

Gadamer's Legacy in Aesthetics and Plato Studies: Play and Participation in the Work of Art

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While Gadamer's aesthetics has recently received a good deal of attention, discussion of the subject in the literature has remained at a disturbingly "theoretical" level. The discussion rarely employs terms or concepts familiar to us from other approaches to aesthetics, and—most disappointing of all—we are seldom, if ever, given concrete examples that might illustrate the relevance of hermeneutics to the practical concerns of aesthetic inquiry and analysis. As a result, whether convinced or unconvinced, one leaves the discussion wondering just what bearing Gadamer's aesthetics has on our actual encounter with art, and whether hermeneutics really has anything new and worthwhile to say about aesthetics. In this paper, while I shall often have to employ a good deal of the technical jargon, I shall nevertheless attempt to render Gadamer's aesthetics accessible to the reader who is not a specialist in phenomenology and hermeneutics, first by linking together Gadamer's notion of "play" and Plato's notions of "imitation" and "participation," and second by use of an example. I hope to demonstrate not only that Gadamer's aesthetics may thus be profitably elucidated in a novel manner, but also that hermeneutics does indeed have valuable insights to offer aesthetics. First I shall discuss briefly Plato's criticisms and at more length his psychology of imitation. These discussions will be followed by a brief exposition of Gadamer's analysis of the ontology of the work of art. I shall then employ the results of Gadamer's analysis in the reinterpretation of Plato's criticisms and the nature of the aesthetic experience and artistic creativity. I shall conclude by testing the conclusions of the preceding hermeneutic analyses in the consideration of an example.

Plato's Criticisms of Art and Poetry

As I shall be concentrating on the *Republic*, it is perhaps best to speak not of "art" in general but of "poetry" in particular. While there is discussion of art in general in this dialogue, the central concern is with poetry. Plato has Socrates deal explicitly with poetry in two separate sections of the dialogue, once in Books Two and Three and again in Book Ten. In the former section (376e–403c), the topic of poetry is introduced in the context of the discussion of the education of the guardians, where Socrates expresses his concern that poetry not be allowed to exercise any morally deleterious effect on the young. He comes to advocate quite far-reaching censorship, laying out a few general rules, as well as several very specific ones, to be followed by the poets in order that the children who listen to their works not take into their souls any opinions which they ought not to have when grown to adulthood. The arguments are familiar enough to demand no lengthy treatment here—it suffices to say that the entire discussion revolves around the moral damage that uncensored

poetry might wreak upon the audience of prospective guardians and responsible adults-to-be.

The commentators have generally attended almost exclusively to the "moralistic" aspect of this criticism, not only because it is so obvious, but also because it makes a good deal of sense—as we see, for example, in the fact that the question of the moral welfare of the audience almost always enters into political discussions of censorship. But by concentrating primarily on the moral aspect of Plato's criticism of poetry we are overlooking an important insight he offered regarding the psychology of the aesthetic experience. Here, in Books Two and Three, Plato is not only discussing the moral hazards of "bad" poetry—he is also, and more importantly, suggesting that poetry is capable of exercising such morally corrupting influence because of the psychological make-up of the human being. It is not until Book Ten, however, that Socrates is finally able to elucidate this psychological criticism of poetry in any depth, and he does so by recalling the discussions of ontology and epistemology, the description of the relation between "mind" and "world," found in the central books of the dialogue.

In that discussion of mind and world (or "reality"), Socrates describes each of the three lower levels of the world as being a "copy" of the level that is immediately above it, and as being dependent upon this higher level for its truth and value. In Book Ten this notion of "copying" is again employed in much the same manner when Socrates speaks of art and poetry, elaborating what I call the "ontological" criticism. The passage in question (595–607) begins with the assertion that, given what has been said regarding the divisions among levels of mind and reality, Socrates and company were quite correct in their previous conclusion with respect to poetry—that is, "In refusing to admit at all so much of it as is imitative" (595a).¹ The upshot of Socrates's argument in this part of Book Ten is that the product of artistic-poetic "creation," being an image of an image (located at the lowest level of the divided line), is at some distance from truth (located among the Forms), and thus can serve no good purpose in the individual's pursuit of knowledge and truth. In short, "poetry, and in general the mimetic art, produces a product that is far removed from truth in the accomplishment of its task, and associates with the part in us that is remote from intelligence, and is its companion for no sound and true purpose" (603b). For this reason, then, imitative poetry is to be banished from the polis. Although this ontological treatment of poetry appears later in the dialogue than the moral-psychological, it is by means of this ontological analysis that we are enabled to see how *mimesis* can exercise its psychological effect. That is, while Books Two and Three tell us what imitation is capable of doing to the audience, Book Ten, which tells us just what imitation is, thereby tells us also how imitation can affect the human psyche as it does. We have now to take a closer look at this "affect."

