

Heidegger and postmodernism: considerations on language

Abstract: Postmodernism has given language and discourse a prominent role in the Humanities. Such concern with language can be seen as a result of the influential work of Martin Heidegger, who criticized the Cartesian tradition and advocated a new way of doing Philosophy. This essay examines how Heidegger's ideas and especially the language he used in his main work, *Sein und Zeit*, have given rise to theoretical perspectives that can be interpreted both as a genial rupture with philosophical tradition and as a complete failure to engage in meaningful political agency outside the discursive arena.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Martin Heidegger, language, Philosophy.

Resumo: O Pós-modernismo atribuiu à língua e ao discurso um papel predominante nas discussões na área das Humanidades. Tal interesse pela língua pode ser visto como resultado da obra de Martin Heidegger, que criticou a tradição cartesiana e defendeu uma nova Filosofia. Este artigo examina como as idéias de Heidegger e, sobretudo, a linguagem empregada por ele em seu principal livro, *Sein und Zeit*, deram origem a perspectivas teóricas que podem ser interpretadas tanto como uma ruptura com a tradição filosófica quanto como uma total incapacidade de engajamento político significativo fora da arena discursiva.

Palavras-chave: Pós-modernismo, Martin Heidegger, língua/linguagem, filosofia.

According to Terry Eagleton, postmodernism¹ has caused as much harm as good. Although we have to recognise that the notions of difference and of unstable, relative knowledge have opened the scientific and political arena to manifestations of minorities that would otherwise still be kept silent, other consequences of postmodernism are quite worrying. For Eagleton, the politics of postmodernism

[H]ave been at once enrichment and evasion. If they have opened up vital new political questions, it is partly because they have beat an undignified retreat from older political issues – not because these have disappeared or been resolved, but because they are for the moment proving intractable....Feminism and ethnicity are popular today because they are markers in the mind of some of the most vital political struggles we confront

in reality. They are also popular because they are not necessarily anti-capitalism, and so fit well enough with a post-radical age (1996, p. 24).

It seems that the critique of traditional philosophy and science adopted by the authors linked to postmodernism have launched a process in which objective knowledge about the world is under suspicion. The obvious result is a lack of certainty about the possibility and validity of human action on the world. If everything is relative, if a pluralistic view replaces the notion of a rational truth, and even language and communication are problematized to such an extent as to challenge the possibility of understanding, it is more difficult to engage in any form of action that demands believing in something that can be deemed as universal, including concepts such as human rights, freedom and democracy.

The questioning of the Cartesian concept of truth and knowledge is basic to the postmodern agenda and in that sense, postmodernism can be considered as a radicalization of concerns and claims expressed in the philosophy associated with the transcendental tradition. One of the most important thinkers in that tradition is the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, whose first book, *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*)², remains both controversial and inspiring today.

In many aspects, Heidegger's influence on subsequent philosophical developments and, thus, on the allegedly incapacity of the postmodern man to escape apathy is undeniable. Even when not always acknowledged or when mediated by Derridean or Sartrean thought in the works of more contemporary writers, many of the points of the Heideggerian approach underlie postmodern theories, for example:

- His destruction/deconstruction of ontological tradition with its cartesian rational and conscious subject;
- His claim (or acknowledgement) that man is influenced by something over which he does not have much control and which is prior to understanding;
- His emphasis on the human being within his/her own experiences as a *locus* for philosophical inquiry (Being-in-the-world and towards-the-world);
- His emphasis on the special relation between Being and language.

These are perspectives that echoed in the writings of prominent authors like Gadamer, Sartre, Arendt, Derrida, Foucault, Levinas,

Lyotard and others, who themselves made substantial contributions to various philosophical movements, including Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, Existentialism, Deconstruction, and to the ideas sheltered under the umbrella term Postmodernism.

