the relation between art and the tradition to which it belongs is left largely unexplicated. However, in using the example of festivals to illustrate the temporality of an artwork, the implicit relation to tradition can be seen. An artwork, claims Gadamer, is like a periodic festival in that its being depends on coming to presentation. While no two celebrations of a festival are identical, it must still be said that it is always the same festival that is being celebrated (TM 122-124). Whatever the value of this illustration, it is clear that a festival is not a self-supporting structure. Though it may be experienced on its own terms, it is only because the festival is a part of the tradition of a particular culture that it can be celebrated periodically. The same must apply to artworks: though they may be experienced as autonomous stuctures, their identity through time must be mediated by a tradition which supports the various experiences of the work by members of a culture.

6. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 195.

7. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1972), p. 290.

Chapter Two: Benjamin's Construction

Benjamin was as opposed as Gadamer to the historicist procedure of trying to understand the past as it really was. And like Gadamer, Benjamin believed that the inquirer's present is productive for historical understanding. However, unlike Gadamer, and like the historicists that they both oppose, Benjamin viewed the connection between past and present that is furnished by a context of transmission with extreme suspicion. From Gadamer's perspective, Benjamin too remains caught up in the web of Enlightenment prejudice against tradition. In this chapter I explicate Benjamin's different construal of the relation between the inquirer's present and the past. My emphasis will be on Benjamin's later theory of historical interpretation. Thus I will touch only fleetingly on his two greatest long works: the essay on "Goethe's Elective Affinities" and *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*.

It is useful to trace his enduring anti-historicist perspective to motifs in these early critical works. Through an appropriation of aspects of early Romantic art criticism in a long essay on Goethe's novel, *Elective Affinities*, Benjamin forms his interpretation in polemical opposition to previous work on Goethe, particularly that of Friedrich Gundolf. Benjamin accuses Gundolf of interpreting *Elective Affinities* by relating episodes in the novel to events in Goethe's life, as if everything important in a work had to have a correlative in the biography of the creator. Benjamin saw this as a particularly distorting form of historicism. It is not that he believed that there are no significant relations between a creator's life and his work. Rather, it is the assumption that the life is some kind of self-evident grounding for interpretation

that he opposed.

Benjamin's own interpretation tries to find a more adequate basis for relating historical events to the meaning of the work. Here Benjamin finds the productive effect of temporal distance: For its contemporaries, a work is still more or less immediately comprehensible, since the historical reality that makes up its content is still their own reality. Later readers, by contrast, may find historical elements in the work unfamiliar. However, at the same time, with the passing of a relation of familiarity to the subject matter, later readers will be in a better position to judge what is of enduring value in the work. Thus Benjamin tries to find the proper relation between the historical circumstances of its production which leave traces in the work and which he refers to as its "material content" and assigns to the task of "commentary," and its enduring value, its "truth content," which is the task of "critique" to uncover:

> [T]he history of works prepares for their critique, and thus historical distance increases their power. If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a burning funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Whereas, for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive. Thus, the critic inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced.[1]

The proper interpretation will be the one that properly carries out both tasks, commentary and critique, without confusing them, as Gundolf did.

While Benjamin's account of the theoretical basis of his interpretation is rather elliptical in this essay, it at least reveals a rejection of an approach which sees temporal distance as necessitating an epistemological leap into the past. But in his subsequent critical work, it becomes clear that Benjamin sees the effects of temporal dis-

tance as problematic as well. Temporal distance, the time between a work's point of origin and a later inquirer, implies the mediation of successive layers of the work's interpretation. That is, the present inquirer sees the work in terms of an interpretive framework that has been built up around it through time. And this framework has already set apart its enduring value and those elements which disappear in the ashes of time. Benjamin's dissatisfaction with the extant interpretive frameworks within which works are viewed led him to suspect temporal distance as potentially distorting.

In his *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin examines German baroque drama with the intention of extricating it from a context of misinterpretation. Until Benjamin's time, the German *Trauerspiel*, or mourning play, had been interpreted as a degenerate form of tragedy, whose insufficiencies were to be contrasted with paradigmatic examples of tragedy, especially Greek tragedy. According to Benjamin, these seventeenth-century German dramas were not tragedies at all, and thus could not be evaluated in the critical terms used to assess tragedy. A substantial portion of Benjamin's work consists in overcoming the distorting effects of the uncritical application of a genre term, tragedy – in German, *Tragödie* – to a kind of drama that is not properly subsumed under it. (The erroneous translation of the German title, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* as *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* threatens to reinstate the misunderstanding, since it is precisely tragedy with which the baroque mourning play must be contrasted.) The notoriously cryptic "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" sets out the methodological basis for Benjamin's counter-interpretation. While this account is indeed difficult, largely because it is filled with extravagant metaphysical terminology, things become a little clearer if it is read as a polemic against historicism, and particularly against the uncritical genre ideas that often accompany historicist thinking.

Central to the Prologue is the imperative of interpreting phenomena in terms of what Benjamin calls their "idea." Interpretations must account for the phenomena of their subject matter. "Phenomena do not, however, enter into the realm of ideas whole, in their crude empirical state, adulterated by appearances, but only in their basic elements, redeemed. They are divested of their false unity so that, thus divided, they might partake of the genuine unity of truth."[2] With this claim, Benjamin baldly introduces the metaphysical nature of correct interpretation. These ideas, he goes on to argue, are not to be understood as subsumptive concepts:

> The question of whether it [the idea] comprehends that which it apprehends, in the way in which the concept genus includes the species, cannot be regarded as a criterion of its existence. That is not the task of the idea. Its significance can be illustrated with an analogy. Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars.[3]

Ideas, as constellations, are not so much interested in bringing their phenomena under categories. Rather, they explicate the relations between the phenomena in a way that allows a true image of the subject matter to shine forth.

Of special importance to constellations is the relation between the most extreme phenomena, and the other phenomena that are their elements:

> The idea is best understood as the representation of the context within which the unique and extreme stands alongside its counterpart. It is therefore erroneous to understand the most universal [*allgemeinsten*] references which language makes as concepts, instead of recognizing them as ideas. It is absurd to attempt to explain the universal [*allgemeine*] as an average. The universal is the idea. The empirical on the other hand, can be all the more profoundly understood the more clearly it is seen as an extreme.[4]

Ideas do not enumerate a set of conditions which phenomena must satisfy to be sub-

sumed under them: such a procedure only reveals the lowest common denominator. Rather, just as the farthest flung stars of a constellation are of special importance in revealing the image of a constellation, so the extreme phenomena, which would be left outside subsumptive concepts, are of decisive importance for revealing the nature of the phenomena.

The importance of these "ideas" becomes apparent when Benjamin contrasts their use with what he calls the literary-historical approach: "In literary-historical analysis differences and extremes are brought together in order that they might be relativized in evolutionary terms."[5] In other words, those aspects of a phenomenon which endure are retrospectively enumerated as the essential features. They become the lowest common denominators that constitute subsumptive concepts. On the other hand, for the authentic approach, "the extremes are necessary; the historical process is merely virtual."[6] Benjamin's target here is the use of levelling genre concepts by a literary historicism. Such concepts are used uncritically to bring the most disparate phenomena under a rigid set of categories. Yet, since ideas are a kind of universal, it is clear that Benjamin believes it is not necessary for aesthetics to abolish genres.[7]

This is where Benjamin's criticism of dogmatically-applied genre categories combines with his attack on historicism. Typically, a genre concept is applied to a work if the inquirer believes that its creator was trying to fulfil the set of minimal criteria embodied in the subsumptive concept of the genre. The work is then judged according to whether it adequately meets those criteria. By contrast, Benjamin argues that an inquirer must look at the entire context into which a work is absorbed. Only a procedure that assesses a work independently of the creator's intentions will be able to correctly apply ideas to aesthetic phenomena. Such ideas are detached from any specific creator's intentions, yet they are, Benjamin claims, nevertheless

historical in that the inquirer retrospectively examines material critically in order to construct the correct constellation in which any given work will appear, thus revealing their genuine historical significance apart from anyone's intentions. Temporal distance, a separation from the genetic roots of a phenomenon, is productive in that it enables the inquirer to see the phenomenon as related to the larger history that preceded its creation, and the history into which it was taken up. The focus on marginal cases is helpful because these most clearly reveal the inadequacy of the self-understanding of a creator and his contemporaries, as well as providing the basis for a resistance to historicist reduction.

