

The Ontologization of the Concept of Symbol in H–G. Gadamer’s Hermeneutics

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ABSTRACT: H–G. Gadamer’s aesthetic reflection constitutes the previous step to a theoretical proposal, philosophical hermeneutics, which is released from the epistemic and ontological prejudices of modern scientific tradition. The aesthetic concepts of play, festival and symbol, intend to serve as a basis for an alternative description of the phenomenon of understanding. In this paper we aim to show how these notions are not just preparatory but ontological concepts since they give an account of understanding as the fundamental mode of being of each and every individual. We will focus in particular on the concept of symbol: to the extent that our understanding occurs through a language that reflects in a permanently unsuited way the whole of the tradition that constitutes us, the notion of symbol becomes a basic ontological concept since it expresses the tension between the sensible and the intelligible in which our hermeneutic experience occurs.

KEYWORDS: aesthetic, hermeneutics, symbol, linguisticity, understanding.

1. Introduction

Intuitively speaking we could define knowledge as that relation by which we are able to attribute some defining feature to that which is presented to us. We say we know an object when we institute certain characteristics that allow us to identify and recognise it as a member of a group with which it would share certain traits that differentiate it from other objects. With regard to our knowledge we can distinguish between a particular element (intuition) and another that would indicate the general conditions of application of our words to objects (concept). However, this provisional differentiation between intuition and concept does not seem to work as clearly in the aesthetic field. In our encounter with a work of art we are effectively given an object although it is difficult to find a concept which

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fits it fully. Faced with artistic products we are left orphaned of concepts, not so much because we are unable to recognise any object but because no representation establishes univocal conditions of application for our terms. In the aesthetic domain, the rigid borders between the intuitive and the conceptual get blurred.

Based on H–G. Gadamer’s theoretical proposal, in this article we intend to show how the experience of the work of art compels to rethink the difference we establish naturally between the intuitive and the conceptual (section 2). In this sense, the specificity of the artistic field for hermeneutics is that the concepts that account for our aesthetic experience (play, festival and symbol) also describe our mode of being in the world (section 3). The notion of symbol is fundamental in this context to explain the hermeneutic dimension in the finite rational being. In the same way that during Romanticism the concept of symbol became “a universal aesthetic principle” (Gadamer 1989: 67), in H–G. Gadamer’s hermeneutics this concept turns into a universal *ontological* principle. The author of *Truth and Method* takes the symbolic nature of the work of art as an explicative model of the phenomenon of understanding, given that the sensible–intelligible tension that is constitutive of the symbol allows us to think both linguisticity as a fundamental feature of our understanding and the speculative character of our language (section 4).

2. The Aesthetic Experience in H–G. Gadamer

One of the characteristics shared by most contemporary philosophical currents is the admonition of the constituted character of consciousness, its being inhabited by elements “other” than reason hard to assimilate with modern demands on clarity and distinction in our judgements. For contemporary thinking, consciousness goes from being constituent to being constituted. It is in the consequent pre–eminence given to the cognitive dimension where we find philosophy’s main battlefield since the mid–nineteenth century, especially with regards to the questionable reduction of rationality to its scientific–technical aspect¹. Gadamer’s thought is part of this wide critical tradition.

1. As an example, here is this brief relation: a) the forgetfulness of Being, of the ontological difference denounced by Heidegger, would constitute the first step in the progress to a predominance of the technical model; b) for the Frankfurt School, the instrumental rationality proper to scientific knowledge would lead to human history’s greatest aberration: Auschwitz; c) the recognition of a cognitive interest characteristic of the historical–hermeneutic sciences, differentiated from the natural sciences, in Habermas’ thought, etc.

The fundamental assumption of Gadamerian hermeneutics resides in the recognition of a specific model of knowledge and truth for the “human sciences” (*Geisteswissenschaften*). Gadamer begins with the analysis of the experience of the work of art with the aim of recovering a concept of truth and a methodological ideal that are not polluted by the requirements of modern science. The former intuitive description of the nature of our knowledge, as the establishment of some defining characteristics of what we are presented with, derives from this scientific-based model. In his determination of our aesthetic experience through the concepts of play, symbol and festival, Gadamer expects to win the ground to outline an ontology and an epistemology suitable for the human phenomena². Let us see how he proceeds.

