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Hermeneutics and Poetics: Gadamer on the Poetic Word

Abstract

Despite Gadamer's sustained engagement with poetry throughout his career, evidenced by his numerous publications on modern German poetry, his contributions towards a poetics have gone underappreciated. In this essay I argue that a poetics can be drawn from his work, a poetics hermeneutically attuned to the poetic word as the true word, as the privileged site where the being of language as an event of unconcealment comes to language. Indeed, what is at stake for Gadamer in the poetic word is the hermeneutic understanding of language as the medium of phenomenological self-showing. The paper further outlines the salient features of hermeneutic poetics by highlighting, elaborating and integrating five basic traits of the poetic word as an event of language. First, because language itself appears in the poetic word it is *language bound*. Second, gathering itself into the unity of a linguistic configuration the poetic word is *self-standing*. Third, *listening to* the language of the poem the reader enables what is said to come forth. Fourth, where this occurs the poem achieves a unique presence simply by virtue of its *being-said*. In this way, fifth, the poetic word preserves our familiarity with the world by *bearing witness* to its nearness.

Key words

Gadamer, hermeneutics, poetics, language, art

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Despite his assertion of the universality of hermeneutics, Gadamer holds that the entire effort of his thought has been “directed toward not forgetting the limit implicit in every hermeneutical experience of meaning.”¹ The engagement with poetry that Gadamer sustains throughout his career is, I believe, emblematic of this effort. This is evident, for instance, where he finds that the poetry of our time has reached the “limits of intelligible meaning.”² Here he is responding to the hermetic tendencies of modern lyric poetry which seems to resist our attempts to understand it. The hermeneutical challenge this presents concerns the way that meaning is withdrawn and even withheld by the very language of the poem which brings it forth. Such poetry draws us to the limits of intelligibility where the poetic word elicits an interplay of meaning and its concealment which seems to foil the effort of understanding that it nevertheless prompts. By exposing us to this limit lyric poetry in particular opens hermeneutics to a distinctive experience of language and being. Gadamer’s poetics attends to the poetic word as attesting to such an experience.

Yet modern lyric only heightens what, for Gadamer, is characteristic of the poetic word – namely, “the inseparability of the linguistic work of art and its original manifestation as language.”³ For it is in the language of poetry that language itself comes to appearance in an essential manner.⁴ The privilege granted poetry has to with the hermeneutic understanding of language as an ontological event – that is, with the mysterious power of language to bring something to presence within the open relational context of the world that it holds open. It is this power of language to call something forth from its concealment that Gadamer finds epitomized in poetry. Summoned by the language of the poem, what is

¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. R.E. Palmer, Evanston 2007, p. 162; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 2: Hermeneutik II*, Tübingen 1993, p. 334.

² H.-G. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. R. Bernasconi, Cambridge 1986, p. 9; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8: Ästhetik und Poetik I*, Tübingen 1993, p. 100.

³ H.-G. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 134; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 235.

⁴ This underscores the extent to which Gadamer follows the path of Heidegger’s encounter with poetry. For Heidegger too poetry lets the essence of language appear: “Language itself is poetry in the essential sense.” M. Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, eds. and trans. J. Young, K. Haynes, Cambridge 2002, p. 46.

spoken about comes to stand there in the openness of its unconcealment. Hence, following Heidegger, he seeks to reclaim for poetry this original power of language in its productivity as *poiesis*, as a bringing forth that affirms the poetic word as a mode of truth as unconcealment (*aletheia*).⁵ As the “true word,” the language of the poem subverts our ordinary relation to language as a means of communication. We no longer dispose over language; rather, language disposes over us. By altering our customary relation to language, poetry makes possible another, more original, experience with language. But attending to the language of poetry in its appearance as language requires not just reading but listening.⁶ Attuning itself to the saying of the poem, such listening responds to the event of language that takes place there. In this event we find ourselves addressed by what is said in the poem and responsible to what comes to presence there. Reminiscent of Heidegger, Gadamer conceives the encounter with poetry as a genuine experience in which we enter into an event of language and submit ourselves to its claim.⁷ What we experience in the language of the poem is the profound intimacy of the world we inhabit as our own. Attesting to the nearness of the world, poetry reminds us that it is by language that we belong to a world at all.

It is important to note that Gadamer’s poetics remains phenomenological as well as ontological. It is phenomenological in that it describes the essential features of the poetic word as those emerge from the encounter with it. This confirms the hermeneutic emphasis on practice. His poetics is, in large part, a hermeneutic reflection on the practice of interpreting poetry. Here Gadamer draws on his many decades as a serious reader of poetry, especially of modern German poetry. Indeed, the many pieces on Goethe, Rilke, Hölderlin, George, Celan and others gathered in the *Gesammelte Werke* testify to his long experience with poetry. His poetics is also ontological in that it offers an account of the poetic word as

⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 143; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 46. In “Discourse Language, Saying, Showing” Wrathall provides an illuminating account of Heidegger’s notion of language as world-disclosive. Moreover, he tracks Heidegger’s path to “originary language” by enlisting Heidegger’s interpretation of (George’s) poetry. See M. Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Truth, Language, and History*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 119–155.

⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 182; p. 182; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9: Ästhetik und Poetik II*, Tübingen 1993, p. 352.

⁷ M. Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. P.D. Hertz, New York 1971, pp. 57–58.

an event of language that is, at once, an event of being. Here he proceeds in the wake of Heidegger's later thought which itself leads through a selective reading of German poets – most notably, Hölderlin – that forges an ontological approach to poetry as an event of unconcealment. Like Heidegger, Gadamer's concern springs from a sense that the essential achievement of language (the disclosure of world) has been concealed and forgotten.⁸ It is in view of this predicament that he turns to poetry to find attestation of the power of language. The distinction of Gadamer's poetics lies in the way that it holds together these two aspects: referring the ontological claims for the poetic word to the discipline of phenomenological description, his poetics grounds the phenomenological account of the experience of poetry in its ontological aspect as an event of language. However, Gadamer neither pursues a poetizing thinking nor binds the import of the poetic word to a tale of two beginnings. This perhaps allows his hermeneutic approach to poetry a broader reach than Heidegger's while reaffirming "the ontological vocation of poetics."⁹

In *Truth and Method* he already grants poetry preeminence, even though the topic receives scant attention there.¹⁰ However, Gadamer's further philosophical reflections on the poetic word are scattered

⁸ For both Gadamer and Heidegger, poetry retrieves the originary understanding of language as an ontological event which discloses world from its prevailing condition of concealment. So even while Gadamer resists Heidegger's history of *Seinsvergessenheit*, the forgetfulness of being, his hermeneutics nevertheless proceeds from a deep sense of *Sprachvergessenheit*, the forgetfulness of language. See R. Coltman, *The Language of Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Heidegger in Dialogue*, Albany 1998, pp. 67–68. So despite Gadamer's reluctance to follow Heidegger's flight into poetizing thinking, he nonetheless asserts the priority of poetry in the hermeneutic retrieval of language as an event of being.

⁹ I invoke here the title of Vattimo's essay "The Ontological Vocation of Poetics in the Twentieth Century." See: G. Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, ed. S. Zabala, trans. L. D'Isanto, New York 2008 (1985), pp. 29–56.

