

A Non-subjectivist Concept of Play-- Gadamer and Heidegger versus Rilke and Nietzsche*



richard detsch

Hans-Georg Gadamer's book *Wahrheit und Methode*, which first appeared in 1960, is a milestone in philosophical hermeneutics and has become an important tool in the hands of literary critics bent on undermining the foundations of the New Criticism. Just as in the field of aesthetics Gadamer criticizes the notion of a self-contained work of art, maintaining an existence independent of its creator and its observer, so too, in the interpretation of historical texts he establishes a continuum reaching through the text from the author to the interpreter and precluding any possibility of isolating an absolutely valid meaning of the text itself. He proceeds from an analysis of

the aesthetic experience to a re-evaluation of the type of understanding involved in the human sciences and ultimately in any aspect of human experience expressed by language. Although enough has been written about Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics so that it can hardly be considered esoteric,¹ thus far little attention has been given to his concept of play — an element in the development of his argument which serves an important illustrative purpose and which is already introduced in the motto of the book.² Such relative neglect is somewhat surprising since, as this essay's first section attempts to demonstrate, Gadamer weaves play imagery into his main ar-

* The readers of Professor Detsch's article here will be interested in the forthcoming book on Gadamer by Joel C. Weinsheimer of the University of Minnesota. The title of the book is, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: a Reading of TRUTH AND METHOD*, scheduled to appear in September 1985. It is comprehensive and detailed, a section-by-section commentary on *Truth and Method*. The publisher is Yale University Press (92A Yale Station, New Haven, Connecticut 06520). Price, \$20 (hardcover), xiii-278 pages. (R. Lechner, editor)

gument in all three parts of his book. However, Gadamer's use of Rilke's poem, "In merely catching your own casting," as his book's motto can be misleading if one assumes that his notion of play is identical with Rilke's. In fact, there is a basic divergence between Rilke's concept of play and Gadamer's, despite certain similarities. Rilke's concept of play, as the second section of this essay argues, has its origin in Nietzsche and is thus inappropriate for Gadamer who, as the third section of this essay suggests, derived his concept from Heidegger, especially from Heidegger's concept of truth. The entire investigation focuses on the subjectivity involved in the notion of play held by each of these authors, that is, on the degree to which human mastery over play appears in their thought. How successfully each one avoids subjectivity depends, in the final analysis, on how each reacts to the metaphysical tradition of thinking in terms of the eternal as opposed to the temporal.

I

Prior to Gadamer, other thinkers had made "play" central to their presentations; but many of these exhibit an anthropological bias, as, for example, in Schiller's famous dictum that the human being is completely human only when he plays ("15th Letter on the Aesthetic Education of Man").³ In other words, "play" is a capability of the human being which eminently enhances his humanity. This centering of attention on the human being, while quite in conformity with the ideals of the Enlightenment, is precisely the aspect which Gadamer finds unsatisfactory in Schiller's concept of play, to which he opposes his own concept. Gadamer expressly intends to remove from this concept any "subjective

meaning." "If, in connection with the experience of art, we speak of play, this refers neither to the attitude nor even to the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor to the freedom of a subjectivity expressed in play, but to the mode of being of the work of art itself." (GE, p. 91/G, p. 97).

According to Gadamer's concept, the play takes control of the player. In a well-played game of sports, for example, the players are so absorbed that they can no longer be said to direct the movement of the game; it carries them away with its own momentum. (G 101-102). The game played on the sports field serves Gadamer as an analogy of the work of art, notably in the particular instance of the "Schauspiel." He argues that the stage play, like any kind of play, has its primary mode of existence in its presentation, in the playing of the play. (G 110-111) It is for this purpose that the author has written it; for this purpose the players practice their roles; and the spectators become spectators because of this purpose. In the successful play, all of the individuals involved in the performance, including the spectators, become totally absorbed in the very act of performing. (G 118, 126) The critics, who afterwards write a critique of the play, have, in a sense, destroyed the wholeness of the work of art by analytically approaching as a separately existing entity that which commanded their undivided attention at the time of its performance. (G 112)

Gadamer extends his example of the stage play to all of art, for which the established critical practice of the last two centuries has demanded an "aesthetic differentiation" of the work from the milieu of its presentation and from the observer. (G 81, 111-112) The work of art is not an object in the scientific sense, nor are those who experience it merely detached subjects *vis á*

vis indifferent surroundings. How did such a view of art become possible in the first place?

Schiller's work in aesthetic theory, deriving ostensibly from Kant but, according to Gadamer, relying heavily on Fichte's understanding of human freedom (G 77-78), had a great influence on nineteenth century aesthetic thought. Schiller more radically separated art from reality than ever before. Art belongs for Schiller, to the realm of beautiful appearance and as such remains unalterably opposed to that of practical reality. (G 78) This was not the traditional outlook on art, deriving from Aristotle, according to which art (*technē*) functions as a complement to nature. It brings to completion those things which nature had not (e.g., Aristotle's house in *Physics*, Book II, Chapter 8, 199a14). And, like nature, its products are directed toward fulfilling a purpose. Not so for Schiller and the later theorists for whom art assumes a transcendent position independent of reality. The transformation of reality which Schiller intended art to accomplish remains, however, essentially unfulfilled. "Beauty and art give to reality only a fleeting and transfiguring radiance. The freedom of spirit to which they raise one up is freedom merely in an aesthetic state and not in reality." (GE p. 74/G pp. 78-9) Gadamer concludes that Schiller's aesthetic theory only deepens the Kantian dualism of reality and morality which it strives to overcome.