In the novel *El árbol de la ciencia* (1911), Pío Baroja describes various episodes of Andrés Hurtado's journey through the Madrid of the end of the nineteenth century. Although any reader of the book encounters the same descriptions, not because of that we expect that the representation of the different places of the capital is the same for everyone. Gadamer's thesis is that the work presents a series of conditions that establish the framework of an «appropriate» reception, without this implying the existence of a sole interpretation which could be identified with «the» content of the work (Gadamer 1980: 194). What the work of art would mean as such — its supposed «pure aesthetical» content— can't be differentiated from all of its possible receptions. This approach does not imply any «hermeneutic nihilism» (Gadamer 1989: 82), i.e. that there be as many interpretations as recipients, since in the end it is about «one» work, *El árbol de la ciencia* by Pío Baroja.

Gadamer states that the artistic product establishes a dynamic «field» (*Spielraum*) of reception. The concept of «play» (*Spiel*) defines a «space» (*Raum*) which follows its own rules independently of who is making every specific movement. The work of art presents its own set of rules that delimit the space in which it is possible to gain a valid experience of it. An especially intuitive example is the one referred above. In the literary work, words provide us their universal meaning; that is to say, the specific visualization that each reader could do is disregarded to therefore remain in the order of what is essential to the objects in question (Gadamer 1977: 234).

2. This is the precise opinion that Gadamer has on the reflection Heidegger makes about the work of art, as a privileged place to access understanding of Being and Truth as event and un-covering: “The fundamental significance of the essay on the work of art, it seems to me, is that it provides us with an indication of the later Heidegger's real concern. No one can ignore the fact that in the work of art, in which a world arises, not only is something meaningful given to experience that was not known before, but also something new comes into existence with the work of art itself. It is not simply the laying bare of a truth, it is itself an event. This offers us an opportunity to pursue one step further Heidegger's critique of western metaphysics and its culmination in the subjectivism of the modern age”; Gadamer 1960b: 105.

The characterization of the artistic product in terms of a play implies reducing the weight of the subject as a privileged space for the aesthetic experience (Orueta 2013: 80–98). The experience of the work of art does not depend on who receives it; rather the subjects are the occasion that the work uses to present its truth. While it is clear that there is no play without players, its taking place does not depend on the participation of any specific agent. The game is subject, it characterizes itself by its autonomous being: “Play is really limited to presenting itself. Thus its mode of being is self-presentation” (Gadamer 1989: 108). In the artistic experience, there is an actualization of the potentialities of the work of art, so that it can be said that it is the work itself what takes place or is constructed in its encounter with the spectator (Gadamer 1992a: 386f).

The phenomenon of the «festival» (*Fest*) allows Gadamer to reveal another feature of the aesthetic experience. In any celebration, one stops perceiving the other as an individual with whom he competes for means of survival, to recognise him as belonging to a same group. In the festival, it is the community itself which appears, i.e. a series of mutually shared meanings and expectations that transcend us as individuals. For the author of *Truth and Method* in the work of art “it is the truth of our own world—the religious and moral world in which we live—that is presented before us and in which we recognize ourselves” (Gadamer 1986: 124). In the aesthetic experience we recognize (it is made explicit to us in what it is essential to it³) that which binds us as members of a community, something that provides us with a knowledge of ourselves. The work of art acts as a mediator between the past and a present world which inevitably points to the future.

