

THE HEAD OF JANUS: HERMENEUTICS AND DECONSTRUCTION IN GADAMER AND DERRIDA BETWEEN AGREEMENT AND DISAGREEMENT

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ABSTRACT. *The Head of Janus: Hermeneutics and Deconstruction in Gadamer and Derrida between Agreement and Disagreement.* The paper aims to discuss the complexity of the relationship between Gadamer's Hermeneutics and Derrida's Deconstruction in order to remove the usual opposition between these two thinkers and their philosophical perspectives. It is possible to build a collaboration against every idealistic and subjectivist foundation moving from the hermeneutic-deconstructive interaction between the concepts of identity and difference, understanding and sense, writing and reading etc. Only in this way can the so-called "improbable debate" become an "un-interrupted" dialogue: the distance ceases to be an insuperable obstacle and becomes an openness of sense.

Keywords: *Gadamer, Derrida, Hermeneutics, Deconstruction*

1. Introduction

Like a head of Janus, hermeneutics and deconstruction, while sharing traits of a common identity, look towards opposite horizons. Both recognize in language and in understanding essential dimensions not only for life, but also for human thought and knowledge, although this assumption is configured in different and sometimes even divergent ways. This is evident above all in reference to Gadamer and Derrida, two authors who, although starting from an initial, conscious and clear distancing – even if coming from a philosophical common ground² –, have left

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² For common ground it is meant Heidegger's lection, Hegel's heritage, Greek philosophy and the interest not only in the contemporary philosophical debate, but even in "art and, above all, literature and poetry", D. Di Cesare and R. Valgenti (2004), 73.

traces not only for a possible comparison of their works, but above all for a possible dialogue between these two philosophical perspectives.³

After the famous and problematic encounter at the Goethe-Institut of Paris in April 1981,⁴ where the initial methodological opposition between hermeneutics and deconstruction reverberated in the hearing of those present and of subsequent commentators in all its irremediable ‘ideological’ dichotomy – “an alternation of statements rather than a genuine dialogue”⁵ –, in the years that followed Gadamer’s commitment to an active and conscious exchange⁶ was met by substantial and ill-concealed indifference on the part of Derrida. After having underlined in a 1993 interview book⁷ – even due to the non-definitive results of the 1988 Heidelberg conference⁸ – the impossibility of a discussion with someone like Derrida who is not only uninterested in dialoguing, but also shows a “manifest (...) inability to dialogue”,⁹ in a more recent interview Gadamer declared that he had cleared things up with the French philosopher,¹⁰ a statement seemingly confirmed by *Béliers*,¹¹ the inspired and heartfelt obituary delivered in 2003 by the latter at the commemoration of the one-year anniversary of his colleague’s passing. In this text, Derrida confesses

³ The present contribution will therefore not provide for the albeit fundamental inclusion of Paul Ricoeur in this debate, who, with his phenomenological-reflexive hermeneutics, increasingly open in his later developments to a semiotic pragmatism focused on the text its relational and temporal paradigm, consciously positions himself as a mediator between Gadamer and Derrida and above all between hermeneutics and deconstruction.

⁴ On the comparison between Gadamer and Derrida, the two reference texts are certainly those inspired by the 1981 encounter: see Forget (1984) and Michelfelder and Palmer (eds.) (1989).

⁵ Dallmayr (1989), 76.

⁶ “I have been following Derrida’s work for decades. Within the French scene as a whole, he was the one with whom I shared the greatest number of starting points. He, too, came from Heidegger”, Gadamer (1995), 125. Gadamer’s texts the years immediately following and inspired by the Paris encounter and those generally addressing the comparison between hermeneutics and deconstruction are the following: Gadamer (1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1989d, 1993b, 1993c).

⁷ Dutt (1995²), 43ff.

⁸ Derrida (2005c), 136.

⁹ Dutt (1995²), 51.

¹⁰ “Obviously, every interpretation must go beyond what any logocentrism can recognize or claim to recognize. No, it was quite a gross misunderstanding of my position on the part of Derrida to interpret my will to understanding as a thoroughgoing Nietzscheanism, and, for the most part, the translation and the editing of the debate were at fault. Why Derrida was taken in by it, I don’t know. But, in the meantime, Derrida and I became quite well attuned to one another — after I made it clear in Naples that the horizon that one speaks of in the fusion of the horizons of interpretation is nothing that one ever reaches, so it can’t assume a metaphysical position. Since then he has been entirely on my side. The horizon of interpretation changes constantly, just as our visual horizon also varies with every step that we take”, Gadamer (2006), 60-61.

