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**On Gadamer's Heteronomy Argument:  
The "Irruption" of Reality vs. its "Strategic Excision"**

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**Abstract**

*The aim of this paper is to find out whether Gadamer is entitled to hold together his finitist commitment to the heteronomy of art and thought, and his advocacy of an "endless conversation with itself" of humankind. We focus on three texts: Gadamer's dismissal of Carl Schmitt's outside-in account of the heteronomy implied by the "irruption of reality" in the play Hamlet and, as Archimedean point, Shakespeare's "excision of reality" according to Stephen Greenblatt, and its inside-out heteronomic consequences. The results: Schmitt's approach restricts Gadamer's argument on the "endless dialogue", Gadamer's rejoinder aggravates his own argumentative fragility, and Greenblatt's perspectivation discloses a non-sequitur. The inspection of these texts attests that heteronomy per se does not entail any openness to "creative" interpretations, that a universalized logos endiēthetos is a chimera, and that there cannot be any "infinite conversation" which would sustain the Gadamerian interplay of question and answer.*

**Keywords:** Hans-Georg Gadamer, Carl Schmitt, Stephen Greenblatt, Hamlet, heteronomy, aesthetic consciousness, endless dialogue, finitism

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Current philological approaches recognize the heterogeneous, disconnected structure of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the interrelatedness of its central theses, previously taken for granted, have begun to appear problematic. To the unprepared reader, in particular, Gadamer may appear eager to maintain a sober, finitist commitment to the heteronomy of art and thought compatible with the ostensibly nostalgic, neo-Romantic attachment to an idealized "infinite conversation which we ourselves are" (Gadamer 2004, 360 and 1975, 381). Needless to say, this problematic striving coexists with a set of innovative advocacies, such as the "effective" history, the fusion of horizons, the rehabilitation of prejudice, authority, and tradition, or the "application" as chief hermeneutic tool.

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<sup>1</sup> Prominent in the philological concern with Gadamer's oeuvre is the work of Jean Grondin (see Grondin 1990).

It remains a riddle, though, how Gadamer's opposition to autonomous aesthetics and his account of tradition as an endless but continually productive "dialogue" of humankind with itself could be kept interdependent. The indisputable starting point for overcoming this difficulty is the core position of the aesthetic concern in Gadamer's thought. He opposes tying the experience of art to the framework he calls "aesthetic consciousness", a mindset which peaks in the attribution to aesthetic perception of an immediate, congenial and subjective character (the instant grasping of *Erlebnisse*) of blatantly Romantic origin (Gadamer 2004, 66 and 1975, 61). In Gadamer's view, by insisting on the autonomy of the aesthetic attitude in contrast to other modes of experience, the "aesthetic consciousness" dissociates art and the aesthetic from everyday life.

Gadamer's critique of the abstraction inherent to this attitude lies at the very heart of his thought. He aims at replacing it by a hermeneutic approach to the experience of art which, far from being an isolated part of his doctrine, works in many ways as its chief foundation. It starts by highlighting the extra-aesthetic or un-functionalized aspects of artworks and the practices surrounding their production: games, plays, feasts, rituals, symbolic uses, cultish and religious purposes, everyday roles, life-worldly tasks. According to Gadamer, in short, religious, ritualistic and life-worldly contexts held sway upon the isolating consideration of artworks, which are seen as a compendium of mundane bondages. His main aim, therefore, is to re-functionalize artworks by tying them back to the lived world. It must be kept in mind, however, that Gadamer's rejection of the "aesthetic consciousness" is not confined to the autonomy of artworks because his conception of "understanding" embraces both art and life.

In summary, therefore, Gadamer rejects the "aesthetic consciousness", by which he means aesthetic autonomy and un-functionalized art and sees the subjectivation of aesthetics as its conceptual opposite (Gadamer 2004, 65 and 1975, 60). (He admits, though, that along history art has striven to become autonomous from both reality and convention, as shown by prevailing notions like "sureness of taste" (Gadamer 2004, 33 and 1975, 34). Conversely, Gadamer defends artistic heteronomy and alongside it the primacy of an externalist approach, driven by the idea that "aesthetic truth" (the truth-content of art, as we will see, not merely the truth about art) is to be found in not-aesthetic practices.