¹⁰ Gadamer asserts "the preeminence of poetry" In Part Three of *Truth and Method* where he addresses the speculative dimension of language. Inhabiting "*die Mitte der Sprache*," the midst or middle of language, enables what is said to resonate with the whole of what remains unsaid. This reflects the "speculative structure" of language as the dynamic movement of revealment and concealment. Gadamer grants preeminence to poetry because the speculative dimension of language attains a special intensity there. He will continue to invoke this understanding of language in his later reflections on the poetic word. H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised, eds. and trans. J. Weisenheimer, D.G. Marshall, New York 1989, pp. 452–469; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 1...*, op. cit., pp. 460–478.

among numerous essays and lectures published across the several decades after the appearance of his magnum opus. Moreover, no one of them provide a definitive, much less comprehensive, statement of his understanding of the poetic word. Typically they focus on certain aspects of poetry while giving short shrift to others discussed more fully elsewhere. And even where the same aspect is revisited in several essays they often address it from various perspectives, sometimes deploying different terms to convey it. To sort out these diverse discussions, highlight the most salient topics and integrate them into a more complete account is the principal purpose of this essay. To this end, I argue that a poetics can be elicited from Gadamer's hermeneutics by attending to the basic traits of the poetic word that emerge from his work.¹¹ Further, I intend to outline such a hermeneutic poetics by elaborating upon these basic traits which I mark by the expressions "language-bound," "self-standing," "listening-to," "being-said," and "bearing witness." (1) By affirming its own linguistic being the poetic word remains, in a distinctive way, *language-bound*. (2) As a linguistic configuration the poetic word is *self-standing*, that is, it exhibits the unity of a work that it stands in its own right. (3) Standing for itself the poetic word invites the reader to tarry with it, *listening to* the language of the poem so that what is said there comes forth. (4) What comes forth in the lingual event of the poetic word thereby achieves a unique presence simply by virtue of its *being-said*. (5) What is said in the poetic word preserves our familiarity with the world by *bearing witness* to its nearness. So while the initial section establishes the distinctive relation of poetry to language, the following three sections set forth Gadamer's complex understanding the poetic word as an event of language and the final section highlights the essential achievement of the poetic word understood as such an event.

¹¹ Although reference is occasionally made to Gadamer's poetics, I am aware of no study that sets forth his hermeneutic reflection on poetry. For instance, despite the title of a recently published book by John Arthos, one finds there no sustained discussion of Gadamer's engagement with modern poetry or of a hermeneutic poetics that might be drawn from it. So while it contains much of value in understanding Gadamer's hermeneutic approach to art, the book's subtitle is perhaps more descriptive of its intent. See J. Arthos, *Gadamer's Poetics: A Critique of Modern Aesthetics*, London 2013.

Language-Bound: The Irreducibility of Language in the Poetic Word

Gadamer asserts that in poetry “the unity of sound-quality and meaning that characterizes every word we speak finds its ultimate fulfillment.”¹² He elaborates this claim by distinguishing between language in its ordinary use and the language of poetry. In its everyday use language “points to something beyond itself and disappears behind it.”¹³ Ordinarily words are used to refer to something else, to some feature of the world to which they point. In terms familiar to phenomenology, such reference indicates the intentional element of language. As speakers and hearers we too are directed toward what is pointed out so that language conceals itself even as it bears us toward the world. Because language ordinarily recedes into its referential function, Gadamer characterizes speaking as the most “self-forgetful” act we perform.¹⁴ In the poem, however, the words that address us are not overtaken by the intention of the speech act only to be left behind. With poetry, to the contrary, language does not disappear into signification; instead it appears in a distinctive manner.¹⁵

The claim that language itself appears in the poem is fundamental to the hermeneutic understanding of the poetic word, a claim that Gadamer compactly conveys in the formula: “poetry is language-bound.”¹⁶ I submit that the poetics which emerges in his work can be construed as a sustained reflection on the meaning of such a claim. In fact, his reflections on poetry can be seen, in part, as a hermeneutic response to the radical thesis of modern poetry that the poem is a creation of language; that it is, as Mallarme insists, made of words.¹⁷ Gadamer explicitly rec-

¹² H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 70; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 21.

¹³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 67; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 19.

¹⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 107; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 2...*, op. cit., p. 198.

¹⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 181; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 352.

¹⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 69; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 21.

¹⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan: "Who Am I and Who Are You?" and Other Essays*, eds. and trans. R. Heinemann, B. Krajewski, Albany 1997, p. 2.

ognizes the import for modern lyric of Mallarmé's project of developing a "pure poetry" in which the musicality of the poetic word is intensified to a very high degree. Here a poem emerges from the rhythmic structuring of the sound quality of the words. By heightening the musicality of poetry modern lyric shows how the sensuous dimension of language is capable of creating a web of associations that build up a poetic configuration wherein words acquire a sonorous resonance that would be concealed by their function as mere signs. In a poem, Gadamer says, "not only does the word make what is said present; it also makes it present in the radiant actuality as sound."¹⁸ The poetic word thereby affirms its own being as language.

If Gadamer nevertheless treats "pure poetry" as an "extreme case" this is because he holds that, even where the sonority of the poetic word is intensified, "it still remains a question of the musicality of *language*."¹⁹ His point is that the language of a poem is not just sound but also sense; that is, as language it must mean something. Even in modern lyric, where poetry approaches the limit of intelligibility, the poem still asks to be understood. This bears on the way in which the language of poetry acquires both density and unity in the poem. As Gadamer observes, "[t]he unity of form that is so characteristic of the poetic work of art [...], is sensuously present, and to this extent cannot be reduced to the mere inten-

¹⁸ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 182; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 352. Gadamer privileges sonic over graphic qualities in poetry. "In no way can the written sign insinuate itself as an equal partner into the delicately balanced relationship of sound and meaning that constitutes a poem. Whatever cannot be heard in the inner ear of the reader, whatever does not serve the rhythmic structure of sound and meaning in the shape of the poem, has no actual poetic existence" (H.-G. Gadamer, *Literature and Philosophy in Dialogue: Essays in German Literary Theory*, trans. R.H. Paslick, Albany 1994, p. 132; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 283). Derrida would no doubt contest such privileging of the phonic over the graphic and connect it with the related privileging of speech over writing along and the valorization of word, meaning, being and truth that, in his estimation, constitutes "logocentrism." Derrida's short essay on "Mallarmé" provides a relevant introduction to his different reading of poetry. See J. Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. D. Attridge, New York 1992, pp. 110–127. J.M. Baker, Jr. provides a divergent interpretation of Gadamer's engagement with Mallarmé and Hegel and the speculative in poetry in "Lyric as Paradigm: Hegel and the Speculative Instance of Poetry." See *The Cambridge Guide to Gadamer*, ed. R. Dostal, Cambridge 2002, pp. 143–166.

