

UNIVERSITATEA “BABEȘ-BOLYAI” CLUJ-NAPOCA
ȘCOALA DOCTORALĂ “CULTURĂ ȘI COMUNICARE”

Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction

A Critical Approach of the Question of Understanding

PhD THESIS
- SUMMARY -

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Cluj-Napoca
2010

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Keywords:

interpretation; understanding, historical understanding; misunderstanding; misinterpretation; blindness; comprehension; reading; writing; meaning; historical meaning; text; language; world; ontical; ontological; existentiell; existential; facticity; life; tradition; hermeneutical situation; belongingness; lived experience; expression; signifier; signified; sign; alterity; other; I and Thou; fusion of horizons; historically effective consciousness; differánce; dialogue; interior dialogue; event; human sciences; question and answer; dialectic; inner word; sharing; hermeneutics of the human sciences; hermeneutics of facticity; philosophical hermeneutics; deconstruction; Schleiermacher; Dilthey; Heidegger; Gadamer; Derrida; Habermas; Betti; Strauss; Derrida; Paul de Man

- SUMMARY -***Introduction***

The present investigation starts from a somewhat paradoxical situation with which we are confronted by the history of philosophy and of hermeneutics. Even though something like a hermeneutics has always been thematic in Western thought and despite that the development of this discipline is related to some of the most important names in the history of philosophy, the problematic of interpretation and understanding has never occupied a central position in the philosophical debates of the times. Ever since its beginnings in Late Antiquity, hermeneutics was considered to be a secondary endeavor, ancillary to theology, law and philology. The situation remained the same even in modern philosophy, which turning against the dogmatism of Antiquity and the Middle Ages, ceases to see the world as an imperfect redoubling of a higher wordly realm of the Ideas and defines it as a “book written by the finger of God.” Insomuch as not even in this new philosophical context in which the world becomes a world of signs waiting to be apprehended hermeneutics is recognized as a noteworthy philosophical endeavor one will be tempted to think that it would never be. Nevertheless history proves us wrong. Hence the paradoxical situation we were talking about.

For, in the second half of the 20th century, with the description offered to the phenomenon of interpretation and understanding in *Truth and Method* by Hans-Georg Gadamer, hermeneutics becomes – as Gianni Vattimo puts it – the “new koiné of philosophy.” In our times more and more philosophers turned their heads towards the problematic of interpretation and understanding and the Gadamerian reflection upon these matters has been taken up as ground and “model” by more and more philosophical disciplines such as aesthetics, ethics, epistemology and the theory of science, the philosophy of culture, political philosophy, etc. In the second half of the 20th century though, the influence of Gadamer’s hermeneutics goes far beyond the sphere of philosophy. There is now a hermeneutic pedagogy and a hermeneutical didactics. On the basis of Gadamer’s reflection in the United Kingdom some researchers developed a hermeneutic psychotherapy while in the United States others used philosophical hermeneutics for rethinking the relation between physician/nurse and patient.

Despite the proliferation of the interest in hermeneutics as such and in Gadamer’s hermeneutics in particular, the German philosopher’s description of the phenomenon of interpretation and understanding, to our knowledge, has not been subjected to a thorough critical examination so far. The task we assumed in the present investigation is that of supplementing this lack. We believe that no critique is possible but under the condition of the right measure and from the right distance from what is to be critiqued. That is why our endeavor was not to criticize what Gadamer says about interpretation and understanding, but to evaluate it, trying to bring to light the ground (or the lack thereof) of philosophical hermeneutics’ views on these matters and to open a path towards a possible correction in this sense.

Can a hermeneutic philosophy affirming that we can never understand *better*, but only differently really be critiqued and, what is more, corrected? Are we not confronted by Gadamer’s interpretation of interpretation with an impossible task insomuch as it demonstrates that “there cannot be any single interpretation that is ‘in itself’ correct” (TM 398). We should be very attentive to what Gadamer tries to say. If there can be no interpretation that is ‘in itself’ correct this does not mean that one can say anything about everything; it simply means that the truth of every interpretation is dependent on the interpretive horizon wherein it takes place and that the correctness or incorrectness of an interpretation becomes manifest only in the light of and through another interpretation. In fact, philosophical hermeneutics presents itself as a critique

of Dilthey's hermeneutics of the human sciences; and the description of the phenomenon of interpretation and understanding it offers is nothing but a *correction* of Schleiermacher and Dilthey's answer to the question: "What does it mean to interpret and how is understanding possible?" on the basis of Heidegger's thought. Gadamer insists upon this every time he talks about his philosophical endeavor.

In this way, far from rendering problematic the task we assumed, *Truth and Method* actually prefigures it. Gadamer's description of interpretation and understanding must be measured within the problematic horizon of the human sciences against Schleiermacher and Dilthey's view of understanding, and its correctness or incorrectness is directly dependent on whether in this horizon another interpretation of interpretation and understanding is possible or not. Our investigation unfolded on these two directions of inquiry and was oriented by two basic lines of questions.

In Part I we focused our attention on (i) what and how is the romanticist hermeneutics of the human sciences corrected by Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics; and (ii) how is Heidegger's ontology assumed as foundation for this correction. While in Part II we turned to the critical interpellations with which philosophical hermeneutics was confronted over the years by Leo Strauss, Emilio Betti, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida in order to see whether the description of the phenomenon of interpretation and understanding it offers can really be defended.

The importance of these interpellations has been generally marginalized in the literature. About some of them (such as those put forth by Leo Strauss and Betti) nothing has been written so far, while the others (such as Derrida's) have been considered to be completely misplaced or even nonsensical. Are these critical interpellations so irrelevant as the commentators would have us believe? Assuming the principle of the right measure we believed it to be our duty to at least listen to what they have to say. By doing this though, philosophical hermeneutics' limits and limitations quickly became apparent.