## II

Gadamer sets "aesthetic in-difference" against artistic autonomy, and this grounding move deserves some scrutiny. By stressing historicity, externalism, facticity, and dependence from the lifeworld, Gadamer signals to the defenders

of the aesthetic consciousness that the artworks are not a universe added to the universe, with laws, materials and developments of their own. Conversely, artistic constructions must be traced back to their less abstract, more life-worldly context, for the artwork's way of being consists in practices that originally are not aesthetic (Gadamer 2004, 81 and 1975, 75). Artistic experience is not necessarily the experience of artworks. Experience (*Erfahrung*) is not research (*Erforschung*) fed by methodical-objectivizing procedures. According to Gadamer, nevertheless, truth exists also (or better, in the best Heideggerian descent: above all) outside the sciences originated by these "procedures".<sup>2</sup> In his view, scientism and the idolization of method must give way to an anti-methodical attitude towards artistic traditions that can be un-problematically transferred to the tradition of ideas.

The outstanding consequence of Gadamer's anti-methodologism is that any tradition amounts to the seamless creative supplementation of what are already consolidated artistic or philosophical works, enriched by the subsequent history of their interpretations. Gadamer's idealist tenet of the constitutive uncloseness or *Unabgeschlossenheit* of cultural entities supports this view, reminiscent of the expansive Preromantic views on criticism. A notorious statement of Gadamer clarifies this issue:

Understanding is not, in fact, understanding better (*kein Besserverstehen*), either in the sense of superior knowledge of the subject because of clearer ideas (*sachlichen Besserwissens durch deutlichere Begriffe*) or in the sense of fundamental superiority (*Überlegenheit*) of conscious over unconscious production. It is enough to say that we understand in a different way, if we understand at all. (Gadamer 2004, 296 and 1975, 280)

Any encounter with an artwork or a text, therefore, "is an encounter with an unfinished event [properly 'with an un-self-contained coming-into-being (*unabgeschlossen Geschehen*)] and is itself part of this event" [properly 'belongs as well to this coming-into-being (*ist ein Teil dieses Geschehen*)]'. (Gadamer 2004, 85 and 1975, 94) The resonance of these Gadamerian views has been massive. For instance, the suggestion that any event is actually present only if interpreted has been neatly expressed by K. P. Liessmann: each artwork or text "in its being also includes the ways of its reception (*in seinem Sein schließt auch die Weisen seiner Rezeption ein*)" (Liessmann 2003, 225). Such glosses underscore the

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<sup>2</sup> Yet Gadamer believes, on the other hand, that the "autonomous" artworks are surreptitiously congruent with a methodology-bound, objectivizing approach. (Gadamer 2004, XXIX and 1975, XXII).

essential productivity (not the mere reproductivity, as presumed notoriously by Friedrich Schleiermacher) assigned to the interpreter:

The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies (*hängt eben nicht von dem Okkasionellen ab*) of the author and his original audience. It certainly is not identical with them (*er geht zum mindesten nicht darin auf*), for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history. (Gadamer 2004, 296 and 1975, 280)

This tenet is so crucial in Gadamer's thought that its effects reverberate throughout Truth and Method:

There is no possible consciousness, however infinite, in which any traditional 'subject matter' would appear in the light of eternity. Every appropriation of tradition is historically different (*ist eine geschichtlich andere*): which does not mean that each one represents only an imperfect understanding (*getrübe Erfassung*) of it. Rather, each is the experience of an 'aspect' (*einer 'Ansicht'*) of the thing itself. (Gadamer 2004, 468 and 1975, 448)

### III

The outstanding role assigned by Gadamer to the productivity of the interpreter supports the hermeneutic understanding of thought. Yet it depends on a motivating background which is also the fine-grained basis of Gadamer's conception of heteronomy and hence deserves close attention. Already the classical vocabulary called "internal logos" the *verbum interius* (Philo of Alexandria's *logos endiathétos*), i.e., that which wants to be said and, therefore, corresponds to Gadamer's belief that any expression rests on unstated presuppositions (Gadamer 2004, 434 and 1975, 455). Conversely, the *actus exercitus* (*logos prophorikos*) designated what the discourse actually means for both speakers and hearers, that is, the "uttered logos", what in a statement can be logically apprehended. This polarity was originally conceived by Augustine of Hippo (Augustine 2015, 239 and 280) to distinguish the stoic principle of the logos from the outwardness of repetitive commentary.