¹¹ See Derrida (2005c).

to not having paid due attention to Gadamer's requests, admitting that he preferred a sort of "interior dialogue" to a clear intellectual and academic conversation (which he ultimately considered impossible "for a thousand reasons")¹², a dialogue which, however, in those pages reveals itself to be of a certain weight and significance. What might appear to be a strategically self-interested intervention rather than an 'innocently' belated involvement, in reality, in the face of *Béliers'* moving and convinced arguments, shows itself to be a sincere farewell to a friend in thought whom Derrida paradoxically wanted to keep away not because he was too far from his own positions, but maybe because he was too close.¹³

2. A disconnecting Connection

The "productive tension"¹⁴ between hermeneutics and deconstruction that emerges from Gadamer and Derrida's difficult dialogue is structured precisely on the asymmetries of this substantially unsuccessful encounter. The disconnection of identity from difference is the fundamental conceptual matrix of the relationship between the thought of our two authors: the adventure of understanding involves more than simply registering similarities and compatibilities, such as a proper hermeneutical exercise proposes; it also requires distinguishing the various reasons for a distance that deconstructs a comparison as facile as it is acritical. Deconstruction is a reverse negative of hermeneutics; it is hermeneutics that deconstructs itself. Hermeneutics is a reverse positive of deconstruction; it is a deconstruction that reconstructs itself. We must start from such a presupposition to reinterrogate these two profoundly connected fields of knowledge, kept distant, however, by their two main exponents. For Derrida, hermeneutics risks being configured as an essentially conservative and hierarchical discipline based on theoretical and methodological dogmas, such as unity and identity, and consequently entrenched in the privilege of establishing the lawfulness and validity of understanding from an absolute perspective. A similarly important role is played by the ever-cumbersome shadow of Heidegger¹⁵, whose thought, according to the French philosopher, regardless of its fatal political repercussions,

¹² Ibid., 136.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Bernstein (2008), 597.

¹⁵ A shadow that swings between "urbanization or radicalization of the heideggerian tradition", Ferraris (1996), 170ff.

although he never contemplated a biological drift,¹⁶ would prescribe an irreparably reactionary speculation prejudiced by a strongly conservative nature because oriented to re-founding thought within thought itself. Which in the case of an ontological hermeneutics would weaken the textual and scriptural fruitfulness of a wisdom of active and free interpretation in favor of a staid ontology of language itself closed in its own theoretical self-referentiality. In addition to an ontological drift, the *punctum dolens* of hermeneutics according to Derrida is above all its potentially deleterious need to unify and universalize, inevitably aimed at an irenic ideal of mutual consent among individuals, which would smooth out the bumps of varying intentions in favor of an indistinct homogeneity of solutions.¹⁷ Hermeneutics would take shape as the search for a unity of understanding to be achieved at all costs, designed not only as an agreement and understanding placing interlocutors on equal footing, but as an inescapable presupposition of understanding itself. However, it is precisely this status of understanding as a prerequisite that does not convince Derrida, who instead focuses entirely on the necessary differential and non-transcendental openness of every interpretative and communicative process. This in spite of the fact that Gadamer's fore-conception of completeness [*Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*] is not actually, as it has been sometimes translated, a "prerequisite of perfection", but an "anticipation of completeness", or an anticipation of the unity of meaning that every text must have to truly be a text: "The fore-conception of completeness that guides all our understanding is, then, always determined by the specific content. Not only does the reader assume an immanent unity of meaning, but his understanding is likewise guided by the constant transcendent expectations of meaning that proceed from the relation to the truth of what is being said".¹⁸ By unity Gadamer does not mean an all-encompassing homogenization, but a primary and at the same time agreed-upon meaningfulness; without this unity – which is not pre-established, but is constituted by and through the very process of understanding – we risk achieving only rhapsodies of more or less enchanting meanings, impossible to agree upon. Meaning, therefore, not as a mere presupposition, but more properly as an *event*, a *Richtungssinn*,¹⁹ a directional meaning not comparable to a transcendental, in the traditional sense of the term.

