



# Another Beginning? Heidegger, Gadamer, and Postmodernity

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**ABSTRACT:** Martin Heidegger's critique of modernity, and his vision of what may come after it, constitutes a sustained argument across the arc of his career. Does Hans-Georg Gadamer follow Heidegger's path of making possible "another beginning" after the modern age? In this article, I show that, in contrast to Heidegger, Gadamer cultivates modernity's hidden resources. We can gain insight into Gadamer's difference from Heidegger on this fundamental point with reference to his ambivalence toward and departure from two of Heidegger's touchstones for postmodernity, namely, Friedrich Nietzsche and Friedrich Hölderlin. We can appreciate and motivate Gadamer's proposal to rehabilitate modernity by juxtaposing his rootedness in Wilhelm Dilthey and Rainer Maria Rilke with Heidegger's corresponding interest in Nietzsche and Hölderlin. This difference in influences and conceptual starting points demonstrates Heidegger and Gadamer's competing approaches to the modern age, a contrast that I concretize through a close reading of Gadamer's choice of a poem by Rilke as the epigraph to *Truth and Method*.

Martin Heidegger's critique of modernity, and his vision of what forms of life and thinking may come after it, constitutes a sustained argument that stretches across the arc of his decades-long career and became increasingly central to his philosophical project beginning in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> Does Hans-Georg Gadamer, for his part, follow his teacher Heidegger's path of making possible "another beginning" after the modern age? Here in this article, I intend to show that, in contrast to Heidegger's proposal, Gadamer opts instead to cultivate modernity's hidden resources. We can gain insight into Gadamer's difference from Heidegger on this fundamental point in what Jürgen Habermas called, in his landmark study of the title, the philosophical discourse of modernity with reference to his ambivalence toward and departure from two of Heidegger's

touchstones for his thinking of postmodernity, namely, Friedrich Nietzsche and Friedrich Hölderlin.<sup>2</sup> My suggestion shall be that we can more fully appreciate and motivate Gadamer's proposal to rehabilitate modernity—that is, to dwell with, rather than abandon, our inheritances from modern thought and culture—by juxtaposing his rootedness in Wilhelm Dilthey and Rainer Maria Rilke with the later Heidegger's persistent and corresponding interest in Nietzsche and Hölderlin. This subtle but important difference in Heidegger and Gadamer's influences and historical and conceptual starting points will demonstrate their competing approaches to the problem of the modern age. I will argue that out of these contrasts emerges a substantive disagreement between Heidegger and Gadamer concerning the possibility of another beginning after the end of modernity that the later Heidegger was so concerned to investigate, explicate, and defend—always, crucially, in dialogue with and taking provocation from Nietzsche and Hölderlin. In avowedly departing from Heidegger's central starting points in these two writers, Gadamer, I will argue, correspondingly rejects the possibility of the other beginning in which these two visionaries inspired Heidegger to believe so fervently. Gadamer's contestation of Heidegger sets the stage for his own positive thinking on these issues, meaning that we should now recognize how Gadamer substantively contributes to the philosophical discourse of modernity.

### §1. NIETZSCHE/DILTHEY

I want to investigate the sources of Gadamer's ambivalence first toward Nietzsche and then toward Hölderlin. Leo Strauss interrogates Gadamer's differences from Heidegger in their 1961 correspondence, and insightfully observes in this regard that in *Truth and Method*, “there is a chapter on Dilthey and none on Nietzsche.”<sup>3</sup> Gadamer replies, “You are entirely right when you speak of . . . Dilthey instead of Nietzsche.”<sup>4</sup> In an interview conducted in 1986, clearly still impressed by the insight contained in the correspondence of twenty-five years earlier, Gadamer admits, “I suppose that Leo Strauss was right when he said that my concern was to respond critically to Dilthey, just as it was Heidegger's concern to respond critically to Nietzsche.”<sup>5</sup> In both these comments, we see a pronounced profession of agreement by Gadamer with Strauss concerning the significance of the rootedness of Gadamer's thinking in the concerns of Dilthey rather than in those of Nietzsche. With regard to Heidegger's relation to both Nietzsche—and, as we will soon see, Hölderlin as well—Gadamer proclaims a significant degree of ambivalence.

How should we understand this putative distinction between Nietzsche and Dilthey? In the 1986 interview in which he recalls his correspondence with

Strauss, Gadamer's interviewers press him to clarify his attitude toward Nietzsche, and he replies as follows:

In fact I have never understood the enthusiasm for Nietzsche, neither in those days [the 1920s and 1930s] nor in our own. I have never understood how one has come to see Nietzsche as an epochal figure, or perhaps now I do understand it. Nietzsche is the one, I suppose, who has expressed what it is about modernity that makes life impossible. But the productive use of Nietzsche which so many of my friends and later my students undertook has always been strange to me.<sup>6</sup>

This comment is, we must admit, a rather extraordinary thing for a Heideggerian thinker to utter. Of course, in his later interpretations, Heidegger forcefully and exhaustively articulated exactly the thesis that Gadamer professes here not to understand, namely, that Nietzsche was "an epochal figure." In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer articulates more precisely the reason why Nietzsche was epochally important from Heidegger's perspective:

In raising the question of being and thus reversing the whole direction of Western metaphysics, the true predecessor of Heidegger was neither Dilthey nor Husserl, then, but rather *Nietzsche*. Heidegger may have realized this only later; but in retrospect we can see that the aims already implicit in *Being and Time* were to raise Nietzsche's radical critique of "Platonism" to the level of the tradition he criticizes, to confront Western metaphysics on its own level, and to recognize that transcendental inquiry is a consequence of modern [*neuzeitlichen*] subjectivism, and so overcome [*überwinden*] it.<sup>7</sup>

Gadamer insightfully suggests here that for Heidegger, the struggle with Nietzsche meant the struggle with metaphysics. Indeed, Heidegger considered Nietzsche the consummation of ontotheology, the metaphysical attempt to grasp the meaning of entities as such and as a whole.<sup>8</sup> At the same time that Nietzsche achieved the late-modern culmination of the entire metaphysical tradition, he also pointed positively toward how to twist free from that tradition and hence beyond the modern age. As Heidegger exclaims of Nietzsche in the *Black Notebooks*, we must "allow this endwork [*Endwerk*] to rest in itself as an impetus into the other beginning."<sup>9</sup> In other words, when we dwell with Nietzsche's metaphysics of eternally recurring will to power, we see the nihilistic outcome or end of the ontotheological tradition, but we also glimpse how the end of the history of being consequently opens up for us another beginning after metaphysics. In pointing to the way Heidegger saw Nietzsche as a positive model for freeing ourselves from metaphysics, Gadamer signals his awareness of the motif in Heidegger of the double-sided nature of Nietzsche's significance: "I just want to remind you what [the philosophical relevance of Nietzsche] is all about: 'It is the question of overcoming [*Überwindung*] metaphysics.' This is indeed the question which

Nietzsche was asked by Heidegger to discuss.”<sup>10</sup> As Gadamer recognizes, Heidegger thought that Nietzsche represented both the height of metaphysics as well as the hint as to how positively to escape from it.

Though Gadamer here intimates his awareness of this theme in Heidegger, he does not devote any significant discussion to Nietzsche in *Truth and Method*, as Strauss insightfully noticed, and does so only in a few places elsewhere in his corpus. Both in his occasionally explicit uneasiness and more frequent silence about Nietzsche, Gadamer expresses hesitancy concerning the prospect of following Heidegger’s path of meditating on the prospect of freeing ourselves from the metaphysics of modernity and consequently opening up a new and postmodern future.<sup>11</sup> Gadamer’s skepticism about Nietzsche and his influence on European intellectual culture more generally amounts, then, to a dramatic consequence of his objection to Heidegger’s postmodern project that was motivated by Heidegger’s dramatic struggle against Nietzsche. We can see the outline of Gadamer’s alternative to Heidegger here in the fact that he does not merely reject Nietzsche in a one-sidedly negative gesture, but rather claims a starting point of his own in Dilthey: “Dilthey instead of Nietzsche,” as he expresses this point in his letter to Strauss. What, then, is the significance of Dilthey here?

As is well known, a considerable part of the argument of *Truth and Method* enacts a struggle against Dilthey’s formative influence on the development of modern hermeneutics, as signaled by the title of an important chapter of that text: “Overcoming the Epistemological Problem Through Phenomenological Investigation [*Forschung*].”<sup>12</sup> Dilthey’s great ambition was to provide (as per the title of one of his many unfinished works) a *Critique of Historical Reason*, that is, to justify the cognitive achievements of the humanities and social sciences on the model of Kant’s justification of the natural sciences in the First Critique. Following Heidegger, Gadamer strongly rejects this epistemological starting point: “Today’s task could be to free ourselves from the dominant influence of Dilthey’s approach and from the prejudices of the discipline that he founded.”<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Gadamer shares Dilthey’s distinctive and hermeneutical orientation toward defending the *Geisteswissenschaften*. As he explains in the introduction to *Truth and Method*, he admires and follows “the breadth of the historical horizon in which Dilthey has placed all philosophizing.”<sup>14</sup> Significantly, the later Heidegger expresses only muted respect for precisely this salient feature of Dilthey’s philosophical project: “*Dilthey*: does not belong among the philosophers, but still less among the historiologists [*Historikern*]; he is a historical thinker of the type whose greatest form was realized in the nineteenth century by Jacob Burckhardt.”<sup>15</sup> We should understand Heidegger’s claim that Dilthey “does not belong among the philosophers” as more than a merely petty swipe or insult. Rather, Heidegger suggests Dilthey is not an epochal metaphysician who has reoriented our entire culture’s sense of what it means for anything to be at all.

Dilthey may certainly be an important thinker *about* history, which places him alongside the likes of the historian Burckhardt, but Dilthey, according to Heidegger, does not count as a thinker who has *formed* history through his own thought. Nietzsche, on the other hand, was for Heidegger just such a thinker. In other words, Nietzsche occupies an exalted position in the history of being and Dilthey does not. Indeed, in virtue of Heidegger's later orientation toward the development of a comprehensive history of being for the revolutionary purpose of freeing ourselves from the totalizing and one-sided way of viewing reality characteristic of metaphysics as ontotheology, Nietzsche became one of his most important later interlocutors while Dilthey ultimately did not.