Yet an unavoidable question comes to mind. Is there really a *logos endiathétos* to which the *logos prophorikos* only imperfectly corresponds, so that an always renewed effort at matching both must be attempted? After all, the *verbum interius* (*logos endiathétos*), summoned by Gadamer as supporting the hermeneutic consciousness, may have the same "occasional" (and hence "accidental") character that Gadamer assigns to the notion of the "original reader",

as far as it is prone to be "determined by the course of events (*sich von Gelegenheit zu Gelegenheit ausgefüllt*)". It is exposed, therefore, to the Gadamerian charge of "unsuspected idealization" (*undurchschaute Idealisierung*). (Gadamer 2004, 397 and 1975, 373)

According to Gadamer, in short, the "interior word" is irreducible to stated discourse. A sort of "essential deficit" always occurs. We cannot accomplish in uttered language (the *logos prophórikos*) the full expression (the *logos endiathétos*) of what we would have to assert in order to be effectively understood. Gadamer summarized this viewpoint in a conversation with Jean Grondin:

One cannot express everything that one has in mind, the *logos endiathetos*. That is something I learned from Augustine's *De Trinitate*. This experience is universal: the *actus signatus* is never fully covered by the *actus exercitus*. (Grondin 1994, xiv)

Yet, the problem posed by a universalized *logos endiathétos* had already been detected by Leo Strauss shortly after the publication of *Truth and Method*:

The hermeneutic experience I possess makes me doubtful whether a universal hermeneutic theory which is more than 'formal' or external is possible. I believe that the doubt arises from the feeling of the irretrievably 'occasional' character of every worthwhile interpretation. (Strauss and Gadamer 1978, 5-6)<sup>3</sup>

This perplexity closes our foray into the operative ground of Gadamer's hermeneutic consciousness. The question of whether Gadamerian heteronomy and his endorsement of an "endless dialogue" of humankind can be kept together boils down to ascertaining whether it does make sense to hold on to the *logos prophórikos*. Does Gadamer's advocacy of the *verbum interius* shed light on the process of reflection and correction triggered by the unfolding of tradition? It must be admitted that tradition, understood as a succession of hermeneutic encounters, evinces a healthy fertility, and a continually productive evolution of historical meanings cannot be doubted. Some aspects of this growing process shall become hegemonic, yet other elements will have baffling consequences. They will come up as obstacles preventing our full self-understanding, but paradoxically they can in some way turn us back to ourselves. The Gadamerian dialogism of question and answer, precisely, is a step further in this direction:

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<sup>3</sup> Letter (in English) of 26th February 1961 sent by Leo Strauss to Gadamer, who blandly replied (in German) that Strauss' dismissal "is no reproach against [my] theory [...], rather an anticipation of this theory itself." (Strauss and Gadamer 1978, 9. Translated by G.E. Tucker).

The apparently thetic beginning of interpretation is, in fact, a response; and the sense of an interpretation (der Sinn einer Auslegung) is determined, like every response (wie jede Antwort), by the question asked. Thus, the dialectic of question and answer always precedes the dialectic of interpretation. It is what determines understanding as an event (das Verstehen als ein Geschehen). (Gadamer 2004, 467 and 1975, 447)

Summing up, Gadamer convincingly rejects the "aesthetic consciousness" (i.e., the de-functionalized view of artworks that undergirds every claim of artistic autonomy) but gives the impression of doing it for the wrong reasons. In his view, declaring artworks autonomous amounts to saying that they are closed or *abgeschlossen*, which prevents any "creative" interpretation (Gadamerian hermeneutics' chief tenet) and merely allows "reproductive" approaches. Pace Gadamer, however, heteronomy per se does not entail any openness or *Unabgeschlossenheit* that would allow "productive" interventions. No "endless dialogue" occurs that could sustain the interplay of question and answer whose outcome would be a ceaseless build-up of commentary. (Against Gadamer's support of an "endless dialogue" of humankind can also be objected that it assumes a prior agreement about the subject matter of such "dialogue" or, in other words, its chief presupposition is sharing a common meaning. This assumption, however, jeopardizes the acknowledgement of differences which often are hard to overcome. Gadamer's "fusion of horizons", in particular, blurs the heterogeneity of traditions and hence conceals their likely conflict. As a result, the Gadamerian "dialogue" appears at bottom coercive and totalitarian. It tends to overshadow differences by producing what outwardly looks like an agreement but is actually a sort of resultant in a parallelogram of forces.)