A characteristic of Heidegger's work that seemed particularly appealing to the authors mentioned above is language. Besides the so-called Heideggerian philosophy or theory of language, the way he concretely dealt with language in his own texts has itself stimulated many debates. His daring linguistic attitude in his writings has been seen by his followers as a stroke of genius and by his opponents as a sign of disregard for the reader, at best, and as the manifestation of his inability to express his ideas in a clear manner, at worst.

Interestingly enough, language, that Heidegger held in high esteem as an essential form of Being, has been regarded, by critics of the postmodern theories, as a refuge from the dangers and struggles of real life. The exaggerated concern with linguistic-philosophical matters, associating literary criticism, history, social theory, cultural studies and many more areas of inquiry, is seen as a disguise for inaction, in a move that feeds endlessly on discursive theoretical emptiness.

The accusation of omission has also been made against Heidegger's work. Some of his opponents see him as someone who allegedly chose to dedicate his talent to the inquiry of abstract and transcendental issues like Being and language in times that demanded more concrete actions (due, for example, independence wars in some of the former European colonies and the political changes in pre-second war Germany).

The problem of the potential double role that the Heideggerian use of language can assume represents perfectly the multilayered nuances that reality has for the postmodern thought. There can be many meanings simultaneously, depending on the reader/culture/group, within a play of hiding and revealing, of being and not-being.

This aspect of linguistic indetermination, which allows both for positive and negative reception, sets the tone of this article and is here associated with the fact that Heidegger's work can be and has been associated with good and bad aspects of postmodernism. This, however, should not be taken as an attack to his philosophy itself, but as a recognition of how rich and open to interpretation his work is, allowing to extreme readings and practices that Heidegger himself would have opposed (his claims that he was never an existentialist in Sartrean terms is an example³).

The Heideggerian language as used in his book *Sein und Zeit* is viewed here as a feature that can be regarded simultaneously as the

strongest and weakest aspect of the book: strong for its obvious novelty and its recognition of language as a problematic and fluctuating locus; weak because of the potential opening of language to no-meaning and, ultimately, no understanding.

Although deemed by some as the main philosophical work of 20th century philosophy, Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* has also been the object of other kinds of reaction. His followers, the Heideggerians, are numerous and are as if enchanted by Heidegger's approach to philosophy, to language, to history and to the *Seinsfrage* or question of Being. His antagonists condemn his arguably naïve claims and his difficult mode of expression. George Steiner, one of Heidegger's admirers himself, has summarized the attacks the latter's work has received with the following words:

His writings are a thicket of impenetrable verbiage; the questions he poses are sham-questions; the doctrines he puts forward are, so far as anything at all can be made of them, either false or trivial. To try and analyse Heideggerian 'ontology', the study and theory of the nature of being or existence, is to speak or to speak of nonsense – non-sense, in the most drastic connotations of the term (1978, pp. 11-12).

Surprisingly, Heidegger has also been dismissed as being a mere "language-mystic", a "meta-theologian", an ominous symptom of the moral and intellectual disarray of our time" (*ibid*, p. 11), a pseudo-thinker not worthy of being called a philosopher. On the same page of his book, Steiner notices, for example, that Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* does not even mention Heidegger's work. Besides the indifference of some distinct authors (like Russell), Heidegger's dubious *liaisons* with the German Nazi regime were also an obstacle to those who wanted to portray him as the precursor of a new era of understanding.

Heidegger has declared that searching for "influences and dependencies among thinkers is to misunderstand thinking" as for him every "thinker is dependent – upon the address of Being" (1975, p. 55). Taking the risk of misunderstanding thinking, one should, however, understand Heidegger's view on philosophy within the German Philosophy, which was built on a tradition of thinkers like Hegel, Kant and Nietzsche. Obviously those were very influential in Heidegger's writings, but he was also interested in the writings of Brentano and Kierkegaard and closely attached to Dilthey's hermeneutics and especially to Husserl's phenomenology. It is fair to say that Heidegger was drawn to the issue of transcendental philosophy, of trying to

understand what underlies human knowledge. His affiliation to Christian theology is also well known, to the point that Caputo claims that Heidegger reads the texts of Greek philosophers “not scientifically or philosophically but religiously”, as texts that “demand our self-transformation” (Caputo, 2000, p. 88).

