

CHAPTER III THE RISE OF HISTORICISM

Our brief survey of Bacon, Descartes, and Kant has suggested that the three contributed not only to the decline of tradition, but also (and indirectly) to a refined understanding of what tradition is. Bacon's doctrine of idols, we saw, revealed the reflexive nature of all understanding, even understanding of the past. One never understands things simply as they are, but reflects them in thought, mingling human nature with the nature of things. Descartes sought a unity of mathematics and metaphysics, and so presented a new way to address the metaphysical questions inherited from tradition by means of the scientific method. Kant erected a moral philosophy in opposition to the English philosophers' empiricism of feeling, emphasizing instead the traditional concepts of moral law, duty, and the exercise of judgment. In these thinkers we begin to see the unavoidability of tradition.

To be sure, they were unanimous in their suspicion of received dogmas. These dogmas were chief among the idols which Bacon wanted to destroy. In his opinion they hindered, rather than revealed, the truth. Received dogmas belonged to the universe which Descartes wanted to submit to a systematic doubt. Only if they could be reduced to clear and distinct ideas could they survive his skeptical scrutiny. And received dogmas were the target of the Kantian critical philosophy, which sought to replace unexamined presuppositions with indisputable conditions for the possibility for knowledge. The pursuit of truth, for these thinkers, required the replacement of dogma with reason. But despite their criticism of what had actually been transmitted from the past, did they not acknowledge that the past – in the reflexes of thought, in the unavoidability of metaphysical questions, and in the necessity of fostering the principles of good taste – remains effective? They could not help raising anew the question of humanity's relation to its inheritance from the past, even in their efforts to break with discredited tradition.

That the Age of Reason contributed something to the understanding of tradition must be conceded. In the analyses of the preceding chapter, a balance was sought between the age's distrust of the past, on the one hand, and its unintentional contribution to the concept of tradition, on the other. In sum, however, this age represents what we have described as the decline of tradition. Its flight from tradition, regarded as a contamination of truth by dogma, reached a zenith in the Kantian critical philosophy. In it we see Bacon's hopeless task of purifying human opinion by means of thought and indisputable first principles.¹ In Kant's discrimination between the understanding's a priori principles of knowledge and the lesser claims of practical reason and judgment, we see the conditions for the possibility of clear intuition, which is the basis of Descartes' questionable ideal of method. Some of the problems with the Kantian re-thinking of

¹ Kant took as an epigram to his second (1787) edition of the Kritik der reinen Vernunft a passage from the preface to Bacon's Novum Organum. In that passage, Bacon states that he is silent about himself, and asks that his auditors think of his great instauration not as mere opinions but as a task for thought: "De nobis ipsis silemus: De re autem, quae agitur, petimus: ut homines eam non Opinionem, sed Opus esse cogitent."

reason were sketched in our discussions above. Kant neglects that concept of tradition which, effective on the level of historical language, pre-forms human thought. His doctrine of the understanding's a priori principles of knowledge does little justice to the traditions which, on the pre-rational level of common sense, or in terms of Jankowitz' concept of prejudice, shape what we consider reason to be.² The effect of history upon reason receives in the Kantian critiques scant attention. Yet Kant, in his projection of a pure and autonomous reason, laid the theoretical foundation for the nineteenth century's concept of history. This concept poses a problem to the understanding of our relation to tradition. The nineteenth century in German humanistic studies saw the flowering of the historical-critical method, a method which has proved of inestimable value to our understanding of the past. But it also marked the development of aesthetic consciousness and romantic hermeneutics. This development, as Gadamer shows, led to the rise of historicism and its subtle impasses.

III.1. Aesthetic Consciousness

Gadamer defines aesthetic consciousness in relation to the truth of art. This question of artistic truth seems remote from the problem of tradition. Yet the two are bound together, and their relation can be seen in the reception of Kant's third critique. Kant himself did not advocate aesthetic consciousness – Gadamer excuses him from that – but the Kantian concepts of genius and of nature lay at its foundations.³ Kant defines genius as “the innate mental aptitude (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art.”⁴ It is a kind of guiding spirit, given to human beings at birth, from which original or natural ideas spring. In this sense, genius is what governs artistic creation, rather than evaluation or criticism. Kant never explicitly stated that a geniality of creation corresponds to a geniality of understanding. But the soul or *Geist* which animates the mental powers in the presence of the beautiful⁵ is, as Gadamer argues, applicable both to the genius which creates and to the taste which the aesthete possesses.⁶ The implication is that, without genius, neither art nor taste is possible.

III.1.A. The Subordination of Taste to Genius

² As Jankowitz (p. 74) argues, Kant failed to acknowledge that pure reason's decision on behalf of rationality presupposes a standpoint, prior to rationality, within whose perspective such a decision could be made. “Kant übersieht, dass man sich *nicht rational für Rationalität* in seinem Sinn entscheiden kann, den das würde einen Ort *ausserhalb* von Rationalität voraussetzen.”

³ Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 52-56 (trans.: pp. 51-55).

⁴ “Genie ist die angeborne Gemüthsanlage (*ingenium*) durch welche die Natur der Kunst die Regel giebt.” Kant, Kritik der Urteilskraft, in Kant's Werke, 5:307 (first part, section 46).

⁵ *Ibid.*, section 49.

⁶ Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 52-53 (trans.: p. 52).

The concept of taste lost its importance, as a result, because taste became superfluous when confronted with the art of genius. Kant, to be sure, held the concept of taste firmly in mind, as Gadamer shows, and natural beauty remained for him the norm of the beautiful.⁷ But the concept of genius, for Kant's contemporaries and for the generations which immediately succeeded him, came to predominate over the idea of taste. Nature ceased to offer a measure for the beautiful. This development can be seen, for example, in the dramaturgical writings of Lessing. For Lessing, the superiority of Shakespeare's genius lay precisely in his break with the "natural" idea of French classicism.⁸ And in the work of Fichte, one sees genius elevated to an all-encompassing philosophical concept.⁹ Taste, by contrast, was relegated to a mere condition of the beautiful. Its heritage in the communal ideals of decorum and propriety was forgotten. What was formerly the measure of the beautiful, the tradition of good taste which seemed as natural as the beauty of a landscape, subordinated itself to genius, which better expressed the universality of artistic value.

The Kantian idea of nature contributed, along with that of genius, to the development of aesthetic consciousness.¹⁰ Nature was exemplary for Kant because, although beauty delights us apart from concepts – that is, apart from intellectual or moral criteria for what beauty ought to be – nevertheless it 'represents this delight a priori as proper to humanity in general.'¹¹ Nature reveals itself to us not as a matter of chance. Its beauty seems a product of design, as law-directed, and as purposeful; but it is without an explicit end or purpose. The end of beauty lies not without but within the beholder. Beauty turns our eyes to the moral side of our being, as Kant wrote, in order to find there the proper ends

⁷ Ibid., p. 47 (trans.: p. 46).

⁸ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Hamburgische Dramaturgie, vol. 5 of Lessings Werke, vollständige Ausgabe, ed. Julius Petersen and Waldemar von Olshausen with Karl Borinski et al., 25 vols. in 20 (Berlin: Deutsches Verlagshaus Bong & Co., 1925). In the "Zwölftes Stück" (June 9, 1767), Lessing compares Voltaire's Semiramis unfavorably with Shakespeare's Hamlet; other comparisons of Shakespeare to lesser French productions appear in the pieces of June 19, 1767 and January 12, 1768.

⁹ In his Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Principien der Wissenschaftslehre (1796), Fichte defined the philosophic genius as that which grasps the universal concept in the particular object or action, rather than losing the concept in the object: "Das philosophische Genie, d.h. das Talent, in und während des Handelns selbst nicht nur das, was in ihm entsteht, sondern auch das Handeln, als solches, zu finden, diese ganz entge[n]gesetzten Richtungen in einer Auffassung zu vereinigen, und so seinen eignen Geist auf der That zu ergreifen, entdeckte zuerst bei'm Objekte den Begriff; und der Umfang des Bewusstseyns erhielt ein neues Gebiet." Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Gesamtausgabe, ed. by Reinhard Lauth and Hans Jacob with Richard Schottky, 16 vols. (Stuttgart and Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag (Günther Holzboog), 1962-1979), I,3: 316.

¹⁰ Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 46-49 (trans.: 46-49).

¹¹ Kant, Kritik der Urteilskraft, first part, section 42.

of nature. Natural beauty reveals humanity as the goal of creation. This marked a re-definition of nature, Gadamer argues, and a break with the world of antiquity: “The dissolution of ancient cosmological thought, which assigned man his place in the total structure of being and to each existent its goal of perfection, gives the world, which ceases to be beautiful as a structure of absolute ends, the new beauty of finality for us.”¹² After Kant, nature was no longer the representation of purposeful being within whose structure humanity finds its measure. Instead, it was stripped of content, and its nakedness became the sign of its virtue. Because natural beauty does not offer concepts to human thought, it does not participate in the social vices of human beings. It is doubtless more pure, but it is also less expressive. Nature shows humanity not the purposeful being within which humanity has its place, but offers human beings freedom for the play of their mental faculties.¹³ In the beauty of nature and in art, one does not look for an agreement with reality or a given order. To the contrary, beauty expands our idea of what reality or the given order is.

