

A VOLUME IN THE SUNY SERIES IN CONTEMPORARY CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Donatella Ester Di Cesare

Niall Keane, translator

Utopia of Understanding

Between Babel and Auschwitz

UTOPIA OF UNDERSTANDING

Between Babel and Auschwitz

DONATELLA



TRANSLATED BY

NIALL KEANE

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Published by
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS, ALBANY

© 2012 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, contact
State University of New York Press, Albany, NY
www.sunypress.edu

Production, Laurie D. Searl
Marketing, Anne M. Valentine

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Di Cesare, Donatella.

[Utopia del comprendere. English]

Utopia of understanding : between Babel and Auschwitz / Donatella Ester Di Cesare ; translated by Niall Keane.

p. cm. — (SUNY series in contemporary Continental philosophy)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4384-4253-2 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-1-4384-4252-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Hermeneutics. 2. Language and languages—Philosophy. I. Title.

BD241.D425313 2012

121'.686—dc23

2011030211

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

UTOPIA OF UNDERSTANDING

SUNY series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy

Dennis J. Schmidt, editor

In memory of Caterina Serafino

PREFACE

Every philosophy book, no less than a novel, no more than a poem, is autobiographical. It has to do with the biography of the one who writes it, although it is difficult to say how in each individual case. Therefore, it is difficult even in this case. I could not say when I began writing it, or for how long I have been writing it, and only with difficulty can I write the date of its end.

After many interruptions, and as many resumptions, this book was born from a lecture given in Heidelberg at a conference organized by German and American colleagues. I was not sure of its title, and even less of its thesis: *Exiled in the Mother Tongue*. Later, after some reflection, I was convinced both of the thesis and of the title, but also of the need to write a much larger text. Thus, the fourth chapter of this book was born. But in the meantime, other ideas, simply collateral and parallel, or already intertwined and connected, had begun to emerge, and other theses had sedimented. In particular, I had the opportunity to return again and again to the question of understanding, which opens up between hermeneutics and deconstruction, and to revisit the text of the lecture held on this theme at the *Forum für Philosophie* in Bad Homburg, the proceedings of which were published by Suhrkamp in 2000. The initial thesis, rearticulated in light of the later events, forms the content of Chapter 7.

In every way, I consider this to be a book about the philosophy of language, a continuation of what I have been writing since the beginning. But it would be vain, although actually not unusual, to repeat the same things. Once repeated, they already become different. I have never believed in coherence. Curiosity, a well-known feminine flaw, has forced me, in my exile, to search for new stars and new constellations. Hence, although I am the same, I am also different, perhaps even very different than I was at first. I have learned to be so thanks to hermeneutics. And it goes without saying that this book has developed through an uninterrupted dialogue with Hans-Georg Gadamer, uninterrupted even after the interruption of his death. It is difficult to say what I owe him, because it is too much. Perhaps in a word: philosophy. Just as there is no method, so in hermeneutics there is no correct *dóxa*, no orthodoxy to defend. Hence, I assume full responsibility for what I say and the positions I take. First of all, for my openness to

deconstruction, to which I do not want to hide my debt—a word that would not have pleased Derrida. Furthermore, I certainly would not have written these pages without the constant point of orientation, that is, without the orient, of the Jewish tradition, which is perhaps the text's guiding thread, almost to the point of obsession.

In this book, different philosophers appear who have reflected and written on language, speaking, and understanding: Plato, Aristotle, Hamann, von Humboldt, Schleiermacher, Hegel, Nietzsche, Buber, Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Jaspers, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Derrida. But the whole book moves, so to speak, toward a poet, Paul Celan, to whom the seventh, and final, chapter is dedicated. I did not dwell on interpreting Celan, and moreover, I did not want to interpret Celan. If I have, one should treat it as an accident along the way, essential to every way. And much less did I seek out a new language for philosophy in Celan's work—an undertaking that would be doomed to failure from the very beginning. Through many readings, and on different occasions, I have realized that his poetry is a setting to work of a reflection on poetry and of a reflection on language where it would be impossible to separate, or even to distinguish, between the setting to work and the reflection. Yet what matters most is that, with his reflections, Celan situates himself within contemporary philosophy of language, not only thanks to the themes he confronts, but also thanks to the anti-metaphysical or a-metaphysical way that he confronts them. Speaking of the affinities with Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, or even more legitimately, with Heidegger of *On the Way to Language* is almost obvious. Yet there is something more, a surplus, an excess, and also a beyond, which is his distinctive and chosen trait. Celan thinks of language starting from Auschwitz, after Auschwitz.