In broad terms, the work of transcendental philosophers in the 19th and 20th centuries can be deemed as a critique to the direction the world was taking in terms of dealing with knowledge. The emphasis on reason as the essence of all understanding, translated in the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, was the motto for what was later called a logocentric⁴ perspective of knowledge, in which the subject was completely separated from the object, and the scientific methods were the only path to real or valid knowledge. As science was ascribed to the role of owner of truth, philosophy was then left with the secondary role of reaffirming the supremacy of sciences or speculating about the nature of scientific knowledge. Human existence as an issue in itself was not the main concern of philosophy. This approach was, of course, associated with the Enlightenment and gave origin to modernism and modernity.

It was within a philosophical reaction against the claims that science was the holder of knowledge that Heidegger wrote *Sein und Zeit*. Published in 1927, the book starts with the statement that we are no longer perplexed by existence, as were the first Greek philosophers. Heidegger claimed that the fundamental question of Being was not asked anymore, that the matter of Being was of no relevance, and that Being had become a familiar concept, domesticated in the name of the more important search for knowledge about things or beings. Bringing back the concern about Being into philosophy was, therefore, the main objective of *Sein und Zeit*.

Based on the notions of elementary understanding and lived experience in Dilthey’s work, according to whom understanding “arises, first of all, in the interest of practical life where people are dependant on dealing with each other” (Dilthey, 2000, p. 154) and “all understanding contains something irrational because life is irrational; it cannot be represented in a logical formula” (*idem*, p. 162), Heidegger advocated that knowledge was based on something pretheoretical and preconceptual and, therefore, was not in the reach of purely rational scientific investigation. For him, understanding involved more than what could be taken from experiments and scientific analysis. Furthermore, the idea of a subject that could be detached from the object he was observing led to the notion that both subject and object

could be independent and stable entities, whose essence would remain the same in any place or point in time. Heidegger called this the present-at-hand prejudice, which can be read as the belief that things only exist as long as they are present. This idea would be developed later by Derrida, in his concept of metaphysics of presence:

The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix ... is the determination of being as presence is all the senses of this word. It would be possible to show that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the I center have always designated the constant of a presence – *eidos*, *arche*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject), *aletheia* [truth], transcendentality, consciousness or conscience, God, man, and so forth (Derrida, 1978, p. 280).

The Heideggerian Being is a matter of projection, of becoming or choosing one of the many possibilities the being has as an entity in the world in a given time. It is, therefore, neither stable nor independent of temporal and special conditions. His Being is the “am” or “is”, the being conjugated in the present tense, made concrete in time and not frozen in some theoretical analysis detached from living. “Present” here does not mean a return to the present-at-hand perspective mentioned above. It should be taken as the temporal experience of Being, with its connections to the past and obviously to the future. In that sense, the way to the Meaning of Being is the understanding of what it is “to be an experiencer having experiences” (Ryle, 1978, p. 58), an entity actually living in the world.

This contextualized perspective makes it possible to formulate the only worthy question – what is Being? –, the question of Being, the *Seinsfrage*. Heidegger claimed that this should be the primary concern of philosophy and hermeneutics. However, he is not interested in giving an answer to the *Seinsfrage*, and, in fact, he never does that. His work is a preparatory one, directed to the inquiry of Being, but more concerned with the inquirer, the one who cares about the Being, the one who is asking the question. For Heidegger, the inquirer is the fundamental element for dealing with the *Seinsfrage*, and he calls this inquirer *Dasein*, the “I” who thinks and in particular is asking the questions, using the methods, and appreciating the answers that I am now doing” (Ryle, *idem*). Heidegger defines the *Dasein* as the “entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being” (B/T, p. 27). This entity, the *Dasein*, needs to be understood and made transparent so that the question of Being can be asked adequately. Without dealing with the one who is intending existence,

the approach to the *Seinsfrage* is never right, because the very foundations of the enquiry are ignored.

