

# Ecological Restoration as the Art of Playing with Nature

W. S. K. Cameron<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

A paradox of ecological restoration is that many get involved for aesthetic reasons, but the theoretically astute soon develop a bad conscience. Kant gave the aesthetic appreciation of nature a prominent role for moral and theological reasons, but Hegel soon convincingly argued that art should take pride of place, since the experience of beauty in nature was thoroughly suffused with cultural values. When young Hegelians rejected Hegel's system, however, the very notion of natural beauty appeared unsustainable. Absent metaphysical foundations, the search for cross- or supra-cultural standards of natural beauty seemed quixotic—and worse, any particular, culturally determinate standard of beauty would tempt the restorationist to impose fundamentally foreign expectations on the environment whose integrity she sought to protect.

I hope to reconstruct a notion of natural beauty with the help of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who circumvented the subjectivism of modern aesthetics with a new ontology of the work of art based on the concept of play. Gadamer argued that play applied far beyond the human world, and drew attention to an interchange in which we participated without being in control. For both reasons, I would extend Gadamer's ontology of art to the natural world. Moreover doing so appears practically productive. Gadamer understands the artist as accomplishing a “transformation into structure”—i.e. she creates a pattern that, e.g., later performing artists will incarnate. Gadamer recognizes the role of interpretation and context in shaping the meaning of the work of art, but even better, he insists that every interpretation is meant to let the work itself speak to its audience. Gadamer thus defends the relative freedom and independence of art—and I would add, of nature—even as he concedes that this freedom is not absolute. I will close by showing how language helps us conceive nature's independence and aesthetic value.

## 1. Introduction

A peculiar paradox haunts those who would connect aesthetic concerns with their interest in ecological restoration. Many get involved in restoration for aesthetic reasons: they are revolted by the despoilation of environments they have learned to love; and they invest time in anticipation of their delight at seeing them successfully restored. Yet the most theoretically astute soon develop a bad conscience. Robert Elliot began this discussion with a sharply posed challenge to the general concept of ecological restoration in his famous article, “Faking Nature” (Elliot 1982). Just to the extent that we clarify and then impose our intentions on the land we are restoring to its former condition, we impair the very integrity, independence, and “naturalness” that had produced our sense of loss and inspired our desire to restore it.<sup>2</sup> Moreover this general

---

<sup>1</sup> Dept. of Philosophy, Loyola Marymount University, One LMU Dr., Suite 3600, Los Angeles, CA 90045 USA.

<sup>2</sup> Elliot is, I should note, careful to concede that restoration may be better than leaving the land in its degraded condition; his primary target is the “restorationist thesis” that exploiting and then restoring land can possibly be done without cost. What we restore simply is not nature.

problem becomes even more pressing with the invocation of aesthetic considerations, given the debates about how to interpret works of art and the even more vexed challenge of construing the beauty of the natural world. A variety of restorationists and environmental philosophers have begun to address the problem of ecological restoration in general (Higgs 2003, Vogel 2002, 2003). In this paper, I take up the role of aesthetic considerations in particular. I cannot promise the resolution of all outstanding issues, much less a critical discussion of every alternate approach. But I will argue that many longstanding problems appear far less compelling when approached through the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Our itinerary will be as follows. In the first section, I will outline a series of familiar challenges raised by the concept of beauty in art and in the natural world. The second section will introduce Gadamer's response: to abandon modern assumptions in favor of a new, phenomenologically-justified ontology of the work of art. Gadamer's primary concern is to redeem the truth-claim of art, and this requires him to locate it in the broader context of history, a field to which we have our richest access through language. As we will see in the third section, Gadamer's ontology of the work of art already suggests new insights into natural beauty. Even better, by developing a sophisticated, linguistically-mediated account of the nature-culture relation, Gadamer can acknowledge the role of cultural presuppositions in structuring our appreciation of natural beauty while still protecting its relative independence—i.e. the possibility that we may be challenged by new experiences and unanticipated insights into nature's aesthetic, moral, and epistemic significance. The concluding section will suggest a few issues we should consider as we introduce aesthetic considerations into discussions of ecological restoration.

## **2. The Theoretical Challenge Posed by Natural Beauty**

Despite his pean to beauty in the *Symposium* and the evident artistry of all his dialogues, Plato's suspicion of the senses' seductiveness and his description of art as two removes from the truth played a major role in delaying beauty's philosophical elaboration. Initially, modern philosophy fared little better under the influence of Descartes' rationalism; and while the empiricists focused on the evidence of their senses, they were primarily concerned to justify scientific claims. In 1750, however, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten began to develop "aesthetics" as an independent field of philosophical study. He thereby introduced a series of longstanding philosophical problems that Gadamer uses as foils in developing his own constructive approach. These concerns could be described in various ways, but I have collected them under three heads: problems concerning the concept of artistic beauty; problems concerning the concept of natural beauty; and problems concerning the relation between the beauty of art and the beauty of nature.

### **a) The Concept of Artistic Beauty**

The traditional view of art as imitating nature began to appear suspect in the post-enlightenment and especially post-Darwinian context. Artists and art critics raised a series of fundamental problems. First, why should artists imitate nature? What, more concretely, could her authority be if we were no longer sure she had an Author? Second, how could we imitate nature if we were no longer sure exactly what it was, given modern reservations about the knowability and Darwinian reservations about the very existence of natural kinds? Finally, modern artists and

their critics were much less impressed by imitation in an era when the mechanical reproduction of a photograph could achieve virtually unsurpassable realism without thereby exhausting the haunting potential of great art.

Theorists responded to these challenges in three broad ways. The empiricists offered the simplest resolution, arguing that beauty should be understood either as a subjective individual preference or as a culturally-encouraged predisposition to enjoy the appearance of certain things—a move that acknowledged the wide variety of interpretations of the beautiful at the cost of radically relativizing it.

Immanuel Kant and the romantics, on the other hand, defended the genuine authority of judgments of beauty despite the severe limits imposed by Kant's critical turn. Having interpreted truth as a function of the universality and necessity of judgments, Kant could not establish beauty either on the synthetic a priori necessity of the pure concepts of the understanding, nor on the empirical universality of scientific judgments, nor on the a priori universality of the pure form of law that undergirded moral judgment. But he remained convinced that judgments of taste could not be reduced in empiricist fashion to mere empirical generality: for in the first place, that empirical generality was lacking—we often disagree about what is beautiful; and even where a consensus existed, judgments of taste appeared to Kant to claim an authority that superseded mere popularity.

Kant's solution was to argue that judgments of taste have an a priori element which is genuinely universal, even if not cognitive: viz., they are based on the experience of the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding. Since we all have the same faculties of imagination and understanding, judgments of taste rightly claim universality. Yet the harmonious free play we experience in the presence of the beautiful is not merely an immediate pleasure of sense, and it typically involves more than one sense simultaneously. Thus our recognition of this free play demands a reflective judgment—something at which some are better than others. Kant's view thus accounted for the genuine authority of judgments of beauty while also explaining why they often fall short of empirical universality: all experience beauty, but not all are equally sensitive to its charms. As Gadamer notes:

Kant . . . does justice to both aspects of the phenomenon: its empirical non-universality and its a priori claim to universality.

But the price that he pays for this legitimation . . . is that he denies taste any *significance as knowledge*. . . . In taste nothing is known of the objects judged to be beautiful, but it is stated only that there is a feeling of pleasure connected with them a priori in the subjective consciousness. (Gadamer, 1991, 43)

In romantic hands, Kant's view justified the independent authority and cultural significance of art as expressing a mode of experience that could not be reduced to scientific, technical, or moral rules. Indeed the fine arts could not even be reduced to artistic rules. As Kant had argued, the artistic genius created the free play of imagination and understanding precisely by breaking pre-existing conventions—an observation that explained the importance of artistic originality as distinguishing fine artwork from merely proficient reproductions, however perfectly they may have been produced either by fine craftsmanship or by newly-developed technical means. Imitating the work of past artists could at best be an artist's apprenticeship; her particular challenge was to engender the free play of imagination and understanding by breaking tired rules and exhausted formula in a new and fruitful way.