¹⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 134; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 235, italics original.

tion of meaning.” Yet in the very next sentence he affirms that even this presence bears “an intentional element that points to an indeterminate dimension of possible fulfillments.”²⁰ Hence Gadamer speaks of the “peculiar tension” generated in the poetic word “between the directedness to meaning inherent in discourse and the self-presentation inherent in its appearing.”²¹

This tension between the sonorous and the significant is the source of the characteristic indeterminacy of poetic language. On the one hand, the language of the poem is not consumed by its signifying intention but demands to be brought forth in its linguistic appearance. On the other hand, the elements of language which poetry shapes have a meaning by which they refer beyond themselves. The poetic configuration arises from this tension in which the network of sounds give depth and resonance to the emerging sense of the poem while the sense gives direction and coherence to the resounding words. This relational context created by the linguistic configuration of the poem strips the words of their ordinary referential function and yet grants their reference to what comes to presence in the poem.²² Refusing reduction either to intentional meaning or to meaningless sound, the poem instead conveys a unity of meaning in and through the sensuous configuration of language it forms. Here language is disclosive, not just denotative; it is productive of meaning, not just reproductive; it reveals something not otherwise presentable, rather than referring to something already present.²³ Thus the presentation that takes place in the poem is, at once, its self-presentation as language.

²⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 70; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 21.

²¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 182; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 352.

²² In “The Relevance of the Beautiful” Gadamer appeals to the symbol in order to address the distinctive reference of artworks: as with the symbol, the poem secures the very presence to which it refers. (See H.-G. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., pp. 31–39; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., pp. 122–130.) The poem as a work of art – i.e., as a configuration of language – is discussed in the following section.

²³ The language of the poem thereby exhibits a “self-reference” or “coming back to itself.” (H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 151; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 53.)

For this reason, Gadamer asserts that “poetry is language in a preeminent sense.”²⁴ What is at stake here is the hermeneutic understanding of language as the medium of phenomenological self-showing, as the site for the self-presentation of being. This aspect is heightened in the poem where language presents or shows itself in the very manner by which it presents something, thereby showing what it means.²⁵ So while the unity of musicality and meaning is characteristic of every word we speak, it becomes especially prominent in poetry where the dimensions of sound and sense are brought inextricably together. In modern lyric poetry the fusion of these two dimensions attains “an extreme point” where they become quite indissoluble. For this reason the lyric poem presents an “identity of meaning and being” that confronts us with an “unconditional case of untranslatability.”²⁶ Here the sound and sense of the words are so inseparably interwoven that the poem cannot be translated without loss. On the one hand, such untranslatability implies that the language of poetry exhibits an irreducible indeterminacy that poses an insurmountable limit to any claim to translate it without remainder. On the other hand, it also implies the poetic word is inexhaustible such that the poetic word always holds in reserve other possibilities of meaning. In fact, the self-showing instigated by the poem is, as we shall see, a complex movement of revealing and concealing in which the linguistically configured meaning both emerges from and withdraws into the poem. So the point is not that the indeterminacy of poetic language obstructs the emergence of meaning; it is rather that this emergent meaning cannot be abstracted from the language of the poem. In this distinctive sense poetry is language-bound.

²⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 106; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 71.

²⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, eds. D. Misgeld, G. Nicholson, trans. L. Schmidt, M. Ross, Albany 1992, p. 73; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 362.

²⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 111; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 76.

Self-Standing: The Configuration of Language in the Poetic Word

“The language of poetry,” Gadamer asserts, “comes to stand in its own right.”²⁷ In poetry language stands for itself; that is, poetry is distinguished from ordinary language by the way in which language comes to stand as a configuration (*Gebilde*). Where language comes to stand in the poem it does not disappear into the meaning of what is said as with ordinary discourse. In its usual function, Gadamer says, “language never stands for itself” but rather “stands for something” to which it refers. Here the word “does not simply stand for itself; in fact, it does not stand at all, but on the contrary passes over into what is said.”²⁸ By contrast, the language of poetry stands by itself, bearing its own authority within. Striving to understand a poem one is directed neither to the author’s intention nor the reader’s, but rather to the poem itself. “We are wholly directed toward the word as it stands.” Standing there the poem is independent of both reader and poet. “Detached from all intending, the word is complete in itself.”²⁹

Here Gadamer adopts Heidegger’s discussion of the work-being of the artwork in terms of its *Insich(selbst)stehen*, its way of standing-in-itself.³⁰ The German denotes independence or autonomy, meanings which Gadamer appropriates. But, like Heidegger, he also exploits its more literal meaning characterizing, for example, the happening of the work as its *zum-stehen-kommen* (“coming-to-stand”) or speaking of the work’s *dastehen* (“standing-there”). At issue here is a phenomenological description of the ontological event in which the artwork comes to be. In *Truth and Method* he discusses this event as “the transformation into structure” (*die Verwandlung ins Gebilde*) whereby something acquires the ontological status of an artwork.³¹ In poetry it is through language itself that the

²⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 67; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 19. The German reads: “Abgelöst von allem Meinen ist it ganz, ganz Wort!”

²⁸ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 132; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 233.

²⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 107; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 72.

³⁰ M. Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, op. cit., pp. 1–56 (especially 19–22).

³¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., pp. 110–119; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 1: Hermeneutik I*, Tübingen 1990, pp. 116–126. As Arthos points out, “the

poem acquires the status of a *Gebilde*, a structure or configuration that “stands” in its own right. In fact, the ontological distinction of the poem consists in its “forming a self-standing linguistic configuration.”³² Gadamer refers to such linguistic configurations variously as “autonomous,” “genuine,” and even “eminent” texts where “language stands on its own” or “brings itself to stand.”³³ Deploying a textile metaphor, he describes the text as a woven texture in which language itself “holds together in such a way that it ‘stands’ [there] in its own right and no longer refers back to a more authentic saying.”³⁴ Standing in its own right the text provides an authentic saying that neither appeals to the author’s intention for its meaning nor refers to the external world for its validation.

But how does the language of poetry hold together so that it comes-to-stand as a poetic configuration? Gadamer’s reply draws on his conception of the poem as a *Gebilde*. Briefly, it is through the shifting balance of sound and sense in the poem that it acquires the structural unity of form and meaning proper to it as a linguistic configuration. He both asks and answers the central question here. “What does this tell us about the ontological constitution of poetic language? The structuring of sound, rhyme, intonation, assonance, and so on, furnishes us with the stabilizing factors that haul back and bring to a standstill the fleeting word that points beyond itself.”³⁵ The structuring accomplished by these linguistic elements comprises what might be called the “compositional unity” by which the flow of discourse is stabilized and the poetic word comes to stand in its own right as a text or work. By virtue of its compositional unity, “the dimensions of sound and sense are inextricably woven together.”³⁶ The more tightly these dimensions are interwoven in the poem, the more dense its texture and the more resonant its

phrase *Verwandlung ins Gebilde* has to be taken as one unseparated concept.” While he rightly emphasizes this as a dialectical relation, I would add that it carries the force of an ontological event. See J. Arthos, op. cit., p. 13.

³² H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 129; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 429.

³³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 37; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 2...*, op. cit., p. 508.

³⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 142; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 145.

³⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 134; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 235.

³⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 111; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 76.

meaning. In such cases no word can substitute for another without loss to both the coherence of the poetic configuration and the richness of the poem's meaning. Especially in contemporary poetry, where the syntactic means at the disposal of language are used very sparingly, individual words gain in presence and disclosive power. Hence Gadamer characterizes poetic composition (*dichten*) in terms of compression (*verdichten*), as largely a matter of intensification and condensation.³⁷

As a linguistic art poetry also takes advantage of the fact that “[w]ords are not simply complexes of sound, but meaning-gestures that point beyond themselves.”³⁸ However, unlike everyday language which recedes behind that to which it refers, poetic language “shows itself even as it points.”³⁹ Thus the compositional unity achieved by the transformation of language into a poetic structure simultaneously accomplishes (what one might call) an “intentional unity” through which its meaning-intention points us in a certain direction.⁴⁰ At one stroke the poetic *Gebilde* establishes a unity of form that achieves a unity of meaning. This implies that one cannot extract the meaning-intention of the poem from the sensuous structure in which it is embodied. As a consequence, that meaning cannot be captured in another – above all, conceptual – discourse. Instead the meaning of the poem is only available through the composition of its linguistic *Gebilde*. Inversely, the sensuous structure of the poem finds its proper weight and balance from its meaning-intention; “the sound quality of poetry only acquires definition through the understanding of meaning.”⁴¹ Moreover, as a unity of meaning the poem has its own intentionality apart from that of its writer or reader such that “it asks to be understood in what *it* ‘says’ or ‘intends.’”⁴² So what the reader seeks to understand is just the meaning-intention of the poem itself

³⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 135; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 434.

³⁸ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 69; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 21.

³⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 67; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 19.

⁴⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 72; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 23.

⁴¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 69; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 21.

⁴² H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 26; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 17 (*italics added*).

as that comes forth in the poetic composition. The poem thereby exhibits both a unity of form (the compositional unity achieved by the fabric of sound and sense woven into a poetic configuration) and a unity of meaning (the intentional unity by which the poetic configuration points in a direction of meaning) each of which is mediated by the other.

It is the complex unity of such a unique linguistic configuration that justifies his use of the singular “word” to designate the poem despite its being comprised of many words. Yet Gadamer recognizes that the unity of the poetic word does not underwrite a univocal meaning; to the contrary, the polyvalence of the poem ensures an indeterminacy of meaning. Indeed, by loosening the constraints of logic and syntax contemporary poetry enriches the associations of sound and sense. “It is as if the disunity of the words and parts of speech increases the potency of the elements of the utterance, such that they say more and radiate in more directions than they could in taut syntactical wrapping.”⁴³ However, this can render the linguistic unity of the poem itself quite tenuous. Gadamer realizes that this poses a challenge for any reading which seeks to comprehend a whole emerging from the shapes of sound and fragments of meaning offered by such poems. He nevertheless insists that the successful poem still exhibits a “framework of coherence” – that is, “a tension-laden framework of sound and meaning” mediated with “the text’s unified orientation of meaning (*einheitliche Sinnmeinung*).”⁴⁴ Hence he rejects the demand that poetry abandon meaningful speech in favor of sound shapes, holding instead that speech always retains a unity of sense.⁴⁵ Indeed, he maintains that the precise significance of a word can only be determined by “the unity of a figure of meaning formed by the speech.”⁴⁶ This is true even where, as in modern lyric, the unity offered

⁴³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 135; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 434.

⁴⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 136; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 434.

⁴⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 135; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 236. Gadamer insists that even lyric poetry can never completely detach itself from intentional language; a strictly “nonobjective poetry” would be utter gibberish. “Language as the medium and material of expression can never fully emancipate itself from meaning” (H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 69; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 21).

⁴⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 129; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 429.

by a figure of meaning remains dark, cracked and brittle. For Gadamer, wherever a poem succeeds a linguistic unity emerges that gathers the polyvalence released by its syntactic indeterminacy into a direction of meaning that distributes the semantic weight of its elements in a way that strengthens the poetic configuration. "The more intimate one is with the poetic conjoining (*Fügung*)," he writes, "the richer in meaning and the more present the word becomes."⁴⁷

Listening-To: The Completion of Language in the Poetic Word

Already in *Truth and Method* Gadamer argues that the transformation into structure requires the participation of the spectator. We have seen that only when the words which comprise the poem come to stand in their own right do they acquire the status of a poetic *Gebilde*, that is, an autonomous linguistic configuration that provides an "incomparable and untranslatable balance of sound and meaning upon which a reading is built."⁴⁸ We now add that this happens only when the reader is engaged by what the poem says. In fact, the poem does not come to stand without our being addressed as readers; both are ingredient in the event of language that takes place in the poem as a work of art. This surely motivates Gadamer's own commentary on Celan's poetry, entitled *Who am I and Who are You?* Like the "I" that occurs in these poems, he finds the "You" pronounced in a direct, yet uncertain and changing way. So while the You is clearly the addressee, it remains undetermined who You (and I) are. "The address has an aim, but it has no object – other than perhaps whoever faces up to the address by answering."⁴⁹ This is doubtless the situation of every work of art: it addresses itself to another who responds by answering – that is, by taking up the challenge of understanding and thereby completing the work. But Celan's poems express a deep concern, even an anxiety, about reaching the You to whom they are addressed. Nonetheless, Gadamer contends, the poem only occurs where

⁴⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History...*, op. cit., p. 73; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 362.

⁴⁸ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 147; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 443.

⁴⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 69; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 385.

such address takes place. As readers our responsibility is to respond by listening to what it says.

Here Gadamer understands the work of art from its temporal being as event. He holds that the artwork is never something finished or completed but is always underway as an open-ended, intransitive movement that is “not tied down to any goal.”⁵⁰ This sets up a dialectical tension between the work’s closedness and its openness. On the one hand, as a meaningful whole, it has the structure of a completed work that presents a “closed world.” Therein lies the poem’s sovereignty as a configuration that stands independent of the poet’s intention as much as the reader’s. As a structure that stands in its own right, the poem is “lifted out of the ongoing course of the ordinary world” and “enclosed in its own autonomous circle of meaning.”⁵¹ On the other hand, the work is essentially incomplete insofar as it remains open toward those to whom it is presented. So however much the work presents a world closed within itself, it is nonetheless open toward the spectator in whom the work achieves its meaning. Thus, for Gadamer, “openness toward the spectator is part of the closedness of the play” precisely because “[t]he audience only completes what the play as such is.”⁵²

Gadamer therefore finds that the movement of play best describes the mode of being of the work of art. Just as the game only properly exists when it is being played, so too the work only comes forth when it is being performed. For “play appears as the self-movement that does not pursue any particular end or purpose as much as movement as movement,

⁵⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 22; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 113.

⁵¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 124; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 1...*, op. cit., p. 133. In the “Epilogue” to his commentary on Celan Gadamer emphasizes this point with respect to poetry. “Indeed, the closed unity of meaning of a poem is so stringent that it scarcely allows itself to be redefined by a larger context [...]” (H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 145; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 441).