Plato's Psychology of Imitation

In contemporary idiom, we say that a person "mimics" another. A child, for example, mimics her elders when she unexpectedly blurts out a profanity she overheard the day before. This kind of "imitation" is, however, utterly devoid of content. The child does not understand the meaning of the four-letter word, and her first (and quite often last) utterance of the word in the presence of her parents is significant to the child only in the negative response it elicits. Nowadays mimicry is generally regarded as childish, and it is more than likely that it was so regarded in Plato's day as well. Some commentators—R. G. Collingwood and Rupert C. Lodge² among them—have claimed that (Plato's) Socrates maintained that all imitation, *qua* mimicry, is to be avoided, precisely because it is childish and appeals to what is non-rational in human nature. That Plato, and presumably also Socrates, did argue along this line is undeniable, but there is more to the argument than this. To begin with, imitation is immediately demanding of censure on at least two counts. First, imitation is "removed" from reality—that is, the imitation itself must always be adjudged as of far less significance and value than that which is imitated. This is a rather straightforward "ontological" criticism of imitation, and the censure itself appears to be little more than an exaggerated statement of the ontological imperfection of the imitation. A second reason for the censure of imitation is, as just explained, that it is "childish," it nurtures the undeveloped, non-rational element of human nature. Plato's intention in leveling this "psychological" criticism of imitation appears to have been motivated not so much by the recognition that imitation itself is non-rational (insofar as it is "removed" from the reality discerned only by means of reason), but rather by the fear that through the imitation of the non-rational one might become non-rational. In other words, Plato recognized that the imitation of the non-rational is capable of leading to the participation in the non-rational. As this distinction between the notions of "imitation" and "participation" is central to the analyses that follow, it warrants further clarification. A few etymological observations might prove helpful here.

As Merleau-Ponty writes: "The realization that speech is an originating realm naturally comes late. Here as everywhere, the relation of *having*, which can be seen in the very etymology of the word habit [*habitude*], is at first concealed by relations belonging to the domain of *being*, or, as we may equally say, by ontic relations obtaining within the world."³ The "very etymology of the word" is as follows. Our word "habit," like the modern French *habitude*, comes to us through the Old French *habit*, *abit*, which derives from the Latin *habitus* (*habere*, to have), which means: the way in which one holds or "has" oneself, i.e., the mode or condition in which one is, or exists, or exhibits oneself—be it in character, in disposition, in way of acting, or by way of comporting oneself or dealing with things. In short, then, for one to "have" something is for that something to be one of one's habits, and thus for it to be a mode of one's being, a manner in which one exists in the world. The cultivation of habit is, then, the development of a particular way of being or existing.

In Plato's Greek, "habit" translates *hexis*, which is cognate with the verb *echein*, which usually translates "to have." But *echein* can also translate "to be" (as can the Latin *habere*).⁴ For the Greeks, then, as well as for the Romans and ourselves, a habit is something one "has" by virtue of consistently behaving (be-having) in a particular manner—by virtue, that is to say, of consistently existing or being in a certain way. The Greek word we most often read in translating "participation" is *methexis*, a form combining the preposition *meta* and the verb *echein*. In combined forms, *meta* generally designates a community of or sharing among individuals. Thus, *metechein* might literally be rendered the "having in common" of something with another person or thing. Given the context in which it usually appears in Plato, however, it might more precisely be rendered the "being in common."⁵ Regarding Plato's technical philosophical notion of "participation" in the light of this etymology, we might say that "to participate" means to share the same habit, the same way of being, with another. Thus, for example, all physical entities may be said to participate in corporeality in that each of them exists as a spatially extended body.

Plato first explored this notion in depth in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates is said to participate both in tallness and, at the same time, in shortness, depending upon the tallness or the shortness of the person with whom he is comparing himself—depending, that is, upon the manner or mode of existing that he "has" in common with the tall person on the one hand and the short person on the other. Apart from such physical "habits," there are, more importantly, countless non-physical "ways of being." For example, an evil character—and "character" here could also translate *hexis*—is nothing other than an evil way of being. Yet such an "evil way of being" is, of course, made manifest only in outward behavior. That is, we can only judge a person as "evil" if that person consistently acts in a way that we would deem evil. We infer an evil character from repeated, habitual evil deeds. We do not actually see that character, the *hexis* itself—we see only its physically manifested effects. This mention of inference from the physical also recalls the *Phaedo*, where the progression from the physical and sensible to the purely intelligible is described in such a way as to render the sensation of physical objects a necessary preliminary to the recognition of the non-sensible Forms, such as "equality" and "the Good." What is of most importance to note here is that there exists a sort of connection between the physical and the non-physical, and that this connection may be construed as to some extent a causal one. Thus, by repeatedly imitating the physical characteristics or actions of another person, one may develop certain physical habits that have their non-physical counterparts in one's mental or spiritual "disposition" (*hexis*). Imitation, in short, may lead to participation (*methexis*), both physically and spiritually.

