

SPEAKING ON BEHALF OF THE OTHER: DEATH AND DIALOGUE IN PLATO, GADAMER, AND DERRIDA

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In 1981 Derrida proposed that Gadamer's account of dialogue presupposes a metaphysics of the will. Gadamer denied this, tracing his account to a Platonic 'kindly spirit' at work in any dialogue worthy of the name. In *Béliers* Derrida reassessed Gadamer's hermeneutic. By interpreting the *Theaetetus* as a dialogue about dialogue, I show that through this reassessment Derrida goes to the heart of the problematic of such a 'kindly spirit' by dealing with dialogue in relation to death and the problem of speaking on behalf of any 'other'.

The complicated relation between death and dialogue plays an important role in Jacques Derrida's work. Already in *La pharmacie de Platon*, he addresses this relation.¹ Noting that Plato's dialogues were written after Socrates' death, he wonders what this can mean for the esteemed 'living speech' of dialogue if this dialogue is an attempt to continue a conversation with someone who is dead and can no longer speak for himself. This theme returns in his later work guided by the following questions: How does one continue a dialogue with the dead? How does one and should one speak on behalf of someone who can no longer respond?

It is not surprising that Derrida's reflection on these issues begins with Plato. The latter's dialogues are all marked by indirect speech, often in a double way: On a meta-level, Plato does not speak himself; rather, he analyzes philosophical problems through the artifice of having various characters voice different points of view. Also there are incidents of indirect speech within the dialogues: that is, the interlocutors retell a conversation at which they were not present, or they present the opinions of someone else, thus adopting, mimetically, the role of a person who is absent.

What Derrida finds crucial is the manner in which such 'indirect speech' is representational in the sense of one speaking *for* one who cannot speak for himself. In this essay I reread a few passages from the *Theaetetus* in which speaking for some other plays a crucial role. The aim in retracing the notion of the relation between dialogue and indirect speech is, firstly, to take account of what speaking on behalf of the other implies for any dialogical relation. More crucially, this account allows us to return and rethink the relation between the works of Gadamer and Derrida.

I. DIALOGUE IN THE *THEAETETUS*

Why begin with the *Theaetetus* for elucidating the difference between Gadamer's and Derrida's account of dialogue? Part of the answer lies in this passage from the *Theaetetus*, where Plato teases out the distinction between a real argument and mere controversy:

It is the height of unreasonableness that a person who professes to care for moral goodness should be consistently unjust in discussion. I mean by injustice, in this connection, the behavior of a man who does not take care to keep controversy (*hos agonizomenos tas diatribas*) distinct from discussion (*dialegomenos*); a man who forgets that in controversy he may play about and trip up his opponent as often as he can, but that in discussion he must be serious, he must keep on helping his opponent to his feet again, [. . .]

So, if you take my advice, as I said before, you will sit down with us without ill will (*dusmenos*) or hostility (*machetikos*), in a kindly spirit (*hileoi tei dianoiāi*).²

The similarities between this Socratic characterization of dialogue and Gadamer's are striking. When the latter describes hermeneutic dialogue, he notes that the each dialogical partner 'brings into play' (*ins Spiel bringen*) his or her point of view, not in order to win an argument or to persist in his or her opinions, but rather 'to risk' (*aufs Spiel setzen*) these opinions to clarify the subject matter under discussion.³ For Gadamer the goal of a dialogue is not to win a debate or a controversy but to comprehend what is at stake (*die Sache*) in the conversation. In contrast to the 'ill will or hostility' of controversy that tries to 'trip up' the opponent, the 'kindly spirit' or good will of dialogue is rather interested in the exposition of truth in the expressed opinions.⁴

Such a relation between Gadamer's and Plato's account of the good will or kindly spirit as a presupposition of dialogue is affirmed by Gadamer himself. Specifically, he does so in the notorious 'Gadamer-Derrida Encounter' of 1981. During this encounter Derrida took up the Gadamerian notion of 'good will' in order to relate the latter's hermeneutic to a metaphysics of the will. Gadamer responds that this suggestion misses the point: this hermeneutic 'good will' is not modern in nature, but is similar to Plato's *eumeneis elenchoi*, which he paraphrases as follows:

One does not go about identifying the weaknesses of what another person says in order to prove that one is always right, but one seeks instead to strengthen the other's viewpoints so that what the other person has to say becomes illuminating.⁵

Derrida did not relate Gadamerian dialogue to this Platonic background in 1981; yet this does not mean that he did not come to appreciate it later. Specifically, his account of Gadamer's hermeneutics in *Béliers* elaborates concerns that mark this problematic of Platonic dialogue. To bring out the force of Derrida's concerns, I return in the next section to the context of the above quotation from the *Theaetetus*.

a dialogue about dialogue

In the *Theaetetus*, Theaetetus, Theodorus and Socrates discuss the question of what knowledge is. At the beginning the young mathematician Theaetetus proposes to equate knowledge (*episteme*) with perception (*aisthesis*). This account is, rightly or wrongly, attributed to Protagoras.⁶ Rather than focusing on this first and most obvious topic of the *Theaetetus*, I will follow Jean-Luc Nancy's suggestion: 'the topic of the *Meno*, the *Theaetetus*, the *Sophist*, the *Symposium*, [. . .] is it not always *likewise* dialogue or dialogicity as such?'⁷ According to Nancy, the *Theaetetus* is not only a dialogue about the nature of knowledge; it is just as crucially a dialogue about dialogue itself. What, then, does this dialogue have to tell us about dialogue and dialogicity?