The actual experience of art represents the wholeness of a human milieu, a "world" in Gadamer's terminology, to which Schiller's aesthetic ideal does violence. The older ideal of "taste" respected the wholeness of this milieu. Taste depended on empirically verifiable criteria, having to do with those experiences which were actually pre-

ferred in a given society and which formed the common fabric of social life. (G 80) Society as a whole determines which experiences are an integral part of this fabric and which are not. Schiller's ideal, on the other hand, would place the aesthetically educated individual consciousness in the position of sole arbiter of what is aesthetically valid. What is considered to be true art, aesthetic "truth," is thus wrenched from its actual milieu and made the property of this individual consciousness. "Everything that it acknowledges as having 'quality' belongs to it." (GE, p. 76/G p. 80) According to Gadamer, such a determination of the aesthetically valid is itself the result of an invalid abstraction from the function and significance of the work. (G, p. 81)

Gadamer's insistence on function in his theory of aesthetics is illustrated by his choice of examples from the realm of play. When he proceeds in his analysis of play to that form of human play which can be called artistic, he first refers to the religious presentations which, in turn, gave birth to secular plays. Such religious ceremonies have an added dimension beyond those manifested in other forms of human play, including sports. Even in the game of sports, the spectators are not part of the original intention of the game: a contest between opponents or opposing sides. The cult presentation, by contrast, is intended for spectators to whom the deeds of the divinity are to be transmitted. (G 104) Here, especially, an aesthetic differentiation of the work of art from the circumstances of its presentation would be utterly senseless. Gadamer's example from the realm of religion necessarily points beyond the works of art to a more encompassing purpose. It is, therefore, not surprising that he emphasizes in another passage Kierkegaard's criti-

• PHILOSOPHY TODAY •

cism of the purely aesthetic existence. (G, p. 91) Kierkegaard's criticism is from the standpoint of the moral philosopher who sees destructive consequences in the subjectivism of the aesthetic viewpoint (cf. Schiller). Very significantly, Gadamer holds that Kierkegaard's exposure of the inner contradictions in the purely aesthetic existence forces that existence to go beyond itself. (G 91)

Gadamer is intent on placing aesthetic theory in an area which transcends human subjectivity. Because of this and because of the issue which forms the background of Gadamer's entire investigation, the nature of "truth," one might suspect a theological bent in his reasoning. The notion of truth with its centuries of metaphysical ballast conjures up almost automatically the "eternal truths" of religion or the Platonic world of ideas. It could come, therefore, as a surprise to the reader of *Wahrheit und Methode* that Gadamer, at the end of the first large chapter entitled "Die Transzendierung der ästhetischen Dimension," insists on maintaining the standpoint of finiteness. (G 94-95) While, as we have seen, Gadamer refuses to concede the locus of aesthetic truth to human subjectivity, he is equally unwilling to posit a "beyond" as the abode of this truth. The truth that Gadamer envisages and that he opposes to the empirical truth obtainable through the scientific method, for many in our century the only valid truth, has to do with the universality of the language experience. Any experience of art, to be described as such, must involve the transmission of that experience through language. Language will be, therefore, the encompassing medium in which Gadamer will locate the event of truth. Such truth will take the form not of a result verifiable by the scientific method but of a

necessarily uncompleted happening, inasmuch as the transmission of each new experience of art involves a new dialogue between the interpreter and the artistic phenomenon. Never can any one interpretation of a particular artistic expression be considered the "last word" in this regard. In words which he emphasizes, Gadamer views every encounter with the language of art as "*encounter with a still unfinished happening and . . . itself part of this happening.*" (GE, p. 88/G, p. 94) As will be shown later, Gadamer uses "Geschehen" (happening) synonymously with "play" in relation to human understanding. Both concepts underline Gadamer's attempt to banish subjectivity from precisely the sphere where it has almost unquestionably held sway during the past few centuries. As play takes precedence over the players, so is understanding as happening more significant than those to whom it happens.

By locating truth in human language and understanding, Gadamer places it within a finite context. He rejects just as decisively Hegel's solution to Kantian dualism through the infinite understanding of art in philosophy (G 93-94) and refers, instead, to Heidegger, who anchors the human being's understanding of existence in finite temporality ("Zeit") and is, nevertheless, able to move beyond the confines of a limited understanding of the self.

The philosophical question asks what is the being of self-understanding. In revealing time as its hidden ground, it does not preach blind commitment out of nihilistic despair, but opens itself to a hitherto concealed experience, transcending thinking from the position of subjectivity, an experience that Heidegger calls 'being.' (GE, p. 89/G, p. 95)

GADAMER/HEIDEGGER/RILKE/NIETZSCHE • • •

Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* and Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* are based on the same paradoxical assumption. They both posit a dimension which, unlike modern existential philosophy, transcends human subjectivity; but, unlike the older metaphysical-theological speculation, they both hold fast to human finiteness.

In the second part of *Wahrheit und Methode*, entitled "Ausweitung der Wahrheitsfrage auf das Verstehen in den Geisteswissenschaften," Schleiermacher takes Schiller's place as the adversary and at the same time provides a bridge to the first part. Just as Schiller invested the aesthetically competent individual with the sole capacity to determine artistic value, so now Schleiermacher requires that the interpreter of any historical text identify, in a sense, with the creative act of its author. Interpretation thus becomes "a divinatory process, a placing of oneself within the mind of the author." (GE, p. 164/G, p. 175) For Gadamer, this approach to understanding represents an unwarranted narrowing of focus and a reduction of the text in question to a purely "aesthetic" product totally at the command of the interpreter. To it he opposes Heidegger's view of the process of understanding as a kind of tension between the interpreter and the text in which the former brings to the latter preconceptions constantly in need of verification or revision (G, 277); [cf. the subsection "Heidegger's disclosure of the forestructure of understanding" (GE, p. 235/G, pp. 250-256)]. Rather than tending toward either subjective pole in the act of understanding, toward the author or the interpreter, Gadamer explicitly locates this act in an area "between" the two: *the true home of hermeneutics is in this intermediate area* (GE, p. 263/G, p. 279, Gadamer's emphasis). Again Gadamer

