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Hans-Georg Gadamer's Poetics: Hermeneutics, Language, and the Reading of Paul Celan

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Abstract: This paper investigates Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics by following his sustained dialogue with modern poetry, especially the work of Paul Celan. Although *Truth and Method* secured Gadamer's place in both philosophy and literary studies, its rather diffuse presentation leaves lingering questions about how notions such as the "fusion of horizons," the "hermeneutic circle," and the "logic of question and answer" actually operate in practice. The inquiry also turns to Gadamer's commentary volume *Wer bin ich und wer bist du?*, which Gadamer devoted to Celan's *Atemkristall* cycle. In this commentary, Gadamer provides a chance to see these hermeneutic strategies in action. By tracing Gadamer's references to Celan throughout his essays and situating them within debates on modern art and music, the paper outlines Gadamer's poetics as a philosophy of language that stresses the autonomy of the poetic text, the recollection of language, and the productive dissonance of the modern lyric. Celan's fragmented hermetic prose serves as a striking illustration of Gadamer's claim that poetry refuses to vanish, insisting instead on endless rereading and a dialogic encounter. In the end, Gadamer's meditation on Celan uncovers a hermeneutic that is simultaneously philosophical and richly poetic, forging a bridge between philosophy and literature that sheds new light on the challenges of interpreting modern texts.

Keywords: Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Celan, hermeneutics, fusion of horizons, poetic language, modern poetry interpretation

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German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his 1960 work *Wahrheit und Methode* (*Truth and Method*),¹ grounds philosophical hermeneutics with potent originality. Since its publication, the work's international recognition made it a canonical reference in philosophy and literature courses. This prestige, however, does not exempt the work from opacity; there are still obscure areas that make its conceptual framework difficult to handle. How should one operationalize, for

instance, such concepts as the “fusion of horizons,” the “hermeneutic circle,” and the “logic of question and answer” in the interpretive practice of a poetic text?

That is not a simple question to answer, given the diffuse character of the work. As Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has suggested, in a text written in celebration of the hundredth anniversary of Gadamer's birth, the fact that *Wahrheit und Methode* does not establish a doctrine with precise boundaries interferes with the recognizability of its concepts—and therefore their effectiveness—throughout its reception history. It is difficult to imagine what literary theory (*Literaturwissenschaft*) might have been in German-speaking universities prior to the reception of Gadamer's work. Paradoxically, nevertheless, it is even more difficult to understand precisely Gadamer's influence on our academic practices concerning literature.

Influenced by the existential ontology of Martin Heidegger, Gadamer argues in *Wahrheit und Methode* that the act of interpreting the world is a central component of human existence. His interpretative locus is not that of a researcher in the face of a literary object. Rather, Gadamer argues, in contrast to Enlightenment criticism, that the interpretation of the world and of texts is guided by a prejudice (*Vor-Urteil*). The hermeneutist's task consists of fusing horizons, to join the horizon of the past world (or of the text under analysis) with the horizon of the present world (where the analyst is located).

From this “fusion of horizon” (*Horizontverschmelzung*) comes understanding. The subject who understands does so as an agent of an event of the tradition, dialogues with the text, and engages it “in play.” For Gadamer, this subject, defined by Gumbrecht as a “weak subject,” is, ultimately, the subject of the human sciences. In interpretation, Gadamer appeals not only to pure reason but also to formation (*Bildung*), taste, and judgment.

Despite its diffuse character, Gadamer's *magnum opus* contains an acknowledgeable project in development, one that highlights the structural axes of its hermeneutic architecture—namely, the attitude and action of the interpreter towards the literary text. What is not clear, however, is the interpreter's *modus operandi*, the praxis and operationalization of his philosophical hermeneutics. Since *Wahrheit und Methode* does not provide this, Gadamer's 1973 commentary volume *Wer bin ich und wer bist du?* (*Who Am I and Who Are You?*), devoted to Paul Celan's *Atemkristall* (*Breath-Crystal*) cycle, offers an excellent opportunity to envisage the author himself at work, with his original concepts, in the hermeneutic field. In this book, Gadamer comments on each of the twenty-one short and hermetic poems of Celan.² The Gadamerian analysis of these poems becomes exemplary of Gadamer's hermeneutic strategies and concretizes his ideas of “understanding” and “poetry.”

This paper seeks to outline Gadamer's poetics, and more specifically, his singular and rich reading of Celan's poems, based on the essays Gadamer wrote on lyric poetry in *Wahrheit und Methode* and elsewhere (including his commentaries in *Wer bin ich und wer bist du?*).