Part I. What is Understanding? The Genesis of the Answer of Philosophical Hermeneutics

Preamble. The Necessity of Going Back to the Sources of Philosophical Hermeneutics

Judging by the great number of contexts in which Gadamer himself talks about the relationship between his philosophical hermeneutics and the hermeneutics of the human sciences of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, on the one hand, and his indebtedness to Heidegger, on the other, one would be tempted to think that a clarification in this sense presupposes a mere exegetical endeavor deprived of any speculative stake. In order to circumscribe the conceptual horizon of the German philosopher's description of interpretation and understanding, the texts must purely and simply be read. If one does this thought, it becomes manifest that the problem is not as simple as it seems to be. As Thomas Nenon shows, even though the general outline of Gadamer's critique of Dilthey is easily identifiable in *Truth and Method*, the details of his critique are quite ambiguous. The only thing certain is that for Gadamer the problem is that Dilthey's thought weavers between science and the philosophy of life.

And the situation is the same in what concerns philosophical hermeneutics' relation with Heidegger's ontology. The dominant image in the literature in this regard – an image never put into question – is that proposed by Habermas according to which Gadamer would be an “urbanizer of the Heideggerian province.” In a way Gadamer himself is responsible for this insofar as in *Truth and Method* (but also in other contexts) he formulates and defines the project of philosophical hermeneutics in terms of a “transposing” or a “derivation” of Heidegger's thought in the sphere of the human sciences. If one asks what exactly did Gadamer transpose and how, the image of the urbanization becomes problematical. In certain contexts the German philosopher identifies as the ground of his philosophical hermeneutics Heidegger's project of a hermeneutics of facticity from the 20s; in others, on the contrary, the ontological doctrine of understanding formulated through the analytic of Dasein in *Being and Time*. Sometimes Gadamer shows that such derivation was not possible without “essential alterations” and that philosophical hermeneutics opens another way to Heidegger's later thought; with other occasions though, he notes that philosophical

hermeneutics would actually be an “alternative” to it, going so far as to say that the possibility Heidegger’s ontology after the turn, and his ontology as such is opened only by the concept of understanding he developed.

Considering all these complications it has become manifest that if our investigation is to come to an answer to the first line of questioning, it has to go back to the sources and begin from the very beginning. That is why the first chapter of our study has been dedicated exclusively to Dilthey’s hermeneutics and the answer it offers along with Schleiermacher to the question of understanding and to Heidegger’s hermeneutic ontology as it has been formulated in the 20s.

Chapter 1. Understanding Between Epistemology and Ontology

I. Romanticist Hermeneutics: The Epistemological View of Understanding of Schleiermacher and Dilthey

Every return to the sources and any essay to map a history of philosophical influences is constantly exposed to the risk of arbitrariness, taking what is accessory as essential and the other way round. Such an endeavor can guard itself against this peril only inasmuch as it anchors itself explicitly in at least one point of the influenced thinking and approaches the influent one in its light. Because our return to Dilthey aimed to make manifest how is the hermeneutics of the human sciences and its view of understanding corrected by philosophical hermeneutics, we have anchored our investigation in the relation between science and the philosophy of life in the German philosopher’s thought, the only thing we know for certain as problematical for Gadamer.

Thus, we have tried to retrace as closely (but also as briefly) as possible what could be called “Dilthey’s way to hermeneutics” focusing our attention especially on two questions: first of all, the development of Dilthey’s “critique of historical reason” throughout the two fundamental phases of his thought; and, second of all, the way in which Schleiermacher’s philosophy of interpretation is adapted by Dilthey to his own epistemological ends.

Through this, it has become manifest that the objection of psychologism that is usually raised against the German philosopher’s thought *in toto* is justified actually only in connection with the first phase of its development. We have shown, Dilthey himself was well aware of this problem (this is actually what determined him to try to

search for a methodological foundation of the human sciences in the philosophy of life), a problem he overcame by ceasing to approach the epistemological question of the human sciences through the looking-glass of the concept of “fact of consciousness” in favor of that of “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*). Even though these concepts are structurally similar, lived experience is, on the one hand, preconscious and, on the other, oriented theologically towards “expression” (*Ausdruck*). This makes it possible for it to acquire an objective character.

By bringing to light the way in which Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics is engaged in the project of a “critique of historical reason” though, it has also become manifest that neither the objection of subjectivism with which Dilthey was confronted holds. It is true, Dilthey follows closely Schleiermacher’s view of understanding. For him too, just like for Schleiermacher, the hermeneutic “object” presupposes both an objective and a subjective side, being constituted by the exteriorization of the subjectivity of the author in the objective meanings of language. For both of them the subjectivity of the author is to be understood and, for this reason, the process of comprehension takes the form of a movement of transcendence from the outside towards the interiority of the author’s mind guided by the hermeneutical circle of part and whole. In contrast to Schleiermacher, for Dilthey though, what ensures the possibility of this movement of transcendence is not the mere congeniality between the interpreter and the author, and the process of interpretation does not imply in any way whatsoever a divination. On the contrary, as the German philosopher shows, it is based on the “communality of the spirit” instituted by the fact that the same lived experience is always objectivated in expression in the same manner. That is why Dilthey replaces the Schleiermacher’s divinatory moment of interpretation with a triple epistemological process based on *induction*, *analysis* and *construction* assuring the rigor and scientificity of interpretation.

II. *Heidegger’s Hermeneutics of Dasein*

Just like in the case of the return to Dilthey, our inquiry into Heidegger’s thought assumed as anchoring point what is known with certainty about its relation with philosophical hermeneutics. Considering Gadamer’s affirmations in this sense two things are sure, namely that the basis of the critique of Schleiermacher and Dilthey’s view of understanding is to be found somewhere along the lines of the

hermeneutics of facticity or of the analytic of Dasein and that this basis was not assumed in an uncritical manner, being subjected, as Gadamer puts it, to “essential alterations.”