Socrates' characterization of dialogue provides us with a first hint. If we take a closer look at this statement, however, we notice that more is at stake. The characterization that is given is not just that of Socrates; it is proposed as part of a lengthy speech in which Socrates *is speaking on behalf of* Protagoras. It is Socrates' voice that we hear, but

according to Socrates himself, it is Protagoras' account of dialogue. Consequently, to understand what the *Theaetetus* has to tell us about dialogicity, it is not enough to focus on *what* is said explicitly; it is necessary also to take into account *how* it is said. In particular we need to notice the speech form in which this description appears, namely the form of a 'speaking on behalf of . . .', and we need further to address the question of how this specific form affects dialogue. To meet these demands, I will adopt a Derridean perspective and show how this 'speaking for . . .' serves to unsettle and interrupt dialogue as living speech. 'Living speech' refers to a speaking that requires *the presence* of the speakers. Moreover, a speaker is not merely some one who happens to be speaking, but more specifically the one who is speaking in such a way that he or she knows and understands the subject he or she is talking about. 'Speaking for . . .' unsettles these two traits of dialogue – living presence and understanding – by planting death at the heart of dialogue. To demonstrate this, I will discuss three key points in the dialogue where the phenomenon of 'speaking for . . .' is imposed on us. I will show how this device gives rise to interruptions and throws up insurmountable ambiguities.

three interruptions

(1) The first and most crucial interruption of the dialogue as *living speech* is caused by the fact that Protagoras is no longer among the living at the time of the discussion; his death has interrupted the possibility of a living conversation with him. Nevertheless, the dialogue discusses *his* teachings; it therefore requires the voice of the father of these teachings. The only way to revive this voice is by *speaking for* Protagoras. As such, 'speaking for . . .' is an indispensable and integral element of the dialogue, because the latter involves someone who can no longer speak for himself.

In *La pharmacie de Platon*, Derrida discusses a similar situation. He argues that Plato's ventriloquism of Socrates problematizes dialogue as the locus of living speech, and thus of a truth that presupposes the presence of the speakers. Every Platonic dialogue 'is thus, when read from the viewpoint of Socrates' death, in the situation of writing as it is indicted in the *Phaedrus*'.⁸ As is well-known, Derrida approaches the question of death from the perspective of writing. He argues that Plato's *Phaedrus* proposes a linguistic hierarchy between, on the one hand, the fecundity of living speech for understanding and truth and, on the other hand, the sterility of writing. In contrast to this hierarchy, however, the death of Socrates as the point of departure of the Platonic dialogue implies that these dialogues are deprived of the presence of the speaker. They should therefore be in the same situation as writing, and are threatened with a similar sterility.

The *Theaetetus* is aware of this problem. To describe the situation of Protagoras's teachings after his death, Socrates uses the same image he used in the *Phaedrus* to describe writing. Like written texts, Protagoras's teachings are orphans - like children no longer protected by their father, and as such easily trampled on.⁹ Socrates therefore asks, who will protect these orphans? Who will account for the views of someone who is no longer present? Protagoras's orphans can only be defended if someone is willing to represent him. Like a foster parent, this representative will become *responsible* for the thoughts, arguments, and opinions of Protagoras.

The serious responsibility at stake in speaking for the 'other' points to a different kind of representation than that of writing. A text always repeats the same words over and over again.¹⁰ The responsibility of speaking for an 'other', however, requires more than simply repeating words that Protagoras once spoke. The representative needs to reply for Protagoras in situations to which he has never spoken. He or she has the responsibility of

saying what Protagoras *would* have said, if he *had been* present in a particular discussion.¹¹ Thus, Protagoras has to be interpreted in a double sense: his voice has to be represented, *and* his opinions have to be interpreted.

(2) This second point shows how an insurmountable and undecidable ambiguity is imposed on us. The *Theaetetus* takes seriously the problem of a *fundamental difference* between Protagoras and anyone who represents him; this complicates the identification of Protagoras's voice, as well as the appreciation of his teachings. This difference can be most clearly traced in its consequences: there is a *multiplication* to Protagoras's voice. The dialogue between Theodorus, Theaetetus and Socrates shares in Protagoras' voice, but this sharing only takes place as multiplication and division.¹² Put otherwise, Protagoras does not simply have *one* representative. *Each* of the participants at one time or another adopts the role of Protagoras. Moreover, they do so for different reasons and with different effects.

Theaetetus first speaks for Protagoras. When he does so, the discussion partners become painfully aware of the difference between Theaetetus and Protagoras. Although Theaetetus is very bright, he is also very young and too easily thrown-off by Socrates' rhetorical skill; as a consequence Protagoras's teachings are too easily refuted. As Socrates notes, this would never have happened if Protagoras had been able to speak for himself.¹³ This first representative appears more a *parody* or *mockery* than a genuine representative. Since Protagoras deserves to be defended by the best candidate possible, Socrates suggests that Theodorus adopt the role. Theodorus is not only a professed friend of Protagoras, he is also older and wiser than Theaetetus. Theodorus hesitates nonetheless, because he fears that when Socrates questions him he will be 'tripped up', and that his good friend Protagoras will be rebutted because of his own lack of argumentative skills.¹⁴

His refusal and the accompanying silence is perhaps not without significance, although the dialogue does not say much about it. Unlike Theaetetus who became a mockery to the memory of Protagoras, Theodorus' refusal testifies in a different, more serious way to the difference between Protagoras and his potential doubles. By keeping silent and refusing to lend his voice, Theodorus underlines the impossibility of doing justice to Protagoras and his memory in any effort to identify him or appreciate his teachings.