One might ask: What does this have to do with Auschwitz? One could easily respond to this question with another question: How can one continue to philosophize calmly about language after Auschwitz? How can one continue to philosophize after the anti-world of the world and after the anti-language of language? How can one continue to philosophize as if nothing had happened? If anything, it is starting from "what happened," from that limit situation, where the limit of the human condition became the center of the inhuman condition, and the exception became the rule, that philosophy must rethink language, must reflect yet again, once again, and more responsibly, on speaking and understanding. And it is precisely understanding that, starting from Auschwitz, after Auschwitz, demands to be understood anew. In this sense, I hope this book is a political one, not only because it speaks of utopia, or of the atypical and heterotypical utopias, that is, of the tomorrows of the future, of the coming of the other, of the mes-

sianic promise *to come*, but because the question of language is an eminently political question.

I thank Jacques Derrida for having given me the permission to cite what was at that time a still unpublished essay, *Béliers. Le dialogue interrompu entre deux infinis, le poème*, Galilée, Paris 2003.

This book is dedicated to my maternal grandmother, Caterina Serafino, who has given me a great past and who believed in the utopias of the future.

Heidelberg, September 2003

CONTENTS

PREFACE	xi
CHAPTER ONE: BEING AND LANGUAGE IN PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS	1
1. Philosophical Hermeneutics and the <i>Linguistic Turn</i>	1
2. Which “Turn”?	2
3. From Heidegger to Gadamer: Language as Dwelling, Refuge, Shelter, Exile	3
4. “The History of a Comma”	4
5. Gadamer’s Self-Interpretation	6
6. Understanding as Middle Term and Mediation	6
7. Language and Linguisticity	7
8. Searching for the “Right” Word	8
9. “Being” Twice: The Speculative Passage from Being to Being-Language	9
10. The Universal “There” of the Word	10
11. Self-Overcoming: The Movement of Hermeneutics	11
12. The Understanding of Being: Hermeneutics Facing Ontology	12
13. The A-Metaphysical Dimension of Philosophical Hermeneutics	12
14. A Philosophy of Infinite Finitude	13
CHAPTER TWO: THE HERMENEUTIC UNDERSTANDING OF LANGUAGE	17
1. Heidegger and the Derivativeness of Assertion	17
2. Aristotle’s Lesson	18
3. Hermeneutics Between Semantic <i>Lógos</i> and Apophantic <i>Lógos</i>	20
4. The Logic of Linguistic Praxis	20
5. As if “assertions fall from the sky . . .” The Analytic Artifice	21
6. Assertion, Method, and the Power of Technology	22
7. The Tribunal of Assertions	23
8. <i>Hermeneía</i> : From the Said to the Unsaid	24
9. <i>Speculum</i> : The Speculative Movement of Language	25

10. Beyond Hegel: The Dialectic of Finite and Infinite	27
11. The Truth of the Word	28
12. The Hermeneutic Listening to Language	29
 CHAPTER THREE: TRANSLATION AND REDEMPTION	 35
1. “. . . one shall no longer understand the lip of the other.” Babel	35
2. Languages in the Diaspora	40
3. “Love without Demands”: Translation in the Age of Romanticism	41
4. From the Original to the Originary: On Heidegger	49
5. Giving Voice to the Foreign Voice: The Translation of the Torah	62
6. The Dialogue of Languages: On Benjamin	70
7. “Pure Language” and Messianic Silence	80
 CHAPTER FOUR: EXILED IN LANGUAGE	 95
1. “Exile” in the Jewish Tradition	95
2. “How Much Home Does One Man Need?”	96
3. Exile from the Land, Exile from the Language	98
4. On the Mother Tongue	100
5. In the Firmament of Rosenzweig: The Holy Language and the Language of the Guest	103
6. If German is the Language of Origin	106
7. “What Remains? The Mother Tongue Remains”: On Hannah Arendt	108
8. My Language Which is of the Other: Derrida and Monolingualism	111
9. Language Forbids Ownership	114
10. The Exile of Language	115
 CHAPTER FIVE: THE DIALOGUE OF POETRY	 125
1. Paul Celan as a Witness to Hermeneutic Dialogue	125
2. The Everyday Word and the Poetic Word	126
3. Poetizing and Interpreting	127
4. “Your irrefutable witness”	128
5. Your I and My Thou: The Universality of Poetry	129
6. The Flow of Dialogue and the Crystal of Poetry	130
7. The “Soul’s Refrain”	131