It is for that reason that Gadamer establishes a sharp contrast between his connection to Dilthey and Heidegger's to Nietzsche. Gadamer does not share Heidegger's persistent concern with the history of being for which Nietzsche stands as an avatar. Instead, he wants to stay behind and bask in the setting sun of the twilight of modernity. Gadamer's avowed starting point in Dilthey is crucially consonant with his dispute with Heidegger on this point. In his systematic attempt throughout *Truth and Method* to dispute the variously epistemological, historicist, and romantic models of modern hermeneutics, a struggle signaled by his avowal in the 1986 interview "to respond critically to Dilthey," Gadamer remains focused on and dwells within a modern intellectual tradition—albeit one he attempts to advance in a radical way very much rooted in Heidegger. But where Heidegger wants to move on to the new beginning after the exhaustion of modernity, past the distinctive intellectual movements and achievements of the modern age, Gadamer finds that not everything in modernity is worth abandoning.

According to Gadamer, the modern tradition of hermeneutics is one such resource that still demands thoughtful attention, whereas Heidegger in his later work increasingly ceases to identify his own thinking with hermeneutics. As he provocatively and succinctly puts it in a 1973 letter to Otto Pöggeler, "Hermeneutical philosophy? Oh, that is Gadamer's thing [*ist die Sache von Gadamer*]!"<sup>16</sup> The later Heidegger, in his persistent attempt to open up another beginning, slyly twists free of any reductive or narrowing label for his thinking: "It is always risky [*verfänglich*]," as he puts it in the *Black Notebooks*, "to give names to the basic positions of philosophical thinking."<sup>17</sup> This dictum would seem to apply especially to labels like "hermeneutics" or "hermeneutical philosophy" that have their origins distinctively in the modern age, since such associations risk obviating or imperiling Heidegger's maverick attempt to think another beginning free of any trace of the deficiencies and shortcomings distinctive of modern philosophy. Indeed, when asked in 1953/1954 why he had "dropped both words ['phenomenology' and 'hermeneutics']" to identify his own thinking, Heidegger avers that he had "to abandon my own path of thinking to namelessness [*um*

*meinem Denkweg im Namenlosen zu lassen*].<sup>18</sup> Gadamer, who freely placed his thinking under the banner of “philosophical hermeneutics”—meaning that he wants to put the tradition of hermeneutical thinking, which traces its modern origins to Friedrich Schleiermacher as well as Dilthey, on a new philosophical basis—decidedly does not share this compunction about philosophical labels. “Hermeneutics” requires avowed rehabilitation and new life, not abandonment in favor of a radical mode of thinking without name or label. It is this difference that I read Gadamer as gesturing toward in the contrast he draws between Dilthey, now understood as a symbol for the hermeneutical reinvigoration and rehabilitation but not abandonment of modern thinking, and Nietzsche, who represents the Heideggerian movement to another beginning.

## §2. HÖLDERLIN/RILKE

Seen from a certain angle, Gadamer’s attitude toward Hölderlin seems markedly different from his predominantly negative characterization of and avowed distance from Nietzsche. Like Heidegger—perhaps even more so, since he makes it one of the central features of his entire hermeneutics—Gadamer derives enormous inspiration from Hölderlin’s motto that “we are a conversation.”<sup>19</sup> No such central concept from Nietzsche makes its way into the very heart of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. While Nietzsche only infrequently appears in Gadamer’s work, he devotes many essays to interpreting Hölderlin’s poetry, several of which are collected in the volume dedicated to the hermeneutics of poetry in his *Gesammelte Werke*.<sup>20</sup> Finally, one finds many approving and emotionally resonant allusions to and quotations from Hölderlin’s poetry throughout Gadamer’s corpus, including in a 2002 letter written less than two months before his death at the age of 102 containing the following distillation of the very essence of his hermeneutics: “In the constantly changing structure of our essentially finite languages, we might find, with Hölderlin, that we ‘still have access to much of the divine.’”<sup>21</sup> It is difficult to imagine Gadamer appealing to Nietzsche in such a movingly positive and appropriative gesture or under similar life circumstances.

It is thus perhaps surprising that we observe a similar dynamic to Gadamer’s ambivalence toward Nietzsche in his avowal that he does not follow Heidegger in the direction of Hölderlin’s poetry. When he proclaims, “I did not follow him [Heidegger] on the path [*Wege*] of an inspiration from the poetic mythos of Hölderlin,” Gadamer sounds the same note as in his avowed distance from Heidegger’s obsession with Nietzsche.<sup>22</sup> Like his reaction to Strauss’s insight concerning his distance from Nietzsche, Gadamer gestures here toward a difference with Heidegger in terms of a rejection of one of the latter’s most important starting points and conversation partners. As he also does when considering the difference between Nietzsche and Dilthey, Gadamer significantly repeats

this claim concerning Hölderlin multiple times, suggesting the importance of the point: “I did not need to follow Heidegger, who based himself on Hölderlin instead of Hegel [*der Hölderlin gegen Hegel*] . . . in order to recognize the hubris [*Hybris*] that resides in concepts.”<sup>23</sup> What significance should we attach to Gadamer explicitly taking leave from Heidegger’s turn to Hölderlin?