In conclusion, the current philological reception of Gadamer's work is marked by a disagreement about what aspects of understanding ought to prevail: either its ontological and existential traits, or the problems posed by its validity (Gadamer 1976, 74). Hermeneutics as a philosophical doctrine about the linguistic and historical constitution of our being-in-the-world, or as the procedural confrontation with the difficulties of understanding the texts of the past. We are convinced, however, that the emerging conflicts must be addressed by the attentive reading of specific texts. One of the few concrete expositions of Gadamer's standpoint on heteronomy is his twofold (in the main text of *Truth and Method* and in an *Annex* to the same work) diatribe against Carl Schmitt's approach to Shakespeare's Hamlet. This Gadamerian precedent has led us to focussing our discussion on three main texts: Gadamer's negative reaction to Carl Schmitt's theses about the irruption of reality in the play Hamlet and, as the necessary Archimedean point that allows to mediate between these opposite views, Ste-

phen Greenblatt's revocation of these antecedent positions, to the benefit of innovative insights into Shakespeare's masterpiece. These concrete theses, both related to Hamlet, ground two alternative conceptions of heteronomy, opposed to each other and both incompatible with Gadamer's.

#### IV

In his book *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Irruption of Time into the Play*, Carl Schmitt advocates a viewpoint that was vehemently disqualified by Gadamer, and which in essence argues that in Shakespeare's Hamlet takes place an "irruption of historical reality" (Schmitt 2006 and 2017). This "breaking-in" consists in "historical facts" embracing the circumstances of King James' access to the throne of England and thus suggesting a similarity between the Stuart family and that of the Hamlets. Both James I's and Hamlet's father were slain, and their mother wed the respective murderer. In a few words, James I's personal history (enmeshed in the historical post-Reformation conflict between Catholics and Protestants) intrudes upon the formal universe of play in Hamlet, altering it in a way that was obvious for the original audience, but which is bound to remain undetected by the modern viewer.

Schmitt perceives the historical reality "breaking into" the drama Hamlet in a twofold way: 1) Queen Gertrude's (Hamlet's mother) unclear guilt or innocence may point out to the likely involvement of James's mother, Mary Queen of Scots, in the killing of her spouse. The Protestant aversion to Catholic Mary is congruent with the guilty role Shakespeare ambiguously assigns to her, but at the same time he implicitly supports James's bid for the throne by hinting at her potential innocence. In fact, both James I and Mary Stuart "are there without being there". 2) The "Hamletization" of the revenge hero (i.e., the transformation of the hero with a mission of vengeance into a dithering, action-shunning melancholicer) is the alternate way in which reality breaks out into the play. Shakespeare gestures toward the broader religious struggles of the Reformation by highlighting Hamlet's indecision, which represents the plight of James, caught between Catholics and Protestants.

Schmitt's argument sheds light on the fragility of Gadamer's tenet about the constitutive un-closeness or *Unabgeschlossenheit* of cultural entities. The outside-in, positive sort of heteronomy advocated by Schmitt poses a crucial dilemma. Does the play Hamlet remain closed (which means that it cannot be "interpreted" any longer) even if the surrounding world irrupts upon it, for this is Schmitt's claim? Or, as Gadamer contends, it is the intrusion of the play into the reality of its own time what becomes represented before us? Evidently, Schmitt's position is incompatible with Gadamer's defence of the heteronomous

artwork, destined to be supplemented and "present only in interpretation". Yet Schmitt's move involves a separation of aesthetics and politics, which would seem a regress to the illusion of autonomy were it not for the table-turning irruption of reality that he detects in Hamlet.

Schmitt's stance, therefore, is fiercely anti-hermeneutic: historical facts are immune to interpretation, the reader must stifle his or her decoding impulses, commentary is impossible. In his view, interpretations are intrinsically weak because they never trigger real changes in the interpretandum, a shortcoming that is especially manifest in Hamlet's case. There, the "irrupting exteriority" does not need to be interpreted because it consists in the same historical-epochal event in which both author and public are involved. It makes any hermeneutic request redundant, which dispels the Romantic lure of an "infinite conversation":

A terrifying historical reality (*eine furchtbare geschichtliche Wirklichkeit*) shed a faint light through the masks and costumes of a theatre play. No interpretation (*Deutung*), whether philological, philosophical, or aesthetic, however subtle (*scharfsinnige*), can change that. (Schmitt 2006, 18 and 2017, 21)

This anti-hermeneuticist mindset suggests that Schmitt's mistrust of an "endless conversation" arose from the link he established between the concept of "dialogue" (*Gespräch*) and the Romantic eagerness for an infinite "productivity" bent to building sociable wordplays upon arbitrary objects.

