In Memoriam Hans-Georg Gadamer

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Son œuvre, qui a puissamment marqué tous les champs du savoir, de la culture et de la vie publique, restera associée au terme d’« herméneutique », qui n’était pas très connu avant Gadamer, voire pas du tout. Depuis, il est devenu incontournable. Autrefois, il ne servait qu’à désigner la « méthodologie » des sciences de l’interprétation, c’est-à-dire la théorie des règles et des méthodes qu’il faut suivre lorsque l’on interprète des textes ou des événements historiques. L’herméneutique devait donc fonder la prétention des sciences de l’homme à l’objectivité, méthodologie sans laquelle, pensait-on, les humanités ne seraient que de simples exercices de bavardage, indignes du titre de science. Fort bien, disait Gadamer, mais lorsque l’on interprète des textes, se contente-t-on simplement de suivre des méthodes? La vérité—que l’on éprouve, que l’on découvre en lisant, par exemple, Sophocle, Mozart ou Riopelle—dépend-t-elle exclusivement de la rigueur des méthodes que l’on applique? C’est cette question, toute simple, mais révolutionnaire, qu’il posait dans son chef-d’œuvre Vérité et méthode (1960), qui fut l’ouvrage le plus marquant de la pensée allemande après la guerre. Le titre a suscité bien des malentendus. On a parfois pensé que Gadamer s’élevait « contre » la méthode, à l’instar de Paul Feyerabend, qui avait écrit, lui, un livre Against Method en 1973. Humaniste jusqu’à la moelle, Gadamer veut seulement rappeler que la méthode ne suffit pas vraiment si l’on veut décrire l’expérience de vérité qui est celle des sciences humaines et, en un sens plus large encore, celle de notre compréhension du monde et de nous-mêmes. Comprendre, enseignait, Gadamer, ce n’est pas seulement, dominer, maîtriser et produire des « résultats » vérifiables qui soient indépendants de l’observateur (comme le commande l’ethos de la science moderne), c’est plutôt être pris par une interrogation et entrer dans un...
dialogue. L’interprète, comme l’individu qui agit moralement, ne se trouve pas en face de « données » qu’il se contenterait d’observer ou de mesurer, comme s’il se tenait à une souveraine distance des contenus qu’il comprend. Interpellé, il est, au contraire, toujours concerné, transformé et formé par le « sens » qui l’entraîne, un peu comme le fait un roman ou une pièce de musique. Ses « données » sont toujours parlantes et sollicitent une réponse, que l’on appelle une interprétation. C’est cet art socratique du dialogue qu’enseignait et pratiquait passionnément Gadamer.

Si la compréhension n’est pas vraiment une « maîtrise », elle peut se tromper et toujours apprendre. Gadamer aimait citer le mot de Leibniz : « j’approuve à peu près tout ce que je lis », parce que l’on peut trouver des raisons, des vérités derrière tous les points de vue, avec ou sans méthode. Il a souvent dit que l’âme de son herméneutique consistait seulement à reconnaître que c’était peut-être l’autre qui avait raison. Il détestait écrire, pensant qu’il n’avait pas lui-même de doctrine à enseigner, sinon celle du dialogue. Il ne ratait jamais une occasion de dialoguer et d’apprendre d’autrui. Au début de mars, il devait assister à un petit colloque sur l’herméneutique, l’esthétique et les sciences cognitives qui voulait rendre hommage à son 102e anniversaire. Il n’y était pas. J’ai tout de suite compris qu’il devait se porter atrocement mal (il y a quelques mois à peine, je l’avais encore vu discuter pendant six heures avec un groupe de jeunes lycéens, qui l’avaient invité et qui étaient tous beaucoup plus fatigués que lui!). Une petite visite a confirmé mes pires appréhensions. Mais il conservait toute sa tendre lucidité, parlant de Heidegger, s’informant du colloque : ah! disait-il, comme pour se retirer à la fin d’un Banquet, c’est maintenant à une nouvelle génération de jouer. Elle lui doit tout, le sens de la tradition, du dialogue et la transcendance de soi. Adieu! cher Maître, et merci d’avoir été là pendant si longtemps. La philosophie, l’Allemagne et le monde contemporain en avaient grand besoin.