Heidegger’s relation to and interpretation of Hölderlin is, of course, a highly complex topic.<sup>24</sup> It will, for our purposes, suffice to say that Heidegger views Hölderlin’s significance principally in terms of the way his poetry makes accessible to the present a new relation to being as such, as he makes clear in the following programmatic statement: “A poetic turning toward his [Hölderlin’s] poetry is possible only as a *thoughtful* altercation [*Auseinandersetzung*] with the *revelation of being* [*Offenbarung des Seyns*] that is achieved in his poetry.”<sup>25</sup> For Heidegger, Hölderlin envisions a radically new and non-modern (if not “postmodern”) understanding of being. His poetry hence demands thoughtful attention, and so Heidegger frankly dubs him “the poet of the other beginning.”<sup>26</sup> Hölderlin points the way to a new relation between humanity and being that goes beyond the impoverished, reductive, and ultimately nihilistic understanding of being characteristic of late modernity and its technologically oriented way of life. When the later Heidegger speaks of another beginning for Western culture and our relation to being, he upholds Hölderlin’s poetry as the most profound and inspiringly hopeful account of that possibility for our entire culture—if only we were able to hear his poetry in the right way. For Heidegger, Hölderlin shows us nothing less than the “‘transition’ [*Übergang*]” to another beginning outside or beyond the modern age.<sup>27</sup>

Just as Gadamer expresses reluctance to follow Heidegger in his altercation with Nietzsche’s metaphysics and the other beginning such a confrontation opens up, so too Gadamer’s ambivalence about Heidegger’s Hölderlinian turn should be read as motivated by a disagreement with Heidegger concerning the very possibility of another beginning after modernity. With regard to Nietzsche, I sketched Gadamer’s alternative to Heidegger in terms of his preferred starting point in Dilthey. A corresponding illustration of Gadamer’s thinking can be adduced in the case of Hölderlin, this time with Rilke playing the role of counterweight to Hölderlin just as Dilthey was the antagonist of Heidegger’s Nietzschean turn. I will now reconstruct, with reference to Rilke, Gadamer’s ambivalence concerning Heidegger’s Hölderlin.

Heidegger would no doubt have agreed with Gadamer’s insightful reading of Hölderlin as the poet of “the pain of separation [*Schmerz der Trennung*].”<sup>28</sup> That is, in Heideggerian terms, Hölderlin articulates our abandonment by being, or the way our thinking has forgotten the inexhaustible source of our forms of intelligibility, but Hölderlin also positively indicates how to regain contact with the gods. When Gadamer signals his distrust of Heidegger’s turn to Hölderlin,

he must refer to these Hölderlinian themes of abandonment and a subsequent new beginning that became so programmatic for the later Heidegger. To get a glimpse of another perspective on Gadamer's alternative to this Heideggerian project, we should turn to one of his other poetic touchstones, namely, Rilke.<sup>29</sup> In the recently published *Black Notebooks* circa 1938-1939, Heidegger explicitly compares Rilke unfavorably to Hölderlin: "Stefan George and Rilke deserve esteem, but they should never be employed as aids to the interpretation [*Auslegung*] of Hölderlin, for they are nowhere equal to or even close to his historical destiny [*Bestimmung*] and cannot at all be compared to him."<sup>30</sup> On Heidegger's reading, Rilke fails to live up to the incredibly high poetic standard set by Hölderlin because only the latter provides us with a picture of how to get out of modernity and back into contact with the gods: "Rilke stands, although more essentially and more poetically in his own proper course, as little as does Stefan George on the path of the vocation [*Berufung*] of the 'poet,' a vocation grounded by Hölderlin but nowhere taken up. Rilke has not—and even less has George—surmounted [*bewältigt*] Western humanity and its 'world' in a poetic-thoughtful way."<sup>31</sup> For this devastating reason, Heidegger ascribes to Rilke—in explicit contrast to Hölderlin—"the lack of essential *decision* [*wesentlicher Entscheidungen*]," which I read as a description of Rilke's unfortunate inability to be anything but modern.<sup>32</sup>

These unpublished comments from the *Black Notebooks*, of which Gadamer would of course have been unaware, shed considerable light on Heidegger's difficult and well-known interpretation of Rilke's poetry in "What Are Poets For?" from 1946.<sup>33</sup> In that essay, as in the *Notebooks* of several years earlier, Heidegger contends that Hölderlin exceeds Rilke in importance: "Rilke's poetry, in its course within the history of being, remains behind Hölderlin in rank and position."<sup>34</sup> What accounts for Rilke's lesser status as a poet in the terms of the history of being? For Heidegger, Rilke amounts to a poet of modern subjectivity who "remains moderately [*abgemilderten*] in the shadow of a Nietzschean metaphysics."<sup>35</sup> Heidegger claims that Rilke's poetry valorizes the inner space of consciousness as a sanctuary to which we could turn as a desirable alternative to the onslaught of modern technology and scientific objectification and alienation. In this latter respect, Rilke admirably and perceptively identified many of the deficiencies of the modern age, but Heidegger views his turn to interiority as a deficient response to the problem of modernity. Rilke becomes, on Heidegger's reading, merely a poet of consciousness, albeit of "the reversal of consciousness [*die Umkehrung des Bewußtseins*]."<sup>36</sup> That is, Rilke correctly saw the damagingly nihilistic effects of modern-Cartesian subjectivism, in which conscious subjects become the only sites of meaning over against a world of inert and otherwise meaningless objects. But Rilke's alternative to this distinctively modern horror is only to make the interior realm of consciousness a space to which we could retreat in order to freely discover and create meaning outside of subject-object