These issues evoke Schmitt's notorious discussion of the decisionist<sup>4</sup> intervention of the sovereign into political affairs, for the alleged "irruption of reality" amounts in fact to a decision that outwardly seems to make interpretation redundant. Yet Schmitt concedes that "historical objectivation could not put an end to the series of new interpretations of Hamlet [*den immer wieder neuen Hamlet-Deutungen*]" (Schmitt 2006, 9 and 2017, 10). The invocation of a clear-cut historical context does not really exclude innovative interpretations. On this topic, an insight of Andreas Höfele (2016) should be mentioned. In Schmitt's view, Hamlet was the emblem of both the post-war reality and Schmitt's own maverick position in its midst. Through the portrayal of James I, Schmitt's back-broken Hamlet, according to Höfele, stands as well for the schism which, arising from the upheaval of 1848 and continuing to the German defeat of 1918, has steered the European destiny. Hamlet, therefore, aids to understand both Schmitt's general vision of history and his role as thinker of the torn German past.)

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<sup>4</sup> On the wayward thesis that a hermeneutical spirit permeates Schmitt's decisionism (see Marder 2010, 309).



V

From a wider perspective it can be concluded that when Schmitt opposes the autonomy of art (he underscores "the limits [*Grenze*] constraining the free invention of the author" [Schmitt 2006, 34 and 2017, 37]) he is defending a sort of ideal-typical, externalist approach. The resistance of the aesthetic realm to conceptual formulation is viewed by Schmitt as one of the two aspects of modern experience, the other being abstract quantification. He concedes that the aestheticist approach, claiming the autonomy of the artwork, may be congruent to the creative freedom ascribed to the lyrical poet. (This admission, however, is blurred when he blames the "aesthetic ideology" for depoliticizing all intellectual endeavours, in line with his understanding of politics as existential confrontation.) But he points out that the dramatist's imagination, unlike the poet's case, is constrained by the historical circumstances, the immediate perception of the audience, and the collective consensus spanning author, actors and public. In short, it is grounded upon a shared historical reality and indifferent to the rules and the language of the play.

Yet, how are we to conceive the "time" that, according to Schmitt, breaks-in or intrudes into the play? In his view it cannot be understood in chronological or empirical terms (the public events surrounding the play or, more specifically, the empirical existence and political ascendancy of both James I and Mary Stuart, who after all "are there without being there"), because it consists in an epochal reality that manifests itself precisely through these terms. Alternatively, the "irruption" or "intrusion" that occurs in the play, as Carlo Galli has strongly stated, is "of an immediacy which renders mediation at once real and impossible" (we must keep in mind Schmitt's relentless anti-hermeneuticism) and which he frames as the relation between the concrete political event and the universality of dramatic representation:

For Schmitt, the immediacy and uniqueness of historical events, the objectivity of the problems to be analysed, place before us, from the very beginning, the theme of Shakespeare's work. [...] By putting aside the interpretive and explanatory accretions that, like a gigantic crust, suffocate the Shakespearian masterpiece, Schmitt faces Hamlet frontally in order to study its 'history'. (Galli 2012, 61 and 64)

Schmitt is careful to avoid misunderstandings on this issue. In his view, what distinguishes tragedy from other forms of drama is a kind of "surplus value" which resides in the objective existence of the tragic action. No human mind has conceived this externally imposed, unavoidable and unalterable reality. The explicit summoning of "real" historical facts limits the writer's imagination and

in so doing raises drama to tragedy. Shakespeare's tragedies (in that respect opposite, for instance, to Friedrich Schiller's historical dramas) represent a historical state of emergency that demands a decision. While the play Hamlet decides nothing, it makes indecision intensely real to the audience. It can even be said that Shakespeare, not Hamlet, appears decisive when he displays the state of emergency embodied by 17th century England.

In Schmitt's perception, Hamlet is a tragic figure that represents the historic failure of the Stuarts as reigning dynasty. He embodies the situation of an English prince before the historical emergence of a concrete conception of the political in authors like Thomas Hobbes. And Schmitt also believes that, in Shakespeare's eyes, Hamlet is a figure of barbarism (Schmitt 2006, 54) because his shortcomings as a melancholic and indecisive prince are ancillary to the insular English condition of late 16th century and display the Stuarts' inability to leave the "barbaric" Middle Age behind and take instead the path of Modernity.

Finally, it may be worthwhile to point out that the occasionalist procedure endorsed by Gadamer in his commentary of Schmitt's Hamletian text (a practice both attacked and mutely adopted by Schmitt) has also oriented our approach in the present paper. Convinced that tiny phenomena may throw light on big problems, Gadamer defends the tendency to perceive particular issues as "occasions" leading to far-reaching conclusions:

Occasionality must appear as a meaningful element within a work's total claim to meaning (*als ein Sinnmoment im Sinnanspruch eines Werkes*) and not as the trace of the particular circumstances (*die Spur des Gelegenheitlichen*) that are, as it were, hidden behind the work and are to be revealed by interpretation. (Gadamer 2004, 498 and 1975, 469)

This same "occasionalism", precisely, has encouraged us to focus the discussion of the present topics on distinctly circumscribed texts. Schmitt's contribution understands Hamlet out of his "concrete situation" (Schmitt 2006, 55), which constitutes the source of "the tragic" deemed as the ultimate "historical reality" and defined as the "intrusion" (*Einbruch*) of historical time into the play. What in Schmitt's view is actually tragic, therefore, is this tangible "breaking in" effected by historical time. It converts the "trespassed" play into a myth (it mythologizes the historical event represented in the play) and so perpetuates trans-historically the very idea of tragedy.