Thus far Gadamer applauds the Kantian doctrine of nature. It accounts both for the universal claims of beauty (in that the beauty of nature reveals a design which all human beings can see) and for differences in taste and perception (in that nature turns the individual’s attention to the human self as the goal of creation). This means, however, that nature effectively ceases to be an ideal of beauty. To be sure, it remains beauty’s normative idea, the indispensable pre requisite for the beautiful. But the ideal of beauty is not to be sought in nature, wrote Kant, but only in the human figure.¹⁴ By consequence, the beauty of art declares its independence from the world, from the traditional norms wherein once lay its perfection. Gadamer puts it this way:

Precisely with that classicist distinction between normative idea and the ideal of beauty Kant destroys the grounds on which the aesthetics of perfection finds, in the complete presence to the senses of every existing thing, its [the thing’s] unique, incomparable beauty. Only now can ‘art’ become an autonomous phenomenon. Its task is no longer the representation of the ideals of nature, but the self-encounter of man in nature and in the human, historical world.¹⁵

¹² “Die Auflösung des antiken Kosmosgedankens, der dem Menschen im Allgefüge des Seienden seinen Platz gab und jedem Seienden seinen Zweck der Vollkommenheit, gibt der Welt, die aufhört, als eine Ordnung absoluter Zwecke schön zu sein, die neue Schönheit, für uns zweckmässig zu sein.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 47-48 (trans.: p. 47). The ambiguity of the word “Zweck,” which means both “purpose” and “goal,” is apparent in the translation, which renders the word and its cognates as “goal,” “ends,” and “finality.”

¹³ Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, first part, section 49.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, section 17.

¹⁵ “Gerade mit jener klassizistischen Unterscheidung von Normalidee und Ideal der Schönheit vernichtet Kant die Grundlage, von der aus die Vollkommenheitsästhetik in der vollendeten Sinnenfalligkeit jegliches Seienden seine unvergleichbar einzigartige Schönheit findet. Jetzt erst vermag ‘die Kunst’ zu einer autonomen Erscheinung zu

When there are no ideals in nature, but only norms, there can be no measure of perfection. Art no longer represents nature's ideals, in the Kantian critique of judgment, and has slipped its moorings from the natural world. Once that world had supplied art with its content and had provided its measure. Now art is a law unto itself" and the world merely the locale where the human self-encounter takes place. This is what Gadamer means by the subjectivization of aesthetics.¹⁶ The Kantian concept of the beautiful, whether of art or of nature, teaches no objective knowledge; rather, it arouses the purposeful but subjective feeling of freedom in the play of our capacities for knowledge. Kant freed beauty from judgmental criteria, it can be said, but also divorced it from knowledge of the world.

III.1.B. The Separation of Art from Its World

To be sure, Kant's efforts should be seen in their proper context. He defined judgment as the central faculty which would actualize in the realm of nature and theoretical understanding the ends proposed in the realm of freedom and practical reason. We should therefore situate this faculty within Kant's transcendental intention. Although judgment has to do with the form of knowledge, rather than its content, it nevertheless bridges the apparent chasm between the moral and the sensory realms. Judgment, which appears to be a purely subjective faculty, ought to be understood as uniting subject and object in a scheme which transcends both. The majority of Kant's followers did not understand it in this way. The subjectivity of judgment shifted in their thought, as Gadamer makes clear, from a presupposition of method to one of content.¹⁷ Friedrich Schiller's letters Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen (1794-1795) are a good example of this. In them he argued that one must adopt an aesthetic attitude toward the world. This means that one must sever oneself from the world in order to realize true freedom.¹⁸ Only then, wrote Schiller, can one regard the world objectively.¹⁹ To take an

werden. Ihre Aufgabe ist nicht mehr Darstellung der Naturideale – sondern die Selbstbegegnung des Menschen in Natur und menschlich-geschichtlicher Welt." Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 46 (trans.: pp. 45-46). The first sentence of the above citation has been re-translated, because the published translation erroneously attributes beauty to the aesthetics of perfection, instead of to the presence of the existing thing.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 52 (trans.: p. 51).

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 77 (trans.: p. 73).

¹⁸ Gadamer writes that the doctrine of aesthetic education transformed the Kantian dualism of "is" and "ought" into a more profound dualism: "Es ist die Prosa der entfremdeten Wirklichkeit, gegen die die Poesie der ästhetischen Versöhnung ihr eigenes Selbstbewusstsein suchen muss." Ibid., p. 79 (trans.: p. 74).

¹⁹ "Solange der Mensch, in seinem ersten physischen Zustande, die Sinnenwelt bloss leidend in sich aufnimmt, bloss empfindet, ist er auch noch völlig eins mit derselben, und eben weil er selbst bloss Welt ist, so ist für ihn noch keine Welt. Erst wenn er in seinem ästhetischen Stande sie ausser sich stellt oder betrachtet, sondert sich seine Persönlichkeit

aesthetical attitude toward the world is to emancipate oneself from its petty politics and bourgeois morality. In their place one cultivates artistic sensitivity. The greater one's aesthetic refinement, the greater one's freedom of spirit. But is this a true freedom~ Does it genuinely reconcile the real with the ideal? To these questions Gadamer replies in the negative. He argues that Schiller's ideal of an aesthetic education cut off the one who is aesthetically educated from the communal ideal of taste.²⁰ That ideal binds the work of art to the community which treasures it. The dissolution of that ideal, by means of an aesthetic consciousness which has been emancipated from the wider community, separated the work of art from its world.

It is here that aesthetic consciousness becomes significant. Gadamer defines this consciousness in a nuanced fashion. It discriminates, on the one hand, between that which has quality and that which does not, but fails to discriminate, on the other hand, in terms of any knowledge which the art work might offer the concept offer. Gadamer writes:

As aesthetic consciousness it has been derived from defining and definite taste, but has gone beyond it and itself represents a total lack of definiteness. The connection of the work of art with its world is no longer of any importance to it but, on the contrary, the aesthetic consciousness is the experiencing centre from which everything considered to be art is measured.²¹

No external criteria of taste are valid for aesthetic consciousness. It evaluates the work of art by the work's own internal measure. This measure has apparently nothing to do with the world to which both the work and the aesthetically educated person belong. It can be called taste, but only in terms of a private sensitivity of a refined individual and not as the ideal which binds the work and the community together. Aesthetic consciousness exemplifies the subjectivization of aesthetics. It allows the work to seemingly exist in and for itself as a pure work of art, abstracted from its original function within culture,

von ihr ab, und es erscheint ihm eine Welt, weil er aufgehört hat, mit derselben eins aufzumachen." Friedrich Schiller, Über die ästhetischen Erziehung des Menschen, in Schillers Sämtliche Werke, Säkular-Ausgabe, ed. Eduard von der Hellen et al., 16 vols (Stuttgart and Berlin: J.G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung Nachfolger, 1904), 25th letter, 12:98-99.

²⁰ Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 80 (trans.: p. 76).

²¹ "Es ist als ästhetisches Bewusstsein aus allem bestimmenden und bestimmten Geschmack herausreflektiert und stellt selbst einen Nullgrad von Bestimmtheit dar. Ihm gilt nicht mehr die Zugehörigkeit des Kunstwerks zu seiner Welt, sondern umgekehrt ist das ästhetische Bewusstsein das erlebende Zentrum, von dem her alles als Kunst Geltende sich bemisst." Ibid., pp. 80-81 (trans.: p. 76).

The English uses two verbs, "to be derived from" and "to go beyond" to translate the one German verb, "herausreflektieren." Two verbs are necessary to suggest that aesthetic consciousness is related to taste (as to a mirror image), and yet disconnected from taste (as a mere image is disconnected from its original).

religion, or society. But this means that aesthetic consciousness is not only cut off from the contemporary world, but also from the world of antiquity. To separate the work of art from the communal ideal of taste is to weaken its bonds with tradition. The aesthetically educated, who measure the work of art solely by their subjective experience of it, abstract from it the tradition from which it sprung. They interpret the work as an autonomous self-expression of the individual artist, rather than a claim to truth, from an earlier world and from its traditions, upon their own. This procedure is directly related to what Gadamer calls romantic hermeneutics. It was characteristic of a significant portion of humanistic studies in Germany's nineteenth century. Romantic hermeneutics marked a particular moment in the rise of historicism and the decline of tradition.