Recalling now the "mimicry" of the child, Plato's fear of the dangers of imitation seems quite reasonable. As Aristotle too pointed out, and as contemporary psychologists continue to demonstrate ever more convincingly, a good part of a child's earliest education consists precisely in imitating the actions of her elders,⁶

and were the child to imitate a bad example, she might easily herself become bad. Yet there is another side to this "criticism" of imitation. The question lies in whether imitation might not be able to inculcate good habits in the child. Although the discussion in Book Three of the *Republic* concentrates on the negative results of imitating a bad model, Plato clearly recognized that there can also be imitation that is good. At *Republic* 395cd, we read: "But if [the guardians] imitate they should from childhood up imitate what is appropriate to them—men, that is, who are brave, sober, pious, free, and all things of that kind—but things unbecoming the free man they should neither do nor be clever at imitating, lest from the imitation they imbibe the reality. Or have you not observed that imitations, if continued from youth far into life, settle down into habits and second nature in the body, the speech, and the thought?" In short, the child will become what she repeatedly imitates, she will come to possess the same "way of being" as the model copied, and it is clearly desirable for the child to attend to only the best of models.

Gadamer on the Ontology of the Work of Art

The central notion in Gadamer's analysis of the ontology of the work of art is "play." The German word for "play" is *Spiel*, which also translates "game." This double meaning of *Spiel* is crucial for Gadamer's analyses, for he maintains that the work of art is similar to a game, which reaches its completion only when it is being played. This is most clearly the case in what Gadamer refers to as the "transitory arts," such as music and dance. As he writes:

In the reproductive arts, the work of art must constantly be reconstituted as a creation. The transitory arts teach us most vividly that representation is required not only for the reproductive arts, but for any creation that we call a work of art. It demands to be constructed by the viewer to whom it is presented.... [I]t is something that manifests and displays itself when it is constituted in the viewer.⁷

This act of constitution on the part of the viewer demands that he participate in the creation of the work of art. The essential role played by the viewer in the creation of the work of art has clear implications with regard to its ontological status. The work of art is not to be considered and analyzed solely, or even primarily, as an independently existing object occasionally confronted by an aesthetically conscious subject. It is not a mere "product" of the creative activity of the original artist that can later be used by the viewer for the sake of aesthetic pleasure. Rather, as Gadamer puts it:

Just as a symbolic gesture is not just itself but expresses something else through itself, so too the work of art is not itself simply as a product.... [I]t is something that has emerged in an unrepeatable way and has manifested itself

in a unique fashion. It seems to me, therefore, that it would be more accurate to call it a creation (*Gebilde*) than a work. For the word *Gebilde* implies that the manifestation in question has in a strange way transcended the process in which it originated, or has relegated that process to the periphery. It is set forth in its own appearance as a self-sufficient creation ("Play," 126).

We can quickly summarize Gadamer's position in general, and at the same time establish a link to Plato's criticisms, by concentrating for the moment on three claims made in the passage just quoted: (1) the work of art is analogous to a symbolic gesture; (2) the work of art is properly to be regarded as a *Gebilde*; and (3) the work of art is a self-sufficient creation. I shall deal with each in turn.

To say that the work of art is analogous to a symbolic gesture is to say little more than that it "stands for something else" ("Play," 126). This observation is to be found already in Plato, although its importance for our interpretation of his criticisms of art and poetry has too often been overlooked. According to Plato, art is essentially mimetic, employing images that symbolically point beyond themselves. One of the dangers he saw in art was that these images are capable of being taken for the reality itself. For example, the precocious young child who undertakes on her own the reading of the *Iliad* will not, without proper guidance (or perhaps even with such guidance), be capable of recognizing what Plato calls the *hyponoias*, the "underlying meanings," of the text. Instead, she will take the text at face value, adhering to its literal interpretation.⁸ Approached with this in mind, his criticisms of art and poetry are seen to rest upon the recognition of a symbolic function of art. Just as for Gadamer, so too for Plato does the work of art always have the power of pointing beyond itself to that which it is not. This power is constitutive of the work; it is an essential part of its very nature as a work of art. It is in this sense that we say that the work of art is a "transcendent" object: it transcends not only the process of its original creation but also itself *qua* imitation. It demands that we properly regard it as more than merely a finished product; it is to be understood as imitative, and as thereby directing the viewer beyond what is immediately, literally given. Its ability to do this derives from its existing not as a mere work, but as a *Gebilde*, and this brings us to the second point raised in the passage quoted above.

The translator of Gadamer's paper has rendered *Gebilde* as "creation," which is not an entirely happy translation in this context. Here the term⁹ refers to a work that does not exist at only one level, so to speak, but on several levels, and its completion as a work depends upon these various levels being recognized and brought into play by the viewer. One such level consists precisely of the images I spoke of just above. Only by recognizing the images of a work of art as images is the work capable of performing that symbolic function that belongs to its very nature. What this amounts to is that the work of art never fully comes into being as such until the viewer constructs or constitutes it. In this act of constitution, the building up of the *Gebilde*, the viewer does not act as an independently existing

subject encountering an already finished and completed object. Rather, both the object and the subject first come into being as players in the game of artistic creation, i.e., the recreation of artistic play. Further, they do not exist as separate and distinct players, but as one and the same creative activity itself.¹⁰ This is not, of course, to deny that both the "subject" engaged in the aesthetic experience and the "object" confronted retain some sort of independent ontological status, whatever it may be. The point is simply that both the subject and the object take on a new identity; each is now to be identified with the game in which they are engaged as one. To take as an example one of the "transitory" arts mentioned above, when I dance I *am* the dance, and the dance exists as my dancing, i.e., the dancing of the dancer.