Unfortunately, the Kantian and romantic accounts of artistic beauty bore within themselves the seeds of their own destruction. Paradoxically, the romantic emphasis on genius coupled with their convictions about the social significance of original art had the effect of rendering art *less* influential in the broader culture. On the romantic view, the artist's greatest challenge was to become part of the vanguard that produced new and significant aesthetic developments. But since this meant breaking old rules—i.e., the ones with which their contemporaries were comfortable—artists could not expect much patronage. Indeed the elitism implicit in the model inevitably alienated the very audience that was supposed to benefit from, and (through funding agencies) to support, its exposure to socially significant art. If most people could understand and appreciate a new work, that virtually proved it was not inspired.

Worse yet, romantic critics could offer no satisfactory account either of the artists' creative or of their own critical authority. Although they, like Kant, believed that aesthetic judgments were normative—i.e., they were, or at least should be, actually true—art critics justified their judgments by appealing to immediate intuitions about the free play of their imaginations and understanding. But this appeal to immediate intuition meant that their aesthetic judgments were subjective in effect if not in intention. Romantics disagreed on which works embodied genius; and even when they agreed they could never be sure that they were looking at the same works of art in the same way, since no conceptual description of the work could be adequate to its being. Eventually, the romantics argued that a critic must also be a genius to recognize the rule-breaking success of the great artist—but this did not resolve the original problem, since the critical genius could offer no more adequate conceptual justification of how she had recognized great art than the artist could give of how she had created it.

Finally, the romantic valorization of the rule-breaking artistic genius unintentionally licensed self-destructive behavior. Our modern caricature of the artist as a bohemian, convention-defying, devil-may-care, drug- and alcohol-abusing, sexually experimenting outcast is a direct consequence of romantic aesthetics, for these were the practical ways in which artists expressed their independence from and defiance of social convention. Moreover by implying that artists could only produce great work when they were “inspired,” the romantic view undermined the work ethic that had appeared to lie behind the unquestionably great work of, e.g., Michelangelo or Mozart.

Hegel resolved the problem posed by the romantics' conceptually empty and apparently arbitrary appeal to their own intuitions by emphasizing art's historico-cultural context and cognitive content. On Hegel's view, the artist's social significance was to embody and express, as at times also to challenge, the form of conscious of her age; and like everything else, art was thereby drawn into Hegel's historico-philosophical story of the ever more adequate elaboration and embodiment of freedom. Yet Hegel paid a price, since he effectively subsumed art and religion within history, and all three within philosophy. Art critics—as also, on parallel grounds, religious thinkers and historians—reacted quickly and emphatically. Neither art, nor religion, nor the richness and color of historical and cultural life could be so easily subsumed. No matter how rich the conceptual elaboration of Absolute Spirit, we'd all be the poorer if we had lost Monet's “Water Lilies.”

## **b) The Concept of Natural Beauty**

Yet if the concept of artistic beauty was problematic, the concept of natural beauty was even more difficult for moderns to clarify. Since we did not make and often could not recreate

what was beautiful in the natural world, we could not elucidate natural beauty by referring to any human artist's intent. Nor could we talk unselfconsciously, much less uncontroversially—about the Artist's intent. In a post-enlightenment context, even those who affirmed the goodness and beauty of creation on religious grounds could no longer confidently expect to root the beauty of a natural object in its form or telos. Indeed as the romantics had already begun to realize, any appeal to “formal qualities”—even if they referred not to deep metaphysical structure but to accidents of size, shape, or relation—was problematic in natural as also in an artistic contexts. The concept of form was simply too wide to identify the beautiful, since it could refer not only to nature or art but to virtually everything else. Absent some convincing way to distinguish a beautiful form from an ugly one (a strategy that would merely restate the original problem in a different way), we could not helpfully appeal to form. Finally, the romantic's insistence on the independence of beauty from moral or cognitive concepts and on the consequent necessity of contemplating it in a disinterested way appeared especially problematic in the context of natural beauty. The challenge was simple: we could not plausibly maintain a distanced, merely aesthetic attitude to the natural world, for it was our only home, the breast at which we would suckle as long as we lived.

### **c) The Relation between Artistic and Natural Beauty**

Finally, in addition to the challenges of explaining artistic and natural beauty, moderns faced the difficulty of understanding their relation. Kant defended the moral priority of natural beauty, for it suggested a kind of order that could not be explained by human intention, and thus served (along with the moral law) as an indication of the purposiveness and indeed the divine design of the natural world. Hegel, on the other hand, insisted on the priority of artistic over natural beauty, since our interpretation of natural beauty inevitably shifted with culturally and historically dominant views of art. The romantic reevaluation of mountains provided his best evidence. For two hundred years we, following the romantics, have taken mountainscapes as paradigmatic of natural beauty. Yet mountains had traditionally appeared as barren wastes, the infertile haunts of wolves, ogres, and giants; and only the violent conquest of the natural world during the industrial revolution began to suggest the salutary value of natural spaces well beyond our power to master or tame.

Contemporary postmodern approaches escape the apparent naïveté of Hegel's hope to discern progress toward an ever more philosophically adequate and eventually Absolute consciousness. Yet by affirming, like him, the social construction of reality, they effectively deny the possibility of drawing any radical distinction between cultural images of beauty and the beauty of the natural world. In effect, they volatilize the natural world's reality, and hence its beauty, completely: for if nature is only what we conceive it to be, we lack any independent preservation- or restoration-worthy moral or aesthetic ideal. Again, deconstructionists legitimately worry about Hegel's reduction of every Other to the Same—something they find both philosophically and politically suspect. Yet their emphasis on inviolable otherness has paradoxical theoretical and practical effects. To the extent they emphasize the theoretical inaccessibility of the Other—here the natural world independent of human categories—they undermine any obligation to understand and appreciate it. Assuming the commonsense view that the impossible cannot be morally required, the Other, as finally unknowable, can make no inescapable demands upon us. An absolute Other can at most inspire the aesthetic appreciation of our theoretical and practical finitude; it cannot require concrete sacrifices of us if we can never

really grasp its needs. Such an apparently extravagant respect for the Other renders it, in fact, practically inconsequential.

Are we stuck? Are the classical theory of mimesis, empiricist and romantic subjectivisms, Hegel's subsumption of beauty to philosophy or the postmodern subsumption of nature to culture the only options from which to choose? One of Gadamer's major aims in his magnum opus was to weave a path through this aporia-ridden field. The following excursus not only through Gadamer's reflections on art, but also through historical and linguistic claims may seem to lead us far out of our way. Yet as I hope to show in the following section, we can only triangulate a safe approach to natural beauty if we have recourse to all three beacons.

### **3. *Truth and Method* as a Challenge to Modern Philosophy**

#### **a) Gadamer's Response to the Dilemmas of Aesthetic Consciousness: Art is Play, but We are not in charge of the Game**

In the forward to the second edition of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer pithily summarizes both his title and his fundamental theme: "The hermeneutic phenomenon is basically not a problem of method. . . . It is not concerned primarily with amassing verified knowledge, such as would satisfy the methodological ideal of science—yet it too is concerned with knowledge and truth. . . . But what kind of knowledge and what kind of truth?" (Gadamer, 1991, xxi). Reservations about the modern restriction of truth to what is demonstrable set Gadamer's goal: to explore and defend "the experience of truth that comes to us through the work of art against the aesthetic theory that lets itself be restricted to a scientific conception of truth" (Gadamer, 1991, xxiii). The non-cognitivist interpretations of beauty produced by the empiricists, by Kant, and by the romantics all began with the belief that judgments of beauty could never meet the Cartesian ideal of truth. Gadamer sets off in the opposite direction, questioning the modern ideal itself.