III.2. Romantic Hermeneutics

In order to define romantic hermeneutics, it is necessary to trace its relation to aesthetic consciousness. This consciousness, as we saw, has its roots in the Kantian critique of judgment. The faculty of judgment mediates between the realms of freedom and of nature, actualizing the moral ends of what should be in the sensible world of what is. Judgment subordinates particulars to universals; it does not supply them. Thus one can say that it is without content. Kant drew from this the consequence that the judgment of taste is without significance for knowledge. Knowledge dwells in concepts, according to Kant, but the beautiful pleases without concepts. Instead, it offers freedom for the play of the imagination, animating the powers of the mind, while leaving to the faculties of reason and understanding – not to judgment – the task of knowledge. For the successors of Kant, primarily for Schiller, the bond between the work of art and the world of knowledge was broken. The doctrine of an aesthetic education, as Gadamer has shown, brought about the reconciliation of the real world of what is and the moral world of what ought to be by a flight from the world. Aesthetic consciousness became a kind of refuge, remote from politics, from morality, and from history.

But aesthetic consciousness was not without its critics, even in the nineteenth century. Gadamer brings forward the example of Søren Kierkegaard. The aesthetic stage of existence, Kierkegaard wrote, cannot be sustained because it neglects the continuity, from aesthetic moment to aesthetic moment, of human life.²² Only the one who lives ethically holds these moments together in memory.²³ Aesthetic consciousness, by contrast, fails to acknowledge the historical dimension of experience, that is, the way the continuity of human life links the moments of aesthetic pleasure in a continuum. It sees art as a time less wonder which offers freedom for the play of the mental faculties. But aesthetic experience is not simply a free-form animation of the mind; rather, the work of art defines the aesthetic experience. Each new experience of the work is not unrelated to the previous one, but builds upon it. “The pantheon of art is not a timeless presence which offers itself to pure aesthetic consciousness,” Gadamer argues, “but the

²² Ibid., p. 91 (trans.: pp. 85-86).

²³ Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, Enten-Eller, Et Livs-Fragment, in Samlede Vaerker, ed. A. B. Drachmann, J. L. Heiberg, & H. O. Lange, 14 vols. (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1962), 3:213. Either/Or, trans. Walter Lowrie, David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 2:193.

achievement of a spirit which is gathered and gathers itself in history.”²⁴ This spirit requires special modes of study, the *Geisteswissenschaften*, for which the German term is particularly apt. The English translation of this term, the humanities, is not inappropriate, for the kind of knowledge offered here is linked to knowledge of our human selves. Without a doubt, it is not sense-knowledge, nor is it conceptual knowledge. Gadamer calls it the “mediation of truth,” and links it to the development in history of the human spirit.²⁵ The models of human knowledge inherited from the Enlightenment, he says, are insufficient to grasp it.

If the Kantians were wrong in denying the significance for knowledge of the aesthetic judgment, and if aesthetic consciousness removes the experience of art from the world and neglects the continuity of that experience, then a question arises. It can be stated this way. How can one approach the work of art, or indeed any work of the past whose origins are alien to us, if the experimental approach of natural science or the conceptual approach of Kantian philosophy will not suffice? The nineteenth century responded to this question with the development of hermeneutics, the science of interpretation. This science attempts to do justice both to the historical origins from which the objects of study sprung, and to the contemporary world to which the objects now belong and in which they have their meaning. In the nineteenth century’s development of hermeneutics there was no unanimity as to how this understanding might be defined. Gadamer presents two extreme positions characteristic of that age.²⁶ They are Schleiermacher’s aim of historical reconstruction, and Hegel’s task of integration.

Hegel defined the interpretation of the past as integrating it in thought with contemporary life. Rather than seeking to project the mind back into the past through a scientific and imaginative act of recreating the work’s original context, he saw that every such effort was bound to fail. It could not restore the reality, but could only, in an act akin to nostalgia, recall what no longer is. In contrast to this, Hegel proposed that the interpreter mediate the past to the present by means of a thought which holds two poles in a dialectical tension. The one pole is the alien past, divided from the interpreter by the gulf of history. The other pole is the recognition that one can encounter oneself in what is not oneself, coming to see both in a newer and higher mode.²⁷ This definition of the

²⁴ “Das Pantheon der Kunst ist nicht eine zeitlose Gegenwärtigkeit, die sich dem reinen ästhetischen Bewusstsein darstellt, sondern die Tat eines geschichtlich sich sammelnden und versammelnden Geistes.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 92, my translation (pub. trans.: p. 86).

²⁵ Ibid. p. 93. The phrase in the English translation (p. 87), “transmission of truth,” cannot fully capture the German, “Vermittlung von Wahrheit,” which connotes mediation as well as transmission.

²⁶ Ibid. pp. 157-161 (trans.: pp. 146-150).

²⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Jubiläumsausgabe, ed. Hermann Glockner, 20 vols. (Stuttgart: Fr. Frommann Verlag, 1951), 2:573. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller with analysis of the text and foreword by J.N. Findlay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 456.

hermeneutic task is the one to which Gadamer is most sympathetic. It alone, he feels, does justice to the claim of truth which the past makes upon the present. The treatment of Gadamer's assessment of Hegel, in consequence, belongs more to the rehabilitation than to the decline of tradition.

Schleiermacher represents a different case. He conceived of the hermeneutical task, in Gadamer's estimation, as one of reconstructing the world to which the ancient artifact belongs. That artifact has been, in a sense, torn from its homeland. Schleiermacher aimed to restore it by suggesting that the ancient work is only to be understood in terms of its origins. He sought a point of entry into the work which would enable him to encounter the spirit of the work's author or maker. In that spirit he could then divine, almost by an act of creating it anew, the work's original production. About this characterization of the hermeneutical task Gadamer poses two critical questions.²⁸ The first asks whether the result of reconstruction can be equated with the meaning of a work. The second asks whether the recreation of an original production correctly defines what understanding is. These questions are critical because, in Gadamer's opinion, Schleiermacher epitomizes the problem of romantic hermeneutics.

III.2. Schleiermacher's Reconstructive Aim

It should not be said, however, that the characterization by Gadamer of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics as romantic is unqualifiedly negative. If the great contribution of romanticism lay in its emphasis upon the power of imagination to animate what a rationalist understanding had suppressed, then the romanticism of Schleiermacher was an invaluable contribution. He championed the idea of interpretation as a kind of artistry, for which no mechanical application of rules would suffice.²⁹ What is needed instead is a dynamic sensitivity, a *lebendige Gefühl*. Gadamer praises Schleiermacher for seeing that genius creates new forms and genres, each of which teaches the one who would understand it a new way of understanding.³⁰ The interpreter becomes, in Schleiermacher's view, an artist whose genius can be called divinatory. It divines that other genius of the one whose work is being interpreted. The basis for this congeniality is the participation of both individuals, artist and interpreter, in the universality of life.

Hegel refers to this dialectic as "die *Er-Innerung* des in ihnen noch *veräusserten* Geistes." He points to the wider meaning of "Erinnerung," or memory, by hyphenating the word. This suggests that it is not mere recollection, but a renewed, inner appropriation.

²⁸ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 159 (trans.: pp. 148-149).

²⁹ Under the heading, "Das Auslegen ist Kunst," Schleiermacher characterizes interpretation as a dialectic between finite language and the infinite perspective of the individual, resulting in a construction which "kann nicht durch Regeln gegeben werden welche die Sicherheit ihrer Anwendung in sich trügen." Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Zur Theologie*, in *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Friedrich Lücke, 30 vols. in 29 (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1835-1884), first part, vol. 7, p. 15.

³⁰ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 177 (trans.: p. 166).

One encounters oneself in the work of the other, because both are parts of a greater whole.³¹ This is perhaps the most romantic aspect of Schleiermacher's romantic hermeneutics. Through an imaginative participation in the life of the other, the interpreter grasps the individuality of the ancient author and the ancient work. In this way, Schleiermacher teaches us something profound about tradition. That greater whole which is tradition offers something productive to contemporary life, because it unites us with the voices of tradition. They can never be, according to Schleiermacher's teaching, wholly alien to us, because within us we carry a part of them.

III.2.B. Individual Expressivity, Not Content

The question is, what is this part we carry within us? Gadamer's critique of Schleiermacher fastens on this point. He believes that Schleiermacher sought not the subject matter about which both author and interpreter are concerned, but rather to grasp the individuality of the author.³² This is, in itself, not a bad thing. Only by being sensitive to the other's genius can one learn to read aright, that is, to leave behind one's dulling prejudices and open oneself to new insights. But Schleiermacher followed the Kantian doctrine of aesthetic judgment, as Gadamer argues, and understood the task of interpreting works of the past along the lines of artistic interpretation. They represent what can be called artistic thought, and this thought is to be interpreted as one interprets beauty: not as something which offers concepts to our understanding, but rather as that which gives aesthetic pleasure.³³ Gadamer puts it this way:

Schleiermacher sees in 'artistic thoughts' life-moments which contain so much pleasure that they burst into utterance, but they remain even then – however much

³¹ Schleiermacher hints at this recognition of oneself in the other in his definition of the divinatory: "Die divinatorische ist die, welche indem man sich selbst gleichsam in den andern verwandelt, das individuelle unmittelbar aufzufassen sucht." Schleiermacher, Sämtliche Werke, I, vii: 146.

³² Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 174 (trans.: p. 164).

³³ In "Beilage F" to his Dialektik, Schleiermacher defines dialectic as "Darlegung der Grundsätze [sic] für die kunstmässige Gesprächsführung im Gebiet des reinen Denkens." This last phrase is important, because the expression of pure thought defines itself in terms of the difference between "geschäftliche Denken" and "künstlerische Denken" [sic]. Unlike commercial or interested thought, artistic or disinterested thought does not exist for the sake of the other, and this it has in common with pure thought: both the pure and the artistic exhibit thought in its widest sense. Schleiermacher then adds: "Zu diesem künstlerischen aber gehört alles Denken, welches nur unterschieden wird an dem grösseren oder geringeren Wohlgefallen." This passage is quoted by Gadamer as evidence for the influence upon Schleiermacher of Kant's third critique. The citation in Wahrheit und Methode is, however, incorrect. The passage from Schleiermacher is not taken from Odebrecht's edition of the Dialektik (which omits the "Beilagen"), but from L. Jonas' edition in the Sämtliche Werke, III, iv, 2, p. 569.

pleasure they evoke in the ‘originals of artistic works’ – individual thought, a free construction unbounded by the being (object).³⁴

On the positive side, Gadamer lauds Schleiermacher’s efforts to see the works of the past in relation to the author’s life. These works express their author’s individuality, and the one who approaches them under Schleiermacher’s tutelage gains a vivid sense of the moment of their origin. But the artistic thought which Schleiermacher’s interpreter appropriates is individual, free, unbounded by what is. This is the negative side of the evaluation. Artistic thoughts give pleasure, uniting us with the ancient author, but it is aesthetic pleasure in the Kantian sense: a pleasure unbounded by concepts. The participation in the life of the author which Schleiermacher offers is thus limited. In Gadamer’s eyes, it is a participation removed from the ancient author’s conceptual thought, and so removed from the truth of the matter with which the author addresses the interpreter.³⁵ Romantic hermeneutics, for which Schleiermacher’s name is a kind of metonym, becomes for this reason a pejorative term.

Gadamer contrasts Schleiermacher with his predecessor, Johann Martin Chladenius (1710-1759) and with Friedrich Ast (1778-1841), his contemporary. Chladenius anticipated a number of later hermeneutical problems in his 1742 Einleitung zur richtigen Auslegung vernünftiger Reden und Schriften, including the distinction

³⁴ “Schleiermacher sieht im ‘künstlerischen Denken’ ausgezeichnete Lebensmomente, in denen ein so grosses Wohlgefallen ist, dass sie in die Ausserung hervorbrechen, aber sie bleiben auch dann – so sehr sie in den “Urbildern künstlerischer Werke” Wohlgefallen hervorrufen – individuelles Denken, freie, nicht durch das Sein gebundene Kombination.” Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 176 (trans.: p. 165). The English leaves the word “ausgezeichnete” untranslated, and the word “object” in parentheses obscures the idea that artistic thoughts are unbounded by that which is, namely, the work of art.

³⁵ To be sure, Schleiermacher’s hermeneutic encompasses two procedures, grammatical and psychological, of which only the latter is aimed at divining the individuality of the ancient author. The grammatical side of interpretation, by contrast, concerns itself with what is individual in language itself. It is characteristic of Schleiermacher that his grammatical understanding attempts to do justice to the self identity of language, to its invariability from speaker to speaker, while psychological understanding corresponds to the differences in usage of language arising from the speaker’s genius. But it is not fair to reduce the dialectic of identity and difference to an opposition between language as an expressive tool and the individual thoughts which language expresses. Schleiermacher failed to distinguish, according to Gadamer, between the linguistic difference due to a highly individualistic usage of language and that due to an original understanding whose expression does not call for an alteration in the language itself. Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Das Problem der Sprache in Schleiermachers Hermeneutik,” in Kleine Schriften, vol. III: Idee und Sprache, p. 140. “The Problem of Language in Schleiermacher’s Hermeneutic,” trans. David E. Linge, in Robert W. Funk, ed., Journal for Theology and the Church, vol. 7: Schleiermacher as Contemporary (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 83.

between understanding and interpretation, and the difference between authorial intention and the meaning of a work. He is of particular importance to Gadamer because he made clear that understanding is understanding of the subject matter. Whether one recalls from a text what one already knows, or learns something new, it is the subject matter that one encounters.³⁶ Gadamer compares this with Schleiermacher's contrary emphasis on understanding a text as an expression of the period from which it sprung or of the psychology of the author at the work's moment of origin.³⁷ He finds these procedures wanting. They confuse the imaginative recreation of a work or an account of its origins with its meaning.

Doubtless, to seek the understanding of a work in terms of its genesis has a particular methodological advantage: it is universally applicable. No matter what one sets out to interpret, whether an art work of classical antiquity or a Christian Gospel, one can understand it after a fashion in terms of its origins, regardless of whether one accepts classical antiquity as a norm for human excellence, or of whether one is or is not a Christian. In this sense Schleiermacher has projected, according to Gadamer, a universal hermeneutic.³⁸ It unites classical philology with theology by applying to them a common interpretive procedure. Both are the subjects of comparable hermeneutical experiences. But for Schleiermacher's contemporary, Friedrich Ast, the unity of the two disciplines stood on a different footing. He saw them united in the thought of Christian humanism, in which the content of what is to be understood from both sources forms a single deposit of tradition.³⁹ Christian humanists, according to this view, presuppose the compatibility and the normativeness of the deposit of classical and Christian antiquity. For them the unity of hermeneutics lies in the importance of what that antiquity can teach, as Gadamer makes clear:

Schleiermacher, on the other hand, no longer seeks the unity of hermeneutics in the unity of the content of tradition, to which understanding has to be applied, but apart from any particular content, in the unity of a procedure that is not divided

³⁶ “Der unmittelbare Verstand einer Stelle ist eine Vorstellung und Erkänniss der Sache, die in der Stelle abgehandelt wird. Diese Vorstellung der Sache kann entweder durch die Stelle zum ersten mal in uns hervorgebracht werden, und alsdenn lernen wir etwas aus der Stelle, oder wir haben dieselbe Erkänniss und Vorstellung, ,die den unmittelbaren Verstand ausmacht, schon vorher gehabt, ehe wir noch die Stelle gelesen haben.” Johann Martin Chladenius, Einleitung zur richtigen Auslegung vernünfftiger Reden und Schriften, with an introduction by Lutz Geldsetzer (Dusseldorf: Stern-Verlag Janssen & Co., 1969), section 682.

³⁷ Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 171 (trans.: p. 161).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 172-185 (trans.: pp. 162-173).

³⁹ Gadamer (*Ibid.*, p. 167; trans.: p. 157), who presumably refers to Ast's Grundlinien der Grammatik, Hermeneutik und Kritik (Landshut, 1808), states that “die hervorzubringende Einheit des griechischen und christlichen Lebens” was the goal of Ast.

even by the way in which the ideas are transmitted – whether in writing or orally, in a foreign language or in one’s own.⁴⁰

Gadamer points here to the particular sense in which Schleiermacher’s hermeneutic is universally applicable. Regardless of the varied media and content of the works through which tradition addresses the interpreter, those works nevertheless all offer an experience of the past. That past is distant, strange, easily misunderstood. By treating the ancient work as the basis for an experience of what is alien, Schleiermacher found a sort of common-hermeneutical denominator. No matter what the medium or what the message, all works of the past offer the interpreter an experience. But this experience is not the common denominator of a Christian humanist such as Ast. He viewed the unity of hermeneutics as, in Gadamer’s phrase, the unity of the content of tradition. That tradition is, as a Christian humanist would argue, anything but alien. Rather, it offers a wealth of artifacts and works whose content has so become a part of modern culture that it almost defines who the Christian humanist is.