1. Reflections by Gadamer on Paul Celan

In *Wahrheit und Methode* and in essays written between 1968 and 1991, Gadamer references Celan on several occasions. Sometimes he draws on Celan, as in two passages of *Wahrheit und Methode*, in raising the issue of hermeneutics in the face of certain modes of language such as

modern poetry and its hermetic character. At other times, he engages with Celan directly, as when he selects Celan's poetry as the theme for his essays "Sinn und Sinnverhüllung bei Paul Celan" ("Meaning and Concealment of Meaning in Paul Celan") and "Phänomenologischer und semantischer Zugang zu Celan?" ("A Phenomenological and Semantic Approach to Celan?").

Because *Wahrheit und Methode* is the most internationally renowned Gadamer work, and because it addresses the issue of the interpretation of works of art, it is useful to recall, briefly contextualized, its two references to Paul Celan.³ Afterwards, we shall turn to Gadamerian essays published after 1967 (the date of the significant encounter between Heidegger and Celan in the Black Forest),⁴ which testify the philosopher's interest in the poet (Lyon). Mapping Celan's principal appearances in Gadamer's work will reveal Gadamer's poetic philosophy, at this point still fairly unknown for both readers of Gadamer and of Celan.

Though Gadamer sometimes refers to *Wer bin ich und wer bist du* as his "little book" (*Büchlein*) of commentary on Celan's poetry, the diminutive should not be mistaken as a devaluation of the author or his texts. Evidence of this can be found in the conclusion to his "Self-Presentation" ("Selbstdarstellung"), completed in 1975, included as the last appendix to *Wahrheit und Methode*: in the final lines of the concluding paragraph, Gadamer cites *Wer bin ich und wer bist du* as one of the significant works he developed after the publication of the first volume of *Wahrheit und Methode* (*Gesammelte Werke* [2]). We will explore this below.

The autonomy of the poetic text, a question that runs through a large part of Gadamer's essays, in its reception provokes a specific change in the basic hermeneutic relation of question and answer: "The reception and interpretation of poetry seem to imply a *sui generis* dialogical relationship" (*Gesammelte Werke* 2: 508). Conceptual explanation, as Gadamer reminds us, cannot exhaust the content of a poetical production. According to the author, other modes of language, not only the poetic, alter the dialectics of the questions and sustain the hermeneutic process:

I refer to the diverse forms of religious language, such as proclamation, oration, sermon, and benediction. I refer to the mythical "legend", to the juridical text, and even to the more or less babbling language of philosophy. These modes form a problematic of applied hermeneutics, to which I have devoted myself increasingly ever since the emergence of *Wahrheit und Methode*. I think I have approached the theme from two angles: my studies on Hegel, in which I have tackled the role of the element of language in its relation to the logical element, and modern hermetic poetry, which I have analyzed in a commentary on Paul Celan's "Breath-crystal". The relationship between poetry and philosophy is at the center of these investigations. (2: 508)

1.1 Fusion of Horizons and Texts That Never "Disappear"

In a 1986 essay from *Wahrheit und Methode*, entitled "Text und Interpretation," Gadamer once again references Celan's poetry. Once the understanding of a text has been achieved, the interpreter, according to what the philosopher believes, has no other function but to withdraw. The interpreter's discourse does not properly constitute a text, but rather it exists to serve the text. This discourse, or mediating language, has a dialogical structure, and the interpreter of discourse would be a kind of "negotiator":

I believe there is a very similar relationship between the text and the reader. After having

overcome the strange element of a text, thus helping the reader to understand it, the withdrawal of the interpreter does not mean disappearance in the negative sense. It means rather his incorporation into communication, thereby resolving the tension between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader. That is what I call *fusion of horizons*. The horizons, separated as distinct points of view, are fused into one. That is why the understanding of a text tends toward integrating the reader into what the text says. It is precisely the text that disappears. (*Gesammelte Werke* 2: 351)

However, not all texts disappear after being understood—such is the case of the phenomenon called literature. Literary texts cannot be seen as the mere fixation of spoken discourse, for they possess a special status. Given the self-presentation (*Selbstpräsentation*) of the literary word, its interpretation cannot be reduced simply to a mediation between statement and reader: “[...] a literary text demands to be present in its manifestation of language and not merely to fulfill its communicative function. It is not enough to read it; it is necessary to listen to it, even if only with the inner ear” (2: 352).

