Must Nietzsche be Incorporated into Hermeneutics? Some Reasons for a Little Resistance
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Abstract: The question of Nietzsche’s place in hermeneutics raises many questions: can Nietzsche’s thought itself be characterized as “hermeneutical” and to what extent, given that hermeneutics was only developed as such after him? Can and should hermeneutics, which until recently did not take his thought much into account, incorporate Nietzsche’s thought as a whole? Whereas a mutual fecundation will always be fruitful, this paper argues that one should resist a simple integration of Nietzsche into hermeneutics in light of their different understandings of truth, interpretation and nihilism. It thus becomes possible to also resist the postmodern and nihilistic understanding of hermeneutics. Aware of their differences, hermeneutics and Nietzsche will perhaps have more to say to one another.

“Nietzsche and hermeneutics” is certainly a title that names an extraordinary philosophical challenge. Assuming that everyone has a clear idea of what the words “Nietzsche” and “hermeneutics” signify, for this is surely far from evident in both cases, how are we to understand the “and” that is supposed to unite them? Fichte liked to say that the little conjunction “and” was the least philosophical word imaginable: a mere juxtaposition which establishes no intelligible connection, no deduction or justification, between the terms that it thinks together. It is indeed a word that can be understood in several different ways: a) one can understand it in the sense of a simple continuation or temporal succession (as in the expression “Kant and German Idealism”); b) one can also see it as expressing an emphatic and clear cut opposition (as in “capitalism and communism” or “Heidegger and Carnap”); but also, c) as a more natural or indeed explanatory connection (“Husserl and phenomenology” or “Einstein and the theory of relativity”). Is it in this last sense that we should understand the expression “Nietzsche and hermeneutics”?

There is a tension, and an eminently philosophical one, here that one can address from several different angles, with regard both to Nietzsche and to hermeneutics, and to what might possibly bring them together.
1. Is it necessary to “Nietzscheanize” hermeneutics?

In this last sense I alluded to the idea would be to show that the perspectives of Nietzsche and those of hermeneutics, although they may appear alien to one another at first sight, are indeed compatible, or at least, more modestly expressed, are capable of mutually enriching one another. But in this regard, one could, on the first hand, ask whether one can or needs to “hermeneuticize” Nietzsche? I borrow this expression from Jesús Conill who asked in one of his last books whether there was a hermeneutical Kant, or a Kant capable of being “hermeneuticized,”¹ that is to say, a Kant susceptible of being recuperated by hermeneutics or at least brought into harmony with hermeneutics. Jésus Conill had already attempted to show, in an earlier and indeed excellent book on Nietzsche and the Power of the Lie that there are indeed a number of significant connections between Nietzsche and hermeneutics.² The line that is pursued there suggests a rapprochement between these two universes of thought. But, on the other hand, we may also ask whether hermeneutics itself can or needs to be “Nietzscheanized.” This would imply that there are certain elements in hermeneutics itself that are capable of being understood in a more Nietzschean sense, or would benefit from being understood in this way. Here too Jésus Conill is quite sympathetic to such a “Nietzscheanization” of hermeneutics.

But who would gain from this “hermeneuticization” (of Nietzsche) or this “Nietzscheanization” (of hermeneutics)? Does hermeneutics need Nietzsche? Can Nietzsche help hermeneutics the better to be itself? And as for Nietzsche, would he become sharper and more penetrating if he were taken up into hermeneutics? I would not like say that this would simply represent an “urbanisation,” or domestication, of Nietzsche, but it might mean that his thought would lose something of its uniqueness, and doubtless much of its attraction for certain readers.

On this question, I am slightly more skeptical than my colleague Jésus Conill, even though I have learned a great deal from his writings in this regard. For it seems to me that hermeneutics today (and this was not the case thirty years ago) is already “Nietzscheanized” enough, and that it has little to gain by becoming more so. I am thinking here of the most recent versions of hermeneutical thought, which are effectively dominated, so it seems, by writers such as Richard Rorty or Gianni Vattimo who have wished to read hermeneutics in a relativistic sense (“there are no facts, there are only interpre-

Must Nietzsche be Incorporated into Hermeneutics?

107

must nietzsche be incorporated into hermeneutics? 107

tations”), and thus in an extremely nietzschean one. In the case of Vattimo, this “Nietzscheanization of hermeneutics” is quite openly admitted and promoted, for here we are dealing after all with an experienced interpreter of Nietzsche (and Heidegger). With this relativistic, even nihilistic, interpretation, Vattimo is seeking to give a Nietzschean twist to hermeneutics, if not exactly to erase the distinction between them.