While Benjamin claims that the true attribution of genre ideas to works must be in terms of a larger historical context, as opposed to the particular intentions of the creator, he is nevertheless also deeply suspicious the context of transmission into which a work enters. Thus the larger historical context that he claims the work must be understood in is not that of tradition, but rather is metaphysically conceived. Temporal distance does not so much enable the inquirer to see his subject matter as it has been taken up in a tradition as enable him to transcend the dimension of merely human history altogether. Ideas specify historical phenomena, but are themselves immune to the dissolution of the temporal flux. But why is it necessary to take up a position outside of history? The reason seems to be that Benjamin views the context of transmission as complicit in the levelling performed by historicist genre ideas. A context of transmission tends to filter out precisely those marginal cases which are crucial to a true understanding of a work, delivering only those which gravitate toward the lowest common denominator, thus carrying into the future a work as a misunderstood "false unity" with which Benjamin has contrasted "the genuine unity of truth." This explains the necessity of the work's "Platonic redemption" in ideas.[8]

Benjamin's view of correct interpretation seems to imply an ahistorical standpoint. This becomes clearer when he argues that the ideas of interpretation are monads. What Benjamin appropriates from Leibniz's concept is the notion that "every single monad contains, in an indistinct way, all the others."[9] For Benjamin, this means that every interpretation implies its relation to the interpretation of all other phenomenon. And this implies that the ultimate task of interpretation is "penetrating so deeply into everything real as to reveal thereby an objective interpretation of the world."[10] Thus Benjamin's desire to replace arbitrary genre concepts which devalue or neglect marginal phenomenon drives him to the view that authentic genre ideas can only be established on the basis of a comprehensive view of human history. So he rejects an empathizing historicism on the basis of a metaphysical position: a "true" view of history, which "redeems" phenomena from their merely human significance.[11]

If this is all there was to the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue," it would perhaps not merit attention here. However, it also contains an account of how the *Trauerspiel* has been misunderstood – largely due to historicist distortions – which points beyond a metaphysical theory to Benjamin's later theory of interpretation. The neglect and misunderstanding of the baroque drama, he argues, can be explained by the hostile environment for its reception in the subsequent course of literary history. With the rise of Romanticism, the dominance of the concept of the artist as genius implied a devaluation of baroque drama, for "there can be no question of the free or playful unfolding of poetic genius in these dramas."[12] Instead of always striving for innovations which reveal their genius, the dramatists of the German baroque apply themselves over and over again to the single task of "creating the form of a secular drama."[13] The aesthetics of genius and the *Erlebniskunst* theory of reception that accompanied it provide no productive basis for judging the *Trauerspiel*; for the standpoint of

Erlebniskunst implies a superior feeling for life that allows the receiver to transcend his own time and empathize with the creator's own transcendent feeling. Transcending a given set of artistic conventions was not a part of the *Trauerspiel*. And thus an historicism which bases its empathy on a superior feeling for life that brings together the inquirer and his subject matter must devalue the *Trauerspiel*.

A different but complementary form of historicism also devalued the *Trauerspiel*. This form of interpretation construes a work as a product of its age, so that if the dramatists of the German baroque could not attain the lofty heights of authentic tragedy, this was to be explained by the historical limitations imposed by the political circumstances of the time. Benjamin responds: "It is, however, obvious that we learn nothing from establishing that a work of art is necessarily prompted by a subjective disposition on the part of its author."[14] Such a procedure merely dismisses the independent value of the work, rendering aesthetic judgments pointless. Whether the work is either naively assimilated on the basis of a complementarity of life in the creator and receiver, or it is explained away through an allegedly exhaustive interpretation in terms the conditions of its creation, empathy remains methodological procedure. Benjamin rejection of this procedure is emphatic:

> This is characteristic of our age: there is no new style, no unknown popular heritage to be discovered which would not straight away appeal with the utmost clarity to the feelings of contemporaries. This fatal, pathological suggestibility, by means of which the historian seeks through 'substitution', to insinuate himself into the place of the creator – as if the creator were, just because he created it, also the best interpreter of his work – this has been called 'empathy', in an attempt to provide a disguise under which idle curiosity masquerades as method.[15]

Thus Benjamin denounces the pretence that the inquirer's present is left behind through

empathy. Nevertheless, as Benjamin goes on to suggest, there is a sense in which the inquirer's present might be productive. Benjamin notes that in his own time, the early twentieth century, new perspectives are being forged which might evaluate the *Trauerspiel* in a more positive light. A similarity can be seen in some of the contemporary works of expressionist drama and that of the German baroque. Of special importance is that "like expressionism, the baroque is not so much an age of genuine artistic achievement as an age possessed of an unremitting artistic will."[16]

But Benjamin gives the productive new perspectives on baroque drama made possible in his own present qualified importance, and does not seem to want to raise the standpoint of the present inquirer to methodological significance. This is because Benjamin views the distorting context of interpretation into which the *Trauerspiel* has fallen as necessitating a "redeeming" of the subject matter in a true, "timeless" interpretation. To interpret *differently* than those who had devalued the *Trauerspiel* meant, for Benjamin, interpreting *truly*. With the increasing emphasis on the productivity of the present in Benjamin's later writings, however, the imperative of interpreting differently, prompted by specifically political concerns, brings with it a corresponding diminution of the importance of interpreting truly, that is, timelessly.

Interestingly, the philosophical basis for interpreting differently is explicated in Benjamin's interpretation of the baroque allegory itself. These allegories were the product of an emerging modern view of the world, in which the significance of religious traditions had become highly problematical. The dramas were written in the unstable social environment of the Counter-Reformation, with its wars and political intrigues. For the *Trauerspiel* dramatists, the harmonious Christian world-view of the medieval era was vitiated by the experience of violent upheavals which revolutionized the political and social life of the people. Yet despite the fact that the Chris-

tian answer to the problems of life seemed unable to address the situation of the time, the authority of Christian dogma was never challenged directly. Benjamin explains the artistic temperament of the times:

> Heresy, the mediaeval road of revolt, was barred; in part precisely because of the vigour with which Christianity asserted its authority, but primarily because the ardour of a new secular will could not come anywhere near to expressing itself in the heterodox nuances of doctrine and conduct. Since therefore neither rebellion nor submission were practicable in religious terms, all the energy of the age was concentrated on a complete revolution of the content of life, while orthodox ecclesiastical forms were preserved.[17]

The effort of the new, secular will, expressing itself within a basically Christian schema, results in an idiosyncratic and rather brutal religious metaphysics that forms the background to the baroque allegory:

> The hereafter is emptied of everything which contains the slightest breath of this world, and from it the baroque extracts a profusion of things which customarily escaped the grasp of artistic formulation and, at its highpoint, brings them violently into the light of day, in order to clear an ultimate heaven, enabling it, as a vacuum, one day to destroy the world with catastrophic violence.[18]

It is within this religious metaphysics that the specificity of baroque allegory must be understood.

The rehabilitation of allegory against the romantically-inspired dominance of the symbol is one of Benjamin's most important concerns. In Romanticism, the symbol refers to the embodiment of transcendence in something material. The symbol does not merely refer the person who apprehends it to something else which makes it comprehensible, but effects a unity of the sensible and the non-sensible. When it is taken up as part of the aesthetics of genius, the task of the artist becomes that of

allowing something which transcends the merely earthly and everyday to come to expression in this earthly material itself. Most often, this appearance of transcendence was viewed as something fleeting, to be grasped in a moment which breaks through the mundane temporal continuum. This is obviously a secularization of the idea of the religious symbol, in which a divine presence is felt directly in sacred objects, and, in the Christian tradition, this understanding of the religious symbol is modelled on the event of the incarnation: God becoming flesh.

With the rise of the Romantic symbol came a corresponding devaluation of allegory. Allegory was a conventional correspondence, in which one thing is understood to refer to something else. Usually a more complex, or higher meaning is construed figuratively in terms that are more easily comprehended, and are understood to refer to that higher meaning. Thus the artist does not embody the transcendent in his creations, but may intend a relation to transcendence by appealing to a conventionally established structure of reference. The reason for the Romantic devaluation of allegory should be clear: an artist who merely relies on conventionally established relations is not rising to the level of a genius who can directly express transcendence in his creations.

The symbol thus finds its place in the Romantic aesthetics of genius, providing an amplified explanation for the neglect of the baroque drama. These dramatists could by no means express transcendence directly. They wrote in a period in which the religiously-based allegory inherited from the middle ages was the dominant mode of artistic representation and it was still unthinkable for the artist to presume to embody trascendence in his own creations in a way that is analagous to the embodiment of transcedence in religious symbols. This points to the curious specificity of baroque allegory. For if these dramas were allegories, relying on a conventional correspond-

ence between the signifier and the signified, the previously enduring structure of reference on which allegorical correspondence depended had become unstable. And this meant that allegorical reference becomes arbitrary: "Any person, any object, any relationship, can mean absolutely anything else. With this possibility a destructive, but just verdict is passed on the profane world: it is characterized as a world in which the detail is of no great importance."[19] In other words, with the problematization of the religious tradition that had formed the solid foundation for artistic reference in the middle ages, artists take up allegory in a new way, dwelling on very lack of foundation for their constructions of meaning.