GARY B. MADISON, McMaster University

As a friend of mine said upon learning of Gadamer’s death, “I feel like an orphan. I guess I was beginning to think that Gadamer would live forever.” How many of us who knew Gadamer well didn’t have that feeling? In my case, Gadamer’s passing marks a great loss, the loss of someone I could always count on, someone who was both a mentor-protector and a friend—the end of an exceedingly important, thirty-year relationship. With his passing, I have indeed been philosophically orphaned. I offer here some personal reflections on the great friend, the “good neighbor.” I have now lost.

I first met Gadamer in 1972 when he paid one of his first visits (or was it the very first?) to North America and was giving a talk at the University of Toronto. After the question period I introduced myself to him as a student of Paul
Ricoeur and extended an invitation to him to contribute to a *Festschrift* that I was then preparing for Ricoeur’s sixty-fifth birthday. That humble beginning blossomed into a full-fledged philosophical friendship during the years that he subsequently spent at McMaster as a visiting professor every fall term from 1973 to 1976. What an extraordinary learning experience—to have one of the greatest philosophers in the world at your disposal—that was for me and many others at McMaster! I remember often going by Gadamer’s office around about five o’clock and asking him if he’d like to go over to the faculty club for a beer and some discussion. “That is a good idea,” he invariably replied. And that indeed was Gadamer’s mission in life—to make himself unstintingly available to others whom he respected and to whom he felt he could be of benefit.

When, with its characteristic short-sightedness, McMaster failed to renew Gadamer’s contract, Boston College snatched him up. That was a great loss for McMaster and for Canada. But it did not prevent Gadamer from coming back on a regular basis to give talks at the university to which he had a special attachment (one reason being his Germanic fondness for taking afternoon walks along the wooded paths of the Royal Botanical Gardens adjacent to the campus). On the occasion of those visits he would stay at my home and, before his hosts would come to spirit him away for the day, we had a ritual we would follow. Over freshly-brewed coffee we would sit at our respective places in my living room (Gadamer always took the couch, as many people know) and would pursue our on-going conversation. This, of course, is precisely the way Gadamer intended it, devoted as he was to the spirit of dialogue and to being of assistance, through dialogue, to young professors like me (that was then, of course). Gadamer would usually begin our matinal conversations by saying something like, “As you were saying, Gary, last year when we broke off our conversation.....” These conversations with Gadamer that I had the great privilege of participating in on a one-to-one basis over many years were marvelously Scheherazade-like; they always picked up where they had left off a year previous, and always ended with the anticipation of more to come. It was in these conversations that I truly learned what Gadamer’s “philosophy” was all about. Not a neat little system of ideas that he wished to pan off on others, but dialogue itself—pure, free, open, unrestrained dialogue.

Often in these conversations we agreed on things, often we took somewhat different stances on this or that, and sometimes we just agreed to disagree on some basic issue (Gadamer would never go along with my support of the Sophists over and against Plato, even though he agreed that I had legitimate and persuasive arguments on my side)—but these were never “Yes, Socrates,” “Indeed, Socrates,” “Indubitably, you are right Socrates” kind of dialogues. Gadamer wasn’t like that; he was not out to score points. It was the dialogue itself that always mattered for him. And for Gadamer, the obligatory presupposition of dialogue is the readiness to admit that the other may be right over against oneself. This is the meaning of the
Hegelian notion of *Anerkennung*, mutual recognition, and, as such, is an articulation of the ethical basis of democratic practice.

Unlike some people who talk a lot about the theory of communicative rationality but who, in practice, are among the most dogmatic and closed-minded of people, Gadamer was not only a leading exponent of the *theory* of dialogue or "conversation" (as anyone who has read his works knows); he was also a master of the actual *practice* of dialogue (as anyone who knew him personally also knows). As one of my colleagues wrote on the occasion of his one hundredth birthday, what was most memorable about Gadamer's stay at McMaster was "witnessing the unity of theory and practice in Gadamer's activity of thinking and teaching." And as John Robertson also remarked, "Even more than Gadamer's often dazzling insights, his truly active listening to his conversation partners was what most inspired us." Dialogue was Gadamer's true "philosophy," his *dao*, which he pursued with passion to the very end, to practically the day he died at the age of 102.

Gadamer truly lived his philosophy, just as Socrates did his. Indeed, like Socrates, Gadamer's "philosophy" was not some great dogmatic edifice but the actual living of the questioning life, of dialogue—which is always open to the new, the unexpected, the "other." It is fully appropriate, and also revealing, that upon his death Pope John Paul II should have sent a telegraph of condolence. It was after all Gadamer, a true humanist and a fully secular philosopher, who had inspired the Pope to issue his 1999 document on Memory and Reconciliation. The Pope knew a master of dialogue and "reconciliation" when he saw one. In these globalizing times when a "clash of civilizations"—between, above all, Islam and the Western world—looms on the horizon, Gadamer's "philosophy of dialogue" is of the utmost relevance. It is really the only basis on which could ever be conducted what President Khatami of Iran has called a "dialogue of civilizations."

