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Duquesne Studies in Phenomenology

SOCRATES WITH A CANE

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Those who knew Hans-Georg Gadamer could not understand hermeneutics – as a theory or a practice – apart from his person. He was, as we often said, a hermeneutic Mensch. In conversation, whether it was casual or concentrated, in the classroom, or simply in sharing a meal, wine, or one of his very strong coffees together Gadamer always embodied something of the ideals of what one thinks of as defining hermeneutics. He was open to others, listened remarkably well, was attentive to what was said, and the words used, he was funny and thoughtful, and always engaged. Those of us who knew him as a teacher saw how reading a text brought it to life and those of us who counted him as a friend learned how a care for others enriched everyone.

It is not always the case that the life and person of philosopher is so profoundly commensurate with her or his work, but in the case of Gadamer one could never escape a sense that he did indeed model something of what his writings taught. Plato found this identity between words and deeds, between a logos and an ergon, to be at the heart of the immense and deep charm of Socrates. I suspect that it was not because Plato always found Socrates to be "right" that he was so in love with his teacher, but because Socrates had managed to be an example of just how one can live a life in harmony with what – for the lack of a better word – we can call the logos. Just as Plato could not imagine the practice of philosophizing without doing so in the figure of Socrates, so too must I confess that the practice of hermeneutics has, for me, a human face and voice. My Socrates spoke English, but with a charming German accent, walked with a cane, and somehow made all of us who worked with him stronger and better than we were before we met him.

Gadamer was genuinely beloved by many who knew him, and I suspect it for the same reason that Plato so loved Socrates. He was not an ideal, but an exemplar and in taking joy in the life of a philosopher – not just in being a philosophy professor, but in being a teacher, a student, and a friend – Gadamer became perhaps the best evidence for the truth of hermeneutics. Soon, those of us who had the privilege and pleasure of knowing Gadamer in this way will be gone and his name will be associated with a body of work, a set of texts, and a theory. Biographies have already been written and Gadamer has even written a memoir, but testimonies from those of us who knew him and cannot help but hear his voice in the texts he wrote still, perhaps have a place. I am grateful to the editor of this volume, James Risser, who was also a close student of Gadamer's, for the invitation to make some remarks on Gadamer as a person.

In 1999, I was invited to contribute to a collection of essays written by friends, students, and colleagues of Gadamer. That collection was published and presented to Gadamer in February 2000, on the occasion of his 100th birthday. Risser's invitation sent me back to that essay and led me to revise it for this special issue now. I do this because it was written while Gadamer was alive and during a time we spoke often, so it has the feel of Gadamer's presence for me. The core of what I wrote then still seems to be what I most want to say about how Gadamer as a person modelled the sort of philosophical life I saw and admired in him. I have modified the text and changed several parts to reflect my understanding of Gadamer from this present as well. Sadly, one of the modifications – the least significant and most trivial in some ways – was also the most difficult: I had to change the tense of that essay from the present to the past tense. I also had to change the language from German to English.

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I knew Hans-Georg Gadamer for nearly twenty-seven years at the time of his death in March of 2002. When I first met him in the Fall of 1975, he was my professor in a seminar on Hegel and Heidegger that he taught in English at Boston College. Shortly after his retirement from teaching at the University of Heidelberg in 1968, Professor Gadamer began a "second career" as a professor in North America. That career was set in motion by two people to whom Gadamer always felt a great debt: Thomas Prufer of Catholic University and Charles Scott of Vanderbilt University. Gadamer would recall his start in North America with fondness and with amazement at the patience of those who endured what he described as at best a halting ability to speak English. During one of the periods of those early years Gadamer was teaching at McMaster University in Canada. It was during the lonely evenings, isolated in snowstorms, in a foreign country that Gadamer would write his memoir entitled *Philosophische Lehrejahre*. These were the years that Gadamer would begin what he described as a second career, he often called it his "second youth" and his "philosophische Wanderjahre." It was a career that took him to Vanderbilt and Catholic University before he arrived at Boston College where he would regularly teach for one semester a year for close to a decade. By the time we met at Boston College, Gadamer was already seventy-five years old, an age that most people would be retired rather than starting a second career in a new country and a new language. Gadamer's instincts, his love of teaching and of learning languages, his curiosity about the younger generation, and his pleasure in conversation served him well in this new beginning. As I think back to those early years when I sat in Gadamer's seminars, it is striking that none of my memories, none of my images, of Gadamer are of an old man, and so I cannot speak of him without wondering about the source of his enduring youth. What stands out among all of these memories is a person who was vital, eager to learn, open to the future, curious about what the world holds. When I reflect upon what I came to know of Hans-Georg Gadamer over the years I often think of the poetic line from Wordsworth that says that "the child is the father of the man," and I wonder about the life of that remarkable man, three-quarters of a century of which was lived before I came to know him as professor who taught German and Greek philosophy in English.