Literary language resonates. Its relationships of meaning, evoked by primary meanings, give them volume (*Volumen*), that is, wit: autonomy and embodiment. Could it be that these additional meanings, often produced in a relation of opposition, render a text literary? The question is, without a doubt, far more complex. As Gadamer reminds us, words that are not literary can also possess connotations or autonomous meanings, as happens, for example, in puns, which break the univocity of meaning in discourse. Gadamer analyzes the different effects of puns in daily speech and in the poetry of Celan:

The reiterated use of wordplay and puns irritates us, because it breaks the unity of the discourse. The disarticulating principle of wordplay would hardly be effective in a song or in a lyric poem, that is, whenever the melodic figuration of language prevails. [...] it is a different case when the poetic discourse does not originate the flow of the narration, the agility of singing, nor the dramatic representation, but moves rather consciously in the play of reflection, of whose speculative games the disarticulation of the expectations of discourse are a part. Wordplay therefore may exercise a fertile function in a very reflexive lyric. That is what happens in the hermetic lyric of Paul Celan. (2: 354–355)

1.2 Gadamer's Interest in Celan's Poetry

In a 1968 essay about Stefan George, Gadamer briefly mentions Celan's poetry for the first time. He writes about the epigrammatic force of George's language, resonant in the work of Gottfried Benn and Celan (*Gesammelte Werke* 9: 126). Gadamer's interest in Celan's poetry was inspired by Celan's encounter with Heidegger in the Black Forest, on July 25, 1967, an event that inspired Celan's poem “Todtnauberg.” Gadamer concludes his 1974 commemorative essay written for Heidegger's 85th birthday with a reading of “Todtnauberg.” In the final paragraph, just before the citation of the poem, he recalls Celan's visit to the village of Todtnauberg, where Heidegger's hut stood. “Consider this: a persecuted Jewish person, a poet, who did not live in Germany but rather in Paris, yet who was a German poet, oppressed, takes a risk with this visit” (3: 269). He then comments on a passage from the poem: he associates the verses “forest sward, unleveled,

/ orchis and orchis, singly” to Heidegger and Celan’s walk in the meadow near the hut, “lonely both—like the solitary flowers in the path (‘orchis and orchis’)” (*Gesammelte Werke* 3: 269).

In his 1990 essay “Im Schatten des Nihilismus” (“Under the Shadow of Nihilism”), Gadamer compares Celan to Benn: “[They] are the two great poets who, in the aftermath of the Second War, gave expression to the German feeling of life, to German destiny, to the unstable position between faith and incredulity, between hope and despair” (9: 367–368). Gadamer’s argument of proximity between Benn and Celan will not convince every reader. Benn’s poetry, melodious and harmonic, comprises eight regular quatrains of heptasyllabic lines with ABAB, CDCD rhyme schemes. Celan’s poetry, in contrast, is notably dissonant: the poem is irregular, the line breaks are unexpected, and the meaning is obscure. Although both poets share a common theme of nihilism and the negation of God, they present different poetic gestures. Celan’s relationship with language is more intimate and, at the same time, more estranged than Benn’s. In his *Bremer Rede*, Celan describes himself as a poet who “goes towards language with his existence” (186), and the result of this encounter is fragmentary, dissonant poetry. Benn, in contrast, speaks about terrible subjects in his poem in an open, melodic, and harmonious form, reinforcing a clear distinction between life and art.

“Todtnauberg” appears a second time in “Im Schatten des Nihilismus.” After describing the concrete elements Celan evokes in the poem, like the hut (where Gadamer stayed many times) and the well (next to which Gadamer often shaved in the company of Heidegger),⁵ Gadamer examines the final stanzas, in which Celan talks about the path of logs (*Knüppelpfade*) in the moor, half-trodden:

That is indeed how it is on the tall mountains. The flooded pathways on the moor become somewhat viable by means of logs. The poem talks of half-trodden pathways of logs, which means: where one cannot cross and is forced to return. They are like lost tracks [*Holzwege*]. There is an association with the fact that Heidegger did not intend and could not say [to the poet] a word “to come” (*kommendes Wort*), a “hope, today” [...]. Then, it may well be that the obscure poet has not experienced in this visit any transformation of hope and clarity. (*Gesammelte Werke* 9: 377)

Gadamer’s final remarks on “Todtnauberg,” though merely touched upon here, reveal not only his interest in the dialogue between empirical reality (Celan’s visit to Heidegger) and poetic language, but also the dialogue between philosophy and poetry (the “word to come” expected from the philosopher). One will realize, however, that the historical outlook—the terror of the war crimes against the Jewish people, though not forgotten, is rarely mentioned in his essays—is shunned in favor of the philosopher’s word, as the poem reveals, only to be understood by the poet on his return home; Heidegger’s “word to come,” not given to Celan, overshadows “that which silenced between the two” (Lyon 189–190).⁶

Gadamer favors Celan’s poetry as a locus in which to discuss the problem of mutism in modernity in the 1970 essay “Verstummen die Dichter?” (“Are the Poets Falling Silent?”). For Gadamer, the question is not whether the poets have fallen silent; rather, in the case of Celan’s poems, one must ask “whether our ears are sharp enough to hear them” (*Gesammelte Werke* 9: 363). Celan’s poetry provokes in Gadamer a series of questions, more than could be exhaustively listed here. As we have mapped the occurrences of Celan in Gadamer’s work, it is time to narrow the focus. What does Gadamer understand of modern poetry, and, more specifically, Celan’s poetics?