That the subject is the opportunity the work makes use of to present the truth that we are implies that the intention of the author (*mens auctoris*) does not provide a privileged access road to understanding (Gadamer 1958: 12). That which for Gadamer is characteristic of our own encounter with art is the inexhaustible interpretative process, the infinite number of considerations it raises. There exists, therefore, a residue of meaning in all artistic product that impedes its complete and definitive subsumption under the concept, the absorption of aesthetic by philosophy⁴. The truth of the work of art has to do with a display that conceals, where what is shown is

3. „Es liegt im Wiedererkennen, daß man das Gesehene auf das Bleibende, Wesentliche hinsieht, das von den kontingenten Umständen des Einmal-gesehen-Habens und des Wieder-gesehen-Habens nicht mehr getrübt ist. Das macht Wiedererkennung aus, und so ist sie in der Freude an der Nachahmung wirksam. Was in der Nachahmung sichtbar wird, ist also gerade das eigentliche Wesen der Sache“; Gadamer 1966: 32.

4. At this point we find the radical difference between Gadamer’s and Hegel’s aesthetic proposal. For the first, the artistic phenomenon and the truth that belongs to it can not be reduced by philosophy (Gjesdal 2007: 366–369).

as important as what is hidden. The borders between the intuitive and the conceptual are mitigated in the aesthetic experience:

“«without determination» — that seems a proper description of the play with appearance that imagination produces in inner intuition. This does not presuppose the definiteness of any given concept and neither that imagination follows vague associations as it may occur with the beauty of nature, but that imagination, when playing with appearance, occasions thinking. What Kant here describes from the perspective of the subject as the result of the aesthetic judgment or as genius and spirit, can also be formulated from another perspective: the intuition of the world that is presented in every work of art. There is no determinate intuitive object that restricts this intuition. The self-produced image in inner intuition allows us to look beyond everything given in experience” (Gadamer 1980: 197f).

The artistic product is the sensible presentation of an endless number of interpretations, each of which gives testimony and is in debt to the very event of tradition. To the extent that it exposes a set of elements (the whole of a transmission of meanings) which goes beyond every concept that is proposed in the interpretative process, it can be said that the work of art has a symbolic nature. It is not that the symbol constitutes a third order of knowledge alongside the intuitive and the conceptual. The work of art is symbolic in the sense that it discloses the impossibility of finding any conceptual representation that fully fits the intuitive content which is presented, although it constantly invites us to do so. The artistic product refers to the whole of tradition which presents itself in a constantly elusive way. In other terms, art renders sensible the intelligible and, therefore, its ontological character is symbolic. The description of the work of art in terms of symbol can be explained due to its metaphysical background, which makes it especially suitable to enable the crossing from sensible to non-sensible. As Kant points out in his aesthetic reflections⁵, the symbolic presupposes and expresses this link between the sensible and the idea, which in the work of art implies for Gadamer a link of what is presented and the depth of tradition.

The work of art's symbolic character should not be confused with its understanding in terms of sign. All sign auto-cancels itself in presence of that which is designated. Unlike our ordinary use of language with which we refer to things (letters, once read, can be destroyed since they have

5. “All hypotyposis (presentation, *subjecto sub adspectum*), as making something sensible, is of one of two kinds: either schematic, where to a concept grasped by the understanding the corresponding intuition is given *a priori*; or symbolic, where to a concept which only reason can think, and to which no sensible intuition can be adequate, an intuition is attributed with which the power of judgment proceeds in a way merely analogous to that which it observes in schematization, i.e., it is merely the rule of this procedure, not of the intuition itself, and thus merely the form of the reflection, not the content, which corresponds to the concept” (Kant 2000: 225).

already carried out their function), artistic language maintains itself without external help (Gadamer 1981: 249f). Art is fundamentally symbol because it reflects the whole of tradition through the sensible mediation of the work:

“In the case of the symbol, on the other hand, and for our experience of the symbolic in general, the particular represents itself as a fragment of being that promises to complete and make whole whatever corresponds to it. Or, indeed, the symbol is that other fragment that has always been sought in order to complete and make whole our own fragmentary life. The “meaning” of art in this sense does not seem to me to be tied to special social conditions as was the meaning given to art in the later bourgeois religion of culture. On the contrary, the experience of the beautiful, and particularly the beautiful in art, is the invocation of a potentially whole and holy order of things, wherever it may be found. (Gadamer 1986: 32).