## VI

Gadamer addresses Schmitt's standpoint in the section *The Ontology of the Art-work* (p. 141 of *Truth and Method*), and more explicitly in the *Appendix II* of the

same book (pp. 498-500). He begins his criticism of Schmitt's theses by denouncing their alleged link to the "aesthetic subjectivity". He energetically reinstates, against Schmitt, the premisses of his own heteronomic conception of artworks:

A work of art belongs so closely to what it is related to (*worauf es Bezug hat*) that it enriches the being of that as if through a new event of being (*dass es dessen Sein wie durch einen neuen Seinsvorgang bereichert*). To be fixed in a picture, addressed in a poem, to be the object of an allusion from the stage, are not incidental and remote from what the thing essentially is (*sind nicht Beiläufigkeiten, die dem Wesen fernbleiben*); they are presentations of the essence itself. (Gadamer 2004, 141 and 1975, 140)

In the *Appendix II of Truth and Method* the stakes appear even sharper drawn. The dilemma boils down to whether there is an intrusion of political reality into the play Hamlet, as Schmitt contends, or conversely, as Gadamer states, "what we are really seeing here is the irruption of the play into time (*es ist in Wahrheit der Einbruch des Spiels in die Zeit, der sich hier vor uns darstellt*)". (Gadamer 2004, 499 and 1975, 470)

When Gadamer turns Schmitt's contention around and defends the idea of "the irruption of the play into time", he is merely alluding to Shakespeare's authorial intervention in the political reality of his time. Faithful to his heteronomic standpoint, he cannot see any disparity between the play and the concrete historical events surrounding it. Needless to say, his hermeneutical stance clashes with Schmitt's genealogical bent. In Gadamer's view, Schmitt misses the dramatic concreteness of the play when he converts it into a sort of roman à clef.

Paradoxically, Gadamer's criticism sheds light on the difficulties of viewing tradition as an "endless dialogue". His argument, indeed, backfires: 1) it shows how the alleged un-closeness or *Unabgeschlossenheit* of texts and artworks can be bypassed; 2) it points out the ways of counteracting the Romantic regress to an infinite conversation. While Gadamer asserts that the irruption of political reality into Hamlet suppresses the possibility for this play to ever become a "new" event, in fact this overdetermination closes off the play to our (for we are its virtual present-day audience) lived involvement with it.

Setting Schmitt's views against Gadamer's<sup>5</sup> has resulted in a duck/rabbit perplexity about what is internal to the dramatic representation and what is external to it. We obviously need a contrasting view which, acting as an Archime-

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, the positions of both Gadamer and Schmitt are ancillary to the Romantic *topos* of the essential "incompleteness" of everything, which entails the necessity of "creatively completing" what we want to experience.

dean point, will contribute to overcoming this quandary. If the outside-in account has proved unconvincing, the search for a tie-breaking tool directs us to the tradition that arose in Germany with Johann Gottfried Herder and the *Sturm und Drang* and which perceived in Shakespeare's works (and chiefly in Hamlet) an invitation to breaking with the theatrical conventions for the benefit of the authorial self-determination that German aesthetics was bound to adopt. A crucial trait of this tradition has been revived in unexpected ways, as we will see in the next section, by the inside-out approach to Hamlet (and to Shakespeare's works in general) authored by Stephen Greenblatt.