III.2.C. The Untrustworthiness of Dogmatic Tradition

For Schleiermacher, by contrast, the tradition is in a certain sense untrustworthy. This is not to say that Schleiermacher viewed the Scriptures as anything but normative for theology, for example, or that he failed to acknowledge the exemplary nature of classical antiquity. It means rather that for Schleiermacher’s concept of interpretation, the possibility of misinterpreting is constitutive. Misunderstanding should be avoided – that is how Schleiermacher summarizes the hermeneutic practice by which understanding is consciously willed and sought.⁴¹ Such a concept has a self-evident ring to it. No one doubts that the interpreter should avoid misunderstanding, because a genuine understanding is what every interpreter desires and seeks. Why then does Gadamer refer to Schleiermacher’s definition of hermeneutics as some thing fundamentally new?⁴² The

⁴⁰ “Schleiermacher dagegen sucht die Einheit der Hermeneutik *nicht mehr* in der inhaltlichen Einheit der Überlieferung, auf die das Verstehen angewendet werden soll, sondern abgelöst von aller inhaltlichen Besonderung in der Einheit eines Verfahrens, das nicht einmal durch die Art, wie die Gedanken überliefert sind, ob schriftlich oder mündlich, in fremder oder in der eigenen gleichzeitigen Sprache, differenziert wird.” Gadamer, *Ibid.* The English obscures the relation of tradition (Überlieferung) to the past participle of the verb “to transmit” (überliefert), and fails to hint at the relation between procedure (Verfahren) and experience (Erfahrung). Experience determines the Schleiermacherian interpreter’s procedure – an experience of the work which gives aesthetic pleasure, rather than the content of the work which makes a claim to truth.

⁴¹ The fifteenth of Schleiermacher’s 23 theses introducing his *Hermeneutik* in the volume *Zur Theologie* states the interpretive practice in negative terms: “Die laxere Praxis in der Kunst geht davon aus, dass sich das Verstehen von selbst ergibt und drückt das Ziel negative aus: Misverstand soll vermieden werden.” The sixteenth thesis states it positively: “Die strengere Praxis geht davon aus dass sich das Misverstehen von selbst ergibt und das Verstehen auf jedem Punkt gewollt und gesucht werden.” Schleiermacher, *Sämtliche Werke*, I, vii, pp. 2930.

⁴² Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Method*, p. 173 (trans.: p. 163).

answer to this question has to do with the idea of willing and seeking understanding. Before Schleiermacher, misunderstanding was viewed as an exception, for the remedy of which hermeneutical rules were called into play. One presumed, in reading the Scriptures and the classics, that one understood the text. This understanding took place within a dogmatic tradition which provided the context for what was read. With Schleiermacher, however, the rules for understanding a text were to be severed from dogmatic ties. The interpreter would apply these rules precisely to emancipate the meaning of a text from those traditions which had obscured it. One could no longer presume to have read the text generally aright, but must desire and seek an understanding which tradition – even one’s own tradition – might conceal.

The problem inherent in this distrust of tradition becomes most obvious when the interpretive object is a part of the tradition which one distrusts. The classic example is interpretation of the Bible. If one distrusts the dogmatic tradition within which the Bible has been handed down, and within which it has its authority, then the interpretive task changes. And indeed, with the rise of historical criticism, traditional exegesis became suspect. One could no longer turn to the text as to an authority for whom one’s respect was unqualified, but the interpreter was forced to question the obvious meaning as some thing which had been manipulated for dogmatic purposes. The interpreter thus stood over against the ancient text, casting a wary eye, so to speak, upon its claims to truth. This raised, however, a difficult question: how is the interpreter to judge the text?

Schleiermacher turned for his answer, as we saw, to the Kantian notion of aesthetic judgment. Such a judgment is not concerned primarily with the content of what is judged. The ancient work is viewed rather as a free production of the ancient author’s genius, an expression of the psychological moment of the work’s genesis. The interpreter, whose efforts are confined not to the content of the work but to its expressivity, can understand the work, thanks to the philological expertise bequeathed by modern research, better than its author. This gave a new twist, writes Gadamer, to the interpreter’s task.⁴³ The traditional formulation of the task, which Schleiermacher himself endorsed, is this: “to understand the text at first as well as and then better than its author.”⁴⁴ This formula has traditionally meant that one seeks a better conceptual grasp of the subject matter of an authoritative work. To understand it better than its author does not diminish the value of the work, as if the interpreter were to supplant the original author; rather, it extends and clarifies implications which, even to its creator, were obscure. One can overcome apparent contradictions in a work, for example, not by abandoning it and starting afresh, but by thinking it through more deeply. The work remains authoritative and, in the usual definition of the interpreter’s task, the better

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 180-184 (trans.: pp. 169-172).

⁴⁴ “Die Aufgabe ist auch so auszudrücken ‘die Rede zuerst eben so gut und dann besser zu verstehen als ihr Urheber[.]’” Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, Hermeneutik, nach den Handschriften, newly edited and introduced by Heinz Kimmerle (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1959), p. 87. Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts, trans. James Duke and Jack Forstman (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1977), p. 112.

understanding available to the interpreter results from a more profound grasp of the work's dogmatic tradition. But to judge a work aesthetically, in the Kantian sense, changes all that.

For Schleiermacher, the better understanding referred to in the formula no longer presupposed an appropriation of the work's dogmatic tradition. Instead, the formula suggested to him the superior position of the romantic hermeneut, whose aesthetic consciousness rises above the subject matter about which the ancient work is concerned. To judge the work aesthetically is to put aside all question of its dogmatic content. Rather than confining itself within the seemingly narrow world view of an antique doctrine, Schleiermacher's romantic hermeneutics regards the text as an expression of an alien culture, which the modern can imaginatively divine and hence reconstruct. Because the modern interpreter is independent of the dogmatic tradition, the interpretation is better. Gadamer presents the following thesis:

It is thus probable that Schleiermacher, who made hermeneutics a method independent from all content, was the first who could pose the question of a shift by which the fundamental claim of the superiority of the interpreter to the subject matter could be made.⁴⁵

The Schleiermacherian interpreter claims superiority to the subject matter, according to Gadamer, on two counts. First, the interpretation does not limit itself to the explicit concerns of the author. The author's doctrine no longer defines the legitimate area of inquiry. Second, the interpreter encounters in the work an experience of an alien culture. That experience is the new object of hermeneutics, and scientific expertise allows the interpreter to understand the ancient culture better than those who dwelt in it. By putting that culture in question, as it were, and by refusing to accept its dogmatic tradition as normative for the present, the interpreter could achieve, in Schleiermacher's opinion, a better understanding. The superiority of the understanding consists in this: it is consciously willed and sought as an exception, rather than presumed as the interpretive rule.

But to characterize understanding as that which is consciously willed and sought is to encounter fundamental difficulties. These difficulties recall the attempts to characterize prejudice as a pre judgment which persists contrary to evidence, and efforts to define tradition as an explicit doctrine transmitted by an authoritative mechanism. Both of these neglect what can be called the historical dimension. This is the participative dimension of history, according to which the individual forms a part of that

⁴⁵ "Es ist daher von vornherein wahrscheinlich, dass erst für Schleiermacher, der die Hermeneutik zu einer von allen Inhalten abgelösten Methode verselbständigt hat, eine Wendung in Frage kommen konnte, die die Überlegenheit des Interpreten über seinen Gegenstand so grundsätzlich in Anspruch nahm." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 182 (trans.: p. 171). The translation above is my own. The published translation suggests that the formula, "to understand the text at first as well as and then better than its author," really does claim the superiority of the interpreter to the text's content – a claim which Gadamer is at pains here to deny.

which exceeds the individual grasp. Such a dimension draws a limit to every human endeavor. Whether one seeks to grasp the nature of understanding or to free one self from prejudice, one cannot transcend the historical situation. This situation shapes what understanding and prejudice are conceived to be. It relativizes every intellectual effort, mocking humanity with the specter of a further effort, beyond its own, which will render the present state of understanding obsolete. It is for this reason that Gadamer throws a harsh light upon Schleiermacher's hermeneutical rule, "misunderstanding should be avoided." The rule suggests in its context that misunderstanding (and, by extension, understanding itself) can escape the historical dimension. An improper understanding can be avoided, and a proper one achieved – once and for all. But if understanding, like all human efforts, remains history's vassal, subordinate to an historical spirit beyond its grasp, then the definition of hermeneutics as an attempt to avoid misunderstanding is inadequate. It fails to acknowledge the historical dimension of understanding.

It would be wrong, however, to characterize the historical dimension of understanding solely as that which relativizes all intellectual effort. That would suggest that the historical dimension leads to a hermeneutical nihilism – that is, to the idea that there are no true interpretations. Such a conclusion can be drawn only if one begins with a notion of understanding removed from history. If true understanding is static and unchanging, then to assert that history molds understanding would indeed be nihilistic. Gadamer starts, by contrast, with a dynamic and fluid concept of understanding, one which takes the historical dimension as fundamental. He sees, not hermeneutical nihilism, but the possibility of genuine historical understanding.⁴⁶ This understanding is not, as Schleiermacher might characterize it, freed from the misunderstandings of a dogmatic tradition. Rather, it is historical understanding, understanding within a tradition which cannot be fully plumbed and which provides a context for correct interpretation. Doubtless, such an understanding is relative, if such a word can be used, to the tradition within which understanding takes place. But it is not relativistic if tradition is viewed in its true breadth, as the form which the human spirit assumes and in which it has its meaning. With this we are very close to Hegel's task of integration, adumbrated above, and to the rehabilitation of tradition. Yet the historical school of humanistic studies in nineteenth-century Germany did not, on the whole, pursue this line. It followed Schleiermacher more than Hegel, as Gadamer argues, and became entangled in the perplexities of historicism.