Gadamer begins with a long explication and critique of "aesthetic consciousness"—that mode of awareness cultivated by 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Western cultural elites as a virtue radically distinct from the scientist's more literal, prosaic approach. On this view, art and aesthetic experience more generally are constituted by a process of abstraction through which the critic eliminates all non-artistic elements from the object of study: its purpose, its function, its context—and thus its cognitive significance. In the famous slogan, we should pay attention to art for art's sake. The aesthetic object, moreover, must be regarded in an aesthetic way. In the performing arts, the original play or musical composition is distinguished from its performance, so that "both the original (in contrast to the reproduction) and the reproduction itself (in contrast to the original or other possible interpretations) can be posited as what is aesthetic" (Gadamer, 1991, 86). We think, that is, of the score in contrast to its performance at a particular time and place, and we maintain awareness of the director's and actors' interpretive decisions throughout the performance of a play. Moreover since aesthetic consciousness aspires to embrace everything of artistic value, it defies the constraint of its own historical and cultural context—a defiance institutionally reflected in the development of libraries of "world literature," in contemporary radio stations devoted to "world music," and in museums that collect material from all around the world to be displayed together in some cultural capital. Indeed museums embody and thereby reinforce aesthetic consciousness explicitly. They gather materials from all around the world, effectively stripping them of their native context and meaning (we tend, for instance, to regard a

shaman's mask with an eye to its artistic qualities rather than its cultic power); and the collected pieces are then recontextualized next to one another, set off in frames or together in display cases to facilitate the process of comparison and contrast through which they elicit an unhistorical, because merely simultaneous, awareness of the world's artistic and cultural variety.

Gadamer terms the processes of abstraction that generates aesthetic consciousness "aesthetic differentiation," and argues that the aesthete's promiscuous immersion in immediate but discontinuous experience denies him the possibility of a genuinely enriching encounter with art and culture. By arguing, in effect, that deep can call unto deep only by drawing on living connections to their roots, Gadamer not only elaborates Kierkegaard's critique of aesthetic consciousness, but borrows his metaphor of the gospel's contemporaneity to clarify the nature of the call embodied in art. Great art does speak to those who have ears to hear, but we betray art if we are merely titillated by its variety. At its best, art can produce an overwhelming and life-transforming experience—an adventure—from which we do not return to the same lives that we left precisely because we have faced the challenge of integrating its significance. With the romantics, Gadamer agrees that such adventures cannot be reduced to and adequately captured in any particular formula; but unlike them, he insists that we engage all our linguistic and conceptual capacities in order to conceive and appreciate their significance, their truth. To clarify what he means by an interaction that illumines experience in a new way and yet is not fully accessible to discursive self-consciousness, Gadamer elaborates a new ontology of the work of art using the concept of play. The reason? Play, like art, involves a type of free, yet meaningful self-expression; it has, in consequence, a characteristic but never finally determinable structure and significance; and it exists most fully when we abandon our reflective self-consciousness to lose ourselves in the momentum of the game.

Given the seriousness with which we treat art, Gadamer's recourse to play might seem surprising. But he does not have in mind our consciousness of "being playful"; or rather, this form of consciousness stands in the same relation to play as the aesthetic attitude stands to the experience of art. Gadamer first draws attention to the wide variety of metaphorical uses of "play": there is the play of light, the play of gears, the play of forces, the interplay of limbs; gnats play, waves and colors play; we even make plays on words. What makes the extension of play possible in all these cases?

The movement of playing has no goal that brings it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition. The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement. . . . It is the game that is played—it is irrelevant whether or not there is a subject who plays it. (Gadamer, 1991, 103)

Play, then, is essentially a constrained but not wholly determined to and fro movement. It requires no subject, for the fundamental sense is the medial one. Gadamer even questions our conviction that the broader senses of play are metaphorical. We ought "not . . . say that animals *too* play, nor . . . [that] water and light play *as well*. Rather, on the contrary, we can say that *man* too plays" (Gadamer, 1991, 104). Play in its primary sense occurs throughout nature.

We will return again to the ontological breadth Gadamer attributes to the concept of play, but first we must observe that even where *humans* are playing, Gadamer insists on "the *primacy of play over the consciousness of the player*" (Gadamer, 1991, 104). Playing is in fact a being-played. It is of course possible to reflect ourselves out of a game, to think of its rules and its end.

But this requires an interruption, a break in the spirit of play. In play proper, “the attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players” (Gadamer, 1991, 106). The consciousness of being “playful” can even get in the way: for no one ruins a game more quickly than one who does not take it seriously; and one’s success at play typically diminishes insofar as one reflectively concentrates on technique.

Gadamer makes the link between play and art explicit in three moves. Play, as we have seen, is a structured movement, and what distinguishes a particular game is its pattern of action as constituted by the rules. But in art as well we find this “transformation into structure.” In a play, for instance, “even the unforeseen elements of improvisation . . . [are] in principle repeatable and hence permanent. It has the character of a work, of an *ergon* and not only of *energeia*” (Gadamer, 1991, 110). In this sense, we can talk of it as a structure [*Gebilde*]. We identify a particular play, to speak more concretely, by a repeatable pattern or structure of action.

Second, play does not have an external aim, a goal; rather “its mode of being is self-presentation.” But every presentation “is potentially a representation for someone,” and it is this possibility which is the characteristic feature of art. A play, for instance, does not exist as a play in the mind of the actor—she’s concentrating on blocking, lines, and modes of expression; rather, it exists in the minds of the audience members looking on *Lady Macbeth* (Gadamer, 1991, 108-9). Here Gadamer reintroduces the cognitive function of art. While the classical theory of art had started with imitation, Gadamer begins from presentation, but in both cases “the presentation of the essence . . . is necessarily revelatory.” “In imitating,” Gadamer continues, “one has to leave out and to heighten,” and yet this does not represent a bewitchment from which we must be redeemed, “rather it is itself redemption and transformation back into true being. In being presented in play, what is emerges” (Gadamer, 1991, 112). Precisely by having been freed from the journalist’s traditional role of presenting the literal truth, the playwright can portray the essential significance and inner meaning of a relationship or event.

Finally, just as we can take up an attitude to a game which we nevertheless play most fully when we are most fully absorbed, so also we can take up an attitude to art—here Gadamer acknowledges the possibility of aesthetic reflection—and yet the aestheticizing focus on different interpretations is not adequate to the fundamental experience of art. Different interpretations are indeed possible, just as different moves in the structured whole of a game, and we can thematize the appropriateness of an interpretation just as armchair athletes can hypothesize about the coaching decisions they would have made. Yet in the *experience* of art, the interpretation should be no more thematic than the rules are in the midst of a game, for the goal of interpretation is precisely to make possible our absorption in the performance. Again a little more concretely, great actors and directors work very hard to ensure that not Laurence Olivier or Mel Gibson or Kenneth Branagh, but Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, appears before us. Moreover the spectator’s absorption is not the sign of mere naiveté. “Here self-forgetfulness is anything but a privative condition, for it arises from devoting one’s full attention to the matter at hand” (Gadamer, 1991, 126). And it is through this, “the spectator’s own positive accomplishment” of rapt attention, that the work of art comes to fruition and manifests its power: not merely as the subject of our detached observation, but by drawing us in, shaking us up, and putting *us* into question.

