While Gadamer rarely discusses trust (Vertrauen) in explicit terms as a philosophical concept important for his project, there is no doubt that trust or confidence is operative in his philosophical hermeneutics. For instance, we can easily see how in *Truth and Method* trust is a necessary condition for Gadamer’s notion of conversation as a model for hermeneutic interpretation and understanding. Partners in a genuine conversation must have confidence in each other, such that each attempt to come to an agreement about the subject matter at hand, and concomitantly, that each attempt to find each other in a common language. It is such a trust or confidence that allows one to “fall into” the conversation, that is, for an individual to be led by the conversation instead of one leading the conversation.¹ This is in line with what Robert J. Dostal has argued about Gadamer’s hermeneutics when he calls it a hermeneutics of trust or good will.² In this regard, reference to a hermeneutics of trust in Gadamer is often raised in opposition to the hermeneutics of suspicion, a phrase coined by Paul Ricoeur.³ While a hermeneutics of suspicion attempts to interpret a meaning that is hidden, latent, or perhaps unconscious to what a text or another person says, a hermeneutics of trust is a disposition that favors openness and readiness to receive

what the text or the other has to say. It does not presume a latent or more “meaningful” meaning hidden behind the words or what is spoken. Furthermore, a hermeneutics of trust allows one’s own prejudices to be put into play in the dialogic event of understanding.

In this essay, I want to contribute to this discussion of Gadamer’s hermeneutics of trust by focusing on one of his often-overlooked essays on the poet, Hilde Domin: “Hilde Domin, Lied zur Ermutigung II.” This essay is not only a rare moment in which Gadamer focuses specifically on trust, but it also sheds new light on the importance of trust in his overall hermeneutic project. I claim that Gadamer’s analysis of trust in Domin’s poem indicates a trust that cuts to the core of this debate surrounding the hermeneutics of trust/good will and the hermeneutics of suspicion. As I will show, Gadamer’s concern with trust in Domin’s poem shows us that trust is a matter of language itself, or, the linguisticality of hermeneutic experience. Language or linguisticality has always been at the foundation of Gadamer’s hermeneutic project as the condition for the possibility of interpretation and understanding. We cannot talk about language or linguisticality without a necessary trust or confidence in language. Gadamer’s essay on Domin is a diagnosis of what happens when this trust begins to fail, when a breakdown in the trust in language leads to a breakdown in the possibility of understanding the world and each other, when language becomes confused, distorted, or even tyrannous to the point that one is forced to flee or run away from language, and when trust in language has been altogether lost or forgotten. If we recall Gadamer’s well-known assertion, that “Being that can be understood is language,” then a failure in the trust in language threatens the very possibility of understanding to take place at all. All of these considerations speak to issues at the phenomenological grounding of Gadamer’s hermeneutics and ultimately offer a further response to philosophical scholarship that affirms a hermeneutics of suspicion. As I will show, Gadamer’s reading of Domin brings to bear not only certain political and ethical implications of trust and language, but ultimately it shows us the ontological stakes involved in affirming a hermeneutics of trust. Without a trust in language, we lose the capacity to disclose ourselves to each other and the possibility for the phenomenological-hermeneutical event of understanding to take place.

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4 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hilde Domin, Lied zur Ermutigung II,” in Ästhetik und Poetik II: Hermeneutik im Vollzug, Gesammelte Werke, vol. 9 (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 320–22. He discusses Domin and her work on at least two other occasions. In 1971, he provides an encomium for her work when she received the Droste-Preis, entitled “Hilde Domin, Dichterin der Rückkehr.” In 1988, Gadamer also writes an essay on the topic of Domin’s Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen, entitled “Die Höhe erreichen.” These are available in Gadamer, Ästhetik und Poetik II.

5 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 490.
The first part of this essay reads through Gadamer’s own analysis of Domin’s poem in order to draw out this ontological claim about trust and language in Gadamer’s works. Above all, I focus on Gadamer’s own emphasis on trust as “the most difficult ABC” as it appears in Domin’s poem. This leads him into a reflection on how easy it is to lose or forget one’s trust in language and the world, while at the same time, the great difficulty in being able to learn or relearn this trust. The ABC of trust indicates, for Gadamer, how rudimentary and foundational trust is for us in our relationship to the world and others, and that this relationship is grounded in our trust in language. While this kind of trust can be threatened and put at great risk, Gadamer will ultimately claim that trust is never truly an impossibility or something that can be annihilated. Even in the most extreme circumstances, Gadamer will claim that trust is perhaps hidden and imperceptible, but is nevertheless available for anyone to take up at any point. The second part of this essay then focuses on Domin’s own self-interpretations of her poem and on what I call her own “poetics of trust” in her writings. A poetics of trust concerns both the ethical demand to rectify a language that has been abused, distorted, and falsified, as well as an act of resistance as a “nevertheless” (Trotzdem or Dennoch) in the face of catastrophe. Both aspects of this poetics of trust ultimately call for courage to resist all lies, deception, and dishonesty and to preserve our trust in language. In so doing, we may preserve our trust in each other and in the world. Here, I claim that Gadamer and Domin find common ground in their respective positions on trust and language. The relationship between a hermeneutics of trust and a poetics of trust is grounded in a trust in language, whereby the poem is itself an act of trust. Ultimately, I claim that Gadamer’s reading of Domin is not a minor digression in Gadamer’s thought. Instead, his essay discloses an existential truth about the limits of hermeneutic experience and points to the crucial role of the poet as a guarantor of our trust in language.