Socrates then refuses this refusal. To persuade Theodorus, he begins a lengthy speech in the name of Protagoras in which he appeals to Theodorus, attempting in two different ways to convince him to speak for Protagoras. He first stresses that the discussion so far has not done justice to Protagoras's doctrines. Implicitly Socrates is saying that if Theodorus really wants to accept his responsibility as a friend, he should recognize that his friend will be treated unjustly as long as he keeps quiet. Secondly, Socrates (as Protagoras) makes the crucial distinction between philosophical discussion and mere controversy, as we saw above. We now see that within the composition of the *Theaetetus*, this distinction not only characterizes and marks off philosophical dialogue; it also plays a strategic function. By speaking for Protagoras, Socrates aims to persuade Theodorus to participate in the dialogue.¹⁵

These two types of appeal are different. The second is argumentative and claims that Theodorus' fears of being tripped up are unjustified. This is a philosophical thesis concerning the nature and goals of philosophical dialogue: in a dialogue everyone must defend his or her own position, even if someone else thought of it already and subjected it to the test of reason. In this way, the other's point of view can be appropriated. Thus, the difference between Protagoras and his potential doubles is not as deep as I suggested above; in fact, it is ultimately effaced: for a philosophical interrogation and in a reasonable

defense of Protagoras's opinions, this difference is not essential. Consequently, no insurmountable or undecidable ambiguity exists here.

The first appeal, however, does not suggest that the difference between Protagoras and Theodorus is not important. This appeal is concerned with Theodorus' refusal in a different way: by not speaking on behalf of Protagoras, he does not *risk* the *undecidable* or insurmountable difference between himself and Protagoras. Here the adjective 'undecidable', borrowed from Derrida, refers to an *aporia* of representation: when speaking on behalf of an 'other', it is impossible to decide at what point the risk of *replacing* (rather than representing) the other – sweeping away their memory and even their arguments – in fact occurs. So long as Theodorus does not risk this difference, the 'orphans' of his friend will be trampled on and mocked because of the inadequate representatives who *do* risk this *aporia* of representation. Although Theodorus' silence might be appropriate to the *aporia* before him, Socrates nevertheless requests a generous decision by Theodorus. He has to decide to become responsible for his dead friend so as to allow a genuine dialogue with him to continue after his death.

Socrates' impersonation of Protagoras therefore interweaves a philosophical argument around the appeal to a friend: the philosophical thesis about dialogue he puts in the mouth of Protagoras cannot be distinguished from the appeal to Theodorus to decide to represent his friend. The philosophical thesis implies that Protagoras's voice can be interpreted without genuine loss, whereas the appeal is based on the notion that Theodorus must risk such a potentially irrecoverable loss. This ambiguity reflects beautifully the undecidable nature of the kind of speech that is frequently enacted in this dialogue: when I speak for the other, it is undecidable who speaks. Do I speak, or does the other speak? Do I give the floor to the other and let his appeal be heard, or does the other become a mouthpiece for me? Do I represent the other, or rather replace him?

(3) As opposed to Theodorus' fear of being rebutted by Socrates, the third key passage raises the possibility of being rebutted by Protagoras. This passage heightens the problem of the undecidable I raised above. An allusion to this danger occurs at the end of Socrates' speech in the name of Protagoras, where he says:

Well, Theodorus, here is my contribution to the rescue of your friend – the best I can do, with my resources, and little enough that is. If he were alive himself, he would have come to the rescue of his offspring in a grander style.¹⁶

Socrates acknowledges the difference between himself and Protagoras by stating that he cannot do justice to Protagoras's style of argumentation. Socrates later returns to this difference when he paints the gruesome and comical picture of the unheard-of possibility that Protagoras would rise up among the living:

Hence it is likely that Protagoras, being older than we are, really is wiser as well; and if he were to stick up his head from below as far as the neck just here as we are, he would in all likelihood convict me twenty times over of talking nonsense, and show you up too for agreeing with me, before he ducked down to rush off again.¹⁷

This raises the possibility of Protagoras's returning among the living; such a possibility is described as something which *haunts* the dialogue. In Derrida's terminology, this concerns the possibility of Protagoras as a *revenant*, which is the French word for ghost, but also derives from the verb *revenir*, returning or coming back. Protagoras, as *revenant*, could thus always come back in such a way that his legacy can never be exhausted by his three interpreters. Socrates thereby points to a limit to dialogue as living speech: something must

always remain unsaid. This unsaid might be one more interpretation, one more argument, or one more defense to rebut one of Socrates' propositions. In this sense, the remainder appears essential to the rational dimension of dialogue as such; however, it might also be just another turn of phrase or rhetorical trick by which Protagoras, the great sophist, would trip the living. It would then be external to the strictly philosophical dimension of dialogue; in sum, the nature of the *revenant* itself is undecidable.

The depicted (im)possibility of Protagoras's return gives yet another meaning to the impossibility of fully representing or bringing to life his views through the ventriloquism of his friends. It implies yet again that the discussion partners are unable to do full justice to Protagoras. At the same time, by invoking the impossible possibility of a *revenant*, the dialogue suggests that every interpretation of his teachings and every effort to say what Protagoras would have said, is never simply what it is. The possibility of Protagoras *adding* something to what he taught implies that voicing and repeating the teachings of Protagoras 'results in speech always saying something other than what it says: it says the other who speaks 'before' and 'outside' it'.¹⁸

This quote from Derrida's *Mémoires pour Paul de Man* does not comment on the *Theaetetus*, yet it does describe exactly what is at stake here. The haunting possibility of being rebutted by Protagoras implies that no appropriation can hide the fact that it is at the same time an expropriation. In light of this possibility, everything that is said *in the name of Protagoras* also might say something else than what the representative can account for or intended to disclose. In this way, 'speaking for . . .' is haunted by a 'before' and an 'outside' – Protagoras himself – who could suddenly surface. Yet, as I shall argue later, it is precisely due to this structure that 'speaking for . . .' may become the locus in language where the 'other' can draw near *without* having its otherness completely absorbed or evacuated.