The same is true of all aesthetic experiences, although the extent of my participation in the constitution of the work of art is often not so clearly to be seen. When, for example, I immerse myself in the reading of *War and Peace*, no one is liable to walk by and ask himself, "How do I tell the reader from the novel?" In fact, however, the two are not as easily to be distinguished as is commonly believed. "Where" after all does the novel really exist? It is not identical with the physical object, the book I am holding in my hands. If it were, then there would be as many novels as there are books, but we generally agree that there is only one *War and Peace*. Nor does the novel exist "in my head," for in that case there would be as many novels as there are readers.¹¹ There is only one novel here, although it allows itself to be constituted, or "concretized," in innumerable ways by innumerable readers while it remains in some sense always the "same" novel. The very fact that a given work of art refuses to allow certain interpretations already indicates that it is not merely "in my head," while the fact that it nevertheless allows for various interpretations, and that it demands to be interpreted, indicates that it is not to be identified with the written text itself. The novel, then, exists neither as the physical object nor as the mental construction of the psychical subject. These two "poles" of the aesthetic experience are encompassed by the existence of the novel, but they do not exhaust its existence. The novel, that is, transcends both the subject and the object, uniting them in an aesthetic activity that consists in the fulfilment or completion of the novel itself, i.e., the novel as constituted, concretized work of art.

The ontological status of the work of art can be further clarified by considering the third point I listed above. To say that the work of art is a self-sufficient creation is not to imply that it in any way existed "before" its creation by the artist. The claim is merely that the work of art, once having come into being, proceeds to lead a life of its own, independent of its creator. It is for this reason that knowledge of the artist's intention is not essential for the aesthetic experience of the work of art. When I read *War and Peace*, whatever Tolstoy may have intended to convey is of no concern to me.¹² What is of concern is that the characters come alive for me, and that it is I who love or despise them. Moreover, and more importantly, I do so in accordance with my own beliefs and convictions. When I read a novel, attempting

to enter into its world, I always carry with me my own world, my own values and beliefs, my own emotional and intellectual prejudices.

Since the world of the work first comes fully into being through my participation in its constitution, it is clear that it derives many of its characteristics and features from me. But the work of art also imparts something to me. It serves as a mirror that reflects to me those values, beliefs, and convictions that I have injected into its world. To describe art as being essentially imitative is, then, not to claim that it imitates nature by copying it, but that it imitates human nature by reflecting it. The work of art holds up to the viewer his own beliefs and values, and by thus calling them to his attention, invites his self-critical reflection. As Gadamer writes, the experience of art "does not leave him who has it unchanged."¹³ When we return from the world of the work, we bring a bit of that world with us, and this opens up to us new ways of looking at our own world and ourselves, and questions arise that we had not asked ourselves before. It is in this manner that the work of art, as a *Gebilde*, is capable of playing a significant role in our individual *Bildung*, our emotional and intellectual, "cultural" development as individuals.¹⁴

A word should be said here about what might appear to be a return, in the preceding paragraph, to the very sort of "subjectivization" of aesthetics criticized by Gadamer in *Truth and Method*. I do not intend such a subjectivization. My purpose is merely to stress that the role played by the subject in the experience of the work of art cannot be denied. To ignore the subjective element in this experience can only result in a radical "objectivization"—that is, in a view that takes the work of art as existing independently of the viewer—and this must be denied in any phenomenological analysis of the ontology of the work of art. The crucial point in this regard is that the viewer contributes something to the constitution of the work of art. That is not to say, however, that the work is entirely dependent upon the viewer for its existence. We might say that the "completed" work of art, prior to its being encountered by the viewer, exists potentially but not actually: "it" is already present, awaiting its completion, its constitution *qua* concretized, "actualized" work of art. In other words, the book, for example, exists as the potential novel, and the novel achieves its actualization through the constitutive activity of the reader. Further, as such actualization on the part of the reader depends upon his interpreting the book "through his own eyes"—that is, on the basis of his own experience—the "objectivity" of the work of art is, as Merleau-Ponty might say, "shot through with subjectivity." This is not, then, to return to the subjectivization of the work. It is merely to emphasize that in any analysis of the ontology of the work the role played by the viewer is not to be ignored. Also not to be ignored is the intersubjective basis of the beliefs, values, and convictions of the individual subject. To see in the work of art a reflection of my own values is at the same time to see a reflection of the larger context of intersubjectively constituted values in terms of which I come to recognize and define my own. The relation of subjectivity to intersubjectivity is fundamental to such phenomenological analyses as those of Gadamer, and it is not here being denied. Indeed, the "play" in which the (potential) work and the

(actualizing) viewer engage may be regarded as itself a sort of "fusion of horizons," a "dialogue" between two "subjects" that gives rise to the intersubjective constitution of new values, new beliefs, new ways of looking at the world.