Gadamer’s Reading of Domin’s “Lied zur Ermutigung II”

Gadamer’s biographical and intellectual relationship with Domin and her works has received little attention in Gadamerian scholarship over the decades with a few rare exceptions. Gadamer and Domin were friends and carried on a correspondence. It

7 One of these exceptions is a brief section in James Risser, The Life of Understanding: A Contemporary Hermeneutics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), which refers to Gadamer’s text on Domin as a poet of return in a discussion about Martin Heidegger and Gadamer on the topic of poetry and
would also be Gadamer who provided the laudatory remarks on the occasion of Domin’s reception of the Droste-Preis in Meersburg, Germany, in 1971, in which he famously refers to her as a “poet of return” (Dichterin der Rückkehr). Gadamer’s comments on trust appear in an earlier essay from 1966 in which he offers a reading of the second poem in Domin’s series of poems entitled, “Lied zur Ermutigung” (Song of Encouragement). Given their friendship, it should come as no surprise that this particular essay on Domin first appeared alongside Domin’s own self-interpretation of her poem in a volume edited by Domin entitled, Doppelinterpretationen: Das zeitgenössische deutsche Gedicht zwischen Autor und Leser. The poem, “Lied zur Ermutigung II,” reads as follows:

Lange wurdest du um die türelosen
Mauern der Stadt gejagt.

Du fliehst und streust
die verwirrten Namen der Dinge
hinter dich.

Vertrauen, dieses schwerste
ABC.

Ich mache ein kleines Zeichen
in die Luft,
unsichtbar,
wo die neue Stadt beginnt,
Jerusalem,
die goldene,
aus Nichts.  

homecoming (35–36). While I argue that Gadamer scholars should start to take both his short essays on Domin and Domin’s own poetry and essays more seriously, it is unclear as to why this has not yet been done. One reason could simply be that Gadamer only offers three brief, untranslated essays on her work, and that this pales in comparison to his substantial engagement with poets such as Friedrich Hölderlin, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Paul Celan.

Long were you chased around the doorless walls of the city.

You flee and scatter the confused names of things behind you.

Trust, this most difficult ABC.

I make a small sign in the air, invisible, where the new city begins, Jerusalem, the golden city, from out of nothing.\(^9\)

The poem itself was written by Domin in the winter of 1960/61 in Spain shortly before her return home to Germany after a long exile.\(^10\) After leaving Germany in 1932, she would travel to Italy, then England, and finally land in the Dominican Republic in 1940. From 1954 until 1961 she would split her time between Spain and Germany, and then would finally call Heidelberg her home from 1961 until her death in 2006 at the age of 96. It is for this reason, along with the ever-present sense of loss, exile, and returning in her poems, that Gadamer refers to Domin as a poet of return. This is precisely what Gadamer reads in Domin’s poem, especially pertaining to the word and theme of _Vertrauen_. For Gadamer, the first part of the poem describes the loss of trust, or a trust that is in exile, and the second part of the poem describes the beginning of a return to trust. The two lines that occupy the middle of the poem, “Trust, this most difficult/ABC,” name, for Gadamer, the central theme and context of the poem. I quote Gadamer here at length:

One immediately asks: does one have to initially learn trust? Can one learn it in the way one learns to write? As if one could live at all without trust. Is not

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\(^9\) This poem, as well as future quotations from Domin’s work, are my own translations into English.  
all of our speaking sustained by trust: trust in the other, who understands, trust in the words, which we all know, trust in the world, which is there in these words? And yet, here trust is named as something that one must learn, completely from the beginning. How must it have gotten lost, that which is the simplest thing that underlies all abiding in life and speech, the ABC. Can one simply learn it again? As something not yet known or as something forgotten? Are not the walls, along which one searches, without doors? In actuality: It is the most difficult ABC—that one again and again forgets, that one again and again loses. How should one learn it?