III.3. The Historical School

Historicism is the final stage in our sketch of the decline of tradition. Its early representatives, of whom Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-1884), and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) are most prominent, were influenced by

⁴⁶ It is in this context that Gadamer's criticism of Schleiermacher must be seen. Gadamer brings forward the figure of Schleiermacher to exemplify romantic hermeneutics. This limits his treatment and does not lead him, in the words of Heinz Kimmerle, "to regard Schleiermacher's early conception of understanding as purely linguistic understanding and his conception of history as the history of language to be of positive value for his [Gadamer's] own problematic. Kimmerle, "Afterword of 1968," in Schleiermacher, Hermeneutics, p. 231.

the aesthetic consciousness and romantic hermeneutics expounded above. Just as the advocates of aesthetic consciousness sought to distance themselves from the world, reconciling the real to the ideal world by means of an aesthetic flight from all that is not beautiful, so too the historicists sought a critical distance. Their aim was to distance themselves from the objects of their inquiry in such a way that the objects' true historical significance could be seen. But they encountered a problem, as we shall see, similar to that of the aesthetically educated. This is the problem of achieving critical distance without becoming severed from the world in which both history and historical scholarship have their truth.

Historicism is also related to romantic hermeneutics. Like the romantics, the historicists aimed at an imaginative reconstruction of historical phenomena. They sought through scholarship to reanimate these phenomena as an expression of an ancient time, now alien to us. But the problem of romantic hermeneutics plagued the historicists as it did Schleiermacher. This was the problem of judgment. The historicists strove for an objective and unbiased interpretation of history. Their goal was not to take sides in historical disputes, but rather to judge their true significance. But this posed an apparently insoluble problem: how is one to make a true judgment of the significance of a moment in history without attending to the truth of the matter which that moment disputed? The reply of the historical school, which insisted upon a concept of truth borrowed from the natural sciences, is unsatisfactory, in Gadamer's opinion. The aporiae of historicism, which for our purposes constitute an aspect of tradition's decline, reveal themselves in the paradoxical search for an objective history. This can be called paradoxical, because history is no object, but rather something of which the historian is a part.

It is ironic that the Oxford English Dictionary (1928), "A New English Dictionary on a Historical Basis," omits the word "historicism." Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that in 1898, when the OED entries beginning with the letter H were published, the use of the word historicism, or of *Historismus*, was still largely confined to methodological debates among German-speaking political economists.⁴⁷ Historicism then referred to attempts to make economic theory unduly dependent upon economic history. But after World War I, when the debate intensified as to whether a purely historical approach to human culture would provide an adequate basis for judgments of cultural value, use of the word historicism rapidly gained currency in academic circles. Webster defines it as "a theory of the importance of history as a standard of value or as a determinant of events." History becomes a standard of value when it itself provides the context for interpreting events within history.

Historicism poses a logical problem. How can that which is the individuals and events which have made history-provide a context for history, for what is identical with itself? How can history be both object and context? How can the end of historical knowledge also be the means to it? This logical problem is accompanied by a metaphysical one. The metaphysical problem can be stated in the following way: can one

⁴⁷ The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1972 ed., S.v. "Historicism," by Maurice Mandelbaum.

gain a true knowledge from a history which is in flux? If one can, how does a fluctuating history provide the context for a knowledge which is true? What kind of standard of value can history offer when history is subject to the interpretation of historians? These are the questions which the historical school posed to itself.

They are also important to the present inquiry into the nature of tradition. The examination of tradition faces a similar logical problem. How can one's tradition provide a context for judgment of the past, when tradition is both the object of inquiry and the standard of value? A metaphysical problem arises as well. How can a tradition provide a true measure when what is to be measured is the tradition itself? The replies of the historical school involved its representatives in contradictions, according to Gadamer. He suggests that no reply could be satisfactory within the historicist perspective. His analysis is decisive for the present inquiry because with historicism we encounter both the low point of tradition's decline, and the contradictions out of which its rehabilitation would emerge. Gadamer's treatment of the continuity, expressivity, and experience of history, as they were described by the historical school, will guide the following exposition.

III.3.A. Ranke and the Continuity of History

The continuity of history poses a problem in that history, which is to offer a standard of value, is not a completed whole. Although the historical school compared history to a text in terms of which the individual events and persons of the past could be interpreted, nevertheless the comparison has two definite shortcomings. First, a text is complete while history is underway. The text offers a completed whole in which its parts can be situated. History, however, is not yet a whole. The historicist, who interprets the events and individuals of the past as parts of that whole which is history, must make an imaginative leap, conceiving the whole of history which has not yet come to pass. This brings us to the second shortcoming of the analogy between history and a text. A completed text has an end to which its scenes and incidents tend. But the end of history is not so apparent. To project an end to history would force one into theology, and this the historical school rejected. So it faced a problem: How could it speak of the whole which history is in strictly historical terms?

Leopold von Ranke attempted to solve this problem, according to Gadamer, by focusing on the outcome, end point, or conclusion of history.⁴⁸ The past becomes evident in light of subsequent events, and previous events condition those which follow.⁴⁹ These latter events shape the outcome, it can be seen, toward which earlier events tend. But such a conception might suggest a principle of absolute necessity which operates in

⁴⁸ Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 191-199 (trans.: 179-87).

⁴⁹ "Das Gewordene constituirt den Zusammenhang mit dem Werdenden," stated Ranke, suggesting not only the continuity of history but also the context in which what has taken place is to be interpreted. The unidentified citation from Ranke is in Alfred Dove's "Vorwort" to Ranke's Weltgeschichte, 1st to 3rd edition, ed. Alfred Dove et al., 9 vols. (Leipzig: Verlag von Dunckerl & Humblot, 1888), IX, part ii, "Ueber die Epochen der neueren Geschichte," p. xiv.

history, and Ranke emphatically repudiated this. He insisted rather on human freedom, speaking of historical necessity only as that which offers human beings the situations within which they could exercise free choice, not as that which predestined them. History offers to its students a view of its own inner continuity. What has become is united with what is becoming, not by an extra historical goal which one posits in advance, but by that continuity in which one event can be seen as following upon others. Gadamer summarizes this understanding in the following way: “The ontological structure of history itself, then, is teleological, although without a telos.”⁵⁰ The presence of a telos, that is, of a goal toward which history proceeds with a priori necessity; would hinder human freedom. Ranke rejected this. But if history were not in some sense teleological, then the idea of historical continuity would have to be abandoned. Without this continuity, as Ranke commented, history would be nothing.

Ranke sought a balance between freedom and necessity in his concept of history, emphasizing the human power to create something new, while acknowledging the given basis upon which every new thing is built. His concept of the historical outcome attempted to do justice to the teleological nature of past events without introducing an a priori telos. But this raises a question. Were historicists correct in excluding all a priori concepts on methodological grounds? Gadamer replies in the negative. He criticizes Ranke’s idea of historical continuity. According to that idea, continuity is simply a condition for history, that is, history’s mere form or structure. But continuity has a definite content, says Gadamer, and is “like an a priori of research.”⁵¹ It is not the mere form of history, but the condition for history’s very existence. Without the continuity of history, there would be no historical consciousness, because history would no longer be as we understand it. The very question of the meaning of a continuous history could not be asked.

Gadamer illustrates this by referring to the Swiss philosopher of history, Jakob Burckhardt (1818-1897).⁵² Burckhardt saw that the interruption of the continuity of history by some catastrophe would not be one incident within history, but the end of history itself.⁵³ A conclusion can be drawn which is important for the present investigation. The continuity of history is not merely an experiential given. Rather, that continuity is the necessary condition for our posing questions about the meaning of

⁵⁰ “Die ontologische Struktur der Geschichte selbst also ist, wenn auch ohne Telos, teleologisch.” Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 191 (trans.: p. 179).

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 196 (trans.: pp. 183-184).

⁵² Ibid. p. 197 (trans.: p. 185).

