

Gadamer's Poet of the Return: Hilde Domin and the Return to Language

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Hans-Georg Gadamer is well known for engaging the poetic works of figures like Paul Celan, Friedrich Hölderlin, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Stephan George. One poet that is almost always overlooked in any discussion about Gadamer and poetry is Hilde Domin. In volume nine of Gadamer's *Gesammelte Werke*, there are three essays dedicated to Domin and her work: "Hilde Domin, *Lied zur Ermutigung II*" (1966), "Hilde Domin, *Dichterin der Rückkehr*" (1971), and "*Die Höhe erreichen: Hilde Domins Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen*" (1988). In a recent article, "A Hermeneutics and Poetics of Trust: Gadamer and Domin on Trust and Language," I demonstrate how Gadamer's engagement with Domin's poem, "*Lied zur Ermutigung II*," uncovers the crucial role of 'trust' (*Vertrauen*) in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, which Gadamer rarely discusses in such explicit terms.¹ In my previous article, I focus primarily on Gadamer's 1966 essay and relevant material from Domin's own set of essays and lectures. However, Gadamer's essays from 1971 and 1988 remain unexplored. In this presentation, I continue to investigate the relationship between Gadamer and Domin by focusing on Gadamer's 1971 essay in which he christens Domin as "the poet of return" (*die Dichterin der Rückkehr*). In turning to this essay, research on Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics benefits in a few different ways. First, Gadamer's 1971 essay on Domin discloses another rarely discussed theme in Gadamer's work, namely, the dialectic of exile and return as it relates to language or linguisticity. The particular focus on 'return' resonates with many of Gadamer's hermeneutical insight from *Truth and Method*, such as the person of experience and the polarity of familiarity

¹ Alexander Crist, "A Hermeneutics and Poetics of Trust: Gadamer and Domin on Trust and Language," *Analecta Hermeneutica* 14, no. 3, (2022), 139-158.

and strangeness in hermeneutic consciousness. Second, Gadamer's comments on the exile and return of language point to a critical side of Gadamer that is not often discussed or acknowledged. What Gadamer identifies in Domin's poetry is an effort to cut through a language world that has been corrupted by an age of mass communication, bureaucratization, atomization, and conformism. Third, reading Gadamer's 1971 essay on Domin is another call for scholars in hermeneutics (and continental philosophy at large) to start engaging the works of Hilde Domin not only as a poet, but as a philosopher and literary theorist in her own right.

Gadamer's essay, "Hilde Domin, *Dichterin der Rückkehr*," begins with a simple question: "Wozu Lyrik heute?" or "What is poetry for in today's age?" This question calls to mind Heidegger's well-known essay, "Wozu Dichter?" ("What are Poets For?"), a reference to a line from Hölderlin's poem, *Bread and Wine*: ". . . and what are poets for in a destitute time?"² For Heidegger (via Hölderlin), this destitution is marked by a "default" of the gods from the world, such that "no god any longer gathers men and things unto himself, visibly and unequivocally, and by such gathering disposes the world's history and man's sojourn in it."³ Much more than this, a time of destitution is unable to even "discern the default of God as a default," that is, it is unable to diagnose its own destitution.⁴ For Heidegger, it takes a poet, like Hölderlin, to "reach into the abyss" and "attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods" in a time of destitution.⁵ Heidegger, writing his essay in 1946, was addressing his, and Europe's, particular destitution after two world wars and the holocaust.

² Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter, (New York, New York: Harper & Row, 2001), 89.

³ Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" 89.

⁴ Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" 89.

⁵ Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" 90, 92.

It is much more likely, however, that Gadamer's question, "*Wozu Lyrik heute?*" is a specific reference to a 1968 work of poetic and literary theory (untranslated into English) by Hilde Domin herself: *Wozu Lyrik Heute: Dichtung und Leser in der gesteuerten Gesellschaft* (*What is Poetry for in Today's Age: Writing and Reading Poetry in a Controlled Society*).⁶ In this work, Domin not only rejects Adorno's famous claim about the barbarism of writing poetry after Auschwitz, but she also criticizes the ideological and constricting nature of contemporary literary theory and criticism. Needless to say, the anxious and provocative set of questions concerning the value, purpose, or legitimacy of writing and reading poetry in the post-World War II era has occupied (and continues to occupy) the focus of many scholars and poets. Gadamer himself is concerned with this question, for example, in his 1970 essay, "Are the Poets Falling Silent?" In this essay, which was published one year before his essay on Domin, Gadamer opens with a series of questions about the role of poetry in the modern world:

In our society, which is increasingly ruled by anonymous mechanisms and where the word no longer creates direct communication, the question arises: what power and what possibilities can the art of words, poetry, still have? . . . I wish to ask our age and the literature of our age: Is there still a task for the poet in our civilization? Is there still a time and place for art in an age where social unrest and the discomfort with our social life in an anonymous mass society is felt from all sides and where the demand for rediscovering or reestablishing true solidarities is advanced over and over again? . . . Where consciousness is fulfilled by nothing but *science*, i.e., by the idolatry of scientific progress, does there still exist such a conjoining of words, wherein everyone could be at home?⁷

This essay is one of several essays from the 1970's and 1980's in which Gadamer is quite critical of technology, modern bureaucracy, and science insofar as these conditions make it very difficult to act on and affirm a hermeneutic consciousness in the world with others. In other words, these conditions make it very difficult to discover and affirm solidarity. Gadamer's answer to these

⁶ Hilde Domin, *Wozu Lyrik Heute: Dichtung und Leser in der gesteuerten Gesellschaft* (München, Germany: Piper, 1968).

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Are the Poets Falling Silent?" in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, edited by Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, translated by Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press), 73-74.

questions turns the onus on society itself: “The question is not whether the poets are silent, but whether our ear is acute enough to hear.”⁸ For Gadamer, the poets are not silent, but the din of the modern world has forced them to speak with a much more reserved and quieter voice. Yet it is this quiet and often unheard poetic word that offers possibilities for solidarity, for finding each other once again at home in language and our humanity.⁹

Gadamer considers Hilde Domin to be just such a poet who offers us an opportunity to return to language and return to each other. Immediately after Gadamer asks, “*Wozu Lyrik heute?*” he claims that anyone who has an attuned ear for poetry does not even need to ask the question. As it relates to Domin, any attentive reader and listener of her poetry will recognize a distinctive tone, one which is as quiet and subtle as the wisp of a breath. For Gadamer, Domin’s poetry is marked by her exile and return to Germany, for which he names her the poet of the return.¹⁰ Ilke Scheidgen, Domin’s biographer, notes that Gadamer’s use of the definitive article, ‘the,’ indicates the level of significance that Gadamer gives to Domin’s life and work.¹¹ She is not simply one among many poets whose poetry emphasizes the theme of return or homecoming. Gadamer considers her to be the definitive poet of *Rückkehr*. Biographically speaking, Domin’s ‘return’ is her return to Germany in 1961 after escaping in 1932 and living her life in exile primarily in the Dominican Republic. But this is not primarily what Gadamer has in mind in naming her the poet of return. He also does not think her poetry is simply a matter of healing from her own life of exile or overcoming Germany’s past atrocities. He does not think her poems

⁸ Gadamer, “Are the Poets Falling Silent,” 78.

⁹ Gadamer, “Are the Poets Falling Silent,” 81.

¹⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “*Hilde Domin, Dichterin der Rückkehr*,” in *Ästhetik und Poetik II: Hermeneutik im Vollzug, Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 9 (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 323–328. All quotations from this essay are my own translation.

¹¹ Ilke Scheidgen, *Hilde Domin: Dichterin des Dennoch*, (Lahr, Germany: Kaufmann Verlag), 95. The translation is my own.

are explicitly or exclusively political poems either. For Gadamer, Domin's poetry is a return to language and a return to ourselves: "They are poems. They speak about all of us. We all know or need to learn what return is. So, we all encounter ourselves in the poems themselves, insofar as we learn what we know. What's more, Hilde Domin's poems allow us to understand in a new way what poetry is. Whoever realizes with Domin what return is, knows all at once, that poetry is always return – return to language."¹² At first blush, it is not obvious what Gadamer means by this, especially since language or linguisticity is at the heart of his philosophical hermeneutics. If we are always already in language, and if language or linguisticity is the very condition for the possibility of interpretation and understanding at all, then a 'return' to language seems to contradict something structural within Gadamer's hermeneutics. How can we 'return' to something if we are already 'in' it? Furthermore, what does it mean, exactly, for language to be in exile?

Gadamer begins his account of return by describing it as a kind of double parting or farewell (*doppelter Abschied*) as well as a matter of knowledge or insight. First, when someone returns after a long time away, one has to let go of how things used to be. What once was has become something new upon one's return. To return, then, is not simply a matter of retrieving what was once lost (if this is even possible). The first farewell upon one's return, then, is an acceptance of this change and this loss. The second farewell is the recognition that we ourselves have also changed during our time away. When we return, we return as someone different, who has undergone some kind of transformation. In this way, as Gadamer states, "there is no going back."¹³ To return, then, is at the same time a farewell to what is no more and a parting with who we are no longer. To return, however, also means acquiring knowledge or insight. Gadamer even

¹² Gadamer, "*Dichterin der Rückkehr*," 323-324.