Plato's Criticisms and the Nature of the Aesthetic Experience and Artistic Creativity

Gadamer's analysis provides us with a novel approach to the interpretation of Plato's psychological and ontological criticisms of art and poetry. As we have seen, the work of art, created in my image, is, as a whole, itself an image, and as such it possesses symbolic power. To return to the example of the novel, we find that it does indeed point beyond itself, ultimately to the larger context of intersubjectively constituted human values with regard to which I both recognize and determine the worth of those of my own personal values and interests that I bring with me in my reading. In the work, I find an imitation of myself—or rather, I find that I am that imitation, for my identity is now established as that of the work that arises in the course of my reading. Attending to this imitation, I see myself as a person who adheres to certain values and beliefs. Upon self-critical analysis of this reflected self, I may choose to abandon certain convictions now found to be of dubious worth.¹⁵ Alternatively, I may choose to retain these convictions and to strengthen them as much as possible. In either case, I shall return from my reading of the novel with a desire to adopt or retain a certain mode of being, a "habit" or *hexis*.

Thus, we see that the ability of the work of art to exert upon the viewer a strong psychological effect derives from the ontology of the work itself. This observation is the basis of Plato's psychological criticism of art and poetry which Gadamer's hermeneutic analyses enable us more fully to appreciate. If I am self-critically aware of the imitative character of the work—if, that is, I am aware that the work is to a great extent an imitation of human nature, both my own nature and that of my fellow "subjects" with respect to whom I locate myself—it provides me with a means by which I can achieve a greater degree of self-understanding than would otherwise be possible. If, on the other hand, I lack that self-critical awareness, the work may simply foster in me an unreflective adoption of psychological modes of being that are perhaps undesirable. The latter possibility is that to which Plato calls our attention in his psychological criticism of art and poetry. When he writes, at the outset of his presentation of the ontological criticism in Book Ten of the *Republic*, that imitative art "seems to be a corruption of the mind of all listeners who do not possess as an antidote a knowledge of its real nature," (*Republic* 595b) he would appear to be suggesting that we become aware—self-critically aware—of the nature of artistic imitation.

In the light of the above analyses, I would like, before moving on to the consideration of an example, briefly to discuss from a hermeneutic point of view the nature of artistic creativity. I shall address two related questions: First, why are we attracted to works of art? Second, why do we create works of art?

In approaching an answer to the first question, we may observe that not all people are equally attracted to art, nor are several "artistically sensitive" viewers always unanimous in their estimation of the appeal of a given work of art. Here we may again recall the notion of "play." To the extent that each of us is a unique individual with a unique set of past experiences, our personal beliefs, values, and convictions will vary. As a result—to speak now of the literary work of art in particular—what any one of us, as an individual reader, contributes to the constitution of the literary work of art will rarely be exactly the same as what another viewer would contribute. In other words, we are simply not playing the same game when we severally attend to a given text, and as a result we are not really attending to the same work of art at all. We each constitute or "concretize" a work that, to a greater or lesser extent, is different from that constituted by each of its other readers. As I explained in the preceding analysis of imitation, each of us sees him- or herself in the work. The beauty or ugliness, the joy or sorrow, that I find in the work is but a reflection of a "mode of being," a habit (*hexis*), that I currently bring with me to my participation in the constitution of the work, the work thus sharing with me that mode of being. As Plato was fond of noting, "like attracts like."¹⁶ Whatever its basis, this seems to be a psychological fact, a part of our human make-up. If this is indeed the case, it should come as no surprise that we are attracted to works of art. The ones we find attractive are "like" us—indeed, to some extent they are us.¹⁷

It should also come as no surprise that we create works of art. The urge to imitate is constitutive of human nature,¹⁸ and artistic creation is clearly one of the most profound expressions of this urge. Not only is it a form of self-creation, but it is also at the same time an expression of what Gadamer calls the "play-drive" ("Play," 124). In the creation of the literary work of art, whether we speak now of the author's activity or that of the reader, we witness what is perhaps the most powerful expression of two basic human drives: to imitate and to play. The "final product" of this most serious of all playful activity is not merely the work of art, but the human being whom we have chosen to imitate, and in whose characteristic modes of being we have thereby chosen to participate.

Consideration of an Example

The above analyses provide us with a springboard for further investigation. I would like now to take a tentative step in that direction by way of an example. To sharpen the focus of this explicitly hermeneutic investigation, I shall choose a passage from a novel that strikes me as particularly appropriate to the discussion of "prejudice."