Benjamin argues that the disposition of such allegorists is melancholic, and this means that under their gaze, all inherited structures of meaning are dissolved, and material becomes available for configuration according to the artist's will:

> If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind dead, but eternally secure, then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in his power. That is to say it is now quite incapable of emanating any meaning or significance of its own; such significance as it has, it acquires for the allegorist. He places it within it, and stands behind it; not in a psychological but in an ontological sense.[20]

Yet the significance supplied by the allegorist, being subjective and thus arbitrary, cannot claim any general validity. The baroque allegorists were aware of this and drew attention to the constructed quality of their creations: "The writer must not conceal the fact that his activity is one of arranging, since it was not so much the mere whole as its obviously constructed quality that was the principal impression which was aimed at."[21] To draw the contrast between allegory in general and the particularity of baroque allegory in the most extreme terms, Benjamin concludes that

"[t]he allegory of the seventeenth century is not convention of expression, but expression of convention."[22]

This cursory explication of the baroque allegorists' procedure does not do justice to the richness of Benjamin's interpretation of the *Trauerspiel*. However, it is enough to suggest a noteworthy affinity between allegorical procedure and Benjamin's theory of interpretation in the Prologue. Just as the allegorist begins by wrenching objects out of their traditional context of significance, making them available for his own constructions, so also the interpreter must begin by dissolving the "false unity" that his subject matter presents itself as through a distorting context of transmission. Underlying both procedures is a suspicion of, or unease regarding the traditional context of significance. But there is also an obvious difference: The allegorist's constructions are based on the consciousness of the arbitrariness of reference, leading him to the unending exploration of possible configurations of meaning. By contrast, the constellations which constitute the interpreter's ideas are supposed to be timelessly true, redeemed from arbitrariness. Benjamin is conscious of the affinity of allegorical constructions with interpretive constellations, for he is careful to point out, regarding baroque allegory, that "[i]ts data are not capable of being incorporated in philosophical constellations."[23]

In *Truth and Method*, we find that Gadamer too is interested in the rehabilitation of allegory (TM 70-81). While Gadamer's treatment of allegory is more general than Benjamin's, it is nevertheless instructive to compare. Gadamer's interest is in recovering an understanding of artistic creation that does not depend on the distorting categories of the aesthetics of genius. He wants to "remember quite different criteria and say, for example, that it is not the genuineness of the experience or the intensity of its expression, but the ingenious manipulation of fixed forms and modes

of statement that makes something a work of art" (TM 71). In allegory Gadamer finds the suitable corrective to the distortions of Romanticism. For "[a]llegory is certainly not the product of genius alone. It rests on firm traditions and always has a fixed, statable meaning" (TM 79). He concludes that "it cannot be doubted that the great ages in the history of art were those in which people without any aesthetic consciousness and without our concept of 'art' surrounded themselves with creations whose function in religious or secular life could be understood by everyone and which gave no one solely aesthetic pleasure" (TM 81).

What is significant about Gadamer's account is that he finds the relevance of allegory in the commonality of meaning made possible by an inherited structure of reference. This is then set against the Romantic aesthetic imperative of bursting inherited contexts asunder. It is noteworthy that Gadamer sees the baroque as the "last universal form" of allegory, i.e. the last time that a stable structure of reference supported the general comprehensibility of allegory (TM 79). The devaluation of allegory was made possible by the subsequent Enlightenment doubt regarding the validity of tradition and the corresponding rise of the aesthetics of genius: "For the moment art freed itself from all dogmatic bonds and could be defined as the unconscious production of genius, allegory inevitably became aesthetically suspect" (TM 79). In Benjamin's interpretation, baroque allegory itself displays the dissolution of the structure of reference through a problematization of the traditional, specifically religious, context. It is precisely in allegory that the loss of a commonality of meaning finds expression. So while Gadamer's rehabilitation of allegory in contemporary times is aimed at the re-integration of art in a traditional context which alone does justice to aesthetic experience, for Benjamin, the resonance of baroque allegory in the present is revealed as the expression of arbitrariness characteristic of modernity as such, which

was only covered over temporarily by the extravagances of Romanticism.

I explain the relation of Benjamin's early literary critical work to the later politicized theory of interpretation in terms of a decrease in the distance between (arbitrary) allegorical constructions and (metaphysical) philosophical constellations. Firstly, on the side of allegorical construction, what must be left behind is the melancholic's obsession with the arbitrariness of meaning. Instead of relating themselves to the vacuum that has displaced divine transcendence through the problematization of religious tradition, constructed interpretations must be related primarily to political practice. In the article "Left-Wing Melancholy," Benjamin reviews a contemporary collection of poetry from the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement. What he finds pernicious in the poetry are the ultimately quietistic implications of a literary movement which, while striking a political posture, ultimately has no productive relation to political practice, preferring to dwell endlessly on the bleakness of the social situation of the Weimar Republic:

> [T]his left-wing radicalism is precisely the attitude to which there is no longer in general any corresponding political action. It is to the left not of this or that tendency, but simply to the left of what is in general possible. For from the beginning all it has in mind is to enjoy itself in a negativistic quiet. The metamorphosis of political struggle from a compulsory decision into an object of pleasure, from a means of production into an article of consumption – that is this literature's latest hit.[24]

In a polemical denunciation of this insular self-indulgence, Benjamin concludes: "Tortured stupidity: this is the latest of two millennia of metamorphoses of melancholy."[25]

Instead of the de-situated melancholia displayed by these writers, a politically engaged approach would find its significance in the tasks of the present. Being situated in the present, however, cannot imply thinking of the present as the product

of a context of transmission. For the second important modification of Benjamin's approach is the intensified character of his suspicion of transmission as his work takes on an overtly political character. And finally, the metaphysical and ultimately theological character of the redemption must be relinquished – though, as we shall see, some ambivalence on this point remains. The change in emphasis is indicated in the methodological notes to his never-completed history of nineteenth century Paris:

> From what are phenomena rescued? Not just or not so much from the disrepute and disregard into which they've fallen, but from the catastrophe when a particular form of transmission often presents them in terms of their "value as heritage." –They are rescued by exhibiting the discontinuity that exists in them.[26]

"Exhibiting the discontinuity" expresses the imperative of interpreting differently, which now means interpreting from within a politically-charged situation. As I will explain, this situatedness in the political present does not diminish the constructed quality of interpretation. According to Benjamin, interpreting differently implies breaking with the continuity of a tradition which, for Gadamer, always constrains difference.

There is no independent statement of a theory of interpretation in Benjamin's later writings. My presentation will rely largely on the scattered arguments and statements which intimate such a theory, found in Benjamin's essay on the pioneering socialist art historian Eduard Fuchs.[27] This will be supplemented with arguments, or rather fragments of argument from Benjamin's well-known, if enigmatic, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"[28] and the above-cited collection of largely programmatic notes for the uncompleted historical work. Here I must again acknowledge that not all of what Benjamin writes in these pieces is amenable to the interpretation that I will present.

In the essay "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian," Benjamin is interested in recognizing Fuchs' groundbreaking achievements in working toward a Marxist art-historical method. To this end, Benjamin sets out, in a preliminary fashion, the fundamentals of an alternative mode of historical understanding that is compatible with "historical materialism" and commends Fuchs for incorporating this alternative in his work, while also noting his shortcomings. In presenting Benjamin's construal of historical understanding, I will, for the most part, leave aside the question whether it is "authentically" Marxist.

Benjamin *is* a Marxist insofar as he refuses to consider the realm of culture in abstraction from its genetic roots in social activity. Yet at the same time he acknowledges that a context of transmission separates the past object from those roots. This separation makes a retrieval of the past "as it really was" impossible, and in any event, historical understanding oriented toward present tasks has no use for such a retrieval. At first then, Benjamin describes the importance of the separation of an historical subject matter from its genetic roots, a description which sounds very much like Gadamer's effective-historical consciousness:

> Works of art teach . . . how their function outlives their creator and how his intentions are left behind. They demonstrate how the reception of the work by its contemporaries becomes a component of the effect which a work of art has upon us today, and that this effect does not rest in an encounter with the work of art alone but in an encounter with the history which has allowed the work to come down to our own age.[29]

It is precisely at this point that Benjamin introduces his suspicion regarding the history into which the work enters, when he continues:

> Goethe intimated this in his habitually veiled manner when, in a conversation

> about Shakespeare, he said to Chancellor von Müller: "Everything which has produced a great effect can really no longer be judged." No statement is more suited to evoke that state of unrest which constitutes the beginning of any consideration of history which has the right to call itself dialectical. This state of unrest refers to the demand on the researcher to abandon the tranquil, contemplative attitude toward the object in order to become conscious of the critical constellation in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself with precisely this present.[30]

"Unrest" is the result of the crucial ambiguity of Goethe's statement. A correct interpretation of this statement is required in order to draw the appropriate conclusions regarding the work's entry into the context of transmission.