⁵² H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 109; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 1...*, op. cit., p. 115. Margolis is suspicious of such talk of completing the artwork, insofar as it suggests a uniquely correct interpretation that would “complete” the work. See J. Margolis, *What After All is a Work of Art?*, University Park 1999, p. 82. Gadamer here draws upon Ingarden’s phenomenological account of active reading as a “concretization” of the literary work in which the reader imaginatively fills out the formal structures of the text in a manner that Ingarden considers cocreative. See: R. Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. R.A. Crowley, K.R. Olson, Evanston 1973.

exhibiting, so to speak, a phenomenon of excess, of living self-presentation [*der Selbstdarstellung des Lebendigsein*].⁵³ Released from any origin or end outside itself, the work of art remains open to the only completion proper to it – the performative enactment that accomplishes its self-presentation. The open-ended quality of the work therefore requires one who, responding to the work, is drawn into its movement, enabling the work to present itself. For Gadamer, then, “the genuine reception and experience of the work can exist only for the one who ‘plays along,’ that is, one who performs in an active way himself.”⁵⁴ In other words, the enactment by which the work achieves completion requires the involvement of the spectator who takes part in the work. This in turn means that the spectator is no longer an observer but a player – that is, one who participates in the work’s self-presentation. Only through the spectator’s participation does the artwork as such come into being.

This applies to poetry as well where participating means reading the poem. Yet reading requires patient listening to the poem so that what is said there can come out. Such attentive listening requires both a receptivity to being addressed by the poem as a singular offering of meaning and an active engagement with the directions of meaning that it opens up.⁵⁵ For Gadamer, “the poem speaks better and more authentically through the listener.”⁵⁶ In fact, he is insistent on this point: “It must not only be read, it must also be listened to – even if mostly with the inner ear.”⁵⁷ To ask what the poem says is to listen toward the “completion of meaning” (“*Sinnvollzug des Wortlaufs*”) at which the text aims.⁵⁸ So it is crucial that the reader complete what the poem itself says, so that it is the poem – and not just the interpreter – that speaks. The reader must

⁵³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 23; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 114.

⁵⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., pp. 25–26; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 116.

⁵⁵ Davey’s discussion of “aesthetic attentiveness” provides an illuminating account of the hermeneutic conception of aesthetic experience as both passive and active. See N. Davey, *Unfinished Worlds: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics and Gadamer*, Edinburgh 2013, pp. 65–102.

⁵⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 144; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 46.

⁵⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 182; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 2...*, op. cit., p. 352.

⁵⁸ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 72; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 387.

listen so that the “ideality” of the poem becomes audible for the inner ear where sound and sense are one.⁵⁹ Listening in this manner one understands the polyvalent meaning of individual words as mediated by the poetic configuration which draws them into a unified intention. Gadamer therefore asserts that “the significance of a word is determined only by the unity of a figure of meaning formed by the [poetic] speech.”⁶⁰ He recognizes that this task is all the more difficult with modern lyric where the relative lack of syntactic determinacy creates fissures in the poetic configuration that result in a greater ambiguity of meaning in the poem as a whole. Nevertheless, “the polyvalence of the words is determined in completing the meaning of the [poetic] speech and permits one significance to resound and others to simply resonate.”⁶¹ This completion of meaning is the task of reading. In Celan’s poetry Gadamer finds that the word choices invoke a network of connotations whose “hidden syntax” can only be discerned from the linguistic configuration of the poems themselves. For every interpretation ultimately aims at “making visible the unity of meaning which befits the text as a linguistic unity.”⁶² Only then does the ambiguity and indeterminacy stirred up by the poem become truly understandable.

Gadamer’s account attests to his focus on the language of poetry as “the medium by means of which language is bound back to its own or inner resounding.”⁶³ He emphasizes the role of rhythm which deploys a range of syntactical means to achieve a palpable balance between the

⁵⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 290. Gadamer associates the autonomy of the poetic (or literary) text with its ideality. For an autonomous work “any reproduction – even on the part of the author or reader – contains an inappropriate contingent moment.” He underscores this point: “Every speaker of a ‘text’ knows that no possible vocal realization – not even his own – can ever completely satisfy our inner ear. The text has acquired an ideality that cannot be obviated by any possible realization” (H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 146; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 148).

⁶⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 129; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 429.

⁶¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit.; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit.

⁶² H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., pp. 127–128; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 428.

⁶³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 149; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 52.

movement of meaning and the movement of sound.⁶⁴ A thick network thereby emerges enabling the individual words to cohere into a meaningful whole. What comes forth through this coherence Gadamer, invoking Hölderlin, calls “tone” (*Ton*). The tone of a poem holds throughout the linguistic configuration and joins its elements together. Where this tone pervades the poem a coherence prevails, allowing the listener to detect “instances where discordant notes arise” that detract from the mood it creates.⁶⁵ Reading the poem is thus a matter of listening to its tone, of attuning oneself to the underlying concordance that emerges from the poem’s basic mood. Only by listening can one attend to how the individual words cohere to bring out the unique quality of the poem’s being-said. Where the words are stated concretely and precisely within the poem, the corresponding precision of understanding is what provides the real standard of measure. When understanding succeeds “[e]verything in the text tightens up, the degree of coherence is unmistakably increased, as well as the overall coherence of the interpretation.”⁶⁶ In such understanding one experiences that “attunement” (*Stimmung*) to the text which by which the “rightness” (*Einstimmung*) of an interpretation is confirmed.

Our encounter with poetry thus involves a different experience with language, one in which we experience the appearing of language *as* language. Undergoing such an experience we are taken up into an event of language that surpasses the intentions of both reader and writer. The poem is not merely an object to be understood, but “a phase in the fulfillment of an event of understanding.”⁶⁷ The event of language that occurs in this encounter no longer allows us to take a position outside as an observer; rather we are called into the event as a participant. The poem, Gadamer says, “holds to itself” (*an sich hielte*), thereby “inviting the reader or hearer to tarry, and impelling the reader or hearer to become a lis-

⁶⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 149; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 53.

⁶⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 150; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 52.

⁶⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., pp. 144–145; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 441.

⁶⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 173; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 2...*, op. cit., p. 345.

tener more and more.”⁶⁸ Tarrying with the poem we are drawn into the web of sound and sense created by its linguistic configuration. Listening to the poem we find ourselves engaged by what addresses us there and responsible to let it come forth. In this way the reader performs the poem, fulfills it so that “it comes out.”⁶⁹ Summoned by the text we are called to respond; responding to the text we are answerable to it, responsible to what it says. This is the heart of the hermeneutic experience of poetry as an event of language. Caught up in this event we are, as it were, cast outside ourselves. Here it is no longer a matter of simply deciphering the meaning of the poem, but of responding to what appears there. For this reason the poem is not merely to be read, it must listened to. By listening one takes responsibility for letting the language of the poem speak as language. Such responsive listening requires attuning oneself to the language of each poem, listening to the tone that resounds within this unique configuration so it comes to presence through the sonorous self-presentation of language in the poem.