relations. This heroic turn to the inner heart performs, however, merely a reversal of the modern metaphysics of subjectivity, not a genuine escape from its structure. Because he still works “within the sphericity of modern metaphysics” in his turn to the interior, Rilke’s poetry fails to truly get out of modern subjectivism.<sup>37</sup> In appealing to the inner world of consciousness as the sovereign domain of meaning opposite an exterior world marked by technological objectification, Rilke remains entrapped by the logic of subjectivism.

Even worse than this subjectivistic character of his work, Rilke’s poetry accords with the most deleterious aspects of Nietzsche’s late-modern metaphysics of eternally recurring will to power. Heidegger justifies this provocative claim by arguing that Rilke’s turn to the interior world of consciousness involves a strongly voluntaristic will to emphatically turn away from the outer world that remains the center of attention for most modern people: “Memory, making inward, inverts our essence that only wills assertively, and its objects, into the innermost invisibility of the heart’s space.”<sup>38</sup> Rilke, in other words, has merely inverted the objectifying tendencies of modern technology in his own willful turn to the subjective realm of the inner heart, and in doing so, he plays into the Nietzschean metaphysics of will to power by insisting on a strongly voluntaristic decision to turn inward. When Heidegger claims, at the end of his indictment of Rilke’s Nietzschean and modern tendencies, that “no poet of this era can overtake [*überholen*]” Hölderlin, he suggests that among poets, only Hölderlin has produced a vision that goes beyond the limiting and dangerous dichotomy of subject and object and its attendant metaphysics of the will to power.<sup>39</sup> Rilke remains entrapped within this late-modern metaphysical structure, while Hölderlin helps “blaze [*spuren*] a path [*Weg*] for [his] mortal relations, a path toward the turning point [*Wende*]” beyond modernity.”<sup>40</sup> Rilke does not live up to this task and instead, as Heidegger suggested previously in the *Notebooks*, fails to meaningfully contest or go beyond modern Western culture.

Gadamer does not share Heidegger’s dim view of Rilke’s modernist deficiencies both in “What Are Poets For?” and in the *Black Notebooks*, and it is precisely in his own implicit disagreement with Heidegger’s critique that we can appreciate how Rilke functions for Gadamer as a balance to Hölderlin. As was the case also with regard to Hölderlin, Gadamer wrote extensive commentaries about Rilke, many of which are included in the volume on poetics in the *Gesammelte Werke*.<sup>41</sup> But to appreciate how Rilke provides Gadamer with a compelling and competing alternative vision to Heidegger’s Hölderlinian account of a post-modern future, we need look no further than the epigraph to *Truth and Method* Gadamer chose from Rilke:

Catch only what you’ve thrown yourself, all is  
mere skill and little gain;  
but when you’re suddenly the catcher of a ball

thrown by an eternal partner  
 with accurate and measured swing  
 towards you, to your center, in an arch  
 from the great bridgebuilder of God:  
 why catching then becomes a power—  
 not yours, a world's.<sup>42</sup>

Insofar as commentators even pay attention to Gadamer's citation of Rilke, they typically focus on the way it prefigures his theory of play, his defense of humanism, and other prominent themes in Part One of *Truth and Method*.<sup>43</sup> Rilke's poetry is too important to Gadamer, however, to be treated in so limited a fashion. The Rilke epigraph, I will suggest, poetically expresses insights at the very heart of Gadamerian hermeneutics. Furthermore, Heidegger himself comments on this poem in "What Are Poets For?" and suggests a reading at odds with how Gadamer deploys the poem as the epigraph to his *magnum opus*. As I will now argue, we should see the epigraph in the wider context of Gadamer's entire conception of our belonging to historical tradition in a way that invites comparison with Heidegger's Hölderlin. Gadamer's choice of Rilke's poem as the epigraph to *Truth and Method* suggests an implicit but spirited confrontation with Heidegger.

Rilke contrasts two ways of catching: You can catch either "only what you've thrown yourself" or "a ball / thrown by an eternal partner." In the context of Gadamer quoting this poem as the epigraph to *Truth and Method*, I read these images as competing metaphors for human understanding.<sup>44</sup> The first conception is strongly subjectivistic in character, suggesting that understanding is a sovereign act of will in which we rely only on our own individual capacities for reasoning. The line describing this conception ("Catch only what you've thrown yourself") recalls Kant's monumental claim that "reason has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design."<sup>45</sup> In other words, we can know with certainty only by means of the necessary concepts and principles we use *a priori* to organize experience. The resonance of Kant here also usefully highlights Gadamer's subsequent critique of the Enlightenment. Rilke, and following him Gadamer, suggests that this model, according to which human reason sovereignly organizes experience, is only a narrowly deficient and one-sidedly reductive way of conceiving how, first of all and most of the time, we understand.