I fully realize that there are certain illuminating rapprochements to be explored between Nietzsche and hermeneutics, and that dialogue is always a virtue, but for my part I would modestly suggest that it is time to put up some resistance to this Nietzscheanization, for it threatens to erase the important differences that do exist between these two forms of thought. Jacques Derrida had already sensed this in his book Writing and Difference, when he reclaimed Nietzsche and his celebration of the play of signs precisely in order to distance himself from all “hermeneutic” thought which intrinsically seeks to decipher sense and meaning. Derrida interpreted the opposition between Nietzsche and hermeneutics as an exclusive alternative, and he did so in order to defend the well-founded (so to speak) character of the Nietzschean practice of interpretation (namely the affirmation of the inevitably plural play of signs at the expense of attempts to decipher sense and meaning). While fully recognizing, therefore, that we can establish certain bridges between these two forms of thought, I believe that the Derridean idea of an irreconcilable antagonism here can indeed be maintained. But we can also do so precisely in order to defend hermeneutics against the potential Nietzschean drift we have mentioned. Without wishing in the least to deny the philosophical genius of Nietzsche, I would count myself amongst those who believe that there is good reason to resist the emphatic Nietzscheanization of hermeneutics, at least in the sense intended by Vattimo or Rorty.

In order to cast some light on the complex relation at issue here, I would like to begin by recalling some rather obvious facts (for I believe that there indeed facts and not only interpretations) regarding the place of Nietzsche in hermeneutics and the place of hermeneutics in Nietzsche.


2. The relative absence of Nietzsche in the hermeneutic tradition

In the first place, it is fairly evident that Nietzsche, sadly, does not form part, and never has formed part, of the classical tradition of hermeneutics, that is to say, of that *aurea catena* which links such names as Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. In chronological terms one could of course locate Nietzsche between Dilthey and Heidegger, but the majority of historians of hermeneutics take no real account of his contribution to *hermeneutics* (there are one or two exceptions here). The two most important representatives of contemporary hermeneutics, Gadamer and Ricoeur, have actually written very little on Nietzsche, even though they were quite familiar with his work. Ricoeur mentions him, along with Marx, Freud and Lévi-Strauss, as one of the great “masters of “suspicion,” but he spoke a lot more about these three authors than he did about Nietzsche. And Gadamer only published two essays, both of them very late pieces, on the subject of Nietzsche: “Nietzsche – the Antipode. The Drama of Zarathustra” (1984)\(^6\) and “Nietzsche and Metaphysics” (1999\(^7\), a piece that is actually more concerned with Heidegger than with Nietzsche). But neither of these essays would suggest that Nietzsche had ever been a real and significant inspiration for Gadamer. The matter is very different, of course, in the case of Heidegger, who dedicated a number of lecture courses, several essays, and two important volumes to the figure of Nietzsche (volumes which were to have borne the title “The Metaphysics of Nietzsche,” as the forthcoming publication of Heidegger’s correspondence with Otto Pöggeler reveals\(^8\)). But in his two-volume work which was finally called *Nietzsche* (1961) Heidegger specifically claims to have relinquished what he calls “transcendental and hermeneutic” thought for the sake of a thinking which addresses the history of being.\(^9\) And this is another way of saying that the Heidegger who draws a certain inspiration from Nietzsche does not from the perspective of “hermeneutic” thought, but that of the history of being. And moreover, in this history of being Nietzsche appears more as an adversary than as an ally as far as Heidegger is concerned: for it is Nietzsche who is supposed to have brought “metaphysical” thought to its completion, a mode of thought which is allegedly characterized by the will to dominate beings in their entirety, and expresses the thought of being in terms of “values” or the notion of the “will

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to power.” Whether this interpretation of the will to power is justified or not, it is clear that Heidegger, for his part, seeks to renounce this “will to will” for the sake of the “serenity” or “releaseament” (Gelassenheit) that belongs to the thinking of being, which lets being be instead of subjecting it to the dictates of the will. Nietzsche is not therefore a real ally for Heidegger. Moreover, Heidegger once confessed to those close to him: “Nietzsche hat mich kaputtgemacht” [“Nietzsche blew the daylight out of me”].