⁵³ Jakob Burckhardt, Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen, nach dem oerischen Text, ed. Werner Kaegi (Bern: Verlag Hallwag, 1941). See the appended lecture of 1871, “Über Glück und Unglück in der Weltgeschichte,” esp. pp. 390-391. Force and Freedom: Reflections on History, ed. James Hastings Nichols (New York: Random House, 1943), pp. 367-368.

history. It is an “a priori of historical thinking,” as Gadamer writes, which has shaped our consciousness and provided it with material for reflection.⁵⁴

An analogy can be drawn between the continuity of history and the continuity of tradition. One could interpret that continuity after the fashion of the historical school, calling it central to the propagation of tradition, while defining it merely as the integration and development of earlier customs into their later forms. The continuity of tradition would then be the basic condition for the survival of those customs, mores, and doctrines which provide historians with their raw material. But Gadamer’s critique suggests the limitation of this view. It neglects the ontological dimension to the continuity of tradition. Within this dimension, continuity is not the mere transmission of factual traditions; instead, continuity is what gives those traditions their very existence, their very life. Without continuity, the past would be for us other than the way it now is.

Continuity also ensures that traditions are propagated, not as historical artifacts, but as living claims to truth upon those who preserve them. Rather than the poor form of history’s transmission, continuity is united with the content of tradition, because part of tradition’s claim rests upon the fidelity of those who have transmitted it, who have made it continuous. Not only its existence, but also its truth, depends in part upon this continuity. To be sure, this analogy between the continuity of history and of tradition has its limits. The continuity of history, for example, is an a priori of historical thought insofar as one seeks to understand history as a unified whole. The continuity of tradition, however, is an a priori in another sense: one presupposes it in order to affirm a tradition as one’s own, for continuity has forged the bond between tradition’s origin and the present. But despite the differences between the continuities of history and tradition, the analogy between them is a sound one. And to the extent that the historical school failed to acknowledge the ontological dimension of the continuity of history, the concept of tradition remained incompletely developed. Continuity unites tradition’s form and content. Without that continuity which brings the past to us and makes it what it is, history and tradition could not express themselves at all.

III.3.B. Historical Force and Its Expression in Droysen

The question of how the past expresses itself is by no means self-evident. It can doubtless seem to be, if historical understanding is confined to a recitation of dates, places, and names. But a consideration of history’s effect on the present gives the lie to any talk of self-evidence. The question can be posed in this way: do the people and events in which history expresses itself reveal what can be called historical truth? Or are the expressions of history simply manifestations of currents that go much deeper, of depths where the truth of historical forces in fact resides? This is to put the question from the standpoint of history itself. Another way to raise it is to begin with the historian. Does the historian grasp the truth of history by means of an immediate understanding of the concrete expressions in which it manifests itself? Or is the historian’s understanding an intermediate one, caught between the objective expressions of history and the forces which underlie them, forces which have an effect even upon the

⁵⁴ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 197 (trans.: p. 185).

historian's own life? These questions vexed the historical school. Its thinkers performed the valuable service of showing just how problematic the expressiveness of history is.

J.G. Droysen attempted to clarify the problem, Gadamer has argued, with his concept of moral powers, or *sittliche Mächte*.⁵⁵ These are the forces set in motion by the communal effort of human beings. The efforts of the individual only become a moment of historical importance, claimed Droysen, when they are raised to the status of a common moral possession.⁵⁶ In this way, Droysen explicated the relation between history, the individual, and the moral sphere. The individual's freedom is limited by the moral powers, in the sea of whose movement, it can be said, the individual is adrift. But these powers are not wholly external. Rather, they are human moral powers, put into effect by the free choice of that human family of which the individual is a member. Thus Droysen struck a balance between necessity and freedom in the individual's self-expression in history. "He relates necessity to the unconditional moral imperative, and freedom to the unconditional will," writes Gadamer; "both are expressions of the moral power by which the individual belongs to the moral sphere."⁵⁷ If the individual is constrained by necessity, it is a moral necessity, and so related to free will. If the individual experiences freedom, it is a freedom of desire shaped by the imperatives of the moral sphere. The expressiveness of history, and its necessary impact upon the individual, is always bound to the moral powers through which, as Droysen wrote, freedom manifests itself.

Gadamer endorses Droysen's characterization of the historical individual's relation to history. He praises his insight that individual freedom is mediated in history through the community's moral powers. But Gadamer criticizes Droysen for failing to extend that insight to the freedom of historians. They too stand in a mediated relationship to that which they investigate, moved by the currents of those moral powers of which they are a part. It cannot be denied that, for Droysen, the historian belongs to the past which is being investigated. He distinguished historical research from the procedures of the natural sciences, pointing to the difference between the scientist's relative independence from the experiment (on one side) and the historian's endless return to that tradition (on the other side), the tradition which both unites one and

⁵⁵ Ibid. pp. 199-205 (trans.: pp. 187-192).

⁵⁶ "In den sittlichen Mächten liegt die erziehende Macht der Geschichte. Und jeder hat an dem Leben der Geschichte Teil in dem Masse, als er an ihnen Teil hat." Johann Gustav Droysen, *Grundriss der Historik*, ed. Erich Rothacker (Halle a.d. Saale: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1925), section 55.

⁵⁷ "Er ordnet der Notwendigkeit das unbedingte Sollen, der Freiheit das unbedingte Wollen zu: beides Äusserungen der sittlichen Kraft, mit der der einzelne der sittlichen Sphäre zugehört." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 201 (trans.: p. 189). Gadamer refers here directly to section 76 of Droysen's *Grundriss der Historik*, but the use of "Äusserung" and "Kraft" recalls the section on "Kraft und Verstand, Erscheinung und übersinnliche Welt" in Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*.

distances one from the past.⁵⁸ Yet his grasp of the historical individual's mediated relation to history was more firm than his grasp of the historian's relation. The Cartesian doctrine of the ego's capacity for an unmediated understanding was, according to Gadamer, central for Droysen. He viewed historical understanding along the lines of textual understanding, that is, in terms of romantic hermeneutics.⁵⁹ The historian can appropriate the past by making it present, reconstructing it on the basis of an immediate intuition of the artifacts and documents of tradition.

This raises the question of whether any expression of history or of tradition can be understood immediately, in other words, without mediation. One could say, following Droysen, that such an immediate understanding is indeed possible. In his conception, the moral force of the individual, no matter how knotted-up with the seemingly private impulses of obligation and desire, comes to expression when it participates in common human goals. Insofar as the individual's moral force becomes integrated in the communal efforts of humanity, it becomes a genuine moral power. These moral powers are for Droysen the expressions of history, and are as important to the historian as the laws of nature are for the scientist.⁶⁰ They are what the historian grasps in immediate understanding.

What Droysen and the historical school failed to see, according to Gadamer, is the dialectical relation between historical force ("Kraft") and its expression ("Äusserung"). They advocated a purely historical measure for the interpretation of history, rejecting the speculative idealism of Hegel. But it was Hegel who had made the relation between force and expression clear. Hegel, it must be conceded, did teach that force exists only in its expression.⁶¹ This means, for the sake of historical research, that the forces which exist in history can only be known insofar as they find expression in people and events. More importantly, Hegel also taught that the expression differs from that which it expresses. Force, he stated, is more than its expression.⁶² One can interpret this as an

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 203-4 (trans.: p. 191).

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 200, 204-205 (trans.: pp. 187,192).

⁶⁰ "Die geschichtliche Dinge haben ihre Wahrheit in den sittlichen Mächten (wie die natürlichen in den mechanischen, physikalischen, chemischen usw. 'Gesetzen')." Droysen, Grundriss der Historik, section 15.

⁶¹ "Der Begriff der Kraft erhält sich vielmehr als das Wesen in seiner Wirklichkeitselbst; die Kraft als wirkliche ist schlechthin nur in der Aeusserung, welche zugleich nichts anderes, als ein Sichselbstaufheben ist." Hegel, Phänomenologie des Geistes, in Sämtliche Werke, 2:116 (trans.: p. 86). The reference in the last phrase to expression as a canceling of itself anticipates the dialectical reversal of Hegel's point. Not only does effective force exist only in its expression, but the expression exists only as the effect of historical force.

⁶² "Indem sie [die Kraft] aber nothwendig diess seyn muss, als was [das Medium von Materien] sie noch nicht gesetzt ist, so tritt diess Andere hinzu und sollicitirt sie zur Reflexion in sich selbst, oder hebt ihre Aeusserung auf." Ibid., 2:113 (trans.: p. 83). The

indication that the meaning of history, that is, the truth of historical force, is not exhausted by an examination of the people and events in which it is expressed. The historian's understanding is not an immediate grasp of the panorama which history presents. Rather, it turns from the manifestations of history to the forces which underlie them, and back again to the manifestations. Thus Gadamer concludes that force cannot be known or measured in terms of its expression, but only in terms of its inner being.⁶³ This inner being contains a surplus: it is greater than its effect. Droysen and the historical school, however, were not prepared to accept this analysis. They saw the historian's task not as the continual probing of the relation between force and its expression, but rather as the immediate understanding of historical expression.