¹⁶Derrida (2008), 32. We cannot know whether Derrida would have changed his opinion on the subject if he had been able to consult the most recent publications that could make it problematic to assume the absence of biologism in Heideggerian thought; see Heidegger (2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b).

¹⁷Derrida (1984), 341-343.

¹⁸Gadamer (2004), 305.

¹⁹Gadamer (1993d), 340.

According to Derrida, on the other hand, even this would fall within the scope of that opposition of unity and difference that characterizes the relationship between hermeneutics and deconstruction, indeed more properly within the scope of the opposition of unity and of that rewriting of the difference that is the *différance*:²⁰ the very sign that is deconstruction reveals the dramatic background of human understanding, which hermeneutics would attempt to heal by way of removal. In the deformation of the sign that it is itself like *différance*, the difference becomes understanding, which therefore cannot spring from the circularity of the expressions, from the linearity of intents, from the correspondence of an agreed-upon meaning, from an expectation of meaning, but always and only from a limit situation that is the unique and singular existence itself of individuals, consisting of continual instances of friction and misunderstandings and that continually reopens the wound of itself. This is why understanding is in reality intrinsically 'possessed' by misunderstanding.

3. The close Distance of Understanding

This is also evident in the place where Derrida most closely aligns with Gadamer, that is, in that restlessness which in *Béliers* becomes a philosophical vision, capable of placing at the center the imposed *interruption* due to that radical and definitive separation caused by the death of his friend: an interruption that precisely in colliding with the extreme limit of death is destined to be in-finite. And Derrida is not afraid to use the expression "two infinities" to characterize this "interrupted" conversation with his late friend, taking up again the same expression, "never-ending Dialogue",²¹ that Gadamer used in his replies during the Paris encounter. As if to indicate that it was precisely from that "unlikely"²² encounter in which no shared understanding was reached, due especially to Derrida's stubbornness, that a hermeneutic-deconstructive infiniteness began, anticipated by the finiteness of the previous interruption, all within a dialogue between thinkers. Just as when we speak, we must 'interrupt ourselves' to catch our breath, there can be no real human communication without interruption, "caesura, hiatus, ellipsis",²³ which in this case brought the conversation beyond itself: "Far from signifying the failure of the

²⁰With regard to the concept of *difference* – and to its rielaboration-rewriting as *différance*, see Derrida (1982b).

²¹Gadamer (1989b), 57.

²²Forget (1984), 7ff.

²³Derrida (2005c), 157.

dialogue, such an interruption could become the condition of comprehension and understanding".²⁴ According to Derrida, his understanding with Gadamer became an alternation of interruptions, from that "strange [*étrange*]"²⁵ interruption of an academic encounter that was never truly completed to that "melancholy",²⁶ endless interruption in the encounter with death. And it could not be otherwise, since it is the very understanding between individuals that cannot emerge from a moment of peaceful agreement, of harmonious consensus, but must continually be rewritten in a hiatus of rupture²⁷ and disagreement: "But, primarily, the caesura makes meaning emerge. It does not do so alone, of course; but without interruption—between letters, words, sentences, books—no signification could be awakened".²⁸ The sense of understanding, necessary for hermeneutics for the purpose of understanding the thing in question, appears to the critical and mocking eyes of deconstructionism as a childish or tired utopia. The appropriation of meaning reveals itself for what it is: an illusion that takes us away from the truth of our relationship with the other, made of dispossession and distance; the latter concept was even contemplated by Gadamer and in general firmly safeguarded by the classical hermeneutical dimension of *temporal distance*,²⁹ but not really elevated to a paradigm of understanding itself. Understanding for Derrida is not an organic dimension, but an asymmetrical journey of starts and stops. Many of his interventions are deliberately composed of suspensions, marked by a series of critical reflections that prefer the destabilizing provocation of highly intuitive proposals to the disciplined systematic nature of rigidly consequential reasoning. His analysis continually lingers on the expressionistic gesture of describing the elusiveness of the signs animating the words, of the voids populating the written lines of text, of the impossibility for an open text like that of Gadamer to overcome the intrinsic conflictuality proper to human dialogue. In light of these considerations as well, Derrida wants to show that understanding and communication between individuals cannot be structured and inserted within metaphysical problems;

²⁴Ibid., 139.