Gadamer here understands what is at stake in Domin’s emphasis on trust, namely, that trust is necessary for life and necessary for speech or language. If we have indeed lost trust, this most rudimentary and yet most difficult ABC, what are the possibilities for learning or relearning this trust? The stakes of these questions are also made vivid in Domin’s image of an individual being chased around the city walls. An image, which of course reminds Gadamer of one of the most dreadful scenes from the *Iliad* in which Hector is chased by Achilles around the city walls of Troy. Dreadful, perhaps, because Hector is supposed to be the bravest character of them all, yet even he runs away in fear of his own death at the hands of Achilles. However, Gadamer notes two crucial aspects in Domin’s poem that heighten the fear or dread that we encounter in this scene. First, he notes that the city walls in the poem do not have doors that merely happen to be locked or happen to be unreachable for the one being chased, but that there are no doors at all. We search for the doors that would allow us to seek refuge into what Gadamer identifies in the poem as the “city of trust,” or, “the trusted world,” and there are none to be found. Second, unlike in the *Iliad*, no one comes to the aid of the one being chased to waylay one’s fear of death and offer encouragement to stand one’s ground against their pursuer. But here in Domin’s poem there is also no clear pursuer or enemy against which one can raise their weapons. In fact, as Gadamer notes, “The one here being chased has thrown away all weapons. For he has tossed the names of things behind him because they are ‘confused’ and are no longer any good. This gives the entire image of the chase its initial radical meaning. The confusion of the names of things signifies the greatest danger and the utmost defenselessness.”

In order to bring this great danger and defenselessness to light in relation to the distortion of language, Gadamer refers to Thucydides, who, according to

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11 Gadamer, “Hilde Domin, *Lied zur Ermutigung II,*” 320–21. All quotations from this essay are my own translations into English.
Gadamer, describes the transformation of the meaning of words as a part of the destruction of the plague of Athens. However, we may also refer to Thucydides’s description of the violent revolution that occurred in the city-state of Corcyra, in which he describes this parallel between a violent revolution within a city and a revolution of word meaning: “Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal ally; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question inaptness to act on any. Frantic violence, became the attribute of manliness; cautious plotting, a justifiable means of self-defence.”

For Thucydides, this change in words that accompanies revolution leads to a distrust in each other: “Thus every form of iniquity took root in the Hellenic countries by reason of the troubles. The ancient simplicity into which honor so largely entered was laughed down and disappeared; and society became divided into camps in which no man trusted his fellow. To put an end to this, there was neither promise to be depended upon, nor oath that could command respect; but all parties dwelling rather in their calculation upon the hopelessness of a permanent state of things, were more intent upon self-defence than capable of confidence.”

After his reference to Thucydides, Gadamer makes a general comment about the “monstrous corruption” of language that is usually brought about by the great demagogues (Volksverführer) in history, an allusion to Hitler and the Nazification of the German language under the Third Reich. In all of this, Gadamer brings the seriousness of the distortion or loss of language into view for us and relates this directly to a loss of trust. When the names of things, that is, when the words or languages that were once familiar to us have become confused, distorted, or bewildered, they can become powerless or no longer suited to the situation or community we find ourselves in. In this, we lose our sense of at-homeness and general orientation in the world. For Gadamer, this is precisely the experience that accompanies us is in the collapse of trust: “The one who is no longer encompassed by the protection of trusted words no longer understands the world.”

Trust and language go hand in hand. A breakdown in language is a breakdown in trust. Without a trust in language we cannot understand the world, but more importantly, we cannot come into and understanding with others. Here, I claim,

15 Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, 3.83.1–3.83.2.
16 Gadamer, “Hilde Domin, Lied zur Ermutigung II,” 321. Domin herself discusses this particular example when she offers one of her self-interpretations of “Lied Zur Ermutigung II.” I discuss this later in this article.
Gadamer indicates for us the great violence and devastation that can occur in a community as a result of the collapse of trust we have in language. Ultimately, without a trust in language, we cannot come into a conversation with the world and others, and therefore cannot understand each other.

Gadamer’s commentary here is sparse and does not develop any concrete examples of a society that has lost its trust in language and in each other. Yet his allusion to the corruption of language under the Nazi regime allows us to consider some of the basic social and political conditions of a society in which there has been a breakdown in trust. At a general level, these conditions involve severe political turmoil, strife, or revolution, as well as the polarization, alienation, and atomization of the members of that particular society. To be more specific, we may refer to Hannah Arendt’s discussion of “totalitarian movements” and the dissolving relationship between language and reality in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. As she notes, one of the hallmarks of any society that undergoes a totalitarian movement is mass propaganda and ever shifting lies and falsehoods disseminated by the state that must be consistently affirmed by members of the movement. More than this, falsehood and fiction always triumph over what is true and real: “The outstanding negative quality of the totalitarian elite is that it never stops to think about the world as it really is and never compares the lies with reality. Its most cherished virtue, correspondingly, is loyalty to the Leader, who, like a talisman, assures the ultimate victory of lie and fiction over truth and reality.”19 We may also think here of Arendt’s famous description of the many “language rules” or “language codes” that were used by Hitler and the upper echelons of the Nazi regime, whereby the word for “killing” became “evacuation” or “special treatment,” and “deportation” became “change of residence.”20 In both instances, language has become confused and corrupt, such that one is seemingly defenseless and unable to articulate or bear witness to what is true and real.