CHAPTER SIX: UNDERSTANDING: BETWEEN HERMENEUTICS AND DECONSTRUCTION	137
1. Paris 1981: An “Improbable Debate”	137
2. Hermeneutics and Deconstruction: Which Difference?	139
3. Derrida and Hermeneutics: <i>Plaidoyer</i> for Interruption	141
4. Gadamer and Deconstruction: “. . . at the beginning of a dialogue”	144
5. On the Language of Metaphysics and on Language in General	146
6. The Being-for-the-Other of Language	149
7. Wanting to Say and Wanting to Understand	150
8. “ <i>Comprendre c’est égaler</i> ”? On Nietzsche	154
9. Understanding is Understanding Differently	157
10. On Accord and Discord	161
11. Heidelberg 2003: Starting from that Interruption	164
12. “The world is gone . . .”: Dialogue after Death	164
13. Thinking, Carrying, Translating	166
14. The Blessing of the Hand, the Blessing of the Poem	168
15. Stars and Constellations	170
CHAPTER SEVEN: UTOPIA OF UNDERSTANDING	185
1. U-topia, Topia, Utopia: On Gustav Landauer	185
2. Celan, Poetry and the “Revolution of the Breath”	188
3. Breaking the Silence: Voice and the Absolute Vocative	189
4. January 20: The Date and the Circumcised Word	191
5. Speaking Ever Yet?	193
6. The Language-Grille	195
7. Straitening, Anguish, Anxiety: On the Limit-Situation	198
8. The Other of the Limit, the Limit of the Other: The You is the Lever of the I	199
9. Understanding to live, Living to Understand: Auschwitz	201
10. <i>Átopos</i> : The Stranger Out of Place	208
11. The Tent of Encounter	212
12. “. . . The Language That Wandered With Us”	216
13. The Time of the Promise	218
14. North of the Future	221
15. The Word of Conspiracy	227
INDEX	241

ONE

BEING AND LANGUAGE IN PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

I once formulated this idea by saying that being that can be understood is language. This is certainly not a metaphysical assertion. Instead, it describes, from the medium of understanding, the unrestricted scope possessed by the hermeneutical perspective.

—Hans-Georg Gadamer¹

1. PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS AND THE *LINGUISTIC TURN*

“Being that can be understood is language” is perhaps the most cited, and possibly the most famous sentence of *Truth and Method*.² Written as kind of a summative statement toward the end of the book, it testifies to the centrality of language in philosophical hermeneutics. On the other hand, this centrality echoes, albeit indirectly, the movement of language from the margins to the center stage of philosophy. It illustrates the linguistic turn that Humboldt and Frege had already set in motion in radically different and independent ways in German-speaking philosophy, and finds its major twentieth-century representatives in Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger. Language is destined to become the dominant—if not exclusive—theme on the philosophical landscape.

At the end of the 1950s, when Gadamer wrote the third part of *Truth and Method*, the turn had not yet been fully achieved, and language had not yet imposed itself, as it would a few years later, also thanks to philosophical hermeneutics. The most diverse philosophical currents will coalesce under the theme of “language”: These include logical positivism and the *ordinary language philosophy* of Oxford, American pragmatism,

structuralism, and psychoanalysis, the late Merleau-Ponty and Derrida's deconstruction, Heidegger and philosophical hermeneutics, culminating in the transcendental pragmatics of Apel and Habermas.

When Gadamer sets about outlining his *hermeneutics of language*, he has neither important forerunners nor actual points of reference—other than the tradition that he will reassess in a careful confrontation. Obviously, Heidegger constitutes the only notable exception to this rule. But the connection with Heidegger is more problematic here than one might think. On the one hand, Gadamer largely knows the works Heidegger dedicated to the theme of language and poetry from 1935 onward, and, although he can be assumed to have found a source of inspiration therein, it is hard to say how much and to what extent. On the other hand, one cannot forget that Heidegger's *On the Way to Language* was published only in 1959, when *Truth and Method* had just gone into print. Even if many turns of phrase in Gadamer's magnum opus seem to emerge against the background of Heidegger's thought—not least the very sentence “Being that can be understood is language”—he never expressly refers to Heidegger's writings on language.