²⁵Ibid., 136.

²⁶Ibid., 135.

²⁷"Do not forget that you are the nucleus of a rupture", see Derrida quoting Jabès in Derrida (2001b), 81.

²⁸Ibid., 87.

²⁹"Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted. Hence temporal distance is not something that must be overcome. This was, rather, the naive assumption of historicism, namely that we must transpose ourselves into the spirit of the age, think with its ideas and its thoughts, not with our own, and thus advance toward historical objectivity. In fact, the important thing is to recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive condition enabling understanding", Gadamer (2004), 308.

on the contrary, they can only be articulated in dynamics of possession³⁰ and are conditioned by interpersonal differences. The completeness of communication, which in the Gadamerian hermeneutic circle is assumed as a starting point only because its meaning must be constructed as a point of arrival, is instead for the French philosopher precisely this disconnection, as unpredictable as it is inevitable. The ideal of a communication fully participated in by all parties, based on mutual, conscious understanding, clashes at all times with the tension of the ineffability of sharing, the persistent lack of an easy adhesion to the difference. Yet against this accusation that sees hermeneutics as an apology for identity and the uniformity of consensus, Gadamer responds by arguing that in reality the understanding that his dialogue seeks “does not at all include agreement?”: while the *Übereinstimmung* presupposes a flattening of the frictions and disconnections of understanding, the *Verständigung* guarantees its protection: “I too affirm that understanding is always understanding-differently.³¹ What is pushed aside or dislocated when my word reaches another person, and especially when a text reaches its reader, can never be fixed in a rigid identity. Where understanding takes place, there is not just an identity”.³²

However, although the Gadamerian response left no room for doubt about the possibility of a collaboration between hermeneutics and deconstruction, at the time of the Paris meeting Derrida proved to be deaf to it and insisted that only deconstruction could grasp the true sense of the difference by arguing that the primary issue for understanding is the question of its own impossibility: “one can still raise questions about that axiomatic precondition of interpretive discourse which Professor Gadamer calls ‘*Verstehen*’, ‘understanding the other’, and ‘understanding one another’. Whether one speaks of consensus or of misunderstanding (...), one needs to ask whether the precondition for *Verstehen*, far from being the continuity of *rapport* (...), is not rather the interruption of *rapport*, a certain *rapport* of interruption, the suspending of all mediation?”.³³ In this way, the Gadamerian *Verstehen* would appear as an axiomatic paradigm destined to imprison human communication in a linear and continuous structure, which therefore does not consider the fact that communication occurs also and above all without mediation. Mediation is never

³⁰With regard to the concept of possession – highly remarkable according to Derrida in order to understand the penetration of the metaphysics in the western philosophical tradition, see Derrida (1979).

³¹This famous sentence is present also in *Truth and Method*: “It is enough to say that we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all* (Es genügt zu sagen, daß man *anders versteht, wenn man überhaupt versteht*)”, Gadamer (2004), 307.

³²Gadamer (1993b), 141.

³³Derrida (1989a), 53.

neutral, it implies a will that supports its unavoidably levelling action and which consequently also presupposes a kind of agreement, albeit unilateral or partial. For this reason too, according to Derrida a “metaphysics of the will” can be found here grounded on “the determination of the being of beings, or willing subjectivity”.³⁴ Subject and will: it is therefore the metaphysical declension of these two elements that would distinguish hermeneutics from deconstruction. The moment a subject presupposes that communicative agreement is possible in dialogue, he does nothing but direct the communication and consequently the understanding towards his own fields of expertise and convictions; by doing so he imposes his will to make himself understood. And thus from the Kantian “goodwill”, already absolute in itself, we would pass to a vision “closer to the interpretive style of Nietzsche”,³⁵ to a sweetened form of the *Wille zur Macht*, despite the fact that Gadamer considered Nietzsche as a metaphysical thinker³⁶ and kept him at arms’ length, not only because of his superhumanism, which Gadamer considered self-destructive, and because of the radical nature of his nihilism, but also and above all because the will to power is interpreted as a dimension totally closed to the other, while hermeneutical understanding does not exist without an alterity that dialogues with the subject.³⁷ But Derrida certainly knew this: one must therefore assume that labelling Gadamer a Nietzschean was his way, at the time of the Paris encounter, of shutting the door definitively on any possibility of dialogue with his interlocutor.

