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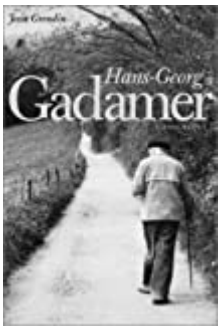

Jean Grondin. *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. xii + 478 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-09841-9.

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"If you cannot summon sufficient toughness toward yourself, nothing will come of you" (p. 117). So wrote Martin Heidegger in 1924 to his young protege Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), a figure universally recognized as the father of philosophical hermeneutics, and who belongs–along with Edmund Husserl, Heidegger, and Theodor Adorno, among others–to a handful of twentieth-century German philosophers who continue to exert an enormous influence on both the humanities and social sciences in the Western world. For this reason alone, the publication of the first Gadamer biography is an important event. Yet the importance of Jean Grondin's extremely well researched work, originally published by Mohr in 1999 under the title *Hans-Georg Gadamer: Eine Biographie*, lies not only in the insight which it provides into the genesis of Gadamer's magnum opus *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960).[1] *Wahrheit und Methode* is renowned for the following phrase: "In truth history does not belong to us but rather we belong to it" (p. 6). If, as Grondin suggests in his introduction, this biography is underpinned by the inescapable relationship between history and truth, and "motivated by the hermeneutic effort to hear the unsaid in the said" (p. 10), then the following question necessarily hangs over it: In what sense do both *Wahrheit und Methode* in particular, and philosophical hermeneutics in general, "belong" to a lifetime that spanned two world wars and the rise and fall of National Socialism in Germany?

One answer to these questions lies in the fact that Gadamer belonged to a philosophical epoch influenced first and foremost by his rather intimidating and foreboding mentor: Heidegger (1889-1976). In fact Heidegger and questions surrounding Heidegger's works mark the very conception of this biography. Grondin acknowledges that the research behind this volume commenced in 1988 under very specific historical and political conditions. A year earlier, Victor Farias's book *Heidegger et le nazisme* had argued that Heidegger's commitment to National Socialism extended well beyond the relatively short period in which he was rector at the University of Freiburg, as well as being integrated into the very fabric of his philosophy. While the debate concerning Heidegger and Nazism continues to this day, Grondin writes that in 1988 his idea for a Gadamer biography emerged from the suggestion that "similar questions might be asked about Gadamer" (p. ix). After all, Gadamer's career did take off during the period of National Socialism (he was first promoted to the position of Professor by the Nazi regime in 1937). Here, then, we approach three further questions which a Gadamer biography needs to answer: to what degree did Heidegger influence Gadamer's phi-

losophy, and how significantly does Gadamer's thought diverge from that of Heidegger? To what extent did Gadamer cooperate with the National Socialist regime? And most importantly: is Gadamer's philosophy compromised by any involvement with National Socialism?

In answer to the first of these questions, Grondin's biography demonstrates conclusively that both Gadamer's life and works bear the mark of Heidegger's influence at nearly every turn. The son of Johannes Gadamer, a distinguished professor of pharmaceutical chemistry at the universities in Breslau and Marburg, Hans-Georg Gadamer was born in 1900 and educated at a Protestant *Gymnasium* in Breslau, before studying *Germanistik*, art history, philosophy, and classical philology at Breslau, Marburg, and Freiburg. When, in 1928, Gadamer's father (at that time rector at the University of Marburg) was dying of cancer, it was the author of the recently published *Sein und Zeit* and new philosophy professor at Marburg (Heidegger) whom he summoned to his deathbed in order to inquire about Hans-Georg's future prospects as a philosopher. "Do you really believe that philosophy is enough of a vocation to occupy one's life?" was the question that Johannes Gadamer put to the rising star of German philosophy. "Yes" was Heidegger's implicit answer, since he had already accepted the responsibility of supervising Gadamer's *Habilitation* thesis on "The Interpretation of Plato's *Philebus*" (p. 29).

Grondin's account of the often complex and difficult relationship between Gadamer and Heidegger is an invaluable record of the personal circumstances under which Gadamer's version of "philosophical hermeneutics" came into being. In the summer semester of 1923, Gadamer attended Heidegger's lectures on the "Hermeneutics of Facticity" in Freiburg. At this point in the history of German philosophy, the meaning of the term "hermeneutics" was dominated by the philosophical legacy of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911). Dilthey had seen hermeneutics as a methodology appropriate to the *Geisteswissenschaften*–a methodology that could "ground" or secure a method for the human sciences and that might, in its rigor, be comparable to the methods of the natural sciences. The chief problem for hermeneutics, as Dilthey saw it, was that of historicism, or the historically relative character of all knowledge in the *Geisteswissenschaften*. According to Dilthey, each historical phenomenon needs to be understood in terms of the lived world or *Lebenswelt* in which it arises. His "solution" to this problem was to insist that a proper methodology for the *Geisteswissenschaften* is one that makes the observer's awareness of historicity and its effects upon knowledge its number one priority and goal. Only in this way could a solid foundation for the *Geisteswissenschaften* be secured.