Understood from the concept of symbol, the work of art is tradition itself. The aesthetic experience allows us to recognize our belonging to a tradition that constitutes and exceeds us, from which our more or less explicit anticipations of meaning take place. The symbolic element appears precisely due to the insufficiency of the sensible to address the intelligible, but from the awareness that there is no other access other than through the sensible (Stambaugh 1997: 133). The rehabilitation of allegory by Gadamer aims to combat the reductionism of the aesthetic consciousness in the disassociation of the work from the tradition that frames it, precisely because the understanding of allegory requires a reference to the context of creation and use. Allegories are the community’s reflection in which these associations have been made, so that they enable the elucidation of various aspects of the tradition in us, in the symbolic there is no arbitrary or conventional coincidence between two elements, the image (sensible) and what it presents (intelligible), “but the union of two things that belong to each other” (Gadamer 1989: 67). The concept of symbol’s etymological meaning is the document in which the members of a community are recognized, that “relic of past life” (Gadamer 1989: 147) that would be shared and given to the guest so that, in the future, his descendants could be able to recognize the relation that had united them (*tessera hospitalis*). As we will show in section 4, the concept of symbol allows us to understand not only the work of art’s nature but also the functioning of understanding itself in the finite rational being.

3. Aesthetics and Hermeneutics

Gadamer’s aesthetic reflection and, as we will see further on, the analysis of the concept of symbol are crucial to hermeneutics as a philosophical

proposal. In this sense, in the fifth edition of *Truth and Method* the author points out that

“the intention of the present conceptual analysis, however, has to do not with theory of art but with ontology. Its first task, the criticism of traditional aesthetics, is only a stage on the way to acquiring a horizon that embraces both art and history” (Gadamer 1989: 132)⁶.

The assimilation of the aesthetical and the historical under a more fundamental ontological project supposes that “*Aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics*” (Gadamer 1989: 157). This affirmation does not annul the specificity of the artistic in favor of the philosophical concept, rather it expresses the will to conserve the ground won from the analysis of the aesthetic experience as the vantage point from which to describe understanding as the specific mode of being of the finite rational being, and this in a way phenomenologically uncontaminated by the ontological presuppositions of the modern scientific tradition (Fehér 1998: 25f)⁷. In the following lines we will elaborate the hermeneutical concepts of knowledge and truth introduced by Gadamer from the standpoint of the notions of play and festival, so that it becomes clear that they are not just aesthetic but ontological concepts. The notion of symbol will be discussed in the next section.

The analysis of aesthetic experience in terms of a festival enables us to describe our interpretative relation to the world as the taking place of a transmission of mutually shared meanings and expectations that both transcend and constitute us. In art's experience as a festival, i.e. as recognition of the intersubjectively shared element that we are, the human rationality's element of finitude appears in the form of the past in us (Gadamer 1992b: 400–440). What we do, feel, say, and think is much more penetrated by agreements, habits and tacit behaviours (a certain *ethos*) than we are able to objectify⁸. All that is understood (and, in particular, the work of art) is inserted in the taking place of a series of events, it constitutes the effect of a certain transmission that conforms «tradition» (*Überlieferung*) (Figal 2002: 118f). At the same time, the one who does the understanding finds himself

6. In this sense, as has been defined by some authors, it can be affirmed that in Gadamer we find an “anti-aesthetic” proposal; (Grondin 1998: 268).

7. The mathematical-physicist model of knowledge knows the singular as a case of a general law and demands the methodical untying of the knowing subject with regard to the known object. Science seems then to operate under the presumption of a Cartesian metaphysical dualism, where subject and object understand each other as self-sufficient substances, transparent to themselves and mutually differentiated. However, this understanding of the object as something whose presence opposes to the consciousness is a derived mode of our relation to things that conceals our non-thematic understanding of the being of what is given and of our own (Heidegger 1927: §7).