The intricate relation between *Dasein* and the *Seinsfrage* is expressed by Heidegger with the following words:

The question of the meaning of Being is the most universal and the emptiest of questions, but at the same time it is possible to individualize it very precisely for any particular *Dasein*. If we are to arrive at the basic concept of 'Being' and to outline the ontological conceptions which it requires and the variations which it necessarily undergoes, we need a clue which is concrete. We shall proceed towards the concept of Being by way of an Interpretation of a certain special entity, *Dasein*... (B/T, p. 63)

He is addressing what it means to be a special kind of Being: a being that relates to the world, to time and to other human beings and things. And also to the question of being itself. Heidegger's ontology can be phrased as: what is it to be a Being that thinks about its being? What constitutes this *Dasein*?

For him, the *Seinsfrage* should be fundamental to any inquiry, because the inquirer has to be seen as he/she really is: a living Being-in-the-world, acting in the world and towards the world. His/her existence is contextualized, temporal, at the same time enhanced and limited by the possibilities of "becoming" he/she faces in life.

As the notion of a temporal and contextualized "Being-who-thinks-about-Being" is in complete opposition to the Cartesian rational subject, Heidegger's authentic *Dasein* demands a critique of the ontological tradition in philosophy. He believed this tradition was responsible for the establishment of a set of presuppositions that prevents men from seeing things by themselves and ultimately from thinking outside the concepts it formulated. Its process is one of naturalization, of making something familiar to the extent of invisibility. For Heidegger,

Tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence; it blocks our access to those primordial 'sources' from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part quite genuinely drawn (B/T, p. 43).

Later on, in a different text, Heidegger would add that

[w]hat matters to preparatory thinking is to light up that space within which Being itself might again be able to take man, with respect to his essence, into a primal relationship. To be preparatory is the essence of such thinking (*apud* Wrathall, 2000, p. 23)⁵.

Accordingly, rather than giving answers, Heidegger's work attempts to reveal the reasons why we do not have the answers, why we can not even ask the questions properly. It is a work that is mainly concerned with what we do not know or with things of which we are not aware. He wants to show how blind we are in terms of our existence in the world, how we managed to lose touch with the meanings of things and ultimately with our own meaning when confronted to our existence: the *Dasein*. In that sense, his work relates both to presence and absence, light and shadow, possibility(ies) and impossibility(ies).

For Heidegger, the question of Being has to be treated from the phenomenological perspective. According to him, phenomenology is the space that allows the raising of the *Seinsfrage*, in a manner that is free from the metaphysics of subjectivity⁶. It is the method of the question of Being, which lies in interpretation and, ultimately in hermeneutics, "in the primordial signification of this word, where it designates this business of interpreting" (B/T, p. 62).

Heidegger's work was in fact one concerned with giving phenomenology a new and fresh perspective, free from the traditional Cartesian subjectivity. His commitment to prepare the path for this new way of doing phenomenology involves a curious and even revolutionary attitude/task: the undoing of philosophical language itself, an amazing adventure of playing with words and philosophical terms to unveil their pre-metaphysical meaning and interconnections. It was an attempt to use language to resuscitate primitive meanings, to rescue the language used to address phenomenological issues as meant by the first Greek philosophers.

Within the deconstructive objective of *Sein und Zeit* – the undoing of metaphysics within language –, language itself can be interpreted as a presupposition or as a meta-narrative, in the sense that it provides a framework that organizes our experiences and, therefore, underlies understanding. In postmodern terms, in his text Heidegger would be rejecting

[T]he empirical idea that language can represent reality, that the world is accessible to us through language because its objects are mirrored in the language we use. From this empirical point of view, language is transparent, a window on the world, and knowledge arises out of our direct experience of reality, undistorted and not contaminated by language (Bertens, 1995, p. 6).