Thus, when he ventures out alone into what in many respects is still uncharted territory for philosophy, the difficulties of his paths are as entirely clear to him as the goal he had set out to reach: *the ontological turn of hermeneutics guided by language*. Gadamer does not know, nor could he have known, however, that his *Wendung* corresponds to the *linguistic turn* of Anglo-American and French philosophy. In a footnote added to the new edition of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer significantly writes: “I am not unaware that the ‘linguistic turn,’ about which I knew nothing in the early ‘50’s, recognized the same thing.”³ And he goes on to refer to his essay *The Phenomenological Movement*.⁴

2. WHICH “TURN”?

It is worth noting that the word Gadamer uses for “turn” is not *Kehre*, but *Wendung*. Here, it is clear that the aim is to distance himself from Heidegger, who, by way of his *Kehre*, wanted to abandon the ground of hermeneutic philosophy so as to turn toward the mystery of language. From Gadamer's standpoint, the *Kehre* seems more like a *Rückkehr*, a return—which nonetheless also implies a radicalization—to the early hermeneutics of *Geworfenheit*, of “being-thrown,” where language, the primary *pro-jection* of this “being-thrown,” of this being-*there* in the world, is the *being-there*, in its original form, and is the first presence to Being. The significance Heidegger attributes to language resounds in the “ontological turn” of Gadamer who, by following the guiding thread of language, remains within the bounds of hermeneutic

philosophy. This may shed light on some important differences between the two philosophers on this point—and not on this point alone.

Aside from the weakening in Gadamer's thought of notions that are absolutely central to Heidegger's—such as metaphysics, the forgetting of Being, and the ontological difference—what is more noteworthy here is the different and novel interpretation of the relationship between *Being* and *language* put forward by the founder of philosophical hermeneutics. With respect to this reading, Vattimo, borrowing an expression from Habermas, speaks of the “urbanization” of Heidegger's thought.⁵ As previously mentioned, Gadamer takes up the Heideggerian identification—or connection—between Being and language, but decidedly shifts the emphasis onto language. Such a shift could be regarded as an act of unfolding, or even dissolving, Being into language.⁶

Irrespective of what interpretation is given to the shift from Being to language, which is already achieved in the third part of *Truth and Method*, the distance between the two philosophers truly stands out when the concluding statements on their respective reflections on language are read together. In the famous conversation with the Japanese scholar, included in *On the Way to Language*, Heidegger recalls the phrase he had already used with reference to language in the *Letter on “Humanism”*: “Language is the house of Being.”⁷ For his part, Gadamer writes in the closing section of *Truth and Method*, which deals with the “*The Universal Aspect of Hermeneutics*,” that “Being that can be understood is language.”⁸

3. FROM HEIDEGGER TO GADAMER: LANGUAGE AS DWELLING, REFUGE, SHELTER, EXILE

The terms of the relationship between *Being* and *language* are clearly inverted in the following two statements: in the first, language is the subject and Being is the predicate, whereas in the second, Being is the subject and language the predicate.⁹ But this is not all. Beyond the inversion of subject and predicate, the terms, which mediate the relation, are different. More specifically, the metaphor of the “house” disappears in Gadamer—not just in this context, but also deliberately in all his reflections on language.

Rather than the house [*Haus*] of Being, language is more the dwelling of man [*Behausung*] that often reveals itself as a casing or shell [*Gehäuse*], which is too suffocating and too closed.¹⁰ Gadamer thus wonders at the end of the essay *Von der Wahrheit des Wortes* (*On the Truth of the Word*): “But who is ‘at home’ [*zu Hause*] in a language?”¹¹ If language is truly the most familiar and intimate place of being-by-oneself (or perhaps the only one), it is likewise true that an even more fundamental nonfamiliarity stands behind and comes before this familiarity. The intimate familiarity of language is something

uncanny [*Unheimliches*] and immemorial [*Unwordenkliches*]. This disquieting intimacy, this disconcerting immemoriality of language—actually revealing itself so *unheimlich nahe* to thought¹²—would represent our “homeland.”¹³

The best-known version of hermeneutics is that most reassuring and urbanized one, emphasizing familiarity. Indeed, hermeneutics is responsible for drawing attention to the urban and civilized side of language. Yet hermeneutics is unwilling to eschew the paradox inherent in that strange and uncanny “homeland.” This explains the existence of the other version, the more disquieting one, which rather emphasizes unfamiliarity. However, the two versions cannot be torn asunder, for they indeed complement one another.