To conclude this discussion of the *Theaetetus*, it is important to note that the possibility of being rebutted by Protagoras is an ambiguous one. Up to now I have bracketed the irony that resounds in Socrates' remark that Protagoras is wiser than him.¹⁹ Irony is also a form of saying something other than what you appear to be saying. Socrates' ironic claim about Protagoras is, however, different. After having raised the haunting image of Protagoras's return, Socrates makes a series of comments indicating that this danger does *not affect* the dialogue. Instead of commemorating Protagoras and imagining the interrupting possibility of his return, Socrates says: 'But we have got to take ourselves as we are, I suppose, and go on saying the things which seem to us to be.'²⁰ One can read this remark as a simple observation: since Protagoras is dead, we are left with no option but to think for ourselves. Yet it also testifies to Socrates' imperturbability in the face of a reappearance by Protagoras. Rather than raising an expectancy relating to this (im)possibility, Socrates suggests that neither the loss nor the possible reappearance of the wiser Protagoras affects who we are, what we think is true, and how we proceed in our examination of opinions about what is. In this way, Socrates tries to *get past* the idea that the dialogue is dealing with the teachings of a man who could persuade us *if only he were present*. From this perspective, it becomes clear that the passage in which Socrates adopts Protagoras's voice to persuade Theodorus to participate is ultimately an effort to expel the ghost of Protagoras and to get rid of this voice that speaks 'before' and 'outside' the actual dialogue. According to Socrates, the philosopher has to say how things appear to him to be and to bring these opinions into play. This dimension of philosophical dialogue requires that one stop attesting to Protagoras's death in order to start accounting for what one actually understands. This implies that only when death is a complete loss, of which

nothing remains and from which nothing imposes itself on us anymore, does the Socratic ideal of only and utterly speaking for oneself become possible.

II. INTERPRETATIONS OF PLATO'S HERMENEUTICS

The ambiguity in the Platonic account of dialogue has a parallel in the discussion concerning the meaning of *hermēneuein* in Plato's thought. I briefly noted above that Nancy considers Plato's dialogues to be about dialogue and dialogicity. He makes these comments in the context of his explication of the meaning of *hermēneuein* in Plato's *Ion*, a dialogue in which poets are portrayed as interpreters (*hermēneutēs*) of the gods. Here, 'interpreter' does not refer to someone who aims at *understanding* the divine *logos*; rather the poet, guided by enthusiasm, interprets the gods, in the sense of giving the gods a voice.²¹ In this dialogue, philosophy tries to account for this poetic speaking for the gods; as such, it is confronted with something it cannot master, since poetic *hermēneuein* is not of the order of understanding. The *Ion* therefore shows us that 'the *hermēneia* of dialogue irresistibly overflows the mastery thought and presented by dialogue'.²² Moreover, since the gods have no voice apart from the lyricism of the poets, speaking *qua* speaking for the other is a primary form of *hermēneuein*, that is, a kind of speaking that opens up language to the gods. Nancy transfers this relation between the gods and their interpreters to the dialogicity of dialogue: a voicing or *hermēneuein* that opens up dialogue necessarily overflows what is understood in dialogue, namely its subject matter.

Ultimately Nancy's analysis aims at a distinction between two forms of interpretation. On the one hand, he takes note of the form of interpretation discussed above: interpretation as a primary voicing that opens up dialogue. This is the primordial form of interpretation. On the other hand, he distinguishes this from a type of interpretation that aims at and leads to understanding. This form of interpretation is on a par with the more or less common hermeneutic explication of interpretation in Ricoeur's and Gadamer's thought. This form of interpretation is 'less primordial', since it takes place within the boundaries of the realm that the primordial interpretation discloses.²³

Moving away from the context of the poet speaking on behalf of the gods and towards our discussion in the previous section, one can see this primary form of *hermēneuein* portrayed in the sections reviewed above from the *Theaetetus*. These original doublings open up the space of a dialogue with Protagoras in the first place. At the same time, since they speak on behalf of someone they can never fully represent, this voicing necessarily overflows what is presented and understood in the dialogue. In turn, the secondary form of *hermēneuein* might be detected in the Socratic tendency to reduce this voicing to a philosophical accounting of what one actually understands of Protagoras's doctrines; that is, this secondary form can be found in the tendency of Plato's dialogues to reduce voicing or speaking to what can be thought and presented in dialogue as its subject matter.

Although we find both forms of interpretation in Plato's dialogues, it remains to be seen whether they are in the hierarchical relation Nancy suggests: Are they indeed a *primary* and a *secondary* form of *hermēneuein*? Our findings suggest otherwise; the relation between the two is not so much hierarchic as intertwined. Moreover, Socrates ultimately favors the second. This possibility is affirmed by Michael Naas' reading of *Le partage des voix*. He notes that although Nancy might be right with respect to the *Ion*, Plato's use of the term *hermēneuein* in his later works conflates the two senses more and more. By emphasizing the *appropriation* involved in Plato's later accounts of *hermēneuein*, Naas notes that

though ‘every dialogue is at once open to its own event, to its own sharing (out) as dialogue’, it is also ‘already on the way to monologue’.²⁴ The dialogue, which is opened up by a voicing of the other, moves towards a monologue; such a monologue effaces the otherness of this voice by the appropriating tendency of philosophy. In this way the dialogue suppresses the haunting possibility that the otherness may reappear in the dialogue. We have seen that Plato does this by affirming that in a *philosophical* dialogue we are responsible for what we think, and need to present the thought of the other in such a way that it is convincing to us and meets the demands of philosophical discourse. Naas describes this as follows:

Hermēneuein here means [. . .] hypothesizing what the other would have said in such a way that the present speaker becomes in a certain sense responsible for it, responsible for making sure it makes sense, that terms are being used consistently, that arguments conform to the law of non-contradiction, and so on.²⁵

Naas’ reading emphasizes the indispensable and even primary character of the second form of interpretation. He seems to be right in this, although one must not forget that Plato’s works continued to be written in dialogical form and, as such, should be read as dialogues staging not only multiple voices but also multiple voicings. One should listen not only to the voice of Socrates, who in the *Theaetetus* ultimately favors a dialogue ‘on its way to monologue’; one should listen also to the other voices, and especially to what they have to say about voicing the other. Such a voicing, as we have seen, is specifically an interruption of the dialogical movement towards monologue. To put this differently, one must decide on the relationship between dialogue and monologue: is monologue a regulative ideal that guides and shapes a dialogue in its occurrence? Or is interruption a constitutive dimension in dialogue? The movements in the *Theaetetus* give rise to a picture of dialogue marked by an ambiguity that does not choose between these two options. This ambiguity allows both for Gadamer’s reflections on dialogue, interpretation, and ‘speaking on behalf of . . .’, and for Derrida’s concerns regarding these issues from the perspective of undecidability, interruption and unreadability.

III. GADAMER AND DERRIDA ON DEATH AND DIALOGUE

At the beginning of the first section I noted a similarity between Gadamer’s account of dialogue and explicit statements on dialogue in the *Theaetetus*. In this section I want to show how Derrida questions this account in *Béliers*, and how he uses the problematic of interruption, undecidability and ‘speaking for . . .’ as his point of departure.

textuality and the endlessness of dialogue

To contextualize Derrida’s discussion, let me recall briefly central aspects of Gadamer’s conception of dialogue. Dialogue is first and foremost a *hermeneutic* dialogue, that is, a dialogue with a text; this marks the stage at which the question of dialogue is set for Gadamer. As a consequence dialogue seems to suspend any treatment of death: rather than dealing with a living or a dead person in conversation, hermeneutic dialogue deals with a text. However, following a suggestion of Ricoeur who understands his own appreciation of the text as a refinement of Gadamer’s account of textuality, a text *presupposes* a death. In *Du texte à l’action*, Ricoeur notes that in reading a text one presupposes the death of the author. Specifically, he notes that one’s relation to a book is

only completed *after* the death of the author, because only then can the author no longer respond.²⁶ On this account, the death of the author and her resulting incapacity to respond is not a loss, but rather a semantic *gain*: through this death the text gains ideality of meaning, and ‘everyone who knows how to read’ can ‘participate equally’ in the meaning of the text.²⁷ Gadamer exposes important aspects of this gain and the purification that can occur thanks to this textualization. Let me discuss four of them.

(1) Gadamer adopts the Socratic distinction between a mere controversy and a genuine philosophical discussion. For him, however, this distinction is ideal; this means that an actual discussion between two living conversation partners can never attain the level of a genuine philosophical discussion in which the participants are *only* guided by the wish to clarify the subject matter. This is so because every dialogue between living people is always marked also by aspects that Gadamer calls the ‘emotional moments of expression and announcement’. A text, on the other hand, has the capacity to cleanse a conversation of these aspects. Only in a text ‘the meaning of what is said is there purely for itself’.²⁸ Apparently the incapacity of actual speakers to commit themselves truly and solely to a philosophical discussion means that such a genuine discussion must be located elsewhere, *after* the death of (one of) the speakers. Here ironically the unresponsiveness of (one of) the partners allows us to approach a genuine philosophical dialogue!

(2) Unlike speech, which has a volatile nature, textuality manifests the ideality of language; it exposes and exploits the repeatability of meaning. This solves the Platonic problem of the father of the *logos* who is absent in writing. For Gadamer the truth of what is said does not derive from the soul of a living person, nor is its external representation in writing a source of possible untruth. Since meaning is repeatable, it is fundamentally at the disposal of everyone who can read. For Plato, this democratic principle of writing was a danger; for Gadamer, this principle opens up the possibility of a continuous and unending dialogue with the text. In this unending dialogue, a text’s meaning is deepened through consecutive readings; the subject matter of a text operates as a unifying principle that regulates the multiple interpretations, for it is the same subject matter that is articulated differently in different interpretations.

(3) Although writing manifests the ideality of language, it at the same time establishes an alienation from speech and meaning. In itself writing lacks the ability to speak and to mean.²⁹ Gadamer agrees with this aspect of Plato’s criticism. Unlike a common conversation in which each of the participants speaks for themselves, a hermeneutic dialogue requires an additional activity on the part of an interpreter. Because the author is dead and the text cannot simply speak, an interpreter needs to change the written signs back into speech and meaning. The interpreter *speaks for* the text; he or she allows the text ‘to come to words’.³⁰ This process of interpretation cannot be understood as an endless, continuous process that aims at elucidating an ideal subject matter; it is a discontinuous process in which each interpreter first has to speak *for* the text *before* he can unfold its meaning. This ‘speaking for . . .’ is the very disclosure of a dialogue with the text and, in this way, the opening up of a space in which the text’s subject matter can be delivered in the first place. In a hermeneutic conversation the text speaks *to* the interpreter only once and because the interpreter speaks *for* the text. These two aspects of hermeneutic dialogue – a disclosive voicing of the text and an unfolding of the text’s meaning – run parallel to Nancy’s primary and secondary interpretations; thus in contrast to Nancy’s claim, we do find both forms of interpretation in Gadamer’s account of hermeneutic dialogue.