Heidegger would then be displacing the illusion of rationality and conscious use of language to prove that there is more to understanding (and to language) than it was believed. At the same time, Heidegger's

language can be understood as a metaphor for the need to return to the basics, the original state of things, previous to the damage traditional philosophy has done to our capacity of thinking for ourselves, of seeing and understanding what is right before our eyes, the Being itself.

These claims are obviously problematic because they presuppose that Heidegger has some control over his own use of language, at least to a reasonable extent. He would then be falling back in the kind of false tradition or metaphysics he wanted to dismantle. As Eagleton would say, in one of his moments of fierce criticism of postmodernism political apathy, the house of Being, an image used by Heidegger (1998), has turned into a prison:

Perhaps we are all simply trapped within the prison house of our discourse. It is a revealing metaphor, which grasps language as obstacle rather than horizon, and one could imagine a bodily analogy to it: If only I could get out of my own head I could see whether there was anything out there... I could encounter the world directly (Eagleton, 1996, p. 12).

The fact is that Heidegger had always been intrigued by language. His belief in the intrinsic connection between language and Being seems to inform the text of *Sein und Zeit* and at the same time be reflected in it.

For Heidegger, language reveals the Being in its relation to the world. The discursive moment is not only about something, but it also has something in-the-talk that is disclosed. This something seems to be ontological, belonging to the condition of *Dasein* itself. Communication should be understood as the locus of constitution of "the Articulation of Being with one another understandingly" (B/T, p. 205), which is a view of communication that distances itself from the one that emphasizes the transmission of concepts or states of mind. The Heideggerian communication is related to the manifestation of a shared "co-state-of-mind" and understanding of Being-with. It is not, therefore, straightforward transmission of information from one person to the other.

Not surprisingly, reading *Sein und Zeit* is not an easy task. The style Heidegger uses is so unique that sometimes his text can be paired with literary production in the sense that the meaning or intention of the arguments are also inscribed in and reinforced by the language used to express them (maybe a hint that the division between signifier and signified is blurred). The relation between language and argumentation is such that George Steiner, in his book *Heidegger*, claims that "no aspect of Heideggerian thought can be divorced from the phenomenon of Heidegger's prose style" (1978, p. 16). Being a well-

known author of works on literature, translation and culture, Steiner was drawn to the issue of language in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*. He reflects on Heidegger's relation to language, on his digressions into etymology and on his creation of a new terminology. For Steiner, reading Heidegger's work is difficult because the reader has to operate with different tools of perception and understanding:

It is not understanding that Heidegger's discourse solicits primarily. It is an 'experiencing', an acceptance of felt strangeness. We are asked to suspend in ourselves the conventions of common logic and unexamined grammar in order to 'hear', to 'stand in the light of' – all these are radical Heideggerian notions – the nearing of elemental truths and possibilities of apprehension long-buried under the frozen crust of habitual, analytically credible saying (*idem*, p. 18).

Again, this is a point that raises disagreement. Rudolf Carnap, for example, considers Heidegger's writings meaningless, as would be those of someone who expresses himself through "pseudosentences", in a way not entirely acceptable in academic and philosophical discourse. For Carnap, Heidegger is a metaphysician torn between art and philosophy:

Metaphysicians are musicians without musical ability. Instead they have a strong inclination to work within the medium of the theoretical, to connect concepts and thoughts. Now, instead of activating, on the one hand, this inclination in the domain of science, and satisfying, on the other hand, the need for expression in art, the metaphysician confuses the two and produces a structure which achieves nothing for knowledge and something inadequate for the expression of attitude (Carnap, 1959, p. 50 *apud* Wrathall, 2000: p. 9)⁷.