Being-Said: The Presence of Language in the Poetic Word

“The poetic word is ‘itself’ in the sense that nothing other, nothing prior, exists against which it can be measured. And yet there is no word which does not exist beyond itself; that is, there is no word which, beyond its polyvalent significance [...], does not yet also constitute its own being-said [*Gesagtsein*].”⁷⁰ Gadamer’s formulation here is as enigmatic as it is provocative. The poetic word is “itself” in that it does not refer beyond itself to a reality or intention external to it that would authenticate the poem. And yet the poetic word exists “beyond” itself insofar as what it says is brought to presence simply by virtue of its being said. Poetic

⁶⁸ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 183; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 2...*, op. cit., p. 353.

⁶⁹ Risser provides an important discussion of tarrying (*Verweilen*) as the performative enactment that enables the work to take place (*Vollzug*). See J. Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Albany 1997, pp. 203–206.

⁷⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 130; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 430. For a discussion that focuses on temporality of tarrying see D.L. Tate, “In the Fullness of Time: Gadamer on the Temporal Dimension of the Work of Art”, *Research in Phenomenology*, 2012, 42/1, pp. 92–113.

saying (*Sage*), Gadamer avers, “is a saying that says so completely what it is that we do not need to add anything beyond what is said in order to accept it in its reality as language.”⁷¹ In fact, the ontological distinction of the poem as an artwork consists in this identity of meaning and being wherein the presence of what it intends is achieved. “Thus poetic language stands out as the highest fulfillment of that revealing (*deloun*) which is the achievement of all speech.”⁷² The poetic word thereby enables language to appear as language – that is, as an event of unconcealment by which something comes to presence.

Here too Gadamer follows Heidegger who sees in poetry a way of speaking that lets the essence of language present itself. And yet, in a significant departure from his mentor, Gadamer recasts the essence of language as a speculative relation that is epitomized by poetry. In the poetic word language manifests itself as an ontological event which exhibits the dynamic structure of being as a revealing-concealing movement, thereby opening a space, a “*Da*,” within which something is brought to presence. The poetic word thus speaks as word by both coming forth and holding back, enacting a relation between what is said and what is not said that comprises its being-as-saying. The language of poetry thereby “makes audible what is in fact not said, but rather presupposed as an expectation of meaning, and indeed awakened by the poem.”⁷³ The poem thereby holds together what is said with what is not said in a unified meaning that breaks forth from the midst (middle) of language. In this regard poetry intensifies the “living virtuality of speech” that Gadamer discerns in the event of language.⁷⁴ So when he speaks of the revealment and concealment of meaning as a dynamic interplay that constitutes the complex presence of the poetic word, this interplay reflects the speculative structure of language. Yet even where the withholding of meaning obscures a poem’s unity of intention, as occurs in modern

⁷¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 110; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 75.

⁷² H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 112; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 76.

⁷³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 131; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 430.

⁷⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op.cit., p. 465; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 1...*, op. cit., 473 .

lyric, this is how the poem reveals meaning.⁷⁵ Simply by virtue of its being-said the poetic word offers a meaningful presence that is brought forth through the poem as a revealing-concealing event. Gadamer calls such being-said a “statement” (*Aussage*) by which he understands poetry as a “saying-forth” (*Aus-sage*).⁷⁶

We have seen that the language of poetry does not point to something else by reference to which its meaning would be fulfilled. Instead the fulfillment of which Gadamer speaks is the unique presence achieved in and by the poem. This presence (which includes absence) neither requires nor receives authentication from the reality of the world that lies “outside” the poem. Indeed, “the [poetic] word finds its fulfillment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind.”⁷⁷ This is the import of Gadamer’s claim that the artwork constitutes itself as a “self-sufficient structure (*Gebilde*)” such that “it is, so to speak, its own measure and measures itself by nothing outside it.”⁷⁸ Any direct reference to reality is effectively suspended by the poetic *Gebilde*. Gadamer even appeals to Husserl’s eidetic reduction – which “brackets” the experience of reality – in order to clarify how, by its transformation into (linguistic) structure, the poem “is capable of canceling or forgetting any reference to reality that discourse normally has.”⁷⁹ By bracketing any positing of reality the poem spontaneously accomplishes the phenomenological epochē. “The poetic word suspends the positive and the posited as that which might serve to verify whether our statement corresponds with what lies outside.”⁸⁰

⁷⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 167; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 452. Where interpretation encounters opacities within the meaning-intention of the poem, this signals the poem’s withholding of meaning. Steiner astutely observes that the resistance experienced in reading is a mark of the poem’s “otherness.” Even where our understanding of a poem deepens into intimacy, he says, “a certain reserve persists.” See G. Steiner, *Real Presences*, Chicago 1989, p. 176.

⁷⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 139; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 42.

⁷⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., pp. 110–111; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 75.

⁷⁸ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 111; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 1...*, op. cit., p. 117.

⁷⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 163; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 194.

⁸⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 112; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 77. Ricoeur makes this same point when he argues that the ab-

By virtue of this spontaneous bracketing of reality the poem is capable of self-fulfillment. To grasp how the poetic word can be “self-fulfilling” (*“Selbsterfülling”*), it helps to recall the phenomenological analysis of truth as the intuitive fulfillment of those intentions wherein something is merely meant. Where something is intended in its absence Husserl speaks of “empty” intentions that are “filled” when the thing intended is encountered in its “bodily presence.” Such fulfillment occurs as the coincidence of what is intuitively given with what is emptily intended. A phenomenological experience of truth occurs where the intuited corresponds with the meant. Husserl’s analysis enables Gadamer to retain the connection between intuition, presence, and existence evoked by the language of poetry with the experience of truth in which the poem is fulfilled.⁸¹ But he deviates from this analysis because the poem cannot be conceived as an “empty” intention which must be “filled” by something given from outside the poem. The poetic word is instead *self-fulfilling* precisely because the intuitive fulfillment of what is said in the poem comes forth from its very being-said. This marks the limit of intentional analysis in regard to poetry. As Gadamer notes, “the poetic configuration does not intend something but rather is the existence of what it intends.”⁸² The poem thereby gives to itself the very intuition which fulfills it; it is, he says, a “self-giving intuition” (*“selbstgebende Anschauung”*).⁸³ In poetry it is language that discloses what presents itself there; in such self-giving intuition lies the truth of the poetic word. “The word is true in the sense that it discloses, producing this self-fulfillment.”⁸⁴ Where it evokes the singular presence by which it produces its own fulfillment the poetic word is true, that is, true *as word*. The truth of the poetic word

olition of ostensive reference to given reality is the condition for the possibility of a non-ostensive reference to the world of the text. See P. Ricoeur, *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, trans and ed. P.B. Thompson, Cambridge 1981, p. 141.

⁸¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 70; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 21.

⁸² H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 113; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 77. On this point Gadamer approvingly cites Günther Eich: “The true language seems to me to be that in which word and thing coincide” (Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., pp. 130–31; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 430).

⁸³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 163; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 194.