Rilke writes that when we realize we are playing catch not only by ourselves but rather with "an eternal partner," we see that the power to catch belongs not only to ourselves, but to "a world." I suggest that the "eternal partner" here names tradition, which for Gadamer functions as the necessary background for all acts of understanding and as a constant conversation partner for whoever wants to authentically understand. How is tradition "eternal"? It stretches far back into the past history of human consciousness and extends indefinitely into the future,

insofar as whoever in the present engages with the past and what it has handed down to us carries tradition forward and keeps it alive. Once we see that we understand only thanks to tradition—that we play catch with an eternal partner encompassing the history of human languages and texts, as well as the reality those human artifacts try to capture and describe—then we will correctly see our capacity for understanding as belonging necessarily to a wider, richer historical context from which we can never wholly extricate ourselves, but which provides us with all our capacities in the first place. Rilke evocatively calls this ineluctably deep background “a world.”

If my reading is right, then Gadamer quotes Rilke at the outset of *Truth and Method* in order to show that the voluntarist and subjectivist conception of human understanding that Rilke compares to catching a ball you have thrown yourself is at best only one stage or level of understanding. Like Rilke in his turn in the poem toward seeing catching as a power belonging to a world, Gadamer will in the course of *Truth and Method* go beyond subjectivist theories of understanding (such as Schleiermacher’s and Dilthey’s) toward a conception of understanding as occurring only against the dynamic backdrop of tradition: “*Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in a happening of tradition [Überlieferungsgeschehen], a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated.*”<sup>46</sup> Rilke’s poem dramatizes precisely this distinction in conceptions of understanding. My reading also suggests that Gadamer’s choice of the epigraph from Rilke implicitly disputes Heidegger’s reading of Rilke as a Nietzschean poet of the will to power who never transcended modern subjectivism. For Gadamer, Rilke is no voluntarist but is rather attuned to this very happening of understanding to which Gadamer, following Heidegger in this respect, calls attention. Significantly for our purposes, Heidegger refers in “What Are Poets For?” to the very poem Gadamer uses as an epigraph when he elliptically suggests that the expression “eternal partner [*ewige Mitspielerin*]” names Rilke’s distinctively modern and hence deleteriously metaphysical understanding of “entities in their entirety [*Seienden im Ganzen*].”<sup>47</sup> On Heidegger’s analysis, as we have seen, Rilke’s understanding of the being of entities is in terms of modern subjectivism and will to power. Gadamer subtly but convincingly contests Heidegger’s harsh critique by suggesting that Rilke goes beyond subjectivism toward a dynamic and indeed phenomenological attunement to the way understanding happens to us—not as something we merely will as on a modern conception, but rather as a bequest dynamically handed down to us by tradition.

How does Rilke’s poem, as I read it here, function also as a rebuke of Heidegger’s Hölderlin? Gadamer quotes these lines from Rilke because they evoke his overall conception of our radical belongingness to historical tradition.<sup>48</sup> Although Rilke’s anti-Kantian picture of understanding suggests a radical critique

of modern thinking with which Gadamer undoubtedly has profound sympathy, Rilke and Gadamer's shared picture of the way we inextricably belong to history implies that we also belong to the modern age, in particular, of which we are all today a part. Heidegger was wrong to one-sidedly read Rilke as a Nietzschean poet of subjectivism, but for Gadamer, Rilke does suggest that we do always already belong to modernity as that tradition we have inherited and in which we live. I would concede this latter point to Heidegger's interpretation. On my reading, Gadamer wants to argue that we do belong to the modern age—a fact we can acknowledge without succumbing to modernity's worst and most excessive and damaging features, such as the will to power that Heidegger tendentiously reads into Rilke. Heidegger's Hölderlin, on the other hand, evokes a world in which we have fallen away from the gods and from being, and so both the thinker and his poet in turn creatively imagine a future in which we have completely left modernity behind. Rilke and Gadamer reject this utopian hope. For them, we cannot just move beyond an age that ineluctably claims us and that also always enables and makes possible all our understanding.<sup>49</sup> Instead, we must live with—and live up to—what we have inherited from tradition.

### §3. CONCLUSION

Earlier, I argued that the contrast between Dilthey and Nietzsche suggested that Gadamer would rehabilitate modern thinking rather than leave it behind entirely. Gadamer's invocation of Rilke instead of Hölderlin, meanwhile, forms part of his argument that we always dwell within an existing historical tradition—including modernity—and can never simply abandon those traditions we inherit. Not only does Rilke suggest an alternative to Heidegger; Gadamer also subtly employs Rilke precisely against Heidegger's infamous reading of him as a thinker of modern subjectivity. In his appeals to Dilthey and Rilke, Gadamer carefully but decidedly distances himself from Heidegger's postmodern touchstones in Nietzsche and Hölderlin—and the call to another beginning that they sound. Gadamer's reactions to this family of figures suggest a sketch, at least, of his own distinctive way of thinking about modernity after Heidegger. Gadamer's readings of Nietzsche, Dilthey, Hölderlin, and Rilke indicate this subtle but important contrast with Heidegger's critique of modernity, and the specific nature of his understanding of these figures, as I have shown, further substantiates my argument that he rejects the Heideggerian vision of another, postmodern beginning. Following Dilthey and Rilke, I argue, Gadamer rehabilitates the central themes, concepts, motifs, and images of the modern age in order to cultivate their hidden resources and motivate a form of hope that modernity still has something to offer us. Validating this way of reading Gadamer's relation to Heidegger and of his philosophical project as a charitable rehabilitation of modern culture and