Grondin shows that Heidegger's lectures on the "Hermeneutics of Facticity" undertook a radical reinterpretation and reorientation of the term "hermeneutics" that would influence the young Gadamer for the rest of his life. While Dilthey's understanding of hermeneutics had remained trapped in a Cartesian and Neo-Kantian subject/object dualism, in which the observer was to a certain degree separate from the phenomenon being observed and therefore capable of unpacking its historical determinations and conditions, Heidegger pointed out that human being-in-the-world or *Dasein* is itself irreducibly historical and temporal in its constitution. Given the irreducible historicity of *Dasein*, no method could control or neutralize the effects of historicity upon consciousness to the extent that an objective "ground" for knowledge could be reached. Rather, there could only be groundless and always provisional attempts to understand *Dasein* from within the flux of intentionality and temporality that is the human condition.

Grondin gives a masterful and highly accessible account of how Heidegger's reinterpretation of hermeneutics eventually led to one of the most important contributions to twentieth-century German philosophy: *Wahrheit und Methode*. He demonstrates conclusively that Gadamer had no significant interest in hermeneutics prior to his exposure to Heidegger's 1923 lectures, and, moreover, that it was Gadamer's fear of Heidegger's criticism that prevented him from publishing his major work until 1960. Grondin also shows that despite Gadamer's fear of his master, he also succeeded in establishing a unique philosophical identity that extended hermeneutics far beyond Heidegger's original and rather fragmentary gestures of the early 1920s. In fact, by 1973 Heidegger wrote to his friend Otto Poeggler: "Hermeneutic philosophy, that is Gadamer's business" (p. 5).

With the publication of *Wahrheit und Methode*, Gadamer made hermeneutics his own and emerged from the shadow of Heidegger. The basic argument of Gadamer's book, according to Grondin, is that "we always come too late when we try to completely conceptualize and methodize what we understand" (p. 284). This delay occurs because understanding is itself an irreducible characteristic of being, which as such is immune to the objectifications of scientific method. Here Gadamer moved beyond Heidegger by invoking the concepts of "prejudice" and "tradition" in order to clarify the hermeneutical situation. The Enlightenment, according

to Gadamer, had created a "prejudice against prejudice" that corresponded with its deepest wish: to find an objective ground for knowledge. For Gadamer, however, prejudice and tradition represent the necessity of human historicity and human finitude–far from being barriers to understanding, they are in fact the conditions of possibility for any act of understanding. The goal of hermeneutics is thus what Gadamer calls *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*–a mode of knowing that is irreducibly determined and effected by tradition and history, while also being self-reflectively conscious of this process of determination.

It has always been Gadamer's focus on the roles played by "tradition" and "prejudice" in acts of understanding that has brought forth charges of conservatism from some commentators. The publication of Grondin's biography has seen the re-surfacing of such charges, particularly in a lengthy review by Richard Wolin that appeared in the Summer 2003 edition of *Book Forum*. The argument behind Wolin's critique is essentially two-fold and to a certain extent mirrors similar charges made against Heidegger: first, Gadamer is to be condemned for having not resisted, and in some cases having cooperated with, the forces of National Socialism; second, it is argued that this cooperation with National Socialism is not just a biographical circumstance, but also indicative of a deep-seated conservatism and authoritarianism in Gadamer's thought.

Here it needs to be said that while Grondin's description of the development of Gadamer's philosophy is nuanced, engaging, persuasive, and authoritative, at times his account of Gadamer's conduct during the period of National Socialism reads like an apologia written for a friend. In this connection, the facts concerning Gadamer are as follows. After having spent some years in the academic wilderness as a *Privatdozent*, and having had a previous application for a professorship rejected on the grounds of an inadequate "sense of community," Gadamer voluntarily enrolled in a Nazi reeducation camp in 1935 (p. 181). He also, along with a number of other German professors, signed a "mandatory loyalty oath" to the National Socialist State dated November 11, 1933 (p. 158). This public declaration was subsequently published outside of Germany in order to lend respectability and legitimacy to Hitler's regime.