3. Nietzsche has little to say about hermeneutics, but a great deal about philology

If the hermeneutic tradition has largely ignored the figure of Nietzsche (as we indicated, there are exceptions such as J. Figl and J. Conill), this ignorance is effectively reciprocated, for Nietzsche himself rarely spoke of hermeneutics as such. It is true that hermeneutics did not enjoy any great visibility in Nietzsche’s lifetime. Things only really changed in this regard with the work of Heidegger and Gadamer. But as a specialist in classical philology, Nietzsche was certainly aware of its existence. In his introductory lectures on classical philology Nietzsche does in fact invoke hermeneutics at one point: “The method which consists in understanding and judging that which has been transmitted through tradition has two parts. Criticism is concerned with the transmission (Überlieferung). Hermeneutics is concerned with what has been transmitted (das Überlieferte).” Alan D. Schrift has rightly pointed out that Nietzsche is here following the terminology of the philologist F. A. Wolf (1759-1824), one of the founders of the disciplines specifically concerned with classical history and culture (klassische Altertumswissenschaften). These disciplines of criticism and hermeneutics preoccupied the writers who were particularly interested in the foundations of the philological sciences in the 18th and in the 19th centuries. Along with the theologians (like Schleiermacher, who was also a philologist), they were almost the only ones at that time who knew what “hermeneutics” meant. Criticism (ars critica) and hermeneutics (hermeneutica, or Auslegerkunst: the art of interpretation) were then the two auxiliary disciplines

of philology itself: criticism was the discipline concerned with establishing “critical” editions of the texts of classical antiquity, based on a critique of the relevant sources, that is, on a careful examination of the various strata of transmission, while hermeneutics was concerned with the way in which such texts, once they had been edited, should be interpreted, and more particularly with the rules of interpretation. It is in this sense that the young Nietzsche claims that criticism is concerned with the “transmission” (Überlieferung) of the texts, while hermeneutics is concerned with the content that has been transmitted (das Überlieferte). But this distinction does not seem to have any particular significance for Nietzsche, and it rarely recurs subsequently, so that there is effectively no significant use of the term “hermeneutics” in the corpus of his work.

But it is interesting, nonetheless, to note that Nietzsche did of course direct his attention to all the disciplines which involved hermeneutics up until the 20th century:

a) Theology. Not only was Nietzsche the son of a pastor, but the very first of his Untimely Meditations was specifically concerned with the theologian David Friedrich Strauss. Nietzsche was also familiar with Schleiermacher and his influence, and had originally planned to compose a (fifth) Untimely Meditation on the question of religion, a theme that he would of course often address in his subsequent works, and indeed in a truly visceral and critical manner that betrays a secret fascination with the matter.

b) History. As the great thinker of genealogy (who would strongly influence Foucault in this regard), Nietzsche wrote a good deal on the question of history, notably in the second of the Untimely Meditations on “The Use and Abuse of History for Life” (and one could say that he was here concerned with a “hermeneutical” perspective on the discipline of history). He would also have read something of the great historians of his time, such as Ranke and Droysen, who had themselves discussed the problems of interpretation and methodology that arose from the historical disciplines. The second Untimely Meditation effectively belongs, albeit in a highly critical way, in the context of such “meta-theoretical” reflections on the nature of history.

c) Classical philology. Here, as everyone knows, we are talking about the early background to Nietzsche’s education and development. If it is true that “origin is future” (Herkunft bleibt Zukunft), one could say that Nietzsche’s “ruminative” and suspicious mode of reading is a legacy of his early philological training. And Nietzsche willingly acknowledged this himself. If he employed the term “hermeneutics” only rarely, he spoke a good deal about “philology.” If we

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13 See Nietzsche’s rather dubious pun on his name in Ecce homo (KSA 6, p. 361) about German philosophers who are “all Schleiermacher” (“es sind Alles blosse Schleiermacher”): literally, “all weavers of veils.”
replaced the word “philology” with the word “hermeneutics” in Nietzsche’s texts, there is no doubt that we would find a mode of thought that possesses authentic hermeneutic significance. It is in this sense that one could speak of Nietzsche’s “silent” contribution to hermeneutics. I shall indicate the major features and the great themes of Nietzsche’s thought in this respect, but I shall do so from an essentially critical perspective in order to explain why it seems appropriate to offer some resistance at least to any attempt to incorporate his thought pure and simple into hermeneutic thought (a resistance that might well be shared by certain thinkers profoundly influenced by Nietzsche: apart from Derrida, one could think of Günter Abel,14 for example, who expressly seeks to dissociate his own extremely Nietzschean philosophy from the practice of interpretation that is characteristic of hermeneutic thought).

