

# Introduction

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When, in 1997, Hans-Georg Gadamer was invited to look back upon his intellectual life, he devoted special attention to his teaching and lecturing experiences. In an almost nostalgic vein, he expatiated on the joys he had found in reading and thinking aloud with his philosophy students at Marburg, Leipzig, and Heidelberg. Likewise, he remembered with great fondness the lecture trips he had made through the United States and Canada after his retirement in 1968. The fact that, on such occasions, his audiences had usually been far more diverse than those assembled in his German seminar rooms did not seem to disturb him. To the contrary, Gadamer spoke with enthusiasm about the various groups of scholars that he had encountered during his lecture tours in North America. He had visited theology departments as well as ‘departments related to language and literature, especially comparative literature, departments which in the German language we sometimes refer to as the “philological disciplines”’. He even remembered thoughtful conversations with lawyers and medical doctors, all of whom, in Gadamer’s recollection, had begun ‘to acquaint themselves with the problems dealt with in hermeneutical philosophy’.<sup>1</sup>

The ease with which Gadamer crossed, or tried to cross, disciplinary boundaries between philosophy, on the one hand, and literary, historical, or religious studies, on the other, should come as no surprise. ‘I believe’, he went on to explain, ‘one can say that the “*Geisteswissenschaften*”, as we call them in German, and those disciplines which in English are labeled the “Humanities”, and those which in French are broadly called “*Lettres*”, have just as much inherited “Western metaphysics” as philosophy itself has.’<sup>2</sup> Moreover, these humanities or *Geisteswissenschaften* (including law and medicine) all engage in interpretative practices of the kind that lie at the heart of hermeneutic philosophy. If, following Gadamer’s definition, ‘hermeneutics is above all a practice, the art of understanding and of making something understood to someone else’,<sup>3</sup> then the humanities are thoroughly hermeneutic. Humanities scholars tirelessly practice the delicate art of trying to make sense of ancient lines of poetry, Renaissance pen drawings, medieval political theories, or the mentality of nineteenth-century British fac-

tory workers. Humanities scholars continuously study cultural artifacts in an attempt to make cultures distant in space or time ‘understood to someone else’. *Wahrheit und Methode* frequently draws on interpretative practices such as those found in law, literature, and (art) history to elucidate the nature of hermeneutic understanding.

These affinities between the humanities and Gadamer’s project help explain why *Wahrheit und Methode* has received quite some attention from scholars working in the humanities or *Geisteswissenschaften*. Ever since its appearance in 1960, the book has not merely been read by philosophers, but also among theologians, lawyers, literary scholars, (art) historians, and classicists. In each of these disciplinary contexts, Gadamer’s philosophy has resonated, just as it still resonates, with questions that all humanities scholars at some point have to ask themselves: What does it take to interpret a Shakespeare tragedy, given our cultural distance from early seventeenth-century London and/or the shelves of studies previously written on the Bard of Avon? What imaginative capacities are required for the interpretation of medieval religious art? Is there a difference, in terms of the interpretative work required, between historians working their ways through huge piles of twentieth-century administrative records and classicists trying to reconstruct an ancient world from two or three shreds of papyrus? In what sort of relationship to our subjects of study do we find ourselves if we try to challenge an existing interpretation? In whatever sense can we claim ‘truth’ or, perhaps less ambitiously, ‘plausibility’ for our interpretative proposals? Given the obvious affinities between these questions and the themes that run through *Wahrheit und Methode*, it is not particularly remarkable that the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Gadamer’s hermeneutics has never been confined to circles of professional philosophers. *Wahrheit und Methode* has been a source of inspiration, discussion, and controversy throughout the humanities.

This is not to say that Gadamer’s interventions have met with unanimous appraisal. As early as 1965, the American literary scholar Eric D. Hirsch made Gadamer the target of a rather notorious criticism, the gist of which was that the German thinker had no clue as to what distinguishes a valid interpretation of a literary text from an invalid one.<sup>4</sup> Many others, including the Marxist critic Terry Eagleton, have protested against what they perceived as the conservative underpinnings of Gadamer’s notion of tradition.<sup>5</sup> Historians for their part have accused the German philosopher of underestimating the ‘scientific’ aspects of historical interpretation.<sup>6</sup> Unfair or narrow-minded as some of these

criticisms may have been, they nonetheless illustrate that Gadamer's book has struck a chord among humanities scholars. Whoever writes a history of the humanities in the second half of the twentieth century will have to deal with *Wahrheit und Methode* as one of the leading voices engaged in debates over the grounds and nature of interpretation.

Surprisingly, however, Gadamer's relation to the humanities has seldom been the subject of sustained inquiry. Although theological responses to Gadamer's work have received some attention<sup>7</sup>, most scholarship on the impact of *Wahrheit und Methode* focuses on the field of philosophy. In many cases, it focuses even more narrowly on Gadamer's relations to such other prominent philosophers as Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida.<sup>8</sup> To some extent, this also holds for the commemorative publications that appeared in 2010, on the occasion of the book's fiftieth anniversary. Although the relevance of *Wahrheit und Methode* to 'a range of disciplines' is noted in passing, there is hardly any consideration of what humanities scholars have done or can do with hermeneutical philosophy.<sup>9</sup> In so far as scholarship on Gadamer's *Wirkungsgeschichte* moves beyond the circles of professional philosophy, it usually pays attention only to sociologists such as Jürgen Habermas and Gadamer's debate with 'critical theory'.<sup>10</sup> There is, of course, no denying the significance of either these conversations or the commentaries they have generated. One may wonder, though, whether they offer a sufficiently broad treatment of *Wahrheit und Methode* and its range of influence. Isn't there a certain one-sidedness in portraying *Wahrheit und Methode* as a book that resonates primarily among philosophers? Doesn't this take too limited a view of its both actual and its potential relevance?