The passage is from the end of the second chapter of Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.¹⁹ The following incident is related as having taken place in Dawson's Landing, a small town "on the Missouri side of the Mississippi," on September 4, 1830. Percy Northumberland Driscoll, one of the chief citizens in town, "brother to the Judge" and of old Virginian ancestry, discovered a couple of dollars missing. This

was the fourth time this had happened to him, and "his patience was exhausted. He was a fairly humane man toward slaves and other animals; he was an exceedingly humane man toward the erring of his own race. Theft he could not abide, and plainly there was a thief in his house. Necessarily the thief must be one of his negroes." He called his servants together and told them that, having warned them before, he would teach them a lesson this time: "I will sell the thief. Which of you is the guilty one?" After demanding of each servant, in vain, that he or she "Name the thief!," "he added these words of awful import":

"I give you one minute"—he took out his watch. "If at the end of that time you have not confessed, I will not only sell all four of you, *but* I will sell you DOWN THE RIVER!"

It was equivalent to sending them to hell! No Missouri negro doubted this. Roxy reeled in her tracks and the color vanished out of her face; the others dropped to their knees as if they had been shot; tears gushed from their eyes, their supplicating hands went up, and three answers came in one instant:

"I done it!"

"I done it!"

"I done it!—have mercy, marster—Lord have mercy on us po' niggers!"

"Very good," said the master, putting up his watch, "I will sell you *here* though you don't deserve it. You ought to be sold down the river."

The culprits flung themselves prone, in an ecstasy of gratitude, and kissed his feet, declaring that they would never forget his goodness and never cease to pray for him as long as they lived. They were sincere, for like a god he had stretched forth his mighty hand and closed the gates of hell against them. He knew, himself, that he had done a noble and gracious thing, and was privately well pleased with his magnanimity; and that night he set the incident down in his diary, so that his son might read it in after years, and be thereby moved to deeds of gentleness and humanity himself.²⁰

I have quoted the passage at length in order to call attention to a feature of the reader's response that might otherwise go unnoticed.²¹ As it stands, this passage, with which the chapter ends, directs the reader to the unobserved prejudices operative in Driscoll's attitude toward and treatment of his slaves. He regards them as members of a different race—indeed, as belonging to a different species, one that has more in common with those of the "other animals" than it does with *homo sapiens*.²² As we read in the last paragraph of the passage, he was quite pleased with himself when he deigned to treat these entities "humanely." This much, I think, is obvious. But there is more to the passage than this. Before pursuing this further, I would like to quote Langston Hughes on this point:

Mark Twain, in his presentation of Negroes as human beings, stands head and shoulders above the other Southern writers of his times, even such distinguished ones as Joel Chandler Harris, F. Hopkins Smith, and Thomas Nelson Page. It was a period when most writers who included Negro characters in their works at all, were given to presenting the slave as ignorant and happy, the freed men of color as ignorant and miserable, and all Negroes as either comic servants on the one hand or dangerous brutes on the other. That Mark Twain's characters in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* fall into none of these categories is a tribute to his discernment. And that he makes them neither heroes nor villains is a tribute to his understanding of human character. 'Color is only skin deep.' In this novel Twain shows how more than anything else environment shapes the man. Yet in his day behavioristic psychology was in its infancy. Likewise the science of fingerprinting. In 1894 *Pudd'nhead Wilson* was a 'modern novel' indeed. And it still may be so classified.²³

Hughes appears to be claiming that Twain was aware of the power of racial prejudice in a way that other authors of his time were not. Today, almost forty-five years after he wrote the above comment, we can see this prejudice still exerting itself in Hughes's own choice of words, careful though he tried to be. "Negro," as we know, is generally frowned upon today, for it is regarded as insinuating that there exists a deeply significant difference between people of different colors; it carries this connotation from its employment in the days of Twain and earlier. One does suspect, however, that Hughes sensed this to some extent; his expression "men of color" suggests as much. But my point here is that even Hughes fell prey to this prejudice to some extent. "Men of color" is a very forced neologism, coined in the endeavor to escape from a prejudice located in the language we speak. To the extent that he was reacting against this prejudice, Hughes was not immune to its force.²⁴

The question that arises from this observation regards the extent to which any of us is entirely free from this prejudice, or more precisely from the prejudice that has taken its place. Let us return to *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, and look at our reading from a hermeneutic point of view. When we read how highly Driscoll thought of himself, how self-gratified he felt as a result of his "humane" treatment of his slaves, a smile might come to our face, and the account might even elicit a quick chuckle or two. We can easily account for this: We now know that such an attitude as Driscoll's is thoroughly unenlightened, that it has been clouded and shaped by an unfounded prejudice. But note that our own view, our "enlightened" conviction as to the equality of all persons, has in fact done no more than replace that of Driscoll. That is to say, the above passage elicits from us the response it does precisely by virtue of the operation of the appropriate prejudice we carry with us in our reading of the text. In short, what has happened here is that we have approached the work of art with our prejudices, and we have concretized the work of art in the light of those prejudices. But the prejudices themselves remain hidden. They operate in our concretization of the work, our constitution of the work of art as aesthetic object,

