

***Words Underway:***  
***Continental Philosophy of Language***

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## Walker Percy, Phenomenology, and the Mystery of Language

The idea that language is what most distinguishes the human being as a species has been around for a very long time. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, describes the human being as *zōon logon echon*, the animal that has language (*logos*).<sup>1</sup> Aristotle thought the capacity for language so important to human life that no person could truly flourish in their being without actively putting it to work through reasoning and deliberation. Indeed, despite the well-known antagonism between philosophers and rhetoricians of ancient Greece, it is worth remembering what the two sides of the battle had in common: both philosophers and rhetoricians alike believed strongly in the power of speech to rightly guide both individual and city.

This way of understanding the human being seems to have been about as intuitively right for the philosophers of ancient Greece as it is today intuitively wrong for us moderns. Whenever I have introduced this idea to students in philosophy classes, I have unfailingly heard the same objections. They will inevitably have heard of scientific studies about how animals communicate with one another, so they conclude that an old thinker like Aristotle must have come to a faulty conclusion based on the fact that he did not have access to these scientific studies. Birds clearly send songs to one another; other birds understand and respond to those songs. Humans have even trained some animals to communicate with them. Chimpanzees use hand signals. Even pet dogs are often trained by their human companions to understand a range of different words. The idea, then, that language is the most distinctively human trait seems thoroughly unconvincing.

From this perspective, the very idea of *philosophy of language* makes little sense. After all, if one wants to understand how language works, then it seems that one ought to just observe what happens — mentally or behaviorally — when a person learns a word, hears and understands a sentence, successfully makes a request of another, and so forth. On this model, the measure of successful communication in each case would be an effect observable independently of the linguistic world: Did the dog go fetch when it heard the human's command? Did the request for salt successfully yield the salt? In other words, it seems that we can understand how

language works just fine by approaching it as an observable process that can be broken up into a series of observable events — some that we observe within the subject, others that we observe in the world outside of the subject. Understood along these lines, it seems like the tools of science are perfectly adequate for the task while philosophy is unnecessary for it.

But is this model appropriate for thinking about everything that human beings do with language? As I write these words, for example, I know that there will be no readily observable effects, no products, the appearance of which serves as a clear measure by which to gauge the success of what I am writing. Hannah Arendt was right on this point: the activity of human speech in this sense is not about the fabrication of products at all.<sup>2</sup> What fuels a writer is something else. A writer would like to say something that has not been said — to prompt their readers to think about things in a new way. They would like to contribute to the development of new understanding. As you read this paragraph, for example, what I hope is happening is not just what transpires with a dog when it goes to fetch upon hearing a human's command. No, the task of understanding for the reader is clearly different. So is the task of listening to another in conversation. We humans delight in those conversations that take us to unexpected places, just as we delight in the book that says something different each time we read it. It would seem to be this sort of activity that we participate in as linguistic beings that requires a *philosophical* examination, since the theoretical model sketched above is not capable of accounting for it.

Yet it should not be surprising that it was perhaps a writer, not a specialist in the discipline of philosophy, who expressed the need for a philosophical examination of language most powerfully. In addition to his novels, the Louisiana writer, Walker Percy, wrote dozens of theoretical essays over the course of his lifetime examining the subject matter of language. He studied major developments in linguistics and the philosophy of language taking place in the twentieth century, an undertaking that, on his own account, became a “mild obsession” of his during the 60's and 70's. But it was Percy's craft as a writer that especially motivated his interest in the topic. As a writer, Percy experienced a persistent sense of wonder about something that we usually take for granted. This is simply, as he puts it, “what happens when people talk, when one person names something or says a sentence about something and another person understands him.”<sup>3</sup> As a novelist, of course, Percy very well might have refrained from such investigations — submitting to the muse of writing without questioning the grounds and the ends of his own craft. Or, he could have limited his readings to the field of literary theory, focusing on language only in

its literary mode. Instead, for decades he diligently examined many of the most important contributions being made to linguistics and the philosophy of language during his lifetime.

As many commentators have pointed out, Percy found the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce particularly illuminating and drew a good deal from Peirce's semiotic theory in his own writing.<sup>4</sup> But Percy was also one of the first major intellectual figures in the United States to recognize the importance of insights from Continental philosophers exploring the nature of language. Percy's essays on language reference not only figures like Rudolf Carnap, Noam Chomsky, and Alfred Tarski but also Ludwig Binswanger, Martin Buber, Martin Heidegger, Søren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, and George Steiner. This was not typical for the time. Much like today, philosophy of language during the 60's and 70's was associated almost exclusively with Anglo-American philosophy. In this context, his engagement with the Continental tradition is notable. Moreover, Percy's essays on language manage to capture some of Continental philosophy's most important insights into what is distinctive about the human's linguistic activity, what is essential about the role of language for our existence, and what it is that keeps us from recognizing these things today. In this chapter, then, I would like to introduce these three key insights by way of Percy's writing and the early phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, which was influential on Percy.

### **The Peculiar Life of the Linguistic Being**

That language plays an essential role in our existence should be obvious. We are constantly engaging with language in some way or another. We do this not only when we are speaking, listening, writing, or reading, but even in the silence of our thoughts, when we are in dialogue with ourselves. Moreover, most of our social interactions are mediated by language in some way – be it in formal ways as in written laws and verbal contracts or in informal ways as in the customary verbal exchanges that we engage in everyday with our friends, family members, coworkers, neighbors, and so on. Yet, as Percy explains, this situation does not make it easier for us to understand the integral role of language in our lives. “The difficulty,” he writes, “is that it *is* under our noses; it is too close and too familiar. Language, symbolization, is the stuff of which our knowledge and awareness of the world are made, the medium through which we see the world. Trying to see it is like trying to see the mirror by which we see everything else.”<sup>5</sup> Percy

devises several schemes for this purpose. In his essay, “The Delta Factor,” for example, he invites us to view human behavior through the eyes of a Martian who has come to earth to study human beings. The first thing that would stand out to the visitor about our behavior, Percy explains, is how constantly we humans are involved with linguistic activity in some way.

Imagine the Martian’s astonishment after landing when he observes that earthlings talk all the time or otherwise traffic in symbols: gossip, tell jokes, argue, make reports, deliver lectures, listen to lectures, take notes, write books, read books, paint pictures, look at pictures, stage plays, attend plays, tell stories, listen to stories, cover blackboards with math symbols – and even at night dream dreams that are a very tissue of symbols.<sup>6</sup>

Now, Percy’s description of human behavior makes two things clear. First, the description is clearly meant to show how frequently all of us are engaged in linguistic activity of some kind. We are engaged not only when we are producing statements as physical utterances but also when we are absorbed in a book, when we are dreaming, when we are engaged in abstract symbolization, and so on. In each case we are interpreting, using, and in some cases helping to formulate signs with shared meanings. Indeed, one is even “speaking” in this sense when one chooses to keep silent, say, as an expression of defiance or frustration. The sheer amount of time that we spend engaged in such activity already suggests that language plays a distinctive role in our lives, and this is something – as Percy points out – even a Martian could understand very plainly about human behavior from observation alone. What may be harder to notice, though, is that we are actually engaged in linguistic activity toward a variety of ends. We “traffic in symbols” in order to deepen our understanding, to articulate formal truths, for amusement, for humor, for artistic expression, for the sake of dialogue with others, and so on. This is one way in which our relationship to language is distinct – one way that the human can be said to be *zōon logon echon*, the linguistic being, and not just a creature for whom language serves some single, limited purpose.

Indeed, many of these ends that we put language to depend on language and would not exist without it. Take the activity of scientific inquiry. When we think of scientific inquiry, we are likely to focus on the interaction between a researcher and objects of research, say, in the

natural world. We tend to see language as epiphenomenal in this context – something needed to coordinate among researchers and to communicate results but not constitutive for the inquiry in any way. However, as Helen Longino has argued, the objects, models, and concepts with which science deals are inevitably social; they emerge from social discourse.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as Charles P. Bigsby explains, “The truth conditions for the human sciences lie within those conditions of language, essentially spiritual, which constitute knower and known, self and other, man and world. This is the great theme of the *logos* itself.”<sup>8</sup> Scientific pursuits only take place, then, in a world where there is language. Likewise, there could be no pursuit of formal validity without a formal language like mathematics or logic in which to construct proofs. Similarly, there would be no artistic expression or humorous performances without a range of symbols – that is, signs with socially shared meanings – from which to draw. All of these pursuits draw from the social activity of language and would be incomprehensible without it. In light of this, we can see that language is not just a tool that can help us accomplish a number of ends; it is also, importantly, a source of ends itself.

This is why, for Percy, it is important to consider what a transformative event language acquisition is. The tendency, of course, is to think about what happens in this process as the gradual acquisition of a set of tools and to imagine that the person learning a language is motivated to acquire these tools because they are instrumental to their existing goals. Certainly this is the most popular way of describing the rationale of language acquisition to adult language-learners. For example, a common rationale given for teaching college-level reading and writing is that it provides a set of skills that are beneficial for communicating in the job place, in public discourse, in our interpersonal relationships, and so on. The message to students, then, is that working on college-level reading and writing is valuable only as a means – a means to perform more effectively in these spheres of action. A similar message is often given to students about the value of learning a foreign language. If language is itself a source of ends though, these arguments leave something important out. They fail to do justice to the transformative and creative effect of reading and writing.

This transformative effect is even clearer when we consider what happens when a child starts to acquire language. No doubt part of what the child does in this process mirrors what the dog does when it learns words like “sit” and “heel.” They learn to respond to certain verbal cues, and in the case of children, to give verbal cues that will typically produce one kind of response.

Such learning is assisted by mirror neurons that are present in human and non-human animals alike.<sup>9</sup> The acquisition of language in this sense is important to the integration of the child into their community. In this way, it is instrumental for their survival. But the child is also undergoing something even more profound. They are entering into a veritable *world* of language. What does this mean? To talk about the development of language as the entrance into a new world in this sense means that, with this development, there is a fundamental transformation not only in how we think about the world, but even more fundamentally, in what appears to us and how it appears. Language's function becomes ontological rather than instrumental. Arendt likens this transformation to a "second birth."<sup>10</sup> Echoing this sentiment, Percy writes, "Once man has crossed the threshold of language and the use of other symbols, he literally lives in a new and different world."<sup>11</sup>

This development has no parallel in the non-human animal world. It distinguishes the human being from other animals and makes it so that many of the concepts and models that we use to understand the lives of other creatures fall short in explaining the human mode of being. As Percy explains:

It, this strange new creature, not only has an environment, as do all creatures. It has a *world*. Its world is the totality of that which is named. This is different from its environment. An environment has gaps. There are no gaps in a world. Nectar is part of the environment of a bee. Cabbages and kings and Buicks are not. There are no gaps in the world of this new creature, because the gaps are called that, *gaps*, or *the unknown*, or out there, or *don't know*.<sup>12</sup>

It is this, then – the emergence of a linguistic world – that is distinctively human. When one has a linguistic world, one pushes for everything to have a place and meaning in language. In children, this is manifest as the desire to know the name for all things. In adults, it is the desire to expand one's understanding of this world through language — through the conversations one has, the books one reads, the jokes one hears, the letters one writes, and so on. The one who "has language" [*logon echon*] in this sense – the linguistic being – has it in a qualitatively different way than does a trained chimpanzee or, to be sure, a programmed computer.

This distinction is lost on us today for the most part. Because of a tendency today to equate reality strictly with that which the empirical sciences can explain, contemporary thinking rarely recognizes the linguistic world of the human being or its ontological function. If language is recognized, it is only the objective works produced through linguistic activity — bridges built, homework assignments submitted, medical discoveries made, computer programs designed. What goes unnoticed and unanalyzed, by contrast, is the linguistic world that leads us to these products, without which none of these things would matter or even exist. A study, for example, on the correlation between meditative practice and certain brain wave readings only matters given a number of discourses already in circulation, for example, about the problems of stress and the importance of self-care.

Again, it is easy to overlook how fundamental discourse is in our lives, though, since, as Percy explains, it is the medium through which our understanding is constantly taking place. To bring this medium into focus, it is helpful to think about how a person's life changes with the acquisition of language. A special case in point is the account that the famous writer, Helen Keller, gives of her own experience learning how to speak as a young child who, due to illness, had lost both her vision and her hearing in her second year of life. Percy is particularly fascinated with Keller's account of her experience and at times attributes some of his most important insights into the question of language to Keller's story. What fascinates Percy is, of course, the nature of the famous breakthrough Keller experienced as an eight-year old child — a development that fundamentally changed the form of her existence and the role of language in it. Percy points out that, prior to this event, Keller had already possessed the ability to communicate basic messages with others. She could signal for a piece of cake when she wanted a piece of cake. She could use a set of symbols as tools to accomplish certain ends. It was not until that fateful day in 1887, however, that Keller developed a relationship to language that would eventually allow her to read, to lecture, to have conversations, and eventually to become an eloquent, sophisticated, and prodigious writer and activist — engaging with the important moral and political questions of the day. According to Keller's own account, the decisive moment occurred during a routine teaching procedure. Anne Sullivan and Keller were outside, and Sullivan, Keller's teacher, ran the young girl's hand under a stream of water from a spout, spelling the word "water" into her other hand. Keller recalls a "misty consciousness" coming upon her, revealing to her "the mystery of language." "I left the house eager to learn. Everything



had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with new life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me.”<sup>13</sup>

For Percy, we can learn about what is distinctive in the human relationship to language by better understanding what happened with young Keller that day. He explains:

Here in the well-house in Tuscumbia in a small space and a short time, something extremely important and mysterious had happened. Eight-year-old Helen made her breakthrough from the good responding animal which behaviorists study so successfully to the strange name-giving and sentence-uttering creature who begins by naming shoes and ships and sealing wax, and later tells jokes, curses, reads the paper, writes *La sua volontade e nostra pace*, or becomes a Hegel and composes an entire system of philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, this new relationship to language transformed Keller’s relationship to the world. Words were no longer just tools for communication; they became sources of meaning and understanding. The world changed too; it became a world whose meaning and truth now hinged upon the human practice of language.