thinking would require, however, additional interpretative work beyond the scope of this article. I invite future Gadamer scholarship, then, to attend to these hermeneutic possibilities for seeing Gadamer as a post-Heideggerian thinker of the modern age that have perhaps not yet been fully explored. Such a project requires attending not only to Gadamer's relation to Heidegger, but also to the possible connections between Gadamer's thinking and that of other important theorists of modernity.

## NOTES

1. As Hubert L. Dreyfus puts it, "Around 1930 . . . Heidegger began to investigate the understanding of being peculiar to modern Western culture" ("Heidegger on the Connection Between Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics," 290). Even as pronounced a critic of Heidegger as Jürgen Habermas recognizes that "Heidegger brought the discourse of modernity into a genuinely philosophical movement of thought once again" (*The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, 53).
2. On Heidegger's appeals to Nietzsche, Hölderlin, as well as Van Gogh (whom I do not discuss in this connection, since as a painter he has no immediately obvious analogue in Gadamer's thinking) as postmodern touchstones, see Iain Thomson, "Nihilism as the Deepest Problem; Art as the Best Response." See also Heidegger's fascinating list of "those who created and suffered" in their thinking of another beginning: "Schiller, Hölderlin, Kierkegaard, Van Gogh, Nietzsche—[all] were torn [*entrissen wurden*] too early from a lucid existence" (Martin Heidegger, *Ponderings II–VI: Black Notebooks 1931–1938*, 235/*Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 94: *Überlegungen II–VI (Schwarze Hefte 1931–1938)*, 324).
3. Hans-Georg Gadamer and Leo Strauss, "Correspondence Concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*," 5.
4. *Ibid.*, 8.
5. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, 145.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 248/*Gesammelte Werke 1: Hermeneutik I. Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 262.
8. On Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche, and on Heidegger's definition of ontotheology, I follow here Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 7–39.
9. Heidegger, *Ponderings II–VI*, 273/*Überlegungen II–VI*, 374.
10. Gadamer, *Hermeneutische Entwürfe*, 137.
11. The first of the two volumes of Gadamer's *Gesammelte Werke* dedicated to *Neuere Philosophie* bears the subtitle "Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger" (*Gesammelte Werke 3: Neuere Philosophie I. Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger*). The omission of Nietzsche from this trio is striking. The second volume on *Neuere Philosophie*, subtitled "Probleme, Gestalten," contains only one essay on Nietzsche, which is a largely literary analysis

- of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*Gesammelte Werke 4: Neuere Philosophie II. Probleme, Gestalten*, 448–62).
12. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 235/ *Gesammelte Werke 1*, 246. Translation modified.
  13. *Ibid.*, 158/ *Gesammelte Werke 1*, 170.
  14. *Ibid.*, xxiv/ *Gesammelte Werke 1*, 5.
  15. Heidegger, *Ponderings II–VI*, 374/ *Überlegungen II–VI*, 514.
  16. Quoted in Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, 412. Jean Grondin cites this remark in a 1996 interview with Gadamer (*ibid.*, 409–27). The original source of the quotation, apparently from a letter dated January 5, 1973, is Pöggeler’s major study *Heidegger und die hermeneutische Philosophie*, 395. Heidegger’s later relation to hermeneutics as a philosophical approach or tradition is a complex topic to which I cannot give sufficient attention here but to which I would like to return in future work.
  17. Heidegger, *Ponderings II–VI*, 206/ *Überlegungen II–VI*, 281.
  18. Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 29/ *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 12: *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 114.
  19. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 370/ *Gesammelte Werke 1*, 383. On the effective history of this idea in the Heideggerian and Gadamerian traditions, and a robust defense of it against some criticisms, see Theodore George, “Are We a Conversation? Hermeneutics, Exteriority, and Transmittability,” 331–50.
  20. Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke 9: Ästhetik und Poetik II. Hermeneutik im Vollzug*.
  21. Gadamer, “Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Letter of Support.” Dated January 14, 2002, to Andrzej Wiercinski and the First International Congress on Hermeneutics.
  22. Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, 339/ *Gesammelte Werke 4*, 477. Translation modified.
  23. Gadamer, “Reflections on my Philosophical Journey,” 37/ *Gesammelte Werke 2: Hermeneutik II. Wahrheit und Methode: Ergänzungen, Register*, 506.
  24. On the crucial political and ethical valences of Heidegger’s reading of Hölderlin, see Charles Bambach, *Thinking the Poetic Measure of Justice: Hölderlin—Heidegger—Celan*.
  25. Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymns: “Germania” and “The Rhine,”* 5/ *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 39: *Hölderlin’s Hymnen “Germanien” und “Der Rhein,”* 6. Translation modified.
  26. Heidegger, *Ponderings II–VI*, 182/ *Überlegungen II–VI*, 248.
  27. *Ibid.*, 182/ *Überlegungen II–VI*, 248.
  28. Gadamer, *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, 98/ *Gesammelte Werke 9* 235.
  29. J. M. Baker, Jr., also articulates (albeit in passing) a Gadamerian contrast between Hölderlin and Rilke that anticipates mine here (“Lyric as Paradigm: Hegel and the Speculative Instance of Poetry in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics,” 159). It should be mentioned that there are important and considerable similarities and continuities between Hölderlin and Rilke that my discussion obscures. For example, a good exploration of the way these two poets can both be seen as expressing a theory of community can be found in Hannah Vandegrift Eldridge, *Lyric Orientations: Hölderlin, Rilke, and the Poetics of Community*.