Thus play is, to summarize, a pattern of action that constitutes a kind of self-presentation in which we are most absorbed when we are least conscious of it. We can, of course, size it up explicitly in a theoretically careful way, but this diminishes and often undermines its capacity to refresh or transform our perspective. Conversely, the discovery that a theoretically self-conscious

approach is in some ways dysfunctional proves that the being of art “cannot be defined as an object of an aesthetic consciousness because, on the contrary, the aesthetic attitude is more than it knows of itself. It is a part of the *event of being that occurs in presentation*, and belongs essentially to play as play” (Gadamer, 1991, 116). But if we do not have recourse to the tools of aesthetic differentiation, how shall we describe this “event of being that occurs in presentation”? How can we understand the identity of a work of art that presents itself so differently in the changing course of ages and circumstances? Gadamer’s answer: the work “does not disintegrate into the changing aspects of itself . . . , but is there in them all. . . . They are all *contemporaneous* (gleichzeitig) with it. Thus we have the task of interpreting the work of art in terms of time” (Gadamer, 1991, 120-21).

That the work of art only comes into being in the performance where it is experienced and understood: Gadamer renders this odd-sounding notion much less paradoxical through the example of a festival. The identity of a festival is not its continuous presence; indeed, “its own original essence is always to be something different (even when celebrated in exactly the same way).” More concretely: a local snow carnival counts as a festival because it involves a break in and eventually a return to normal time. It is different from one year to the next even though its main elements—the snowshoe race, the log cutting and moose-calling competitions, the building of an ice castle, and the pancake breakfast fundraiser for the local Elk’s Lodge—occur each time. In this sense, the being of a festival is “temporal in a more radical sense than everything that belongs to history. It has its being only in becoming and return” (Gadamer, 1991, 123). Moreover just because it has its being in going and return, a festival demands interpretation, as becomes obvious under unusual circumstances. How does one celebrate the snow carnival if unusual weather has melted the snow? And even under normal circumstances, planners may find themselves asking whether certain elements could or should be replaced by others more in line with current community sentiment. While wide innovations attempted all at once could threaten the festival’s very existence, merely mechanical repetition would also doom it to meaninglessness. The question for planners, whether they pose it explicitly or not, is how they can best embody and vivify the festival again this year.

Gadamer argues that all works of art have the temporal and interpretive structure of festivals, and in the case of the performing arts it is hard not to agree that “a drama really exists only when it is played, and ultimately music must resound” (Gadamer, 1991, 116). There is a kind of identity through all the performances, but it is an identity structured by a beginning, a determinate course, and an end. But is this true of all the arts? Having briefly considered the plastic arts, Gadamer turns to the hardest case, literature. In this case, there does not appear to be any presentation. Silent—in contrast with public—reading “is a purely interior mental process. It seems to exhibit a complete detachment from the occasional and contingent” (Gadamer, 1991, 160). Yet the distinction between private and public reading is not as sharp as it first appears.

Reading with understanding is always a kind of reproduction, performance, and interpretation. Emphasis, rhythmic ordering, and the like are part of wholly silent reading too. Meaning and the understanding of it are so closely connected with the corporeality of language that understanding always involves an inner speaking as well.

If this is so, then it is just as true that literature . . . has its original existence in being read, as that the epic has it in being declaimed by the rhapsodist . . . . Thus the reading of a book would still remain an event in which the content comes to presentation. (Gadamer, 1991, 160)

But if reading literature is a temporal and corporeal event, then Gadamer's analysis of art has consequences for far wider fields. For "[a]ll written texts share in the mode of being of literature—not only religious, legal, economic, public and private texts of all kinds, but also scholarly writings that edit and interpret these texts" (Gadamer, 1991, 162). Gadamer's reflections thus lead beyond art to the whole realm of historical understanding, for we can only appreciate the significance of art and literature in the context of history.

### **b) Gadamer's Response to the Dilemmas of Historicism: We are Ourselves Historical**

We cannot follow Gadamer through all the details of his dispute with the historicists, a 19<sup>th</sup> century movement of historians who rebelled against Hegel's (as they saw it) philosophically distorted perspective on the march of history. Reacting against any attempt to fit historical description into the framework provided by the current historian's own values, the historicists aspired to judge each era in its own terms. Yet while Gadamer agrees with the historicists that everything human is historical, he rejects as unfulfillable their aspiration to render history scientific through minute, methodical, contextually-sensitive description. Like non-cognitivist aesthetics, their hope was derived from the presupposition that knowledge demanded an objective approach—a hope that the historicists' own presuppositions put out of reach. As Gadamer argues, historical judgment simply cannot be scientifically secured, since we cannot anchor it either in our unchanging selves nor in the unchanging object of our studies. History is continually developing, and this inevitably introduces a kind of parallax that may distort, but in any case changes, the object of our studies. "The Great War," for instance, only became "World War I" in retrospect, and this horrendous development necessarily reshaped its significance. Moreover we too are historical beings affected by our changing contexts. From what supra-historical perspective could we attain objective truth? Wilhelm Dilthey, the most theoretically astute historicist, had conceded the difficulty of this challenge, but he hoped to overcome it by methodologically distinguishing different unities within historical life—i.e. by identifying past eras that shared enough in common to form their own "closed horizons." On this view, the task of the historian was to leap into the past era—the Florentine Renaissance, or the French Middle Ages, for instance—to bury herself in its artifacts, its literary remains, and what was left of its built environment with the aim of developing a sufficiently refined sense of the era's order of values to form good hypotheses where evidence was thin.

Yet as plausible as Dilthey's method sounded at one level, it was internally inconsistent. As Gadamer notes, the historicist's refusal to import philosophical considerations into history could not be carried through, since without some sense of what counted as a particular historical phenomenon, one could not divide history into different eras in the first place. Did we not need to make some theoretical assumptions about how we would distinguish and aggregate units, given that historical eras neither arrive nor pass wearing clear labels? Worse still, the historicist assumed that different ages had really different perspectives on the world; thus the necessity to renounce one's own age's values and leap into the past age's values through a heroic act of self-extinction. But this immediately generates a series of dilemmas. First and most basically, the more the historicist emphasizes the uniqueness of a past age, the less it seems plausible that he could understand its denizens as they understood themselves. Second, if the products of every age are a function of its order of values, how could any contemporary historian produce work that somehow superceded or escaped the presuppositions of her own time? Finally, Gadamer

questions whether the historian's methodological self-extinction is possible. We always bring our own interests, presuppositions, and questions to the study of others—that's what makes them both relevant and potentially comprehensible to us in the first place. Alluding to a familiar saying, Gadamer notes that "[i]f we put ourselves into someone else's shoes, for example, then we will understand him—i.e. become aware of the otherness, the indissoluble individuality of the other person—by putting *ourselves* in his position" (Gadamer, 1991, 305). In a slightly more general formula, we perceive the foreignness of another world only against the backdrop of our own familiar expectations. Without our own contemporary sense of what it might mean to us, we could not perceive another world at all.

At this point, it could easily appear that Gadamer's view collapses into a radical historical relativism. After all, if we cannot see past ages as they saw themselves because our perspective is skewed by our own values and expectations, what interest could there be in studying history at all? Yet Gadamer rejects this conclusion, since he does not accept that relativism is the only alternative to rigorous, methodologically-secured objective knowledge. As he had suggested in the case of art, so now he suggests in the case of history: we recognize eminent critics and historians by their good judgment; and we rightly learn from them even if they cannot demonstrate their insights in an objective way and even when their judgments, as Gadamer insists more consistently than the historicists, reflect the interests and preoccupations of their day. The realm of truth, again, is wider than that of method. To begin with a simple example, our understanding of Aristotle must be different from his own self-conception, both because he was much more familiar with earlier Greek philosophers than we can hope to be, and also because we understand him by contrast with post-Aristotelian philosophies like those of Aquinas or Kant that he could not have anticipated. Gadamer polemically concludes that we understand the past "in a *different way, if we understand at all*" (Gadamer, 1991, 297). But is this different understanding necessarily inferior?