Thus, in a first step, we have focused our attention on the genesis of the idea of a hermeneutics of factual life and on the way it is circumscribed in Heidegger’s thought in the 20s. Through the analysis of several texts from that period we have tried to show that this origin is to be found in the sketch of an existentiell-ontical doctrine of interpretation and understanding prefacing the task of the destruction (*Destruktion*) of the history of ontology and, at the same time, that the project of a hermeneutics of facticity was expressly envisaged as a *correction* of one of the fundamental minuses of Dilthey’s hermeneutics of the human sciences. For Heidegger, the reason why Dilthey was always on the way to hermeneutics but never managed to complete the project of a critique of historical reason is that he failed to approach the problem of the reality of life as problem. In Heidegger’s view though, this is a prerequisite for any rigorous philosophical endeavor as such. Precisely this is what gives the task of the hermeneutics of facticity. On the basis of two of Heidegger’s lecture courses from 1921-1922 we have shown that its task is that of bringing to light what it means to live (which, in Dasein’s case takes the form of living in a here and now, situated in a “today”) and of the ontological structures determining this life. And the means it is supposed to employ in this sense is none other than interpretation as such understood as an essential distinctive possibility of factual life itself.

In the light of these it has become manifest that despite the notable differences between them, the project of a hermeneutics of facticity is not separated by a radical rupture from the ontology of *Being and Time* as it seemed at first sight. On the contrary, the latter is in fact a maturation of the former. Considering the way it is circumscribed, the idea of a hermeneutics of facticity covers all the three meanings whereby Heidegger’s endeavor from 1927 defines itself as hermeneutic in that “puzzling” (because singular) page from *Being and Time*.

Through this though, the complex history of Heidegger’s influence on development of philosophical hermeneutics is already simplified, and the task of our investigation becomes more precise. It is not about choosing either the hermeneutics of facticity or the ontology of *Being and Time* as source of Gadamer’s thought, but of establishing how the latter develops *in between* these two and starting from both.

In this sense, in the second step of our return to the sources of philosophical hermeneutics we focused our attention on the connections between the sketched doctrine of interpretation and understanding that led to the hermeneutics of facticity and the so-called existential-ontological one from *Being and Time*. Considering the possibility of a critique of Heidegger's thought announced in between the lines of Gadamer's affirmations above, at the centre of our interest was the way in which the latter relates to the poles of language and world, as it is well known, the two fundamental dimensions of philosophical hermeneutics' answer to the question of understanding.

Chapter 2. The Problem of Understanding in Philosophical Hermeneutics. Between and Beyond Dilthey and Heidegger

I. Gadamer's Critique of Dilthey

Due to the ambiguous character of *Truth and Method's* way of dealing with the romanticist hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey the commentators have adopted the most diverse positions regarding what could be problematical with it in Gadamer's view. For Anthony Giddens and David Hoy, for example, the problem is the psychologist and subjectivist character of Dilthey's stance. For Joel Weinsheimer, on the contrary, what is problematic is its objectivism. In Th. Nenon's interpretation Dilthey can be accused of all these in the same measure; while in James Risser's, what is objectionable above all is the ambiguity of Dilthey's thought.

In the previous chapter we have shown that the first two objections are not truly justified or, at least, not without reservations. In contrast to his contemporary interpreters though, Gadamer seems to have been well aware of this. If one takes a closer look at the argumentative structure of *Truth and Method* one will see that none of the interpretive hypotheses proposed in the literature can be defended. It is clear that Gadamer's problem with Dilthey is to be found somewhere else.

Starting from the way Gadamer circumscribes the task of historical consciousness in a series of conferences constituting one of the drafts of *Truth and Method* our hypothesis was that the problem consists rather in the fact that the German philosopher lost sight of the peculiarity of historical experience, thus failing to give an appropriate account of historical meaning and of the way historical understanding takes place. For irrespective of the way in which Dilthey tried to

provide the human sciences with a methodological foundation, he never took into consideration the fact that history is an expression of the spirit just as much as a rapport of forces that transcend the power and the borders of reason. In this sense, Dilthey did nothing else but to confirm Hegel's thesis that all that is real is rational, and all that is rational is real, even though the fundamental task he assumed along with the entire historical school was that of contesting it. As Gadamer ironically notes at some point, Dilthey really managed to substitute Hegel's absolute spirit with the historical consciousness but only with the price of transforming the latter in a form of absolute spirit.

II. *Going Beyond Dilthey Through Heidegger. Understanding and Event*

In the accusation of not having taken into consideration that history is at the same time a rapport of forces *and* an expression of the spirit the echoes of Heidegger's critique of Dilthey can hardly be missed. By taking this as our guiding light we have tried to demonstrate that Gadamer's endeavor to correct Dilthey's hermeneutics of the human sciences goes in the same direction as Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity. Or, better put, that philosophical hermeneutics presents itself explicitly as a direct continuation of the hermeneutics of facticity. Just as Heidegger showed that at the existential level the world is the ontological correlate of Dasein, philosophical hermeneutics wants to show that at the existentiell level this correlate is history as such. Against Dilthey, Gadamer wants to demonstrate that the way in which we relate to the past cannot be reduced to an epistemological rapport between subject and object and that it must be thought rather in terms of "belongingness."

In this sense, the fundamental task the German philosopher assumes is, on the one hand, to show that what Dilthey calls in the footsteps of Hegel "objective spirit", that is the language, the customs, i.e. tradition as such constitutes the facticity of our historical existence for it presents itself as an unsurpassable limit for the reason of the individual. And, on the other hand, that precisely this tradition is what opens the possibility of historical knowledge. Through an analysis of *Truth and Method* we have argued that this is the fundamental stake of Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition and prejudices. Its goal is not to demonstrate that tradition has a rational character because the prejudices it carries with it are based on an act of knowledge. It wants to

show rather that its historical being (*Geschichtlichsein*) is preservation (*Bewahrung*), a process presupposing the “affirmation, embracing and cultivation” of the past that allows something true to come into being.