Gadamer reads the third stanza of Domin’s poem as a sign of a possible resolution to this crisis of trust and language. But first, he marks an important temporal shift between the past tense of the first stanza and the present tense of the second. This hunt or chase around the inaccessible city walls of trust, as well as the casting off of language, started a long time ago and is still going on in the present moment. For Gadamer, this tells us that a return to trust will not emerge in a single moment or event: “the chase from disappointment to disappointment does not come to an end

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with a single blow. It continues on wherever understanding and trust fail.” Yet Gadamer is hopeful, and tells us that while we do not learn, relearn, or recover trust in one moment or instant, trust is always there and even indispensable for our lives. Even when it appears broken and shattered, it is always there as a possibility that one must attempt to learn again. This is much in line with how Gadamer would think about language. Language and the possibility of interpretation and understanding in a world with others is never truly lost, even in the most troubling times. But this is not to say that the relearning of trust is an easy new beginning after all disappointment and despair has run its course. It is not a new beginning in which we can be assured that all is going to be okay, or that we can relearn the ABC of trust in the same step-by-step manner we learn the alphabet. This is to say, there is no verifiable method, no certified lesson plan for the relearning of trust. Instead, trust is “a venture” that is “hidden, unnoticed, unacknowledged.” This is manifest, for Gadamer, in the German phrase “Vertrauen zu fassen,” a trust or confidence that requires us to grab hold of or pick up for ourselves. This is a trust or confidence that is not grounded on proof or evidence by which we may verify, authorize, or validate such trust. Amidst all failure, all disappointment, all despair and deception, trust is still there, perhaps hidden, yet quietly returning to those willing to take it up.

This, for Gadamer, is prominent in the second half of the poem. Trust is an invisible “sign in the air,” and it is from out of what is imperceptible, out of the nothing, that the new city of trust will be built. The radical meaning of the breakdown of language that Gadamer identifies in the first part of the poem leads Gadamer to identify a radical notion of trust at the end of the poem, namely, a trust that is not built on a well-grounded and verifiable foundation. But perhaps what appears radical here is just a reminder of what trust really is to begin with. Trust is not a matter of being secure in one’s reasons or grounds for trusting. If we have to trust but verify, then we are not really trusting at all. Trust is no longer trust if it requires an initial verification or evidence for this trust. We either trust or we do not.

Gadamer’s reading of trust in Domin’s poem shines a light on the ABC of trust at the heart of the linguisticuality of hermeneutic experience. For Gadamer, to understand someone or something is not a matter of “transposing” oneself into another person’s life or historical era of a text, but is much more a matter of “participation” with another person or text. This means that to understand is really a coming into an understanding with the other about the subject matter at hand. For

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23 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 401.
Gadamer, this process or event of understanding takes place within language: “Language is the medium in which substantive understanding and agreement take place between two people.”\(^{24}\) Gadamer’s model for this process of understanding is a conversation in which individuals participate together in allowing the subject matter to emerge in full. This requires an openness towards the other or a text such that we are able to accept what is spoken by the other or the text. This sense of openness is very much in line with a hermeneutics of trust as a hermeneutics of good will, in which we assume the possibility that the other person’s position is right or true. This kind of trust as openness is grounded, however, on a trust in language itself as the very medium of hermeneutic experience. Before we can trust what is spoken to us by the other or a text, we must trust our ability to hear and speak in language. More importantly, as Gadamer shows in his analysis of interpretation and understanding in translation, trust in language is a constant readiness or willingness to find a common language with the other: “Reaching an understanding in conversation presupposes that both partners are ready for it and are trying to recognize the full value of what is alien and opposed to them. If this happens mutually, and each of the partners, while simultaneously holding on to his own arguments, weighs the counterarguments, it is finally possible to achieve—in an imperceptible but not arbitrary reciprocal translation of the other’s position (we call this an exchange of views)—a common diction and a common dictum.”\(^{25}\) Trust is then not a passive disposition that one has towards the other or a text, but an active readiness for an engagement in language itself as the condition for the possibility of understanding in the first place. Trust is a participation in developing the common language that allows us to come into understanding with the other about the subject matter at hand.