It is easy to see from this example how empowering such a development is. To the young child who has not yet undergone this kind of transformation, the world is what it is, an ahistorical field of presence. Of course, it is hard to try to imagine for us now as linguistic beings what life was like without language. Try to imagine for a moment living in a world without any books, newspapers, or websites; without movies and television shows; without private conversations or even any inner monologue. If you’ve ever travelled to a place where the language is totally foreign to you, recall how strange this experience can be, and now imagine that, on top of this, you also lacked the ability to reflect on this strangeness through talking, writing, or even any discursive form of thinking. It should be clear that such a transformation would fundamentally alter our relationship to the world we live in. Thus, it is not surprising that, in her description of her breakthrough, Keller writes of a “new sight” that came to her. What she could now “see” was the world coming into “new life” through speech.<sup>15</sup>

Because of her unique situation, Keller underwent this transformation later and more abruptly than most of us. Still, in an important sense, it is something we all undergo. By acquiring language, we come to inhabit a new kind of world – a world that is constantly revitalized (brought into “new life”) through speech. As soon as a child starts to learn the names for things, an empowering transformation begins to take place. The child has a frenzied interest early on in learning as many names as possible. We find the same interest evident in Keller’s own account when she explains the insight that motivated her newfound eagerness to learn: “Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought.” Recall Percy’s description of the world of the human language user which, unlike the non-human animal, is a world without gaps. Keller had a basic vocabulary to use before this transformation occurred. What she did not have was a sense for how, with language, the world formed a meaningful totality, nor how, as a participant in that language, she herself would play an active role in articulating that totality. Indeed, Keller now came to understand that the world she had taken for granted, including her inner world, would expand and change as she came to participate in meaningful linguistic activity with others. It was this discovery that so thrilled Keller, making everything “quiver with new life.”

Now, few of us will ever have the chance to undergo the kind of experience with language that Keller did. The ontological function of language is, as we have seen, typically neglected in the models by which we commonly understand the world today. Still, in times of crisis we may reconnect with this ontological function. This helps explain the counterintuitive tendency in the modern age for some people to feel more existentially at ease in times of crisis than in situations of leisure. It helps us to unravel the sort of puzzle that Percy has in mind when he asks: “Why is a man apt to feel bad in a good environment, say suburban Short Hills, New Jersey, on an ordinary Wednesday afternoon? Why is the same man apt to feel good in a very bad environment, say an old hotel on Key Largo during a hurricane?”<sup>16</sup> The answer: in times of crisis, we must exercise our linguistic capacity in order to make sense of things. We have no choice but to become active participants in the interpretation of our lives. As it turns out, this is quite fulfilling.<sup>17</sup> Percy knew this well. He entered medical school as a young man but after contracting tuberculosis was forced to take time away from his training to convalesce. During this time, Percy found himself asking questions he never had before. Unable to focus his attention on medicine, he turned to reading philosophy and existentialism in particular. In doing

so, he found a new sense of purpose. Percy never returned to medical school. In his own life, then, he had come to understand that the well-being of a person consists not simply in the proper functioning of the human body as an organism but in the exercise of one's capacity to wonder and to transform one's world through inquiry, that is, in one's capacity as a linguistic being. Thus began his quest to find philosophical treatments of language that could account for this need – a need that he found largely repressed in the modern age.

### **Heidegger, Language, and World Disclosure**

But Percy was not the only thinker during the twentieth century to be fascinated with the ontological significance of the human's capacity for language and disturbed by how little recognition of this capacity exists today. Both ideas were also essential to the development of phenomenology and in particular to hermeneutic phenomenology, which started to emerge in the earlier part of the twentieth century in response to some of the same cultural changes that motivated Percy's own writing. Indeed, as I will suggest here, phenomenology was especially influential on Percy's own analysis of what distinguished the human capacity for language and why this mattered.

Phenomenology first emerged as a philosophical movement early in the twentieth century. It emerged at that time primarily as a critique of certain Enlightenment ideas that, while once radical, had become entrenched dogmas of modern thought. Phenomenologists worried specifically about the modern tendency to attempt to understand the world in isolation of the subject and the subject in isolation of its world – a tendency it saw as complicit with the decline of humanistic inquiry.<sup>18</sup> The idea, still popular today, that good science requires an empiricism purged of any trace of the inquirer is the legacy of this modern tradition. Following in the steps of eighteenth-century philosopher, Immanuel Kant, phenomenology rejected pure empiricism as a model of knowing by showing how all experiences necessarily conform to certain laws of subjective experience. What is most certain, phenomenologists claim, is not the object considered independently from consciousness, as empiricists would argue, but the object as it is *for consciousness*.<sup>19</sup> But phenomenology is not simply a subjective affair, exchanging an emphasis on *objects* of experience for an emphasis on the *subject*. For phenomenology, just as raw sense data is an abstraction, so too is the idea of a purely subjective representation. As

Edmund Husserl explained it, all consciousness is consciousness *of* something. It is never merely subjective. This is the basis upon which the phenomenologist claims, as Husserl did, to go “back to the things themselves.”<sup>20</sup> For Husserl’s successor, Martin Heidegger, this is paramount. It is by examining the structures of human existence, not setting them aside, that we can best proceed with ontology. And yet inquiry of this kind had become devalued in the modern age. Deprived of its ontological and cognitive import, consciousness had become regarded as merely subjective.

It is in this context that Heidegger produces his major contribution to phenomenology, *Being and Time*. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger aims to bring to light several characteristics of human existence typically overlooked by philosophers and scientists alike in the modern age. For example, Heidegger argues that it is the unique characteristic of human existence that our being is, for us, a question. It is not, for us, immediately settled what we are or what we should be. Our existence [*Dasein*] is an issue for us. We can see already in this what must have been inspirational for Percy. As he laid in bed, coughing and fatigued from the tuberculosis, on leave from medical school, Percy became a question to himself. Moreover, for Heidegger, like Percy, such crisis situations, while rare, can reveal to us the true nature of our mode of being – the being for whom being is an issue.

Of course, we are not always in such a crisis. For the most part, this characteristic of our existence manifests itself in a very different way, namely, in our tendency to immerse ourselves in a world full of meaning, allowing this meaning to function in our lives tacitly, pre-reflectively as a guide for our thoughts and actions. This is what Heidegger has in mind when he talks about the existential structure of “being-in-the-world” [*In-der-Welt-sein*]. By immersing ourselves in a world of meaning, we act on our fundamental concern for our being. We are not simply indifferent. Immersed in the world of the university as a university professor, for example, I act with concern for the well-being of my students and with concern for the campus as a space for learning. I encounter my students as fellow inquirers in the quest for deeper understanding, and, unless something happens that requires me to act otherwise, as trustworthy. If, on the other hand, I am immersed as a student in a martial arts class, my cares and concerns are different. Things disclose themselves differently too. My intention in this case is to master the technical skills that I am learning and, if sparring, to avoid submission or injury. Here I encounter my training partners as trustworthy too but also as competitors. In these ways, the worlds I am immersed in shape not only what I care about but even the basic way in which things appear to me. This is

what Heidegger means when he says that to have a world is to have things “show themselves in our concern for the environment.”<sup>21</sup>

For Heidegger, then, this is the way that things show themselves, as he often says, “proximally and for the most part” [*zunächst und zumeist*]. They are disclosed to us not through an act of mental synthesis but in the context of our practical dealings and as meaningful in the context of a particular world or, as Heidegger puts it, as “ready-to-hand” [*zuhanden*].<sup>22</sup> In my examples above, the others I encounter appear to me *as* trustworthy, *as* needy, *as* competitors, etc. depending on the world in which I encounter them. While the familiar claim of the empiricists, then, is that beings appear as they really are only when we set aside our practical interests, Heidegger argues that beings appear to us, proximally and for the most part, through such pre-reflective acts, and that such appearances constitute “understanding” [*Verstehen*] in its most basic sense.<sup>23</sup>

In claiming that there is understanding at work in the basic ways in which things are disclosed to us, Heidegger is not arguing that I intentionally make a deliberate choice to immerse myself in these ways. Understanding, in Heidegger’s sense of the term, is not a voluntary, intentional action. “When we have to do with anything,” Heidegger says, “the mere seeing of the Things which are closest to us bears in itself the structure of interpretation . . . .”<sup>24</sup> I certainly had choices when it came to becoming a university professor and practicing martial arts, but I am not consciously making choices about how these different roles and others like them deeply affect my interpretation of the things. I find myself thrown into these roles, roles that carry with them implicit ways of interpreting the world. Heidegger uses the term “thrownness” [*Geworfenheit*] to refer to the existential structure whereby one is immersed in a world prior to any choice or reflection.

It is in the context of understanding and interpretation that language first arises as a topic in *Being and Time*. In his exposition on “being-in as such,” Heidegger explains that verbal assertions are a mode of interpretation, that is, a way of explicating understanding. Assertions thus derive their sense from the particular ways in which we dwell in the world with others. If I hear someone tell me, “The hammer is too heavy,” Heidegger explains, what I discover is not a representation but “an entity in the way that is ready-to-hand.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, what is disclosed to me in hearing such speech belongs to the world in which I dwell with others. When I pass my colleague in the hall in late November and she whispers, sighing, “two more weeks,” I

know that this means she has grown exhausted from the work of the semester and is looking forward to the holiday break. Likewise, if I am grappling with a partner at the gym and they give me two quick taps on the shoulder, I immediately know to stop. Should my colleague have tapped me twice on the shoulder outside of my office, it would be unclear to me what she meant to say. These examples go to show that, when we interpret language – verbal or non-verbal, we do so always in the context of shared worlds of practical concern. Like other worldly things we encounter, such expressions are ready-to-hand.<sup>26</sup>

As Lawrence Hatab points out, Heidegger’s point here also holds true for the way that we learn language.<sup>27</sup> As young children, we learn language as we learn to dwell in worlds of concern with others, orienting ourselves with others toward different practical tasks. A child learns to say “I love you” as a social ritual that makes up part of the practical activities that they are now learning to take part in. They become accustomed to hearing the phrase in moments of tenderness and to reciprocating with those family members who say it to them. Likewise, they learn to call everything that is above them “sky,” so that when they hear the phrase “look up in the sky,” they know to look up. Proximally and for the most part, then, words are what Hatab, following Heidegger, calls “indicative concepts,” that is, concepts that “point back to factual experience for their realization.”<sup>28</sup> They are, moreover, as Heidegger says, “equiprimordial” with understanding.<sup>29</sup> We become immersed in a world of practical concern as we learn how to communicate with others about things in that world.

It should be clear from these examples, though, that the worlds of practical concern in which we dwell do not exist independently from linguistic practices. Our linguistic practices help to shape the worlds we dwell in. The social ritual of saying “I love you” doesn’t just express a naturally given emotion but allows people to participate in a shared world of meaning. Language’s role in our lives is thus constitutive, creative. As Charles Taylor argues, “possessing language enables us to relate to things in new ways . . . and to have new emotions, goals, relationships . . . . Language transforms our world, using this last word in a clearly Heidegger-derived sense.”<sup>30</sup>

It should not be hard to see, then, given his interests, how Percy would find in Heidegger’s *Being and Time* a model for thinking the peculiar nature of the human being and the special role that language plays in human existence. Indeed, Percy cites Heidegger’s discussion of Dasein’s worldhood in *Being and Time* as instructive for his own thinking. “There is

Heidegger,” Percy writes, “who uses the word ‘*Dasein*’ to describe him, the human creature, a being there. The *Dasein*, moreover, inhabits not only an *Umwelt*, an environment, but a *Welt*, a world.”<sup>31</sup> This conceptual distinction thus proves to be extremely helpful to Percy in his quest to understand what is distinctive about the human, that is, how language operates largely behind the scenes of reflection to set forth those worlds of meaning that are so familiar to us.

### **The Loss of the Creature**

Heidegger’s analysis in *Being and Time* also helped Percy to better recognize the different attitudes that people take toward the disclosive power of language. At any point, we *could* relate to language as Keller did in these reflections – as a way to bring the world constantly into new life. Often, however, we do not. In his essay, “The Loss of the Creature,” Percy describes the tendency that we have to stop examining something closely as soon as we find the term that is functionally appropriate for it, that is, as soon as we are able to file it away in whatever inventory is appropriate for that practical, social context. He describes, for instance, a student who walks into biology class to find a set of materials on his desk: a scalpel, a probe, a syringe, and one “specimen of *Squalus acanthias*.” Here the student is encouraged to see the creature before him, a dogfish, as the experts see it and only as relevant to the practical task at hand. The name used by experts functions as a means of directing attention to that task. Through this process, though, Percy argues, we lose the creature itself, just as the lexicon of botany can make it so that the tree that we laypeople encounter “loses its proper density and mystery as a concrete existent, and, as merely another specimen of a species, becomes itself nugatory.”<sup>32</sup> The point applies not only to objects in nature but to human artifacts as well. Regarding his own writing, Walker Percy himself once remarked that the term “Southern novelist” — a term often used to describe the man behind his work — depressed him, “conjuring up as it does a creature both exotic and familiar and therefore boring, like a yak or a llama in a zoo.”<sup>33</sup>

Percy’s point is not that we should abandon the use of scientific, technical, or categorical terms. We should, however, be aware of the way that such terms can discourage us from interpreting a thing in new ways or finding new meaning in it. Indeed, whenever we start to explore something — be it a new body of literature, a new tree, or a new place, Percy suggests, we should be prepared to struggle against the tendency to use such terms in a way that restricts

all thought to a given practical context. We must not let the designation of Percy's work as "Southern literature" lead us to assume, without further investigation, that its primary purpose is to charm readers with nostalgia and wit, just as we ought not let the identification of a creature as "a specimen of *Squalus acanthias*" reduce the creature to an object whose purpose is to be classified, dissected, and reclassified again for scientific research.

The danger of the ready-to-hand speech into which we are immersed, then, be it "Southern novelist" or *Squalus acanthias*, is that it can rid us of the need for further interpretation and thus thwart the development of further understanding. In his essay, "Naming and Being," Percy explains:

The symbol 'sparrow' is, at first, the means by which a creature is known and affirmed and by which you and I become its co-celebrants. Later, however, the same symbol may serve to conceal the creature until it finally becomes invisible. A sparrow becomes invisible in ordinary life because it disappears behind its symbol. If one sees a movement in a tree and recognizes it and says it is "only a sparrow," one is disposing of the creature through its symbolic formulation.<sup>34</sup>

Percy's concern here is inspired by Heidegger's observation that, although we are that being for whom being is a question, our immersion into world of concern provides us with the ongoing opportunity to flee from this fate. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger makes clear that it is largely through a certain use of language that Dasein attempts this flight. One no longer relates to language in terms of its potential to open up a new world and to give us new ends. Instead, it is leveled down, reduced to what Heidegger calls "idle talk" [*Gerede*].<sup>35</sup> With idle talk, a conversation becomes simply an opportunity to reassert what is already familiar and commonly said. Thus, it is to retreat from the disclosive power of language – not by refraining from speech but by limiting the power of speech.<sup>36</sup> Speech is taken to be only a means of referring to what is already known, and thus what is known independently of speech. Idle talk, Heidegger explains, "not only releases one from the task of genuine understanding, but develops an undifferentiated kind of intelligibility, for which nothing is closed off any longer."<sup>37</sup>

Heidegger's classic example of a subject matter that often elicits idle talk is death. In talking about death, it is common for people to make gestures recognizing its inevitability,



treating it as a most familiar and well-documented event (e.g., “we all know that eventually we will die”). What this obscures though is the fact that nobody can simply relate to their own death in just this way — as an event that will occur. When one speaks of death this way, one is indeed attempting to turn death into what is familiar — an event that occurs like other events and that can be accordingly anticipated and prepared for. Thus, in subjecting the topic of death to idle talk, one is attempting to flee precisely from being that creature for whom being is a question. Although the case of death is paradigmatic in many ways, it is not the only subject matter in connection with which idle talk arises. There is a danger of idle talk present whenever one encounters an account that has the potential to challenge the horizons of their understanding. For example, in hearing about some disturbing event taking place in the world — say, state-sanctioned murder in the Philippines, it can be tempting to invoke common ways of minimizing the level of concern that is due, say, by remarking on how commonplace such violence is in the world. This too is what Percy has in mind when he speaks about disposing of the subject through its symbolic formation.