## VII

In his book *Will of the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt (2004) defends an inside-out, negative form of heteronomy. In his view, Shakespeare devised in Hamlet a "new technique of radical excision" that, by taking out a key explanatory element, accomplished an "expulsion of reality from the play". These insights, arisen from a detailed foray in the Shakespearian context, upturn our subject matter. Assigning to Hamlet a justified prominence among the Shakespearian plays, Greenblatt enters the controversy with an array of startling statements:

The crucial breakthrough in Hamlet [...] had to do with an intense representation of inwardness called forth by a new technique of radical excision. Shakespeare found that he could immeasurably deepen the effect of his plays [...] if he took out a key explanatory element, thereby occluding the rationale, motivation, or ethical principle that accounted for the action that was to unfold. The principle was [...] the creation of a strategic opacity. This opacity, Shakespeare found, released an enormous energy that had been at least partially blocked or contained by familiar, reassuring explanations. [Refusing] to provide himself or his audience with a familiar, comfortable rationale that seemed to make it all make sense, he could get to something immeasurably deeper. The excision of motive [...] expressed Shakespeare's preference for things untidy, damaged, and unresolved [...]. (Greenblatt 2004, 324-325)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Greenblatt expands these views to the whole Shakespearian oeuvre: "In the years after Hamlet, Shakespeare wrote a succession of astonishing tragedies that drew upon this discovery. Repeatedly, he deftly sliced away what would seem indispensable to a coherent, well-made play". This and the following references to Greenblatt's texts belong to pp. 323-325 of Greenblatt 2004.

Greenblatt supports a non-sequitur view which is worthwhile to explore. His stance can be judged both anti-Gadamerian, as far as it excludes any possibility of "endless dialogue", and pro-Gadamerian as well because it involves an heteronomic approach to art and thought. Let's inspect in some detail this Janus-faced attitude. On the one hand, Greenblatt endorses Gadamer. Already in an earlier work, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Greenblatt 1980), he insisted on preserving "a sense of the larger networks of meaning in which both the author and his works participate", thus the opposite to viewing artworks "exclusively as the expression of social rules and instructions" (Greenblatt 1980, 4 and 6). This approach assigns artworks a fundamentally active role. They mirror the extant cultural formations, but above all they also reflect on them and even contribute to their emergence. This blueprint for historical interpretation undergirds Greenblatt's latter approach to Hamlet. From such viewpoint, his tenet about the "strategic excision" accomplished by Shakespeare makes flawless sense.

On the other hand, in Greenblatt's view the "endless dialogue" endorsed by Gadamer cannot take place (which agrees with the conclusions we attained in Schmitt's case). Greenblatt conceives every historical epoch as a sort of battlefield in which several discourses oppose one another. Some of them either prevail over former opponents or combine with them, while others became sidelined or altogether silenced. As Mark Robson points out, Greenblatt "sees culture as dynamic, contested and conflictual" and poses the anti-Gadamerian question of "how individuals come to terms with, and negotiate between, the competing ideas and possibilities within their culture" (Robson 2008, 54). Any artwork, literary text, or cultural practice, in short, according to Greenblatt emerges at the interface of divergent or even mutually destroying impulses.

Let's focus now on Greenblatt's heteronomic thesis. One of its chief entailments is the view that "Shakespeare wrecked the plot provided by the sources" (Greenblatt 2004, 305). This paradoxical gesture has been eloquently explicated by James Wood:

Why does Lear test his daughters' love? Why can't Hamlet effectively avenge the death of his father? Why does Iago ruin Othello's life? The source texts that Shakespeare read all provided transparent answers (Iago was in love with Desdemona, Hamlet should kill Claudius, Lear was unhappy with Cordelia's impending marriage). But Shakespeare was not interested in such transparency. (Wood 2009, 10)

Up to this point, the debate around Hamlet amounts to deciding on the following dilemma. Does the play remain closed (which means that it cannot be "interpreted" any longer) even if (or precisely because) "the reality" of its time intrudes upon it? Or, as Gadamer contends, is it precisely the play itself what encroa-

ches on the reality of its own time? Greenblatt's Archimedean position helps to overcome this perplexity. It allows seeing Hamlet as "a highly political play about betrayal and assassination". As a matter of fact, it includes scenes that could "excite a London audience shaken by the events of 1601 [the insurrection that led to the execution of the Earl of Essex]", but which "do not actually constitute a direct reference to them, and that could be easily explained away". (Greenblatt 2004, 310)

However, producing "a highly political play" without "a direct reference to political events" requires a dire recasting in the dramatist's craft. According to Greenblatt, already "by the turn of the century Shakespeare had perfected the means to represent inwardness" (Greenblatt 2004, 299). This upheaval consisted in taking out major clarifying items and thus creating a sort of productive vagueness. He favoured an "inner structure" that replaced the "structure of superficial meanings". As a result, his "brilliant practice of strategic opacity" became a primary "aesthetic resource". It happened, in sum, that "an opacity shaped by Shakespeare's experience of the world and of his own inner life" inspired his withdrawal of a recognisable justification. This restraint gave sense to the whole play without diminishing its "inward logic and poetic coherence" (Greenblatt 2004, 377).