And it is the only basis on which the concept of democracy can be justified, on a universal scale. I have long maintained that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, his *philosophia practica*, provides the basis for a general theory of democracy, and Gadamer always supported me wholeheartedly in these endeavors. He was always there for me, a great mentor and a great friend (even on one occasion traveling from Heidelberg to Frankfurt just so as to be present and to lend his moral support when I presented a paper there on hermeneutical liberalism to devotees of critical theory). I shall miss him enormously. I feel like an orphan.

I have no doubt that, as long as there are those who believe in the great liberal ideals of tolerance and democracy, Gadamer's ideas—his philosophical legacy—will live on. Because in the last analysis the only really real world is, as he would say, the world of "ideality" that is brought into being by means of the word. Everything in the mundane world comes and goes, but what is best in it is always preserved in the realm of the ideal—the *logos* that we all share in when, like
Gadamer, we commit ourselves without reservation and in a spirit of good will to the questioning life.

JEFF MITSCHERLING, University of Guelph

One beautiful Spring afternoon in 1976, in the Philosophy Department office of the University of California at Santa Barbara, I told the secretaries I was leaving Santa Barbara to start graduate work at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. A graduate student—one of the long-haired radical freaks who worked in continental philosophy back then and there—who happened to be passing through the office at that moment looked at me and asked, “Gadamer’s there now, isn’t he?” I couldn’t answer him, because that’s the first time I’d ever even heard Gadamer’s name. So I suppose some of the more intellectually radical and adventurous graduate students in California were reading him by then, but Gadamer certainly wasn’t on any instructor’s course outlines.

That’s certainly no longer the case today. Now we find hermeneutics courses offered at both the graduate and the undergraduate level at universities across North America, and the name of Gadamer has become part of the everyday vocabulary not only of philosophers and academics but of professionals and practitioners in every field imaginable. From theology to psychotherapy, from literary theory to political philosophy, from economics to classical philology—wherever you go, you will find people discussing Gadamer’s ideas. Hermeneutics is no passing fashion; it’s no intellectual fad. These ideas are here to stay.

Gadamer and I were sitting on a couch at Gary Madison’s house one evening during one of those parties that Gadamer loved so much (still a party animal at eighty!). I was telling him that he didn’t have to worry when he went back to Germany, because all of us, his students, were going to keep his name alive and well here in Canada and North America. He very excitedly interrupted me mid-sentence and firmly stressed, with a smile, “No, no, not the name—the ideas.” That was Gadamer: He didn’t care about being famous, or adding luster to his academic career, or winning awards, or anything like that. It was the ideas that Gadamer was always concerned about, and getting those hermeneutic ideas to people, because he knew that they were just what people need. They need those hermeneutic ideas because hermeneutics gets people to talk to one another, and it’s human dialogue that makes our world what it is and what it can be.

Soon after Wahrheit und Methode was published in Germany in 1960 (the first English translation came fifteen years later), Gadamer was attacked by his critics for being too conservative, and this criticism would come to be widely repeated in North America a couple of decades later. The hermeneutic acknowledg-
ment of the power of history and tradition was taken by many radical political theorists to represent a submission to the authority of the status quo, and hermeneutics was dismissed by many as just another product of the German academic philosophical establishment. This misdirected criticism is still heard occasionally, but the most strident voices have been stilled in the quiet revelation that Gadamer’s hermeneutics doesn’t legitimize the status quo at all. Gadamer’s hermeneutics addresses human nature at a very deep, universal level, common to all, and when operating at this level, we’re not concerned with the preservation of any personal or political or romantic ideals, but only with pursuing the common good, and pursuing it together, with honesty and good will.

In the last letter he wrote to me—it’s dated 29 October 2001—he says that his feet are sore, and every step he takes is heavy. No wonder. He’s been carrying his ideas around, all over the world, delivering them to us personally for over a century, and those feet have earned a rest. But the ideas can’t stop just like that. The ideas are going to keep on traveling and, hopefully, help hold this world together. Goodbye, Professor. Thank you for all that work. And rest easy: The ideas will be fine.