4. Perspectivism and interpretation

There are two issues which both Nietzsche and hermeneutic thought have repeatedly addressed. Nietzsche frequently asserts that the real can only be grasped from one perspective or another. Following Alan D. Schrift, one can distinguish between the meaning of “interpretation” and the meaning of “perspective” in Nietzsche’s work. The notion of perspective refers above all to the point of view which allows us to grasp the real under one aspect or another, but which escapes our own control. This perspectivism is at once physiological, since it would also already apply to our sensory apparatus, and instinctual, since it springs from the order of needs, affects, and emotions, but also socio-historical, since it derives from the culture, the education, and the prejudices that have shaped us, including the prejudices of philosophers. Here Nietzsche accomplishes an authentic operation of Aufklärung or “enlightenment,” and of genealogy, a project which reflects the atmosphere of scientism that was characteristic of the time, even if this is also a spirit which he sometimes criticizes (hence the ambiguity of the particular “enlightenment” which he pursues). The notion of interpretation, on the other hand, and here again we follow the scrupulous analyses of Alan Schrift, refers to the way in which we organize these perspectives, the form that we bestow upon them in relation to our beliefs, opinions, and theories. Thus interpretation signifies a more active and more conscious process than simple perspectivism. It also introduces a greater space of play, so to speak, that is specifically valued by Nietzsche: the more one is an artist, or a philosopher, the more one interprets.

The notions of perspective and interpretation are also familiar to classical and contemporary hermeneutics. In this sense the connection between Nietzsche and hermeneutics appears quite natural, but here one should also beware of attempting premature rapprochements between the two approaches. For in Nietzsche the notion of perspective usually refers to that of the perceiving subject or the interpreter himself. Now in classical hermeneutics, the notion of perspective principally refers to the point of view of the author (or of the text) that one is attempting to interpret. As I have indicated in my work *L'universalité de l'herméneutique* [The Universality of Hermeneutics], the notion of perspective here corresponds to the *Sehe-punkt*, but also the *scopus*, the intention of the text that is to be understood. The perspective lies in the object, in its *verbum interius*, rather than in the subject. The taking into account of the perspective of the author (or of the text), understood as the condition of objectivity, is also that which allows the interpreter to revise his or her understanding of the text. Thus there is always a possibility that the object can offer some “resistance” to the interpretations that we might wish to give of it. Now, if the notion of perspective is located solely on the side of the interpreter, one cannot really see what could govern these perspectives. Hence the abandonment, a fatal abandonment, of the idea of objectivity, even of truth, in Nietzsche and in many of his followers.

One might think that the contemporary hermeneutics of Heidegger or Gadamer is already quite Nietzschean in character insofar as it insists on the anticipatory structure (*Vorstruktur*) of understanding and on the unavoidable “prejudices” or pre-judgements (*Vorurteile*) of the interpreter. The critical intention of both writers has often been insufficiently appreciated in this regard, for they insisted on this point precisely in order to distinguish legitimate pre-judgements, which correspond to the matter itself, from illegitimate ones which fail to do so. The idea of correspondence is presupposed here. There are two well known texts which will suffice to confirm this. 1) In the celebrated passage in *Being and Time* that is concerned with the “circle of understanding,” Heidegger quite clearly says that

 […] our first, last and constant task is never to allow our fore-having (*Vorhaben*), fore-sight (*Vorsicht*), and fore-conception (*Vorgriff*) to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves.\(^{15}\) (My emphasis).

The purpose of interpretation (Auslegung) in Heidegger is always that of bringing into clear focus the anticipations or fore-structures of understanding (Verstehen) in order to see if they are adequate to the phenomena which “phenomenology” promises to present “just as they present themselves.” 2) When Gadamer expressly drew upon this passage in order to present his own hermeneutic conception in Truth and Method, the emphasis lies not so much on the unavoidable character of our pre-judgements as on the correction of these judgements which is always possible, desirable, and even necessary if we do not wish to remain simply enclosed within the circle of our pre-judgements:

Anyone who seeks to understand is exposed to pre-conceptions which cannot be sustained in the face of the things themselves. This is the constant task of understanding: to develop the right projections (Entwürfe) which are appropriate to the matter, projections which are anticipations (Vorwegnahmen) that can only be confirmed “by the things.”16

This corresponds entirely to the classical notion of correspondence (adaequatio). Gadamer underlines that our pre-judgements must preserve or sustain themselves, must stand the test of and be confirmed by the things themselves. Passages such as these are hardly likely to appeal to the more postmodern, to the more Nietzschean, writers and thinkers of our time. But this is what the texts of Heidegger and Gadamer say. Here therefore, so it seems to me, the idea of “Nietzscheanizing” Heidegger or Gadamer any further is entirely implausible. Moreover, when they develop their theories on the anticipatory structure which the interpreter inevitably brings to bear, in Being and Time or in Truth and Method, neither author has anything to say about any specific theses advanced by Nietzsche. In both cases the emphasis lies not on the universal perspectivism of all understanding, which does not appear to be a particularly critical notion anyway, but on the revision of our interpretations which is demanded by evidence of the things themselves.