without our consciously attending to them. On reflection, however, such prejudices are revealed to us. It is precisely this self-critical, hermeneutic reflection that the work of art in fact makes possible for us. My prejudices are present before me in the work that has arisen in the event of my aesthetic experience. The work has become for me a mirror, an "imitation" of the person I am. To recall what I said much earlier, the work is a reflection of the "mode of being"—indeed, of many quite specific "modes of being," a plurality of emotional and conceptual "habits"—that are constitutive of who I am. But the work of art is still more than that; it is more than the mere "imitation" of my person. A basic tenet of Gadamer's hermeneutics is that all understanding is self-understanding, and, as I hope to have demonstrated, this clearly holds good in the case of the understanding belonging to aesthetic experience. The understanding that arises in the interpretation of a text as meaningful in a certain way—as "meaning" this or that, as eliciting this or that response—is essentially self-understanding. As I said above, the "final product" of those "playful activities" of aesthetic experience and artistic creation is not just a work of art, and this "product" is, again, not just a "mirror" in which I find myself reflected. Far more than that, it is itself, in part, the human being whom I have already chosen to imitate, and in whose characteristic modes of being I have thereby chosen to participate. The subject who I am belongs essentially to the object under scrutiny, for "subject" and "object" are merely two poles of the one event of aesthetic experience and understanding. At the very heart of the aesthetic object we find the subject who concretizes it, and who, by virtue of the self-reflection made available by the work of art, becomes conscious both of who he is and who he might want to become. The creation of a work of art is, in the richest sense possible, the creation of a human being.

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Notes

1. We should note in passing that this was not their previous conclusion, according to which some sorts of imitative poetry were to be allowed.
2. Speaking of Socrates's criticism of art, Lodge writes: "As far as the Ionian account of art is concerned, Socrates rejects the realistic view which restricts art to copying, to reproducing and conforming to the factual processes of mere nature. Where there is no idealism, there can be only a secondary mechanical kind of art; and Socrates will have none of it. What is called 'mimicry', the imitative or representative reproduction of the sounds and sights of inanimate nature—e.g. the whistling or whispering of the wind, the crash or roar of surf, the clatter of falling rocks, and the like, i.e., speaking generally everything which comes under the head of onomatopoeia in prose or verse composition—has a certain fascination for the childish, the uneducated, and the unintelligent type of mentality. It expresses the very lowest level

of human intelligence, and is at the extreme opposite of the ideal which would satisfy a well developed mind: tending, indeed, toward chaos and downright insanity. It will not do at all." (Rupert C. Lodge, *The Philosophy of Plato* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1956], 128–9. Lodge's note to this passage [n. 51]: "Crat. 422d f., 423cd, 424c f., Rep. 397a f., 596 ff., Soph. 233c ff., Phil. 59a, cf. Laws 700d f. Cf. R. G. Collingwood, *Princ. of Art*, pp. 46–52.")

3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, ed. Ted Honderich (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1964; first published in 1962), 174.

4. As at Herodotus 6.39 and *Od.* 24.245. Plato uses *echein* in this sense at, for example, *Rep.* 456d: *pos oun echeis doxes*. This sense of the verb is also retained in idiomatic Modern (Demotic) Greek: *ti echeis*, "what's the matter?," "what's wrong (with you)?" "Habit" also translates the Greek *ethos* and *ēthos*. The three terms seem, as a rule, roughly equivalent in Plato. Plato also seems to regard *diathesis*, "disposition," as synonymous with *hexis* (as, for example, at *Phil.* 11d).

5. That the term *methexis* (the word itself, even divorced from any context) does have such a heavy ontological connotation finds indirect support in Plato's occasional use of it (as in *Phaedo*) as synonymous with *parousia* (also translated "participation"). The noun is cognate with the verb *pareinai*, "to be by or near," "to be present." The word is a compound built off *einai*, "to be," and thus it too carries with it an ontological or ontic connotation.

6. "Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation." (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1448b; trans. Ingram Bywater, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon [New York: Random House, 1941].)

7. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Play of Art," in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 126. Hereafter cited as "Play."

8. A similar danger is pointed out by Origen (185–254), who distinguishes between three sorts of interpretation of scripture: the "somatic" (literal/historical), the "psychic" (moral), and the "pneumatic" (spiritual), and maintains that an exclusively literal reading is puerile and incomplete. The sort of reading one follows is largely determined by one's mental and spiritual capabilities. On this point, he is in agreement with Plato, who argues that a sound education is necessary for the development of the child's cognitive and spiritual faculties. Without such an education, the "higher" levels of the mind remain asleep, as it were, and one is condemned to approach the work of art on a solely literal level, attending to the

representational images not as images of the reality or truth to which they symbolically point, but as themselves the reality.