Nevertheless, a problem arises here. Although Gadamer emphasizes both aspects of hermeneutic dialogue, it is not clear how he reconciles the interpreter’s speaking for the

text with the ideality of meaning. Nancy's questions can be understood better if we relate them to this problem: Is the text an alienation of speech and meaning, or is it a demonstration of the ideality of meaning? This ambiguity makes it difficult to interpret what Gadamer means by participation when he writes that it is an 'indispensable presupposition for the interpreter to participate in [the text's] meaning'.³¹ Either this participation occurs as the interpreter's speaking *for* the text, thanks to which he or she shares in the subject matter; or it results *from* a subject matter *beyond* the boundaries of an actual hermeneutic dialogue with the text. Which comes first? Does the interpreter's 'speaking for . . .' come first, or the ideality of meaning? This ambiguity parallels the one we uncovered in the *Theaetetus*: if dialogue is primarily concerned with interpretation as understanding, then the subject matter and its interpretability must be given *outside* and *before* the dialogue, as a regulative principle which orients it. If on the other hand dialogue is primarily concerned with voicing or 'allowing to come to words', then the interpretation of a text is primarily a 'speaking on behalf of . . .' that brings the text to speak in order to open up a space for its meaning. It is only in this space that a conversation with the text about its subject matter can take place.

(4) Finally, Gadamer considers dialogue to be an infinite or endless exercise. To some extent this might come as a surprise, since he has a clear conception of the *end* of dialogue: the agreement, as the German word suggests (*Einverständnis*), between the interlocutors is the ultimate goal of dialogue. Such an agreement is not only the dialogue's goal, but also its closure as dialogue: the agreement becomes a 'monologue'. At this point the participants speak with one voice and one meaning about the subject matter.³² Such an agreement, however, can never be attained according to Gadamer, since it contradicts the individuality and finitude of human beings; thus the finitude of the discussion partners keeps the dialogue going and prevents it from becoming an inevitable progression towards such an end.³³ Finitude thus plays an ambiguous role: on the one hand it is a weakness or incapacity that prevents dialogue from reaching its goal. On the other hand it keeps dialogue going and gives rise to a rich unfolding of meaning through multiple interpretations. From this perspective finitude may be viewed as a productive *interruption* of a (possibly premature) monological agreement between speakers. Such a tension between the ideal, endlessly deferred goal of dialogue and the individuality of the participants is a recurring theme in Gadamer's thought. The continuity of dialogue as well as the readability and interpretability of a text are grounded in and ensured by regulative structures. This teleological structure serves to domesticate the interruptions, limit and enclose the discontinuities Gadamer requires in his full account of hermeneutic dialogue: the individuality of human beings, the alienation of the text, and the interpreter's speaking for the text.

death as the interruption of dialogue

In the opening pages of *Béliers* Derrida notes that dialogue 'will remain [. . .] foreign to my lexicon, as if belonging to a foreign language'.³⁴ Still, the way Derrida 'translates' dialogue betrays his particular signature. Returning to the point of view he adopted in *La pharmacie de Platon*, he approaches dialogue from the point of view of the death of one of the partners that interrupts dialogue from the beginning. He writes:

From the first encounter, interruption anticipates death, precedes death. Interruption casts over each the pall of an implacable future anterior. One of us two will have had to remain alone. Both of us knew this in advance. And right from the start. One of the two will have been doomed, from the

beginning, to carry alone, in himself, both the dialogue, which he must pursue beyond the interruption, and the memory of the first interruption.³⁵

Speaking for the other, Derrida insists, is not a type of speech that characterizes only this or that dialogue, e.g., the *Theaetetus*; on the contrary, it is the ultimate form of speech of every dialogue, because every dialogue between two living speakers anticipates the death of one of them. To understand why Derrida says this, it is helpful to contrast his comment with Gadamer's account of the end of dialogue. For Gadamer dialogue anticipates teleological agreement; this agreement is the end of the dialogue, and the dialogue should be understood in light of this end, even though it is never attained. Derrida reinterprets this 'end' and consequently places dialogue in a different light: a dialogue is irrevocably ended by the death of one of the discussion partners. Anticipating this end, dialogue is always already marked by the approaching death of one of them.

This leads to a different appreciation of the finitude and individuality of the partners. The singularity of voices in a conversation does not postpone or obstruct the arrival of what the dialogue anticipates, as is the case with Gadamer, but rather marks the dialogical character of this speech from the beginning: this is a speech in which multiple, irreducible voices speak. But the end of dialogue threatens this multiplicity: if one voice can no longer be heard due to the death of one of the speakers, the dialogue is interrupted. In Derrida's reading a monologue plays an entirely different role than it did in Gadamer's thought. For Gadamer it is the regulative principle towards which dialogue tends; ultimately, it is the unattainable fulfillment of dialogue. For Derrida, monologue is the threat that arises when one of the voices is lost and can no longer be heard. This danger makes us ask: How may a dialogue be continued after the death of one of the partners? The survival of the dialogue is not at all obvious or assured, since it must accommodate this fundamental interruption of living speech: the death of the other speaker.