8. In this sense Grondin talks about the «immemorial character» of our reason, forwarding the hermeneutic proposal to Schelling's philosophy (Grondin 1999: 65–72).

immersed in a flow of tradition(s), in a way that the one who understands “belongs to the being of that which is understood” (Gadamer 1989: xxviii).

In other words, any interpretative process needs to be understood from the «history of effect» (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) principle, which establishes that all understanding is the result of a chain of effects that delimits the horizon from where it takes place. However, the awareness of this principle does not imply the possibility of a disassociation that allows us to obtain a transparent image of itself. There exists no point exterior to the relation of knowledge since, as a historical event, the act of understanding always occurs from a certain hermeneutic situation in which past and present interpenetrate. The universal character of the hermeneutical phenomenon, i.e. the finite nature of the human and its own historicity, consists precisely in that, for who understands, a point of view external to what is understood is not possible. The fundamental mode of being of every individual is understanding, in the sense that the elaboration of its relation with itself and with everything that appears to it happens in the opening, exhibition, or ‘interpretation’ (*Auslegung*) of the being it already is. Precisely for being immersed in the series of effects of historical transmission, our relation to the object parts from certain ‘pre-judices’ (*Vor-urteile*) that act as previous conditions that make understanding possible (Gadamer 1981: 186).

That understanding always comes interceded by our pre-judices does not imply that any interpretation is equally suitable, since we also have false pre-judices that can make it wrong. One of the fruits of dialogue, with others and with our own tradition, is the substitution of our unsuitable fore-conceptions. Experience in a hermeneutic sense consists in this modification of pre-judices with which the subject’s horizon of understanding is broadened. Gadamer turns to the image of the traveller: when we come back home from a voyage we are never the same, since in the journey there is an experience that transforms us as subjects. We can never abandon our starting horizon, but during the journey there is a certain expansion of it that has to do with the questioning of our pre-judices as those conditions that make understanding possible (Gadamer 1989: 445)⁹.

9. For this same reason Gadamer states that the formal accusation of self-cancellation or contradiction between the relative or conditioned character of all truth and the truth claim of hermeneutical proposal is not valid since: a) these are statements that are at different logical levels; b) it only makes sense if we presuppose a concept of truth as correspondence that is debatable by its ontological assumptions; c) supposing that the uncovering of our finitude or contingency constitutes the establishment of a foundation is contradictory since it is hardly possible to build something on the basis of being-towards-death or existence’s finitude. Even if we accepted that there is a contradiction between our understanding’s radically historical character and the establishment of the principle of history of effect, the only thing that this supposed contradiction would do is, once again, confirm the finite character of our knowledge (Grondin 1999b: 190).

Analogously to what happens on a trip, the contact with tradition allows the clarification of our pre-judices since the past that we are challenges us from its unyielding otherness. Interpretation positions itself in the distance that mediates between strangeness and familiarity, closeness of an understanding which is always given on the basis of pre-judices that make interpretation possible, although the one who understands can only be partially aware of them. Gadamer's hermeneutics has the character of remembering (*anamnesis*) that in which we already are and that constitutes us in what we are:

"All self-knowledge arises from what is historically pregiven, what with Hegel we call "substance," because it underlies all subjective intentions and actions, and hence both prescribes and limits every possibility for understanding any tradition whatsoever in its historical alterity. This almost defines the aim of philosophical hermeneutics: its task is to retrace the path of Hegel's phenomenology of mind until we discover in all that is subjective the substantiality that determines it" (Gadamer 1989: 301).