Greenblatt is particularly convincing when he points out that Shakespeare's ground-breaking practice of removal (the controlled exclusion of reality in the play) led him to rethink "the amount of explicit psychologic rationale a character needed to be compelling". This recasting culminated in Hamlet, where a "daring transformation of Shakespeare's whole way of writing" brought about a momentous "break in his career" (Greenblatt 2004, 307).

It is worth mentioning that Greenblatt's concern with the dramatic power of ambiguity has long been active. Already in his book *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2001), Greenblatt declared his desire to "bear witness to the intensity of Hamlet", a feature he ascribed to Shakespeare's decision to deliberately leaving the status of the Ghost of King Hamlet open to interpretation (Greenblatt 2001, 4). The reason of this ambivalence is that it cannot be decided whether the Ghost is "a spirit of health or goblin damned", or otherwise put, whether it proffers a call to revenge or to remembrance (Greenblatt 2001, 239-40). In so doing, Greenblatt concludes, Shakespeare mobilizes the controversy about Ghosts that pervaded the Elizabethan society. The very undecidability that surrounds the Ghost, in consequence, furnishes the key to the play's dramatic thrust.

In general terms, Greenblatt agrees with Schmitt: a determining lack does inhabit the play Hamlet. But they are at odds over the reasons for this absence: contemporary events in Schmitt's case, Shakespeare's expressive strategy in

Greenblatt's. In Carlo Galli's words, Schmitt sees in Hamlet "a shadow or lacuna that cannot be explained from inside the text, but only in reference to a core of contemporary historical events" (Galli 2012, 65). We may well imagine that this is the contention that Schmitt, if anachronistically confronted with Greenblatt, would oppose to the belief in a Shakespearean scrapping of motive.

Applying Greenblatt's insights to the problem we have been addressing, we conclude that the "productive ambiguity (*produktive Vieldeutigkeit*)" highlighted<sup>7</sup> by Gadamer is in no way "productive". That Hamlet amounts to "a courtyard of the indeterminate (*ein Hof des Unbestimmten*)", does not attest its "essential capacity to become an event again (*neu zum Ereignis zu werden*)". Just the contrary is what happens. If the *Unbestimmtheit* makes up the aesthetic value of the play, in fact closes it to new, "productive" interpretations while outwardly demanding updated commentaries.

## VIII

Schmitt's account not only disables Gadamer's argument on the issue of the endless conversation but emerges as its very opposite. And Gadamer's rejoinder, as we have seen, merely aggravates the fragility of his own position. Finally, Greenblatt puts their antagonism in perspective. Both Schmitt's and Greenblatt's conceptions of heteronomy, though opposite to each other, attest Gadamer's inconsequence when he holds together the endlessly productive drive of humankind's "dialogue" and a finitist persuasion<sup>8</sup> of Heideggerian descent:

In fact, our fundamental experience of beings subject to time (*als zeitliche Wesen*) is that all things escape us, that all the events of our lives fade more and more (*dass alle Inhalte unseres Lebens uns mehr und mehr verblassen*), so that at best (*aus fernster Erinnerung*) they glow with an almost unreal shimmer in the most distant recollection. (Gadamer 1986, 114 and 1997, 78)

This finitist credo conceals a blessing in disguise because, according to Gadamer, precisely the inconclusiveness of our experience generates endless innovative understandings.

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<sup>7</sup> The references to Gadamer's text in this paragraph belong to Gadamer 2004, 499 and Gadamer 1975, 471.

<sup>8</sup> We can only disagree with this attempt at conciliation: "Dialogue or conversation is the form of recovery, not from the one sidedness of dialectical thinking, but in Socratic fashion, from the soul fallen into the finitude of bodily existence." (Risser 2002, 91).

In our experience we bring nothing to a close [...] and the special significance of the human disciplines ensues from this inconclusiveness (*Unabschliessbarkeit*) of all experience. [Accordingly,] we come upon [renewed] insights. That means that we return from the blindnesses (*Verblendungen*) that held us captive. (Gadamer 1993, 32)

Both the anti-hermeneutic renown of Schmitt's views, alongside Gadamer's negative reaction to them, and Greenblatt's insight on the "excision of reality" achieved by Shakespeare in his plays, reflect the contemporary sway of Gadamer's thought. His finitist alchemy, however, cannot curtail the evidence that heteronomy per se does not entail any openness to "creative" interpretations. A universalized *logos endiathétos* is a chimera, and there cannot be any "endless conversation" that would sustain the Gadamerian interplay of question and answer and so give raise to unlimited accumulations of commentary.

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