employs his metaphor of play to describe this act; but again also, "play" is divested of any possible subjective implications. Play is not like two opposing sides, the author's text and the interpreter; rather play simply "takes place," so to speak, without any clearly definable players. Both the interpreter's preconceptions and the text come into play in their contact with each other. Both are open to the possibility of reinterpretation. To quote Gadamer: "In fact our own prejudice is properly brought into play through its being at stake. Only through its being given full play is it able to experience the other's (the text's) claim to truth and make it possible for it to have full play." (GE, p. 266/G, p. 283) The historical school of nineteenth-century Germany in the wake of Schleiermacher (Ranke, even Dilthey) ignored the historicity of the investigating subject itself and thus sought to attain a false objectivity in historical studies. The object of historical studies is, in reality, not an object, Gadamer writes, "but the unity of the one (the interpreter's own opinions) and the other (the text), a relationship in which exist both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding." (GE, p. 267/G, p. 283) This unity or relationship of the one to the other in understanding historical records, a relationship which forms the basis of history itself, receives the designation "effective-history." Gadamer further characterizes "effective-history" as the "process of fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves." (GE, p. 273/G, p. 289) He means the horizons of the present and of the past, that of the interpreter and that of the text. These horizons are formed as distinct from each other in the process of understanding only to be fused in the same process. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect, Gadamer

• PHILOSOPHY TODAY •

argues, to speak simply of the formation of one horizon. (G 290) The tension of the two poles is essential to the process of understanding; it is that which sets the process in motion, brings it into play.

One cannot help but perceive a dialectical relationship between the two poles, their separation from each other as a necessary prelude to their ultimate union at a more advanced stage. For this reason, undoubtedly, Gadamer finds it again necessary to contrast the concepts he has developed with those of Hegel. Gadamer's theory of understanding stands remarkably close to Hegel's theory as expounded in the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. For Gadamer, too, refers to a self (interpreter) which, in knowing the other (text), comes to a greater realization of the self in a more complete understanding. This would, indeed, seem to be what Gadamer means by his "fusion of horizons." There is, however, an important aspect of Hegel's theory to which Gadamer objects. Hegel's emphasis on the self ("Sichwissen") is such that everything classed as "other" than self can be totally absorbed and voided as such. The self achieves the position of absolute supremacy. Gadamer's insistence on the finiteness of human understanding lets him perceive a contradiction in Hegel's foundation of all experience, this absolute standpoint. By placing an end to experience in absolute knowledge, Hegel also places an end to the free play of the dialectic by which knowledge is rendered possible in the first place. Against Hegel Gadamer argues: "the dialectic of experience has its own fulfillment, not in definitive knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is brought into play by experience itself." (GE, p. 319/G, p. 338)

Part 3 of Gadamer's book deals with language as the medium of experi-

ence not only in art and historical studies but in all areas of human understanding, to which he applies the term "hermeneutics." Again he stresses the avoidance of the two poles of objectivity and subjectivity which, according to Gadamer, have been at the root of previous attempts to explain human understanding. "If we formulated this universal hermeneutics on the basis of the concept of language, this was not only to guard against a false methodologism that gives to the concept of objectivity in the human sciences connotations foreign to it. We were also attempting to avoid the idealistic spiritualism of a metaphysics of infinity in the Hegelian manner." (GE, p. 433/G, p. 451) "Neither is the mind of the interpreter in control of what words of tradition reach him, nor can one suitably describe what happens here as the progressive knowledge of what exists, so that an infinite intellect would contain everything that could ever speak out of the whole of tradition." (GE, p. 419/G, p. 437)

Now the first pole, the consciousness of the interpreter as that which determines what part of tradition will speak to him, manifests itself as something clearly subjective, whereas the same pole in the previous quotation had indicated at least an attempt at objectivity. Here Gadamer cites the "concept of objectivity" which the human sciences have taken over from the natural sciences. For him, however, this concept is a delusion. He sees in it merely another aspect of modern subjectivity, even as regards the natural scientist's field. "Once the scientist has discovered the law of a natural process, he has it in his power." (GE, p. 411/G, p. 429) Rather than the ill-conceived poles marked by the scientist's assumed objectivity and the subjective idealism of Hegel, Gadamer proposes a

position of mediation, that of the "Mitte der Sprache." Language stands between the human subject and its world. It belongs to neither, really, but rather takes place, "happens," as a conversation between them. Gadamer speaks of the "speculative" structure of language. (G, p. 450) Language has no reality in itself; it functions like a mirror (speculum) to reflect reality. "It (the mirror-image) has no being of its own, it is like a 'vision' that is not the thing itself (e.g., the castle reflected in the pond) and yet causes the view itself to appear as a mirror-image. It is like a duplication that is still only one thing." (GE, p. 423/G, p. 441) Like the reflection in the mirror, the spoken work is only a reflection of reality and vanishes in the very act of speaking. A speculative person is conscious of this peculiar doubling and knows how to distinguish, in Hegelian terms, the "Fürsich" (the reflection, the word) from the "Ansich" (the real). Through the medium of language, all understanding is speculative: that is, a purely medial activity for which to posit, as pieces of reality, the poles of subject and object amounts to something secondary and derivative. Again, Gadamer returns to his metaphor of play, this time in conjunction with happening (Geschehen). The act of understanding "happens" as a conversation between the interpreter and the text handed down and neither remains the same after the encounter.

Seen from the point of view of the interpreter, "happening" means that he does not, as a knower, seek his object, "discovering" by methodological means what was meant and what the situation actually was . . . But the actual happening is made possible only because the word that has come down to us as tradition and to which we are to listen really

strikes us and does so as though it addresses us and singles us out.

