

PART ONE:  
HANS-GEORG GADAMER AND THE DECLINE OF TRADITION



## INTRODUCTION TO PART ONE

In his Wahrheit und Methode, Hans-Georg Gadamer traces the development of two concepts or expressions of a spirit which reached its fruition in the nineteenth century: aesthetic consciousness and romantic hermeneutics. Both concepts have their roots in the Reformation and the Enlightenment, both have shaped the contemporary task of the humanities and theology, and both are, in Gadamer's eyes, questionable. Aesthetic consciousness he associates with the "subjectivization" of aesthetics accomplished by Immanuel Kant's Kritik der Urteilskraft (1790). Romantic hermeneutics, of which Friedrich Schleiermacher offered the most significant expression, led to the *aporiae*, or impasses, of historicism. Historicism is subject to critical scrutiny because it narrows the claim to truth of the humanities and theology, the claim of the human sciences or *Geisteswissenschaften*. That claim is the focus of Wahrheit und Methode, and Gadamer sketches the history of aesthetic consciousness and romantic hermeneutics as moments in a decline of the understanding of truth.

His sketch is also a history of the decline of tradition. Tradition declines, we can say, when it comes to be interpreted as a restraint upon the mind from which one can free oneself. The individual acknowledges that a belief, formerly held, is erroneous; recognizes that the error has been transmitted by preceding generations; attributes the persistence of the error to the unquestioned authority of those who have transmitted it; and repudiates tradition as that which propagated the error. Freedom from tradition thus becomes the prerequisite for the pursuit of truth. The Age of Reason grasped the rejection of the authority of tradition as a central thought. Tradition declined in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries by sinking below the horizon of legitimate philosophical inquiry, eclipsed, as it were, by reason. Our present task is to chronicle the stages of this decline, showing the parallels between Gadamer's question of truth and the question of tradition. Ultimately, the task is to raise a question: to what extent has our understanding of the truth been narrowed as a result of the decline of tradition?

To speak of a decline of tradition, however, can be misleading. It can suggest, for instance, that the Enlightenment and subsequent thinkers lost interest in the historical past. But such is hardly the case. On the contrary, this period coincides with the development of the historical-critical method in Biblical studies, the recovery of Hellenism, and the rise of the idea of a universal history. The decline of tradition cannot refer therefore to the modern age's application to the past of the scientific method. Nor can it mean, as we shall see, that tradition ceased to be effective within modern intellectual life. No matter how the Enlightenment sought to objectify tradition, it could never remove itself totally from the tradition of which it was a part. But many of its leading thinkers believed that they could. It is in this sense that tradition declined. It declined because its role was no longer seen as constitutive for human understanding.

In order to see why the rise of aesthetic consciousness and romantic hermeneutics are, for Gadamer, moments in the decline of tradition, it is necessary to show the subordination of tradition to reason. In the opinion of most Enlightenment thinkers, reason is the final arbiter of all that which tradition offers. One frees oneself from tradition precisely by submitting that which has been transmitted to the judgment of reason. Implicit in this is the assumption that one can readily distinguish between what tradition offers, the authorities who transmit it, and the recipients of the tradition. The final "what" of tradition can be isolated from the "who" passing it on and those "to whom" it is transmitted.

Of these three, the first two – the authorities of the past which conserve tradition and the doctrines they teach – belonged, in the Enlightenment view, to tradition proper. The third, the inheritors of tradition, are a different case. They enjoy, in the opinion of many Enlightenment thinkers, freedom in regard to tradition. Unlike the authoritative transmitters of tradition, who were presumably committed to what they passed on and thus not at liberty to scrutinize it critically, the modern-day recipients are not consciously committed to a tradition. These recipients form a category to which the Enlightenment thinkers thought themselves to belong. They had emancipated themselves from the seductive power of past doctrine and from the compelling authority which transmits it.

It is precisely this emancipation which, as a result of Gadamer's investigation of aesthetic consciousness and romantic hermeneutics, can be doubted. What is emancipation from tradition? To what extent can a human being be freed from it? In order to answer these questions, an analysis of the nature of tradition is required. Gadamer's research suggests important directions for that analysis. Before following the train of his research in detail, let us sketch in preliminary fashion what can be called the unconscious dimension of tradition. It is this dimension which enables a criticism of the Enlightenment's optimistic view of reason as superior to tradition.

Tradition, we can say, is not simply the authority which conserves and propagates certain doctrines. Nor is it simply the doctrines themselves. Rather, it is a complex of authority and doctrine, neither of which can be restricted to what is deliberately conserved. Doubtless, all who are involved in the transmission of culture possess authority by virtue of the importance of what they transmit, but the authority of tradition does not consist in their deliberate efforts. And to be sure, the doctrines which are transmitted throughout history are properly called traditions, but tradition is greater than any explicit body of teachings. There is some thing undeliberate and inexplicit about it.

Reason, by contrast, has to do only with what is deliberate and explicit. It grasps in intuition, as Descartes said, that which must be clear and distinct.<sup>1</sup> Can the intuition of reason, in this way, grasp tradition? No, not clearly and distinctly, not if tradition is constantly in flux, unfolding its own consequences. Tradition cannot be fully subordinated to reason because that which is unclear and indistinct in tradition remains outside reason's pale. Such a subordination does tradition an injustice. It treats the concept of tradition as if it were a datum of consciousness. But tradition is more than what can be grasped by the conscious use of reason. What reason criticizes in tradition is only that aspect of it which comes to consciousness, and can be arraigned, so to speak, before the bar of reason. This is, however, only a small part of tradition, whose compelling power reason cannot harness.

But the thinkers of the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment believed that reason, if rigorously applied, could harness tradition. In the chapters which follow, we shall trace their efforts and the obstacles they met. Chapter I examines the general problem of tradition and intellectual freedom. In particular, it compares the viewpoint of Gadamer, who believes that tradition is constitutive of knowledge, with that of Kant, who believed

---

<sup>1</sup> Rene Descartes, Discours de la Methode, in Oeuvres de Descartes (1897-1904), published by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 12 vols., reprint edition (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1965), 6.18 (French) and 6.550 (Latin). Translation: Discourse on Method, in Philosophical Essays, The Library of Liberal Arts, no. 99, trans., with an introduction and notes, by Laurence J. Lafleur (Indianapolis, New York, Kansas City: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc. , 1964), p. 15.

that it is not. Chapter II presents the Enlightenment's critique of tradition. Tracing the thought of Bacon, Descartes, and Kant, it argues that these thinkers, all of whom criticized the concept of tradition, had to account for it. They did so in terms of memory, the influence of tradition on morals, and its role in the cultivation of judgment. Finally, in Chapter III, the rise of historicism becomes our theme. There we shall see the consequences of the Enlightenment critique as manifest in the aesthetic cult of genius, the efforts of Biblical interpreters to eschew the claims of dogma, and the historicist longing for a study of the past uninfluenced by past values. A twofold aim guides this section: first, to accurately restate the critique which brought tradition into a decline; and second, to suggest the limits of the critique, limits which even the critics themselves adumbrated.