For Benjamin, the unrest produced should not point the inquirer to the task of trying to recover the past as it really was, before it became obscured. Rather, it is precisely by thinking the past from the specificity of the present situation that the object is recovered, or liberated from the context of transmission. In fact every present brings with it a critical new opportunity for interpreting differently:

> "The past will not run away from us" – a statement found in Gottfried Keller – indicates exactly that point in the historical image of historicism where that image is broken through by historical materialism. It is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present which does not recognize itself as intended in that image.[31]

The properly conceived task of the inquirer is not the historicist one of thinking the past in its own terms so as to grasp a self-identical object; but neither is it to accept the mediation of tradition. Every present implies a new past: that is the reason for the heightened awareness required of the inquirer.

A contextualization of the past within the tasks of a specific present suggests a radically different notion of historical inquiry, distinguished from both historicism

and philosophical hermeneutics. The critique of both positions is revealed in Benjamin's further delineation of historical understanding:

> The historical materialist must abandon the epic element in history. For him history becomes the object of a construct which is not located in empty time, but rather forms the image of a specific epoch, a specific life, a specific work. The historical materialist explodes the epoch out of its reified "historical continuity," and thereby lifts the life out of this epoch, and the work out of the life work. Yet this construct results in simultaneous preservation and suspension of the life work in the work, of the epoch in the life work and of the course of history in the epoch.[32]

Benjamin is claiming that, in interpreting a given past from within a particular present, the inquirer does not try to understand that past as taken up in the transmitted contexts of a life work, or an epoch. Rather, in constructing his interpretation, he is constructing new contexts for the work, contexts for which the relation of a politicized present to that specific past work is the constructive principle.

In addition to dispensing with the historicist problematic, this image of interpretation also implies a rejection of philosophical hermeneutics. For Gadamer, interpreting from within a present situation always involves an extension of tradition. The norms which guide the understanding in every present are those which have come down, and any departure from that context must always be related to, and comprehensible from within it. A context of interpretation is always one shared by a historical culture in its existence through time, and that makes understanding the common property of a group, or nation. Benjamin's claim that the "historical materialist must abandon the epic element in history" means that interpreting from within the present involves a suspension of the validity of the shared, transmitted understanding.

This is a radical departure from traditional notions of historical understanding

because such understanding is usually thought to make the present of a historical culture comprehensible through an implicit narrative of a common past which both grounds and challenges that culture's present. Recall Gadamer's agreement with Ranke that there is a continuity of West's cultural heritage, though against Ranke, Gadamer holds that this continuity is only established insofar as the substantive content of its cultural heritage is transmitted. Benjamin's historical understanding is not aimed at an integration within a shared narrative, but reveals the specific relevance of a specific past in relation to the tasks of a specific present. So the new context that is constructed with the historical object is not an alternative epic narrative which would re-ground the common understanding of the community in a superior way. Rather, this new context is that of a direct relation of past and present which produces an insight into the social situation. The point is to clarify the political task of the present, not to reinforce an understanding allegedly shared by an entire culture.

Benjamin emphasizes the distinction between hermeneutical understanding's task of integrating the present with the past and the disruption of a continuous past by a politicized approach: "To bring about the consolidation of experience with history, *which is original for every present*, is the task of historical materialism."[33] That this consolidation assumes the character of a breach in, or break with tradition is clear in the German: the word translated as "original" here is "*ursprüngliche*," which means "original," but contains a graphic element that is lost in translation. "*Ur-sprung*," literally means "primal-leap." That Benjamin is drawing on this resonance is made clear elsewhere, as when he argues that the authentic relation between past and present is not a "continuous" one, based on "development," but rather effects a "leaping forth," in German, "*sprunghaft*."[34] Every genuine integration of past and present thus implies a certain break with, or breach in tradition. The ability to interpret in a new

way, to tear the past out of a given context of transmission and bring it into a relation with the tasks of the present, "bears to the highest degree the stamp of that critical, dangerous impetus that lies at the source of all reading."[35]

An original image of the past, formed within a politicized present, marks a breach in tradition. But is such a breach really possible? And why is such a decisive break with the transmitted understanding necessary? To the latter question, Benjamin answers that a decisive break is necessary from the standpoint of a certain class. Benjamin supposes that the content of the present, as constituted by the interests that the inquirer brings to his subject matter, will depend on the class to which the inquirer belongs. To a generalized Marxist division of society into ruling and oppressed classes, there correspond two different relations to the transmission of tradition. Contra Gadamer, a traditional understanding is not the product of the participation of the whole community, in which every member has "an equal share" in the interpretation and transmission of culture, but is itself caught up in the web of social conflicts which divide society. Crudely put, the understanding of the arbiters of tradition is in conflict with that of others, who are prevented from participating.

Given the exclusion of some from participation in the transmission of the understanding which is shared by those who *do* participate, the attempt to generalize a transmitted understanding as a common understanding must be viewed as an imposition of the interests of one class onto another. A transmitted understanding is an ideological understanding. The very idea of a culture which is common to a class-divided society must be refused:

> whatever the historical materialist would survey in art or science has a lineage which cannot be contemplated without dread. The products of art and science owe their existence not merely to the effort of the great geniuses that created

> them, but also to the nameless drudgery of their contemporaries. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.[36]

In the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," which incorporate a revised version of the above passage, Benjamin adds: "And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain."[37] Elsewhere, Benjamin indicates that it is really the barbarism of transmission that is the decisive factor:

> Barbarism inheres in the very concept of culture: taken as the concept of a hoard of values that is independent, not of the production process from which those values emerged, but of the process in which they survive. In this way, they serve the apotheosis of the latter, no matter how barbaric it may be.[38]

The barbarism of transmission is indeed the important point here, for it is only through this context, as what delivers the past to the present, that Gadamer's hermeneutical understanding can be achieved.

That this argument, which Benjamin intends as an argument against historicism, is also an argument against philosophical hermeneutics is easily explained. The historicist presumes to leave aside the concepts of the present in order to grasp the past as it really was. But in the attempt to dissolve himself into the past, the historicist has left behind the only productive standpoint for understanding. Without a standpoint in the present, he merely dissolves into the past *as it has been transmitted*, for the present provides the only standpoint which could give a perspective on the object that can detach it from the context of transmission. The delusive effort to leave the present behind results, against the intention of the historicist, in an implicit reliance

on an image of the past as it has come down. And since this context is one in which the winners are the arbiters of tradition, Benjamin concludes that historicist empathy is really an "empathy with the victor," which, in reaffirming the content of tradition as transmitted, "benefits the rulers."[39]

In affirming that we only have the past as transmitted in the tradition of a historical culture, Gadamer dispenses with the pretence of thinking the past purely on its own terms. Yet that only leaves him more directly open to the charge of complicity with "the rulers." For Gadamer depends on the universalizing power of a context of transmission in order to obviate the historicist problematic. It is true that Gadamer does incorporate a certain productive present with his notion of application. But the novelty of the present is always relativized as an extension of tradition: all new understandings must be integrated into the interpretive frameworks that have come down, frameworks which ultimately ground the common past of a historical culture.

If the process of transmission involves a significant inequality of participation in which the cultural products and evaluations reflect the interests of one group far more than another, then the relevance of an understanding which frees its subject matter from its context in an ideological tradition is clear. The ideological character of tradition means that a reception of a past work oriented toward the political tasks of the present must inquire into the work's "prosaic historical content."[40] But the specific relevance of the work's historical content was not just misunderstood by the defenders of the cultural heritage. According to Benjamin, leaders of the socialist movement also had remained entangled in a web of misunderstanding that led them to misconstrue the nature of a politicized relation to tradition.