In contact with tradition, distance in time is not the obstacle that historical understanding has to «save» (with the objective of positioning itself in the personal and/or historical perspective of who produced the text), rather it is what makes understanding itself possible by means of a distancing from our own pre-judices (Grondin 1995: 327f). The experience of art, especially contemporary art, is again revealing: only temporary distance allows us to consolidate our judgements on the aesthetic quality of a work (Gadamer 1989: 297). Beyond the effect of the impression or the novelty, only deep and contrasted reflection can allow us a suitable application of our pre-judices. Here a key concept for hermeneutics and human sciences in general is picked up again, and it is *Bildung* as the forming process of the individual that consists in an integrating build-up of knowledge oriented to a practical wisdom or 'taste', which is intersubjectively shared in a certain period, i.e. the concept of 'common sense' (*sensus communis*). Taste is what should let us value the aesthetic quality of a piece, precisely where there is no rule which allows us to pass judgement on the object (Weinsheimer 1985: III)¹⁰.

That human's mode of being and his relation to the world happen interpretatively implies that a text's reception cannot be differentiated from its interpretation (Gadamer 1989: 399). A clarifying example is that of the

10. The historical analysis of the concepts of 'common sense' (*sensus communis*), the faculty of judgment and taste in its reception by the humanistic tradition to the German Illustration in the eighteenth Century, aims to show a type of knowledge about the singular that refers to a generalization or a whole without it being given or it being directly applicable as a principle. That is to say, a type of knowledge that does not hold on to the methodological demands and the ideal of knowledge proper to the mathematical science of nature (Gadamer 1989: 19-36).

musical or theatrical representations, whose existence lies in its execution. That which is characteristic in all understanding, and in this sense Gadamer refers to legal and theological hermeneutics, is not the meaning of the text in general or as a historical document, but the value that the document has in relation to the situation in which it is applying to (Gadamer 1989: 328). No understanding can occur without the application of the understood in the moment or situation in which it is carried out¹¹. Immersed in a constant process of historical transformation, the understanding of the object (artistic or not) never occurs definitely. Both the subject and the object are a part of a process that surpasses them (they belong to the «game» of the tradition they «are»), therefore it does not make sense to raise the question of knowledge from the Cartesian outline of the two self-transparent and mutually independent substances:

“The illumination of this situation—reflection on effective history—can never be completely achieved; yet the fact that it cannot be completed is due not to a deficiency in reflection but to the essence of the historical being that we are. To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete” (Gadamer 1989: 301)¹².

The analysis of aesthetic experience in terms of a play enables us again to describe this phenomenon. The experience of the work of art does not depend on who receives it, rather the subject is the occasion that the work uses to present its truth. In the artistic experience there is an actualization of the potentialities of the work of art, so that it can be said that it is the work itself what takes place or is constructed in its encounter with the spectator. This infinitude of meaning is explained by Gadamer from the concept of horizon, i.e. that vision which varies permanently with the observer’s movement without there being any loss of unity. Understanding occurs in the ‘fusion of horizons’ (*Horizontverschmelzung*) of the reader and the work. The concept of horizon expects to do justice to the historicity of understanding in the sense that the horizon is never static or completely

11. The concept of application allows to giving a common foundation to various hermeneutic disciplines (law, theology, literature, and history) (Gadamer 1989: 336).

12. Experience as an event that does not occur exclusively in consciousness but rather transforms the subject into what it is, collects a negative moment which is consubstantial to the concept of experience since it involves accepting the fallibility of our point of view: “experience in this sense inevitably involves many disappointments of one’s expectations and only thus is experience acquired” (Gadamer 1989: 350). The negative character implies the recognition of our existence’s fragility, the past’s irrevocable character and the future’s unpredictability. Hence the hermeneutic primacy of the question: all questioning implies being open to the truth of the other without reducing him to previous expectations or being subdued by his claims. Hermeneutics is “the art of being able to be wrong” since it accepts the contingency of the starting point, the possibility that our understanding of things may be otherwise.

closed (a «horizon in itself») rather it moves forward and modifies with the one who walks.

The fusion of horizons does not imply a dialectical overcoming by which an absolute identity of the subject is raised. It is rather a constant dislocation movement that takes place in the difference between the text and its various receptions. That is to say: this permanent transformation of the one who carries out the experience of strangeness does not allow the establishment of an ultimate foundation, of what we would truly be once we were stripped of all our historical-linguistic coatings (Vattimo 1989: 90). Understanding is not an activity we carry out but an experience in which we find ourselves and endure:

“We showed that understanding is not a method which the inquiring consciousness applies to an object it chooses and so turns it into objective knowledge; rather, being situated within an event of tradition, a process of handing down, is a prior condition of understanding. Understanding proves to be an event” (Gadamer 1989: 308)¹³.