Gadamer's constructive contribution owes more to Heidegger than we can consider here, but it begins from the historicist insight that our historical context determines our perspective. If that is true, and if we are interpreting our own past, then we are ourselves products of the past world we want to know better—indeed, we have inherited from that world a language, a cultural vocabulary, and a sense for what is important or questionable, all of which provide clues to our past. Enlightenment historians, swept away by the power of science and thus by the method that produced it, had adopted a very critical attitude to ancient religious and cultural beliefs. Chastened by the romantics and frustrated by Hegel, the historicists assumed the more conciliatory position that past beliefs might make sense in the context of their time. Yet they were still too impressed by the scientific method, which they inconsistently thought could secure their own work against the vicissitudes of time. Gadamer argues that finite, temporal beings must reject this aspiration as vain, but reassures us that the past's influence on our contemporary context can be and typically is a source of real insight. For example, we have fewer than thirty of the hundreds of Greek tragedies written during the fifth century BCE, but by then-contemporary inscriptions on stone we know that virtually all the plays we have were award-winners, i.e. ones the fifth century Greeks thought the best.

Gadamer thus rejects the Enlightenment view that the pre-modern world was radically or essentially different and that we should assume misunderstanding until we have proven otherwise. On the contrary, misunderstandings are only possible on the basis of wide agreement. Even an everyday argument cannot get off the ground unless both speakers think the issue is important and unless they share a language and a wide enough set of common assumptions to

begin communicating in the first place. Thus even where we disagree with some past thinker's position, our disagreement reflects not two wholly different worldviews but rather a set of common assumptions against which meaningful differences can appear. In place of the historicist's "leap" into past eras, Gadamer suggests that historical investigation proceeds through a gradual "fusion" of horizons: we move into past worlds *by way of* our own. He also relies on the metaphor of translation, since it not only highlights the importance of literary evidence in interpreting all other historical remains, but brings out the way in which we move from confident assumptions about the meaning of certain ideas to speculation about others that are less clear. The Rosetta Stone provides the most obvious example: a long tradition of translating Greek carried on into our day, together with speculation based on the living liturgical use of Coptic, enabled first the translation of the demotic scrip and eventually the translation of the hieroglyphic—a development that shed a bright new light on ancient Egypt. Our broad inheritance of literary, religious, moral, legal, and material traditions from the past thus need not blind us, but first opens our eyes to appreciate the past. Gadamer never denies that the past could pass on misperceptions about itself, but even when it does, it normally passes on the very physical evidence and half-submerged counter-narratives in the light of which we can draw that critical conclusion.

Yet Gadamer's defense of our tradition's continuing influence has rankled many, since he also adopts a version of the "linguistic turn": the view that we never see the world "naked," but rather that language constitutes our self- and other-perceptions in ways that cannot be immediately and thus securely checked against a non-linguistic reality. A sophisticated account of his argument would demand far more detail, but even a quick sketch suggests its overall plausibility. Gadamer concludes that we only understand the world in and through language on the basis of a Hegelian and Heideggerian argument that the world transcends the bounds of our immediate perception entirely. The world as a whole includes what is present to us at any one time, but also what could not be immediately present because it is temporally distant or too large or small to fall within my current field of view. Moreover even what is immediately present cannot be concretely characterized except with respect to what is not present: e.g., one can only understand *here* by reference to *there*, *now* by reference to *then*, and *red* as *not-blue* and *not-green* and *not-necessarily-big*. On both grounds, Gadamer argues, we can understand—i.e. indicate and describe the world—only through language.

At one level, Gadamer's commitment to the linguistic turn fits well with his emphasis on the presuppositions we've inherited from the past, for language is one of the primary media through which the past continues to constitute the present. Yet if we've inherited both our language and our fundamental assumptions, and if indeed we can neither see ourselves nor anyone else otherwise, does this not mean that we're doomed to repeat past misunderstandings? In a post-Enlightenment, liberal political context suspicious of the intellectual and moral authority of pre-modern Europe, Gadamer's defense of inherited presuppositions—he audaciously calls them prejudices, in the root sense of preliminary judgments—cannot but appear politically problematic. Jürgen Habermas's (1977) widely cited and enormously influential review puts the challenge most poignantly: Gadamer's view makes us "ontologically" dependent on tradition, since as he himself says "the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being" (Gadamer, 1991, 276-77). If Gadamer is right, Habermas continues, then we are doomed either to repeat our politically problematic past or irrationally and arbitrarily (because unselfconsciously) to reject it. If we can never fully comprehend ourselves because we lack a God's-eye grasp of our place in history,

then we can never justify arguments for the radical reform of—much less for revolution against—the unjust elements of our past. The ensuing Gadamer-Habermas debate involved a series of contributions from both principals and has become the subject of an enormous secondary literature (e.g. Ricoeur 1973; Bernstein 1983; Warnke 1987; Kelly 1988; Cameron 1996). I raise the challenge here only because it reveals the importance of the new account of the language-world relation that Gadamer develops in the concluding third of his book, an account that provides powerful resources for resolving our original questions about interpreting natural beauty.

### **c) Gadamer's Response to the Dangers of Historical Relativism: a New View of the Language-World Relation**

Habermas's challenge to Gadamer is rooted in an old dilemma: either we can directly confirm our presuppositions against immediate intuitions as both Enlightenment-era rationalists and empiricists had hoped, or we concede that linguistically-embodied presuppositions structure our experience, enabling us to think but at the same time isolating us from the language-worlds of other times and cultures. On Gadamer's view, however, this dilemma is no more compelling than that faced by the historicists, for it rests on the same assumption that all legitimate knowledge claims must be methodologically secured. Gadamer's counterposition: that though our linguistically-constituted presuppositions are historically particular and potentially problematic, they do nevertheless provide us with the tools we need to discover and overcome their limitations. To recall the point above: we cannot understand or even intend the world immediately, but always grasp it by means of the concepts and presuppositions embodied in our language. Yet against any more radical linguistic idealism, Gadamer argues that we do intend and grasp the world *itself* through language; indeed the very function of language, like eyeglasses, is to disappear so the world can appear through them.

How does this work, more concretely? Linguistically-embedded presuppositions offer a rough initial orientation or map of the world. But while these presuppositions help us grasp the world, they stand—again like maps—in constant need of confirmation. Like maps, our presuppositions can be wrong, but language itself provides the tools needed for their correction. My linguistic capacity to anticipate that the world should have a certain character together with my linguistic capacity to recognize that my expectations have not been met, are precisely what enable me to discover the limits of my linguistically constituted “world” and thus to grasp the *real* world in a richer and more adequate way.

Language thus does not block, but rather makes possible those “negative experiences”—the disappointment of expectations—by which the actual character of the world is more fully revealed. Having language, I can hold a scientific theory and then come to grasp why new evidence undermines it. A dog may continually react and adapt to her environment, but—assuming that she doesn't have language—she cannot grasp, let alone theorize about, the world at all. She may leap to the sound of her leash being picked up or, motivated by hunger, she may get up hoping to find some food. But if she has no language, she could not form a thought like “I hope we go running next Tuesday”—much less form counterfactual beliefs about the character of the world as a whole including the deep past, the likely future, and all the space beyond her immediate field of vision. Only in and through language can the world appear *as* a world in the first place, and only through our linguistic ability to grasp what is *not* true, can our characterization of it grow more adequate (Gadamer, 1991, 438-56). Thus the fact that the world

of our experience is always already constituted in historically particular ways does not prevent us from seeing it anew. Again, both our experience of the world and the language by which we conceive it are relatively consistent—otherwise we could neither function nor communicate at all. But language is by no means a prison; rather, it gives us the freedom to acknowledge and reflect on new experiences of the world, and over time, to reshape the concepts through which we conceive it.