For on the other side, that of the "object," this happening means the coming into play, the playing itself out, of the content of tradition in its constantly new possibilities of significance and resonance, newly extended by the other person receiving it. Inasmuch as the tradition is newly expressed in language, something comes into being and exists from now on that had not existed before. (GE, p. 419/G, pp. 437-438)

Gadamer focuses intently on what happens in the act of understanding, leaving aside questions concerning the substance of what is understood and the preconditions of the understanding mind. Understanding takes place in the medium of language, whose being, like that of the reflected image in the mirror, exhausts itself in the presentation. It is not as though what the understanding mind perceives enters a new form of reality in language. Rather, the presentation in language belongs to the "reality" of anything than moves through the medium of language. The distinction between a real object and the word naming it turns out to be a false distinction: "a distinction that should really not be a distinction at all." (GE, p. 432/G, p. 450)

Gadamer's view of language recapitulates his approach to the work of art and to the historical text. The work of art is also not a thing in itself ("Das Sein des Kunstwerks war kein Ansichsein"), which could be approached by separating it ("ästhetische Unterscheidung") from the milieu of its appearance. (G 450-451) Nor does the meaning of a historical text or occurrence have objective reality which one could discover as such. (G 451) The authentic aesthetic and historical consciousness was already firmly located

• PHILOSOPHY TODAY •

in the "process" of reception or understanding, in precisely the place occupied by language as the universal medium of such receptivity and understanding.

In the concluding pages of his book, Gadamer again establishes a connection between play and language. "The way in which the weight of the things that we encounter in understanding enters into play is itself a linguistic event, a game with words, so to speak, playing around and about what is meant." (GE, p. 446/G, p. 464) And again Gadamer insists that we are not the ones who direct this game with words but rather that this game is a "game of language itself." Only apparently do we determine the criteria for what we will acknowledge as true or untrue; in reality, we are part of the process of truth itself. "In understanding we are drawn into an event of truth and arrive, as it were, too late, if we want to know what we ought to believe." (GE, p. 446/G, p. 465). The truth resides neither in the subject nor in the object of its search, nor is it guaranteed by a method which artificially separates the two. What is true in understanding, as illustrated by authentic play, is revealed only as the process in which that understanding takes place.

II

The game-imagery, with its emphasis on playing as opposed to the specific roles of players and spectators, is the key to understanding Gadamer's entire book. It is not surprising, therefore, that the book begins with a motto from a poem by Rilke in which the non-subjectivist aspect of the game is presented in the form of an exhortation:

In merely catching your own casting
all's
mere cleverness and indecisive
winning: —

only when all at once you're catching
balls
an everlasting partner hurtles
spinning
into your very centre, with trajectory
exactly calculated, curvingly
recalling God's stupendous pontifecture, —
only then catching's capability,
not yours, a world's.⁴

Here Rilke seems to detract from the importance of the player in the same way that Gadamer does. The "everlasting partner" is nature, the eternal life force or the universe, as in lines from an uncompleted poem: "for the games of the All are infinite." (RE, p. 193) The player to whom the poem quoted by Gadamer is addressed (Nanny Wunderly-Volkart) should lose herself in the game in such a way that her own skill becomes a property of the universal game in which she is involved. But does Rilke really overcome the subjectivist world view that Gadamer opposes? Rilke's world view has been linked by several critics to Nietzsche's philosophy of the will. A striking example is Erich Heller's characterization of Rilke in *The Disinherited Mind* as "the St. Francis of the Will to Power."⁵ *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, a work with which Rilke comes to grips in notes found in the estate of the woman who had introduced him to the writings of Nietzsche, Lou Andreas-Salomé (R VI, 1163-1177), refers to the world seen in the light of the tragic myth as "an artistic game which the will, in the eternal fullness of its joy, plays with itself."⁶ If Nietzsche is the intellectual progenitor of Rilke's game-imagery, then does not Gadamer's use of Rilke, apparently to illustrate his own non-subjectivist concept of play, represent a contradiction? Since Gadamer nowhere dissociates his "play" concept

from that of Nietzsche or Rilke, he has given rise to at least a possible confusion. Gadamer's concept is therefore in need of further clarification by differentiating it from Rilke's admittedly similar imagery.

First, however, let us consider another similarity. Both Gadamer and Rilke attach a cosmological significance to the game: that is, for both, the game characterizes all of reality and not merely a particular activity of man. Gadamer sees as central to the concept of the game a to-and-fro movement which repeats itself constantly. (G 99) Such a movement occurs manifestly in nature. (G 100) Among the works of man, the stage-play, Gadamer's paradigm of all other works of art, comes into being by means of playing. Aesthetic being arises, therefore, through playing. (G 111) Gadamer again takes his cue from Martin Heidegger, for whom art is the establishment of truth ("Ins-Werk-Setzen der Wahrheit") in a kind of movement produced by the tension between revelation and concealment.⁷ Moreover, as we shall see, for Heidegger this tension is the origin of all particular beings from their source in the concealment of Being (Sein). The later Heidegger speaks of a clearing (Lichtung) into which particular beings emerge temporarily from their basic hiddenness (Verborgenheit). For him, the process by which these beings emerge is more significant than the beings themselves. Particular beings come into and pass out of existence in a happening, an event — the similarity between Heidegger and Gadamer extends to their imagery — a "play" which is the manifestation of truth.

For Rilke, also, the game assumes a cosmological significance. "All is a game," he writes in one of his unfinished poems. (RE, p. 315) Human

existence is, of course, an essential part of this universal play. In the Seventh Duino Elegy the water of a fountain rises and falls "in a game of promise" (RE, *Elegies* p. 53) symbolizing the life and death cycle of existence. In one of the Sonnets to Orpheus human existence is "a play of pure forces." (RE, *Sonnets* p. 75) But the world of nature surrounding us plays also, often with us. A rough draft of an ode refers to the games of the life force: "Within these games so wholly we're included, used and discarded in ways infinite." (RE, p. 213) The universe plays in an infinite number of ways, as Rilke indicates in the uncompleted poem already cited. (RE, p. 193) Wherein, then, lies the difference between Rilke's "game" and Gadamer's "game?"