The fact that to be means to be situated in history and that the tradition in which we find ourselves inexorably opens the possibility of historical knowledge, we showed, subjects the data of the hermeneutic problem to a radical modification. With this, historical meaning cannot be seen anymore as a unity existing in itself as an expression of lived experience and becomes something existing “for us” in the guise of a “fluid multiplicity of possibilities” expressing both the intention of an author or an agent and the result of certain decisions taken in the course of history regarding its truth and relevance through the process of affirmation, embracing and cultivation. And, on the other hand, the hermeneutic “object” becomes the theme, the matter at hand (*Sache*) the text, historical event or work of art talks about rather than the style or the lived experience behind the expression. And this object has a dual nature being constituted both by what was intended by the author and by the chain of interpretation it received in the course of history.

The modification of the general framework of interpretation though modifies also the problem as such. As we have tried to show, from now on the fundamental task of hermeneutics is to explain if and how the interpreter is able to recognize the alterity of the hermeneutic “object” and the way in which the opinion of the text, the historical event or the work or art differs from his or hers. Through this we finally came to understand why Gadamer presents his philosophical project also as a “translation” or a “transposition” at the level of the human sciences of Heidegger’s analytic of *Dasein*. For precisely this is what Gadamer does. He will try to show that, at the ontical level, historical understanding mirrors almost perfectly the structure of ontological understanding and that they take place following the same movement.

We retraced as closely as possible Gadamer’s translation of Heidegger’s doctrine of understanding at the level of the human sciences insisting (for reasons that will come to light in the next chapter) mainly on two issues. First of all, on the fact that understanding, as Gadamer conceives it, is not a subjective performance but, rather, something that *happens*, an *event* to which the interpreter participates.

Second of all, we have insisted on the inter-active character of what Gadamer calls the foregrounding (*Abhebung*) of the interpreter and text’s horizons in understanding, and on the fact that despite its overtones, the concept of “fusion”

whereby the German philosopher describes understanding does not amount in any way to a melting and thus with a leveling of alterity. Through such fusion the different opinion of the text does not become familiar and thus indistinguishable from that of the interpreter; it is just seen in a familiar light as a *completely different* opinion.

III. *The Silent Turn Against Heidegger. Philosophical Hermeneutics as Hermeneutic Ontology*

If one considers what has been shown so far in the light of the task of a correction of Schleiermacher and Dilthey's view of understanding on the basis of Heidegger's ontology – as Gadamer insists, the fundamental task of his thought – two things seem clear: first of all, that this task has already been completed and, second of all, that the originality of the Gadamerian project is quite modest. For, as we have seen, in all the key points of this endeavor Gadamer followed closely in the footsteps of his teacher.

Precisely when the project of philosophical hermeneutics seems to have been completed though, *Truth and Method* takes a step further and reformulates the idea of “fusion of horizons” whereby understanding was defined in terms of “application.” With this, as Gadamer puts it, Aristotle's ethics and theological and legal hermeneutics become of “special importance” and gain “exemplary significance” for philosophical hermeneutics. *Truth and Method* justifies this reformulation explicitly through the need to show that even though it institutes as a condition of possibility of understanding something like a “historically effective consciousness,” it does not become a philosophy of consciousness. In this sense Aristotle is important in order to attest that this form of consciousness has the “structure of experience” understood as experience of limitation and finitude. Otherwise put, that understanding as such is an event that happens to the interpreter above and beyond his or her will.

As we have seen though, this was already clear in the description of the movement of understanding. That is why, it seems, the “special importance” of Aristotle's ethics and the “exemplary significance” of legal and theological hermeneutics is to be found (also) somewhere else. On the basis of some of Gadamer's statements concerning the role of the concept of historically effective consciousness, going beyond the image of the “urbanization of the Heideggerian

province” generally accepted in the literature, we argued that Gadamer’s recourse to Aristotle is the mark of a silent turn against Heidegger.

In our interpretation, the way in which the Greek philosopher circumscribes moral knowledge (*phronesis*) in opposition with technical knowledge (*techne*) is truly important for Gadamer because it provides the means for arguing that the understanding at work in the human sciences itself presupposes a “doing”, involves the “whole of human life” and takes the form of seeing something as something in an apophantic sense. Otherwise put, it is important for showing that the so-called “derivative”, existential understanding is actually existential and that the Heideggerian distinction between these two modes of understanding does not really hold and, thus, that the historical hermeneutics of facticity is in truth an ontological hermeneutics of Dasein. This constitutes the first step of a critique and a correction of Heidegger’s thought in philosophical hermeneutics. But, we have shown, it is not also the last one.

Gadamer takes a second step in this sense with the third difference between *phronesis* and *techne* he sketches following Aristotle, a difference that leads to another reformulation of the problem of understanding in terms of “I” and “Thou.” At a first glance it is not very clear how could this reformulation be taken as a criticism of Heidegger thought for the German philosopher does not relate the problem of understanding to that of alterity. We have tried to show that for Gadamer precisely this is the problem. For him the “Thou,” the concrete other given to us in a here and now is a mark of our finitude and another face of our thrownness (*Geworfenheit*). It represents a constitutive limit to Dasein just like its own death. Should Heidegger have understood this, he would have understood also that the other not only can but also must play a role in understanding. Otherwise put, he would have realized that understanding does not take place as a projection of a solitary Dasein.

But the way in which Gadamer undertakes the reformulation of the question of understanding in the terms of “I” and “Thou” brought to light also the ground of his affirmations – noted in the preamble – that philosophical hermeneutics constitutes an “alternative” to Heidegger’s ontology and that it opens another path towards the German philosopher’s later thought, accounting for its “leap” or the “step back” behind metaphysics.