To continue a dialogue after this interruption, it is necessary that the one who remains behind speaks on behalf of the other and 'carries the other's voice' in herself. How does Derrida characterize this speaking for the other? It is not a speaking marked by understanding or that strives after a correct interpretation of the other's opinions. The quest for meaning is at best secondary. Rather Derrida emphasizes the insurmountable difference between the singular voice of the other and its representation by the one who remains behind. This is the basic situation we discerned in the *Theaetetus*. The insurmountable difference not only upsets the philosophical primacy of understanding, it is also nestled at the heart of understanding itself. In his commemoration of Paul de Man, Derrida describes speaking for the other as follows:

It speaks the other and makes the other speak, but it does so in order to let the other speak, for the other will have spoken first. It has no choice but to let the other speak, since it cannot make the other speak without the other having *already* spoken, without this *trace* of speech which comes from the other [. . .] This trace results in speech always saying something other than what it says: it says the other who speaks 'before' and 'outside' it.³⁶

This quote gathers all the important aspects of speaking for the other. The other has spoken first but can no longer speak due to his death. This death is an irrecoverable loss. Therefore, 'speaking for . . .' works to let the other speak, while at the same time not forgetting this interruption. The characterization Derrida offers here indicates how this interruption is remembered. Speaking on behalf of the other is not an appropriation of the other's voice or of the other's opinions; instead it should be a kind of speech that cannot

account fully for what it says. Only in this way, by saying more than what it says, can it carry and keep the trace of other.

In the same text on De Man, Derrida juxtaposes such speaking with Heidegger's conception of speaking (*sprechen*) and language (*Sprache*). For Heidegger, the essence of language is saying as showing: saying brings to presence and shows the listener something. In contrast, Derrida suggests in line with De Man that language is fundamentally a *versprechen*, a promising. Speaking on behalf of the other *promises* the voice of the other, but it can never *fulfill* this promise and actually present the other. Playing with the German verb *versprechen*, Derrida notes that *sich versprechen* means to make a slip of the tongue. He writes: '[Paul de Man] implies that when the *sprechen* of speech is affected by 'ver-', it not only becomes a promisor, but it also becomes unsettled, disturbed, corrupted, perverted, affected by a kind of fatal drift.'³⁷ On the one hand, this corruption implies a contamination of the pure presencing and showing character of language by an element that cannot be reduced to the voice which speaks. As such, it is a condition for the possibility of speaking on behalf of the other. It constitutes also, however, the possibility of the contamination of the promising character of speaking for the other; although we may try to speak for the other, we can never be sure that we are not reducing the other's voice to our own. The *Theaetetus* gives us several examples of this kind of problematic promising: Theaetetus becomes a mockery of Protagoras when he promises to defend him; Socrates, while claiming to give the best defense of Protagoras, uses Protagoras's voice to expel the ghost of Protagoras.

Throughout his work Derrida has understood this contamination at the heart of language as dissemination. In *Béliers* Derrida again points to this disseminal experience his thought exposes. Here he explains it as an experience of the undecidable: due to the particular structure of the promise that never gives what it promises, it is impossible to decide who actually speaks when I speak for the other: is it I or is it the other, and when it is the other, who is he or she? In contrast to this disseminal experience, Derrida distinguishes a 'hermeneutic experience', which is an experience of language that experiences the meaningfulness of saying. This experience thus aspires to decipher and interpret the meaning of what is said. According to Derrida, such a hermeneutic experience guides Gadamer's thought; still in the example he gives, Gadamer's reading of Paul Celan's poetry, he notes that a disseminal experience is not foreign to Gadamer's reading. On the contrary: at the limits of his hermeneutic reading, Gadamer transgresses hermeneutic experience. Specifically, Derrida refers to an important remark Gadamer makes in relation to the question of who the 'You' is in Celan's poetry. This question is not marginal, given the fact that Gadamer has entitled his essay on Celan 'Wer bin Ich und wer bist Du?' Gadamer notes that 'the poem does not decide who the You is'.³⁸ Derrida remarks:

This indecision seems to interrupt or suspend the decipherment of reading [. . .]. Indecision keeps attention forever in suspense, breathless, that is to say, keeps it alive, alert, vigilant, ready to embark on a wholly other path, to open itself up to whatever may come, listening faithfully, giving ear, to that other speech.³⁹

This interruption of the meaning and the identification of the 'you' of the text implies that the hermeneutic intentionality remains unfulfilled. This interruption corresponds to an experience of its own, however, one that listens to the speech and the voice of the other. In this moment of indecision, in which the 'you' is not (yet) identified, the 'you' can give itself to be thought in yet another way. In this sense, Derrida can claim that this indecision is 'ready to embark on a wholly other path'.

Such indecision characterizes the phenomenon of speaking on behalf of an ‘other’. In the poetry of Celan, the ‘you’ is the other. The poem speaks *of* the other and speaks *for* this other. The undecidability and non-identifiability of the ‘you’ distinguishes the phenomenon of speaking for the other from appropriation and identification. By its indecisive speech, speaking for the other becomes a locus or a place in language in which the other can, perhaps, draw near without being reduced to a presence or a presencing.

This disseminational excess, exemplified by the death of Protagoras in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, interrupts the Socratic account of dialogue. We noted before that, after Socrates has depicted the possibility of Protagoras’s return, he tries to expel the ghost of Protagoras and says: ‘But we have got to take ourselves as we are, I suppose, and go on saying the things which seem to us to be.’⁴⁰ For Derrida, on the other hand, speaking for the other is never simply speaking for ourselves. It is never simply addressing oneself to the views of the other and restricting oneself to what one understands of the other’s viewpoints. Speaking for the other is never simply bringing the other’s views into accord with that which is intelligible and meaningful. It also preserves a trace of the other’s singularity and commemorates the death of the other. In light of this latter ‘end’ of dialogue, it speaks by ‘saying something other than what it says’.

Notes

1 Jacques Derrida, ‘La pharmacie de Platon’ in *La Dissemination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 69–198.

2 *Theaetetus* 167e–168b; translations taken from M. Burnyeat, *The Theaetetus of Plato*, with a translation of Plato’s *Theaetetus* by M.J. Levett (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1990).