The difference lies in their points of departure. Rilke's is a game of last resort, a daring hazard of the alienated poet in the face of a world emptied of meaning, whereas Gadamer's is an initiation to the wholeness which still obtains in every experience of beauty and meaning. In spite of Rilke's enthusiastic paean to the game of existence in his *Duineser Elegien*, there is a strong undercurrent of melancholy in the allusions to unfulfilled existence and insignificant surroundings. "And ever lessening, the outer world disappears," the Seventh Elegy tells us (RE, *Elegies*, p. 55). "Remember, too, that we're surrounded by a world that's blind," we are told in an unfinished poem. (RE, p. 343) One of the Sonnets to Orpheus asks: "What was real in the All?" and answers "Nothing except the balls. Their splendid arcs." (RE, *Sonnets*, p. 71)

The reference to the balls brings us back to the ball game of the poem which Gadamer quotes in part as a motto for his book. In the part not

• PHILOSOPHY TODAY •

quoted the selfless ball player is encouraged to throw back the ball from the everlasting partner in such a way that no attention is paid to the effort of the thrust. This again coincides with Gadamer's observation that the players are totally absorbed in a game well played. But then come Rilke's words: "— in that mood of sheer abandon you'd be equal to the game." (RE, p. 260) The word "abandon" commands our attention. The game we play with the universe involves that kind of hazard, risk (Wagnis). This poem dates from the time when, in a flood of inspiration, Rilke completed the *Duineser Elegien* and composed all of *Die Sonette an Orpheus* — early 1922. Another poem, written in June, 1924, elaborates on this hazard:

As Nature lets the other creatures follow
the daring of their dim delight,
alone
giving no special heed to hill or hollow, —
we, too, are no whit dearer to our own
background of being; *it dares us.*
Though, at least,
more daringly than plant or beast,
we will this daring, walk with it,
and woo it,
and sometimes (in no self-regarding sense)
dare against Life itself and just outdo it . . . (RE, p. 309)^a

Nature hazards us, risks us, as it does all beings in a universe which the Sonnet quoted above claims to be essentially empty. Not the beings, not we exist, but, strictly speaking, only the trajectories described by the hazarding life force. Only the hazard exists. Our existence is predicated on the fact that we are even a little more hazarding than life itself. We *will* the hazard

across the abyss of nothingness and thus respond to the will of nature.

This is the response of which Nietzsche, in his last uncompleted work, speaks: "To *stamp* becoming with the character of Being — this is the *highest Will to Power*. (NE, Vol. XV of *The Complete Works*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, p. 107) For him, this is "Nihilism, and of the most extreme kind. It finds that the value of things consists precisely in the fact that these values are *not* real, and never have been real, but that they are only a symptom of strength on the part of the valuer." (NE, Vol. XIV *The Complete Works*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, p. 16) The will to power operates in a vacuum, so to speak. It creates its own values and sustains them in a world without a logical basis. It is the will which arises from ever renewed desire and thus perpetuates itself. "Joys (Lust) all want eternity," sings Nietzsche. (NE, Vol. XI *The Complete Works*, trans. Thomas Cotton, p. 398) And Rilke echoes in one of the Sonnets: "Oh, this pleasure (Lust), always new, from the loosened clay! (RE, *Sonnets*, p. 103) He goes on in this poem to speak of the earliest "hazarders," who, unaided by the rest of nature, had built the civilizations of the earth and established its cultures. They had fashioned religions, too, whose gods remain immortal, even as they are struck down again by fate. In the end there will be one long-awaited deity that prevails. The child, which in the course of countless generations always surpasses its parents, will one day astound us. (R I, 767) From here it is but a small step to Nietzsche's "Übermensch," who affirms the eternity of desire and thus impresses being upon nothingness. For Rilke also, the new deity arises from our own kind, from us, the "endlessly risked." (RE, *Sonnets*, p. 103)

GADAMER/HEIDEGGER/RILKE/NIETZSCHE • • •

Upon the crucial word "*Wagnis*" (abandon, daring, hazard, risk) hinges the difference between Rilke's and Gadamer's concepts of "play." Both insist on the element of selflessness in the game, the priority of the game over the players. But Rilke reintroduces the subjectivist element unwittingly, as it were, through the effort of the will required to carry out the hazard.⁹ If the game is one played over the abyss, then all the more determination is needed by the players. Rilke's "play" comes into being through the danger of existence. "Among the destroyers (rose) your ordered upbuilding song" he writes of Orpheus in one of the Sonnets. (RE, *Sonnets*, p. 53) The players must will the transitory game of existence. Another sonnet begins with the imperative: "Will the transformation." (R *Sonnets*, p. 79) It is the great task of human beings, the most transitory of creatures, to carry out the transformation of the visible into the invisible called for in the Ninth Elegy and thus overcome the finiteness of the earth. The earth wants such a transformation; and the poet responds with the words: "Earth, dear one, I will." (RE, *Elegies*, p. 73) Once again, this response is but a more tenderly conceived version of Nietzsche's highest will to power: to impress upon change the character of being. Rilke's commitment of absolute effort in an art which has become an absolute unto itself in modern times corresponds to Nietzsche's affirmation of a world perceived as an aesthetic game which the will plays eternally with itself. In this vicious circle the self cannot be suppressed, and thus Gadamer's injunction for the well-played game cannot be fulfilled.

It turns out that Gadamer himself casts doubt on Rilke's ability to represent the kind of non-subjectivist worldview that is revealed in the game-

imagery of his *Wahrheit und Methode*. In the last of three essays on Rilke in the second volume of *Kleine Schriften*, he speaks of Rilke's "mythopoetic inversion,"¹⁰ the poetic technique by which Rilke raises the world of his own experience and concerns to the mythic level. "By his high mannerist art he succeeds, at a time devoid of myths, in raising the world of experience of the human heart into the mythic-poetic realm." (my translation)¹¹ Rilke often renders the most unpoetic of materials sublime through his art — a characteristic which, probably more than any other, singles him out among poets. Gadamer gives the example of the comparison, in the Tenth Elegy, between the church in the "City of Pain" and a post office, closed on Sunday, and asks what other poet could have ventured such a verse. Rilke succeeds in transforming even the most banal reality through a process of internalization peculiarly his own: "a mythopoesis of his own heart."¹²