Through their craft, writers like Percy work against this levelling, striving to make the world and the language that discloses it to us something thought-provoking. This is what Heidegger has in mind when he tells us that the writer “experiences his poetic calling as a call to the word as the source, as the bourn of Being.”<sup>38</sup> The writer deploys language in a way that allows not only for the discovery of what is ready-to-hand in the world but also for heightened attunement to the role of language in the development of human understanding. Rather than complete absorption in the disclosive power of language, then, Percy’s craft offers an opportunity for us as readers to reflect on and be more deliberate about what it means to be a linguistic being — the *zōon logon echon*.

For both Percy and Heidegger, the stakes of preserving this attunement to language are great indeed. Without it, after all, meaning becomes disconnected from the process of human inquiry, deliberation, and interpretation. The meaning and the ends of our existence become independent of these basic social activities. As a result, the world we live in presents us with fewer and fewer questions. We too become less of a question to ourselves and, in turn, less capable of understanding what we, as human beings, need to flourish. This is the crisis we find ourselves in in the modern age. As Percy puts it: “Man knows he is something more than an organism in an environment. . . . Yet he no longer has the means of understanding the traditional

Judeo-Christian teaching that the ‘something more’ is a soul somehow locked in the organism like a ghost in a machine. What is he then? He has not the faintest idea.”<sup>39</sup>

This predicament is even more familiar to us today than it was to Heidegger and Percy. One need only think about the lack of support for rigorous public debate or for humanities and arts programs in American schools to know that the problem has worsened in the United States over the last few decades. We find ourselves more now than ever lacking any sense for what is distinctive about the human’s capacity for language. Yet, this crisis is also an opportunity. After all, it was only in the modern age that Percy could have come to grapple with the mystery of what is distinctive about human language as he did. Likewise, it was the gradual disappearance of humanistic inquiry from science, culminating in the twentieth century, that prompted the development of hermeneutic phenomenology – a development that, as we will see, set the stage for Continental philosophy of language thereafter. Just as Percy’s own illness as a young man gave him the occasion to question the source of meaning in his own life, then, the past century has challenged philosophers in a similar way. In the next chapter, we will look more closely at the treatment of language in hermeneutic phenomenology before moving on to examine later developments in twentieth-century Continental thought.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1098b) argues that it not the capacity for survival or perception that is distinctively human but the capacity for action in accordance with *logos* (language, speech, reasoning).

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 173-84.

<sup>3</sup> Walker Percy, “The Delta Factor,” in *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York: Picador, 1975), 14.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, three essays focusing on the Peirce-Percy connection in the recently published volume, *Walker Percy, Philosopher* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): “Percy, Peirce, and Parsifal: Intuition’s Farther Shore” by Stephen Utz, “That Mystery Category ‘Fourthness’ and Its Relationship to the Work of C.S. Peirce” by Stacey E. Ake, and “Diamonds in the Rough: The Peirce-Percy Semiotic in *The Second Coming*” by Karey Perkins.

<sup>5</sup> Walker Percy, “The Mystery of Language,” in *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York: Picador, 1975), 151.

<sup>6</sup> Walker Percy, “The Delta Factor,” 13.

<sup>7</sup> See Helen E. Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990) and Helen E. Longino, *The Fate of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Charles P. Bigger, “Logos and Epiphany: Walker Percy’s Theology of Language,” in *Critical Essays on Walker Percy*, ed. J. Donald Crowley and Sue Mitchell Crowley (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall and Company, 1989), 56.

<sup>9</sup> Rizzolatti and his colleagues at the University of Parma first discovered mirror neurons while studying macaque monkeys. They observed that certain neurons fired when the macaques were observing behavior just the same as if they were engaged in the behavior directly. Rizzolatti later extended this study of mirror neurons to show their role in human language. Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia, *Mirrors in the Brain: How Our Minds Share Actions and Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176.

<sup>11</sup> Walker Percy, “Is A Theory of Man Possible?,” in *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Picador, 1991), 119.

<sup>12</sup> Walker Percy, “The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Human Mind,” in *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Picador, 1991), 289.

<sup>13</sup> Walker Percy, “The Delta Factor,” 35.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Keller was insistent on using metaphors of vision and rejected the idea that they were inaccessible to the blind. In *The World I Live In*, she responds to the policy of the *Matilda Ziegler Magazine for the Blind* to omit stories and poems that make allusions to visually stunning scenes that would, according to the magazine, only “serve to emphasize the blind man’s sense of his affliction.” Keller responds: “That is to say, I may not talk about beautiful mansions and gardens because I am poor. I may not read about Paris and the West Indies because I cannot visit them in territorial reality. I may not dream of heaven because it is possible that I may never

go there. Yet a venturesome spirit impels me to use words of sight and sound whose meaning I can guess only from analogy and fancy. This hazardous game is half the delight, the frolic, of daily life. I glow as I read of splendors which the eye alone can survey.” Helen Keller, “The World I Live In,” in *Helen Keller: Selected Writings*, ed. Kim E. Nielsen (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 32.

<sup>16</sup> Walker Percy, “The Delta Factor,” 4.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of this theme in Percy’s novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome*, see Micah Mattix, “Walker Percy’s Alternative to Reductive Scientism in *The Thanatos Syndrome*,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 40, no. 3 (2011): 147–152.

<sup>18</sup> Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

<sup>19</sup> It was G.W.F. Hegel that first introduced this argument that twentieth-century phenomenologists then later retrieved. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 53.

<sup>20</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations, Volume 2*, ed. Dermot Moran (London: Routledge, 2001), 168.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 95.

<sup>22</sup> Despite the point of convergence between Heidegger and Husserl discussed above, it should be noted that this claim that things are given to us, first and foremost, through our practical dealings and not through an act of mental synthesis differentiates Heideggerean from Husserlian phenomenology. For a discussion of this point, see Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 188. The matter of how to assess the adequacy of understanding in this sense is an ongoing subject of debate. Gilbert Ryle, for example, argues that, although this familiarity with things comes first in the order of knowing, it does not have logical priority, because it is not necessarily valid and could turn out to be false. See Gilbert Ryle, “Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*,” in *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Michael Murray (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), 59. Ryle presents this as a point of disagreement with Heidegger, but, as Dreyfus explains, Heidegger does not present this kind of understanding, which Dreyfus calls our “preontological understanding of being,” as the complete and final picture of knowledge. See Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 19-21. As will become clear

beginning in the next chapter, it becomes increasingly important for certain figures in the Continental tradition to articulate what must supplement this pre-reflective understanding in order for it to be complete.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 190.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 196.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 204.

<sup>27</sup> Lawrence J. Hatab, *Proto-Phenomenology and the Nature of Language: Dwelling in Speech, Volume 1* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> Lawrence J. Hatab, *Proto-Phenomenology and the Nature of Language*, 15.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 203.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 37.

<sup>31</sup> Walker Percy, "The Fateful Rift," 289-90.

<sup>32</sup> Walker Percy, "Metaphor as Mistake," in *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York: Picador, 1975), 63.

<sup>33</sup> Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, 153.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 211-14.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Inkpin argues that Heidegger has a deep ambivalence about language in *Being and Time*: "While recognizing its constitutive role in everyday understanding of the world, [in his discussion of *Gerede*] he also clearly insinuates that the understanding it constitutes lacks something important." Andrew Inkpin, *Disclosing the World: On the Phenomenology of Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 70. I am arguing here, however, that, for Heidegger, while our immersion into language establishes the danger of idle talk, the two are distinct in one important sense. Our immersion into language is the condition for the pursuit of understanding, while idle talk impedes the development of this understanding.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 213.

<sup>38</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Nature of Language,” in *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 66.

<sup>39</sup> Walker Percy, “The Delta Factor,” 9.

## **On Linguistic Trauma and the Demand to Write: Continental Philosophy and the Literature of the Holocaust**

In the last two chapters, we considered the unique role that language plays in human existence. We saw how, for human beings, language is not just a tool used for designating things in the world but fundamentally shapes the kind of world that we live in. The profound changes that happen to our lives as we acquire language are a testament to this point. Language becomes for us a source of understanding, of meaning, and of new ends. We, in turn, become the kind of creature who seeks out these discoveries, what I have referred to as a linguistic being. This transformation is profound. It is also ongoing. We do not just become linguistic beings at some point in childhood; we continue this *becoming* for the rest of our lives. In turn, the language we come to inhabit is not simply a set of unchanging ideas overdetermining our understanding of the world. For no act of speech, however eloquent or precise, ever has the final word.

When philosophers in the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology, then, insist on the need for interpretation as a basic feature of texts, it is this understanding of language that they have in mind. For hermeneutic phenomenology, understanding a text often requires the bi-directional movement described in the last chapter. It requires that we project beyond what is immediately given in the text and that we then put the meanings that emerge from this projection to the test. In this way, the activity of reading mirrors what occurs in genuine conversation. Indeed, such projection is, for this tradition, a regular feature of our everyday lives. When engaged in genuine conversation with a friend, we project ourselves ahead of the individual words and sentences they utter in order to think along with them. We project some understanding of what it is they are talking about and what, in general, they want to say. Likewise, when we read a book, we do not just read to receive information from the author but to think along with them about the topic at hand. In these ways, language regularly solicits from us what Gadamer calls understanding [*Verstehen*].

We know, of course, that not every instance of language that we encounter solicits us in this way though. Much of it is immediately intelligible to us. But are there certain kinds of

writing that tend to engage us in the hermeneutic process of understanding? Beyond this, are there specific life experiences that compel a person to engage in such writing? Now on this last question, it would seem that phenomenology itself has little to say. The question is, after all, about the worldly occurrences that might compel or cause a certain kind of writing to occur. For Husserl, though, phenomenological inquiry must bracket consideration of causal questions,<sup>1</sup> a point that Heidegger reiterates when he insists on a strong distinction between ontological and ontic inquiry and relegates all anthropological, psychological, and biological investigations into human behavior to the latter category.<sup>2</sup>

The question naturally arose, however, to twentieth-century Continental philosophers as they began to grapple with the literature of the Holocaust. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, after all, many survivors turned to writing to bear witness to what had transpired when friends and family members suddenly went missing in the night or when they themselves labored and starved in the Nazis' camps. Continental philosophers, coming out of the phenomenological tradition, read these works and recognized that these texts in particular placed a demand upon all those who read them. The texts left behind were, after all, often cryptic and self-effacing. Their authors struggled to find adequate language for what they experienced, as they struggled to discover any coherence or meaning in the tragedy. Some mark this failure in their writings, and some speak about it in their own commentary on their work. Moreover, the sense of failure for many writers was heightened by memories of intense linguistic alienation in the camps or as a survivor in post-war Europe. Present in the writings of Robert Antelme, Paul Celan, and Primo Levi, these patterns have drawn the interest of a number of Continental philosophers, including Gadamer, Maurice Blanchot, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Sarah Kofman, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Francois Lyotard, each of whom have written on what compelled this writing and on the social and philosophical response that it demands.

In this chapter, then, I want to explore how some of these interpretations of Holocaust literature helped to shape Continental philosophy of language. For although the historical moment that is marked by this body of literature is undoubtedly singular, the philosophical response to the literature of the Holocaust also helped to shape Continental philosophy of language for decades to come. As I will argue here, it encouraged Continental philosophers like Blanchot and Derrida to consider why survivors of traumatic experiences so often turn to writing as a way of recovering meaning in the wake of trauma and what role others have, as readers and



listeners, in this process of recovery. Moreover, in examining the suffering that can occur when, through trauma, one becomes alienated from language, we will begin in this chapter to explore the vulnerability of our linguistic being and how attention to such vulnerability helps bring to light the essential role of language in human flourishing.

### **The Writing of Trauma as a Way of Understanding**

Nobody over the past century did more than Maurice Blanchot to bring a serious and sustained reflection on literary writing to philosophy. Besides the novels he wrote himself, Blanchot produced several major works on the subject of writing. Notable among these are: *The Work of Fire* (1943), *The Space of Literature* (1955), *The Infinite Conversation* (1969), and *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980). Some of these volumes contain the kind of argumentative essays that are the standard for the genre of philosophy. Their adherence to a standard philosophical style of argument, for example, makes *The Space of Literature* and *The Infinite Conversation* his most accessible works for a philosophical audience. Others, like *The Writing of the Disaster*, are comprised of fragments and thus are less accessible to traditional philosophical readers. All of these works, however, are reflections on modern literary experience and, in particular, on the experience of those writers in the modern era, like post-Holocaust authors, for whom language serves a redemptive function.

In *The Space of Literature*, for example, Blanchot examines Franz Kafka's experience of the need to write as recounted in his diaries. Like other modern writers that Blanchot discusses (like Mallarmé, Valéry, and Rimbaud), Kafka had a tremendous sense of urgency about writing and spoke about it often as a means essential to his survival and sense of place in the world. In one entry from 1914 that Blanchot discusses, for example, Kafka makes note of the life-changing events quickly transpiring around him as the war intensifies. In his journal entry, Kafka notes that, with the development of the war, he is more determined than ever to write. As he puts it: "I will write despite everything, at any price: it is my fight for survival."<sup>3</sup> Kafka's words here capture well what interests Blanchot throughout his life — the experience of an urgent *demand to write* and the question of what gives rise to this demand. It is from the standpoint of this question that Blanchot will examine the phenomenon of modern literature and, with it, the literature of the Holocaust.