2. Gadamer's Poetics

Having differentiated between everyday language and poetic language, we now turn to Gadamer's understanding of Celan's poetry through a comparative lens on modern fine arts and music. The questions he raises about the gravitational force of the poetic word, the tendency towards concentration and condensation in modern music and poetry, as well as musical and poetic dissonance, point us towards a reflection on composite words (*Komposita*) found in Celan, which will be discussed later in this section.

It is self-forgetfulness (*Selbstvergessenheit*) that fundamentally distinguishes everyday language from poetic language (*Gesammelte Werke* 9: 362). In communicative speech, words disappear behind the object or referent they evoke; it is this effacing of the signifying (or the self-forgetfulness of the language) that makes understanding possible. The formal elements of a discourse or of a text have to be forgotten in the act of understanding, they must neutralize their presence as if they were diaphanous and devoid of thickness. Poetry, on the other hand, is the *remembrance of language*, the recovery of its materiality and elocutionary potency.

In comparing the two forms, Gadamer often draws upon Paul Valéry's metaphor: the poetic word is a gold coin, whose value lies in its materiality or substance, whereas the word of everyday language (communicative speech) is paper currency, whose value is merely symbolic. In his 1986 essay "Der 'eminente' Text und seine Wahrheit" ("The 'Eminent' Text and Its Truth"), Gadamer describes poetic texts as "autonomous configurations, consolidated in themselves, which want always to be read anew, even if they have always been understood" (9: 289). The correspondence between sound and sense, according to Gadamer, also renders the text eminent (9: 291).

2.1 The Remembrance of Language in Celan

How, then, do we describe the eminence and singular "remembrance of language" in a poet like Celan—Jewish, German-speaking, persecuted by the Nazi regime—who chose to write in German, the "murderous language" (*Mördersprache*)⁷ that killed his parents? Celan related in his famous Bremen Speech: "Attainable, near and not-lost, one thing has remained in the midst of the losses: language. It, the language, remained not-lost, yes, in spite of all. But it had to go through its own emptiness of answers, the terrible muteness, the thousand glooms of death-bringing speech" (9: 379).

Gadamer does not fail to consider the inscription of the Holocaust (or, under the Judaic prism, the *Shoah*) in Celan's poetry, even if he does not favor the historical approach: "What Celan's message expresses has its own gravity, and surely also its dramatic apex, in the terrors of the crimes committed during the Second World War. But from the historical-formal and philosophical-artistic point of view, its preparation can already be traced to the very beginning of this century" (9: 379).

Gadamer frequently situates Celan's poetry in dialogue with developments in modern art and music. The revolutions of early 20th-century painting and the innovations in musical theory and practice emerge as necessary preconditions for Celan's poetic language. The disintegration of forms in cubism and the simultaneity of multiple perspectives in Picasso's portraits are like bodies shattered into hundreds of fragments, demanding the viewer, who is accustomed to classic figuration, to reconstruct their sensibility and attribute a new sense of the whole to these semantic shards. Gadamer argues that the same semantic reconstruction—from the shards to the unity of the work—is required in reading Celan's poetry. Reflecting on a poem whose opening stanza consists of three isolated,

imperative commands—“Do not act ahead of time / do not transmit / stand / within”—addressed to an unspecified you, Gadamer remarks:

Just as in the imperatives at the beginning of our poem, so in a portrait of Picasso we suddenly recognize shards of meaning—a nose, some lips, or an eye. After they have been identified, a formal quest begins for the several layers of this fractured whole, until one has in front of one’s eyes a whole structured in itself and monumentally formed by means of this structuring. (*Gesammelte Werke* 9: 380)

To some degree, the analogy between Celan’s poetry and Picasso’s portraits is accurate. In Cubism, the painter develops an object from lines and plane and presents figurative elements from diverse points of view, that is, simultaneous perspectivalizations of an object. In poetry, the poet’s quest for orientation is more urgent (or more anguished) than any logic of fragmentation or unfolding of planes: the poet is always in search of a place, or places. As Celan says in “The Meridian”: “in the light of utopia, I’m looking for all this with a probably very imprecise, because restless, finger on a map—on a child’s map, I must confess” (“Der Meridian” 202).⁸ These places (or points of view) do not exist, he argues, although they should exist. Celan expresses a demand for a beyond that reality cannot provide.