4. A dialoguing Writing

Indeed, on the metaphysics of the subject Gadamer has always been very clear, placing his perspective in a point of mediation between Derrida and Ricoeur, between an irrevocable death of the subject and a recovery in great style of subjectivity: his proud critique of the subject, of metaphysical tradition, always

³⁴Ibid., 52-53.

³⁵Ibid., 53. In addition, it should be recalled that Derrida spoke about Nietzsche during the encounter in Paris; see Derrida (1989b).

³⁶This consideration is for example present even in the letter to Dallmayr (1985) about the encounter in Paris; see Gadamer (1989c).

³⁷“What I meant I also said clearly in the conference I gave in Paris: ‘good will’ means what Plato calls *eumeneis elenchoi*. This means not only aiming to be right and therefore identifying the weaknesses of others, but rather trying to give them the maximum strength, so that what they say receives clarity”, Gadamer (1984), 59.

takes into account the fact that in the *game*³⁸ of dialogue subjectivity cannot be erased without the game itself being erased. But just as in a game “the players are not the subjects of play; instead play merely reaches presentation (*Darstellung*) through the players”,³⁹ so too in the case of dialogue the dialogists create something that already affects them and orients them. In the Gadamerian dialogue as well, the prevalence of one subject over another or with respect to an object is impossible, since in it the living dimension that involves both subject and object is predominant. Dialogue is always an open communicative process, which by virtue of this openness nullifies every individualistic hierarchy. In an unexpected manner, therefore, the convinced anti-subjectivism of our authors, although developed according to different perspectives, makes hermeneutics and deconstruction converge, both founded on the irrepressible, radical finiteness of language. Thus, Gadamer does not believe that the subjectivity present in his hermeneutics, weakened and contextualized in the context of an ontology of language, could have any connection with the subject of metaphysical tradition; nevertheless, Derrida is convinced that these are precisely the terms of the question because on this issue one must not proceed by mediation: it must not be re-examined but definitively overcome. The *écriture* is the cemetery of the subject: “The ‘subject’ of writing does not exist”.⁴⁰ The consolidated, almost petrified words of written testimony blot out every individualistic trace and write a discourse that proceeds beyond personalistic interpretations. Writing is a crystallized flow that makes it impossible for a subject to emerge and differentiate itself, because the very writing is the difference, taken as understanding, that springs from the interruption of any dialogical temptation of the irenic kind. The *écriture* is an act of accusation against logocentrism understood as an essential theoretical matrix of Western metaphysics that elevates to the level of dogmas of thought *lógos* and *phoné*, which have always removed and marginalized the written sign. Starting from the imposition of the Platonic diktat against the misleading dispersion of the semblance of wisdom⁴¹ of the writing, the *gramma* as a *trace* has been forced in the granitic opposition of the metaphysics of presence that structures itself in the historical and theoretical primacy of the voice.⁴² Only the trace can restore truth to its archetypal depth, which is not to be found, as the philosophers of the Western

³⁸Gadamer (2004), 107ff.

³⁹Ibid., 107.

⁴⁰Derrida (2001c), 285.

⁴¹See Plato and his famous criticism against the writing in Plato (2002), 274c-276a, 68-70.

⁴²See Derrida (1982c).

tradition have thought, in a unique and unrepeatable logocentric origin, but precisely in the differential iterability of the representation that the sign-based testament always bears with itself,⁴³ in the *dissemination*⁴⁴ of the signs that penetrates the opacity of understanding, renouncing any form of transparency as an end in itself. The grammatological project⁴⁵ is structured around the need to identify in writing the authentic temporality, that which is disconnected and asymmetrical and capable of overcoming the utopian pre-eminence of time understood as permanence. In such a project, writing as an inscription of the trace, which knows no authority outside itself, removes the complicit union of voice and presence to attest to the only possible originality, that which never spoils, becoming impure, since it is itself already impurity. The trace undermines the completeness of voice that usually imposes itself on both human conversation and the philosophical soliloquy proper to consciousness speaking with itself, setting in opposition to the phonocentric unity – grafted onto the pre-eminence of the *phoné* in its privileged relationship with the *logos* of which it would be the highest and most ideal expression – its own, irrepressible sign-based difference. While philosophy has founded its metaphysical origin in the voice as the fullness of permanence, it is in the *arche-writing*⁴⁶ as the absence of a presence, that philosophy would thus recover the sign of an origin that cannot be externalized in a certain ontology bound to an ultimate and foundational reality on the one hand and that cannot be “recognized as an *object* of a science”⁴⁷ on the other.