Why then, generally speaking, do we write? I mean writing here as an intransitive verb – the kind of writing that fascinates Walker Percy, which, as we saw in the first chapter, led him to marvel at what a peculiar creature the human being is. I mean the kind of writing that we do that appears to us, as we write, to be its own end. Why do we do this kind of writing? It is common for us today to think about this demand as the need a person might have to express something personal, that is, to bring something that is privately weighing upon them out into the open to be shared with others. Indeed, this is usually how we understand the point of writing a journal. However, Blanchot suggests that the impetus of writing for the modern writer is something quite different, even opposite, from this. The modern writer writes, Blanchot says, so that the world might recede and fall silent.<sup>4</sup> They do not embark on a journey inward. They do not write to know themselves better or to express their personal experiences. The point is not about representing the immediate “I” or its experiences but about transforming experience through a kind of negation. In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot describes this as the essential function of language. Drawing from Mallarmé’s distinction between two kinds of language, Blanchot explains: “Crude speech ‘has a bearing upon the reality of things.’ ‘Narration, instruction, even description’ give us the presence of things, ‘represent’ them. The essential word moves them away, makes them disappear. It is always allusive; it suggests, evokes.”<sup>5</sup>

To most, this will sound like a very peculiar interpretation of writing. After all, we don’t usually think about writing as an act of negation — one that leaves us with less wonder, less meaning, less understanding, and so on. Blanchot, however, does not conceive of the writer’s activity as a purely negative procedure in this sense. Instead, he sees writing as enacting a more *determinate* negation in the Hegelian sense. For Hegel, thinking and, indeed, reality itself proceeds as a series of negations, for instance, the negation of untrue forms of consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Each of these negations results not in skepticism or pure nothingness but in some new content in which what is negated is preserved.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the negations are determinate – producing some positive meaning – rather than simply indeterminate. For Blanchot, Hegel’s concept of negation helps to explain that peculiar human experience of wanting to translate life into the written word. In putting itself to the task of writing, human consciousness replaces its former object (the “I” and its immediate experiences) with something new. With this development comes not just a new object for but also a new *mode of* human consciousness.<sup>7</sup> This new mode of consciousness is the “work.”

It is significant that Blanchot talks about “works” and not “texts.” The latter became the preferred term for Continental theorists in the poststructuralist tradition like Derrida and Roland Barthes. Barthes makes much, in fact, of why we ought to prefer the term “text” to “work” in his essay, “From Work to Text.”<sup>8</sup> However, Blanchot uses “work” because he is interested precisely in the independent being of the object that the labor of writing produces. In producing a work, the writer does not simply convey the experiences of a subject. They transform these things into something new, and in so doing they transform their relationship to these things as well.

But where does the need for such a transformation come from for Blanchot? In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot describes how language in general serves the purpose of capturing what is more stable and permanent among that stream of fleeting impressions that make up our first-order experience. This is true for writing but also, at a more basic level, for linguistic concepts themselves. Linguistic concepts — “work,” “immediacy,” etc. — give us ways to gather experience together to form new objects of knowledge that have relative stability over time. It is thus the fleetingness of experience that requires this general transformation according to Blanchot.

In *The Infinite Conversation* and *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot describes this fleetingness of experience metaphorically as a kind of “death” that is built into human experience and to which we are naturally compelled to respond. The response provided by language is not, however, a simple refusal of this “death” but the transformation of it. This is clear, for example, in the case of concept development. Blanchot explains:

The force of the concept does not reside in refusing the negation that is proper to death, but on the contrary in having introduced it into thought so that, through negation, every fixed form of thought should disappear and always become other than itself. Language is of a divine nature, not because it renders eternal by naming, but because, says Hegel, ‘it immediately overturns what it names in order to transform it into something else’ . . . in order to reduce it to the unyielding work of the negative through which, in an unceasing combat, meaning comes toward us, and we toward it.<sup>9</sup>

For Blanchot, then, the demand to write issues from human experience itself. It is an attempt to capture what risks being lost in the constant flow of first-order experience. Thus, one need not have experienced the loss of a particular person, place, or life goal to be claimed by the urge to write. This, after all, was not the primary motivation to write for people like Kafka, Mallarme, or Rimbaud. The demand to write can issue from any kind of life at all, for writing is precisely the attempt to work through human experience in all of its accidental character.

That said, given Blanchot's point about the fleetingness of experience, it would only make sense that the demand to write would be especially pronounced whenever one senses that a valuable experience, idea, or element of the imagination is at risk of disappearing. When we go through something difficult, confusing, or unsettling, many of us try to make sense of what we have experienced through writing. By expressing it in language, we hope to bring the experience into new focus, seeing it in terms of what we feel we know better, leaving us less unsettled. We tend to write more when we are traveling, for example. This is not only to preserve valuable experiences that we have while away but because traveling tends to instill in us a sense for the fleetingness of things, and this stirs us to write. Many people also feel compelled to write as a way of coming to terms with the death of a loved one. In this case, again, we are not attempting to substitute a set of remarks, say, in a eulogy, for the person we've lost, but we are attempting to find them in a new form and through a transformed mode of relation. Blanchot's work thus sheds light on why we are compelled to work through such losses with words and what we mean to accomplish through such work. In writing, we find determinacy and meaning where previously there was none. In this way, writing is pivotal to how human beings reorient themselves after they have lost their footing in the world.

To Blanchot, this became especially apparent as he grappled with the writing that emerged out of the experiences of the Holocaust. This was, after all, a time of profound loss — loss of those who were starved, gassed, shot, or worked to death by the SS and loss of hope in the masses of humanity that allowed it to happen. It was a time of great anxiety about what future generations would remember and learn from the Holocaust. It was also a time in which many survivors, like Blanchot himself, who only narrowly escaped execution by the Nazis in 1944, struggled with the guilt of having survived what so many others did not — a guilt accompanied by a profound sense of justice's absence from the world.<sup>10</sup> This guilt even affected many of those who survived the camps. Primo Levi, for example, struggled after liberation with

the torment of having survived, plagued by a sense that he had usurped the place of others.<sup>11</sup> It is not surprising then that many survivors, like Levi himself, eventually took their own lives.

The Holocaust thus robbed those who survived it of the world that they knew. The people, the social institutions, and the ways of understanding themselves that had anchored them in their lives had either disappeared or had come to appear to them as precarious and fleeting. Many who survived these atrocities, then, felt a need to put the terrible ordeal into language. Through documentation, the experiences would be preserved for future reflection. They would be preserved — not so that the wounds of these profound losses would stay open, subjecting future generations to the same violence survivors themselves endured. Instead, through speaking and writing about them, survivors could distill from these traumatic experiences a new object of consciousness, finding some determinate meaning in them that could be passed on to others.

But here too, Blanchot insists, the demand to write was not a matter of simply conveying these traumatic experiences as they were experienced. Regarding Robert Antelme's *The Human Condition*, for instance, Blanchot explains: "It is not . . . simply a witness's testimony to the reality of the camps or a historical reporting, nor is it an autobiographical narrative. It is clear that for Robert Antelme, and very surely for many others, it is a question not of telling one's story, of testifying, but essentially of *speaking*."<sup>12</sup>

What distinction is Blanchot drawing here? For Blanchot, Antelme's need to speak of Dachau did not amount to a need to replay his memories of Dachau. Returning to the scene of trauma, after all, would be unbearable for a survivor. Trauma undoes the sense of self and wreaks havoc on one's ability to make sense of the world. It makes the world feel intensely unpredictable and undoes one's confidence in finding meaning in it. Writers like Antelme, then, wanted to speak not as a way of simply representing their memories to others but as a way of converting traumatic memories into something new and thus relating to them in a new way. Their writing was like the speech of eulogy in this way. It provided a way to testify to loss while preserving what has been lost in a new way. It was in this way that such writing served a therapeutic function for these authors. For as Butler explains of Levi's writing, it was the substitution of a story for his raw memory, what she refers to as the "crystallization" of traumatic memory, that was necessary for Levi in the aftermath of his experiences at Auschwitz.<sup>13</sup> It is this writing, then, that is non-immediate in the sense described in the last chapter, as it provides neither the reader nor even the author with unmediated access to the original experience that

prompted the writing. Indeed, for Blanchot, it is the movement of negation, the negation of that original experience, that constitutes the *work* of these texts and a primary motivation for these authors to write.

### **The Linguistic Alienation of Trauma: The Case of Paul Celan**

Perhaps no other writer to emerge from the tragedy of the Shoah better expressed the experience of the demand to write than Paul Celan. Celan's poems are undoubtedly expressions of profound loss. They are attempts to give expression to the traumatic events that Celan, born Paul Antschel, experienced during the Third Reich. Celan's parents were deported from their home in 1942 to an internment camp in Transnistria, where his father died of typhus and his mother, as Celan later learned, was shot in the neck. Many of Celan's poems grieve the loss of his parents. Others address the loss of close friends. Another, the loss of his first-born son. And beyond these personal losses, there is good reason to read many of Celan's poems as mourning all victims of the Holocaust as well as the disappearance of a grounding trust in humanity that Celan lost through the atrocities of the Third Reich and never regained.

But, like Antelme's writing, Celan's poems do not just describe these traumatic losses. Instead, writing was a way to work through them. Celan makes this point in his Bremen Address ("Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen") when he speaks about the way language anchored and oriented him through the incredible losses he suffered. Writing poems, he explains, was a way to "orient myself, to find out where I was and where I meant to go, to sketch out reality for myself [*um mir Wirklichkeit zu entwerfen*]." <sup>14</sup> What Celan describes here is the essential, world-formative capacity of human language that, as we saw in the first chapter, Heidegger and Percy found so important. When examined phenomenologically, recall, language is not just a tool for referring and communicating but is basic to the constitution of the world in which we dwell. It is largely through language that we orient ourselves in a world and sketch out a reality for ourselves, and this is why language is, as we have seen, of such central importance to the kind of existence that we have as human beings.

But does such a model of language really capture what is taking place in the literature that emerges from survivors of the Holocaust? One might object here after all that it is this

normal capacity that we have as linguistic beings that is severed when one undergoes trauma. Trauma indeed wreaks havoc on the trust we typically put into language to make sense of things and to settle the meaning of our experiences.<sup>15</sup> With trauma, one undergoes an experience of violence that is either so sudden (e.g., deportation, rape, physical assault, the sudden forced separation from one's family) or so totally dehumanizing (e.g., enslavement, incarceration, or internment in a death camp) that one is unable to make sense of or psychologically defend oneself against the loss one is suffering.

The objection is an important one, since it is, indeed, common for a victim of trauma to lose their sense of themselves as a linguistic being. If, for example, in being assaulted, I feel myself suddenly reduced to a mere object for another, deprived of any ability to address or be recognized as a subject by my assailant, then I will suffer a profound alienation from myself as a linguistic being. Likewise, if through state-organized incarceration and detainment, I lose my ability to form or retain social relations, come and go freely, exercise moral conscience, and protest against, flee from, or otherwise fend off assaults and violations to my person, then I will suffer not just these harms themselves but the additional loss of linguistic being.

Robert Antelme explains that such deprivation was one part of what made the camps so dehumanizing. He describes, for example, the profound alienation he experienced when he was addressed by the SS during the roll call each day at Dachau. Antelme writes:

A Lagerschutz calls out the names, butchering them. In among them, amid Polish and Russian names, is my name. Laughter when my name is called, and I reply 'Present.' It sounded outlandish in my ear, but I'd recognized it. And so for one brief instant I'd been directly designated here, I and no other had been addressed, I had been specially solicited — I, myself, irreplaceable! And there I was. Someone turned up to say yes to this sound, which was at least as much my name as I was myself, in this place. And you had to say yes in order to return into the night, into the stone that bore the nameless face. Had I said nothing, they would have hunted for me, and the others would not have left until I had been found. They would have had a recount, they would have seen that there was one who hadn't said yes, one who didn't want that to be him. Then, having found me, the SS would have worked me over so as to make it clear to me that here being

me really meant being me, and so as I'd have the logic good and straight in my head: that, around here, I was damned well I, and this nothing that bore the name that had been read out was damned well me.<sup>16</sup>

Here we see one of the ways that linguistic alienation was a part of the trauma that Antelme experienced. To answer to his name, to participate in this linguistic exchange administered by the SS, would be to confirm the reality of what was transpiring. Thus the prisoner's reluctant participation in the forced exchange. Traces of this linguistic alienation are present in Antelme's writing. Kofman notes, for example, the frequency of the impersonal pronoun "one" in Antelme's text, which she argues underscores how the prisoner loses their ability to say "I" as well as the space of interpersonal address in which they would use "I" in conversation with another. Kofman observes that the pronoun "I" appears only rarely in Antelme's writing, and when it does, usually shows up as "a defensive reaction against 'coagulation' and anonymity, when Antelme is describing the loss of identity of the detainee."<sup>17</sup> Here his words were reduced to an instrument with which the SS exerted control over his life. His organs of speech, usually the locus of transcendence, became a means through which he was cruelly reduced to mere facticity, to the object of an irrational power. One thinks here of Elaine Scarry's description of torture, where torturers, "mime the work of pain by temporarily breaking off the voice, making it their own, making it speak their words, making it cry when they want it to cry, be silent when they want its silence, turning it off and on, using its sound to abuse the one whose voice it is as well as other prisoners."<sup>18</sup> This particular form of agony, one that Antelme knew well, is captured in the title of Kofman's book: *Smothered Words* [*Paroles suffoquées*].

Wreaking havoc upon one's sense of oneself as a linguistic being, traumatic experience appears to be precisely the kind of thing that "smothers" language, that speech cannot easily settle for us. Traumatic experiences leave us, instead, speechless. Moreover, as Susan Brison explains, the effects of trauma remain long after the physical threat is gone.<sup>19</sup> Just as survivors tend to suffer from a heightened sense of physical vulnerability in the aftermath of the traumatic experience, so too do many survivors experience a diminished sense of linguistic being as a long-term symptom of trauma.

Why then did so many survivors – Antelme, Celan, Levi – turn to writing after the Holocaust? And what could it mean when Celan describes, not just writing, but language in



general as the one stable, reliable thing that he could turn to throughout the trauma and its aftermath? “Reachable, near and not lost,” Celan says, “there remained in the midst of the losses this one thing: language.”<sup>20</sup> How is it then that language remained a means of orienting himself as Celan tried to navigate a life haunted by a persistent sense of irresolvable loss?

Blanchot’s analysis of the demand to write can help us up to a point. Recall that, for Blanchot, the demand to write is bound up with the movement of negation and is always to some extent an attempt to work through loss. What this involves is not denying loss and replacing it with some substitute representation but a determinate negation of immediate experience. This helps explain why post-Holocaust writers like Celan, Levi, and Kofman refrained from writing in a purely documentary style, one that presented itself as an unadulterated memory of past events. It sheds light on Celan’s remarks in his Bremen Address as well, where he tells his audience that “language, remained, not lost, yes in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darkneses of deathbringing speech [*todbringender Rede*] . . . ‘enriched’ by all this.”<sup>21</sup> It is this aspect of Celan’s poetics that captured the interest of Blanchot, like so many other Continental philosophers of language.

On the other hand, the work of negation seems never to come to completion for Celan. Celan himself seems never to have managed to work through his loss completely, and his poor mental health, his hospitalizations, and eventually his suicide in Paris in 1970 all attest to the fact that, for Celan, the demand to write was never satisfied. One is tempted here to use an image from one of Celan’s poems and say that the wounds he suffered did not “scar over [*vernarben*]” but remained open.<sup>22</sup> This conclusion is suggested too by the repetition of negative formulations in “Psalm,” “The Sluice,” “An Eye, Open,” and the untitled poem beginning “Aspen Tree” – a repetition that supplies each of these poems with its distinctive rhythm. In these instances, the negation does not seem determinate. It does not seem to resolve itself into new meaning.<sup>23</sup> The transformation of the loss into a work seems to remain *underway*. They speak, yes, but seemingly only of the absence of a proper account of what has been lost and of the strain upon language as it tries to give this account. We find, for example, the following lines where there is a palpable ambiguity in the poet’s relationship to language.

