

MAELA UVA  
Estética De la Creación

Alejandro A. Vallega entre arte y pie

desde el existencialismo  
como símbolo orgánico de  
existencia y proximidad viva

Proximidad viva → y estimo

por lo de lo cual nos identificamos

Sense and

Finitude

Encounters at the Limits of

Language, Art, and the Political

antes del ego  
antes del individuo social  
antes del sistema

El pensamiento sentido es la estética

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# Sense and Finitude

SUNY series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy

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Dennis J. Schmidt, editor

# Sense and Finitude

*Encounters at the Limits of  
Language, Art, and the Political*

ALEJANDRO A. VALLEGA

**SUNY**  
P R E S S

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*For Daniela*

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# Introduction

Words are the gestures that remain and expose us to the tacit language of being in its many passing senses. This experience of language and thought requires a sensibility that opens for us through contemporary thought: Once conceptual thought, sustained by the metaphysical tradition in the history of the West, encounters its finitude face to face, at that point a sensibility in thought begins to become explicit, a thinking beyond the rational-irrational divide that traditionally frames all determinations of being. The point is not to discover a new faculty or capacity in thought, but to bring forth and highlight a certain disposition towards experience and sense, one that opens when one thinks in light of the singularity and incommensurability of experiences such as the coming to presence of things, their value and meaning, images, words, ideas, desires, memories, sense experiences, and our selves as rational subjects; to mention a few of those moments that we encounter under that slippery word “being,” and to which we make claims through language, art, politics, and philosophy. To say it in another register, the aim of this book is to engage a fundamental shift in conceptual philosophical understanding—an epistemic shift.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, for example, the discussion of Heidegger in chapters one through four marks a border that limits his thought as well as an opening in that delimitation towards other ways of undergoing temporality in thought. It is this diversified and diversifying experience of conceptual thought at the limit of its determinations and always already on the way to unbounded configurations beyond its tradition(s) that is sought in various manners in this book. As such, this book does not pretend to have an all encompassing and final interpretation of the many figures and encounters it discusses. My aim is to introduce a sensibility operative in thought in various ways that may encourage the reader to go further into the spaces explored.

A brief mention and explanation about the original and untranslatable title of this book gives a further idea of its focus. The original title was *El Pensamiento Sentido*. Although the phrase “sense and finitude” seems appropriate, sense, as equated with reason on the one hand, and the five senses or faculties on the other, falls short of a certain connotation in the single word, *sentido*. In Spanish, the word “*sentido*,” (from the verb *sentir*) refers to the

understanding of the senses of experience as simultaneously rooted in ideas or conceptual meaning as well as in sensible experience (hearing, seeing), and ultimately in sensing with heart and soul. Therefore, in speaking of this *pensamiento sentido* under the title *Sense and Finitude*, this book attempts a thought explicitly engaged in the dense interplays between these various registers in which we undergo configurations of being and come to experience them. The interplay is purposeful, and aims for thinking in ways that overflow the traditional divisions between mind-body, reason-passion, objective calculation-feeling, sense perception-intelligible knowledge, contingency-soul, et cetera. In this sense, one might also say that this work engages the concreteness of thought. Furthermore, this thinking between registers particularly concerns the way language, the basic requirement for Western culture and philosophy, can be undergone in relation to nonlinguistic passages, passages that may be uncovered as they situate linguistic meaning in its representational and logical frameworks. For example, I am speaking of the way the senses intermix in the sense of poetic words (synesthesia), such as when a color is understood as a texture and scent; or the way a nonrepresentational graphic image may have sense and call for a title-word, as in the paintings of Paul Klee; or, that tacit sense I experience of the world beyond words already shaping them when a cat sits next to me as I write. Indeed, throughout this book thought arises in relation to elements often thought of as the other of the rational (the irrational, nature, the non-Western, the artistic, the foreign, the fantastic, the ephemeral, the animal, and the forgotten), and, for this reason, as the other of language. In these chapters a resistance to this separation becomes apparent. Furthermore, each chapter calls for a continuous recognition of a certain otherness operative in the very configuration of what we call language (the representational system of significations and logical rules), as well as in what we call philosophy.

A second aspect of the original title takes us a little further into this last statement: *el pensamiento sentido* is meant as a thinking (in words) that is *sentido*, that is, a thinking that is felt, undergone, and withstood in its singular, ephemeral, and concrete finite passages. The book engages the senses of words and ideas in their coming to pass. In this sense, words, ideas, and language do not aim to represent, order, explain, or justify being: my aim is neither ontological nor analytical. Here, words and ideas, images, marks, gestures, absences, and silences function as sites that open and expose us to the singular and transformative undergoing and unexpected possibilities underlying the orderings, logic, definitions, and representations that compose and sustain our senses of truth and reality. Each discussion entails an encounter that exposes the reader to singular sensibilities in thought's engagement of its finitude (most chapters play out the double encounter of a philosopher with a writer or artist and vice versa). These sensibilities occur in the exposure of a philosophical