2.2 Celan and His (Dis)Association with Surrealism

The apparent disconnection between imperative sentences in Celan’s poem might be better compared to surrealist art, where the logic of dream and the unconscious prevail over any spatial rationale. The imperative lines of poetry, lacking explicit links amongst themselves, can be read as images from distinct semantic fields clustered in a whole that is less structured than Picasso’s cubist portraits. Yet, in a broader view, the analogy between Celan’s poetry and surrealist works is limited because, although his poems bring together radically heterogeneous words—namely these compound words from the cycle of poems analyzed by Gadamer: “Atemkristall” (Atem=breath + Kristall=crystal); “Schlāfenzange” (Schlāfen=temples + Zange=tongs); “Holzlied” (Holz=wood + Lied=song); “Wundenspiegel” (Wunden=wounds + Spiegel=mirror)—there exists an existential strain in his poetry which avoids interpretation associated with the automatic unconscious that is privileged by surrealism.

It is worth noting that from 1945 to 1947 Celan practiced within a circle of surrealist authors and artists in Bucharest. The Romanian avant-garde, perhaps even more than other European groups, was in direct contact with the international movement of its founders belonging to the Parisian avant-garde. In late 1947, Celan moved to Vienna, where he lived until 1948 before settling in Paris, and there participated in the briefly flourishing Viennese surrealist movement alongside Edgar Jené. During this period he published his first book, *Der Sand aus den Urnen* (*The Sand of the Urns*) with traceable surrealist motifs. In the poem “Erinnerung aus Frankreich” (“Remembrance of France”), the figure of his neighbor, *Monsieur Le Songe*, is personified as a dream. Celan even contributed the text “Edgar Jené und der Traum vom Traume” to a catalog of thirty of Jené’s paintings. However, Barbara Wiedermann, in an essay about Viennese surrealist publications, remarks that Celan, in a letter to his mentor and friend from Bucharest, Margul-Sperber, betrays an irony and distance from the Viennese avant-garde: “He is here, so to speak, the ‘pope’ of surrealism, and I am his most influential (only) cardinal. But I have prophesied that his superior, Saint Peter—

that is, André Breton—will certainly not recognize him as his representative in Vienna, much less me, who has committed sins as serious as writing rhymes” (127). After 1950, Celan would vehemently reject any identification of his work to Surrealism (Goßens and Patka 70).

2.3 The Poem and Its Pluridimensionality

When relating poetry to the fine arts, Gadamer does not remain confined to the two-dimensional image of painting. In his 1981 essay “Philosophie und Literatur” (“Philosophy and Literature”), he argues that the poem, unlike grammar and syntax which regulate the “use” of language, makes room for the gravitational pull of words: “The poetic incarnation of meaning in language does not need to conform to the one-dimensionality of argumentative coherences or logical sequencings. Through the plurilocality of every word—as Celan once called it—the poem acquires, as it were, a third dimension” (*Gesammelte Werke* 8: 254).

For Gadamer, the poem invites comparison not with drawing, but with sculpture, or even with the multidimensional sound space of music: “There is a peculiar reciprocity between the singularity of the manifestation of sound and polyphony, which attaches to the isolated word a whole system of references and reveals to us the whole as a single network” (8: 254).

The gravitation of the poetic word, almost always mentioned alongside the *poésie pure* of Stéphane Mallarmé, is then examined in relation to the modernist revolution in music:

A word irradiates, develops grammatical and semantical powers. A group of words irradiates and develops syntactical powers. If one wishes to name this principle here at work, if one wishes to understand the special unity of the whole, then it could be called the principle of harmonic dissonance [Prinzip der harmonischen Dissonanz]. Contrary to the oldest habitual forms of poetry, which contain a lot of rhetorical luster, the dissonances here reach even the elements of the composition and undo the unity of the words. In one word: “it sounds in discord” [klingt es auseinander]. We saw it, for example, in Celan’s final poem, in “stand towards here inside,” in “delicate,” in “according to the prescript,” and in “unsurpassable”. To sound in discord means dissonance [Auseinanderklingen heißt Dissonanz].⁹ (*Gesammelte Werke* 9: 378)

Before we comment on the relation of the poetic word to musical dissonance, we must make a parenthesis about the circularity of understanding underlying Gadamer’s statement. Although he understands the poem using modern concepts, that is, the poem as a constellation of words, his reference to Mallarmé’s *poésie pure* remains faithful to a hermeneutic circularity of understanding derived from ancient rhetoric (*Gesammelte Werke* 1: 275). The irradiation of the words and, subsequently, the irradiation of a group of words in the understanding of the special unity of the whole resembles Friedrich Schleiermacher’s understanding of the movement between part and whole: just as a word can only be understood within a sentence, and a sentence within the work as a whole, so too any discourse is a part that can be grasped only in relation to a larger whole. What Gadamer adds to this circularity, however, is the significance of the relational force between words, which, in modern poetry, has precedence over grammatical and syntactical rules; in poetry, the word is not so much to the sentence, as the romantic hermeneutist explains, as the word is to the word. As he writes in “Von der Wahrheit des Wortes” (“On the Truth of the Word”): “the word speaks as word” (*Gesammelte Werke* 8: 49).