Nowhere are you asked after — The place where they lay, it has a name — it has

none.<sup>24</sup>

[*Nirgends fragt es nach dir -- Der Ort, wo sie lagen, er hat einen Namen – er hat keinen.*]

You my words go with me going crippled, you my straight ones.<sup>25</sup>

[*Ihr meine mit mir verkrüppelnden Worte, ihr meine geraden.*]

These words attest to a kind of linguistic alienation, that is, a significant disruption in one's capacity as a linguistic being. To be sure, the linguistic alienation presented here differs in significant ways from Antelme's experience in Dachau but still appears here in a way that seems to make the *work* of these poems appear incomplete. In the first line, from the poem "Stretto," Celan both confirms and denies the naming of a loss. To name the place where the dead lie would be to consecrate the loss and to hold it in memory. For Celan, though, the place is both consecrated and not consecrated, remembered and forgotten.

From all of this, one might conclude that a trauma like the one that Celan endured brings language to its limit. One may even argue that such a case calls into question the general claim that I developed in the last chapter, namely, that language plays an essential role in what allows a human being to flourish. What then does Celan mean when he says that language remained despite everything?

To get a more complete answer to this question, we need to go further into a dimension of linguistic being that we have only touched upon up to this point, that is, the interpersonal. What we will see is that, for Celan, the demand to write issued from a distinctly interpersonal need that linguistic beings possess. This is the need to *bear witness* to loss, to find an empathetic other that will listen and, as part of this listening, engage in the process of interpretive understanding described in the previous chapter. This, I will argue, is why Celan's poems so often feel like works still underway toward their destination. It is not just that Celan found it difficult to speak about his experiences. Like many trauma survivors who begin to speak and write about their experiences, he used his poetry as a way of addressing others who might listen, and he did this as a way of working through trauma.

### Derrida on the Poem as Interpersonal Address

Losing trust in others is a common symptom experienced by trauma survivors. In Celan's case, it was crippling — so intense that it ruined many of his closest relationships and contributed to the instability that eventually led to his suicide. The struggle also appears very evidently in his poems, which speak often of the absence of witnesses to suffering and the absence of memorialization for the victims of the Holocaust. In speaking of absence, these poems seem to perform not a determinate negation as described above but rather an indeterminate one. Rather than articulating a new form of consciousness that emerges as one grapples with such loss, they seem to cut off any such development — marking what has not and perhaps cannot be understood about what happened. In his book on Celan's poetry, *Sovereignties in Question*, Derrida suggests that Celan's poems "seal" themselves up in various ways, withholding something from the reader even as they are read. This happens, for example, through the frequent use of a seemingly untranslatable idiom but also, Derrida argues, through the observation that the poems "may refer to events to which the German language will have been a privileged witness, namely, the Shoah."<sup>26</sup>

Despite this, Derrida, points out, the poems still function as a powerful act of communication. Steeped as they are in an encrypted idiom and referring, as they seem to do, to a singular set of experiences, they manage nevertheless to bear witness. Indeed, Derrida concludes from his reading of Celan that "all responsible witnessing engages a poetic experience of language."<sup>27</sup> But what does it mean that one cannot bear witness responsibly without engaging in this kind of poetic experience? Consider the following stanza written by Celan, which serves as the basis for Derrida's reflection in his essay. The stanza reads:

Ash-aureole behind ...  
No one  
bears witness for the  
witness.<sup>28</sup>

[*Aschenglorie hinter ...*  
*Niemand*  
*Zeugt für den Zeugen.*]

On the face of it, these words seem to attest to an absolute alienation – to Celan having lost all hope in bearing witness. After all, here we see the use of an indeterminate form of negation: *Niemand*. Nobody can bear witness for the witness, the survivor of the Holocaust. The survivor will find nobody with whom to share what happened, who will understand. If this is what is meant, then the survivor's experience and testimony would seem then to return to the fleeting passage of all things, to that which, according to Blanchot, writing was supposed to offer some meaning and resolution.

Let us look more closely at how the attempt at translation reveals the hermetic quality of the poem, according to Derrida. Looking at the translation of the poem from one idiom to the other, we can see that some words in the poem would present real challenges to translators. *Zeugen*, for example, can mean not only to bear witness but to engender, to procreate, or to father. Neither the English word *witness* nor the French word *témoin* carry this meaning. What's more, Celan's term *Aschenglorie*, as a neologism, has no direct equivalent, and sounds cryptic even in German. Like the rest of his neologisms, they make up part of Celan's unique idiom.<sup>29</sup> The idiomatic nature of Celan's poems is thus one way that they caution us to respect their singularity.

The other way that the poems do this, as mentioned above, has to do with their reference to singular events. Now, one might want to say that Celan's poems cannot be witnessed by another in that they refer to a first-person experience that nobody else can stake a claim to, not even another survivor whose first-hand experience would be their own. This may strike us as important to acknowledge so as not to overlook important differences between the experiences of, say, Celan and Derrida or Celan and Blanchot. At the same time, it is also important to keep in mind what we have been establishing about the writing of trauma, namely, that the survivor-writer must not simply retain the traumatic experience in its original form as the object of their writing but must transform it. As such, one finds more allusion to the events of the Holocaust in Celan's poems rather than direct, unequivocal reference. Moreover, by alluding to the events and encrypting the language used to express these events, Celan's poems invite readers to engage in the process of understanding as they read and interpret. Where the language leaves off, they press on. Where the idiom is sealed, they translate. The poems invite readers, in other words, to participate in what I have called the living life of language.

For Derrida, then, these features do not resign the author to an absolute linguistic alienation. Rather, they allow for texts that claim us as readers, that call for the work of understanding. We explored the meaning of understanding in this sense in the previous chapter. There we emphasized that one has understanding of a text, for example, not when one has an accurate mental representation of the words on the page or even the intentions of the author but when one is able to think along with the text, entering into conversation with it. It is, we argued, as conversation that language is fundamental to our hermeneutic situation. Given this, it is not hard to see why the act of translation, and in particular the translation of a text whose terms have no ready-to-hand equivalent in the language one is translating into, requires this kind of understanding. To translate, as Gadamer argues, one must think along with the author that one is translating. Thus, it is only by joining the author in a line of thinking that a good translation is produced.<sup>30</sup> The text in need of translation is, then, like the text woven with allusions. Both come to us “sealed.” Thus, Derrida argues, both allow for that act of understanding that is the central topic of investigation in Gadamer’s hermeneutic phenomenology.<sup>31</sup>

Derrida clarifies this point by comparing what happens in the poem to what happens when one acts as a witness in a court of law. In both cases, the non-immediacy of what is being recounted or described might be seen to threaten the reliability of the speech-act. What Derrida shows, instead, is that neither speech-act could exist except by virtue of this non-immediacy. The speech-act of testimony after all, Derrida points out, requires a kind of oath on the part of the witness and a kind of faith on the part of the audience. He clarifies: “...Bearing witness appeals to the act of faith, and thus takes place in the space of pledged or sworn word, or of a promise engaging responsibility before the law, a promise always open to betrayal, always hanging on the possibility of perjury, infidelity, or abjuration.”<sup>32</sup> Although to this day personal testimony continues to function as evidence in courts of law, testimony differs in this way from other forms of evidence (what Derrida refers to as “proof”). There is an interpersonal dynamic that is vital to its functioning. In bearing witness, I am not just reporting on events according to memory. I must attest before my audience to my own sincerity and thus self-presence. And nobody can do this for me. I must bear witness, in other words, to my own consciousness, swear to what I was present to: what I saw, heard, touched, felt, etc., and it is this act of swearing that establishes my testimony as credible.<sup>33</sup>

Now, it may be surprising, given Derrida’s general unwillingness to take for granted the

concept of the subject and its concomitant moral demands, that he acknowledges an authority of self-presence here. He even goes so far in this essay as to say that all responsibility hangs on self-presence, that it would not exist without it. The type of self-presence that he has in mind, though, is not only one that is “coextensive with presence to other things, with having-been present” but also, he adds, “to the presence of the other.”<sup>34</sup> When, for example, I am asked to tell the truth, to promise, or to swear, it is by others that I am called to self-presence – to attest, for example, to my sincerity and good faith. I am not constantly in a state of presence to myself. Moreover, promises, oaths, witness accounts, and so on requires an addressee, another with whom one shares a world. So, while nobody may testify in the place of another – to witness for the witness, self-presence in this case is emphatically also other-presence.

We can see now why, in his reading of Celan, Derrida concludes that “all responsible witnessing engages a poetic experience of language.” When I read a poem as wanting to speak, as having something to say, I know that I cannot take the text as immediate, that I must grapple with it to determine what it wants to say. This is why it exerts a personal claim upon me. Likewise, when I hear another’s testimony, I recognize that, even as I listen to what is being said and allow myself to be persuaded and moved, the experience of which the witness speaks is alien to me. It is an experience that is not mine and will not become mine, even as I listen. In this sense, I can only bear witness for the witness by affirming these limits, knowing that I cannot speak in the other’s place.

For Derrida, then, the fact that there is no witness for the witness turns out to be the very condition for the possibility of bearing witness. It is only one whose experience is not my own that I can hear bear witness. Likewise, it is not the text whose meaning is completely ready-to-hand that we truly read, as it is the non-immediacy of the text that is the very condition for the possibility of truly reading. As Gadamer says, we read a text not simply through our preconceptions but by having our preconceptions challenged, which is to say, by listening.<sup>35</sup>

But this means that the person on the other side of each of these interactions also knows something of this kind of interpersonal exchange as well. They write in anticipation of others. When they bear witness, similarly, they do so only in relation with others. In this sense, their own words are, for them, underway. This is nowhere clearer than in the case of post-Holocaust literature, where the choice to write indicated a continued connection with others, a continued desire to address and to be understood by others. Such connection was no doubt put to the test by

the traumas endured during the Holocaust. And yet it was to this connection that survivors returned again and again in hope and desperation. Kofman explains that this is why, despite the drastic alienation from language that people like Antelme experienced in the camps, it remained necessary for the prisoners to talk with one another. Such exchanges, Kofman writes, “made it possible for each of them to maintain within himself, in spite of everything, the presence of the other [*autrui*], the responsibility within each for the other’s will to stay alive; they make it possible to rediscover the meaning of ‘we’ . . . .”<sup>36</sup>

Through Derrida’s reading of Celan’s poetry, then, we can better understand the role that linguistic alienation plays in the life of the linguistic being as well as in Continental philosophy of language. Linguistic alienation is an important part of trauma. It results from traumatic experience and, like other long-term effects of trauma, can linger with a survivor long after the violence has subsided. When present, then, it plays a significant role in the human relationship to language. Continental philosophers like Derrida, then, have rightly given their attention to those authors and texts that bear the traces of such alienation. Yet, as Derrida emphasizes in his reading of Celan, it is also clear that what Blanchot calls “the demand to write” persists even through this painful life condition. As Celan says, the poem is *both lonely and underway*. “The poem wants to reach an Other,” Celan tells us, “it needs this other, it needs an Over-against. It seeks it out, speaks toward it.”<sup>37</sup> Linguistic alienation is, then, the exception that proves the rule. It deepens rather than diminishes the need that one has for acts of empathetic understanding that sustain us as linguistic beings and allows us to recognize more acutely than ever just how vital to our existence the capacity for speech is.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1962), 100.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 71-75.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 63.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>6</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 51-52. For a helpful discussion of determinate negation, see also Miles Hentrup, "Self-Completing Skepticism: On Hegel's Sublation of Pyrrhonism," *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 23, no. 1 (2018): 105-123.

<sup>7</sup> On this point, Blanchot follows Hegel's argument in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where Hegel writes: ". . . In the alteration of the knowledge, the object itself alters for it too, for the knowledge that was present was essentially a knowledge of the object: as the knowledge changes, so too does the object, for it essentially belonged to this knowledge." G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 54.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 56-64.

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 35.

<sup>10</sup> Blanchot conveys this story in his short essay, "The Instant of My Death." In telling the story, Blanchot chooses to write in the third-person so as to mark the strangeness of calling this near-death experience his *own* experience. There he speaks about the guilt of having survived with his life when others did not. He writes, "No doubt what began for the young man was the torment of injustice. No more ecstasy; the feeling that he was only living because, even in the eyes of the Russians, he belonged to a noble class. This was war: life for some, for others, the cruelty of assassination." Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*, and Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 69.

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 134.

<sup>13</sup> "The story is there to establish evidence, to acknowledge that there was an enormous, if not unfathomable, loss of life, and to provide the explicit recognition of loss that mourning requires. But if the story makes more remote the memory of suffering and loss, then the story might be said to institute a kind of melancholia in which the suffering and the loss are denied.



The story threatens to substitute for the events it relays, and crystallization is the means of that substitution. The substitution comes at the cost of the event, and so it would seem that a certain strict accountability applies: the story is purchased at the expense of the event itself, just as the life of the survivor is understood to come at the expense of the dead.” Judith Butler, “Primo Levi for the Present,” in *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press), 190.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Celan, “Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen,” in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, 395-6, trans. Joel Felstiner (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 396.

<sup>15</sup> Elaine Scarry, for example, describes the world-shattering, language-shattering effect of traumatic pain in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, trans. Madeline Dobie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 45.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, 47.

<sup>18</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, 54.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 39-40.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Celan, “Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen,” 395.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 395.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Celan, “Voices,” in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, 88-93, trans. Joel Felstiner (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 93.

<sup>23</sup> Magdalena Zollkos offers a reading of Celan along these lines, reading his work as an indication of the way that transitional justice narratives can too easily smooth over the impossibility of reconciliation for the traumatized subject. Magdalena Zollkos, “No Pasarán: Trauma, Testimony, and Language for Paul Celan,” *The European Legacy* 14, no. 3 (2009): 269-282.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Celan, “Stretto,” in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. Joel Felstiner (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 120.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Celan, “The Wellspring Rushes,” in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. Joel Felstiner (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 165.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Poetics and Politics of Witnessing,” in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 67.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida presents the poem abridged and elided in this way at the beginning of his essay. The full poem can be found in Derrida’s essay and in Felstiner’s translation: Paul Celan, “Ash-aureole,” in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. Joel Felstiner (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 260-61.

<sup>29</sup> For an alternative account of the unique idiomatic quality of Celan’s poetry, see Alejandro Vallega’s *Sense and Finitude*, where he argues that the poet’s departure from the normal constraints of grammar and syntax are a way of regenerating language by reactivating its sensuous, prelinguistic roots. Alejandro Vallega, *Sense and Finitude: Encounters at the Limits of Language, Art, and the Political* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009), 81-101.