And it is from this point, that is to say from the push to “go beyond precisely that restriction due to method”,⁴⁸ that Gadamer starts, who does not hesitate to declare his attraction for Derrida’s meditation on writing, understanding the reasons for what we could define the “charm of solitude”⁴⁹ that each of us feels and which we let ensnare us in the experience of writing. Yet, unlike Derrida, Gadamer does not intend to proceed by caesuras, oppositions, incompatibilities: «I would maintain that the hermeneutical problem is basically the same for oral and written discourse”.⁵⁰ According to the German thinker the task of hermeneutics is

⁴³The effort to understand this iterability, which finds the lonely possible non-originated origin in the signs that allow the repetition and the representation, is central in Derrida (1967).

⁴⁴See Derrida, *Dissemination* (1981).

⁴⁵See Derrida (1997).

⁴⁶Ibid., 60.

⁴⁷Ibid., 83.

⁴⁸Gadamer, (1993c), 148.

⁴⁹“It is clear why Derrida, based on his position, wants to give a privileged position to the written text and to writing. The breath of solitude blows over all that is written”, *ibid.*, 159.

⁵⁰Gadamer (1989a), 36.

to look for the common horizon of *écriture/writing* and *Gespräch/dialogue*, because an opposition between these two terms has no meaning in the *text* which, also from the linguistic point of view, is always both oral and written. The understanding to which both the written text and the oral text call us is the true task of hermeneutics, which in fact starts from the assumption that “the voice is (...) a *voix pensée*, a thought-out voice, just as the *écriture* is only thought-out writing”.⁵¹ Paradoxically, in the conception of the deconstructive superiority of writing with respect to the hermeneutic identity of dialogue, Derrida uncritically follows the imposition of a tradition that has become calcified in the desire to differentiate the scriptural gesture from the dialogical gesture, without realizing that dialogicity is in reality also inherent in the *scriptum*. That which is removed, according to Gadamer, is not therefore writing in its irreducibility as compared to dialogue but writing in its intrinsic dialogical matrix. At the center there should not be an inscription of traces that risks remaining in a sign-based identity pre-established by tradition, but the appeal of both the *écriture* and the *Gespräch* for the subjectivity to become involved in a dialogue.

A radicalization of the written text would thus not take into account that even with the written text a dialogue is established, because, just as with a living interlocutor, the written text, if authoritative, appeals to us and asks us to question our knowledge, skills and competences. It is in the dimension of the *Lesen*, of the reading of a text, that, in the latest Gadamerian writings,⁵² there seems to be an attempt to overcome the impasse that the dialogue placed at the center of hermeneutics is likely to incur in the face of writing placed at the center by deconstruction. In reading, we actualize that mediation between orality and writing that allows us to overcome both the Platonic extremism that sees orality as the only guarantee of an original wisdom that is never a slave to copies and repetitions, and the Derridian extremism that sees in the fragmentary nature of writing that impossibility of originality deemed the only originality still and truly possible. In fact, Gadamer’s question “what is writing if it is not meant to be read?”⁵³ must not be answered either by the superiority of the voice or by the superiority of the writing, but only by the continuous and lively mixing of identity and difference.

⁵¹Gadamer (1993c), 153.

⁵²Gadamer (1993a), 42-55.

⁵³Gadamer (1993b), 141.