#### 4. Gadamer and the Appreciation of Beauty in the Natural World

What does Gadamer's hermeneutics have to tell us about interpreting natural beauty? Though he thematizes this question nowhere, insights relevant to this challenge occur throughout each of the three main sections of *Truth and Method* discussed above. We'll take them up in turn:

##### a) The Play of Nature

The first part of *Truth and Method* addresses the problem of artistic beauty; is it equally perspicuous in illuminating the beauty of nature? While Gadamer gives no explicit affirmation, there are firm grounds for hope since he downplays or eliminates many of the assumptions that had generated the traditional puzzle of relating these two types of beauty. In the first place, Gadamer grounds the ontological structure of art in the category of play which is, as he notes, much broader than most have noticed. To recall, we ought "not . . . say that animals too play, nor . . . [that] water and light play as well. Rather, on the contrary, we can say that man too plays" (Gadamer, 1991, 104). And if play characterizes not only human, animal, and animate beings, but even inanimate light and water, can we not argue that nature too engages—and engages us—in a kind of self-presentation? Since Descartes, modern philosophy has drawn a radical distinction between free, conscious, willing, responsible, intelligent subjects and everything else, which is essentially dead matter. But Gadamer has studied Plato and Aristotle long enough to be aware of other forms of representation, e.g. that by which sensible objects more or less adequately reflect and embody the unchanging patterns of change, or forms. On this view, it is much less surprising that the natural world is capable, and perhaps even in some respects *as* capable, of stimulating aesthetic experience as art. The person who marvels at driftwood, or the colors that water can bring out of stone, or the maple-covered Gatineau Mountains so stunningly dressed for fall, recognizes in nature intricate patterns of consonance, contrast, harmony, and tension—patterns richly evocative of real and potential significance. Indeed the tendency of the natural world to put *us* in play, its capacity to recontextualize and thereby reshape our self-perception, its power to produce adventures from which we return with minds sharpened and changed: surely this reflects the experience of an underlying, structure, a structure that has inspired people not only since Kant drew attention to the sublime, but since shamans of old first went, and sent others on, vision quests.

On Gadamer's view, moreover, the problem of determining the artist's intent—one of the traditional worries of those who drew a strong distinction between artistic and natural beauty—also falls by the wayside. We saw above that the domain of play is far wider than human playfulness, but even within human play the element of conscious, reflective self-possession does not predominate—or rather, it gets in the way insofar as it does. The romantic approach by

way of aesthetic differentiation challenges the critic watching a play to focus on the artistic intent of the playwright, the director, and the actors; Gadamer, in contrast, turns our attention to the fundamental experience of art, which sweeps us away not by confronting us with an actor's intent but with Hamlet himself. Moreover because both works of art and their later interpreters are situated in a continually shifting historical context, Gadamer denies that the artist's intent could ever determine the meaning of a work in the first place. To be sure, she intends to communicate, but she is more like a parent than a ventriloquist with a puppet: her role is to embody a work that can speak for itself. Like a parent, she cannot fully anticipate, let alone control what her child will say; and the meaning of her child's expressions are even further beyond her grasp since even our most casual interchanges can develop a new and entirely unanticipated significance after the fact—for instance, when some carelessly tossed-off goodbye turns out to be one's last words to a loved one. But if the artist's intent need not be thematic since it doesn't determine the meaning of the work of art in the first place, then neither the absence of human intent nor the inscrutability of the Creator's intent should block our aesthetic appreciation of the natural world. We can go further: if "the distorting mirror of subjectivity" has caused problems in interpreting art, it is even more obviously problematic in the interpretation of the natural world and thus natural beauty more broadly. We participate in and help shape the meaning of nature at many levels, but here it's even more obvious than with art that we're participants in a relationship that resists our full control.

Yet if the natural world also plays and if the significance of this play need not and indeed cannot be fixed by any human intent, then we must concede the polysemy of the natural world as of great art. Neither can be exhausted by any one interpretation. In fact, what makes them both so challenging and exciting is their contemporaneity with every age—i.e. the obligation of each new generation to interpret them anew. To be sure, the polysemy of both art and the natural world could tempt us to relativism, for if many meanings are possible, then how could any one be preferred? Yet Gadamer does not draw this consequence of artistic interpretation, nor must he do so of natural beauty. If the meaning of a work goes beyond any particular interpretation of it, that does not mean that every interpretation is equally adequate: some may be richer than others even if no one is uniquely or permanently ideal. Or better: what makes an interpretation work best in one setting will likely be an argument against its use in another, for interpretation, like communication in general, is context-specific. Language enables us to draw attention to truth in a form adequate to finite minds precisely by highlighting aspects of a whole that we could never comprehend all at once, yet which we truly intend in our every description. The task of the interpreter—like the makeup artist—is to choose what forms of emphasis will work best in a particular light. Thus the task of the interpreter of natural beauty—as also of the director, conductor, performing artist, and art critic reflecting on art—is to enable the natural world to speak to the current generation. And as with art, so also with nature: the interpreter must pay close to its context.

For the beauty and significance of a particular natural environment, as also that of a work of art, is in part constituted by its relation to its historical, cultural, and regional context. As with art, so in the natural world we often cherish what is rare, precious, intricate, and unique in its context: flora and fauna that are beautiful in one place can be out of place or even destructively invasive in another. And here the metaphor of play gains a new echo. Part of what we value in a game are the particular interactions it fosters or discourages: soccer for instance, only allows the goalkeeper to touch the ball when it's in play with her hands. If more start to do so, either the play ends in frustration, or a new game may develop over time—rugby, say, or football—but in

either case, if no one plays the original game we will have lost something that we may later and legitimately regret. If we are to restore the natural world, we must first interpret it—but that means that we need to develop a sense for the structure of its play in each particular context. But as with art, so again with nature: the relevant context is not only synchronic—cultural and regional—but also diachronic—a context changing through time. Because both it, and we its interpreters, live and change, our experience of natural beauty will be as historical as we ourselves are.

### **b) As We are Historical, so is our Perception of Natural Beauty**

Here again we must acknowledge the spectre of relativism. If our interpretation of natural beauty cannot be constrained by an artist's intent and if its significance changes with changing contexts, then how can our opinions about it be any more than arbitrary? The interpretation of art has shifted dramatically over time—Shakespeare, for instance, fell out of favor for over a century, and we now know from chemical analysis that much Greek marble statuary was not “classically” white, but painted in colors we'd find garish in any context other than a Vegas casino. Nor are such changes unique to art: we've already noted how dramatically the interpretation of mountains and forests changed in the aftermath of the industrial revolution. Moreover as Eric Higgs has made clear (2003), we face significant challenges in collecting evidence. Art is typically given form in a relatively enduring physical structure; it finds its place in a relatively enduring architectural context; and it gets passed down as something precious along with the history of its interpretation. The natural world, on the contrary, often has no such advantages. How could we hope to justify claims about natural beauty?

Of course we must begin by conceding the problem. For the above reasons and others, it will always be difficult to interpret the beauty of nature. Yet we are not entirely at a loss: sometimes the changes are happening before our eyes. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) served as an evocative and effective call to action in part because she drew attention to changes that fell within the memory of her readers. Problems of evidence can be mitigated, as Higgs notes (2003), by paying closer attention: we can identify reference environments and collect data to determine baselines. Moreover we can sometimes find historical reports once we've turned to look for them. Ancient writers tell us, for example, that Greece was lush and well-forested, which suggests that something—perhaps the cultivation of olives—has produced that country's current, dry and rocky look; and while it's hard for us to imagine Israel as the promised land “flowing with milk and honey” or Iraq as the “fertile crescent,” we know from more recent experience what salinization and deforestation can do.