<sup>30</sup> Derrida follows Gadamer in arguing that translation has its proper place precisely where translation is difficult. This is why, for Derrida, the poem is “the only place propitious to the experience of language, that is to say, of an idiom that forever defies translation and therefore demands a translation that will do the impossible, make the impossible possible in an unheard-of event.” Jacques Derrida, “Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, the Poem,” in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 137. It should be pointed out, however, that this point of agreement was not properly recognized by Derrida himself.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue,” 139-40.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Poetics and Politics of Witnessing,” 75.

<sup>33</sup> This is notoriously difficult to do for the survivor of trauma who is giving testimony to their experience precisely because, as we have seen, there is often a crystallization of memory that takes place in the wake of trauma. Still, Derrida’s point is that testimony is not simply about recounting what happened but swearing to be sincere in recounting as best as possible.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Poetics and Politics of Witnessing,” 79-80.

<sup>35</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 282-85.

<sup>36</sup> Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, 54.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Celan, “The Meridian,” in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. Joel Felstiner (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 409.

## **Rethinking Women's Silence: Contributions from Continental Feminism**

In the previous chapter, we explored how language plays a role in helping people to work through traumatic experience. This was demonstrated in the work of post-Holocaust writers like Celan and Antelme, who turned to writing in the wake of the atrocities of the Holocaust. For these survivors, writing was an attempt to work through trauma, recovering meaning where it had previously been lost. Their writing thus exemplifies language's constant role as the essential mode of disclosure for human beings. Yet the efficacy of language in this role, as we saw, hinges on the anticipation of others who share language with me. This is generally true of all writing. As Derrida argues, it is always for another that I write. It is in response to another's address that I bear witness to what I have experienced. It is by another that I am first called to disclose myself in speech. Hence, if we want to support others as linguistic beings, we must take on the role of the empathetic listener. We must "bear witness for the witness," as Derrida says.

This argument has radical implications for how we understand understanding. It suggests, for one, that whenever I speak about myself or my experience, that account is always structured by the others to whom I am responding. Their expectations mediate the accounts of myself that I give, just as they mediate the way that I understand the world. In this way, my language is never simply my own, a reflection of an individual's isolated attempt to make sense of things.

Continental philosophers coming out of the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology have generally focused on what such mediation enables in our lives. Having the ear of the other compels me to speak. It pushes me to participate in the activity of interpretation. It compels me to bear witness to what I have undergone and to my own self-presence at this moment. These positive effects take place even when I am alone insofar as I anticipate another who will listen. Gadamer reminds us that even the private conversation that we have with ourselves "is always simultaneously the anticipation of conversation with others and the introduction of others into the conversation with ourselves."<sup>1</sup> My potential reader pushes me to articulate ideas, to identify them as my own, and to find new meanings through this process. Being able to anticipate others

who can recognize the meaning of what I have to say, then, is essential to my flourishing as a linguistic being. Indeed, we might say that, beyond the freedom to speak, it is access to empathetic listening that is the more fundamental social good, since without the latter the former is meaningless.

Ideally, we enable one another to speak by both listening to others and having them listen to us. In reality, though, our patterns of social communication often lack this reciprocity. What we find is that, in our personal interactions, some people do more talking and receive more of the listening, while others take on the lion's share of the listening and, over time, do much less of the talking. Hermeneutic phenomenology has not traditionally concerned itself with this problem. Given what we have seen so far, though, this pattern, wherever we find it, should be concerning. It should concern us not because it violates some abstract principle of equality but because it speaks to how people can become alienated from their linguistic being and deprived of what they need to flourish in this capacity. In this chapter, I will examine the way that some feminist philosophers have taken up this issue, focusing particularly on contributions by Continental feminist philosophers. In so doing, my hope is to show not only how conversations in feminist philosophy pose new and important questions relevant to a hermeneutic philosophy of language but also but how important developments in Continental feminist philosophy carry forward some of the key insights of hermeneutic phenomenology.

### **The Idea of Women's Language in Continental Feminism**

One might wonder, though, whether the treatment of language in Continental feminist philosophy is really compatible with the account of language that I have offered so far, an account that has been grounded in the insights of hermeneutic phenomenology. Indeed, one may even take as a defining characteristic of Continental feminism a general skepticism toward language that stems from a commitment to identity politics, where the language that we all rely upon to understand the world is seen and discounted as "man's language," the imposition of a set of concepts rooted in male experience and imposed upon women. From such a vantage point, language does not appear to be the means by which the world is continually disclosed and the source for new meanings and ends. It is looked at skeptically, suspiciously, as an analogue to power that is rooted in male identity. I want to begin, then, by first discussing how this approach

to language emerges in Continental feminism so as to make clear where exactly I see alternative accounts of language being developed by Continental feminist philosophers.

The emergence of identity politics is rightly described as one of the most significant changes to the political landscape in the West to have occurred over the last half century. Having witnessed the emergence of the gay liberation movement, the Combahee River Collective, the Quebec sovereignty movement, the Scottish National Party, and the like, recent generations have become accustomed to thinking about such movements as essential to the political process. Radical democratic theorists, for example, may equate democracy itself, as Michael L. Ferguson does, with “the ongoing contestation of the very subject (‘the people’) whose existence it presupposes.”<sup>2</sup> This process, on such a view, is one where different groups, understanding their own unique interests to have been neglected on the basis of historic subordination or marginalization, campaign for greater power and recognition. When it is recognition that is sought, such campaigns require acceptance of the premise that the subordinated group is different in significant ways, in its identity and interests, from that of the broader group from which recognition is sought. As Georgia Warnke points out, this feature of identity politics distinguishes it from earlier movements that were guided by an “integrationist ideal.” She explains: “In contrast to earlier struggles for civil and political rights, which demanded equal treatment . . . the politics of identity demands that social and political institutions acknowledge and accommodate differences in race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.”<sup>3</sup>

This change in our conception of the political process emerged hand in hand with certain developments in sociolinguistics and the philosophy of language. As identity politics took hold of the political imaginary, researchers in the social sciences and humanities both applied the popular paradigm to the study of language and found in their research new evidence supporting the theoretical premises of identity politics. This was nowhere clearer than in the academic branch of the Women’s Movement. In the 70’s and 80’s, academia became a battleground for feminist interventions that aimed at rectifying the subordination and marginalization of women within the mechanisms of culture, and academia increasingly became an important site for the development of scholarship that shed light on the nature and importance of that subordination. In this context, language became an object of focus for feminist inquiry — both in academia and beyond.

Major works like Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978) and Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* (1980) argued that women are engrossed in languages and other symbolic structures that bind them in hidden ways to a patriarchal social structure. They present any language developed under conditions of patriarchy, such as the English language, as "literally man made" and "still primarily under male control."<sup>4</sup> In arguing that language is a symbolic structure used to maintain patriarchal power, they adhere to a model of language as a finite construction of reality, not unlike the famous model developed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf.<sup>5</sup> They adhere, in other words, to a model of linguistic determinism. This is evident early on in *Man Made Language*, when Spender writes: "Each day, we construct the world we live in according to these man made rules. We select, pattern and interpret the flux of events in the attempt to make life meaningful and few of us suspect how deeply entrenched, and arbitrary, these rules are. We impose them on the world so that what we see conforms to what we have been led to see. And one of the crucial factors in our construction of this reality is language."<sup>6</sup> Like Sapir and Whorf, Spender emphasizes here the constitutive role that language plays in shaping the way we understand the world at even the most basic level. For Spender, though, this constitutive power must be thought of as an analogue to the political hegemony of men, a connection that seemed well-supported by the significant amount of empirical research in the 70's and 80's on women as a "muted group."<sup>7</sup> All of this encouraged an increasingly critical attitude toward language within the Women's Movement.

Adrienne Rich's *The Dream of a Common Language*, containing poems written from 1974-1977, is a telling artifact from this period. The opening lines from its most famous poem, "Cartographies of Silence," read:

A conversation begins  
with a lie. And each  
  
speaker of the so-called common language feels  
the ice-floe split, the drift apart  
  
as if powerless, as if up against  
a force of nature<sup>8</sup>

In its suspicion regarding the “so-called common language,” the poem’s imagery became iconic for its age. It was cited frequently by scholars interested in language as a battleground of identity politics and seen by some to be a poetic expression of Muted Group Theory.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as Rich’s poetry touched upon two cartographies of silence, that experienced by women and also by lesbians in particular, it was often read as a general argument about the need for identity politics. According to this argument, it is the illusion of a common language — a common means of recognition — that is most vexing for any subordinated group seeking redress, since this covers over the need to acknowledge and accommodate the group in its particularity.

This argument became central to the thinking of several Continental feminist theorists. Indeed, its prominence within the writings of figures like Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous gave rise to a new category of feminist theory commonly referred to by anglophone theorists simply as “French feminism” but more accurately referred to as the intellectual movement of *Écriture féminine* (“women’s writing”). The theorists of *Écriture féminine* were distinctive in that they took language in particular as a significant, albeit hidden, source of inequality, one that has long rendered women essentially silent. Cixous, for example, describes the impact of a history of writing where “woman has never *her* turn to speak”<sup>10</sup> and where writing has been organized around a “typically masculine — economy . . . where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over.”<sup>11</sup> Because of this history of silencing women, Cixous argues that it is impossible to say in advance what women’s writing will contain. It will be something new, insurgent, unpredictable.<sup>12</sup> With its emphasis on keeping open the content of women’s writing, this utopian claim distinguishes the work of French Feminists like Cixous from other proponents of identity politics. However, Cixous nevertheless ensures her readers that when women “break out of the snare of silence,”<sup>13</sup> there will be a decisive political transformation in women’s lives. Thus, Cixous urges women to write and assures them that, in so doing, they will uncover an authentic self that had become gradually suppressed by the disciplinary mechanisms of patriarchy and, above all, by shame. They will come finally to speak as women, in the language authentic to women as historical subjects.

Such arguments brought into prominence the theoretical writings of some Continental feminists, namely, those, like the theories of *Écriture féminine*, that reflected the growing shift of political theory toward identity politics. With that shift, however, a whole other branch of



Continental feminist philosophy of language becomes less visible, less representative of Continental feminism as a whole. This is a branch that highlights the situation of diverse standpoints, not in order to call into question the validity of all attempts to arrive at communication and mutual understanding in this situation, but in order to shed light on the social conditions that enable these achievements. It is a branch that understands the importance of examining language as a site of women's subordination but does not understand the problem as a matter of women being enclosed in a finite structure that imposes fixed determinations onto thought. It recognizes the problem of linguistic alienation but avoids equating this with all forms of silence and refrains from taking as its central political goal the reconstruction of woman's authentic voice. This branch of Continental feminist philosophy is one rooted in the hermeneutic tradition.

In the next section, I introduce the version of this argument presented by Judith Butler, a leading figure in Continental feminist theory whose approach to language, I argue, is in many ways more compatible with the hermeneutic tradition than with that of identity politics.<sup>14</sup> Sharing the critical interest in language taken by writers like Cixous and Spender, Butler is committed to the critical interrogation of discourses presumed to be "common" but which function in exclusionary ways. Unlike these writers, however, Butler is emphatic in her insistence on the inevitable sociality of the speaking subject. For Butler, the speaking subject emerges in response to being addressed by others. Moreover, Butler argues that there are ethical reasons for keeping ourselves open and responsive to the other's address throughout our lives. Such claims set Butler apart from many of her counterparts in Continental feminism but carry forward some of the most important aspects of the hermeneutic tradition's approach to language.

### **Giving an Account of Oneself: Butler's Hermeneutic Circle**

Butler has made a career for herself drawing attention to how certain patterns of discourse have come to shape the world we live in. Her early work (*Gender Trouble, Bodies That Matter, The Psychic Life of Power, Undoing Gender*), is especially focused on dominant discourses of sex, gender, and sexuality. It examines, for example, the role that medical discourse has played in producing the concepts of homosexuality and heterosexuality that we

take for granted today.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, it considers how psychiatric discourse has shaped the way that we think about transgendered lives, seeing these lives as something needing diagnosis and the legitimation of medical opinion.<sup>16</sup> In her early work, she even examines the discourse surrounding gay marriage and the way that it has impacted our attitude toward different kinship relations and sexual lifestyles, helping to further entrench a problematic distinction between normality and abnormality of kinship relations within the gay community.<sup>17</sup> Through such investigations, Butler remains attentive to the way that discourses can render certain lives less intelligible and thus less legitimate than others.

Indeed, for Butler, drawing attention to such discourse is the primary task of all critical theory and thus of any critical feminist theory. It is this task that she undertakes when, for example, she famously engages in a critical genealogy of the category of sex.<sup>18</sup> While it is common for people today to think about gender as the cultural interpretation of sex and the latter as a category that exists independently of any cultural practices, Butler challenges this way of distinguishing sex and gender. She argues that male and female appear as natural kinds and thus as unavoidable categories within animal life only because of the system of gender. The system of gender pervades social life. My gender plays a significant role in my dating practices; in the way that my partner, my colleagues, and my family relate to me; in the kinds of work that I am encouraged or discouraged from performing; in how that work is interpreted and valued; in the health care that I receive; in the way that I inhabit and move my body, etc. In sum, gender has traditionally been a primary way in which we interpret our lives and in which others interpret us. It is true that, in certain social settings today, gender no longer plays as primary of an interpretive role as it once did, but given how uncomfortable the majority of people still are in any context when they encounter a person whose gender is unclear to them, it is evident that gender still plays a significant, even primary, role in most social settings. It is in this general context, where the categories of male and female are relevant to people in the majority of social settings, that the category of sex is given the significance that it has as a natural category. Scientific studies, say, of the different risks of cardiovascular disease for women and men, make sense because these are meaningful categories for most people. Almost all people use these categories in some way to identify themselves (most by simply identifying as one or the other) and so can use the information from these studies to understand their health risks. At the same time, scientific studies that use sexual difference as a starting point are often doing more than this. They can

serve to reinforce or even introduce the significance of gender as a means of interpreting ourselves and others. One learns from many books, for example, to interpret the challenges they experience in life in terms of struggles that men or women specifically have. So, one reads one of thousands of self-help titles directed towards women, like *Women Who Think Too Much: How to Break Free of Overthinking and Reclaim Your Life* or *How to Be Happy (Or At Least Less Sad): A Creative Workbook*.<sup>19</sup> That some such books are written by scientists and draw from scientific research to support their findings should not be surprising. As Helen Longino's work has made clear, science is a value-laden enterprise.<sup>20</sup> It works with categories that are significant in our social world. To subject the discourse of sex to a critical genealogy, then, would be to draw attention to the cultural practices and social systems of meaning that have historically propped up this discourse. In so doing, we should be able to see that there is no guarantee that such discourse will always be as meaningful as it has been in the past – that thirty years in the future, for example, it will seem appropriate to host “gender reveal” parties or to tailor life advice to women in particular under the assumption that “overthinking” is a woman's problem.