⁸⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 112; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 76. Also see J. Risser, op. cit., p. 191.

thus lies in itself; it 'says' what it 'means' and "whatever shows itself [to be] what it is, is true."⁸⁵

In poetry, then, we encounter the true word. It is the language of the poem itself that makes possible the intuitive fulfillment of its meaning. Even as the words bear a unity of meaning by which they point beyond themselves, enabling the poem to intend something, that meaning is nonetheless "secured and sheltered in the ordered composure of the [poetic] configuration."⁸⁶ For this reason, Gadamer claims that the artwork is "more than the mere manifestation of meaning" and this "additional something" he calls its "facticity." The very "fact" of the poem's appearing in this particular configuration is decisive. Consequently there is no question of surpassing the language of the poem toward comprehension of its meaning by concepts. Like all works of art, the poetic word "resists pure conceptualization."⁸⁷ The irreducibility of the poem's linguistic manifestation to conceptual comprehension is just the other side of the indeterminacy of its meaning. This indeterminacy is not merely a matter of the polyvalent meaning of the poem's words; it further implies that the meaning drawn forth from the linguistic configuration of the poem is simultaneously drawn back into it. This is borne out by the resistance of poetry to translation which underscores the extent to which it is the language of the poem that secures the presence of what appears there. Thus the privilege Gadamer accords poetry is thus based on the inseparability of what becomes present in the poem from its self-presentation as language.⁸⁸ Due to its distinctive way of being bound to language, the poetic word "embodies and vouchsafes its meaning."⁸⁹ For Gadamer,

⁸⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 108; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 73. In fact, just as Gadamer spoke of the ontological valence of the image in *Truth and Method*, he speaks of "a valence of being [*Seinsvalenz*] resident in the word" (H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 152; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 54). By virtue of its being-said the poetic word undergoes an increase of being.

⁸⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 34; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 135.

⁸⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 37; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 128.

⁸⁸ In *Truth and Method* Gadamer discusses the inseparability of presentation and presented in the artwork as the "principle of aesthetic non-differentiation" (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 116; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 1...*, op. cit., p. 122).

⁸⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 37; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 128. In this respect, the language of poetry compares to "the

the poem's facticity affirms its singularity as "a unique manifestation of truth whose particularity cannot be surpassed."⁹⁰

So when Gadamer says that in poetry the word speaks authentically as word, as true word, he means that "the word as word is not only disclosure but must [...] be hiding and sheltering."⁹¹ In such a word there occurs a revealing-concealing event in which something comes to presence and yet is drawn back into the sheltering being of the word from which it comes forth. The "authentic" word is not therefore a mode of propositional discourse in which something true is said; rather it has to do with the "word" in its most authentic sense, "a word that speaks, a telling [*sagend*, saying] word."⁹² In poetry the word as word speaks more tellingly than anywhere else for it is there that the true being of the word is fulfilled in its "being-as-saying." As such a saying the poetic word is a statement (*Aussage*) in that it speaks forth (*Aus-sage*). The true word stands for itself and – we now add – speaks for itself. When the poem speaks it says something, but in such a way that "what is said in the saying is completely there."⁹³ In "the coming-forth of the word" something comes forth in the poem. Gadamer asks – and answers – the question: "What is it that is there [...] when the *Aussage* takes place or happens? I think it is self-presence, the being of the 'there' [*Sein des 'Da'*]."⁹⁴

On this basis we better understand why Gadamer relates poetry as a saying (*Sage*) to the original meaning of myth. Like myth, poetry seeks a shared saying, "a saying that possesses absolute reality simply by vir-

language of gesture;" both are embodied meanings. Like gesture, what the poem expresses is "there" in the poem itself such that the whole being of the poem lies in what it says. The poem also resembles gesture inasmuch as it is at once "something wholly corporeal and wholly spiritual." Yet, again akin to gesture, every poem is "opaque in an enigmatic fashion" such that "[i]t holds back as much as it reveals" (H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 79; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 328).

⁹⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 37; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 128.

⁹¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 136; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 40.

⁹² H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 137; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 40.

⁹³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 147; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 50.

⁹⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 148; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 50.

tue of its being said.”⁹⁵ What Gadamer emphasizes about myth is the act of telling and the act of naming. Myths are believed only as long as they are told and retold. In this sense “all poetry is mythical, for like myth, the credence we give to it depends on this saying.”⁹⁶ But poetic “saying” is also closely connected to “naming” as an invocation that calls into presence.⁹⁷ For Gadamer, poetry restores to language this original possibility of naming as calling into presence, albeit a presence caught within the tensive play of revealing and concealing characteristic of the speculative structure of language as an event of being. The poetic word thus reclaims the original capacity of language to call into presence simply by virtue of its being-said. He even adopts the word *parousia* to describe this power of poetry. “*Parousia* means nothing more than presence – and presence through the word, only through the word, and in the word, is what we call a *poem*.”⁹⁸

Bearing Witness: The Nearness of Language in the Poetic Word

Poetry is “myth,” that is, a “Saga” that attests to itself by virtue of its being-said. The poetic word is thus a statement, a saying-forth, that bears witness.⁹⁹ Here, however, poetry is not conceived as the transmission of myth; it is not the retelling of a traditional story. That such a mythical world no longer exists provides the assumption behind Gadamer’s question: “where in our unromantic world is such a ‘Saga’ requiring no attestation?” This framing of the question invokes Hegel’s concept of the romantic as the final stage in the historical unfolding of art in accordance with his thesis declaring the pastness of art. For Hegel, “romantic art” encompasses the entire history of art and poetry in the “Christian Era”

⁹⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 70; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 22.

⁹⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 70; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 22.

⁹⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 135; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 235.

⁹⁸ H.-G. Gadamer, *Literature and Philosophy in Dialogue...*, op. cit., p. 171; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 305, italics original.

⁹⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 110; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 75.

which embraces “the magnificent humanistic-Christian unity which we call the Western tradition of our culture.”¹⁰⁰ Gadamer understands the “end” of romantic art declared in Hegel’s thesis to indicate the dissolution of this mythical tradition, bound by Greco-Christian thought. If art now finds itself in an “unromantic” world, this means that poetry can no longer secure its legitimacy with the recitation of an extant mythos. Nor can poetry convincingly invoke the myths which once conveyed our experience of the world. This is the present predicament of poetry that Gadamer confronts in “The Verse and the Whole.” This predicament confronts poets today with a unique challenge: “How can the path of the poet be taken as a path to the whole, when the whole is so different and so alienated from the verse[?]”¹⁰¹ Although verse that would seek to revive that mythical tradition today would surely ring false, he insists that poetry remains a recitation of truth. Even today poetry must reaffirm its age-old vocation of invoking the whole of our experience of the world within which we encounter ourselves. Poetry that takes up this vocation responds to the continual demand for return and self-communion that confronts us as human beings. In Gadamer’s terms, the task of poetry today is to supersede this alienation of verse from the whole by renewing the whole in the verse. He believes that this is still possible in the lyric poetry of our time. “In the end, its pure lyrical power is proven not by transmitting a mythical inheritance but by creating its own mythopoetic incantation.”¹⁰² In this way lyric poetry “fulfills the law of its genre” – namely, “to be a whole of sound and meaning that does not tell us a saga but does tell us how we are.”¹⁰³ As a self-authenticating saying, lyric is its own saga. No longer conveying mythical narratives, lyric poetry brings forth its own pres-

¹⁰⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History...*, op. cit., p. 87; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 252.