But even where our evidence is soundest, the interpretation of natural beauty cannot be reduced to a science any more than the interpretation of artistic beauty. Much will depend on the good judgment of dedicated individuals, for sensitivity to the beauty of nature, just like sensitivity to the beauty of art, is to some degree a learned taste. Many thrill to pounding of waves on a beach, to a brilliant sunset, to the northern lights, or to the flaming colors of a southern Ontario fall, but it takes a subtler eye to appreciate the fecundity of a swamp, the delicate and brittle beauty of desert scrub, or the passing of seasons barely hinted in coastal California. As with artistic taste, our sensitivity to the beauty of the natural world grows most quickly by watching and listening to those who've moved further in developing their eye. Those who've lived long with the land or who've studied it closely have a natural and obvious authority. And though Gadamer would defend a larger role for the interpreter's context, he'd

accept many of Allen Carlson's (2002) arguments for the importance of cognitive clarity about the objects of aesthetic appreciation. When appreciating natural beauty we must not import inappropriate standards or expectations. Recalling the limpid clarity of the Caribbean Sea, we will only thrill to the same "purity" of northern Ontario lakes until we've learned that it resulted from deadly acid rain.

### c) Language as Freeing Natural Beauty to Appear

At this point, I can imagine a frustrated reaction: "All this is hopelessly metaphorical! Obviously one can and perhaps inevitably does interpret the natural world, but one can no more gain interpretive access to it than to the groaning of trees in the wind. Any significance one finds there is wholly imaginary, a phantom of one's fevered brain or at best a construction of one's culture." Indeed the deconstructive critics whom we briefly considered before turning to *Truth and Method* see this concession not only as necessary, but as a virtue. If we can never grasp the natural world except through culturally-mediated presuppositions, then what sense does it make to talk of the natural world's beauty—or indeed to characterize it as independent in any form—in the first place? Isn't the attempt to do so merely an unselfconscious imposition of our own ideas?

Yet Gadamer does have resources to reply to this modern and postmodern challenge. The general suspicion of culturally-mediated views trades on an assumption shared by both modern and postmodern critic: namely that true views would only be possible if they could be methodically and extra-culturally secured. And Gadamer questions just this assumption.

In the first place, to concede that our experience of the natural world is linguistically and culturally mediated does not mean that it is misguided or wrong. To be sure, it may be, and we can easily find examples of periods that did not appreciate beauties we now see. But error is not inevitable. To draw a simple perceptual analogy: bats and whales perceive their surroundings though sound, other mammals, reptiles and insects rely largely on smell, and we rely primarily on visible light. The resulting maps of experience are surely as different as our corresponding physiologies, but that doesn't make any of these maps misleading. Moreover this is true even if we cannot finally prove in Cartesian, Humean, or any other extra-cultural fashion that our claims are legitimate. Hegel famously questioned Descartes' default to doubt, but in an environmental context that default is even more dubious. Human beings, and thus human culture, is itself a development in and of nature. Would it not be arbitrary to think that we had got it wrong by default?

Thus even where we can point to historical instances where other cultures or our own previous intuitions were wrong, this does not justify the Cartesian default to doubt—especially given our capacity to detect and correct apparent errors over time. And it's at this point that Gadamer's reflections on language become most useful. Gadamer consistently insists, as we saw above, that while animals have natural environments, only we humans have a world,<sup>3</sup> for one can have a world, and can only have it, through language. The linguistically-constituted presuppositions through which we constitute the world as world provide the very means by which we can notice, acknowledge, describe, reconceive and reconstitute the world of our experience. Language, again, does not block our access to the world, but rather gives us the tools by which we can realize that what we had formerly ignored or written off—a swamp, for instance, or an anthill—may have an entirely unsuspected beauty.

---

<sup>3</sup> So far as we currently know, of course.

## 5. The Theoretical Fruit of Gadamer's Hermeneutics for an Aesthetics of Ecological Restoration

After a long look at the ways in which Gadamer's hermeneutics may be fruitful in interpreting natural beauty, I will close with a few reflections on the especially vexed questions posed by the aesthetic dimension of ecological restoration:

First and most importantly, I have argued above that it is not at all unreasonable or romantically soggy-headed to thrill to the beauty of the natural world. To be sure, its beauty is different from artistic beauty in several ways: it does not immediately invite interpretation as direct communication; it can be framed in a wider variety of ways, since the boundaries of the "work" are less firmly fixed; and while nature, like art, faces all cultures with the task of interpretation and assimilation, we cannot approach nature, as we do a work of art, with the field of interpretation narrowed by its meaning in some original local context. For all these reasons and more, the interpretation of natural beauty must pose greater difficulties than the interpretation of art. Yet as we have seen, the tools that Gadamer has developed to rescue art from the aporias of modern aesthetics are just as, and arguably even more applicable in the context of the natural world. It need not be puzzling that people's relation to the nature—and their motivation for preserving and restoring it—is so often expressed in an aesthetic register.

But our goal in this final section is more complex, for here we thematize not merely the appreciation of natural beauty, but the role it may play in *ecological restoration*. And this must give us pause. For as happy as we should be to participate in restoration, we ought never forget that restoration is a necessary evil: we restore only when something presumptively beautiful and good has been harmed. Furthermore, Robert Elliot is obviously right, as we saw in the introduction, to worry that too great a confidence in our ability to restore may tempt us to condone the destruction of what we cannot in fact replace. Indeed Gadamer would argue that we can never restore an area to its preexisting condition even where restoration is highly successful. Both we ourselves and the natural world are marked by our histories in ways that affect our perception and our very being. Thus if the restored environment won't be the same and may not be as rich as the one it replaces, caution is clearly necessary, and an orientation to preservation wise.

Yet to concede that restoration is a necessary evil is not to reject the practice of restoration as such, and thus not that of aesthetic restoration either. Though we may mourn the original harm, the restored area can be far more beautiful than it would be unrestored even when our work is less than perfect. And as a number of people have argued, the perfectionism of those who reject restoration as illegitimate is problematic on moral, legal, epistemological, ontological, historical and performative grounds (see e.g. (Guha, 1989; Cronon, 1995; Nelson, 1996; Hettinger and Throop, 1999; and Cameron, 2004).

Assuming, then, the legitimacy of invoking aesthetic judgments about nature and also that restoration may be a laudable goal, how should we bring the two together? We must first concede that combining an interest in natural beauty with the practical task of ecological restoration will compound our difficulties. The restorationist faces a series of vexing practical problems quite apart from any special concern with aesthetics. The would-be restorationist must figure out what the area to be restored looked like and how it functioned—a challenge that demands resolving difficult evidentiary issues as also the question of which, among a number of possible historical periods, she should take as her model; and she must aim not merely to reproduce some momentary idealized "snapshot," but a living and thus dynamically adjusting

and developing ecosystem. Finally, the restorationist must determine the best restored state attainable given current and anticipated ecological, political, and economic constraints. Isn't that enough to consider?

Perhaps. But what would it mean to introduce aesthetic considerations? Minimally, the restorationist must consider her contemporaries' taste for the picturesque. Nor is this only a first thought: practically speaking, this consideration is often essential, since much of the political and economic support for restoration derives from the moral and aesthetic pleasure that the prospect of restoration provides. Thus as she evaluates the current unrestored state and assesses its ecological potential, the restorationist will inevitably consider contemporary views about what is especially worth sustaining or restoring as beautiful. Yet if restorationists must start from current perceptions of the beautiful, they cannot end there, since we may not yet have discerned or appreciated many elements of the beauty of the natural world. We need not look far for such examples. We learned to see mountains as beautiful only during the last two centuries in the west; it took until the last two or three decades to appreciate deserts, wetlands, and the isolated remnants of the short- and long-grass prairies; and we've no idea what we may someday see as beautiful that we do not currently appreciate. Later ages may recognize what we do not yet have eyes to see.

Indeed here we find the first of five primary virtues of invoking Gadamer to integrate aesthetic considerations in ecological restoration: he highlights the historically and culturally-mediated nature of our perceptions of the beautiful without denying that those perceptions can develop over time as they are enriched by extra-cultural sources of insight. Other cultures have had and doubtless will continue to have much to teach us, as perhaps we may continue to have something to say to others. Moreover it's not only possible but likely that the natural world will reveal itself further to those sufficiently patient or still to listen. Every culture inevitably sensitizes its members to the value and beauty of particular environments, but the finitude of every individual mind and indeed of every particular culture forces us to acknowledge and emphasize the importance of discovering the limits of our current perspective. The possibility of what Gadamer (following Hegel) calls "negative experiences"—the disappointment of former expectations that forces us to broaden our view—plays a critical role in illuminating how other cultures and nature herself can break through to us in new ways.