5. Is truth a form of error?

This critical distinction is evident from the fact that neither Gadamer nor Heidegger ever attempted to renounce the notion of truth. It seems that Nietzsche, on the other hand, is willing to relinquish it when he says that truth is a kind of error without which a particular species of living beings would find it impossible to survive. If I am not mistaken, “truth” is the first word in the title of *Truth and Method*, and Heidegger never ceased to meditate, in his lectures and his books, upon “the essence of truth” (*Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*). It is very hard to speak of any abandonment of the idea of truth (or of the question of essence) in this connection. Heidegger certainly defends a “new” conception of truth, namely as “unconcealment” (also a very classical idea), or as *aletheia*. The originality of this notion of *aletheia*, even if the conception can already be found in the idea of ontological truth in Augustine and Aquinas, lies in the fact that it is always an unconcealment of being or the things themselves: being which emerges (*physis*) and manifests itself. Heidegger puts the matter in this way precisely in order to challenge and disturb the conception of truth which is happy to treat truth as a prerogative of human knowledge or of the subject (which is what Nietzschean perspectivism does): prior to any true or cognitive relation to things, there is already an appearing, a self-disclosure (*Unverborgenheit*) of Being itself. It would be too hasty to regard this simply as a challenge to the traditional idea of truth. Heidegger does not really criticize the notion of truth as correspondence, he merely seeks to show that it is derived in character insofar as it presupposes an even more original appearing of being, which Heidegger tries to understand by recourse to the notion of *aletheia* (and the meaning of this word evolves in Heidegger’s work: while in *Being and Time* truth consists in “exposing” or unveiling the things that are covered up, which constitute the object of truth – thus always in the name of an ideal of adequation – in the later Heidegger this veiling and unveiling belongs to the very event of being. We are aware of the harsh judgment which Ernst Tugendhat has pronounced, not without some justice, on this later conception of truth17). Thus Heidegger does not deny that the truth of knowledge, which certainly exists, should be understood in the sense of adequation. But above all: Heidegger presupposes this sense whenever he speaks of the destruction of traditional metaphysics. One can only “destroy” or dismantle a tradition because one judges that it is inadequate and that a better one must be developed. Truth as correspondence is thus maintained in hermeneutic thought.

For his part, Nietzsche hopes to bid farewell to the idea or the fable of truth. But can truth be nothing but an error? What strikes one here is that

this very idea of error or fable presupposes the notion of truth that it affects to criticize. One can only speak of “error” (or distortion) in the name of a conception of truth as adequation. This is also true when one criticizes the notion of truth as adequation: one can only denounce this conception because one judges it to be, precisely, inadequate. Hermeneutics appears to be more consistent when it upholds the idea of adequation. The kind of Nietzschean hermeneutics that would renounce this idea (Vattimo) thus finds itself entangled in a glaring self-contradiction, and that in two ways: 1) it maintains with the utmost seriousness that the conception of truth as adequation is inadequate, and 2) it presents its own conception as being, itself, just and adequate.

5. There are facts and not only interpretations

With regard to the Nietzschean idea that there are no facts but only interpretations, an idea in terms of which certain thinkers have attempted to define hermeneutics, I have always thought that it can be refuted by evoking the simplest of facts: the capital of Spain is not Copenhagen but Madrid, I have never visited Saturn, a molecule of water contains two and not three atoms of hydrogen, this person is suffering from cancer, and there are no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. We find that this idea of adequation is presupposed even in our most ordinary and everyday activities and dealings: if we want to know whether it is raining or not, we just have to look out of the window. One could easily multiply such examples. Of course, some of these claims are fallible in character: it could, theoretically, transpire one of these days that one does find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, but such a discovery would simply reveal that our initial conception was mistaken and inadequate.

In his debate with Gianni Vattimo, René Girard claims that the declaration that “there are no facts, but only interpretations” is, in the best case scenario, a jest with which Nietzsche wished to provoke the more positivistic of his philological colleagues who sometimes forgot that their facts were often the result of interpretations. He had a good point, but it too presupposes the idea of adequation: the philologists are often wrong to believe that

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18 R. Girard, “Non solo interpretazioni: ci sono anche i fatti,” in: R. Girard-G. Vattimo, *Verità o fede debole. Dialogo su cristianesimo e relativismo*, edited by P. Antonello, Massa: Transeuropa, 2006, p. 82: “This remark springs from a brilliant polemic aimed at the old positivists who were quite convinced they were providing immortal scientific truths every time they opened their mouths. But Nietzsche’s *boutade* certainly cannot function as a theory of interpretation: to possess nothing but interpretations is the same as not having any at all.”
they are concerned solely with facts, when they are only bearing witness to their own interpretations.