5. Conclusion

And it was precisely the difference not as a destiny of impenetrability, but as a viaticum of comprehensibility that, after having distanced Derrida from Gadamer, eventually brought them close together. Derrida seems to set out on precisely this path of rapprochement in *Béliers*, changing course, and sufficiently admitting the relevance that Gadamer's hermeneutics has had for his philosophy and citing Gadamer's famous phrase in *Destruktion and Deconstruction*, "Whoever wants me to take deconstruction to heart and insists on difference stands at the beginning of a conversation, not at its end".⁵⁴ It is as if Derrida for the first time understood that this thesis of Gadamer's does not contradict the autonomy of deconstruction but safeguards it. From this new awareness springs a need to find, beyond simple posthumous reunions, the real point of union between deconstruction and hermeneutics, albeit through a detachment steeped in difference: Celan. A poet beloved of Gadamer, who dedicated extremely important readings to him,⁵⁵ a constant and precious inspiration for Derrida,⁵⁶ but is above all a magmatic poet, impossible to decode definitively and impossible to understand without going to the place from which his poetry speaks, without, therefore, a sounding of its depths at once profound and inevitably tormented. And the poetry chosen, *Grosse, glühende Wölbung*, as almost always happens with Celan, is not really a poem, but a veritable abyss, not a list of meanings, but a vertiginous vortex of sense. The choice of Celan is not by chance: he is the poet who can indicate the need for a 'collaboration' between hermeneutics and deconstruction. Breaking the sedimented and obvious balances of ordinary language, his words are stones, thrown against custom and the inability to reach the limits of language itself. His poetry is the testimony that not everything that can be understood can be communicated, demonstrating in a clear and at the same time painful way that philosophy needs both hermeneutics and deconstruction to stay alive and to continue its dialogue. That understanding is both agreement, encounter, openness, as well as friction, collision, closure. Celan's poetry opens up horizons of meaning precisely in the darkness of meaning, makes us familiar with the stranger and with the distant

⁵⁴Gadamer (1989d), 113.

⁵⁵See Gadamer (1997a). This volume contains Gadamer's contributions on Celan starting from *Who Am I and Who Are You?* dating back to 1986, Gadamer (1997b) until *A Phenomenological and Semantic Approach to Celan?* dating back to 1991, Gadamer (1998).

⁵⁶See Derrida (2005a). This volume contains Derrida's contributions on Celan starting from *Shibboleth. For Paul Celan* dating back to 1984, Derrida (2005b) until precisely *Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, the Poem* dating back to 2003, Derrida (2005c).

without giving in to the temptation of removing them. And it is no coincidence that Derrida takes up the word *unheimlich*⁵⁷ again, an absolutely untranslatable term except at the cost of losing much of its semantic essence, not only to describe Celan's poetry, but also his encounter with Gadamer. *Unheimlich* not a kind of perturbing that paralyzes and confuses, but a perturbing that creates and imagines: *Great, glowing vault / With the outward- and away- / burrowing black-constellation swarm: / into the silicified forehead of a ram / I burn this image, between / The horns, therein, / In the singing of the coils, the / Marrow of the curdled / Heartses swells. / What doesn't he butt against? / The world is gone, I have to carry you.*⁵⁸

The figure of the ram that dominates these verses is highly emblematic: the indomitable, recalcitrant rams are indeed Gadamer and Derrida, who meet in this clash, both maintaining in their position, but making their experience of life and thought alive and unique. Surely Derrida espies in the image branded with fire on the animal's "silicified forehead" the sign-based legacy of the text intended as a trace that remains despite being dead, a testament that is fixed even if it is lost. The mark is engraved with fire because proper to writing is the solemnity of its custody of absence, of its custody of the remnant that remains. To penetrate Celan's poetry one cannot apply interpretative procedures relating to the formal structure and intentions of the author, to something calculable; rather one must deconstruct the opposition which arises in every understanding before the incalculable, always referring to the fact that the word that speaks to us is already a remnant, and for this reason it must remain. The trace of the incalculable is what remains: *Die Welt ist fort, ich muß dich tragen*. The poem is sealed off from time in this last verse: *Die Welt ist fort* means that the one who was there now is no longer there, he has gone away forever and now one must learn to live this absence. The poem ends with an infinite gesture, that of carrying the friend after the end of the world that is every death. In this way Derrida establishes that I-you relationship that is at the basis of Gadamer's reading of Celan, and that expresses the deeper sense of alterity proper to the hermeneutical approach.⁵⁹ A gesture that takes up the beginning of the poem, that infinite gaze upon the great glowing vault populated by a constellation swarm that, with a resounding image charged with a profound evocative potential, Celan describes as burrowing – looking for both a way out (outward/*hinaus*) and an escape route (away/*hinweg*).

⁵⁷ Derrida (2005c), 137f.

⁵⁸ Celan (1995), 233.

⁵⁹ Derrida closes his commemorative speech with the following verse by Hölderlin: *Denn keiner trägt das Leben allein*; in Hölderlin (1995²), 510.