A second primary virtue of Gadamer's approach is tied to the first: his emphasis on historical and cultural context. Readily suggesting extension to the environmental context that plays such a central role in both the restorationist's aesthetic and ecological decisions, Gadamer's theory reveals why our concern with conserving and restoring particular environments becomes more pressing as they become rarer. If restoration begins with contemporary ideas about the picturesque, the restorationist—chastened by the realization that our received ideas may be inadequate—will insist on preserving landforms that do not meet contemporary aesthetic expectations just because they may inspire groundbreaking negative experiences in the future.

Gadamer's metaphor of "play" suggests two further critical insights. As Gadamer notes, that metaphor, like the phenomenon of beauty, is ontologically broad: to recall once again, we ought "not . . . say that animals *too* play, nor . . . [that] water and light play *as well*. Rather, . . . *man* too plays" (Gadamer, 1991, 104). And this suggests another respect in which the restorationist's concern with aesthetic considerations must move beyond the traditionally picturesque. As Holmes Rolston III (1995) and Allen Carlson (2002) have recently argued, we may enjoy aesthetic satisfactions not only in scenery, but in what we have learned—about

individual plants, animals, and landscape features; about the groups or stands they form; about their interaction and underlying relationships as revealed by biology, ecology, and related fields; about how these interactions develop over time (e.g. with forest fires periodically clearing away some plants while unlocking the otherwise dormant potential of others); and about the way that effective strategies for restoration renew or strengthen the relationship of local human communities to the land. The restorationist's interests in aesthetic considerations should not distract her, but rather drive her deeper into the beautiful interplay of the environment she's nursing back to life.

Moreover Gadamer's metaphor of "play" does not trivialize of art as something we merely play at; on the contrary art's power puts *us* in play, daring us to risk taking part in potentially transformative experiences that we do not ultimately control. His critique of Romantic aesthetics reminds us that the full experience (*Erfahrung*) of a work of art becomes potentially and productively transformative by pushing us beyond our attunement to aesthetically differentiated, purely artistic effects to reveal new truths, new possibilities, new ways of seeing, conceiving, and interacting with the world. In the context of restoration, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics suggests a fourth insight. The practitioner aims to recreate an environment not only "plays" as a symphony of elements, but that can put us in play by challenging us to step out of our manufactured and apparently predictable built and temperature-modulated environments. This is metaphysically and morally as well as aesthetically challenging, for it reminds us of the fundamental ecological truth that despite all our efforts to control our world, "nature bats last."

If restoring a blighted area appears sufficiently daunting without invoking aesthetic considerations, Gadamer's approach offers a fifth virtue: the affirmation that while we must give some answer to this last challenge, it is at least a recurring one and thus one we could potentially improve at meeting. As regards inevitability, the question is not whether the restorationist could or should invoke aesthetic considerations—she must do so. Since the restored area will have aesthetic characteristics whether they are willed or not, the issue turns not on whether she's an artist but on whether her work is effective. A restored area is always a work of art. Success demands the cultivation of many skills, but it is not merely, as with crafts, the predictable result of mastering sometimes difficult techniques. Like a fine art, successful restoration produces something both unique and potentially powerfully meaningful.

Indeed even those who preserve restored areas are creative artists in the same sense that classically trained musicians are. Their task—to maintain the site—may appear simple at first, but that demands, as in the performing arts, not merely the cultivation of basic skills, but their creative application to sustain a living tradition in the face of a dynamically changing world. Invasive species, collapses in the food chain, the interaction of constituent species populations, the natural (or chaotic?) patterns of ecosystem change, pollution effects, and now, most ominously, global warming: all these threats demand imaginative work not only from the original "composer" but also from the later "performing" artists. In this interchange, no period of happy homeostasis will last long.

Yet this potentially disheartening insight is true of the fine arts too: no interpretation of a work will speak to all generations. And while this confronts both performing artists and restorationists with a never-ending quest for the best contemporary interpretation of their worlds, this quest, like the cultivation of virtues, has a meaningful if not full realizable goal. After three and a half centuries of attempting to become "lords and masters of nature" (Descartes, 1985), a project whose most notable success is our capacity to destroy life on a massive scale,

restorationists invite us to a different—and arguably much older—relationship to the natural world. Restoration creates beauty, but it does not only do that. Moving well beyond the real but limited satisfaction of crafting beautiful performances for disinterested aesthetic appreciation, or the even more limited pleasures of roadside eye-candy for passing motorists, restorationists aim to revivify both the land and our relationship to the land. That is, after all, the only way that their work can survive over time. Their goal, to switch metaphors, is not merely that of contemporary performers, who so impress us with their proficiency that we only ever sing with them in the shower. Great restorationists, on the contrary, invite us to a drum circle whose participants join in creating a whole greater than the sum of its parts, a whole that reminds us of the rhythms of our bodies, of our lives, of our communities, and ultimately of the land which gave us birth and to which we will all return.

### LITERATURE CITED

- Bernstein, Richard J. 1983. What is the difference that makes a difference? Gadamer, Habermas, and Rorty. PSA: the Proceedings of the 1982 Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association. Ed. P.D. Asquith and T. Nickles. PSA, East Lansing.
- Carlson, Allen. 2002. Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art, and Architecture. Routledge, London.
- Cameron, W. S. K. 2004. Gadamerian insights on the wild. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society for Hermeneutics and Postmodern Philosophy in Winnipeg, MB, May 2004.
- , 1996. On communicative actors talking past one another: the Gadamer-Habermas debate. *Philosophy Today* **40**: 160-168.
- Carson, Rachel. 1962. *Silent Spring*. Houghton Mifflin Press, Boston.
- Cronon, William. 1995. The trouble with wilderness; or, getting back to the wrong nature. Pages 69-90 of *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. W.W. Norton, New York.
- Descartes, René. 1985. *Discourse on the Method*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. 1. Trans John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

- Elliot, Robert. 1982. Faking nature. *Inquiry* **25**: 81-93.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1991. *Truth and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. Trans. W. Glen-Doepel, ed. J. Cumming and G. Barden, rev. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall. Crossroad Press, New York.
- Guha, Ramachandra. 1989. Radical American environmentalism and wilderness preservation: a third world critique. *Environmental Ethics* **11**: 71-83.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1977. A review of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. Pages 335-63 of *Understanding and Social Inquiry*. Trans. and ed. by F. R. Dallmayr and T. A. McCarthy. Univ. of Notre Dame, Notre Dame.
- Hettinger, Ned and Bill Throop. 1999. Refocusing ecocentrism: de-emphasizing stability and defending wildness. *Environmental Ethics* **22**: 3-21.
- Higgs, Eric. 2003. *Nature by Design: People, Natural Process, and Ecological Restoration*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Kelly, Michael. 1988. The Gadamer/Habermas debate revisited: the question of ethics. *Philosophy and Social Criticism* **14**: 369-89.
- Nelson, Michael P. 1996. Rethinking wilderness: the need for a new idea of wilderness. *Philosophy and the Contemporary World* **3**: 6-9.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1973. Ethics and culture. *Philosophy Today* **17**: 157-169.
- Rolston III, Holms. 1995. Does aesthetic appreciation of landscapes need to be Science-Based? *The British Journal of Aesthetics* **35**: 374-85.
- Vogel, Steven. 2002. Environmental philosophy after the end of nature. *Environmental Ethics* **24**: 23-39.
- Vogel, Steven. 2003. The nature of artifacts. *Environmental Ethics* **25**: 149-68.

Warnke, Georgia. 1987. *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason*. Stanford Univ. Press, Stanford.