These leaders felt the "unrest" referred to above, but did not find the appropri-

ate perspective on the "prosaic historical content" of past works. Benjamin argues that this was because they did not follow the critique of the class-based nature of cultural phenomena to its logical conclusion. Instead of a critique of the whole notion of relating to the past as mediated by tradition, the socialists merely tried, through their educational efforts, to include the working class in tradition. An educated working class, it was thought, is a class able to understand the social situation. And thus, "knowledge is power," became the slogan of the Social Democrats:

> But the Social Democrats did not perceive the double meaning of their own slogan. They believed that the same knowledge which secured the domination of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie would enable the proletariat to free itself from this domination. But in reality a form of knowledge without access to practice, and which could teach the proletariat nothing about its situation, was of no danger to its oppressors.[41]

Instead of considering the past primarily on the basis of its relation to the political present, the socialists had taken over the humanistic idea, trying to bring the working class within the scope of tradition. But since the priorities of the arbiters of tradition had always been hostile to the oppressed, the content of that tradition, as transmitted, bears no productive relation to situation of the oppressed. The past, viewed as embodied in a tradition that is the universal property of society as a whole, unlinks knowledge of the past from practice, and thus, the revolutionary potential of educating the working class was lost: "The humanities were satisfied 'to stimulate,' 'to offer diversion' or 'to be interesting.' History is disembodied while 'cultural history' is preserved."[42]

Another strain of socialist thinking also failed to disentangle itself from the concept of knowledge as the cumulative inheritance of mankind. Those who saw the

thoroughly ideological character of tradition argued that an objective "science" is the alternative. Here Benjamin is referring to "vulgar Marxists," who grounded history as a science through a technological optimism according to which the advancement of the natural sciences and technology would bring the means of production into the hands of the workers. The educational efforts of these socialists were thus oriented toward increasing workers' knowledge of the latest advances in science and technology. Benjamin responds: "Technology, however, is obviously not a pure scientific fact. It is at the same time a historical fact. As such it forces an examination of the attempted positivistic and undialectical separation between the natural sciences and the humanities."[43] Benjamin is most interested in pointing out what is forgotten in socialist technological optimism: the decisive point is who possesses technology, and this is not the automatic result of the advance of technology as such. In fact, if the workers do not seize control of technology in time, then the forces of technology become destructive, as conflicts in the capitalist world bring it closer to war.

For my purposes, the importance of Benjamin's critique of this vulgar Marxism is his identification of the misunderstanding of the productivity of the past that lies at its root. It is ultimately the same misunderstanding as that of the humanist socialists who had tried to encourage working-class participation in the cultural heritage. The humanist assumption that a productive relation to the past is to the past as transmitted in an historical culture's tradition is analogous to the vulgar assumption that knowledge is immanent in the extant framework of the application of technology. Neither the context of transmission, nor the context of the technological development is grasped as inherently ideological. The humanist socialists and vulgar Marxists fail to extend criticism to these contexts as such. Thus, for both strains of the socialist educational movement, "the past appeared to have been gathered up and

stored forever in the sheds of the present."[44] For Benjamin, the decisive point is rather who in the present possesses both the image of the past, and technology. Technology, like the image of the past, has to be freed from past contexts through a political understanding of the present situation.

Thus, it is the barbarity of the context of transmission that necessitates a radical break with the image of the past delivered by tradition. Benjamin summarizes the separation from actuality effected by a context of transmission:

> The concept of culture, as the substantive concept of creations which are considered independent, if not from the production process in which they originate, then from a production process in which they continue to survive, carries a fetishistic trait. Culture appears in a reified form. Its history would be nothing but the sediment formed by the curiosities which have been stirred up in the consciousness of human beings without any genuine, i.e. political experience.[45]

Such a critique of the context of transmission attempts to introduce a distance between the present and the past as delivered tradition. This alienation-effect is necessary given the authority granted to a cultural heritage viewed as a totality that is independent of its genetic roots in social activity.

In a note to himself which was to guide his own research, Benjamin suggests that this reified way of thinking of the past might be peculiarly modern:

> To discover how the concept of culture arose, what meaning it had in various epochs, and what needs it corresponded to when it was articulated. It could turn out that, insofar as the concept represents the sum total of our "cultural heritage," it is of recent origin; the clergy certainly did not have it when they mounted their war of destruction against the legacy of Antiquity in the early Middle Ages.[46]

If the need to eliminate pagan elements from their culture was obvious to the medi-

eval clergy, this was because they did not automatically venerate what was later called the cultural heritage. Their very different relation to the past – a selective, critical and, if necessary, destructive one – should now, claims Benjamin, be recovered as an alternative to the usual acceptance of the imperative of preserving a culture's heritage.

So while modern hermeneutics has its origin in the recovery of a heritage, the transmission of which had to some extent been interrupted in the Middle Ages, Benjamin is interested in revealing the particularity of the project of recovery itself. To bring the past into relation with "genuine, i.e. political experience," Benjamin, like the medieval clergy, wants to incorporate a destructive element in the relation to the cultural heritage. However, for him, this destruction is not aimed at obliterating what has hitherto been bound to tradition. Rather, the first step in a programme oriented toward the actualization of the past is a thoroughgoing critique of the context of transmission as it constitutes a past work's "prosaic historical content." It is a critique aimed at revealing how that particular work has been taken up in a way that reflects the interests of the arbiters of tradition.

Yet interpretation should not merely reduce the past to a series of ideological expressions. For that would be just one more way of sealing it off from the present: "The work of the past remains uncompleted for historical materialism. It perceives no epoch in which the completed past could even in part drop conveniently, thing-like, into mankind's lap."[47] Benjamin is developing, in a new context, an aspect of the programme of historical understanding outlined in the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue:" redeeming historical phenomena by dissolving their "false unity," though only as a first step.

The critique of philosophical hermeneutics implicit in Benjamin's position

can thus be summarized as follows: The context of transmission which, according to Gadamer, delivers the past to the present and has always already formed the inquirer's understanding, is *not*, as Gadamer claims, a universalizing context which liberates a past object from the particularity of the conditions of its production through its entry into a public space in which the community interprets and transmits what is truly valuable. Rather, this context is itself marked by the stamp of a particularity that is class-based. To Gadamer's "nameless authority" of a context of transmission which implies that preservation is the properly hermeneutic relation to tradition, Benjamin opposes the "nameless drudgery" of those whose interpretations and productions are largely excluded from what is handed down. For Benjamin, to think from within the present situation can no longer mean that the priorities which help constitute the subject matter of interpretation are bound to transmitted evaluative frameworks. What must yet be examined is the plausibility of Benjamin's conception of the actualization of the past in a politicized present, as the non-metaphysical alternative to the "genuine unity of truth" in the Prologue.

Interpreting the past from a particular present means, first of all, that there can be no question of leaving behind the conceptions of the present. In a passage that once again seems to echo the hermeneutical conception of effective-historical consciousness, and in particular, the concept of application, Benjamin claims: "[H]eadway can be made only if one considers contemplation of one's own activity – a new awareness – not as a constraint but as an impetus to rigorous study."[48] Benjamin, like Gadamer, wants to transcend the romantic hermeneutical separation of understanding and application. Benjamin describes this in terms of the overcoming of analogous categories specific to German idealist aesthetics. Fuchs, argues Benjamin, had gone a long way in moving beyond classicist norms such as harmony, that idealism inher-

ited, but he did not comprehend the need for a fundamental theoretical transformation:

> That could not happen any earlier than the point at which the *disiecta membra* which idealism contains as both "historical representation" on the one hand and "appreciation" on the other become one and are thus surpassed. This effort, however, is left to a mode of historical science which does not fashion its object out of a tangled ball of mere facticities but creates it out of the counted group of threads which represent the woof of the past fed into the warp of the present.[49]

Once again, however, overcoming the "*disiecta membra*" does not involve seeing the present as situated in a continuum established by a context of transmission. Benjamin continues:

> (It would be a mistake to equate this woof with mere causal connection. Rather, it is a thoroughly dialectical mode. For centuries threads can become lost and are picked up by the actual course of history in a disjointed an inconspicuous manner.) The historical object removed from pure facticity does not need any "appreciation." It does not offer vague analogies to actuality but constitutes itself as an object in the precise dialectical task which actuality itself is obliged to solve.[50]

Benjamin's reference here (as elsewhere) to the "dialectical" character of his conception of interpretation may be left aside, since his understanding of dialectics does not bear a clear resemblance to the Hegelian (or Marxist) one.[51] And the opposition of a "dialectical mode" to a history conceived as a causal continuum does not necessarily imply an opposition to hermeneutical historicity, since the latter need not be conceived as a simple causal continuum.