When I met Gadamer, his English was still marked by errors, but as he never seemed to worry about the errors in syntax or grammar or accent, he only worried whether or not he was able to make his point, to be understood and to understand others. The struggle to communicate, to reach his listeners and to be able to respond was more important to him than the struggle to get the language "right" or to be "fluent". This passion to find words at any cost lent his errors in English an eloquence, almost a poetry. The "errors" in his English, if they were that at all, were born of a mind wedded to the elemental force of words and so those of us who were in his seminars learned to listen to what the words wanted to say. Gadamer quickly became fluent, he was a natural communicator and lover of words so learning a language came with some ease and it was clear a joy for him. Gadamer tended to speak slowly, even in German, something that seemed to be a result of his care with words, but it also clearly helped with the precision of his speech – even in English.

The impact of Gadamer's personal presence in the States is difficult to overstate. Even now, some thirty-five or more years since he stopped coming to the States, his years of teaching still resonate in so many ways. For those of us fortunate enough to have heard him during those years - and I believe for him as well – the challenge of this translation, the effort to graft the experience of teaching in a new context, provided a Gadamer – and us – with something genuinely stimulating. Philosophy came alive even in the oldest of its texts. Perhaps what most needs to be said is that Gadamer was willing to listen to those of us who were young students. He gave of his time generously and in conversation helps each of us find our way to say what we struggled to know. He clearly took pleasure in these conversations and was always ready to learn from us: he was always interested in the works we found interesting, ready to speak of American politics and cultural life, peppering us with questions about how we thought about the texts we were reading. In this way, he did something more than simply tell us what we needed to know, he showed us how to learn. And the pleasures he took in conversation and the discoveries born of teaching in a new language were infectious. Without losing its seriousness or complexity, philosophizing was a joy. It also took on a powerful concreteness thanks to Gadamer's remarkable perceptive powers which enabled him to find ideas alive in the world. I remember one occasion especially well. It took place at his home in Ziegelhausen, perhaps in the late 1980s. I was no longer a student, but the teacher in him never ceased. He and I were watching an especially close and tense tennis match together on television, when suddenly he began to cite a passage from Hegel's analysis of the dialectic of mastery and slavery. He did it to say something of the role of consciousness in the struggle of the tennis match, but by reading that passage - in which Hegel uses the unusual word "Bewusstseine" - Gadamer not only illuminated what was most gripping about that tennis match, but he managed to give Hegel's seemingly abstract text a concretion and clarity that now belongs to my understanding of Hegel. I have never read Hegel the same after that moment and now, when I teach Hegel, find myself reaching for that example to explain that very difficult passage – and it invariably helps. Such an instance is but one of many in which Gadamer was able to see ideas at play in an ordinary event. And because he saw the world as embodying ideas, and ideas as having concrete stakes, he was able to become for many of us the embodiment of the philosopher's life. In later years, Gadamer would come to speak of "Vollzug" and "vollziehen" as key philosophical notions that speak of the need to understand ideas in their performance, but I was not surprised when he began to emphasize these notions since they seemed to me to be natural extensions of Gadamer's own philosophic practice, even of his basic way of being in the world.