This means that trust in language is not only necessary for interpretation and understanding, but it can also take place even in extreme circumstances of understanding in which meaning is perhaps uncertain or obscure, or in which all possibilities for understanding appear lost. Understanding is always a possibility as soon as we recognize the appeal or address that the text or another individual makes on us to understand. In this moment of recognition, the linguisticality of understanding comes into play for us. A trust in language is a trust that the text or the person has something to say to us, and a confidence in the other that shines a light on the belongingness we have to each other or that we have to a traditionary text. In this

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\(^{24}\) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 402.

sense, to trust in language it is to be entrusted with the other or with a text in a way that is foundational for hermeneutic experience.

This foundational trust in language for hermeneutic experience speaks to Gadamer’s great concern about the loss and relearning of trust in Domin’s essay. A breakdown in this trust would be a breakdown in language, a breakdown in interpretation and understanding, and ultimately a breakdown in hermeneutic experience as such. This is why trust is the most difficult or the most burdensome ABC because it speaks to what is fundamental and often forgotten about hermeneutic experience, namely, that it is grounded in those painful and disappointing experiences of human finitude. In Gadamer’s discussion of hermeneutic experience and the person of experience in *Truth and Method*, experience is considered in its negative quality. This is to say, true experience is marked by a transformative confrontation with what is strange, alien, or different from what we already know or are familiar with. This means that experience is never a confirmation of what we already know, but a change in our own knowledge about the subject matter we encounter. Experience is always new experience, and the experienced person is one who has developed a proper disposition towards new experience: “Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them.”26 Gadamer discusses this kind of experience as that from which no one is “exempt” and from which no one, not even our own children, can be spared.27 Gadamer’s point here is that genuine experience is not something that is always pleasant or enjoyable, but rather it “involves many disappointments of one’s expectations” and that “refers chiefly to painful and disagreeable experiences.”28 In reference to Aeschylus, Gadamer tells us that experience is a “learning through suffering,” in which what we learn is not a particular piece of knowledge, but our very limitations as human beings: “Real experience is that whereby man becomes aware of his finiteness. In it are discovered the limits of the power and the self-knowledge of his planning reason. The idea that everything can be reversed, that there is always time for everything and that everything somehow returns, proves to be an illusion. Rather, the person who is situated and acts in history continually experiences the fact that nothing returns.”29

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A trust in language is to accept this truth of hermeneutic experience, while at the same time, it is to not withdraw into a pessimistic or nihilistic disposition about the world and others. If language is the medium of hermeneutic experience, and a trust in language is not only a readiness or openness to hear what is spoken but is more importantly an active participation in the development of a common language for what is spoken to emerge linguistically, then a trust in language grounds the very possibility of hermeneutic experience. As we just saw, however, what is central to hermeneutic experience is the painful and disagreeable encounter with our own finitude. A return to the trust in language, then, is an inevitable return to this truth of hermeneutic experience. To relearn the ABC of trust in hermeneutics is to relearn that hermeneutic experience is painful. It is to recognize that what is inherent in this trust are those experiences that challenge this very trust, namely, those experiences that overwhelm us and shake our confidence in language and in each other. The task of hermeneutic trust, cast in this light, is a constant affirmation of this trust precisely in those dreadful moments when all seems lost, when we are cast out of the city walls without doors, chased, and defenseless. Trust is not a one-time action, but must constantly be renewed and rehabilitated in our conversations with others in which we try to come into understanding with each other.

While trust and hermeneutic experience reveal this difficult truth about human finitude, Gadamer’s analysis of trust is ultimately a message of hope and possibility. Gadamer’s reading of Domin’s poem tells us that trust is never truly destroyed. At the very end of this essay, Gadamer reminds us that we simply cannot live without trust, that is, without some level of intimacy and familiarity (Vertrautheit) with the world around us. Our trust in language goes all the way down to a grounding trust that we have with ourselves, a trust that Gadamer explains allows us simply to say the letter and the word “I” and allows us to “be” an “I” to begin with. This need for trust and familiarity is echoed in some of Gadamer’s later work when he emphasizes the impossibility of enduring life without hope. For instance, in his 1998 essay, “Wissen zwischen gestern und morgen,” Gadamer describes hope (Hoffnung) as a “fundamental structure of our living consciousness, without which we could scarcely endure the burdens of life.” Gadamer’s comments here indicate the extent to which hope and trust play a pivotal role in hermeneutic experience. The “burdens of life” may refer, on the one hand, to a deeply personal experience, such as recovering from an illness,

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mourning the death of a loved one, or experiencing the betrayal of a friend or family member. On the other hand, the “burdens of life” could include a broader and more expansive socio-political context, such as the failure or breakdown of institutions, war, and as we saw earlier, political movements towards totalitarianism. However, Gadamer’s point about hope and a grounding trust in language is that even in these most dire and catastrophic times, when we seem unable or unwilling to trust language and trust our own reality, or when trust seems lost or long ago forgotten, trust is still always there, perhaps quiet and hidden, perhaps imperceptible, but always as a possibility guiding us along in an indispensable way.