3 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode, Gesammelte Werke* 1 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991), pp. 391–392.

4 Socrates uses the expression *hileoi tei dianoiai* meaning gracious spirit or good intention, and referring to a principle of charity at stake in the intention of the participant in a dialogue.

5 Hans-Georg Gadamer, ‘Reply to Jacques Derrida’ in Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer, *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* (Albany: SUNY, 1989), pp. 55–57; here p. 55. The expression ‘*eumeneis elenchoi*’ refers to the *Seventh Letter* 344b, where it reads ‘*en eumenesin elenchois elenchomena kai aneu phtonon erōtēsesi kai apokrisesi chrōmenōn*’, which is translated in the Loeb edition as ‘proving them by kindly proofs and employing questionings and answerings that are void of envy’. Other translations give ‘good will’ instead of ‘kindly proofs’. cf. John M. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), p. 1661. For Derrida’s remarks cf. Jacques Derrida, ‘Three Questions to Hans-Georg Gadamer’ in Michelfelder, *Dialogue and Deconstruction*, pp. 52–54.

6 *Theaetetus* 151e–152a. Hans-Georg Gadamer, ‘Mathematik und Dialektik bei Plato’ in *Griechische Philosophie III, Gesammelte Werke* 7 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991), pp. 290–312; here, pp. 295–297.

7 Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Sharing Voices’ in Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (eds.), *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context* (New York: SUNY, 1990), pp. 211–259; here, p. 227. The same quote is cited in Michael Naas, ‘Urania – The Only Real Muse? Conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy on the Plurality of Genres’ in Günter Figal (ed.), *Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), pp. 1–22; here, p. 20.

8 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University Press, 1981), pp. 147–148.

9 *Theaetetus* 164e; *Phaedrus* 275e.

10 *Phaedrus* 275d.

11 Cf. Naas, ‘Urania’, p. 16.

12 This duality of sharing and multiplication is captured by Nancy’s notion of *partage*, cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le partage des voix* (Paris: Galilée, 1982).

13 *Theaetetus* 164e.

14 Theodorus replies: ‘The younger had better answer. It will not be so undignified for him to get tripped up.’ *Theaetetus* 165a–b.

15 The distinction between controversy and philosophical dialogue as the distinction between tripping someone up and helping someone to his or her feet again immediately refers back to Theodorus’ concern: he was afraid to be tripped up. To see this, one should note that Socrates characterizes a controversy by the Greek verb for to trip (*sphallo*) – in a controversy, one ‘plays about’ (*paizei*) and tries to ‘trip up’ (*sphallei*) one’s opponent. Theodorus used to same verb to describe what would happen to him if he would speak on behalf of Protagoras. Subsequently, Socrates describes a philosophical discussion as an earnest enterprise in which an opponent is not tripped up, but rather helped on his feet again by pointing out to him the slips (*sphalmata*) that ‘are due to himself or to the intellectual society which he has

previously frequented' (*Theaetetus* 168a). Hence, rather than tripping him up, Socrates notes that Theodorus will be helped on his feet and freed from the slips that are due to his previous intellectual society, that is, Protagoras.

16 *Theaetetus* 168c.

17 *Theaetetus* 171d.

18 Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man. Revised Edition*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 38.

19 Cf. note 25 in Burnyeat, *Theaetetus*, p. 298.

20 *Theaetetus* 171d.

21 'L'hermèneia poétique [...] consiste dans l'énonciation sonore d'un tel logos.' Nancy, *Le partage des voix*, p. 67.

22 'L'hermèneia du dialogue déborde irrésistiblement la maîtrise que le dialogue pense et présente.' Ibid.

23 Naas, 'Urania', p. 20.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., p. 16.

26 Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), p. 155.

27 Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 396.

28 '[D]er Sinn des Gesprochenen ist rein für sich da.' Ibid., p. 396.

29 'Alles Schriftliche ist [...] eine Art entfremdete Rede und bedarf der Rückverwandlung der Zeichen in Rede und in Sinn.' Ibid., p. 397.

30 Ibid., p. 391.

31 Ibid.

32 For hermeneutic critique of the role played by *Einverständnis* in Gadamer's hermeneutics, cf. Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action*, pp. 386–387. Note that my explanation does not take Gadamer's use of the term 'monologue' into account. For him, a Platonic monologue (*Selbstgespräch*) is a dialogue (*Gespräch*) of the soul with itself. The monologue of the soul is a dialogue since the soul has yet not attained the unity of understanding. Hence, because of the finitude of human understanding, the conversation of the soul with itself is never finished and remains dialogical. Nevertheless, this description of the finite conversation of the soul with itself also refers to the unity of understanding and meaning as the goal and the horizon of this dialogue. As such, this finite conversation also refers to the unattainable monologue that is its horizon and to which it is on the way.

33 Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Vorwort zur 2. Auflage' in *Hermeneutik II, Gesammelte Werk 2* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991), pp. 437–448; here, p. 444. Jacques Derrida, *Béliers. Le dialogue ininterrompu. Entre deux infinis, le poème* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), pp. 38–39. Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Grenzen der Sprache' in *Ästhetik und Poetik I, Gesammelte Werke 8* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991), pp. 350–361; here, pp. 359–360.

34 Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen, p. 136.

35 Ibid., p. 140.

36 Derrida, *Memoires*, pp. 37–38.

37 Ibid., p. 98.

38 Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Wer bin Ich und wer bist Du' in *Ästhetik und Poetik II, Gesammelte Werke 9* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991), pp. 383–451; here, p. 406. Quoted by Derrida emphasizing 'does not decide', cf. *Sovereignties*, p. 145.

39 Derrida, *Sovereignties*, p. 146.

40 *Theaetetus* 171d.