The disanalogy of Benjamin's overcoming of the separation of "historical representation" and "appreciation" to Gadamer's overcoming of the separation of inter-

pretation and application is rather to be explicated on the basis of Benjamin's reference to the lost threads of history. The exemplary significance of these lost threads are the counterpart of the exemplary significance of "the classical" in Gadamer. Just as, for Gadamer, the classical furnishes a paradigmatic instance of universalizing potential of transmission, so, for Benjamin, do those elements of the past that are left behind by the context of transmission provide the clue to the appropriate manner of actualizing the past. What is left behind by an allegedly universalizing context of transmission as mere particularity provides the basis for the break with tradition:

> An appreciation or apologia seeks to cover up the revolutionary moments in the course of history. The establishment of continuity is dear to its heart. It only gives importance to those elements of a work that have already generated an after-effect. It misses those points at which the transmission breaks down and thus misses those jags and crags that offer a handhold to someone who wishes to move beyond them.[52]

These "jags and crags," marginalized elements which are not readable on a traditionary basis, can be recovered by the insight of those who are marginalized in the present. In the cultural productions that have been devalued in accordance with the priorities of an ideological interpretive framework which reaffirms the self-image of those whose "will to transmit" shapes culture, the oppressed class can find particular images of the past, which in relation to their own marginalized present can provide an insight and inspiration for political practice. In addition to the recovery of marginalized phenomena, the oppressed class can reinterpret traditional subject matter on the same basis in the present in an unceasing effort to "wrest tradition away" from its arbiters.[53]

These specific insights into the past do not claim any universal validity. Rather they openly declare their class-based character. Transmission is the only non-meta-

physical basis for the establishment of continuity, and since the oppressed cannot ground their self-understanding on that transmission, the specific images of the past formed by the oppressed cannot be integrated in a coherent counter-narrative: "[S]ince the various epochs of the past are touched in varying degrees by the present of the historian . . . a continuity of historical presentation is unattainable."[54] Historical interpretations remain a collection of insights which is always supplemented by new interpretations as previous ones lose their relevance. And that is why these highly specific interpretations can be termed constructions.

The destruction of the continuous image of the past that is delivered by tradition, and the subsequent construction of specific interpretations out of the decontextualized, or dis-integrated remains and previously marginalized elements, reveal the allegorical character of the procedure. In a striking image, the gaze of the allegorist which disintegrates everything continuous becomes that of the angel of history:

> A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.[55]

The gaze of the angel of history disintegrates all traditional contexts in which a subject matter can appear. For him, the binding force of these contexts has been lost.

Politicized interpretation does not rest with this destructive gaze. Disintegration is the first step in the process of constructing particular images of particular pasts. Thus, while the subjectivity of the lone baroque allegorist stood behind his "obviously constructed" dramas, in the revised conception of allegorical procedure, the situation of the oppressed class becomes the basis of construction. These constructions remain particular. A "pile of debris" is the only way in which the course of history as a whole – whether it is conceived as the tradition of a community, or the entire cultural heritage of the West – can be visualized. For "only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past."[56] Benjamin's charge against philosophical hermeneutics is that it misrepresents tradition as a framework that has been redeemed from social conflicts.

Obviously, however, serious social conflicts remain. The important conflict in my reading of Benjamin, the one that makes the image of the past as transmitted in tradition highly particular, is not so much the one between the owners of the means of production and those who have only their labour power to sell. Rather, for the critique of philosophical hermeneutics, it is the conflict between those who control the means of transmission and those who are excluded from participating in transmission that is decisive. Though Benjamin views the two kinds of conflict as linked, the implicit critique of Gadamer remains relevant even if the conflict with regard to transmission is not strictly bound to class conflicts regarding the means of production.

Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition is based on his appropriation of Heidegger's account of the historicity of *Dasein*. As I explained in the previous chapter, that account was the consequence of thinking the concept of historical consciousness to its logical conclusion. An individual can never step outside her own historical conditionedness to take an external point of view on her situation. As I also explained,

this construal of historicity is expanded by Gadamer into an account of the "belonging together" of the inquirer and her subject matter. The same historical context which delivers a past object to the present, sedimented with evaluations, has also formed the consciousness of the inquirer. One great horizon embraces the past and present – at least insofar as there is a context of transmission between them. If this radical historicity must be accepted by those who have left metaphysics behind, the question remains: In trying to think a relation to the past that goes "against the grain" of transmitted understandings, does Benjamin's "historical materialism" violate the precepts of this historicity?

Certainly Benjamin does not fall back into what Gadamer sees as the most untenable aspects of the Enlightenment view of tradition. Benjamin does not see tradition as some static force which determines understanding, for he explicitly acknowledges that "tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable."[57] But he does clearly believe that through all of its evolution, tradition performs the same exclusionary function, necessitating a relation to the past which dis-integrates tradition as a totalizing context.

Perhaps Benjamin's position can be explained by referring to Gadamer's contrast between a properly hermeneutic relation to the past and, as I have termed it, an archaeological relation to the past. Hermeneutics does not consider mere fragments of the past, monuments and ruins that are not linked to the present via a mediating substratum of transmission. Only what has been taken up and sedimented by the evaluations of the intervening generations can be claimed as part of the tradition that has formed the consciousness of the present inquirer. For Benjamin, the criticism of a past work's "prosaic historical content," which is the first part of the process of liberating the work from a context of transmission, severs the relations that, for Gadamer,

provide the only living link to the past. The first part of the interpretive process, according to Benjamin, thus involves something like dissolving the link to a living past into an archaeological one: The web of relations of tradition becomes the "pile of debris" surveyed by the angel of history.

Yet, as I have explained, this disintegration is only an intermediate step for Benjamin. The question might therefore be posed again: Where does the present understanding of the politicized interpreters, who construct specific relations between past and present, come from, if not tradition? Benjamin argues that these specific constructions arise out of the specific situation of a particular class. Based on an existing understanding of this situation, the inquirer then gains a heightened awareness of possibilities based on its relation to a particular past. But his constructions are premised on a rejection of the validity of all traditional frameworks of evaluation, with their criteria for judging interpretations, in order to interpret anew, insofar as it is possible, from within precisely this present. Any new situation brings with it the possibility of constructing sets of relations which are not bound to traditional criteria, but arise from the consciousness of an oppressed class which has grasped that its interests run counter to those of the arbiters of tradition. It need not be denied that politicized inquirers cannot presume a full awareness of all of the sources of their "prejudices" and thus can never make a *total* break with tradition. It is enough to ensure that interpreting differently is possible, that conscious prejudices are prejudices against the context of transmission and its criteria. If the task is to think against the grain, it involves an explicit rejection of Gadamer's demand that the content and evaluations of tradition be acknowledged as the final standpoint for judging any new reflection.

Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition does not just imply that the past always

influences the present. That is as incontestable as it is trivial. Rather, based on his view that tradition is the common property of a historical culture, he demands that all inquirers submit their interpretations for judgment to a common framework of evaluation. Only through the acknowledged universalizing power of such a common framework does the interpreter participate in that transcendence of particularity that is the work of transmission. The demand for such an acknowledgement is Gadamer's attempt to overcome the alienation of modernity, in favour of his "hermeneutical option for continuity" which seeks to reintegrate the isolated *Erlebnisse* of aesthetic consciousness in a communal context. That is why preservation is the primary relation of the inquirer to his past.

From Benjamin's standpoint, the work of preservation constructs a relation to the past that is partial, and can be seen through as partial even from within a thoroughly historical framework. The critique of transmission establishes the necessary distance from the usual interpretive frameworks, and enables the inquirer to think differently. Of course, insofar as he is thinking *against* the interpretive norms of tradition, his constructions will still be *related to* them. But if such a procedure demands a rejection of the criteria that have come down, this negative relation to tradition is no longer a Gadamerian one. Destruction, rather than preservation, becomes the inquirer's primary relation to the context of transmission. Politicized interpretations make no claim to universality and thus are not subject to an illusory common understanding: this provides a margin of freedom to interpret differently. These different interpretations are set against a false, ideological *sensus communis* that Gadamer defends.

Benjamin's critique does indeed extend all the way to those humanist concepts, the attempted revival of which provided Gadamer's starting point in *Truth and*

Method. Benjamin quotes with approval the following passage from Hermann Lotze:

> There has never been a period in history when the level of *Bildung* unique to it permeated the whole of mankind or even the entirety of the nation that was its principal bearer. All degrees and shades of moral coarseness, spiritual obtuseness, and corporeal misery have always co-existed with the cultivated [*gebildete*] refinement of life and the free enjoyment of advantages characteristic of bourgeois order.[58]

The conclusion to be drawn from this is not just that some are excluded from the project of *Bildung*, but that the very norms of the project reflect the partial, exclusionary interests of its participants. In fact, the only inheritance that the oppressed class can lay claim to runs contrary to the humanist image of preserving the *sensus communis* across the generations:

> The class struggle, which is always present to a historian influenced by Marx, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist. Nevertheless, it is not in the form of the spoils which fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude.[59]

This is, no doubt, a rather odd legacy from the standpoint of humanism.