As we have seen, the analysis of aesthetic experience in terms of play and festival does not constitute a preliminary step towards hermeneutics but serves to describe the phenomenon of human understanding itself. Let's see what the role played by the notion of symbol is in Gadamer's proposal.

4. The Linguisticity of Understanding and the Speculative Character of Language

According to M. Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity, what characterizes us as individuals is to find ourselves thrown into the world, inhabiting a language that speaks through us, a language that we are. Expressed in Gadamer's terms: the relation of man to the world, others, and himself, always occurs from a certain hermeneutic situation, it constantly sets off from some pre-judices. Interpretation is the elaboration of understanding as the structural moment of our existence, a phenomenon that happens linguistically insofar as language is the way in which the principle of history of effect is specified or «embodied» (Gadamer 1989: 390f)¹⁴. The linguistic character of our understanding

13. In this sense, the tragic becomes a fundamental aesthetic category since it shines a light on the historicity that is intrinsic to us as finite beings: “What is understood as tragic must simply be accepted” (Gadamer 1989: 126).

14. In this context it is interesting to recover Habermas' concept of “transitory a priori” in reference to language and history. Both elements are conditions from which understanding happens, although we can not control the way and the extension in which it conditions our knowledge, since they are inscribed in a web of historic references we do not understand fully, as well as in a frame of possible variations subjected to human free will (Wachterhauser 2002: 57).

does not limit to texts in a strict sense: “Verbal interpretation is the form of all interpretation, even when what is to be interpreted is not linguistic in nature—i.e., is not a text but a statue or a musical composition” (Gadamer 1989: 400). Our experience is mediated by a certain language that embodies an interpretation of the world, which does not imply any relativism to the extent that the own concept «world itself» becomes problematic for what it has of ontologically debatable. Unlike what happens with perception, where each perception excludes and annuls the others to form the *continuum* of what the object would consist on, in our relation with the world each interpretation contains the others potentially (Gadamer 1989: 449).

Understanding develops itself in the actualization of the tradition we are in each time we are questioned by a text. It takes the form of a question and answer dialectic. Our experience occurs linguistically since all encounter with the object needs to be read by the inner ear (Gadamer 1989: 551)¹⁵. Linguisticity is the fundamental character of each individual’s being-in-the-world. As the original trait of existence, linguisticity cannot occur as an object of experience since it constitutes the totality in which we are always in, hence its ontological character. There does not exist any point of view from nowhere, no location external to our linguistic relation with the world. The nuclear character of language in the hermeneutic characterization of our existence resides in that it constitutes the place where the I and the world appear in their original unity:

“*Being that can be understood is language.* The hermeneutical phenomenon here projects its own universality back onto the ontological constitution of what is understood, determining it in a universal sense as *language* and determining its own relation to beings as interpretation” (Gadamer 1989: 470).

Language situates itself in the centre of our relation with the world to unfold from there to the whole of tradition. This is what its speculative character consists in, a trait that, for Gadamer, is extensible to the ensemble of the real:

“distinguishing itself from itself, presenting itself, language that expresses meaning is not only art and history but everything insofar as it can be understood. The speculative character of being that is the ground of hermeneutics has the same universality as do reason and language” (Gadamer 1989: 472).

This reference to a totality which is characteristic to our linguistical relation with the world excludes the existence of an infinite intellect before

15. For Gadamer, the experience of the work of art implies reading it from the ‘inner ear’ (*das innere Ohr*), in the sense that the recipient must linguistically appropriate and actualize its content (Grondin 1995: 331–332).

which this totality would be given in its finished form (Gadamer 1989: 457). It is not about a being-in-itself which reveals itself in each new reception or interpretation since the only unicity of understanding resides in what has remained in the various receptions occurred (Gadamer 1989: 394). Expressed in different terms: the reference to tradition in Gadamer's thought does not imply authoritarianism or irrationality but an indication to the authority of that we still consider binding (Grondin 1999b: 155).