¹³ Gadamer, "*Dichterin der Rückkehr*," 324.

writes that “all knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] is a farewell. However, what comes to maturity in this farewell is itself knowledge. A new distance has been acquired.”¹⁴ With this new distance, we no longer live our lives with an obsession with managing our lives and calculating various expectations: “The breathlessness of expectation quiets down. No longer are goals pursued systematically. Much slips away like dreams, and what is unexpected is where one will arrive.”¹⁵ In the next moment, Gadamer refers to Domin’s poem, “Treulose Kahnfahrt,” and claims that the notion of return turns into an inner retreat, contemplation, or dwelling (*Einkehr*), especially as it relates to the experience of living in exile: “One wanders in the desert his whole life long and knows that the fruit bearing oasis, in which everything will end well, will never manifest.”¹⁶

Gadamer’s comments here are somewhat cryptic and it is not entirely clear what he is attempting to articulate. However, his comments seem to resonate quite well with his notion of the person of experience in part two of *Truth and Method*. In following his comments on Hegel and the negativity of experience, Gadamer claims that hermeneutical consciousness distinguishes itself from Hegel’s absolute self-consciousness in the following way. The end goal of Hegel’s absolute self-consciousness is “the certainty of itself in knowledge,” whereby the “the consummation of experience is ‘science.’”¹⁷ There should be nothing foreign to itself in this self-consciousness. Hermeneutical consciousness, however, understands experience to be motivated by this foreign or alien character of experience: “The nature of experience is conceived in terms of something that surpasses it; for experience itself can never be science. Experience stands in an ineluctable opposition to knowledge and to the kind of instructions that follows from general

¹⁴ Gadamer, “*Dichterin der Rückkehr*,” 325.

¹⁵ Gadamer, “*Dichterin der Rückkehr*,” 325.

¹⁶ Gadamer, “*Dichterin der Rückkehr*,” 325.

¹⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 363.

theoretical or technical knowledge.”¹⁸ The hermeneutical person of experience, then, is not someone who has experienced everything and has acquired certainty about oneself and the world. The person of experience is someone who is “radically undogmatic,”¹⁹ who knows that experience is always a matter of being open and adept to the very newness of experience. Yet this newness of experience is often fraught with pain, disappointment, suffering, and a challenging of our expectations. This is why Gadamer asserts that what is really at stake in hermeneutical consciousness and experience is the experience of human finitude: “Real experience is that whereby man becomes aware of his finiteness. In it are discovered the limits of the power and the self-knowledge of his planning reason. The idea that everything can be reversed, that there is always time for everything and that everything somehow returns, proves to be an illusion.”²⁰ To return, then, means to be open to the newness of experience. It means that genuine knowledge or insight involves a farewell to what one previously knew and to who one previously was. Furthermore, to return means a return to human finitude, that we cannot rigorously plan our lives to perfection, and that there is no guarantee that all will end well.

However, Gadamer shows us how Domin’s poetry indicates for us something that is guaranteed or vouchsafed in the return, namely, the poetic word. He refers to the following four lines from Domin’s poem, “Drei Arten Gedichte aufzuschreiben,” in order to emphasize the kind of communion that the poet shares with all humanity:

Angst
meine
unsere
und das Dennoch jedes Buchstabens.

Anguish
mine

¹⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 364.

¹⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 364.

²⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 365.

ours
and the nevertheless of every letter.²¹

As Gadamer writes: “That is it. The fixed letter obtains for all of us. The word vouches for itself – and still, what a venture a word is.”²² The poetic word is both, on the one hand, a risk or a venture, but on the other hand, it is that which allows for ever new possibilities of community, conversation, and resistance in the face of a crisis.²³ For Gadamer, Domin’s poetry furthermore speaks to the solidarity that the poet has with all humanity:

The poet’s comportment to language is for all of us a return to language, farewell and knowledge all at once. Because words are never the same. The poet is always wandering outwards from what is already understood. In the breath of breathlessness, which everywhere stirs up astonishment, the poem is born. This is the most extreme instance of isolation. But is this not also a return to what is common? It is not only the case that the poet is taken up by the language that we all speak. It is also the case that we go along with the poet in both farewell and knowledge. It is just as much the case that we ourselves always again wander outwards from out of what is self-evident to us – which we call thinking – and return to that which has become something different – we name this knowledge. Only because we ourselves follow in this manner that we go along with the poet as well.²⁴