Even if we understand Carnap's disdain as coming from an author who was associated with the analytical tradition in philosophy (Wrathall, 2000, p. 9), we must admit that Heidegger is quite demanding on his readers. The excerpts below were taken from the English version of *Sein und Zeit* (B/T), and they keep the difficulties posed by the original German text. They can exemplify how cumbersome his texts can be.

Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it. But in that case, this is a constitutive state of Dasein's Being, and this implies that Dasein, in its Being has a relationship towards that Being – a relationship which itself is one of Being (B/T p. 32).

We are ourselves the entities to be analysed. The Being of any such entity is *in each case mine*. These entities, in their Being, comport themselves towards their Being. As entities with such Being, they are delivered over to their own Being. *Being* is that is an issue for every such entity (*ibid*, p. 67).

Understanding is the Being of such potentiality-for-Being, which is never something outstanding as not yet present-at-hand, but which, as something which is essentially never present-a-hand, 'is' with the Being of Dasein, in the sense of existence (*ibid*, pp. 183-4).

Heidegger's estranging and disorienting language in *Sein und Zeit* can be understood as a device used within a specific agenda. It was instrumental for his point of making language, philosophy and finally the Being itself new to the reader. By doing that, he set an example followed by influential writers like Derrida, whose texts are a manifesto on the unmanageable paradoxes found within language and are also on the frontier between sense and non-sense, as in the following passage, in which Derrida deals with Being, meaning and *différance*:

Since Being has never had a 'meaning,' has never been thought or said as such, except by dissimulating itself in beings, then *différance*, in a certain and very strange way, (is) 'older' than the ontological difference or than the truth of Being. When it has this age it can be called the play of the trace. The play of the trace which no longer belongs to the horizon of Being, but whose play transports and encloses the meaning of Being: the play of the trace, or the *différance*, which has no meaning and is not. Which does not belong. There is no maintaining, and no depth to, this bottomless chessboard on which Being is put into play (Derrida, 1982, p. 22).

Heidegger coined new terms for his new approach to philosophy and phenomenology. The creation of new terms is a project that benefits from the tolerant nature of the German language, which generously allows Heidegger to stretch his linguistic creativity, both by derivation (affixes) and compounding (combination of two or more words). As results, his text is full of expressions like Being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-Sein*), Being-towards-Death (*Sein-zum-Tode*), Being-with (*Mitsein*), Present-at-Hand (*Vorhanden*)/Presence-at-Hand (*Vorhandenheit*), and, of course, *Dasein*, to name a few. As already mentioned, he wanted to go back to the experience of creating the language for philosophical concepts, like the Greek had done when they started thinking about Being. He combined words to form new ones, with their consequent fresh connotations, while keeping somehow the previous and simpler words, a sign that could be associated with the impossibility of ignoring one's own linguistic prison (or house) completely.

His neologisms are so simple that they can be compared to the language of children, maybe in an attempt to bring back the perplexity with which a child sees the world. In fact, Ryle refers to them as “nursery” words and phrases. According to him,

[T]he principle on which he seems to be designing his new terminology is, I should judge, the hypothesis that certain ‘nursery’ words and phrases have a primitiveness and freedom from sophistication which makes them more nearly adequate expressions of really primitive Meanings than the technical terms which science and philosophy in the course of a long development have established (Ryle, 1978, p. 57).

However, that apparent easiness, brought about by the everyday character of the primary words, entraps the reader and forces him/her to apply new ways of thinking about things to grasp the meanings of the “nursery words”. The use of “entraps” here is intentional as the reader has no way to escape this new language Heidegger creates; the only way out is looking at things-at-hand (concepts and words) with different eyes.