In this connection, it is interesting to note how critically Gadamer reviews a book by Eugen Fink, another Heidegger student and philosopher at the University of Freiburg.¹³ This book, entitled *Spiel als Weltsymbol*, professes also to aim beyond the subjective side of the notion of play.¹⁴ "Play is an existential act which leads one out of a purely immanent consideration of things human; it cannot be comprehended at all if one assesses the human being as a self-contained creature, takes him as a being which has definite qualities adhering to itself, thinks of him according to the model of the substance with accidental determinants. Exactly to the extent that the human being is essentially determined by the possibility of play, he is determined by the inscrutable-indeterminate, the indefinite, open, the wavering-

possible of the power-wielding world which is reflected in him."¹⁵

Nevertheless, Gadamer takes issue with Fink for holding fast to the distinction between "Spiel" and "Ernst," which, for Gadamer, amounts to forcing the phenomenon of play into the narrow confines of subjective internalization ("ins Subjektive der Innerlichkeit").¹⁶ When Fink treats the religious ritual, for example, he does so within the perspective of goal-oriented human activity from which the ritual as play remains essentially separated. He doesn't seem to allow for the penetration of the ritual into the reality of everyday human affairs, not to mention the supremacy of the ritual over this reality. The only place for mystery in the human being so thoroughly characterized by "serious" pursuits is the imagination. But, on the contrary, is not the mystery expressed in the ritual the encompassing element within which human existence in its entirety takes place? Gadamer cites Fink's reference to the human being who "disappears into the multidimensionality of the mask" in ritual play and asks if human nature is so unequivocally determinable before such play takes place.¹⁷ For Gadamer, the human being does not approach play from a more clearly defined area outside of play but is always involved in play by the very fact of being human. Gadamer's objection to "subjective internalization" in Fink's analysis can also be directed against Rilke, whose poetry he finds to be "a mythopoesis of his own heart." It is difficult to see how Gadamer could argue away the subjective element in Rilke's poetry, especially in view of his critical appraisal of an analysis which reflects his own notion of play more closely than does Rilke's poetry. It is perhaps significant that in his aforementioned article on Rilke, Gadamer deals

primarily with the Fourth and Tenth Duino Elegies and not with the Seventh and Ninth Elegies where Rilke's actual programmatic intent with its more unmistakably subjective elements appears (e.g., "Nowhere, beloved, can world exist but within." (RE, *Elegies*, p. 55)

In this same review, Gadamer makes no mention of the pre-eminence that Fink accords to Nietzsche in his analysis of play. Fink's book closes with words of Zarathustra which are supposed to present in poetic fashion what Fink had been trying to explain in conceptual language: human play corresponding to the play of the world in which all standards and distinctions are meaningless.

If ever I have spread out a tranquil heaven above me, and have flown into mine own heaven with mine own pinions:

If I have swum playfully in profound luminous distances, and if my freedom's avian wisdom hath come to me: — Thus however speaketh avain wisdom: — "Lo, there is no above and no below!" Throw thyself about, — outward, backward, thou light one!

Sing! speak no more! (NE, Vol. XI, *The Complete Works*, trans. Thomas Cotton, p., 284)

Gadamer could hardly subscribe to a concept of play couched in such a clearly subjective tone ("into mine own heaven with mine own pinions"). In such play, moreover, the freedom which knows no bounds ("no above, no below") is contrary to the constraints on the interpreter which Gadamer accords to tradition. It is, in fact, Fink's reliance on Nietzsche's notion of play, a reliance documented in *Nietzsches Philosophie*,¹⁸ which removes Fink's approach to play most decisively from Gadamer's. Fink finds that in the con-

cept of play Nietzsche is able to go beyond the mode of thought determined by metaphysics, the subject-object dichotomy, and see human nature as truly a part of the constructive-destructive world-play. Yet even here, Fink's Nietzsche has not left the dichotomy behind. This world-play is entirely oblivious of human nature, which remains on the sidelines, as it were, until it grasps the real significance of the world and, by an act of the will, enters into the play.¹⁹ Human nature stands, in other words, *outside* the totality of the world and must seek admittance to it. Gadamer, by contrast, establishes a reciprocity between the human being and tradition by which each continually conditions the other irrespective of any specific awareness of or desire for such conditioning.

As has already been shown, Rilke's close intellectual affiliation with Nietzsche is very damaging to the case Gadamer seems to make on Rilke's behalf. This affiliation is perhaps nowhere more manifest than in the attitude of both Rilke and Nietzsche toward eternity. Far from wishing to discard this notion from the metaphysical-theological tradition, both are bent on translating it into earthly terms. For Nietzsche, it takes the form of the eternal return of the same. For Rilke, it is realized in the accomplishment of the artist's task to transform the visible into the invisible in the face of transitory existence. The contradiction of Nietzsche in the emphatic words of the Ninth Elegy "Everyone *once, once only*. Just *once* and no more. And we also *once*. Never again" (RE, Elegies, p. 67) is only apparent. It is not Nietzsche's eternal return which is so significant but the almost superhuman effort required to come to terms with this devastating insight. Nietzsche's *Übermensch* must will eternity, a pros-

pect as unfathomable as the concept of eternity itself. Such an act of the will is only possible as the seizure of an appropriate moment, symbolized in the "Gateway, 'this moment'" account in *Also sprach Zarathustra*. (NE, Vol. XI, *The Complete Works*, pp. 190-193) There is indeed a close relationship between Nietzsche's "Gateway, 'this moment'" and Rilke's "*once only*." For both the task is stupendous and the stakes are immense. There is an eternity to be gained in the right kind of wager.²⁰ Rilke's cry "*once only*" resounds with an air of expectancy, not with the despondency of defeat. His well-known preoccupation with death serves ultimately as an incentive to transcend its bounds and achieve immortality in art. Therefore, besides failing to achieve the absence of subjectivity that Gadamer requires in his notion of "play," Rilke also fails to adhere consistently to Gadamer's requirement of finiteness.