30. Heidegger, *Ponderings VII–XI: Black Notebooks 1938–1939*, 219/*Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 95: *Überlegungen VII–XI (Schwarze Hefte 1938–1939)*, 281.
31. *Ibid.*, 341/*Überlegungen VII–XI*, 438.
32. *Ibid.*/*Überlegungen VII–XI*, 438.
33. For a view of Heidegger's reading of Rilke as mostly positive, see Julian Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*, 143–7. On my view, the *Black Notebooks* indicate, at least, that Heidegger was quite negative toward Rilke. I will further substantiate this suggestion above. Also, I prefer and hence retain the earlier translation of the title "Wozu Dichter?" as "What Are Poets For?" from the collection *Poetry, Language, Thought*, rather than "Why Poets?" from the more recent translation in *Off the Beaten Track*.
34. Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, 206/*Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 5: *Holzwege*, 276.
35. *Ibid.*, 214/*Holzwege*, 286.
36. *Ibid.*, 230/*Holzwege*, 307.
37. *Ibid.*/*Holzwege*, 307.
38. *Ibid.*, 231/*Holzwege* 309.
39. *Ibid.*, 240/*Holzwege*, 320.
40. *Ibid.*, 202/*Holzwege*, 272.
41. *Gesammelte Werke* 9.
42. Quoted in Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, vi/*Gesammelte Werke* 1, xii. Gadamer quotes from an uncollected poem of Rilke's whose title has also been translated "As long as you catch self-thrown things." For the full poem, see Rainer Maria Rilke, *Uncollected Poems (Bilingual Edition)*, 138–9. Here is the passage Gadamer quotes in German: "Solange du Selbstgeworfenes fängst, ist alles / Geschicklichkeit und läßlicher Gewinn—; / erst wenn du plötzlich Fänger wirst des Balles, / den eine ewige Mitspielerin / dir zuwarf, deiner Mitte, in genau / gekanntem Schwung, in einem jener Bögen / aus Gottes. großem Brückenbau: / erst dann ist Fangen-können ein Vermögen,—/ Nicht deines, einer Welt."
43. See Richard Detsch: "Approximately the first half of this poem serves as a motto for Hans-Georg Gadamer's book *Truth and Method*, in which the renowned Heidelberg philosopher sought to formulate a non-subjective concept of play" (*Rilke's Connections to Nietzsche*, 113–4). Arnd Kerkhecher more insightfully connects the Rilke poem to Gadamer's rehabilitation of modern humanism in the opening sections of *Truth and Method* ("Bedeutung der humanistischen Tradition für die Geisteswissenschaften [GW1 1, 9–47]," 9).
44. It is helpful to remember in this connection that Gadamer's originally intended title for *Truth and Method* was the evocative "Verstehen und Geschehen," which was rejected by the publisher (Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 10: *Hermeneutik im Rückblick*, 75).
45. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxiii.
46. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 291/*Gesammelte Werke* 1, 295. Translation modified.
47. Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, 211/*Holzwege*, 282. Translation modified. Heidegger does not provide his own close reading of Rilke's poem "As long as you catch self-thrown things," the epigraph to *Truth and Method*, in "What Are Poets For?" Rather,

he quickly cites, in the passage just quoted, Rilke's line "thrown by an eternal partner" in connection with the rest of his own broader analysis of Rilke's poetry, which I have explained above.

48. For Gadamer as a thinker of belongingness, see Robert Bernasconi, "Bridging the Abyss: Heidegger and Gadamer," 21; and Jerome Veith, *Gadamer and the Transmission of History*, 81.
49. Walter Lammi refers, not without justification, to "Gadamer's orientation toward the historical past versus Heidegger's orientation toward the future" ("Hans-Georg Gadamer's 'Correction' of Heidegger," 501). I would amend this judgment, however, to say that Gadamer is also oriented toward *the present*. This immanent focus in the context of the reference to Rilke is also evoked by the title of James D. Reid's insightful study, which is responsive to but critical of Heidegger's reading of Rilke throughout, entitled *Being Here is Glorious: On Rilke, Poetry, and Philosophy*. The author would also like to thank Haley Burke, Theodore George, Charles Kalm, Cynthia Nielsen, Joachim Oberst, and Iain Thomson for their helpful comments on and suggestions for this manuscript.

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