Returning to modern music and poetry, the question is: How does the “principle of harmonic

dissonance” relate to the poetry of Celan? Gadamer, commenting on a cryptic poem by Celan, observes:

The poem reflects the great shift in the sense of suppression and concentration, and thus also of condensation, akin to what we know in modern music since Schönberg and Webern. These characteristics are deeply impregnated in the post-war German lyric—not solely because the German lyric speaks in a language that is only paralleled in terms of freedom and word placement, as far as I know, by Ancient Greek, but because the German language provides the lyric with peculiar concentration. The expressions of the syntactical functions of speech, the rhetoric and prosaic which give unity to speech are almost entirely eliminated. The poem relies solely on the gravitational attraction of words. (*Gesammelte Werke* 9: 371).

Extraordinarily short dodecaphonic pieces by Arnold Schönberg and Anton von Webern, originally received as provoking novelties, sustained, according to Gadamer, in their compact form, an energetic irradiation of their own. In these works of music we can observe a certain thickness (*Dickicht*) of dissonances and lack of harmony (9: 380). From Celan’s tightly condensed and concentrated verses, one expects just as little in the way of harmonious sound, clear semantic resolutions, or easy assimilation. Let us return, then, to Gadamer’s “principle of harmonic dissonance”—which, as he notes, though without fully developing it, extends even to the elements of poetic composition—in order to examine what we take to be genuine dissonances or hermeneutic knots in Celan’s poetry: namely, the composite words (*Komposita*) that do not appear in the dictionary. Frequently a single composite word constitutes an entire line in Celan—a line that is, unsurprisingly, severely compressed and highly difficult, as is the case, for instance, in the composition “*Schläfenzange*” (“tongs of temples”), one of the poems of the “*Atemkristall*” (“Breath-crystal”) cycle.

For now, it is worth commenting on the unexpected juxtaposition of the words “*Schläfen*” (“temples”) and “*Zange*” (“tongs”). From a strictly linguistic perspective, the compound *Schläfenzange* does not appear unusual, since it follows the rules of German word formation (*Wortbildung*). In this respect, German shows enormous plasticity (more than the romantic languages) and no restrictions to composition, provided that the rules for joining words are respected. This freedom in creating composite words is one of the reasons behind the intense degree of condensation that Gadamer remarks upon in German poetry, which can be observed in Celan’s work. Given the high degree of heterogeneity of the images “tongs” and “temples,” their juxtaposition remains abrupt and dissonant, making it difficult to imagine possible referents and meanings. In Gadamerian terms, the composition “sounds in discord” (*klingt auseinander*). Faced with a compound such as *Schläfenzange*—where the parts, instead of drawing toward one another, seem to repel each other in a tense and unstable juxtaposition—can one still speak of the gravitational pull of the poetic word?

In several essays, Gadamer associates Celan’s poetry with revolutionary experiments in modern art pertaining to the visual, musical, and poetic fields, which is why he returns so often to Mallarmé for comparison. After identifying the empirical elements in the poem “*Todtnauberg*”—Heidegger’s hut in the Black Forest, the guest book in which Celan leaves a meaningful inscription,¹⁰ the well with the carved star, and the path of logs—Gadamer states that the text, as description (*Schilderung*) of Celan’s actual visit to Todtnauberg, is not unique in Celan’s work; he has written several other

occasional poems (*situationsgebundene Gedichte*) (*Gesammelte Werke* 9: 378). Indeed, empirical marks—dates or historical events—are not uncommon in many of Celan's hermetic poems, and, when identified, provide valuable interpretative entryways.¹¹ It is precisely this empirical dimension present in Celan's poetry that differentiates it, according to Gadamer, from the poetry of Mallarmé:

In his Büchner Award speech, he [Celan] differentiated his own poems, precisely because of this "existential" referent, from Mallarmé's symbolist poetics. This is not, however, an invitation to biographical research. This circumstantiality, which lends to the poem something that is occasional and seems to require complementation by means of knowledge of specific events, has also elevated itself, in fact, to a realm of meaningfulness and truth, making the poem an authentic poem. A poem that speaks to all of us. (9: 378)

3. Gadamer, Reader of Celan: The Approach of an Outsider?

At the beginning of his 1991 essay "Phänomenologischer und semantischer Zugang zu Celan?" Gadamer narrates his participation in a colloquium on Celan that took place in Heidelberg in 1987, describing himself as a reader and appreciator ("Liebhaber") of the poet: "In the circle of Germanists, with their scientific methods for dominating the difficult poet, I stood as an *outsider*, one who wishes only to enable the poems that touch him and that tell him something to continue always being reconstructed" (*Gesammelte Werke* 9: 461). His approach may not be scientific, but he considers it to aim at the ultimate purpose of any scientific engagement with art. Gadamer then characterizes his way of interpreting Celan's poems: "I am not looking for a 'hermeneutic method.' Indeed, I really do not know what such a method would be. I seek only to make conscious what, at bottom, every reader does. And I also do not prefer, say, a phenomenological method over a semantic one. Certainly the semantic dimension of Celan's texts is especially important" (9: 461).