“What is the homeland for us, this place of original familiarity? What is this place and what would it be without language? Language is above all a part of the immemoriality of the homeland!”¹⁴ *Heimat*, which is the fleeting and ephemeral homeland that language can offer, is only attained with effort, starting out from the most essential *Heimatslosigkeit*, the lack of homeland, which defines our finitude in language even prior to our finitude in the world. At a second glance, however, dwelling, the refuge of language, reveals itself to be a shelter, or rather an exile. Poets such as Celan have managed to give voice to this exile—which can even be an exile in the mother tongue.¹⁵ In giving voice to the originary homelessness in language, Gadamer’s hermeneutics, especially in his later works, seems to converge with Derrida’s deconstruction.¹⁶

But what might that more fundamental and more original nonfamiliarity be, if not Being’s resistance to language? This question maps out the context most suited to explain the presence of “understanding” that mediates the relation between *Being* and *language* in Gadamer.

4. “THE HISTORY OF A COMMA”

The most-cited, but also the most misunderstood, sentence of philosophical hermeneutics already has its own *Wirkungsgeschichte*, its history of effects, a history of its reception, which has taken a troubled—and thus all the more interesting—path in Italy. Vattimo revisits this issue in his article “The History of a Comma.”¹⁷

As so often happens, the problem stems from the translation, whose creative role in the *Wirkungsgeschichte* can never be overemphasized. The German sentence reads: “*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache.*”¹⁸ In Vattimo’s Italian translation, the sentence is rendered in the following way: “*l’essere che può venir compreso è linguaggio.*”¹⁹ The two commas, present in German for grammatical reasons, are left out in Italian for stylistic reasons. Vattimo recalls that at the time he would rather have left the commas in,

but the final decision rested with Gadamer. “I submitted the problem to Gadamer and he said that he did not agree, and that there was a risk that the sentence would be misunderstood.”²⁰ Hence, the marginal aspect of a comma takes on a fundamental relevance for the translation and, therefore, also for the interpretation. In short, the necessary presence of the commas in German maintains the ambiguity of the sentence; the possibility of leaving the commas in or out in Italian, however, requires a choice that is more than just stylistic. More than simply style, it is the meaning that undergoes a transformation, or better, the “‘ontological’ weight” of the statement. Taken without commas, Vattimo maintains, it is a harmless utterance, which identifies the domain of beings that offer themselves to understanding with the domain of language; within commas it says that Being is language, and as such it is understandable.²¹

The chasm runs deep and perhaps leads to a crossroads not just in philosophical hermeneutics—or at least not just starting from there. As it stands, the hermeneutic difficulty of the statement raises the crucial question of the meaning to be attributed to Gadamer’s philosophy as a whole. If the second interpretative path—the one indicated by Vattimo—is chosen over the first, one can find in philosophical hermeneutics the possibility of a “weak ontology,” namely, a kind of “ontology of actuality.”²²

In the latter case, it follows that Being is identified with language. In Vattimo’s view, this “ontologically more radical” reading would rid hermeneutics of a metaphysical residue that it would otherwise retain, and that might compromise its position with regard to ontology, from which it nonetheless seeks to take leave. Hence, one is faced with the necessity of going beyond Gadamerian hermeneutics that is locked in a sort of realism where the Being of the world is still identified with the objects as they present themselves, in space and time, to the subject describing them. Such a form of realism would ultimately expose hermeneutics to the suspicions of traditionalism and, above all, relativism.

Yet, in a bid to move beyond Gadamer, Vattimo’s path returns to Heidegger. Vattimo’s legitimate intention is to further the discussion with Heidegger that Gadamer never actually broke off.²³ Nevertheless, by taking up the Heideggerian discourse on the authenticity of Being, and recalling the metaphor of language as the “house of Being,” Vattimo reads Gadamer with Heidegger, or better, on Heidegger’s terms. Gadamer’s sentence “Being, which can be understood, is language” is thus regarded as a “translation”²⁴ of Heidegger’s sentence from *Being and Time*: “Being (not beings) [Sein, nicht Seiendes] is something which ‘there is’ [gibt es] only in so far as truth is [ist]. And truth is only in so far as and as long as Dasein is.”²⁵

Vattimo underlines the importance of the *nicht*, the “not” that separates Being from a being: There is Being only insofar as there is not only a