As we have seen in that context though, Gadamer goes even further in this sense by saying that his own philosophical endeavor offers in the end no more no less

than the foundation of Heidegger's ontology as such. An affirmation such as this might seem bizarre to say the least considering that Gadamer's philosophy is developed explicitly as a direct continuation of the hermeneutic of facticity through the translation of the analytic of Dasein at the level of the human sciences. In our opinion though, the situation changes completely if one takes a closer look at the third part of *Truth and Method*. Gadamer's reflection on the relation between language and world, his endeavor to demonstrate that these "belong" to one another (in the rigorous ontological sense the German philosopher attributes to this term) and that the dialogue constitutes the essence of language represent, we have shown, a third and last step of Gadamer's silent turn against Heidegger. This comes to correct the fundamental ambiguity of the ontological status of language vitiating both Heidegger's early and later thought. For, even though Heidegger understands in the end that language cannot be taken purely and simply as equipment ready-to-hand for Dasein – as is the case in *Being and Time* – being rather the "house of being," he nevertheless reduces its essence to monologue even though he knew all too well that it is "unmistakably bound with human speaking."

Part II. Understanding and Misunderstanding. From Philosophical Hermeneutics to Deconstruction... and Back Again

After seeing how Dilthey's hermeneutics of the human sciences is corrected by Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics on the basis of Heidegger's thought, and that the latter is not actually assumed completely uncritically as ground in this sense, our investigation turned to the second task it assumed: that of establishing whether and in what measure philosophical hermeneutics' answer to the question of understanding can be defended within the conceptual horizon in which it was formulated. We have begun in this sense with a re-evaluation of the three critical interpellations formulated by Leo Strauss, Emilio Betti and Jürgen Habermas.

Chapter 3. In Search for the Right Measure. The Disclosure of a Space for a Critique of Philosophical hermeneutics

I. Leo Strauss and the Question of Relativism

In the chain of scattered questions Leo Strauss addresses to Gadamer in the correspondence between them one can distinguish three objections raised against philosophical hermeneutics.

To put it briefly, Strauss agrees with Gadamer that what is to be understood is the claim to truth of the text and that understanding presupposes the application of meaning upon the present situation of the interpreter but, for him, the concept of “fusion of horizons” Gadamer uses in this sense is problematical on two accounts. On the one hand, as Strauss shows, one cannot say that the horizon of the *author* is enlarged through understanding as Gadamer claims. And the task of understanding is never productive as Truth and Method claims of this basis.

Second of all, Strauss agrees with Gadamer also on the fact that one can never reach a complete understanding but, for him, this does not mean that the idea of *one* true understanding is out of the question. In fact, as the American philosopher argues, precisely this is the thing every interpreter strives for. At this level philosophical hermeneutics involves a form of relativism.

And third of all, for Strauss Gadamer’s understanding of tradition as a continuum of meaning constituted historically is highly problematical. For, in the end, this presupposes that every traditional author has the status of a *model* the interpreters ought to follow. But this is manifestly not the case. Many classical works are purely and simply wrong or unreadable and for this reason they should not be or are impossible to follow.

On the basis of the answer Gadamer himself gave to his American peer and of our interpretation of *Truth and Method* we have tried to show that none of these objections hold. The very way in which the first objection is formulated shows that even though Strauss tries to distance himself from the romanticist hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, he shares with it a common presupposition: that what a text says, that its truth is exclusively the product of the author’s reflection. As we have seen though, this idea cannot be defended. Historical meaning has the character

of a “fluid multiplicity of possibilities” in which the voice of tradition makes itself heard *along* with that of the interpreter. And as soon as one acknowledges this, it also becomes manifest that understanding really implies a productive dimension. For every interpretive endeavor brings to light the prejudices of the interpreter.

Leo Strauss’ second objection is by far the most serious of all. Nevertheless, this does not mean that it is pertinent as well. For, as we have shown, even though philosophical hermeneutics affirms the relativity of interpretation to the situation in which it takes place, the understanding it presupposes is no less than an understanding “in itself.” This case is similar to that of the rapport between language and world. Even though every language is just a view of the surrounding world, what presents itself in each is nothing else than the world as such.

And against the third objection, along with Gadamer, we have shown that no matter whether a text is right or wrong, it is nevertheless “true” in the sense that it uncovers something in tradition.

II. *Emilio Betti and the Monopoly of Truth*

If Leo Strauss and Gadamer agree at least on the fact that understanding presupposes application upon the contemporary situation of the interpreter, for Emilio Betti, the last bastion of the historical school, this is highly problematical. The main thing he reproaches philosophical hermeneutics is that, by taking the juridical text that still produces effects upon the present (i.e., a very particular type of text) as model, it loses sight of the fact that the task of interpretation is “purely contemplative.” In this way philosophical hermeneutics attributes the interpreter a “monopoly of truth” depriving thereby the interpretive process of any chance of becoming objective. As Betti shows in *Hermeneutics as the General Methodology of the Geisteswissenschaften*, the fact that for Gadamer what is to be understood is not the text as expression of an Other (*Fremd*) but, rather, its claim to truth and that the latter is to be understood starting from the tradition in which the interpreter is situated is highly indicative in this sense. Everything happens as if tradition would be if not the warrant, at least the “checking device” of truth.

In his public response to Betti Gadamer contented himself solely to point out that the task of interpretation really consists in application and is not merely contemplative as the Italian jurist indicates. But with regard to all the other matters he

kept complete silence. In our investigation though, we have shown that this is not because Betti is actually right. It is true, from philosophical hermeneutics' point of view, the hermeneutic "object" really is the truth claim of the text but, as the reformulation of the problem in terms of "I" and "Thou" shows, it is to be understood as a *different* claim to truth and *in its difference*. If one takes into account the way in which the interpretive process is described by Gadamer it becomes clear that philosophical hermeneutics cannot be rightfully accused of having transformed tradition in a checking device for truth for, we have seen, the task of understanding is brought about precisely by the fact that it is put in question and it presupposes the bringing into play of the prejudices of the interpreter.