Even if Gadamer denies a hermeneutic method, at least some hermeneutic principles guide his reading of *Atemkristall*. At the beginning of his analysis of the poem "Wege im Schatten-Gebräch" ("Paths in the Shadow-Break"), he explains: "Following the hermeneutic principle, I shall begin by the final line, which bears the stress. It is there that we shall find, it seems evident, the core of this short poem" (*Wer bin ich* 55). The logic of question-and-answer structures the phenomenon of understanding (*Gesammelte Werke* 1: 375–384), which is another dominant hermeneutic principle present in his reading of Celan. His readings are largely punctuated by questions, some of which are answered in the course of the text, while others are left to suggest interpretative horizons. Often the philosopher concludes his interpretations of the poems by raising a series of questions that leave his reflection open for continuing dialogue.

In order for a transmitted text to be converted into an object of interpretation, it is necessary, first and foremost, for it to suggest the formulation of a question to the interpreter (1: 375–384). Case in point, Celan's poems pose to Gadamer the question "Who Am I, and Who Are You?"—a question that not only gives the book its title but structures its poetic approach. Yet, because poems are not merely vehicles of information, they do not simply become objects for interpretation—they become events of self-presentation. Gadamer's comments reveal a dialogical engagement with the poems, by which the poems acquire increasing unity of meaning as the reader enters "to

play” (Spiel) with them. To engage with poems “in play” is to dialogue with the texts to build their meaning, setting off from their familiar aspects towards the strange or obscure. In many instances in his role as a reader, as Gadamer himself admits, he has deciphered few passages and made vague conjectures about how to fill the gaps in his interpretation, and not in the text itself.

4. Final Remarks

The final remarks of this study revisit Gadamer’s hermeneutics through his sustained dialogue with Celan’s poetry. By examining how Gadamer operationalizes concepts such as the fusion of horizons and the hermeneutic circle in the reading of Celan’s hermetic verse, the conclusion highlights the transformation of hermeneutics into a poetics.

4.1 Gadamer’s Poetics and His Engagement with Celan’s Poetry

Gadamer’s engagement with Celan’s poetry provides a privileged lens through which to understand the poetics of philosophical hermeneutics. While *Wahrheit und Methode* established Gadamer’s reputation as a philosopher of interpretation, it left many readers wondering how his concepts (the fusion of horizons, the hermeneutic circle, the logic of question and answer) might be concretely applied to literary texts. Celan’s hermetic, fractured poetry offered Gadamer precisely the kind of challenge that could test and refine his hermeneutic framework. In his commentaries on *Atemkristall* and in essays written over several decades, Gadamer demonstrates how philosophical hermeneutics becomes a poetics: a mode of reading that foregrounds the autonomy of the poetic text, the remembrance of language, and the inexhaustibility of meaning.

Celan’s poetry resists disappearance. Unlike everyday language, which effaces itself behind its referents, poetic language insists on its own materiality. Gadamer’s insistence that literary texts must be “heard” as well as read underscores this difference. In Celan’s case, the German language itself carries the weight of history, marked by the Shoah and by the paradox of writing in the “murderous tongue.” Gadamer does not deny this historical gravity, but he situates Celan’s poetics within a broader constellation of modern art and music. Celan’s poems present shards of meaning that require the reader to respecify them. The hermeneutic act thus becomes a creative reconstruction, a dialogue between text and reader that fuses horizons without erasing difference.

This dialogical model is central to Gadamer’s philosophy. Understanding is not the passive reception of meaning but an event in which the interpreter participates. Celan’s poetry dramatizes this event by refusing closure and by demanding repeated engagement. Gadamer’s notion of the “eminent text” captures this quality: a poem that must always be read anew, even if it has already been understood. In this way, Celan’s work exemplifies the hermeneutic circle, where each reading reshapes the whole and each fragment reorients the reader’s horizon.

The comparison with music is equally instructive. Gadamer often draws analogies between Celan’s dissonant verse and modern musical innovations. Just as Arnold Schoenberg’s atonality or Anton von Webern’s rhythmic ruptures challenged listeners to rethink harmony and form, Celan’s compound words and abrupt line breaks destabilize conventional expectations of lyric. Gadamer interprets this dissonance not as a failure of meaning but as a productive force, a reminder that language itself is never transparent. Poetry, in his view, is the remembrance of language: the

recovery of its thickness, its resonance, its capacity to signify beyond immediate reference.