The radical perspectivism of Nietzsche suggests that any meaning that we understand derives solely from the subjectivity or the will that “creates” this meaning. But is this really true? Do we really constitute the objects that we interpret? If this were true, we could interpret all objects in every possible way, which is evidently impossible. In attributing all creation of meaning to subjectivity, Nietzsche takes his place within the horizon of modern thought and its characteristic nominalism, which claims that the world in itself has no meaning in itself, that this meaning can only be “invented” by the human mind itself. For Kant this process of bestowing meaning sprang in the first instance from the \textit{a priori} categories of the mind that confers form upon the (disordered?) manifold which sense perception supplies to us. Nietzsche individualizes this form-giving activity and ascribes it instead to the particular subject and its sensory apparatus. The “nominalism” here consists in denying that there are any essences or realities in the order of the objects themselves, for these essences or these regularities are supposedly established by the processes of thought alone. In this case reality itself would be reduced to the blind impact of physical masses which possess meaning only for the observer who recognizes or, according to Nietzsche, introduces such significance. The sense or meaning of things can only come “from outside,” from the subject or its will to power (we shall return to this term shortly).

But is it true to claim that there is no meaning in the world, and that any meaning it seems to possess is introduced by ourselves? I have always thought that this view involves a strange overestimation of the contribution of our own feeble subjectivity. Why is it so hard to recognize that the meaning that we seek to understand is already the meaning of the things themselves? For there is indeed an order and a becoming of the things themselves that our thought can strive to understand: orange trees do not blossom in the same way as maples, and there are some intrinsic differences between ants and elephants that do not depend on my thought alone. When I study the growth of an orange tree or an elephant, it is not I who “creates” the object in question, I find it in the world and try to understand it. This is equally true of the interpretation of texts, where, in contrast to a Nietzschean prejudice, one cannot say anything one likes while raising a claim to truth. It is with good reason therefore that Betti has recalled the old hermeneutic adage “\textit{sensus non est inferendus, sed efferendus}.” For Nietzsche, as for Derrida, both heirs of modern thought in this respect, this meaning is always inserted or introduced into the world and into the object that I understand and that I constitute in every sense. This is the acme of nominalism.
6. Is there nothing but the will to power?

If Nietzsche is ever prepared to accept anything resembling a law of reality itself, then it is the will to power (*der Wille zur Macht*). In French one is never quite sure whether to translate the German word *Macht* by “puissance” or “pouvoir.” Since the word “pouvoir” evokes certain undesirable political connotations (the power of the state or “power is right” for example), French interpreters have preferred the rather more aesthetic sounding “puissance” (“potency”). The will to power is an idea that has given rise to the most varied interpretations that are too numerous to be discussed here. Heidegger’s interpretation is not the least famous of these, but it is a very audacious one. He regards the will to power as Nietzsche’s response to the question concerning the essence of being (whose mode of existence would be the “eternal return”): being therefore is simply the will to power, and nothing else (*nichts ausserdem*). This is a very strong interpretation, one which allows Heidegger to locate Nietzsche within a continuous story of the “metaphysics of will,” that is to say, within the project of modern thought which seeks to take possession of beings and to extend its sway over the latter, but only at the cost of falling into a forgetfulness of being. Nietzscheans have naturally reacted unfavorably to this reading, but they have usually tried to counter it by emphasizing that Nietzsche had always criticized metaphysical thought (as if Heidegger were unaware of this) and had never been interested in the question of being (as if having nothing to say about that which is were a matter of distinction for a philosopher). Müller-Lauter responded to Heidegger in a very instructive article in which he pointed out that Nietzsche never spoke of the will to power in the singular, but only ever in the plural: there is no will to power in itself, but only a struggle between wills to power.19 Here again, I have never really understood why this would be sufficient to refute Heidegger’s reading, but the fundamental question I would really like to see discussed is this: is it true to say that the totality of reality can be reduced to a struggle between various wills to power? One might think here of the struggle for survival of which Darwin had spoken. But it is rather amusing to note that Nietzsche specifically criticizes Darwin, notably in the *Twilight of the Idols* (“Observations of an Untimely Man,” no. 14) when he claims that it is not true that the strongest survive, for the weak are also highly proficient in this regard… And his *Genealogy of Morals* effectively ascribes the creation of morality to the resentments of the weak.

The first question that I am tempted to raise here is this: is there really nothing other in reality but the “weak” and the “strong”? Is it necessary to

view the world through this particular prism? It is surely permitted in any case to see in this a reductive, rather Machiavellian and highly elitist vision of the real. No one, of course, will deny that there is some truth to this, and that our world, and not only our political world, is penetrated by power struggles of one kind or another. All of this exists, and it pollutes the world of human relations, but what becomes of solidarity, friendship, love, and assistance in this vision of the world? In all of this Nietzsche will doubtless see nothing but the tactics of the “weak.” But in that case I am tempted to say: long live weakness!