Domin on Vertrauen and the Dennoch of Poetry

To further understand this hermeneutic trust in language that emerges in Gadamer’s reading of Domin’s poem, we should look to Domin’s own essays and interpretations of her own poetry. In turning to Domin’s work, we can draw out a “poetics of trust” that emerges in her own comments on trust (Vertrauen) and the “nevertheless” (Dennoch) of her own life and poetry. In fact, in the foreword to her Gesammelte Essays, she tells us that Vertrauen is the Hauptwort of her life story that always speaks to a “nevertheless” in her life.³³ As someone who lived a life in exile, trust is and was always a trust in the help and generosity of others, as well as a trust in the different language worlds in which she would find a home. For Domin, what could not be lost in her experience of a “permanent flight” in exile was language itself: “For me, language is that which could not be lost [das Unverlierbare] after everything else had proved itself capable of being lost. The final, irremovable home. Only the cessation of the person (brain death) can take it away from me.”³⁴ While language can never be lost in exile, it is certainly in a crisis, and a crisis in language, for Domin, is a crisis of belonging: “We certainly live in a crisis of belongings [Zugehörigkeiten]. Also in a language and speech crisis. The communication crisis, the identity crisis. In the not-home [Nicht-Heimat].”³⁵ Domin’s entire life and poetic project is a resistance to this crisis in language and belonging. Language is that which she will defend to her last breath and for which she

will stand, like Luther, without exception: “I can simply do no other.” 36 This, as we will see, is the spirit of her trust that is always a “nevertheless” or a “still yet.” A poetics of trust is to always continue to salvage a trust in language even amidst a crisis in language.

In 1966, Domin offers her own self-interpretation of the poem “Lied zur Ermutigung II.” She first notes that what emerges in the poem is a kind of dire reality: “The crisis in trust, the crisis in language, mendacity that has already become constitutional after the shattering of belongings.” 37 Here, as in Gadamer’s own reading, the crisis in trust, confidence, or a belonging with each other is a crisis in language and in the falsification of language. It is a crisis of mendacity, *Verlogenheit*, that has taken root in a language that has undergone many distortions under Hitler’s Germany. But, she says, “something livable suddenly appears or is held out before us from out of the unlivable, a nonetheless [ein Trotzdem].” 38 In this self-interpretation, about six years after writing the poem, she is now able to consider whether that which is livable that emerges from the unlivable is the poem itself, namely, that the word and language of the poem is precisely the “city from out of nothing,” 39 or in Gadamer’s interpretation, the new city of trust. The poem, for Domin, is the ever possible “nevertheless” in the face of the distortion or falsification of language. Amidst the sentiment of someone like Theodor W. Adorno, for whom poetry after Auschwitz would be something barbaric, Domin holds on to poetry as that which affirms hope for a return to trust and language.

In *Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen 1987/1988*, Domin provides another self-interpretation of “Lied zur Ermutigung II” and returns once again to the idea of poetry being a “nevertheless.” 40 Here, Domin provides more contour to what she was thinking as she was writing this poem. What Gadamer identifies as the “city of trust” that contained no doors, Domin tells us she was thinking about her home country, Germany. Those who were being chased around the city walls are those who were chased and hunted down across Europe by the Nazi regime. Those who wanted to save themselves ran from their homeland and “fled to the edge of the world.” 41 They had to remove themselves not only from Germany but also from the German

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language, a language that had become distorted and falsified. Much like Arendt’s analysis in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Domin recalls that the word “imprisonment without trial” became “protective custody,” and “murder” became “special treatment.” As Domin tells us, this kind of warping or distortion of language left behind a mistrust in the German language as a language that had proven itself to be so corruptible. Furthermore, she claims that the language continues to be abused through an increased exposure to technology and industrialization, which leads to a “process of dehumanization.”

In response to this falsified and distorted language, the poet must take up a kind of language-ethos (Sprachethos) that she finds in a passage from chapter XIII in Confucius’s *Analects*. Here, in response to a question regarding what is of the greatest importance in governing a city, the master tells us: “The rectification of names.” There is a close relationship between language and reality in this passage, such that, “If names aren’t rectified, speech doesn’t follow from reality.” The consequences that follow from not rectifying the names of things, for Confucius, is an inability to maintain justice in a community. What is proper for the noble-minded, then, is to be “anything but careless in speech.” Domin finds this passage in Confucius as crucial for the task of the poet, for whom the proper naming of things is an ethical task that maintains a strong association between language and reality. A constant displacement between a word and its intended reality “destroys orientation and makes truthfulness impossible from the outset.”