4.2 Celan's Poetry: The Limits of Hermeneutics

At the same time, Gadamer's readings reveal the limits of philosophical hermeneutics. His focus on dialogue, tradition, and the fusion of horizons sometimes downplays the historical trauma inscribed in Celan's German. Critics have noted that Gadamer's essays rarely confront the Holocaust directly, preferring to emphasize philosophical categories. Yet even this omission is telling: it shows how hermeneutics, when confronted with radical historical rupture, must grapple with the tension between philosophical universality and historical specificity. Celan's poetry forces hermeneutics to confront silence, mutism, and the impossibility of full reconciliation. Gadamer's question (i.e., whether our ears are sharp enough to hear) acknowledges that interpretation is always precarious, always threatened by deafness.

The broader implication of Gadamer's poetics is that philosophy and literature are not separate domains but mutually illuminating practices. Celan's poems are not merely objects for philosophical analysis; they are interlocutors that reshape hermeneutic concepts. The fusion of horizons is not only between past and present but also between philosophy and poetry, between conceptual discourse and lyrical language. Gadamer's hermeneutics thus becomes a philosophy of poetics, one that insists on the autonomy of the literary text while recognizing its embeddedness in history and tradition.

For readers of Celan, Gadamer's commentaries offer a way to approach the hermetic without reducing it to paraphrase. His emphasis on dialogue, play, and remembrance encourages us to read Celan's fragments as invitations rather than obstacles. For readers of Gadamer, Celan's poetry exemplifies the practical application of hermeneutic theory, showing how concepts that might seem abstract in *Wahrheit und Methode* acquire concreteness in the act of reading. The encounter between philosopher and poet demonstrates that hermeneutics is not only about understanding texts but about engaging with the limits of language, history, and human experience.

In conclusion, Gadamer's poetics, articulated through his readings of Celan, underscores three key insights. First, poetic language resists disappearance, demanding continual re-engagement and reminding us of the materiality of words. Second, interpretation is dialogical, a fusion of horizons that reconstructs fragments into meaningful wholes without erasing difference. Third, hermeneutics must confront the historical weight of language, acknowledging that meaning is shaped by trauma, silence, and dissonance as much as by tradition and continuity.

Celan's poetry, with its fractured syntax and haunting imagery, becomes the testing ground for these insights. Gadamer's hermeneutics, in turn, becomes a poetics of remembrance and dialogue, a way of reading that honors the autonomy of the text while situating it within the broader currents of modern art, philosophy, and history. The relationship between philosophy and poetry, as Gadamer insists, is at the center of these investigations. By engaging Celan, Gadamer shows that hermeneutics is not merely a method but a way of inhabiting language, a practice of listening to what resists being said, and a commitment to the inexhaustibility of meaning.

Notes

1. The translations in this article are provided by the author, except where otherwise indicated.
2. These poems were first published in a book entitled *Atemkristall* in a limited edition that included eight

etchings by the artist Gisèle Celan-Lestrange. These poems were published again as the first of six poem cycles in the book *Atemwende*.

3. Gadamerian interpretation of poetry, in *Wahrheit und Methode*, is approached by Paolo Euron as a continuation of Heidegger's philosophy of the artwork.
4. Later I will return to this meeting between Celan and Heidegger, which Gadamer also comments on.
5. Gadamer describes details about Heidegger's hut, which he visited several times, and the location of the well mentioned in Celan's poem (*Gesammelte Werke* 9: 376).
6. Here I make a reference to Heidegger's letter to Celan, dated January 30, 1968, in which he thanks Celan for a plaque with the poem "Todtnauberg." It reads: "Since then [our meeting] we have exchanged a good deal of mutual silence. I think that someday some of it will be redeemed from unspokenness through conversation."
7. Remember, for instance, Theo Buck, "Muttersprache. Mördersprache" ("Mother Tongue. Murderous Tongue").
8. For more details on Celan's "Meridian speech" and its connections with Büchner's work, see Böschenstein, "Paul Celan im Gespräch mit deutschen und französischen Dichtern von Hölderlin bis zur Gegenwart," *Oxford German Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2005, pp. 65–78.
9. Gadamer refers here to Celan's poem analyzed previously, when he associated its three initial lines in the imperative mood with a painting by Picasso. According to Gadamer, this is a poem that simply relies on the gravitational force of words.
10. Celan's inscription, cited by Otto Pöggeler: "In the hut book, with the view of the star on the well, with a hope for a coming word in the heart. On July 24, 1967" (265).
11. That is the case of Celan's poem "Du liegst" ["You Lie"], of the *Atemkristall* cycle, in the interpretation of which Gadamer questions the need for information external to the text for its understanding. See *Wer bin ich und wer bist du*, pp. 126–130.

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