¹⁰¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History...*, op. cit., p. 86; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 251. Heller expresses a similar assessment of the predicament of modern poetry. “The notorious obscurity of modern poetry is due to the absence from our lives of commonly accepted symbols to represent and house our deepest feelings.” (E. Heller, *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought*, New York 1975, p. 282.)

¹⁰² H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History...*, op. cit., p. 89; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 255.

¹⁰³ H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History...*, op. cit., p. 89; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 255.

ence. Where such *parousia* occurs “the world as a whole – and the whole of our world experience – has become present.”¹⁰⁴

Lyric thus retains the possibility of “capturing and retaining the whole in the poetic word.”¹⁰⁵ It is precisely as a whole of sound and meaning that the poetic word affords us an experience of the whole of our world and of ourselves within that whole. What is brought forth in verse relates us to the world as whole. As used in our ordinary interaction with objects language dissimulates our relation to the world. By suspending the reference to such objects the language of poetry reveals what ordinarily remains hidden – namely, our originary belonging to the world. So while verse refers to our experience of the world as a whole, it does so by revealing our being-in-the-world prior to the relation of subjects and objects. The relation of verse to the whole is rather a speculative relation in which we are mirrored back to ourselves. Listening to the poetic word we are taken up into the work which situates us within our world. The language of poetry thereby affords us an experience of the whole in which we return to ourselves. For Gadamer, however, this “is always a return to what we have been allotted, i.e. a return to the whole in which we are and [to] who we ourselves are.” Here he appeals to *nomós* as the most profound symbol for this basic human task. However, *nomós* is not just law and the order created by human beings; beyond this “*nomós* is the allotted [*Zugeteilte*], the measure [*Mass*].”¹⁰⁶ Like Heidegger, Gadamer sees in poetry a measure-giving in which we make our own what is most proper to us – that is, what is both possible and necessary for us. Listening to the poetic word is a matter of learning how to submit to this measure. Dwelling with the poetic word in this manner Gadamer calls “living in poetry.” Living in poetry we experience the whole by “adhering to what has been allotted to us, i.e. the *nomós*, whatever it may be.”¹⁰⁷

It is a fundamental tenant of philosophical hermeneutics that language grants our access to a world. If, as Gadamer maintains, poetry is language in its preeminent sense, then the poetic word brings the world toward us in its familiarity. Citing Hegel he describes such familiarity as “feeling at

¹⁰⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History...*, op. cit., p. , 90; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 256.

¹⁰⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History...*, op. cit., p. , 89; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 255.

¹⁰⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History...*, op. cit., pp. , 90–91; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 256.

¹⁰⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History...*, op. cit., p. 91; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 257.

home in the world.” This feeling of familiarity indicates how the world surrounds and supports us, even though it remains forever nonobjective and so never emerges into the light of reflective consciousness. It is, above all, the shared world of linguistic experience that provides the element in which we live and feel at home. Gadamer characterizes the essence of this familiarity as “nearness.” It is the distinction of poetry that it enables us to experience nearness as such. “A genuine poem,” he asserts, “allows us to experience ‘nearness’ in such a way that this nearness is held in and through the linguistic form of the poem.”¹⁰⁸ But the poetic word does not simply continue the process of *Einhausung*, of making ourselves at home in the world. “Instead it stands over against this process like a mirror held up to it. But what appears in this mirror is not the world, nor this or that thing in the world, but rather this nearness or familiarity itself in which we stand for a while.”¹⁰⁹ While it is through language that we have a world in which we feel at home, it is in poetry that we experience its abiding nearness. For Gadamer, the truth of the poetic word consists in its creating a “hold upon nearness (*Halten der Nähe*).”¹¹⁰

Standing within the nearness afforded by the poem we may discern the measure appropriate to our experience of the world. Bringing forth the nearness of the world, the poetic word “bears witness to our own being.”¹¹¹ As such it is a “true word.” A word that fails to testify to the nearness that binds us together bears false witness. In his reading of Celan’s poetry Gadamer calls this a “*Mein-Gedicht*,” a poem wherein I fail to address You. Such a poem is a “false creation of language” that “gives a false oath and is a ‘noem’ (*Genicht*),” a poem that comes to naught de-

¹⁰⁸ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 114; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 78.

¹⁰⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 115; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 79.

¹¹⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 154; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 56. In his study of Celan Ziarek underscores the other’s proximity in distance. While Gadamer places greater emphasis on the nearness of the you than on the distance of the other, he would surely agree that Celan’s poetry is not a representation of the other but rather a happening where the address of the You takes place. See K. Ziarek, *Inflected Language: Towards a Hermeneutics of Nearness – Heidegger, Levinas, Stevens, Celan*, Albany 1994.)

¹¹¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 115; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 79.

spite appearing to be a linguistic configuration.¹¹² Finding a path to the “true word” is the challenge that faces poetry today, as always. But this task is made all the more difficult by the myriad ways in which our common language has been confiscated as a means of communication, thereby muting the more originary dimension of language. Here Gadamer addresses the plight of world withdrawal that accompanies the forgetfulness of language that has overtaken us. Like Heidegger, Gadamer finds in the more profound poetry of our time a heightened experience of the forgetfulness of language where the ontological dimension of language comes to presence as withheld. When the “right word” refuses itself, the poet experiences a profound *Sprachnot* to which the poem bears witness. Indeed, where the word that would speak the sharing of a common world is not given, such poetic attestation acquires urgency. The search for the right word, even – and perhaps especially – where it withholds itself, attests to the poetic vocation of retrieving the disclosive power language in a shared saying that would enable us to experience the world’s nearness. Yet the *Sprachnot* of poetizing does not simply reflect the *Sprachvergessenheit* of thinking; it rather intensifies the need of finding the word that would bring the being of language to language.

In order to stabilize linguistic configurations today in a way that will stand fast amidst the flood of informational chatter that rushes over us, Gadamer observes that poets must deploy “sharper provocations and forms of resistance” than in times past. This situation vindicates the extremity of hermetic poetry even when it appears all but impenetrable. At the risk of unintelligibility modern lyric draws deeply – even desperately – on the resources of language to renew our sense of familiarity in a world where we may no longer feel at home. In their efforts to attest to the nearness of the world, poets today find it increasingly necessary to dismantle our ordinary relation to language as communication in order to reclaim the originary power of language as *poiesis*. While this predicament prompts Gadamer to ask “have poets fallen silent?,” he believes they have just become more discrete, requiring their listeners to attend all the more closely to what is quietly being said in the poem amidst the din of amplified voices. For “only the quietest word still confirms the communality and therefore, the humanity, which you and I find in the word.”¹¹³ In Celan’s poetry, Gadamer finds

¹¹² H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 124; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 426.

¹¹³ H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History...*, op. cit., p. 81; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 366.

a poetic word that bears fraught witness to the fragile intimacy of You and I. Where such intimacy is discretely brought to language the nearness of the world still achieves a shared saying, if only to mark its absence. Even in these “destitute times,” Gadamer avers, poetry seeks the true word that would be binding upon us, a word that, standing for itself, would vow for you and I. “In this sense the poem which must be written today seeks to be an ‘irrefutable witness’ – but only as a poem.”¹¹⁴

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¹¹⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 163; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 449.

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