The current volume, which originated in a conference held at Leiden University in August 2010, attempts to remedy this one-sidedness by explicitly addressing the impact that Gadamer's hermeneutics has made, and still could make, on the humanities. In good Gadamerian fashion, it adopts a fairly inclusive stance on what counts as humanities or *Geisteswissenschaften*. Not only literary studies, historical scholarship, and religious studies are subsumed under this umbrella here, but also law and medicine, in so far as they engage in interpretative practices of the sort discussed in *Wahrheit und Methode* — as when a rule of law is applied in a particular context, or when the ethical aspects of a specific medical case are assessed. All the chapters collected in this volume address either of the two following questions: (1) How has Gadamer's work been received in a particular (sub)field of the humanities

in the past fifty years? What roles, if any, have been played by, or been attributed to *Wahrheit und Methode*? (2) What sort of insights can Gadamerian hermeneutics yield into a specific branch of the humanities? How could Gadamer be ‘applied’ in current humanities debates over authorial intentions, translation, or ethics of representation?

There will be no need to explain that this twofold exercise by its very nature transgresses the limits of a narrowly-focused publication. This is an exploratory volume, the strengths of which are positively correlated to the variety of case-studies that it presents. If it encourages others to bring Gadamer into conversation with even more aspects of the humanities, in disciplinary and/or geographical contexts not covered in the pages that follow, it will have served its purpose. Nonetheless, as my co-editors Madeleine Kasten and Rico Sneller show in their concluding reflections (‘Ausblicke’), there is more than just diversity to be found in the chapters collected here. In drawing together some of the lines developed in the book, Kasten and Sneller observe that a number of concerns seem to be of special importance to most, if not all, of the authors. One of these is Gadamer’s consistently anti-methodological attitude, which manifests itself, among other things, in a preference for ‘play’ as metaphor for interpretation in the humanities. This anti-methodological approach perhaps also helps explain why quite a few authors commend the ability of Gadamerian hermeneutics to build ‘bridges’, or to facilitate conversation between different ‘paradigms’ or ‘schools of thought’ in the humanities. Hermeneutics has an ability to connect and to recognize what is worthwhile in other perspectives.

As far as the editors are concerned, it is a hopeful sign that these themes have been recognized by authors from so many different niches in the humanities. If anything, this strengthens our conviction that Gadamer’s work could serve as a catalyst for cross-disciplinary conversations about interpretation. Whereas in the past, humanities scholars sometimes seemed to be encapsulated in narrow disciplinary frames, each with its own canons of methods and approaches, we are now witnessing a time in which historians, literary theorists, and religious scholars increasingly acknowledge the need for cooperation and shared reflection on the role of interpretation in their research. For such reflection, Gadamer’s hermeneutics offers an excellent starting point.

## Notes

- 1 Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Reflections on My Philosophical Journey', in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lew Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 20.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 4 Eric D. Hirsch, Jr., 'Truth and Method in Interpretation', *Review of Metaphysics* 18 (1965), 488-507; republished as an appendix in Hirsch's widely read study, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1967), 245-264.
- 5 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).
- 6 Herta Nagl-Docekal, *Die Objektivität der Geschichtswissenschaft: systematische Untersuchungen zum wissenschaftlichen Status der Historie* (Vienna; Munich: Oldenbourg, 1982), 162-196.
- 7 Wasim Salman, 'La Wirkungsgeschichte de Hans-Georg Gadamer dans la théologie de Claude Geffré, David Tracy et Wolfhart Pannenberg' (Ph.D. thesis, Pontifical Gregorian University Rome, 2008); Fred Lawrence, 'Gadamer, the Hermeneutic Revolution, and Theology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 167-200; Charles Richard Ringma, *Gadamer's Dialogical Hermeneutic: The Hermeneutics of Bultmann, of the New Testament Sociologists, and of the Social Theologians in Dialogue with Gadamer's Hermeneutic* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1999).
- 8 One typical example is *Gadamer's Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Bruce Krajewski (Berkeley; London; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004). A slightly more interdisciplinary overview is offered in Chris Lawn, *Gadamer: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London; New York: Continuum, 2006), 120-138.
- 9 Jeff Malpas and Santiago Zabala, 'Introduction: Consequences of Hermeneutics', in *Consequences of Hermeneutics: Fifty Years After Gadamer's Truth and Method*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Santiago Zabala (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), xii. The *Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik* 10 (2011) also marked the fiftieth anniversary of Gadamer's book with a special issue ('50 Jahre Wahrheit und Methode').
- 10 Examples include Alan How, *The Habermas-Gadamer Debate and the Nature of the Social: Back to Bedrock* (Aldershot; Brookfield: Avebury, 1995) and Demetrius Teigas, *Knowledge and Hermeneutic Understanding:*

*A Study of the Habermas-Gadamer Debate* (Lewisburg; London: Bucknell University Press; Associated University Presses, 1995).