Though Gadamer did not travel to the United States after he received an honorary doctorate at Boston College in 1988, and though our personal relationship continued exclusively in Europe for the last fourteen years of his life, his years in the States remain a vivid memory and the way he shaped the philosophical lives of so many of us who philosophized along with him in English about German and Greek texts is still very much alive. One reason the force of his personal presence remains so strong in the States is that he gave so many of us genuine attention when we were impressionable young students. I know that I speak for many of those of us who have gone on to our own academic careers when I say that we carry forward much that comes from Gadamer, but that is difficult to name. Never content to play the role of the famous philosopher, Gadamer exhibited what I can only regard as a remarkable patience with the demands students placed on his time. After one exchange in a seminar in which Gadamer led a particularly confused student to the point of posing a genuine question but only after what seemed to be an eternity, I asked Gadamer about this tolerance he demonstrated toward his students and he answered that it was always best to assume that every question had something reasonable motivating it, and that the task of the teacher was to help the student to find how that could be expressed. I know now that his capacity to help us do this, the generosity with which he did this, rested upon his willingness to learn from each of us as well.

This usually meant helping us to formulate questions. But at times it meant showing us that every question, even ones motivated from something less than reason, can have an interesting answer. There is one particularly telling instance from one of Gadamer's early visits to Haverford College. Gadamer had just completed a lecture on the nature of understanding when a member of the audience, bent upon resisting Gadamer's point as forcefully as possible, gave a long, pompous, and rather aggressive reply to Gadamer, at the end of which he finally put his question by saying "Surely, Professor Gadamer, it is much more difficult to understand Heraclitus than your next-door neighbor." To which Gadamer, after a moment of reflection, replied, "That depends on who your neighbor is." Both in public and in private conversation Gadamer showed himself to be a wonderful listener and possessed of an uncanny knack for putting his finger on the point of a conversation or question – he was also someone of great humor and wit. But even more than this, a conversation with Gadamer invariably involved taking up the task of understanding the history of a question or idea, its life in the world, and the reach of the stakes of the conversation. I did not read *Wahrheit und Methode* until after I had known Gadamer for some years as my teacher, and when I did there was a sudden shock of recognition that accompanied my reading: here, in the book for which he was justly famous, was the theorization of the virtues that I had come to value so deeply in the man who had been my teacher. All along, Gadamer had taught me that hermeneutics was first and foremost a practice of philosophizing. It was the performance of a self-questioning openness, a struggle to listen to others, a sensitivity to history and to the differences it produces, a resistance to dogma, and because of the form in which I first learned it - namely in the person of Gadamer - hermeneutics has always been for me a way of relating to others. In short, it has always been a form of ethical life.

The way in which Gadamer embodied the practice of hermeneutics, the way in which ideas were enacted rather than simply spoken about, is clear in his relation to language. When he was in the United States Gadamer always spoke English, a language that he learned rather late in life. It was fascinating to watch him in seminars as he thought from out of the curious space that only seems to live in the between of languages. There is a strange and powerful freedom that characterizes this space that belongs to no single language, and Gadamer was marvellously adept at working out of it. He preferred to speak from notes rather than a prepared text - this was one way he kept the lectures centered on the needs the students present – and this meant both that there was an immediacy to his reading of texts that brought them alive and that we all had the sense that he was lecturing to each of us individually. The occasional struggle to find the right word in English was not simply a moment in which a Gadamer's English failed, but it inevitably became a creative moment in which the relation between thinking and speaking came into play for us. English became the living language of philosophy which was enriched through the process of a constant translation of languages.

Early in our relationship Gadamer asked me to translate an article of his. The translation had to be completed in just a few days and so we worked closely and intensely over the period of a few days. It was, of course, an invaluable opportunity for a young student such as I was then to work closely with him on such a project, but from all the many things that I took with me from that experience what has stayed with me most powerfully is the deep fidelity to an idea that Gadamer was interested in having the translation repeat. There was always a sense that as the translator my obligation was above all to what was being said. The conversations we had at that time – conversations about the limits of words, about the differences between what languages can say – have stayed with me these many years. And they continually serve to remind me of Gadamer's own deep fidelity to something that no single language can say, but that nonetheless drives thinking into the word.