There are numerous indications of Benjamin's ambivalence regarding the necessity of a break with tradition. He acknowledges that such a break implies a significant impoverishment of meaning in the lives of individuals. Yet he also believes that the unlinking of individual existence from tradition is largely a *fait accompli*. In an article called "Experience and Poverty," Benjamin argues that the contemporary revivals of various spiritualistically imbued ideologies, from palmistry to vegetarianism, are themselves symptoms of an existence that has lost a traditional connection to

the past.[60] Rather than attempting to artificially revive such a connection, Benjamin urges a recognition of the unlinking of tradition and individual experience, and the poverty that comes with this unlinking. Since the tradition is in any event politically suspect, it is better to assume the attitude of a "[t]otal disillusionment regarding the present age and nevertheless an unflinching loyalty to it."[61]

A more important implication is that the highly particular nature of interpretations that eschew traditional criteria might give them over to arbitrariness. There is reason to think that Benjamin worried about this. For he sometimes formulates the task of politicized interpretations in terms that seem to re-import a metaphysical, i.e. suprahistorical, guarantee of their validity. For example, he writes that the true historian "grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as a 'now-time' [*Jetztzeit*] which is shot through with chips of Messianic time."[62] In another passage, the relation between the past and the present is described in rather peculiar terms: "Every now is determined by those images that are synchronic with it: every now is the now of a specific recognizability. In it, truth is loaded to the bursting point with time."[63]

It is as if Benjamin was not sure about the definitiveness of the constellations constructed between the past and present, and sought to compensate for his unease by giving these constructions the lustre of transcendence. Clearly, there can be no question of a prior "synchrony" between the past and present.[64] At best, it is the actual political productivity of an interpretation that can establish its "validity." Given the preponderance of such theological figures in Benjamin's writing, it is doubtful whether they can be dismissed as *merely* rhetorical. They seem, rather, to reflect an abiding metaphysical impulse. But there are essays in which no such figures appear, for example the essay on Eduard Fuchs. In order to bring Benjamin into a productive rela-

tion to Gadamer, I have thus left aside much in his later work that tends toward the metaphysical.

From the standpoint of philosophical hermeneutics, Benjamin's constructions may well appear arbitrary. Gadamer tries to preserve an inner-historical universality in the normative character of a transmitted common heritage. But constructed interpretations do not submit themselves to "the court of tradition" for evaluation. They are particular, and declare themselves as such. Given the exclusionary nature of a context of transmission, it is perhaps better to own up to particularity, rather than veiling it with the appearance of universality.

What Lukács derided as a "jumble sale" is appropriate for a conception of history which has rejected the claim that universal meaning is immanent in tradition. For Benjamin, the necessary decontextualization of history from tradition leaves precisely what Lukács described: "a heap of lifeless objects in which one can rummage around at will, picking out whatever one happens to need at the moment . . . something to be taken apart and stuck together again in accordance with the exigencies of the moment." While it must be noted that part of the motivation for Benjamin's decontextualization is his concern for what has been lost or marginalized, there is nevertheless a sense in which history *is* a "jumble sale." After the liquidation of tradition, the cash value of any constructed interpretation is determined by its success in political practice.

Notes to Chapter Two

1. Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," in *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, p. 298.

2. Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977), p. 33.

3. Ibid., p. 34.

4. Ibid., p. 35, translation modified. Cf. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), p. 16.

5. Ibid., p. 38.

6. Ibid.

7. Benjamin makes it clear that aesthetics should not try to abolish genres in his brief discussion of Benedetto Croce. Benjamin writes that "although it is clearly futile to assemble a series of works of art with certain features in common, if the intention is to establish their essential quality rather than to produce a collection of historical or stylistic examples, it is equally inconceivable that the philosophy of art will ever divest itself of some of its most fruitful ideas, such as the tragic or the comic" (ibid., p. 44).

8. Ibid., p. 46.

9. Ibid., p. 47

10. Ibid., p. 48.

11. The metaphysical nature of the redemption of phenomena from a distorting context is especially apparent in Benjamin's account of the approach the interpreter must take if he is not to repeat this distortion of the subject matter. Unlike knowledge, which is attained by grasping objects in subsumptive concepts, ideas are apparently the yield of a more passive approach to the subject matter: "Truth is an intentionless state of being, made up of ideas. The proper approach to it is not therefore one of intention and knowledge, but rather a total immersion and absorption in it. Truth is the death of intention" (ibid., p. 36). While "total immersion" in the subject matter is no doubt a prerequisite of a good understanding, to raise such an approach to methodological status on the basis of a contrast with an "intentional" approach is difficult to comprehend, except on a metaphysical basis. There is indeed a metaphysical philosophy of language partly underlying Benjamin's argument here, but an investigation of that philosophy is outside the scope of this thesis.

12. Ibid., p. 49.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., p. 52.

15. Ibid., pp. 53-54.

16. Ibid., p. 55.

17. Ibid., p. 79.

18. Ibid., p. 66.

19. Ibid., p. 174.

20. Ibid., p. 184.

21. Ibid., p. 179.

22. Ibid., p. 174.

23. Ibid., p. 231.

24. Benjamin, "Left-Wing Melancholy (On Erich Kästner's new book of poems)," trans. Ben Brewster, in *Screen* 15 (1974), p. 30.

25. Ibid., p. 31.

26. Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," p. 63, translation modified. Cf. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 5, Part 1, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), p. 591.

27. Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian," trans. Knut Tarnowski, *New German Critique* 5 (1975), pp. 27-58.

28. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 253-264.

29. Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian," p. 28, translation modified. Cf. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 2, Part 2, p. 467.

30. Ibid., translation modified. Cf. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 2, Part 2, pp. 467-468.

31. Ibid., translation modified. Cf. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 2, Part 2, p. 468.

32. Ibid., pp. 28-29, translation modified. Cf. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 2, Part 2, p. 468.

33. Ibid., p. 29, emphasis added.

34. Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," p. 49. Cf. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 5, Part 1, pp. 576-577.

35. Ibid., pp. 50-51.

36. Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian," p. 35, translation modified. Cf. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 2, Part 2, pp. 476-477.

37. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," pp. 258-259.

38. Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," p. 56.

39. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," p. 258.

40. Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian," p. 30.

41. Ibid., p. 32.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid., p. 33.

44. Ibid., p. 34.

45. Ibid., p. 36.

46. Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," pp. 56-57.

47. Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian," p. 36.

48. Benjamin, "Rigorous Study of Art: On the First Volume of the *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*," trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *October* 47 (1988), p. 86.

49. Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian," p. 37.

50. Ibid., translation modified. Cf. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 2, Part 2, p. 479.

51. Hannah Arendt has suggested that Benjamin may have used the term "dialectics" frequently to appease his editors (Adorno and Horkheimer) at the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. See Arendt's "Introduction" to *Illuminations*.

52. Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," pp. 64-65.

53. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," p. 257.

54. Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," p. 60.

55. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," pp. 259-260.

56. Ibid., p. 256.

57. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, p. 225.

58. Hermann Lotze, quoted in Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," p. 73.

59. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," pp. 256-257.

60. Benjamin, "*Erfahrung und Armut*," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 1, Part 1, p. 215.

61. Ibid., p. 216.

62. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," p. 265, translation modified. Cf. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 1, Part 2, p. 704.

63. Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," p. 50, translation modified. Cf. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 5, Part 1, p. 578.

64. There is a rather complicated theory behind Benjamin's idea of synchrony, which is explicated in a highly fragmentary way in the notes for his history of nineteenth century Paris. This theory seems to involve a mixture of motifs gleaned from the writings of Ludwig Klages, Carl Jung, and some French surrealists. It is well beyond the scope of this thesis to deal with it. See *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 5.

Conclusion

The rejection of historicism is the common point of departure for Benjamin and Gadamer. A mode of historical inquiry that presumes to think the past purely in its own conceptions only detaches it from a productive relation to the present. Gadamer and Benjamin recognize that the past is taken up into a context of transmission, sedimented with the interpretations of subsequent inquirers, and thus made present. There is no relation to a past in itself.

Gadamer gives this separation of historical material from its point of origin an unambiguously positive value. A context of transmission liberates a text from the particularity of its author's intentions and the interpretations of his contemporaries. Participation in tradition means always handing over its material in a way that allows it to speak to future generations with universal authority. Insofar as she participates in tradition, the inquirer and her subject matter are bound together: The same context of transmission which has delivered the past has also formed her consciousness. This claim regarding the commonality of inquirer and the historical material does not give the inquirer a false assurance that might result in a reduction of the subject matter to whatever conforms to the norms of the present. For it is the inquirer's hermeneutical responsibility to foreground, insofar as it is possible, the particularity of her own situation from the particularity of any text from the past to which she relates herself, thus making it possible for the subject matter to challenge her understanding.