The question of truth returns at this point: who can say that Nietzsche’s conception is right? Is this not also a vision of the world that can also be defended like any other, whatever it may be? But if it must be capable of being confirmed by experience, this is because some kind of adequation with respect to reality is indeed possible. And if Nietzsche advances certain reasons or arguments in favor of his doctrine, this is because he believes it to be true, or to conform with reality. And this would again refute his radical perspectivism.

This would seem to explain why there are certain texts of Nietzsche in which he appears to have “revoked” his thesis regarding the will to power. Thus in relatively recent times interpreters have often discussed the following posthumous fragment of Nietzsche:

Exoteric esoteric.
1. Everything is will against will
2. There is no will at all.
1. Causalism.
2. There is no such thing as cause and effect.
All causality is psychologically based on the faith in intentions;
Now the effect of a single intention is indemonstrable.
(the causa efficiens is a tautology of the finalis from the psychological point of view)\(^{20}\)

An intriguing fragment, since Nietzsche here distinguishes an exoteric doctrine from a more esoteric, more secret, form of thought that could well be his own (?). According to his exoteric doctrine (= 1), everything is simply “will against will,” which would imply a form of “causalism.” But according to his more esoteric thought (= 2) there is “no will at all” and “nothing such as cause and effect.” In each case one can understand what Nietzsche wants to say, for both theses can be discovered in his texts. If the doctrine of the will to power (= 1) is generally familiar in broad terms, it is certainly not difficult to find texts where Nietzsche questions this “metaphysical” project, as we

might describe it, insofar as it seeks after some cause or common denominator of reality. In fact Nietzsche frequently criticized (doubtless because it was an “inadequate” vision) our “faith” in the relation of cause and effect as a will that seeks to refer everything back to the subject. If we can see why Nietzsche wanted to grasp reality as will to power, one can also understand why he could want to renounce such a project (for it would represent a new theory concerning reality which claimed to be true.)

We are confronted here with the problem of the coherence of Nietzsche’s thought. This is no small challenge for Nietzschean studies. One of the most seductive solutions to this aporia is to abandon the search for some ultimate coherence in Nietzsche’s thought (in the awareness that any such search would still be metaphysical...), and to emphasize the more aesthetic (or “ironic”) implications of his work, expressly welcoming a Nietzschean conception of life as literature (Nehamas) that mocks the principle of contradiction. This is a rather attractive solution in this postmodern age, where the principle of contradiction may appear as an overly oppressive logical constraint. But those who defend this approach should not forget that this promotion of the aesthetic, based on the idea that “existence can only be justified aesthetically,” remains a metaphysical proposition, that is to say, a response to the question of the meaning of existence, of the meaning of that which is. Otherwise this approach loses all its relevance and significance. An overly “literary” reading of Nietzsche, which is certainly possible, thus threatens to rob him of his philosophical depth. This scope is truly revealed when Nietzsche evokes the question of nihilism.

7. The hermeneutic response to nihilism

Nietzsche spoke powerfully of the death of God in a famous aphorism from The Gay Science (no. 125, “The Madman,” a text that reveals Nietzsche’s familiarity with the Psalms, and notably Psalm 14 that inspired Saint-Anselm at the beginning of his Proslogion.) Contrary to a widespread Deleuzean prejudice, this death is not a source of celebration for Nietzsche, since he expressly presents it as a murder which leaves us bereft of any horizon, and the full significance of which we have not yet grasped. This event, he adds, is still unterwegs, still underway, for its effects are only just beginning to make themselves felt.

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21 F. Nietzsche, Human, All Too Human, I, 18; The Gay Science, no. 127, et passim.
It is not surprising that the perspectivist and thus constructivist vision of Nietzsche should lead to the death of God and of every form of the sacred, even if his invocation of Dionysus preserves a nostalgia for the latter. But can we really live in this predicament? Nietzsche emphasizes that it leaves us inconsolable (GS, The Gay Science, no. 125: “Wie trösten wir uns, die Mörder aller Mörder? Das Heiligste und Mächtigste, was die Welt bisher besaß, es ist unter unseren Messern verblutet – wer wischt dies Blut von uns ab?”). If this has a liberating aspect to it, for we are dealing with the death of an idol, Nietzsche recognizes all the paralysing pain and suffering which it involves. It is this which leads him to speak of the “nihilism” of our culture. In this regard, Nietzsche enjoys an undoubted philosophical relevance and hermeneutic significance. I underline this because the major thinkers of contemporary hermeneutics, such as Gadamer and Ricoeur, perhaps did not say enough about the specter of nihilism when they underscored the historical character of human understanding.25

In this sense Heidegger revealed a better grasp than they did of the challenge that is represented by Nietzsche’s provocation and the rise of nihilism.