III

Heidegger, whom Gadamer credits repeatedly with an abiding influence in the development of his own thought, sees Nietzsche and Rilke at the end of the long tradition of Western metaphysics.²¹ At its beginning was Plato, who had separated the world into two camps, as it were: the visible, a derivative, secondary mode of being, and the invisible, the primary and real world. In the course of the metaphysical tradition, the visible, transitory world was to constantly lose value and respect in the eyes of those adhering to this tradition. The human self became increasingly associated with the invisible, eternal world and exercised its primacy in domination over the visible world, which had been reduced to an object *vis à vis* a subject. Descartes marks the beginning of modern

philosophical thought in the West, for which the human subject assumes the primary position occupied by Plato's world of ideas. Henceforth the subject is the sole criterion for reality. The world of objects sinks ever lower in philosophical esteem until Nietzsche can view this world as senseless and absurd. Nietzsche, carrying a trend of thought in German Romanticism to its extreme, applies the term "play" to reality as a whole. Yet Nietzsche, according to Heidegger, remains within the metaphysical tradition because he is still bound by Plato's division of the world into two camps, now become an utterly meaningless outside world and an absolute subject who grants value to the meaningless by his affirmation. Rilke, in a milder, less acerbic way, does the same. His metaphor of the game must be seen against the backdrop of a world without meaning.

Gadamer's game imagery has a totally different origin, although Gadamer does not specifically acknowledge it. It is derived from the central concern of his teacher's (Heidegger's) later period — the proper understanding of truth. According to this understanding, truth has as little to do with Plato's world of ideas as with the certitude that the Cartesian subject demands from the object of its quest. Instead, Heidegger dwells on the Greek word for truth, "alētheia," which he translates as "Unverborgenheit" (unconcealment). Truth is the name of the process by which particular beings come to light from a concealment which is Being itself. If more attention is paid to the beings than to the process by which they originate, then Being itself (not to be confused with a specific Supreme Being) is forgotten and truth is distorted, as has occurred in Western philosophic thought since Plato. Out of this advertence to particular beings,

rather than to Being and the process of truth, have crystallized the object, on the one hand, and the controlling subject, on the other. But the truth lies essentially in the process and only peripherally in the beings which stand out from it. Truth, in Heidegger's understanding, will never establish itself irrevocably and definitively, with a plenitude of reality. It is a process which can never be completed because the hidden will never relinquish its hold on that which emerges from it. Truth thus reveals the same finite framework that Heidegger constructed at the beginning of his philosophical enterprise by making the correct understanding of finite temporality the basis for the understanding of Being. But Gadamer, as we have seen, also considers truth transmitted through language as the result of an "encounter with an uncompleted happening." (G 94) And Gadamer uses the concepts "happening" and "play" interchangeably to illustrate the actual process of human understanding. Gadamer's concept of "play" and Heidegger's explanation of truth share, therefore, the same important characteristic.

In fact, Heidegger himself uses the word "play" significantly in a book first published in 1957, *Der Satz vom Grund*. A discussion which begins with the principle of sufficient reason leads to the notion of Being, which, Heidegger claims, does not comply with this principle. Being has no reason other than itself. In the attempt by human beings to find reasons for everything that exists is manifested a desire for total control of the environment. Such a desire is not only impossible to fulfill, the closer human beings come to harnessing the forces of their world, the more it escapes their grasp — becomes unfamiliar (*unheimlich*). That which they control at this stage of their history

GADAMER/HEIDEGGER/RILKE/NIETZSCHE • • •

fails to provide the safe ground (Grund) upon which to build their lives. There is, consequently, in this human activity the same relationship between revelation and concealment that we noted with respect to truth. Heidegger characterizes this relationship as follows: "There is a mysterious play of opposing forces between the demand for the provision of grounds (sufficient reason) and the withdrawal of the ground (foundation)."²²

Later in the same book Heidegger uses the word "play" in an even more encompassing sense. Here he maintains that one cannot interpret the essence of "play" from an understanding of Being, but rather one must approach Being from the essence of "play." In other words, "play" even takes precedence over Being, the guiding notion of his philosophy. "Play" plays into our hands both Being as Grund and Being as Ab-Grund. This two-fold sense of Being again brings to mind the revelation and concealment opposition attach-

ing to Heidegger's concept of truth. Being as "Ab-Grund" manifests itself in human life as the nearness of death, which, as the utmost possibility of existence, signaling simultaneously its impossibility, is able to bring about the greatest revelation of Being and its truth ("das Höchste an Lichtung des Seins und seiner Wahrheit").²³ The human being, suspended between Being and Non-Being, experiences "play" in its highest form. In contrast to Rilke, however, this experience, for Heidegger, does not incite the human will to new heights of achievement but manifests human fate as inseparably bound to this "play." "Death is the still unthought measure of the unmeasurable, i.e. of the highest play (game) into which the human being is brought, on which he or she is staked."²⁴ By thus linking the notion of "play" to death, Heidegger anchors it in the same foundation of finiteness that Gadamer makes secure against Hegel in *Wahrheit und Methode*.

ENDNOTES

1. For its application in American literary criticism, see especially Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1969). The following place Gadamer's work within a larger framework of related contemporary studies: David C. Hoy, *The Critical Circle: Literature, History and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1978) and Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1980).
2. *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 3rd ed. with "Anhang" and "Nachwort" added but otherwise essentially unchanged (Tübingen: Mohr 1972), esp. pp. 97-105, hereafter referred to in the text by "G" followed by the page number. The translated text (New York: Seabury Press 1975) is

hereafter referred to in the text by "GE" followed by the page number. I have emended the translation in some instances.

The following secondary works deal with the element of "play" in Gadamer's thought:

Charles S. Byrum, "Philosophy as Play," *Man and World*, 8 (1975), 315-326.

James S. Hans, "Hermeneutics, Play, Deconstruction," *Philosophy Today*, 24 (1980), 299-317.

James S. Hans, *The Play of the World* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1981).