As the poet of return, Domin’s poetry as a return to language calls for everyone to take up what Gadamer has called the “in-between” (*Zwischenstellung*) of hermeneutic consciousness in *Truth and Method*. After discussing the hermeneutic circle and the fore-conception of completeness in chapter four of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer discusses the event of understanding in the sense of belonging to the subject matter of tradition. In order to understand, one must already assume some kind of commitment or commonality with the subject matter at hand. However, at the same time, one often does not confront this subject matter with perfect clarity. Gadamer tells us that a hermeneutic consciousness navigates a “polarity of familiarity and strangeness,” whereby “*the*

²¹ Gadamer, “*Dichterin der Rückkehr*,” 326.

²² Gadamer, “*Dichterin der Rückkehr*,” 326.

²³ For more on the importance of the *Dennoch* of poetry, see Margret Karsch, *das Dennoch jedes Buchstabens: Hilde Domin's Gedichte im Diskurs um Lyrik nach Auschwitz* (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript Verlag, 2007). I also address the notion of the *Dennoch* in my previous article on Gadamer and Domin.

²⁴ Gadamer, “*Dichterin der Rückkehr*,” 326-327.

true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between.”²⁵ Understanding involves a dialectical play between what our own prejudices say about the subject matter and what the subject matter may say which challenges these prejudices. This is precisely why Gadamer claims that understanding is not so much about gaining a ‘better’ understanding about the subject matter, but that “we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all.*”²⁶ To understand hermeneutically is to always return to the subject matter in a different way after encountering its strangeness. The poetic return, then, means to take up language, and each other, in the same way: “In this way, the return to and dwelling [*Einkehr*] in language, which the poet achieves, is not only the poet’s own return, in which he finds himself again, because he has lost everything. It is the return which we all make to ourselves, in which we find ourselves.”²⁷

In a later essay from 1992, “Homeland and Language,” Gadamer speaks in more explicit terms about what it means to return to language and what it means to live in exile from language. He begins his essay by describing the inextricable link between one’s mother tongue and one’s homeland, namely, between one’s own language and what has “primordial familiarity” for us.²⁸ For Gadamer, those who live in exile experience a particular tension, then, between wanting to forget their mother tongue in order to learn and find a new home in the new language world they occupy, and wanting to maintain a “preserving remembrance” of that very mother tongue at the same time.²⁹ Gadamer describes this attempt at “dwelling in another language” as a kind of “rupture” that needs to be accounted for: “Thus, when one cannot get to hear one’s own language

²⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306.

²⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 307.

²⁷ Gadamer, “*Dichterin der Rückkehr*,” 328.

²⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Homeland and Language,” in *Ethics and Aesthetics in History: The Selected Writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, vol. 2, edited and translated by Pol Vandeveld and Arun Iyer, (London, England: Bloomsbury Academic), 177.

²⁹ Gadamer, “Homeland and Language,” 177.

anymore, it is a farewell from the language that binds human beings. This is the human background of all exile.”³⁰

At this point, Gadamer then returns to the question of what it means to return to language from out of this linguistic exile, which he describes as a new or second kind of rupture from the initial exile. This resonates quite well with his comments about the double farewell (*doppelter Abschied*) of return in his earlier essay on Domin, whereby both the world and we ourselves have undergone a kind of transformation. Yet in this later essay, Gadamer indicates that this notion of return from linguistic exile is not exclusive to those who have lived in geographical exile from their home country:

What is at play in such a rupture is like a crisis in dialogue. Even when one’s own homeland, which one has not abandoned, has been disfigured into something alien, one can in the end only live under the maxim of hope and promise: *et illud transit* [‘this too shall pass’]. Even today we in Germany are experiencing what such a rupture is, which makes dialogue difficult, so to speak.³¹

For Gadamer, this kind of linguistic exile within one’s own home country concerns the kind of alienation that comes with the instrumental rationality of the bureaucratic world. Gadamer argues that it is the task of the poet to return to language from out of this particularly new and modern exile:

We must be clear about the fact that entirely new tasks have emerged for writers in the age of the industrial revolution and automatized communication, when the information given to all of us about everything is massively multiplying itself. In a certain sense, writers must constantly return from exile, when they try to withdraw from the world of words constantly needed and utilized, from all pre-processed opinion making, ways of speaking and expectations of information prepared by technology. All the more so will we become conscious of what language is in its true possibilities and how literature is assigned this task of returning to language. This turns all poetry into a return from what is alien. I have articulated this at one time in my congratulatory speech when Hilde Domin was conferred the Droste prize, namely, that even in her case, her poetry is a return to language. It is indeed also the task for all of us in our own life to return home from alienation. The poetic word leads the way in this.³²

³⁰ Gadamer, “Homeland and Language,” 178.