Heidegger’s interest in returning to the Greek roots of philosophical terms–phenomenology, for example–and his emphasis on the point that the Greek philosophers were part of a time before ontology was “reduced to something self-evident–merely material for reworking, as it was for Hegel” (B/T, p. 43) has to be seen, however, also in the light of the cultural nationalist movement in German culture, of which the idealization of Greek culture was an important part. The possibility of redoing philosophy in the German language places it alongside with Greek as the languages chosen for philosophical thought or, more specifically, as the houses of Being. As Caputo has put it, in a harsh criticism to Heidegger’s Eurocentric and Philhellenic views:

one does “think,” which means thinks poetically, *dichtendes Denken*, and that is exclusively and primordially a matter for early Greeks and Hölderlinian Germans. At the very least, if thinking is also permitted to French or Americans or Russians, they must switch to German to do so, as indeed it seems must the Most High Himself, the Ancient of Days, if He too would like to think Himself, as Aristotle thought he did all the time (2000, p. 95).

Within that context, and being aware that Heidegger blamed the translations from Greek to Latin for some of the misconceptions that resulted in the metaphysics of subjectivity, it is easy to infer that the translation of his own works would be quite an interesting *locus* to observe the relations between language, Being and thought and even

about the possibility of translation itself. Difficult questions can be asked: is it possible for the Being to live in a different house? Moving to a different house means being a different Being? It is hard to say.

We can say, however, that the translation of *Sein und Zeit* does expose some of the contradictions of those trying to cope with of the Heideggerian language in practical terms. This seems to be especially true if the translators are Heideggerians themselves, as it is the case with John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, the translators of the English version used for this essay. It is curious that even for them, the ideal of a faithful translation is still valid. The Being of Heidegger's thought would, therefore, be the same in a different language, in a different text, as if none of his statements had changed the traditional representational view of language. In their preface to their translation of *Sein und Zeit*, they claimed that

the ideal translation would perhaps be one so constructed that a reader with reasonable linguistic competence and a key to the translator's conventions should be able to retranslate the new version into the very words of the original. Everybody knows that this is altogether too much to demand; but the faithful translator must at least keep this ahead of him as a desirable though impracticable goal (1973, p. 13).

The translators felt the need to explain themselves to the readers, and this indicates how problematic it would be even to expect a text faithful to the original. They enumerated the various strategies they had used to produce an English version of Heidegger's text, such as coining new terms and using brackets, capitalization, footnotes, quotations of sentences and expressions in German. They also added a German-English glossary and an English-German index, not to mention the page numbers of the original text in the translated text to help the reader to deal with the Heideggerian thought in another language.

Interestingly, it seems that the translators' concepts of language were not modified by Heidegger or by the difficulties they faced. They did not open themselves to the ways of language(s) as have the thinkers and philosophers who came after Heidegger and whose readings of Heidegger were preparatory for postmodernism. The belief underlying the translation is that the faithful translation is a possibility, although it proves to be "impracticable".

Final considerations

The readings of Heidegger's work and the way it was interpreted and applied seem to have led to a point of theoretical impossibility for

hermeneutics, in the sense of the science of interpretation. Radical postmodernism has no faith in univocity or representation in experience, history or language, and the following question then arises: how can interpretation and understanding happen?

Heidegger's notion of language as the *locus* and possibility for change and sharing, which could take human kind to a new level of understanding and solidarity, gave way to a contemplative state of mind, one that keeps men from doing anything to achieve that solidarity. In Heideggerian terms, it is as if the postmodern man were too perplexed with the question of Being, and its unfolding inquiries into discourse, art and meaning, for example. Postmodernism could be described as the radicalization of Heidegger's philosophy, to a point that the aim of that philosophy and of the humanities is itself at risk.

Unless that apathy is what our Being is all about. Our schizophrenic Being would then be an entity condemned to live in a perpetual present, a Being made up of "isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence" (Jameson, 1983, p. 119). This would certainly be Heidegger's ultimate stroke of genius: showing us how passive we can be and foreseeing the turn philosophy would take after him, in a Nietzschean "Wille zum Willen" of theory, in which theory eats itself, and ends up as a meaningless portrait of individualities, mere historiography, no longer history.