So far, what I have described of Butler's project should be uncontroversial. Running throughout the entirety of Butler's corpus is the unifying thread of critique, and the object of critique for Butler is discourse in its world-disclosive capacity. Students who read Butler's work pick up quite easily on these aspects of it. After all, while they tend to be immersed in the discourses that Butler critiques, they are also quite accustomed to adopting an attitude of suspicion towards discourse. Students in my experience tend to be compelled by constructionist arguments found in writers like Nietzsche that present language as an arbitrary construction, offering access to only an illusory reality, and they interpret Butler's critique of discourse as akin to Nietzsche's project in this way.<sup>21</sup> They also tend to believe very deeply in an old Romantic notion, one recently reinvigorated with the rise of identity politics, that an individual only really flourishes if they manage to achieve an authentic self that exists completely independent of any social norms. Thus, they interpret Butler's critique of the category of sex to mean that the category is *merely* a social construct and that, buried beneath the edifice of this construct, there are real identities that, when embraced, can allow one to live life authentically. Understood this way, Butler's version of feminist critique would be indistinguishable from that of Spender, Daly, Irigaray, and Cixous.

Several theoretical features distinguish Butler's approach to the critical examination of language from that of these other theorists though. I present three such points of distinction below, indicating how each marks a significant point of agreement between Butler's thought and the hermeneutic philosophical tradition.

First, Butler acknowledges that the way we inhabit the world is irreducibly social and historical. We begin to interpret the world only after we have been thrown into an intricate set of linguistic practices that interpret the world for us, so that what we often mark as the "beginning" of understanding is not really the point of its origination. This thought is central to what Gadamer, following Heidegger, understand as the "hermeneutic circle," the strange idea that genuine understanding actually develops through interpretative acts that take place on the basis of content that one is thrown<sup>22</sup> into, that is, on the basis of prejudices that are "biases of our openness to the world."<sup>23</sup> Recall that this is also the point that Heidegger returns to in his later lectures on language, where he describes the speaking in which we find ourselves entangled whenever we first go to speak.<sup>24</sup> For Butler too, we inevitably inhabit the world through discourses that we do not ourselves choose and in response to forms of address similarly unchosen.<sup>25</sup> And though she is acutely aware of the distress that this can cause, like the hermeneutic phenomenologist, Butler is insistent that this aspect of the human condition cannot simply be cast off. When we interpret the world, we inevitably do so from within a hermeneutic circle. We begin to interpret ourselves, for instance, only after we have been interpellated by others. I give an account of what motivated my action only after I have come, through being socialized into moral and legal discourses, to see myself and speak of myself as a responsible subject. The capacity for demonstrating accountability in this way, Butler argues, is an effect of another's address. Similarly, one is encouraged to identify as a woman if one has been continually addressed as female since very early on in one's life. Such identities are not spontaneous but issue from a discourse that precedes the individuals that come to identify in this way. As we can see then, even if Butler is sympathetic to the idea that we must look for what is foreclosed by the "so-called common language," Butler could not affirm the next step that people like Cixous make, going from there to encourage people to embrace and speak with some voice independent from others. She is much too attentive to the social interactions that go into the development of both identity and speech.

Second, while Butler recognizes that it is impossible to disentangle one's speaking completely from the influence of others, she also rejects the idea that the discourses we inherit are exhaustively determining of our understanding, a claim that is sometimes put forward by Cixous and Spender, for example. The latter rely at times on a theory of linguistic determinism to explain the vast scope of patriarchal power. Indeed, for Cixous, it is only because patriarchal language has so determined every aspect of the cultural imaginary, including that of women, that it is so difficult to say what a "woman's writing" would entail. But while Butler acknowledges the way that we are thrown into meanings that we do not choose, she also sees how these structures that we are thrown into come to change over time. Indeed, her point is that there is a lot less stability to these discourses than we might think. In her early work, Butler makes this point by showing how certain ideas come to seem natural when they are reinforced through reiterated performance. Take the term "heterosexual," for example. For Butler, the term comes to seem like a natural and inevitable description when it is used repeatedly over time, for example, in clinical and research settings. But this means that the stability of this term rests on such repetition. Butler highlights this instability as a way of demonstrating the immanent possibility of change, despite the power of discourse to habituate our thinking in certain ways. Later, Butler develops a fuller account of how critique arises and functions as a source of change.<sup>26</sup> In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler argues that, although my understanding of things is always mediated by a set of terms, these terms are not beyond revision. In fact, sometimes what I encounter makes me question the terms by which I would otherwise attempt to understand it. In this way, the terms of recognition become "subject to a critical opening."<sup>27</sup> These are two of the ways, then, that Butler attempts to account for how discourse comes to change. While Butler remains vigilant about what the "so-called common language" might foreclose, she cannot commit herself to the notion that language is simply a one-sided projection onto things, unresponsive and unchanging. While she is attentive to the way that certain discourses shape our lives, she, like Gadamer, rejects linguistic determinism.<sup>28</sup>

Third, in addition to emphasizing the way that we are immersed in a language that is shared with others, Butler also argues for the ethical importance of remaining open to the other's address. This argument is an extension of Butler's theory of critique and one that is influenced substantially by Emmanuel Levinas' ethics. For Levinas, my habitual ways of understanding what I encounter in the world are interrupted by the encounter with the other. The encounter

makes the terms of recognition that I have available appear inadequate to me. This is why the object of the encounter is “the Other.” They are “other” in the sense that they elude the operations of discursive judgment that I would typically use to understand them. In this sense, “the Other [*Autru*] remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign [*étranger*].”<sup>29</sup> My relation to the other is, we might say, a relation of non-relation.

It may seem as though this interruption could only arise with the encroachment of some sensory, non-discursive stimuli, but Levinas argues that it is actually the interlocutory scene that most forcefully brings about this relation of non-relation. This is because a conversation requires that one refrain from reducing their interlocutor to an object to be known. There may certainly be times where the theme or subject matter of some conversation is a person, but this is something very different than engaging that person in conversation. To converse with someone is, as we have seen, to *listen* to them, taking them as a source of world disclosure. Levinas explains, “In discourse the divergence that inevitably opens between the Other as my theme and the Other as my interlocutor, emancipated from the theme that seemed a moment to hold him, forthwith contests the meaning I ascribe to my interlocutor.”<sup>30</sup>

It is significant, from a hermeneutic standpoint, that it is within an interlocutory scene, a situation oriented toward mutual understanding, that the relation to the other is most forcefully set forth. This suggests that my relation to the other emerges in the context of trying to understand the world together. I relate to the other as a co-participant in world disclosure. When I do this, I share a world in common with them. The emphasis here on commonality may seem inappropriate, given the Levinasian regard for the absolute alterity of the Other. The point, though, is that, whenever I engage in this activity of co-disclosure with another, I must really listen to them. I must, in other words, take them as a source of understanding distinct from myself. This is how conversation can aim at the development of mutual understanding while also enabling me to encounter the other as other.

Butler draws from this account in Levinas alongside resources in psychoanalysis (in particular, Jean LaPlanche) to explain how the scene of address puts the speaking subject always in relationship to the other. Butler argues that it is only first by being addressed that we come into language. This is how children first come to speak. I give an account of myself when I am prompted to do so. Yet the enabling condition of address is almost always obscured by the narrative that I give of myself. I rarely acknowledge in the account that I give the way that my

account has been shaped by those who have addressed me. In this sense, I remain opaque to myself. As Butler writes, “One enters into a communicative environment as an infant and child who is addressed and who learns certain ways of addressing in return. The default patterns of this relationality emerge as the opacity within any account of oneself.”<sup>31</sup>

It is not only in childhood though that address plays a formative role in our speech. Address functions this way throughout our lives, interrupting our narratives and continually remapping our sources of world disclosure. Put another way, each scene of address prompts a critical opening that puts a given discourse into question. This applies nowhere more clearly than in the case of that discourse that I rely on to understand my interlocutor. In the scene of address, I encounter another whom it seems I cannot (I must not) understand within the existing terms of recognition available to me. After all, if I only encounter them in such terms, I cannot also perceive them as the source of address. What addresses me, insofar as it addresses me, is not an object like other objects. What it demands from me is a critical interrogation of my language, my understanding, up to this point.

It is not hard to see why Butler, like Levinas, argues that being addressed by the other in this way is the necessary condition of any ethical deliberation about how I ought to treat others. Before I can engage in ethical deliberation, I must already have found myself in the world with others, in a state of what Butler calls “unchosen proximity.”<sup>32</sup> I must already have received the other’s address. Butler argues that we must keep this in mind as we engage in ethical deliberation, since any attempt to negate this condition of unchosen proximity will undermine the ground of ethics itself. For many, though, ethical deliberation proceeds precisely by deciding which of those with whom I share the world I am ethically obligated to. Those who fall outside of this sphere then cease to make any claim on me. Indeed, they become virtually unintelligible as subjects with moral status. Even here it is possible that I find myself addressed in unexpected ways, that I encounter the other who falls outside of the sphere in which I imagine my moral obligations encompassed. It is also possible, though, that I cultivate an attitude of responsiveness and openness such that I attune myself to the other’s claim. There are then different ways that I can respond to the unchosen proximity of the other.

For Butler, then, to dwell in language means, on the one hand, to be thrown into forms of world disclosure that we have not chosen. There is no overcoming such a condition. This means that the goal of linguistic authenticity put forward in the work of authors like Spender and

Cixous is untenable. At the same time, Butler also makes clear that dwelling in language means at times finding ourselves responsible for (or, better, responsive to) the discourses into which we find ourselves thrown. This bespeaks a commitment to ongoing critique, one propelled by an interpretive attitude that is responsive to the other's address. This twofold characterization of our relationship to language is essential to Butler's philosophy, just as it is essential to the hermeneutic tradition that Butler draws upon. Butler insists that we overlook neither side of this tension — neither the fact that we are immersed in discourse from the start nor the demand upon us to critically examine this discourse. Gadamer too was quite clear that we never escape the hermeneutic circle. It is where we start from and where we return to again and again in our attempt to understand. As David Loy puts it: "The life we are thrown into is a storied one where the task of interpretation is unavoidable and always incomplete."<sup>33</sup>

Earlier in the chapter, I said that I wanted to broaden our understanding of the contributions of Continental feminism to the philosophy of language. One might wonder at this point, then, what this point about our hermeneutic condition has to do with feminist philosophy and what, if anything, with women in particular. After all, gender was not a meaningful subject within the seminal works of philosophical hermeneutics. Moreover, as I have tried to explain here, the assumption of linguistic authenticity that so often underwrites identity politics is incompatible in important ways with a hermeneutic understanding of language. But the hermeneutic account fits feminist philosophy well if we think about the importance for feminist philosophy of (a) recognizing and not pathologizing the deep relational bonds that we have with others and (b) recognizing, at the same time, the need to critically examine these bonds. A hermeneutic approach to discourse thus makes sense for a feminist theorist, like Butler, who wants to recognize and even value our social bonds with others while still insisting on the importance of social critique.<sup>34</sup> For some time now, feminist philosophy has pursued these two ends — ends which are often taken to be incompatible with one another. A hermeneutic philosophy of language, like the one articulated by Butler, can thus be helpful in shedding light on the compatibility of these two commitments and thus the cohesion of the field of feminist inquiry.

It is clear, then, that the hermeneutic theory of language does not apply only to women. It is explicitly a theory about understanding *in general*. Stepping aside from the terrain mapped out by classical philosophical hermeneutics, though, we might consider the different roles that men



and women tend to play in the interlocutory exchanges that bring about understanding. Is it the case that women and men on average contribute an equal amount of listening? Do men and women display the same responsiveness to the address of the other, bringing the same interpretive attitude to the conversations they enter into? If not, what are the consequences for women?<sup>35</sup> Over the last few decades, researchers in feminist sociolinguistics have produced a number of studies that show a discrepancy in the way that such conversational roles are distributed. In the next section, I turn to examine this discrepancy, focusing particular attention on the treatment of the subject by Sandra Bartky, a feminist philosopher who brought together hermeneutic phenomenology and Marxist theory in order to better understand the subordination of women. In turning to Bartky, then, I hope to illustrate another place in Continental feminism where the investigation of language as a site of women's subordination is consistent with the hermeneutic account of language that I have been developing throughout the book.

### **The Sexual Division of Emotional Labor: Bartky on Women as Empathetic Listeners**

Bartky's landmark volume, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, sheds light on the everyday sources of women's subordination, that is, on the everyday habits that over time contribute to the disempowerment of women. In one of the book's essays, "Feeding Egos and Tending Wounds: Deference and Disaffection in Women's Emotional Labor," Bartky explores how taking on a heavy burden of what she calls "emotional caretaking" leads women to become alienated from the capacities they have as linguistic beings.

What does it mean to provide emotional labor? Bartky explains:

To give such support, then, is to tend to a person's state of mind in such a way as to make his sinking less likely; it is to offer him comfort, typically by the bandaging up of his emotional wounds or to offer him sustenance, typically by the feeding of his self-esteem. The aim of this supporting and sustaining is to produce or to maintain in the one supported and sustained a conviction of the value and importance of his own chosen projects, hence of the value and importance of his own person.<sup>36</sup>

Women typically do more of this emotional caregiving than men. Indeed, Bartky suggests that it is a willingness to bear the burden of such emotional support that we tend to identify with the virtue of “female tenderness.” Arguing, however, that women must locate their subordination “in the duties we are happy to perform and in what we thought were the innocent pleasures of everyday life,”<sup>37</sup> Bartky takes a closer look at the form of disempowerment that so often results when women invest themselves fully in the role of emotional caretaker.