III. *Jürgen Habermas and the Rationality of Tradition*

Leo Strauss and Emilio Betti's critical interpellations focus on particular aspects of philosophical hermeneutics and none of them covers more than a few pages in print. That is why Gadamer's answers themselves were brief and sometimes even vague. Things change completely with Habermas' interpellation, which stirred a true debate between the two philosophers that lasted for several years. At the centre of this debate stands Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition and of the prejudices, problematical in Habermas' view because, on the one hand, it is unsustainable and, on the other, dangerous for the Enlightenment's emancipatory ideal he advocates and defends. The accent and centre of gravity of the German philosopher and sociologist's objections though change over time.

In a first phase, we have shown, the main accusation Habermas formulates against Gadamer concerns the fact that he devaluates the epistemological potential of hermeneutical reflection. In his view, insomuch as understanding presupposes and involves the acknowledgement of the prejudices determining the interpreter's thought it opens the possibility of a "controlled distancing" (*Verfremdung*) from tradition and thus of a "transcendental semantic scheme" for its interpretation. For Habermas, in the end, only such an interpretive scheme can ensure the rationality of tradition; only in this way tradition can be seen as the product of a reason comprehending itself and becomes the object of a consensus capable of orienting social action. Gadamer lost sight both these matters precisely because for him the authority of tradition does

not constitute a problem for the self-understanding of the individual or of the social groups.

In our opinion the two points Habermas notes against Gadamer are basically correct. Through an analysis of Gadamer's answer to Habermas it has become apparent that the German philosopher himself agrees with his peer in both regards. However, we have tried to show, the objection Habermas formulates on the basis of these points cannot actually be defended. Even though hermeneutical reflection gives us the possibility of a controlled distancing from tradition and can lead to a rigorous interpretive methodology this does not in any way mean that its task is suspended. Any understanding of tradition from a distance is in the end an alienated understanding and precisely this is what makes hermeneutical reflection necessary.

Moreover, for Gadamer too the recourse pure and simple to the authority of tradition for the self-understanding of the individual or of the social groups is highly problematical. But, as we have already seen, the rehabilitation of tradition Gadamer undertakes in *Truth and Method* does not in any way whatsoever advocate this, but something completely different: that our thinking is inextricably marked and conditioned by the tradition in which we find ourselves.

Habermas though, was not convinced by any of these answers. That is why, in the second phase of the debate with Gadamer, he restated the basic problem but restructured his argumentative strategy trying this time to put hermeneutics' claim to universality in question. In this sense, the German philosopher and sociologist set to show, on the one hand, that psychoanalytical depth hermeneutics can serve as a basis for the constitution of a theory of communicative competence able to ensure a rigorous methodical understanding. And, on the other hand, that only this can account for the situations in which social communication is distorted. Otherwise put, that the understanding philosophical hermeneutics talks about can and must be supplemented by a depth understanding transposed from the sphere of psychoanalysis to that of society as such.

As an answer to this objection, along with Gadamer, we have argued that the case of psychoanalysis is not comparable to that of the social sciences and that such a transposition of depth hermeneutics to society as such is not acceptable. That is why neither the hermeneutics' claim to universality is really problematical.

IV. *The Encounter Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction*

As it can be seen, none of the critical interpellations approached so far offers us the possibility of a critique and of a correction of philosophical hermeneutics' view of interpretation and understanding. This is the reason why in our investigation we turned in the end, as to a last resort, to the encounter between Gadamer and Derrida. Considering that for both Gadamer and Derrida themselves, but also for all the philosophers that dealt with the dossier of the encounter "nothing happened" between the two philosophers, the chances to find here what we were looking for appeared to be minimal.

A quick look at the three questions Derrida addressed to Gadamer seems to confirm this. Derrida questions first of all the "good will to understand" Gadamer silently institutes as a fundament of philosophical hermeneutics and seems to want to show that this is a sign of fall into metaphysics. He questions, second of all, the context dependency of meaning, i.e. the belongingness of interpretation to the hermeneutical situation and seems to want to argue that this becomes problematical if one takes into account an interpretation that "follows the lines of psychoanalysis." And third of all, Derrida wonders whether it would not be possible that a "rapport of interruption" rather than one of mediation between the interpreter and the text constitutes the condition of possibility of understanding. From the point of view of philosophical hermeneutics, we have shown, the first two questions seem to have no object, while the third appears to be straightforwardly nonsensical.

That is why contemporary scholarship adopted the most diverse positions with regard to Derrida's interpellation. Some commentators have seen it as the sign of a complete misunderstanding of philosophical hermeneutics and of frivolity from Derrida's part for having ventured to question it despite that he was completely unfamiliar with Gadamer's writings. For others it is rather the expression of a will to disengage from the dialogue with Gadamer or even to contest in a performative (in a lax sense) fashion the possibility of understanding as such.

However, we have tried to show that through a close reading of Derrida's work it becomes apparent that the situation presents itself quite differently. It is true that one cannot speak of a dialogue between the two philosophers. But this does not mean that what did (not) happen between them amounts to nothing or that the

questions Derrida voiced are deprived of any critical import. In our interpretation the encounter between Gadamer and Derrida must be seen as a “sharing” (*partage*) – a word Derrida himself uses at some when talking about Gadamer – understood both as joining (i.e., union, unity) and division (i.e., differentiation, difference).