³¹ Gadamer, “Homeland and Language,” 178.

³² Gadamer, “Homeland and Language,” 179.

What Gadamer identifies in Domin's poetry is a return to language as a return to dialogue, a common language, and perhaps solidarity. It is a return to oneself and to others, which nevertheless accounts for the various farewells and ruptures that have taken place in the process. Living in exile from one's own language then does not mean that one is outside or beyond language, but that one's own linguistic world has become confused, distorted, or even falsified in some way. As Gadamer remarks, this task of the poet is likewise the task of everyone. In an age of anonymity, mass communication, and technical rationality, we are all called to find our way back to language and back to each other.

Conclusion: Domin and the Task of Poetry

Gadamer's account of language, poetry and return reflect many of Hilde Domin's own insights about what she considers to be the task of poetry, especially as it pertains to the corruption, distortion, or alienation of language. In my previous essay on Gadamer and Domin, I refer to Domin's "poetics of trust" as that which is always attempting to "salvage a trust in language even amidst a crisis in language," a language crisis which she, like Gadamer, identifies in the modern Western world after World War II.³³ Yet this trust in language is not a blind or passive trust, but one that requires attending to and fighting for a particular linguistic ethic. In her work, *Wozu Lyrik Heute*, Domin claims that the poet ought to attend to language in such a way that the poem makes reality visible or provides a powerful clarity to what is real.³⁴ The poet attempts to name things as they are in a way that avoids any and all prevarication, mendacity, distortion, or falsification of what is real and true. Instead of referring to "protective custody," the poet names it for what it is: prison. Instead of "special treatment," the poet calls it murder:

³³ Crist, "A Hermeneutics and Poetics of Trust," 152.

³⁴ Domin, *Wozu Lyrik Heute* 28. All translations of works from Domin are my own.

“Every minor displacement between the word, and the reality of what is meant by the word, destroys orientation and makes truthfulness impossible from the outset. No one has a more delicate sense of balance for such words as the poet.”³⁵

Like Gadamer, Domin identifies the alienating language of the modern world as that which contributes to our alienation from each other and to ourselves. In a speech from 1978, Domin laments the way in which language has become something suspicious, destitute, and empty. Instead of speaking honestly and with courage, we resort, she thinks, to a cautious, neutral, and empty bureaucratic language.³⁶ In a reference to a term from Karl Jaspers, Domin suggests that such language can lead to *Menschenblindheit*, that is, a particular alienation or exile from each other such that we cannot see or recognize each other in our own humanity. As language goes, so goes our humanity and our relationship to what is true and real. Domin calls for a return to language that avoids such neutrality and false humility in order to return to each other: “To relinquish the dead, bureaucratic nomenclature as well as the hackneyed anti-authoritarian clichés. . . Instead, a direct and conscientious attempt to name what is happening to us. With this we will once again set our eyes on reality, which is slipping away from us.”³⁷

In this way, Gadamer’s focus on Domin as the poet of return points to a critical side of Gadamer that is often not discussed. Typically, we do not think of Gadamer as someone who makes explicit claims about contemporary culture or politics, or as someone who engages in something like a critique of ideology. However, in essays such as “Culture and Media,” “What is Practice?: The Conditions of Social Reason,” “The Limitations of the Expert,” and his essays and lectures on health and medicine, Gadamer often makes critical remarks about mass

³⁵ Domin, *Wozu Lyrik Heute* 29.

³⁶ Hilde Domin, “*Humanität bei Lebzeiten – Eine Utopie?*” in *Gesammelte Essays: Heimat in der Sprache* (München, Germany: Fischer Verlag, 2006), 401.

³⁷ Domin, “*Humanität bei Lebzeiten – Eine Utopie?*” 403.

communication, alienation, atomization, and conformism in the modern world. In one striking example from “Culture and Media,” Gadamer considers “the ability to conform” to various institutions and bureaucratic forces to play such a dominant role in contemporary society, such that “candid deviations from what is publicly said can be pursued substantively only with difficulty.”³⁸ A return to language, then, is not just a return of the poet to the poetic word. More than this, a return to language is a return to dialogue and conversation. It is a return to honesty, diligence, and precision to the subject matter at hand.

³⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Culture and Media,” in *Cultural-Political Interventions in the Unfinished Project of the Enlightenment*, ed. Axel Honneth, Thomas McCarthy, Clause Offe, and Albrecht Wellmer, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992, 185, 187.