This gesture of burrowing vividly communicates the work of understanding that soars into the immensity of the great vault of meaning with inadequate and incomplete tools. For deconstruction, a new way to comprehend understanding is an escape from the metaphysical tradition; for hermeneutics, a way out. At the basis of this lies a difference in the relationship with tradition: Derrida's structural-deconstructive point of view has a testamentary, written-word, and thus oppositional, relationship with tradition, while Gadamer's ontological-hermeneutical point of view engages in a living, dialoguing, and thus conciliatory relationship with that same tradition. The escape route looks towards new horizons, the way out never forgets its point of origin. For the poet these paths can only be traversed together: the *hinaus* movement can only accompany that of the *hinweg*. This is why in the end the perspectives of the two authors cannot simply be distant but will be so as a result of their differences. Despite being totally different dimensions, dialogue and writing have similar functions: both in fact indicate a limit for the subject, a limit which for Derrida is crystallized in the testamentary deposit of the *écriture* and which in Gadamer becomes concrete in the living dialogue between individuals. Both when the subject draws back before a structure and when it projects itself into a relationship, it is weakened and deprived of its metaphysical connotation. Facing the grand vault of the sky is a lyrical ego that impresses upon the forehead of a story that has happened a trace of fire, to then remain, alone, before the loss of the world, to carry the friend who is not there. This image traces the path of a subject who finds in the other the fulfillment of his own essence/absence, in the task of carrying forward precisely that absence/essence of the companion who is no more. This 'carrying the other' finally overcomes the phonologocentric solipsism of the phenomenological voice, understood as consciousness' being present to itself, that withdraws from the world, preferring a fruitful impurity that both our authors, although in different spheres, have sought. Both Gadamer and Derrida sought to avoid entanglement in the dryness of an ideal of presence on the one hand and in the drift of a solipsistic subjectivism of the other. Paradoxically, it is only in the encounter with the other that theory avoids betraying itself: this encounter in fact does not take place as an answer or explanation, as a point of arrival or foundation, but as that extreme limit which death presents to life in its irrevocable finitude.

This is why if we wished to point out, without fear of reproach something non-poetic in this poetry, we could say that the very destiny of the relationship between hermeneutics and deconstruction seems to be at stake here. And not only, as Derrida himself rightly argued, a reference, which is also essential, to the Jewish tradition: the gesture of burning an image onto the ram as well as the

image of the marrow call to mind Abraham and Isaac and others sacrifices in the Old Testament. And yet the hermeneutical gaze goes beyond this rather predictable interpretation which, even if it hits the mark, prevents the poem from expounding all its possibilities: «Celan calls poetic language “multipositional” and leaves many paths open”.⁶⁰ Derrida risks to do nothing but follow a pre-established path, without questioning the multiple “positions” that can open up in a lyric abyss such as Celan’s: the ram is the one who has to knock down the wall standing between him and his freedom, just as the stars burrow in the glowing vault to escape *hinaus* and *hinweg*, to escape from a horizon which itself is already immense. But the immensity of the past is not enough to contain the torment of the human, once it has been set afire like the mark to be branded between the horns of the ram.

Derrida therefore intended deconstruction as an escape from metaphysics, while Gadamer proposed hermeneutics as a way out: while distanced by their intents, the encounter-clash between these two authors shows that hermeneutics and deconstruction lose much of their propulsive drive and their argumentative originality if they are thought of as two dichotomous fields of knowledge, as opposing philosophical visions. Only if they manage to reason within a collaborative perspective can they truly hope to sidestep a dangerously all-encompassing drift on the one hand or purely polemical one on the other. Celan’s poetry shows that the work of understanding is continuous and uneven, it is an effort that does not follow systematic rules or produce a list of certainties, it is a work that must always be done by an interpreter. Celan’s is a poem which continually tests the reader, who is tempted to let himself be led into a drift of nonsense and who, only by resisting this temptation, can make sense of what remains a swirling magma of dark meanings, jealous of their own darkness. The work of understanding arises from this resistance, and for this reason it is both hermeneutical and deconstructive, integrative, dialogical, associative, destructured, testamentary, fragmentary. In any case, a meaning that is not given to the reader, but to which the reader must give himself.

⁶⁰Gadamer (1993c), 159.

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