In this sense we have shown that the things Derrida questions testify for a communality of interests of philosophical hermeneutics and deconstruction and thus that the French philosopher’s questions to Gadamer are actually questions he asks *along* with Gadamer. This is the reason why they seem to have no object. On the basis of a text such as *Limited Inc.* we have brought to light that Derrida himself believes in a “good will to understand” and that for him too meaning is always context dependent. On the other hand, on the basis of some of Gadamer’s texts this time we have shown that no matter how paradoxical this may sound the question concerning the “rapport of interruption” is in fact the fundamental question of Gadamer’s thought, the question that brought about and animated philosophical hermeneutics through and through.

But, starting from the texts the French philosopher dedicates to Gadamer’s memory, we have also argued that the affirmation of a “rapport of interruption,” the suspension of all mediation as the condition of possibility of understanding and of a “different way of thinking about texts” and interpretation must not be dismissed. In *Rams* for example Derrida insists on this matter and further circumscribes it. As we are shown in this context in the margins of a poem by Paul Celan, to interpret could mean also to “carry the other upon yourself,” “to carry yourself towards the infinite inappropriability of the other.” For Derrida, only such an interpretation does justice to the other and opens the possibility of any thinking and weighing.

In the very way in which this other interpretation is circumscribed, due to the fact that it is presented as a different interpretation of interpretation and thus as a supplement to philosophical hermeneutics’ view of interpretation we finally find a path towards a critique and a possible correction of philosophical hermeneutics.

Chapter 4. Towards an Other (of) Understanding

I. Towards an “Outside” of Language “Before” the World

Derrida’s interpellation opens a path towards a critique and a possible correction of philosophical hermeneutics’ view of interpretation. But it does not make

it easier. From the very beginning we are confronted with two sets of questions. First of all, how does the suspension of all mediation make understanding possible? How could it given that, as Derrida himself shows in *Rams*, such a rapport amounts to a disappearance of the world as such? Can we still talk of understanding if the world is gone? Would there still be an other to be understood? From Gadamer we have learned that to have a world is to have language and that language is constitutive of any understanding and alterity as such. So, if the world is gone, language itself disappears and, with it, also the task of understanding and the other to be understood.

And, second of all, what does it really mean that to interpret could also mean to “carry the other upon oneself”? Is this something more than a poetic license?

In order to answer these sets of questions, in a first step, we focused our attention on such texts as *Positions* and *Of Hospitality* and tried to show that even though Derrida shares Gadamer’s insight that “to have a world is to have language,” for him, the conclusion the German philosopher draws from it – namely that the other ‘is’ (in an ontological sense) *in* and *through* language – cannot be defended. In fact, Derrida “defines”¹ his own deconstruction precisely as the search for something that is “nowhere present”, that “could not be presented in the history of philosophy” and which, because of this, has the status of a “completely other” situated outside language and world being independent of them.

In a second step, we undertook a close analysis of Derrida’s reflections from *Of Grammatology* in the margin of the problem of language and of the rapport between speech and writing in Ferdinand de Saussure’s thought and, along with the French philosopher, we brought to light the fact that this “completely other” represents the quasi-transcendental condition of possibility and the non-originary origin of language and world. For, as we are shown in this context, inasmuch as language has a differential character, i.e., inasmuch as every sign becomes what it is by ceaselessly differentiating itself from (and thus sending to) all the other signs, then every sign is actually the sign of a lack and functions as *trace* of something that constantly announces itself but, at the same time and with the same movement, forever defers its presence from the present. And, as Heidegger teaches us, because the world itself is constituted as a structure of references in which every entity plays

¹ Here, the quotation marks are absolutely necessary due to the fact that, by right, one cannot speak of a definition of deconstruction in the traditional sense of the term. As Derrida himself shows, it is not a philosophical project and is deprived of a proximate genus and a specific difference. Deconstruction is nothing; it happens.

the role of a sign, its possibility is opened through the same synthesis with this other that never becomes present.

In the light of these it has become manifest on the one hand that a “rapport of interruption,” the “suspension of all mediation” really is the condition of possibility of any hermeneutic dialogue and understanding. For now it is clear that the “rapport of interruption” Derrida talks about in *Three Questions to Hans-Georg Gadamer* and *Rams* refers to nothing else than the synthesis with the “completely other,” the play of differ^{ance} (to use the French philosopher’s neologism aiming to describe at once the double Latin root of the verb *differer*: to differentiate and to defer) within language serving as origin of both language and world.

On the other hand, it has become manifest that, even though in *Rams* is expressed metaphorically, the idea of an other after the end of the world must be taken as literally as possible. And that the entire discussion about “a different way of thinking about texts and interpretation” affirms more than a “logical possibility” in the sense in which this concept is understood in *Being and Time* as opposed to that of “ontological possibility.” If the other is as Gadamer claims *in* and *through* language and if language and world are inhabited by a play of differ^{ance} constantly attesting a blank space, an absence, then alterity as such, even the “Thou” or the concrete you is, in a certain sense, already “outside” language and world. It presents itself to us as an other after the end of the world precisely at the moment when it gives us something to understand through language in the world.

II. *The Hermeneutical Consequences of Differ^{ance}*

From the point of view of Derrida’s idea of differ^{ance} though, the fundamental limits and limitations of philosophical hermeneutics’ interpretation of interpretation and understanding appear without delay.

A first limit in this sense, we have shown, derives as a direct consequence of what the French philosopher tells us in *Of Grammatology* about language and concerns Gadamer’s view of understanding as dialogue between an “I” and a “Thou.” If a rapport with the “completely other” opens the possibility of meaning only in the measure in which it defers at the same time and with the same movement the full presence of meaning from the present, then any other to be understood is deprived of a stable identity and is condemned to forever become another. That is why the to and

from movement of question and answer whereby we come to understanding constitutes in fact a dialogue with a “Thou” that has always already been. And the other ends up being understood as an other *as* myself rather than as an other *than* myself. For the projects of meaning the interpreter formulates will never manage to keep up with the becoming of alterity.