Grondin seems unable or unwilling to accept that these actions demonstrate that Gadamer was simultaneously a flawed individual and a very fine and important philosopher. Unlike Ruediger Safranski's eminently even-handed Heidegger biography–aptly subtitled *Between Good and Evil*–which presents the facts of Heidegger's personal and philosophical accommodations of National Socialism without any qualms whatsoever, Grondin seems at pains to absolve Gadamer of any sin. Gadamer is thus presented by Grondin as "weathering the storm and getting along himself" (p. 179) and "obeying the law of self-preservation" (p. 172) during the period of National Socialism, a period that saw him replace Jewish colleagues like Richard Kroner and Erich Frank who had been "furloughed" (*beurlaubt*) under Hitler's regime. In this respect, Gadamer's apparent "inner emigration" during the National Socialist period sees his reputation tarnished: Socrates, he definitely was not.

The case for Gadamer having been an active and committed ideological supporter of National Socialism is, however, rather weak, without being altogether nonexistent. There is, let it be said, no document or speech in Gadamer's oeuvre that approaches the unequivocal support given to Hitler by Heidegger in his infamous University of Freiburg rectorial address of 1933.

But one particular paper by Gadamer has been subjected to a scathing critique by scholars like Wolin in the United States and Teresa Orozco in Germany–a piece entitled "*Volk* and History in the Thought of Herder" given at the German Institute in Paris in May 1941. In this paper, Gadamer makes a distinction between the "depth" and "power" of the concept of the *Volk* in the German tradition and what he calls the "democratic slogans of the West." The former, unlike the latter, he argues, has "the power to create a new political and social order in an altered present" (quoted, p. 213). The fact that Gadamer later expunged or altered statements like this from his essay before it appeared in his *Collected Works* points to the fact that he himself may have felt compromised by what appears to be a clear, if relatively isolated, accommodation of National Socialist ideology. Grondin argues that while certain passages in Gadamer's paper are "very strange and indeed offensive," the essay in its entirety needs to be understood within the context of Gadamer's preoccupation with the problem of historicity–a problem that Herder himself first addressed as early as the eighteenth century (p. 213). Again, Grondin's approach to this issue in Gadamer's past seems more defensive than it does probing or objective.

At the same time, however, Richard Wolin's contention that such incidents in Gadamer's career point to the conclusion that philosophical hermeneutics is inherently conservative is also extremely problematic and

reductive. Wolin's argument runs to the effect that Gadamer's "reverence for tradition" and so-called denigration of "claims to objective truth" make any conception of progressive thought impossible.[2] Hermeneutics, we are led to believe by Wolin, leaves us stranded high and dry in a realm of philosophical relativism, where ethical choices become less important because truth itself is mediated by venerated traditions and conventions to which one should always defer.

Wolin presents here a very one-sided account of philosophical hermeneutics, since he fails to consider the fact that Gadamer undertook, in *Wahrheit und Methode*, a thorough-going critique of the ethics of Enlightenment reason and mainstream scientific methodology, which, although couched in completely different terms, is not altogether dissimilar to Horkheimer's and Adorno's critique in *Dialektik der Aufklaerung*. As Gadamer writes in his 1957 essay "Was ist Wahrheit?": "The methods of the natural sciences do not encompass everything that is worth knowing, not least that which is most worth knowing, namely the final purposes that all control of nature and human beings must serve."[3] The question as to what ends the control of nature serves is one which, according to Gadamer, the Enlightenment failed to pose, precisely because posing such a question would be an admission of human finitude and prejudice, both of which emerge from one's historicity and tradition. Tradition is therefore not that to which we should always defer, but rather that which inexorably infiltrates and shapes the ways in which we both pose and answer questions of importance. Rather than being inherently conservative, the recognition of tradition offered by philosophical hermeneutics is a mandatory preliminary procedure for any process of critique. This is because, as Gadamer so brilliantly puts it, "the self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life."[4]

This biography is worth reading for those with a special interest in Gadamer, those with an interest in the ways in which National Socialism influenced German academia, and those concerned with the more theoretical aspects of twentieth-century German philosophy, aesthetics, and historiography. Grondin's philosophical command of Gadamer's thought is impressive and comprehensive. One only wishes that Grondin could have suspended his apparent need to excuse the personal failings of a great philosopher who lived through the most terrible of epochs.

Notes

[1]. This review was written with the support of the Claussen-Simon Stiftung.

[2]. Richard Wolin, "Socratic Apology: A Wonderful, Horrible Life of Hans-Georg Gadamer," *Book Forum* (Summer 2003): `http://www.bookforum.com/wolin.html`.

[3]. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "What is Truth?" in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, ed. and trans. Brice R. Wachterhauser (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994), p. 26.

[4]. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 276.