Byrum begins with an analysis of Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, which he distinguishes from Gadamer's work on the grounds that the former considers play as an aspect of culture instead of considering culture as a "play phenomenon," in which he sees Gadamer's accomplishment. While he makes a convincing argument in this section of his article, his analyses of Heidegger's and

- Gadamer's play concepts are meager and entirely dependent on other secondary sources for quotations. Hans, in both his article and his book, uncritically applies Derrida's characterization of Heidegger's "Being" as "pure presence," as "parousia," to Gadamer's concept of play, thus demonstrating a misunderstanding of this concept. He also maintains incorrectly that Gadamer's play imagery is restricted to the part of his book dealing with aesthetics (*The Play of the World*, p. 6).
3. Friedrich Schiller, *Sämtliche Werke*, 3rd ed (München: Hanser 1962), V, 618. (my translation)
 4. Rainer Maria Rilke: *Poems 1906 to 1926*, trans. J.B. Leishman. (New York: New Directions Books 1957), p. 260. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, II (Wiesbaden: Insel 1957), p. 132, hereafter referred to in the text by "R" followed by the volume and page numbers. English translations of the *Poems*, as well as *Sonnets to Orpheus* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press 1960) and *Duino Elegies* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press 1968) are hereafter referred to in the text by "RE."
 5. Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought*, 3rd ed. (London: Bowes and Bowes 1971), p. 131.
 6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke in drei Bänden*, ed. Karl Schlechta, I (München: Hanser, 1966), 131, hereafter referred to in the text by "N" followed by volume and page numbers. English translation: William A. Haussmann, Vol. I of *The Complete Works*, ed. Oscar Levy (New York: Russell and Russell 1964), p. 183. Hereafter English translation referred to in the text by "NE" followed by volume and page numbers.
Peter Heller considers the concept of "play" crucial to the understanding of Nietzsche. See "Multiplicity and Unity in Nietzsche's Works and Thoughts on Thought," *The German Quarterly*, 52 (1979), 319-338, esp. 321 and 336.
 7. See "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes," *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe*, I. Abt., Bd. V. (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann 1977), pp. 1-74, also Gadamer's "Einführung" to the Reclam edition of Heidegger's essay (Stuttgart: 1960), pp. 102-125.
 8. Heidegger interprets this poem at length in his essay on Rilke entitled "Wozu Dichter?" in *Holzwege*, pp. 269-320. My analysis of Rilke as an adherent of Nietzsche's thought is essentially in agreement with Heidegger's, which, although it appeared before Erich Heller's essay with similar findings, seems to have escaped the latter's notice.
 9. Gadamer also indicates a risk involved in "play." However, Gadamer uses the word "Risiko" and refers to a possible loss of the subject's independence (G 101), whereas Rilke uses the word "Wagnis" and links "wagen" to "wollen" and thus to Nietzsche's will to power. Gadamer's "Risiko" points to diminished subjectivity, Rilke's "Wagnis" to heightened subjectivity.
 10. "Mythopoietische Umkehrung in Rilkes Duineser Elegien," *Kleine Schriften II: Interpretationen* (Tübingen: Mohr 1967), pp. 194-209.
 11. *Interpretationen*, p. 200.
 12. *Interpretationen*, p. 208.
 13. Review of *Spiel als Weltsymbol*, by Eugen Fink, *Philosophische Rundschau*, 9, No. 1 (1961), 1-8.
 14. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960. See especially the last chapter subtitled "Die Welt als Spiel ohne Spieler," pp. 230-242.
 15. *Spiel als Weltsymbol*, pp. 230-231. (My translation.) See also David F. Krell, "Toward an Ontology of Play: Eugen Fink's Notion of Spiel," *Research in Phenomenology*, 2 (1972), 63-93. In contrast to Gadamer, Krell reviews Fink's book without criticism, stressing Fink's characterization of the world as "play without a player" (pp. 87 and 93).
 16. Review of *Spiel als Weltsymbol*, p. 5.
 17. Review of *Spiel als Weltsymbol*, p. 7, "in die Vieldeutigkeit der Maske entgeht."
 18. Eugen Fink, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1968). See especially pp. 187-189.
 19. *Nietzsches Philosophie*, pp. 188-189.
 20. See also Fritz Dehn, "Rilke und Nietzsche: Ein Versuch," *Euphorion*, 37 (1936), 1-22, esp. p. 15: "The angel of the *Duino Elegies* and the eternal return: In both conceptions the world of the earth is supposed to become eternal." (my translation)
 21. See "Wozu Dichter?" *Holzwege*, pp. 269-320. There have been several essays dealing with Heidegger's interpretation of Rilke. Starting with Else Buddeberg's, they have, for the most part, demonstrated a reluctance to accept Heidegger's critical evaluation of Rilke as it stands and have attempted, instead, to establish an affinity between the two. P. Christopher Smith's article is particularly disconcerting in this regard since it totally overlooks the earlier criticism and gives the impression of conveying something new. The following are noteworthy:
Else Buddeberg, "Heideggers Rilke-Deutung," *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift*, 27 (1953), 387-412.
Joachim Storck, "Rilke und Heidegger: Über eine Zwiesprache von Dichten und Denken," *Blätter der Rilke-Gesellschaft*, 4 (1976), 35-71.

- P. Christopher Smith, "Heidegger's Misinterpretation of Rilke," *Philosophy and Literature*, 3 (1979), 3-19.
22. *Der Satz vom Grund* (Pfullingen: Neske 1957), p. 60. (my translation)
23. *Der Satz vom Grund*, pp. 186-87.
24. *Der Satz vom Grund*, p. 187. (my translation)

Kearney State College, Kearney, Nebraska 68849

Editor's Note: Professor Paul Ricoeur's article, "Time as Narrative," and Peter Kemp's interview with Professor Ricoeur — originally scheduled for this Summer 1985 issue of *Philosophy Today* as announced in our Spring 1985 issue (p. 38) will appear in our Fall 1985 issue. Sorry for the delay.

• PHILOSOPHY TODAY •