A second limit and limitation of philosophical hermeneutics concerns Gadamer’s understanding of the hermeneutic “object,” what the German philosopher calls *Sache*, the matter at hand, the theme around which any hermeneutic dialogue gravitates. Through an analysis of *Dissemination* we have tried to show that the objections Derrida raises against Pierre Richard’s literary criticism can be applied punctually and without any modification whatsoever to Gadamer’s thought. In fact, even though he does not mention anywhere the German philosopher’s name, Derrida himself notes that his critique is addressed to the entire “phenomenological, hermeneutic, dialectical project of thematicism.” In this context, through a close reading of Mallarmé, the French philosopher demonstrates that the play of differ^{ance} within language institutes an infinite polysemy that cannot be understood anymore in terms of a horizon of meaning and which, due to this, exceeds the descriptive and comprehensive possibilities of phenomenology and hermeneutics. The play of differ^{ance} renders impossible the “in itself” of the matter at hand. Through this it has become manifest that no text and no dialogue is constituted around just one matter at hand and that to take one matter at hand among others as the one *true* matter at hand to be understood cannot be but an arbitrary gesture.

And a third limit of philosophical hermeneutics concerns Gadamer’s understanding of the concept of text. Even though through the way in which the German philosopher poses the problem of understanding along with and against Heidegger he breaks with the hermeneutical tradition before him, his answer to the question what is a text is as conservative as possible. By following closely the tradition inaugurated by Plato in the *Philebus*, for Gadamer, any text – in the general sense he attributes to this concept covering also the discourse of the other, the work of art and the historical event – presents itself as an extended signifier inscribing a prior dialogue of the soul with itself or another, and describing or representing something outside itself and whose claim to truth can be established through interpretation. As the German philosopher notes, any text inscribes “an original announcement or pronouncement” and discloses something in tradition and about our world even when

what it says is wrong. Taking our cue from several of Derrida's texts we have tried to show that in the light of the idea of differ \acute{a} nce this traditional image of the text or the book cannot be defended anymore. The infinite polysemy of language surpassing the any possible horizon and the ceaseless deferral of the meaning from itself transforms texts in "fabrics of traces" sending to something outside themselves (be it the dialogue they ought to inscribe, or the thing they try to describe) only inasmuch as they send ceaselessly also to other and other texts. In this sense, phenomenologically, every text is constituted as an intentional structure deprived of its intentum and due to this, it cannot be said anymore that it "inscribes" and "describes" or "represents" something and no interpretation can ever hope to establish or to determine its truth claim.

III. Interpretation, blindness, misinterpretation

By its nature any limit delimits the thing limited from that whereby it is limited. The limits and limitation of philosophical hermeneutics that came to the fore in the previous section from the point of view of the idea of differ \acute{a} nce have offered us the possibility to finally clarify by opposition Derrida's enigmatic description of understanding as a "carrying of the other upon oneself" and to bring to light its relation with the view of interpretation of interpretation Gadamer develops in the footsteps of Dilthey and Heidegger.

Thus, we have shown that the other that is to be carried upon oneself is precisely the "completely other" that constitutes the quasi-transcendental condition of possibility of language and world. And to interpret in this sense means nothing else but to tarry upon the written page so as to follow as much as possible and as closely as possible the play of differ \acute{a} nce inhabiting it.

If every text is a "fabric of traces" then the true task of interpretation is to reconstitute the ceaseless movement of differentiation and deferral of its meaning and to track the trace of all the other texts that inhabit and condition its sending to the referent intended by the author, i.e., the thing he or she wanted to describe or represent. In this sense, we have shown, the interpretive activity is a form of writing in its own right. It is, as Derrida puts it, an act of "reading-writing" and is constituted as a process of "production" irreducible to mere explicitation, but which must not be confounded with a creation *ex nihilo* either. For, insomuch as interpretation endeavors to retrace the play of differ \acute{a} nce, it is also subjected to its law.

But, if only as a process of production of meaning taking the form of a “reading-writing” interpretation can live up to the task with which it is confronted by the text as “fabric of traces,” then what are we to say about Gadamer’s interpretation of interpretation and understanding defining itself as strictly “reading”? If through the way they are constituted texts suspend the possibility of deciding with regard to their claim to truth, then, given that it defines itself precisely in rapport with this, are we to conclude that the interpretation philosophical hermeneutics talks about is itself impossible or that it is something other than interpretation?

Although we could be tempted to answer this last problem with which our investigation saw itself confronted in the affirmative, we have tried to show that this is not the case. Starting from Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* we argued that the French philosopher’s view of interpretation does not substitute philosophical hermeneutics’ view in this sense as the only possible “style” of interpretation. On the contrary, it *presupposes* it. This is actually the reason why, every time he talks about interpretation as “carrying the other upon oneself,” Derrida insists on the fact that it represents a “different way” of thinking about texts and interpretation.

On the other hand though, on the basis of some of Paul de Man’s works we argued that, inasmuch as it defines itself through the task of establishing the claim to truth of texts even though this thing is impossible, the interpretation philosophical hermeneutics talks about is actually misinterpretation. What philosophical hermeneutics described as interpretation is – as Paul de Man puts it – a process in which “truth and falsehood are inextricably intertwined.” And the understanding it presupposes, a misunderstanding constituted at the same time as *insight* into what is to be understood and *blindness* towards what is said in the text.

Thus, to interpret in philosophical hermeneutics’ sense is to misinterpret and the understanding it talks about is misunderstanding.

Conclusion

In conclusion we have retraced briefly the central articulations of our investigation and returned to the question whether philosophical hermeneutics’ view of interpretation and understanding can really be taken as ground or “model” by all the theoretical and practical endeavors mentioned in the introduction. We restricted ourselves to noting a precaution in this sense without offering a definitive answer.

Such an answer would presuppose in fact a completely different investigation that exceeds both our interests and competence.