This doctrine contributed to the decline of tradition, in that tradition can never be the object of an immediate understanding. It is always mediated in its expressions, for the dialectic of force and expression takes place in tradition as well as in history. The manifestations of tradition, its expression in documents, customs, and the moral life of a community, always link themselves to the forces which give rise to them. These forces cannot be understood immediately, but require an expression other than the forces themselves. The unwillingness of the historical school to accept this Hegelian inheritance exemplifies a bias toward the immediacy of experience and against idealism's speculative appropriation of tradition. To be sure, the historical school defined its object of inquiry as tradition. Its task was the never-ending examination of tradition, never-ending because the study of tradition cannot yield the decisive results of scientific experimentation. But for the historical school, as Gadamer shows, understanding of the expressions of tradition was always possible, due to an ultimate immediacy.⁶⁴ If the past was distant, its expressions were as near as the ancient text or the unearthed vase. These afford what tradition itself can never bring forward: the certainty of a direct experience.

III.3.C. Dilthey and the Experience of History

What is the experience of a history in which we ourselves participate? Does that experience afford certain knowledge in the immediacy of the historian's psychological perceptions? Or does it offer no unmediated certainties, but rather afford a kind of participation in history from which one gains objective (if not fully thematized) knowledge? The historical school raised these questions in an effort to create a theory of historical knowledge. The representatives of the school saw clearly that the historian is a part of that history which is being studied. This fact makes history available for study, and gives historical study its relevance. But it also prevents the historian from being wholly objective. The historical school sought to discover the transition point between what can be called the subjective experience and the objective knowledge of history. Does history offer expressions which can be grasped psychologically, and then

point of the expression of history is to return one's attention to the force which underlies it. This both reduces the importance of the expression and reveals it in its fullest sense, as the manifestation of history's forceful surplus.

⁶³ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 193 (trans.: p. 181).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 204 (trans.: p. 192).

interpreted hermeneutically, as one interprets a text? Or is historical knowledge a metaphysical thing, to be understood only in terms of the speculative knowledge of philosophy?

Wilhelm Dilthey struggled especially with these latter questions. In him two currents of German thought ceaselessly eddied: speculative idealism and the philosophy of experience or of life. Speculative idealism, especially Hegel's effort to draw the world of history into the orbit of reason's self-understanding, was the philosophic tradition into which Dilthey was educated. Through idealism he saw, as Gadamer notes, that the claims of pure reason could be extended to historical knowledge.⁶⁵ He even contemplated a critique of historical reason which would complement the work of Kant.⁶⁶ But in addition to this philosophical interest Dilthey took seriously the emphasis of the *Lebensphilosophie* of his age upon immediate experience. For him, writes Gadamer, "the ultimate presupposition for knowledge of the historical world, in which the identity between consciousness and object – that speculative postulate of idealism – is still demonstrable reality, is experience."⁶⁷ Only in experience can one prove, as it were, the central tenet of the philosophy of identity: that the knower and the known are commensurable. Historians can gain a true knowledge of history precisely because they are a part of it, and in them, history has reached its culmination.

Dilthey expressed this insight in terms of historical consciousness. For the historical consciousness, the events of history are the objects in which the human spirit knows itself. They express the vitality of existence from which both they and the historian stem.⁶⁸ One knows the past because one shares with it a relation of identity: the historical consciousness understands itself and history as part of that unity which is life. The consequences of Dilthey's notion are important for the understanding of tradition. Tradition is not an alien object at the disposal of a knowing subject, in Dilthey's view, but a manifestation of life. "To that extent," writes Gadamer, "the whole of tradition

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 206-207 (trans.: pp. 193-194).

⁶⁶ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Otto Friedrich Bollnow et al., 12 vols. (Leipzig and Berlin: Verlag von B.G. Teubner, 1914-1958), vol. 7: Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften, ed. Bernhard Groethuysen, pp. 117, 278.

⁶⁷ "Denn die letzte Voraussetzung zur Erkenntnis der geschichtlichen Welt, in der die Identität von Bewusstsein und Gegenstand, dieses spekulative Postulat des Idealismus, noch immer aufweisbare Wirklichkeit ist, ist nach Dilthey das Erlebnis." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 209 (trans.: p. 196).

⁶⁸ Dilthey wrote that the spirit translates itself "in die geistige Lebendigkeit, aus der sie hervorgegangen sind." *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5: Die geistige Welt, ed. Georg Misch, p. 265.

becomes for the historical consciousness the self encounter of the human spirit.”⁶⁹ In tradition the historical consciousness meets that which is truly its own. The breath which animates tradition animates the historian as well.

But this self-encounter of the spirit is not, for Dilthey, a conceptual knowledge gained in philosophical speculation. Such conceptual knowledge – indeed, all of philosophy – loses to historical consciousness its claim to absolute truth. It has only the validity of being an expression of life, along with other events in history, one expression among many which shape the historical consciousness. Hence philosophy is no longer the basis for true knowledge. Only the experience of life offers immediate certainty, according to Dilthey, and this *Lebensphilosophie* cannot be reduced to the content of philosophical concepts.⁷⁰ Such an idea is not without problems. Gadamer criticizes Dilthey because, in Dilthey’s eyes, philosophy merely discloses a perspective or world view. “Inasmuch as it is aware of this,” writes Gadamer, “it gives up its old claim to be knowledge through concepts.”⁷¹ Philosophical concepts are, for Dilthey, objects of confusion and dispute. Their interpretation is problematic, and they do not in themselves yield true knowledge. But no one can argue that they offer an experience. In the experience of the historical consciousness, according to Dilthey, an experience which is both immediate and irreducible to concepts, the truth resides.

Is this truth, however, capable of being expressed? Is it a kind of knowledge that can be shared? Gadamer answers in the negative.⁷² He distinguishes between historical consciousness, for which the entire history of philosophy may appear as a mere flux of opinions and world views, and historical knowledge, the genuine knowledge of the past which the present can acquire. Dilthey failed to make this distinction. His emphasis on historical consciousness, on the insurmountable obstacles to objective conceptual knowledge, obscured for him the knowledge that is genuinely historical. This knowledge makes no pretensions to being certain, immediate, and experimentally verifiable. Its model is not the Enlightenment’s model of natural science. Nor is it ineffable. Rather, it expresses itself in concepts, as all knowledge must, and so partakes of the historical world. But it makes a claim to truth despite – or perhaps it would be better to say, on account of – its own historical nature. Dilthey’s reluctance to acknowledge this flawed

⁶⁹ “Insofern wird die gesamte Überlieferung für das historische Bewusstsein zur Selbstbegegnung des menschlichen Geistes.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 216. The translation above is my own. The published translation is on p. 202.

⁷⁰ “Im Erlebnis ist Innesein und der Inhalt, dessen ich inne bin, eins.” Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7:27. One cannot abstract from an experience a philosophical content.

⁷¹ “Sofern sie sich dessen bewusst ist, gibt sie damit ihren alten Anspruch auf, Erkenntnis durch Begriffe zu sein.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 216 (trans.: pp. 202-203). I have changed to the present tense the published translation’s incorrect future tense of the verb “to give.”

⁷² *Ibid.* p. 217 (trans.: pp. 203-204).

his notion of historical consciousness. It reduced the possibilities of historical knowledge to a form of experience, without due attention to conceptual content.

For the topic of the present investigation, tradition, Dilthey's understanding was a mixed blessing. To be sure, it was an effort to make tradition available. Nothing would seem, at first glance, to be more congenial to tradition than Dilthey's idea of it as the self-encounter of the human spirit. For that is truly what tradition proffers: a knowledge of the self in a knowledge of the past. One experiences in tradition the spirit which animates present as well as past generations. But if tradition lends the present nothing more than the experience of itself, a problem arises. Experience is mute. It demands expression in order to attain the status of knowledge. Such expression is always expression-in-concepts. And for Dilthey, conceptualization is akin to a betrayal of the original experience. His effort to grasp tradition as the self-encounter of the human spirit would compress tradition into an individual experience, preventing a community from sharing in that tradition through a mutual understanding of its concepts.

We thus can see that there is a wider notion of tradition which contains a certain reciprocity. On the one hand, tradition is a spiritual thing, in which the human spirit encounters itself. This self-encounter cannot reduce itself to a transfer of concepts from past to present. Like historical force and its expression, the force of tradition contains a surplus which cannot be exhausted by its expression in concepts. When one encounters oneself in what is other than oneself, in the spirit which animated the persons and events of history, one meets the profound mystery of the human person, a mystery which resists conceptual exposition. On the other hand, it is these concepts that enable one to appropriate tradition and to pass it on. Human beings can share in a tradition by expressing it conceptually, and then investigating, teaching and debating its concepts. This practice elevates tradition to a source for true knowledge. To disparage the conceptualization of tradition, to treat it, as Dilthey treated philosophy, as yet one more expression of life, is to deprive it of its claim to truth. Tradition then ceases to be a source for true reflection. It declines to a mere expression of that life which encompasses it, and life alone becomes the category in which truth resides.