Notes

1. Much has been written on features that could arguably distinguish postmodernism from poststructuralism or from postmodernity or late modernity. As there is much disagreement among authors as to the best term to describe what is itself a movement that praises difference and disagreement, the term "postmodernism" will be used in this essay as a general denomination encompassing the cultural, political and intellectual ideas and attitudes linked to a reaction against the notion of authoritative or hegemonic interpretations of the world and to the dismissal of traditional categories of interpretation such as the binaries man/woman, true/false, transcendental/empirical, signified/signifier. This should not be taken as a dismissal of nuances of meaning or intentions in the use different authors inscribe to their use of different terms, but only as an option for clarity's sake.
2. The translation of *Sein und Zeit* into English used for this paper is the one by John Macquarrie and Edward Robison, of 1973. The original title in German will be used in my text, but the shorter version "B/T" will be preferred for references when there is need to quote from the English translation, followed only by the pertinent page number.
3. Heidegger distinguishes his thought from Sartrean existentialism claiming that *Sein und Zeit* is a preparatory work, in which no statement on the relation of *essentia* and *existentia* was ever made. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism'," *Pathmarks* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 250-1.

4. In view of the existence of innumerable definitions of 'logocentrism', it seems useful to quote what seems to be a short and clear way of explaining what should be understood by logocentrism here: "the belief that the first and last thing is the Logos, the Word, the Divine Mind, the self-presence of full self-consciousness" (Sarup, 1988, p. 39).
5. Martin Heidegger. "The word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'". In: *The Question concerning technology and other essays*, p. 55.
6. In broad terms, the metaphysics of subjectivity is the belief, associated with the Enlightenment, that the human subject is central to all knowledge and that there is an essence to all things. Knowledge of an objective reality would then be independent and outside that reality.
7. Rudolf Carnap, "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language". In: *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1959), p. 80.

References

- Bertens, Hans. *The Idea of the Postmodern: a History*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Caputo, John D. "Theological Presuppositions of Heidegger's Thought". In: Faulconer, James E. and Wrathall, Mark A. (eds.). *Appropriating Heidegger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. pp. 85-100.
- Critchley, Simon. "Heidegger for Beginners". In: Faulconer, James E. and Wrathall, Mark A. (eds.). *Appropriating Heidegger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. pp. 101-18.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences". In: _____. *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. London and New York: Routledge, 1978. pp. 278-94.
- Dilthey, Wilhelm. "The Understanding of Other Persons and their Life-Expressions". In: Mueller-Vollmer, Kurt (ed.). *The Hermeneutics Reader*. New York: Continuum, 2000. pp. 152-64.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Faulconer, James E. "Appropriating Heidegger". In: ____ & Mark A. Wrathall (eds.). *Appropriating Heidegger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. pp. 1-5.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. Jonh Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973.
- _____. "The Anaximander Fragment". In: _____. *Early Greek Thinking*. Trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975. pp. 13-58.
- _____. "Letter on 'Humanism'". In: McNeil, William (ed.). *Pathmarks*. Trans. William McNeil. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. pp. 239-76.
- Jameson, Frederic. "Postmodernism and consumer society". In: Foster, Hal (ed.). *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture*. Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983. pp. 111-25.
- Macquarrie, John and Robinson, Edward. "Translators' Preface". In: Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973. pp. 13-6.
- Ryle, Gilbert. "Heidegger's Sein und Zeit". In: Murray, Michael (Ed.). *Heidegger and modern philosophy: critical essays*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978. pp. 53-64.

- Sarup, Madan. *An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism*. New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988.
- Steiner, George. *Heidegger*. Hassocks, England: The Harvester Press, 1978.
- Wrathall, Mark A. "Philosophy, thinkers, and Heidegger's place in the history of being". In: Faulconer, James E. and Wrathall, Mark A. (eds.). *Appropriating Heidegger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. pp. 9-29.