Benjamin recognized the effectiveness of the context of transmission which separates the subject matter from its origin. But while transmission's effect dispenses

with the historicist problematic, it does *not* liberate its material from particularity. Rather, it imposes the particularity of the collective understanding of the arbiters of tradition, an understanding which is inherently exclusionary. For those whose past has not been taken up into the context of transmission, a relation to the past which is bound to norms integral to the content of tradition can only lead to a misconstrual of their present situation, or at best reinforce their sense of marginality. For the excluded, then, the first task is to destroy the appearance of continuity which unites the arbiters of tradition in the present with the past. This must involve exposing the particularity that has been stamped on traditionary material. Thus, a methodology which uncovers the genetic roots of received interpretations in a class-based understanding is in order. But this historical research is only the necessary step in the process of unhinging the subject matter and making it available for interpretations in which a specific past is brought into relation with a marginalized present. In this way, it is possible even for those whose productions have been excluded from a context of transmission to have a productive relation to the past.

It is a commonplace that time separates the great from the insignificant, the masterpiece from the minor work, the wheat from the chaff. The Benjaminian charge against Gadamer is that he has inflated this commonplace into a conception of hermeneutical understanding which is oblivious to that feeling of unrest which should properly result from the contemplation of the time which separates a work from its origin. This obliviousness to a feeling of unrest can be seen in Gadamer's narrowing of the historicity of *Dasein*. For Gadamer, any attempt to radically distance oneself from a tradition-bound understanding is a misguided de-situating of the inquirer. However, an inquirer who has reason to suspect the "content of tradition" that Gadamer claims must judge the adequacy of interpretations does not have to resume the Enlighten-

ment's quest for an ahistorical standpoint. The suspension of the binding claim of tradition makes the historical material available for a construction of relations between past and present whose plausibility is judged by its efficacy in illuminating the particular present of the marginalized. Of course, even the marginalized are affected, in ways that exceed their self-consciousness, by understandings circulated by the arbiters of tradition. Thus they can never make a total break. But that only means that the work of "wresting tradition away" from its arbiters is a constant task.

The particular quality of constructed interpretations which disavow any appearance of universality clarifies the relation of Benjamin's rejection of philosophical hermeneutics to that other well-known dispute over the efficacy of tradition: the debate between Gadamer and Habermas over the "universality" of hermeneutics. All the details of this debate are not relevant here, but it is illuminating to consider the pivotal argument in Gadamer's reply to Habermas:

> It would be true when Habermas asserts that "hermeneutics bangs helplessly, so to speak, from within against the walls of tradition," if we understand this "within" as opposite to an "outside" that *does not enter* our world – our to be understood, understandable, or nonunderstandable world – but remains the mere observation of external alterations (instead of human actions). With this area of what lies outside the realm of human understanding and human understandings (our world) hermeneutics is not concerned.[1]

Gadamer goes on to claim that the universality of hermeneutics finds its warrant in the universality of language: "The principle of hermeneutics simply means that we should try to understand everything that can be understood. This is what I meant by the sentence: 'Being that can be understood is language'."[2]

It is not clear how Gadamer's claims should be assessed. He seems to be assert-

ing that insofar as a phenomenon comes into the domain of language – a domain which constitutes the world as we know it – that phenomenon can be hermeneutically understood. This response to Habermas does not adequately address Benjamin's concerns about the consequences of the valorization of the context of transmission for historical interpretation. For even if the understandings of the oppressed came to linguistic expression in the past, it is the subsequent marginalisation of these expressions in a context of transmission that requires a response. Those who continue to be oppressed in the present may uncover fragments of a marginalized past. But a standpoint that puts its trust in the universalizing power of the context of transmission and conceives the self-understanding of the present inquirer as a product of that context has a very unsure relation to such fragments.

Benjamin finds an "outside" of tradition which is not outside the potential historical understanding of the oppressed. He insists on the need for dis-integrating historical material from the context of tradition, in order that a new set of relations for the material might then be constructed using criteria derived from the needs of the political present of the marginalized. Any such outside of tradition will still be related to transmitted interpretations. Interpreting "against the grain" implies that the relation of the outsiders to the insiders who control the context of transmission will be one of opposition.

To be sure, an understanding which regards the transmitted past as a collection of fragments rather than an integrated whole is, in a sense, an impoverished one. Gadamer responds to the impoverishment that comes with the unlinking of modern experience from a common structure of significance by recommending the uncovering of the sometimes buried, but allegedly still living link to the past supplied by tradition. Benjamin, as we have seen, instead urges a "total disillusionment" regard-

ing modern life and its poverty of experience. Even if the loss of a living link to a common past as furnished by tradition is not a *fait accompli*, the particularity of the wealth of tradition – the fact that a large proportion of humankind has been excluded from participating in the transmission of an allegedly common understanding – compromises any project of its retrieval. Gadamer's position involves a politically untenable nostalgia for something that never was. The "hermeneutical option for continuity" cannot be a live option.

Evidently, Gadamer is not impressed by claims that we are living in a post-traditional era – that the binding quality of a transmitted, common understanding has been lost, perhaps forever. But he cannot remain obliviousness to the unrest that should properly result from a consideration of the partiality of what has come down. The price to be paid for such obliviousness is the repudiation of hermeneutics' claim to universality.

It must finally be acknowledged, however, that both the acceptance and the rejection of the idea of a common link to a common past points to a questionable assumption in the discussion of tradition in Gadamer and Benjamin. Both tend to view tradition in the singular, as *the* tradition, and formulate their respective evaluations of the function of tradition – one positive, the other negative – on the basis of this putative singularity. By contextualizing the rehabilitation of tradition in a retrieval of humanist conceptions like *Bildung* and the *sensus communis*, Gadamer reveals his supposition that the common values of the community and common ideals of human development, are the evolving, but relatively stable core of *the* tradition. And by viewing the conflicts in his contemporary society in stark and often apocalyptic terms, Benjamin's negative judgment on tradition became a near-totalizing one. The question, which cannot be fully addressed here, is whether conceiving trans-

mission as constituting a singular, relatively unified tradition is the only option.

As I have explained, Gadamer does not view tradition as a univocal determining power. His acknowledgement of the "many voices" within the tradition shows an awareness of the plurality of historically-effective forces that form different understandings. If those many voices give up the project of harmonizing in their devotion to the misconceived task of preserving a nonexistent common past, a new, more relevant conception of the effect of the past on the present might become plausible. Such a conception must at least recognize the different interests in, and points of access to the past that different groups have. And the idea of anything like an overarching continuity of the West, nations, and many other alleged social unities must be relinquished. It is likely that Gadamer fails to conceive the many voices in terms of largely unconnected local traditions because he is still devoted to the very traditional humanist idea of a culture that forms itself around a centre of exemplary classical works. The encounter with the classics may, for many, produce the overwhelming sense that these works express something truly universal which unites humanity, or a nation. But that universality does not exist.

I also explained that Benjamin opposed a very unhumanistic legacy of the oppressed to the dominant tradition, with its pretensions of universality. However, he seems to have been unwilling to consider the possibility that, through time, oppressed groups might work through much of the content of the dominant tradition, reinterpreting it from their perspectives, while also retrieving a substantial portion of those traces of the past that the dominant tradition left behind, and eventually establish relatively stable counter-traditions. Oppressed groups could acknowledge the need for criticism which uncovers the social roots of dominant interpretations, and adopt the procedure of constructing alternative interpretations from the historical material

that has been decontextualized from tradition through social criticism. But if, in a relatively pluralistic society, oppressed groups have at least some control over the transmission of their own understandings, it may be better to view criticism and construction as *part* of an effort by a group to build its own tradition.

Even if these suggestions for a non-polarizing approach to traditions are plausible, Benjamin's claims about the exclusionary effects of unequal access to the effective means of transmission remain relevant, because any emerging tradition could produce a new inequality. In any event, Benjamin's critique of transmission is certainly effective against Gadamer. The consequences of exclusion described by Benjamin exist wherever historical interpretation is bound to a tradition. The charge of partiality against an understanding that appeals to the interpretive consensus of tradition can only be obviated on the assumption of a substantial equality in the historical participation of different groups.

In his response to Habermas, Gadamer asks: "Over against what self-interpretation of the social consciousness (and all morality is such) is it in place to inquire *behind* that consciousness – and when is it not?"[3] Since Gadamer views the self-interpretations of the social consciousness as bound to the evaluative framework of tradition, and since that framework has excluded some from participation in the transmission of its content, the answer must be that it is *always* in place to inquire behind social consciousness.

Notes to Conclusion

1. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 31.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 42:

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