Each reception of tradition is "the experience of an "aspect" of the thing itself" (Gadamer 1986: 468), where by the "thing itself" we need to understand the logical presupposition of a unity that, as logical, lacks a specific cognitive content. The speculative character conceals a reference "toward the infinite", "a relation to the whole being" (Gadamer 1989: 464f). Language acts as a mirror of tradition, in the sense that it reflects a whole that, as such, always appears «displaced» in the image that it shows: "Every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole world-view that underlies it to appear. Thus every word, as the event of a moment, carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and summoning" (Gadamer 1989: 454). Therefore, in each act of understanding our relation with what appears implies a reference to the ensemble of tradition.

Expressed in aesthetic terms: the work of art renders sensible an un-closed totality to the extent that it actualizes itself in each new reception. The symbolic nature of the work of art resides in its serving as a bridge between the sensible presence of the work and the whole of the tradition it embodies. However, this outline does not only restrict to the artistic field. The relation with the world which is intrinsic to the rational finite being responds also to the conditions established by the symbolic in art. Our encounter with the object, as a sensible presentation of a certain transmission of meanings, refers inevitably to a whole of meaning that actualizes itself in this relation and that is elaborated discursively in our understanding. This way, the concept of symbol does not only describe the work of art's nature but it allows to understand the fundamental structure of our being. In this sense Gadamer states:

In the last analysis, Goethe's statement 'Everything is a symbol' is the most comprehensive formulation of the hermeneutical idea. It means that everything points to another thing. This 'everything' is not an assertion about each being, indicating what it is, but an assertion as to how it encounters man's understanding. There is nothing that cannot mean something to it. But the statement implies something else as well: nothing comes forth in the one meaning that is simply offered to us. The impossibility of surveying all relations is just as much present in Goethe's concept of the symbolic as is the vicarious function of the particular for the representation of the whole. For only because the universal relatedness of being is concealed

from human eyes does it need to be discovered. As universal as the hermeneutical idea is that corresponds to Goethe's words, in an eminent sense it is fulfilled only by the experience of art. For the distinctive mark of the language of art is that the individual art work gathers into itself and expresses the symbolic character that, hermeneutically regarded, belongs to all beings. In comparison with all other linguistic and nonlinguistic tradition, the work of art is the absolute present for each particular present, and at the same time holds its word in readiness for every future. The intimacy with which the work of art touches us is at the same time, in enigmatic fashion, a shattering and a demolition of the familiar. It is not only the 'This art thou!' disclosed in a joyous and frightening shock; it also says to us; 'Thou must alter thy life!' (Gadamer 1964: 7f).

5. Conclusion

H-G. Gadamer's aesthetic reflection aims to release our understanding of reality (and, in particular, the interpretation that human sciences have had of themselves since the second half of the nineteenth century) of certain ontological and epistemological pre-judices rooted in modern scientific tradition. In this sense, the notions used for this purpose (play, festival and symbol) not only give an account of our aesthetic experience but hope to reveal essential aspects of our being-in-the-world.

Our existence's radically historical character supposes the incapacity to obtain absolute knowledge both from the object and from ourselves since as individuals we are always located in a tradition that constitutes us (the festival as a moment of recognition of the truth that we are as a set of mutually shared meanings and expectations) and that exceeds us as a history of effects which is linguistically specified (the subject is what the game uses to put its rules into play). On the other hand, the speculative being of language implies that in each act of understanding there is a reference to the whole that has settled in it, so that hermeneutic experience takes place in the permanently open breach between the sensible and the non-sensible. It is in this context where the ontological concept of the symbol in the framework of hermeneutics manifests itself, since it not only describes the nature of the work of art but also accounts for our being's fundamental character.

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