9. *Gebilde* in fact enjoys a technical sense in the terminology of phenomenological aesthetics. Roman Ingarden, for example, employs it in his description of the literary work of art, which he regards as a "formation" constructed of four separate but interrelated "strata." See *The Literary Work of Art*, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

10. A similar situation obtains in every event of understanding. As Gadamer writes in "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem" (in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976], 7): "I am trying to call attention here to a common experience. We say, for instance, that understanding and misunderstanding take place between I and thou. But the formulation 'I and thou' already betrays an enormous alienation. There is nothing like an 'I and thou' at all—there is neither the I nor the thou as isolated, substantial realities. I may say 'thou' and I may refer to myself over against a thou, but a common understanding [*Verständigung*] always precedes these situations. We all know that to say 'thou' to someone presupposes a deep common accord [*ein tiefes Einverständnis*]. Something enduring is already present when this word is spoken."

11. These arguments are developed in some detail by Ingarden in *The Literary Work of Art*, Part I, "Preliminary Questions."

12. We might here recall Stefan George's preface to the second edition of *The Year of the Soul* (trans. Olga Marx and Ernst Morwitz, *The Works of Stefan George* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974], 119): "Even those who very nearly understood what the author had in mind thought that identifying persons and places would make for a better understanding of THE YEAR OF THE SOUL. But just as no one profits from looking for human and regional models in sculpture and painting, thus in poetry too we should avoid so idle a search. Art has transformed them so completely that they have become unimportant to the poet himself and his readers would be more confused than enlightened by a knowledge of the facts. Names should be mentioned only when they serve to indicate a gift or to bestow eternity. And it should be remembered that in this book the I and the You represent the same soul to an almost unprecedented extent."

13. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 89.

14. This is not, of course, to say that the experience of the work of art must always play such a role. It is clear that we can, and quite often do, return from that experience without having undergone any profound emotional or spiritual

transformation. Yet it is equally clear that the experience can have this effect upon us, and the above analyses are intended to describe how this effect is possible. I discuss the notion of *Bildung* at a bit more length in "Philosophical Hermeneutics and 'the Tradition,'" *Man and World*, vol. 22 (1989), 247–250.

15. As Rilke writes in the concluding verse of "Archaischer Torso Apollos":
"You must change your life."

16. See, for example, *Gorg.* 510b, *Rep.* 329a, *Symp.* 195b, and *Laws* 716c. We may regard this as a reference or allusion to *Od.* 17.217–8: "See now how the rascal comes on leading a rascal / about; like guides what is like itself, just as a god does" (trans. Lattimore).

17. Here we detect the distinctly Hegelian flavor of Gadamer's aesthetics.

18. Indeed, one of the first things the newborn does is imitate. See Maya Pines, "Baby, You're Incredible," *Psychology Today*, vol. 16, no. 2 (Feb. 1982), 48–53.

19. All quotations are from the Bantam Books edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1964; first published 1959).

20. It is worth noting here that, on subsequent readings, the last sentence of this passage enjoys far more significance than the reader can discern on first reading. The remainder of the novel provides a context in which the sentence assumes a rich manifold of meanings.

21. I have employed the expression "reader's response" in allusion to Wolfgang Iser, whose "reader response theory" I find entirely compatible with Gadamer's aesthetics. See Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

22. Driscoll's attitude is the same as Aunt Sally's in *Huckleberry Finn*. Having mistaken Huck for Tom Sawyer, who was due to arrive some days earlier, Aunt Sally asks Huck what took him so long. Much like Odysseus, Huck is never at a loss, and he invents a story on the spur of the moment:

"... We been expecting you a couple of days and more. What's kep' you?—boat get aground?"

"Yes'm—she—"

"Don't say yes'm—say Aunt Sally. Where'd she get aground?"

I didn't rightly know what to say, because I didn't know whether the boat would be coming up the river or down.... Now I struck an idea, and fetched it out:

"It warn't the grounding—that didn't keep us back but a little. We blowed out

a cylinder-head."

"Good gracious! anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

"Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt...."

(From *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* [Chicago: The Spencer Press, Inc., 1953], 194–5.)

23. From his introduction to the edition cited above; xi.

24. We might note in passing that two other prejudices are clearly at work in Hughes's thinking. First, he describes Twain's attitude as superior to that of his contemporaries: Twain "stands head and shoulders above the other Southern writers of his times." Implicit in this thinking is the view that freedom from prejudice is a positive achievement. In the case of racial prejudice, we can certainly agree with Hughes. But one wonders whether he does not perhaps regard prejudice in general as something negative. This view of prejudice is what Gadamer attacks in his rehabilitation of the notion of prejudice in *Truth and Method*. Second, Hughes's mention of "behavioristic psychology" and his apparently favorable reference to the view that "environment shapes the man" might point to a presupposition as to the positive value of such an approach in the study of human psychology. Basic to this behavioristic approach is the extension of the method of the natural sciences to the domain of the human sciences, an extension the legitimacy of which Gadamer, following Heidegger (and Dilthey), has also called into question.