Is hermeneutics itself capable of responding to this challenge? I think it is high time that it attempts to do so, and in this it should gratefully accept Nietzsche’s challenge. Hermeneutics, at least as I understand it, is in a position to question the foundations of Nietzschean nihilism, by attacking 1) his constructivism, and 2) his idea that nihilism would imply the end of every sort of foundation, value, and truth.

1. For Nietzschean constructivism, and modern constructivism generally, meaning can only be an invention or construction which has everything to do with our interpretations of the real. But is it actually true to say that we know the world only through our own interpretations? Why not recognize, as the wisdom of common sense suggests, that we can also know and receive the world as it is? Is this not indeed the primary function of our knowledge and our language? Assuredly, modern philosophy, and Nietzschean philosophy, has been happy to regard knowledge and language as mediating elements that would “prevent” (!) us from understanding the world as it is. But must we see language only as a “distortion” of reality? One can only speak of “distortion” because we presuppose that the world can indeed be known as it is, and

How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? The holiest and the mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us? [...] Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it? [...] This tremendous event is still on its way [noch unterwegs], wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men [...]”

that the distortion itself can be recognized as such. The choice here seems to me quite clear: is language a barrier that screens us from the world, or is it the bridge, or rather the light, which allows us to understand the world? Nietzsche opts for the first solution, with all the *aporiae* this entails (self-contradiction, the impossibility of saying anything confirmable about the world). Hermeneutics finds it more plausible to regard language as a mediating element (or *medium*) which allows us to speak of being. Here, then, the phrase “Nietzsche and hermeneutics” expresses a very precise alternative for me, a choice between two conceptions of meaning.

2. This critique of Nietzschean and modern constructivism allows us to offer a certain response to contemporary nihilism. The idea of nihilism supposes that there are no longer any values, nor any truths, that are binding. There might be a form of intellectual presumptuousness which declares that we can only speak of truth, or value, if it answers to ultimate and almost Cartesian norms of justification: because there are no ultimate norms grounded in such a rigorous manner, there can no longer be any norm or truth as such. But this is to cling to a highly Cartesian, and highly questionable, conception of truth and foundations.

For there are two ways of understanding the notion of “foundation.” a) In the first place, there is the kind of foundation which involves *mathematical evidence*: a foundation which functions as a first and absolutely certain axiom from which everything else derives with utmost rigor and cogency. When the nihilism of Nietzsche proclaims that there is no longer any value or truth, it presupposes a truth which would be grounded in this way. But this is not the only manner in which the idea of ground or foundation can be understood. b) There is also an *essential or immemorial kind of ground* on which the whole of life rests, which does not involve an ultimate foundation, but which bears and supports us nonetheless. Gadamer approached this ground when he asked if it was necessary at all costs to found that which has always sustained us (*bedarf es einer Begründung dessen, was uns immer schon trägt?*). Here one may think of the hopes and expectations that support and affect us, but also of that ground which is furnished by friendship, understood in the truest sense of the word. When someone lives through a difficult moment, something that is spared to no one, he or she may rely on a friend, or friends, who offer their assistance and support. Certainly, this is no “mathematical” foundation, for if friendship constitutes the very basis of our life in common, there is absolutely nothing axiomatic about it. Everyone knows that friendship can be broken, disappointed, betrayed etc. But it still furnishes a ground for life as a whole, and one would be quite wrong to claim that it has ceased to exist in the era of nihilism. And no one would be so pedantic as to try and find an ultimate foundation for friendship. One might also think here of the example of faith, which may not appeal to all Nietzscheans, but they should still be
able to understand its meaning. When an individual recognizes that faith is the ground of his entire life, that he commits himself to it, he knows perfectly well that there is no question of a mathematical foundation here. It would be quite ridiculous to wish to find anything of the kind. But faith, or a strong conviction of a different order (loyalty, fidelity to one’s country, to one’s convictions, to one’s obligations) can nonetheless constitute an extraordinarily solid and reliable ground. I cannot think of any person without one.

The purpose of these examples is simply to recall in an era which believes, wrongly, that human life is utterly bereft of any ground or foundation, that “nothing any longer holds,” and that everything is subject to the passing fancy of the individual, that these grounds do indeed exist, although they have perhaps been obscured by a certain, overly scientific or mathematical, way of conceiving the notion of the ground of truth. For no life is thinkable without this ground that may be described as essential and immemorial, which precedes and renders possible all thought and all life. To rediscover this ground might well be one of the fruits of the confrontation, whether cordial or polemical, between Nietzsche and hermeneutics.

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