The poet is precisely the one who “renews” and maintains a vitality in language such that we can continue to find our place in a reality that “relentlessly withdraws itself.” This renewal of language is a renewal of trust in language. This is why trust, *Vertrauen*, is called for after the chase scene depicted in the first stanza of the poem. The poet must reinstate this trust in language, a trust that is at the same time both “that which is the most difficult and the simplest thing.” To reinstate this trust in language is a return to the beginning of language, namely, the ABC: “Trust should be in every letter. Here, it is demanded and also presupposed. Every child learns the ABC. Trust is nevertheless [dennoch] what is called for. And then

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it is described how this trust is conjured up, as it were. (Trust between human beings, as well as the trust in language)." If we read the poet as the subject of the third stanza of the poem, then the trust that the poet must reinstate in language is something that is, as Gadamer notes, imperceptible or unnoticed. It is a small, invisible sign in the air, from out of nothing, in which the new city of trust will emerge: "It is this nevertheless [dies Dennoch], this rising confidence [Zuversicht] from out of the nothing—the moment of freedom, as I’ve named it—, which the poem gives to the author and the reader. Forever and always." 

Domin’s commentary on the “nevertheless” of poetry resonates with another German-language poet who lived in exile during and after WWII, Paul Celan, and whose own commentary can provide clarity on the poetic relationship between language, trust, and reality. In his often-cited Bremen speech from 1958, Celan discusses the existential crisis of language during the years of the Third Reich: “Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface, ‘enriched’ [angerichert] by it all.”

What is crucial to note here is that while language was not ultimately lost, it returns or resurfaces for Celan as something that has undergone a transformation. It is in this “enriched” language, Celan tells us, that he wrote his poetry during and after the war as a search for reality: “In this language I tried, during those years and the years after, to write poems: in order to speak, to orient myself, to find out where I was, where I was going, to chart my reality.” For Celan, this reality is something uncertain and always a matter of “movement,” of “being en route,” and “an attempt to find a direction.” Celan’s trust in language and his own version of the “nevertheless” of poetry is in the way he describes poetry as a “letter in a bottle thrown out to sea” in the hope of approaching this reality.

For both Domin and Celan, as poets of exile,
the search for reality in their poetry is not a matter of simple referentiality between word and thing or object. Celan’s poetic works, for instance, are notoriously difficult to interpret and demand rigorous attention to linguistic, philological, philosophical, historical, religious, biographical, and literary references. This is to say, Celan’s reality is incredibly complex, always in movement, and always underway. With this, we may gain some insight into Domín’s reference to the language-ethos she finds in Confucius. The rectification of language, or the proper naming of things, is not a return to what is old, nor an attempt to speak in an unambiguous or transparent language about a given, stable, clear reality. Instead, the “nevertheless” of the poetic task is to constantly renew, revitalize, or transform language in the poet’s search for truth and reality that is always en route.

This sense of renewal and revitalization of language is present in Domín’s discussion of the ‘nevertheless’ of poetry as a matter of resistance and a transformation of reality. In her fifth lecture of *Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen 1987/1988*, she calls upon the figure of Sisyphus as a metaphor for the “nevertheless” of her poetry, which for her is a “metaphor of resistance.” The “nevertheless” of Sisyphus, for Domín, is the possibility for a change that only remains a possibility so long as one maintains a constant effort to transform reality by attempting to make this reality “livable.” This kind of resistance in the “nevertheless” of poetry is also found in Domín’s essay, “Zivilcourage, ein Fremdwort,” in which the poet must have the courage not only to use their own judgement, but also to make sure “that one does not strangle the voice of their own conscience.”

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57 See Hilde Domín, *Wo zu Lyrik Heute: Dichtung und Leser in der gesteuerten Gesellschaft* (München, Germany: Piper, 1968), in which she offers several remarks on the relationship between poetry and reality, as well as the dangers of the “objectification” (Verdinglichung) of reality (11–14). In one particular footnote, she clearly wants to distance her comments on poetry and reality from any kind of simple realism or referentiality: “In order to avoid any misunderstanding, I am not speaking here about realism in art in the technical sense of the word, that is to say, not about the reproduction [Wiedergabe] of reality but about the relationship between poetry and reality” (12). See also Margret Karsch, *Das Dennoch jedes Buchstabs: Hilde Domins Gedichte im Diskurs um Lyrik nach Auschwitz* (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript Verlag, 2007), 86–99. Here, Karsch provides a much more substantial and nuanced discussion of Domín on the relationship between the poetic word and reality. While my interpretation focuses on a collection of Domín’s essays and lectures on poetry, Karsch’s analysis focuses on a handful of Domín’s poems, including “Linguistik” (1961) and “Wort und Ding” (1969). In this discussion, Karsch likewise refers to Celan’s Bremen speech in relation to this question of language and reality in Domín’s works.