Bartky begins her analysis in this essay by considering the answer to this question offered by Marxist feminist writer, Ann Ferguson, who argues that men’s reliance upon women’s emotional labor is a form of exploitation that parallels the capitalist’s exploitation of workers. Ferguson points out that the expectation for women to act as caretakers is essential to the sexual division of labor and to how women’s labor becomes systematically exploited by men.<sup>38</sup> Now, to understand Ferguson’s argument, we should be clear about how she is using the term “exploitation.” “Exploitation” here refers specifically to a relationship between two parties where one party disproportionately extracts the value produced from another’s labor. Ferguson takes up the term from Marx’s labor theory of value.<sup>39</sup> It is important to also clarify that to speak about exploitation in this sense is to imply neither that the exploited party feels wronged or harmed by the arrangement nor that the exploiting party acts with the intention to harm. Both may be the case in a given situation of exploitation, but in the modern world, exploitation usually occurs in relationships which both parties understand for the most part as a free and equal exchange.<sup>40</sup> Theorists often use the concept of exploitation, then, to make clear how a given relationship, despite the appearance of an equal exchange, transfers value disproportionately to one party. The worker believes the wages they earn are fair compensation for the work they provide, but, in fact, the capitalist only profits if the value that the labor produces is greater than what the laborer is paid. Similarly, Ferguson argues, women often accept a disproportionate burden of caretaking responsibilities in their social relationships with men, believing that their own need for care will still be satisfied from their male partners in the end, even if they themselves provide more, and in many cases believing that, even if they come up short on care, they are fairly compensated in some other ways, namely, by being financially provided for and/or being given certain honors and other social entitlements as a valued caretaker. In reality, though, Ferguson argues, relationships built on such a division of labor are problematic in that the one in the role of the primary caretaker ends up giving a lot more than she receives. Men profit in many ways —

psychologically, financially, even politically — from the emotional caretaking provided to them by women, and they do little as a whole to reciprocate such care. Women’s emotional labor is thus commonly exploited. Again, though, this doesn’t mean that men intentionally take advantage of women’s care, nor that women who are being exploited in this way are conscious of the fact that they are getting a raw deal. As Bartky explains, quoting Ferguson:

Girls learn ‘to find satisfaction in the satisfaction of others, and to place their needs second in the case of a conflict.’ Men, on the other hand, ‘learn such skills are women’s work, learn to demand nurturance from women yet don’t know how to nurture themselves.’ Women, like workers, are caught within a particular division of labor which requires that they produce more of a good — here, nurturance — than they receive in return.<sup>41</sup>

Bartky explains that this kind of caretaking can take many forms. It can involve, for example, a woman putting aside her own interests (or the possibility of developing new interests of her own) and putting aside her own time to support and sustain the interests of her male partner. For example, she may become interested in his hobbies, accompanying him on fishing trips or to football games, things that he was interested in before they met. She may enjoy doing these things insofar as he enjoys them and she enjoys supporting him. Another form that this pattern might take is a woman’s deferring to her husband’s choices, values, and/or ways of understanding the world. Indeed, this may result from the gradual appropriation of his interests and activities. A wife, for example, may defer to her husband’s political standpoint or to his judgment on important decisions (e.g., which house to buy, how to spend the family’s summer vacation, whether or not a particular man is an acceptable match for their daughter, etc.). There is, of course, a spectrum here, and not all heterosexual couples that participate in a sexual division of labor divide up such responsibilities in the same way. But seeing these behaviors on a spectrum allows us to see the common thread among them. In the most extreme case, we have a figure like Teresa Stangl, wife of Fritz Stangl, Kommandant of Treblinka, a Catholic who had moral objections to Nazism and was appalled by her husband’s work but “maintained home and hearth as a safe harbor to which he returned when he could.”<sup>42</sup> Reflecting on the moral shortcomings of Stangl, Bartky insists, “Few of us would take female tenderness to these lengths,

but many of us, I suspect, have been morally silenced or morally compromised in small ways because we thought it more important to provide emotional support than to keep faith with our own principles.”<sup>43</sup> Many women have indeed internalized the idea that “standing by your man” regardless of what he does is a virtue for women. Now, it may seem strange to call such behaviors acts of “labor,” since acts of deference hardly seem like work. However, the accomplishment of such deference requires the performance of concrete actions, actions which take their toll over time on the one who performs them and that benefit the one for whom they are performed. This becomes even more clear when we consider how the expectation of female caretaking takes a commercialized form in the care and attention expected from nurses, flight attendants, secretaries, and service workers – jobs that are traditionally and still primarily occupied by women.

Bartky describes this work as “emotional caretaking” but could just as well have called it “interlocutory caretaking,” since it is almost always the case that the service of emotional care is provided to a man through various communicative gestures that reinforce the importance and coherence of what he is saying. Bartky mentions, for example, the tendency of women to offer “a variety of verbal signals (sometimes called ‘conversational cheerleading’) that incite him to continue speaking, hence reassuring him of the importance of what he is saying.”<sup>44</sup> Bartky's argument echoes that made in a number of studies over the last few decades that have shown women to provide more “backchannel communication” to men than what men tend to provide them.<sup>45</sup> Backchannel responses (or what Bartky colloquially refers to as “conversational cheerleading”) are those that serve to positively assess and reinforce what is being said by the other speaker. These can take a variety of short verbal forms — lexical and non-lexical (e.g., “uh huh,” “interesting,” “I see,” “hmm,” “really?,” “amazing,” “that’s terrible,” etc.). They can also include more substantive forms of reinforcement, such as asking for further elaboration or deliberately echoing the account just given in order to express one's agreement with it. Non-verbal gestures also provide an important form of interlocutory support. These gestures include not only nodding but a wide range of subtle ways of communicating empathy, such as “the compassionate squeezing of a hand” or “the sympathetic frowning of a brow.”<sup>46</sup>

Of course, it is important for us all to have empathetic listeners, even “conversational cheerleaders.” Authors like Jennifer Coates, Sara Mills, and Kathryn Scott<sup>47</sup> are thus right to point out that that these habits of communication are not fundamentally disabling in themselves

and that they serve an important role in maintaining the smooth functioning of a group's interaction. As I have been arguing throughout the book, the capacity to use language to interpret and reinterpret the world is of tremendous value but, as we saw in the previous chapter, the exercise of this capacity hinges on knowing that there are others who will or who at least might listen to me. To participate in the disclosure of the world through speech requires that I believe there is some other for whom my speech or writing takes place. In the last chapter, we explored this in terms of the importance of bearing witness to those who have undergone trauma, since their own capacity to develop an understanding of what they have undergone requires that others are willing to bear witness to what they have to say. Bartky too recognizes the importance of having an empathetic listener in one's life, someone who can nurture the accounts that we give of what we have experienced, seen, figured out, and so on. At the same time, she points out, that "here, as elsewhere, men's needs are not only likelier to be satisfied than women's needs but satisfied at women's expense."<sup>48</sup> The point, then, is not that all one-way channels of communication, where one person plays backchannel for another, are bad. This sort of interlocutory caretaking is, indeed, vital for all of us to perform and receive at times. The problem emerges, for Bartky, only at the point where a woman takes on so much of this caretaking work that her ability to actively engage in interpreting the world becomes diminished. Borrowing Marx's concept, Bartky refers to this situation as "alienation."<sup>49</sup>

By focusing on alienation, Bartky's understanding of the harm that can accompany emotional labor differs slightly from the account presented by Ferguson. While Ferguson understands the harm to lie specifically in the exploitation that occurs through the unequal exchange, that is, in how women provide more emotional labor than they receive, Bartky argues that the real harm lies in women surrendering their capacity to construct a worldview for themselves or, as she puts it, "the capacity, free from the subtle manipulation of consent, to construct an ethical and epistemic standpoint of one's own."<sup>50</sup> In the first chapter, I explained that there is a certain kind of empowerment that occurs when one develops into a linguistic being. As a linguistic being, the meaning of things and the ends to which I am directed are not just given to me to accept as-is but require that I engage myself in the task of interpretation. When I regularly direct my powers of world disclosure to serve as a backchannel for another's, however, I am stunted in the development of this capacity. Like Marx, then, for whom the capacity of creative labor is essential to human fulfillment, Bartky understands alienation to

consist not in the conscious awareness of being harmed or cheated but in the diminishment of that capacity that is essential to human flourishing. Bartky reformulates Marx's concept of alienation, however, to focus not on the loss of creative labor in general but specifically on the loss of the creative labor of linguistic meaning-making – that capacity that, for hermeneutic phenomenology, is essential to human existence.

In the next chapter, we will have the chance to look more closely at the consequences of becoming firmly entrenched in this form of alienation by looking at one specific communicative interaction where the reduction of two-way communication to one-way communication is particularly detrimental, namely, the interaction between therapist and patient. Here again I will rely on feminist research on patterns in communication related to gender. In particular, I will draw from the clinical research of Julia Kristeva, an important figure in the Continental feminist tradition, as well as research of psychologist, Dana Crowley Jack, both of whom explore the relationship between women's communication patterns and depression. Although the term "depression" may be more ready-to-hand for us than the concept of alienation, I argue that the depression they describe is one that is intimately bound up with the habits of linguistic alienation that Bartky identifies.

Such linguistic alienation cannot be properly understood with a model of language that brackets out the influence of others on one's speech, taking this kind of mediation as a violation of one's linguistic authenticity. This model, which contemporary identity politics makes quite tempting, overlooks the essential role that others have in one's own linguistic identification and risks rendering invisible the value of empathetic listening alongside other forms of interlocutory caregiving. To value such things does not mean turning a blind eye, however, to the problem of women's silence. One can both recognize responsiveness as valuable for the linguistic being while taking seriously the harm that can result from over-investing in such a role. To do this, I argue, we need a critical feminist perspective, one where we both affirm that world-disclosure is always a shared undertaking but also give due attention to the power dynamics that can emerge within these social relations. In this chapter, I hope to have developed the contours of such a perspective by highlighting the productive points of overlap between feminist theory and philosophical hermeneutics. It is this perspective from which my analysis in the next chapter proceeds.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 569.

<sup>2</sup> Michaele L. Ferguson, "Sharing Without Knowing: Collective Identity in Feminist and Democratic Theory," *Hypatia* 22, no. 4 (2007): 30.

<sup>3</sup> Georgia Warnke, "Race, Gender, and Antiessentialist Politics," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, no. 1 (2005): 93.

<sup>4</sup> Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 12.

<sup>5</sup> I am referring here to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that I presented in the book's introduction. For an account of the connection between this theory of language and feminist theory, see Michael J. Schneider and Karen A. Foss, "Thought, Sex, and Language: The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in the American Women's Movement," *Women's Studies in Communication* 1, no. 1 (1977): 1-7 and Deborah Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (London: Macmillan Press, 1992), 133.

<sup>6</sup> Spender, *Man Made Language*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Significant landmarks in the development of Muted Group Theory and its application to women include: Edwin Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Women" and "The 'Problem' Revisited," in *Perceiving Women*, ed. Shirley Ardener (London: Malaby Press, 1975); Shirley Ardener, *Defining Females: The Nature of Women in Society* (London: Croom Helm, 1978); and Cheri Kramarae, *Women and Men Speaking* (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Cartographies of Silence," in *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Deborah Cameron, for example, argues that the foundation of Rich's rhetoric can be found in Muted Group Theory. See Deborah Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, 130.

<sup>10</sup> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of Medusa," in *The Women and Language Debate: A Sourcebook*, ed. Camille Roman, Suzanne Juhasz, and Cristanne Miller (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 81.

<sup>11</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of Medusa," 80.

<sup>12</sup> “The new history is coming; it’s not a dream, though it does extend beyond men’s imagination . . . . It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist.” Cixous, “The Laugh of Medusa,” 84.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that Butler studied with Gadamer in 1979 during her year as a Fulbright Scholar in Heidelberg. Butler rarely mentions Gadamer in her writing, but, as I hope to show, her project carries forward important insights from the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Subordination,” in *Inside Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 13-31.

<sup>16</sup> Judith Butler, “Undiagnosing Gender,” in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 75-101.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?,” in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 102-130.

<sup>18</sup> In *Gender Trouble*, Butler asks: “Is there a history of how the duality of sex was established, a genealogy that might expose the binary options as a variable construction? Are the ostensibly natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests?” Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 10.

<sup>19</sup> While I bring these titles up just to illustrate some of the ways that we use categories of gender to interpret our leaves, even in cases where the relevance of gender is unclear, I would be remiss if I did not also point out the role that such literature plays in mystifying the nature of women’s subordination. These books and others like them mislead women about the nature of their struggles. Worst of all, they suggest that they themselves are responsible for their struggles. Unfortunately, too many readers gravitate toward the solutions that they offer instead of consulting more systemic analyses.

<sup>20</sup> See Helen E. Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990) and Helen E. Longino, *The Fate of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> In “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” Nietzsche casts suspicion on the concept of truth by arguing that what we normally think of as being truthful amounts to no more than



using conventional, agreed-upon terms to describe the world and that this conventional usage provides us with nothing but illusions. “Truths,” Nietzsche famously says, “are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are . . .” Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1982), 47.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 174. See my discussion of Heidegger’s concept of *Geworfenheit* (thrownness) in Chapter 1.

<sup>23</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 278-96; also, Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), 9.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 75. See my discussion of this theme in Heidegger’s work in Chapter 2.

<sup>25</sup> Warnke finds a similar parallel between Butler and the hermeneutic tradition on this point. See Georgia Warnke, “Hermeneutics and Constructed Identities,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lorraine Code (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 72-73.

<sup>26</sup> Butler develops this in part in response to criticism that she received from Seyla Benhabib. See Seyla Benhabib, “Feminism and Postmodernism,” in *Feminist Contentions* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 17-34.

<sup>27</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 24.

<sup>28</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “To What Extent Does Language Preform Thought?” in *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 568-75.

<sup>29</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 194.

<sup>30</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195.

<sup>31</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 63.

<sup>32</sup> Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 24.

<sup>33</sup> David Loy, *The World is Made of Stories* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010), 10.

<sup>34</sup> Regarding the importance of both tasks in Butler's work, see Carolyn Culbertson, "The Ethics of Relationality: Judith Butler and Social Critique," *Continental Philosophy Review* 46, no. 3 (2013): 449-63.

<sup>35</sup> These questions carry forward the project that Robin Pappas and William Cowling call "critical hermeneutics," which involves "extending Gadamerian hermeneutics to incorporate gendered, political, and social aspects of understanding." Robin Pappas and William Cowling, "Toward a Critical Hermeneutics," in *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lorraine Code (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 206.

<sup>36</sup> Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 102.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

<sup>38</sup> Ann Ferguson, *Blood at the Root: Motherhood, Sexuality, and Male Dominance* (London: Pandora, 1989).

<sup>39</sup> See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 218.

<sup>40</sup> See Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).

<sup>41</sup> Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 100.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 102.

<sup>45</sup> For a summary of these studies, see Elizabeth Aries, *Men and Women in Interaction: Reconsidering the Differences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). See also Judith A. Hall, et al, "Gender and Medical Encounters: An Analysis of Physician and Patient Communication in a Primary Care Setting," *Health Psychology* 13, no. 5 (1994): 384-92.

<sup>46</sup> Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 103.

<sup>47</sup> See Jennifer Coates, “Gossip Revisited: Language in All-Female Groups” in *Language and Gender: A Reader*, ed. Jennifer Coates and Pia Pichler (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Sara Mills, “Discourse Competence: Or How to Theorize Strong Women Speakers,” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (1992): 4-17; and Kathryn Scott, “Perceptions of Communication Competence: What’s Good for the Goose is not Good for the Gander,” *Women’s Studies International Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1990): 199-208.

<sup>48</sup> Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 113.

<sup>49</sup> “This relation is the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him; it is activity as suffering, strength as weakness, begetting as emasculating, the worker’s *own* physical and mental energy, his personal life – for what is life but activity? – as an activity which is turned against him, independent of him and not belonging to him.” Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988), 75.

<sup>50</sup> Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 117.