One odd legacy of Gadamer's years teaching in the United States is that many of us who were his students came to learn ancient Greek through reading texts with him and now we speak Greek with an ever so slight German accent. Like so many others, I began to work with

Gadamer with the intention, in part at least, to learn about Heidegger, Hegel and other German philosophers, but I soon came to understand how very "Greek" Gadamer was. Whatever one's other interests were, working with Gadamer meant that the Greeks soon counted as chief among one's concerns. In Gadamer we found someone who was reading Greek texts in what seemed to be a new and fresh way, certainly in a way different than the Anglo-American tradition to which we had become accustomed. Through Gadamer the Greek texts finally spoke, one felt their life, and one even felt the urgency which belonged to their creation. I can only describe the impact of Gadamer's seminar on Heraclitus by citing a sentence that Gadamer once wrote to describe his own experience as a student in Heidegger's seminar on Aristotle: "es gingen einem die Augen auf (one's eyes were opened)."

Though I suspect that Gadamer was quite different Heidegger as a person the only words which I find that approximate the impact of Gadamer's presence as a teacher are the words that he used to speak of what it was like to study with Heidegger as a young man. Long before I read Gadamer's own sentence about the experience of working with Heidegger, I had said the very same thing of Gadamer: "Wenn er dozierte, sah man die Dinge vor sich, als ob sie körphaft greifbar wären (when he lectured, one saw the issues right in front of oneself, as if they could be physically grasped)." Though the impact of his books would grow greatly over the succeeding years (and would extend far beyond the confines of philosophy proper), when he came to the United States Gadamer was already a famous philosopher. His name had come to stand for a philosophical "position". But, for me, his work has never been able to sediment into any sort of position because it remains too surely, but gently, bound to the practice of my teacher.

After Gadamer was no longer able to travel to the States we still continued to see one another several times a year during my trips to Germany. He always received me warmly and with great hospitality, and he remained the same: generous with his time, eager to learn what new books have appeared in English, ready for conversation which always, somehow, finds its way back to the Greeks. He also always showed the same generosity of spirit to my own students, many of whom have made the trip to Heidelberg simply in order to meet with him – and he never disappointed them. They would invariably prepare for the meeting with him, planning questions about hermeneutics or about Gadamer's own texts, but they soon discovered that his greatest interest and desire was to hear about their own work and plans. Though Gadamer's work taught us the importance of the past, Gadamer was a person deeply open to the future and to the hope that it would bring something new and even more alive. I believe too that those conversations with young students are one of the reasons that Gadamer always remained young – even to the end. This youth was among Gadamer's defining traits. Although he suffered from the polio that he contracted when he was 22 years old and so walked with a cane all his life, Gadamer always seemed what one is tempted to call sprightly. On his 100th birthday he was asked by an Italian television reported what the secret to his youthfulness was and he answered her by saying "It is easy: never take elevators and learn a poem by heart everyday" – stay alive in body and soul. He did that so very well.

His body gave out on March 13th 2002; Gadamer was 102 years old. Our last conversation a little over a week before his death was a struggle for him. We spoke of Mahler's "Rükert Lieder" and of many other things, but as so often happened the conversation turned to Heidegger and to Gadamer's recollections of the first seminars he had with Heidegger. When that happened, Gadamer's eyes became young again and one could see the young man who was astonished at his good fortune to be in such a class. It was the same great good fortune that many of us would know as students in Gadamer's own seminars – and later as his friend.

In our last two decades together we only spoke German, but Gadamer will always remain the teacher who helped me how to learn to search for the creative possibilities that belong to thinking in English. He was the one who helped me to understand how one finds a freedom in one's relation to words. But more than that, more than anything else, he will remain the philosopher from whom I learned the practice of this freedom and how one might, if one is lucky, share it with others in conversation.

Gadamer lived the life of a philosopher, not just of a philosophy professor, and his life reminded us of the joy, privilege, responsibility, honor, and tasks of such a life. He reminded us that a philosophical life is an ethos. His theoretical work, his writings, what we identify as "hermeneutics" is very much the account of such a life. Just as Plato understood the life of philosophy in the figure of Socrates, those of us who knew Gadamer cannot help but see something of that life in the person we knew and so cherished. Our Socrates walked with a cane and spoke German, but the resemblance is undeniable.