“nevertheless” requires the courage to “call things by their name and to misrepresent [umzulügen] nothing for the sake of expediency.” Here again Domin refers to Confucius, for whom finding the correct word is a matter of avoiding dishonesty and deception in one’s own conscience. Poetic resistance involves the courage to exercise one’s own understanding, to listen to one’s own conscience, and to stand up against all attempts to distort or subvert the proper naming of things. Such a courage is one that preserves the trust in language. If Zivilcourage is a strange or foreign word, as Domin claims, then poetic resistance is to make such strange words familiar again through our own actions: “Fremd-Worte/heimisch zu machen im Tun.” Poetry is a kind of “training in truthfulness” that affords human beings the capacity for Zivilcourage: a capacity to not only resist conforming to a dangerous authority and Gleichschaltung of a community, but also promote solidarity with others in the face of hate, denunciation, and intimidation.

What I am calling a poetics of trust in Domin’s work is a responsibility to language itself. Each poem, down to letter and word, is an attempt to restore the ABC of trust from out of distortion or falsification. A poetics of trust is an ethical demand for the poet to rectify the names of things, which is to name things as they are without deception and dishonesty. This ethical demand has ontological stakes, such that to restore the trust in language is to restore a sense of belonging to reality itself. Being and language are so intertwined that a distortion in language is a distortion of one’s own reality or orientation in the world. A poetics of trust is to always affirm the “nevertheless” of poetry that resists the distortion of language and constantly takes up the ethical task of making something livable out of the unlivable. In the face of all catastrophe and devastation, when both reality and language have run amuck, when we no longer trust ourselves and trust each other, the poem is a “nevertheless” or a “still yet” that resists and says otherwise. It is a Dennoch or Trotzdem that refuses to conform to the way things are. The poet and poem demand an uncompromising commitment to reality and to the proper naming of things. A poetics of trust requires courage to uphold and continue to search for what is true in a world saturated by untruth. As a training in truthfulness, a poetics of trust then holds fast to what is true by affirming and preserving a trust in language.

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63 Domin, “Zivilcourage,” 238.
Conclusion: A Hermeneutics of Trust. A Poetics of Trust.

Gadamer’s essay on Domin not only shines a new light on the crucial role of trust in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, but also brings philosophical hermeneutics and poetry together in their shared responsibility and commitment to language. Gadamer’s reading of Domin’s poem brings to bear an obvious but often overlooked role of trust in his philosophical hermeneutics. Trust is foundational to the linguisticality of hermeneutic experience, such that without a trust in language there is no possibility for understanding to occur. Without a trust in language we cannot enter into a conversation with the world and others. Furthermore, a reflection on trust in language reminds us of another truth about hermeneutic experience, namely, that it necessarily involves those painful and disappointing experiences that confront us with our own finitude as human beings. To trust in language is to be open to new experience regardless of its often strange, alienating, and even painful character, as well as to constantly affirm this trust in every conversation and attempt to understand. This is why Gadamer can be hopeful about trust even in the darkest of times in which trust seems all but lost and forgotten. In learning that trust is not something we come to based on any set of conditions or process of verification, we come to understand that real trust seemingly appears out of nothingness or is something imperceptible. But it is precisely for this reason that trust is always a possibility we can take up in any moment in order to find ourselves and find each other in the world. A trust in language is the possibility of finding and developing a common language with each other. The task of a hermeneutics of trust is a constant and active affirmation of this trust in even the most distrusting of times.

This hermeneutics of trust that emerges in Gadamer’s reading of Domin is complimented by what I am calling Domin’s poetics of trust that emerges in her own work. Here, we see that Gadamer and Domin, philosopher and poet, share the same task in attending to the trust in language. More specifically, we can read Domin’s poetics of trust as an instantiation of a hermeneutics of trust, whereby the poem is itself an act of trust that attempts to rectify a language that has become distorted. Insofar as the poem is an attempt to name the subject matter honestly and without misrepresentation, it is an attempt at developing a common language by which everyone can enter into a conversation with each other. The poem, as an act of trust in language, demonstrates the responsibility of the poet to language itself. To trust in language is to recognize that language is itself entrusted to the poet, and it is in language that we are all entrusted to each other. A poetics of trust is likewise a resistance to a language and reality that has become corrupted by distrust and dishonesty. The poem
as an act of trust is a “nevertheless” or a “still yet” in the face of this corruption. The poem as an act of trust is an act of courage to avoid dishonesty and to name things as they are. In so doing, the trust of the poem is an appeal to others to join in this trust. Like Gadamer, Domin’s “nevertheless” of poetry is one of hope, such that even in the throes of a city in revolt, as in Thucydides’s description of Corcyra, the poem sets out to build a new city of trust seemingly out of nothing.