thought to that which it attempts to articulate. In this sense, a determination of thought finds itself exposed to that which informs the thought in its attempt to articulate it. Thus, in its encounter with its object, thought is exposed to that which remains beyond it: in this sense the already self-determined meaning configured by thought suffers a rift as it is situated in its insurmountable otherness, difference, and singularity. Thus, in the unsettling of thought's configuration of sense in its encounter with what cannot be subsumed by it but inspires it, I find a transformative or abyssal, but most importantly, a fecund moment for thought. The way of encountering such moment is perhaps best indicated in my case by the word "exposure" as I have learned to understand it from the poetry of Paul Celan. While composing the various chapters, one line Paul Celan wrote in 1969 often came to mind: "*La poésie ne s'impose plus, elle s'expose.*" "Poetry no longer imposes itself, it exposes itself."<sup>2</sup> It is this turn in language and thought towards its exposure to its concrete and ephemeral finitude that I seek in the following work. This means that ultimately each chapter strives for undergoing the fecund arising of senses of beings through words informed by sensibilities that expose us to the fragile, ephemeral, and concrete movement and figurations that release us to senses of beings. In the following discussion the terms dis-position, sensibility, flesh, abyss, fecund, overflowing, transformative, and unbounded indicate the movement of concrete and ephemeral unfoldings of sense. This is not to forget the ethical-political dimension of such task. In this sense, the point of exposure is that of setting out towards a thought that in exposing itself to its finitude situates our sense of humanity in its open and unbounded possibilities.

In light of this task, it is not enough to follow each philosopher's thought in what they say and intend. If the aim is thought's exposure to its singularity, then we must seek not only what the philosophers say but also how they say it. We will have to pay particular attention to the internal movement of thought, to how the argument is held forth and also transgressed in its very passage. Only then can one begin to understand in what manner and to what extent a thought does expose itself to its very transformative openings. Thus, for the most part, in each chapter I read a philosopher's text closely, and mark the performative character of the thought, that is, the way dispositions, hesitations, silences, differences, and what cannot be said inform the various discourses. For reasons of space, although crucial to my arguments and to the unfolding of thought's sensibility beyond them, I have kept most of the secondary literature off the page. A reader who wants to follow through those important strands should read along with the footnotes. Finally (although for readers less sympathetic to hermeneutics at times the discussions in the various chapters may seem a mere recounting of a philosopher's thought), each discussion is interpretative, that is, the thought is often developed through close interpretative reading of the main original texts discussed.

The structure of this book is simple and straightforward: the first part introduces the central theme and some of the main issues around it; the other two parts unfold these out of specific encounters between artists, philosophers, and writers.

Part 1 is composed of five chapters. The first four form an extensive meditation on one of the most violent encounters of conceptual philosophy and its metaphysical tradition with its temporality or finitude, namely Heidegger's attempt at a "beyng-historical thinking" in his most intimate and second major work, *Contributions to Philosophy*. Each of the four chapters introduces a central theme concerning the opening of the sensibility and exposure in finitude that our book engages. Chapter 1 discusses thought in its singular situation in our times, that is, life under the rule of the strongest form of metaphysical rationalism, that which Heidegger calls *machination* (*Machenschaft*). The discussion focuses particularly on the overpowering and infinite formulation and production of the senses of all human experience and its contexts (in its present, past, and future) as dominated and determined by reason's quantification, calculation, and production. Chapter 2 points out the emptiness of this manner of understanding existence, and explains how in such exposure to its emptiness rational production encounters a limit. The meditation goes on to indicate how, in the marking of this limit, thought encounters an opening beyond the product of the rational, and towards thinking in the arising of unbounded, fecund, or overflowing senses of beings. This opening leads towards understandings of sense that may be engaged out of other traditions, histories, concerns, and experiences than those framed by the history of the rational metaphysical tradition and machination. Chapter 3 takes chapter 2 further, and explores the specific sensibility or disposition of thought in its unbounded undergoing of senses of being. This chapter articulates thought in its undergoing exposure to its finitude, specifically as a thinking that arises in and through undergoing its overflowing diversifying singularity. The theme is developed by showing how this thought's disposition takes concrete form in its unfolding in a language that exposes us to the emptiness and overflowing passage of sense beyond the confines and domination of rational quantification and production, and in a manner that is transformative for the senses configured as well as for the tradition. Chapter 4 turns back to look at Heidegger's specific engagement with such fecund abyssal exposure. The discussion shows that Heidegger's thought is caught between two visions: the overflowing of being, and the task of leading the Western philosophical tradition to its justification and thought to its single destiny. This double vision leads Heidegger to a certain indecision, or immobility, with respect to a direct engagement with the fecund opening beyond the tradition his thought undergoes: as a result he does not take up the task his thought opens for philosophy, that is, the task of thinking sense

in and from its overflowing. Chapter 5 introduces the work of the American philosopher Charles Scott. In his work on memory, Scott takes a decisive step (in departure from Heidegger) and begins to think sense out of and through its emptiness and fecund overflowing, without burdening or justifying this exposed thinking by assigning it to the task of the destiny of thought in the Western philosophical tradition. Indeed, Scott takes the tradition as the site for the undergoing of the unbounded overflowing of sense.

Part 2 explores the sense of language in light of the task of configuring senses of being out of and in fecund finitude. In diverse ways the chapters discuss the play of nonlinguistic experience in the configuration of language and its sense. Chapter 6 discusses the arising of language out of *physis* in Plato's *Phaidros*, particularly the way logos arises in *physis* not above or as other to it, as is the case in the modern juxtaposition of language and nature. At the same time, the discussion also develops a sense of logos as a medium in which sense is configured and articulated. The chapter closes with a reflection on the transformative character of sense in its coming to presence in language. Chapter 7 explores Gadamer's elegant and rich reading of Paul Celan's poetry in *Who am I, Who are You?* The analysis takes its departure from Gadamer's exposure of thought to Celan's poetry, then goes on to discuss the limits of his reading in his inscription of Celan's poetry in a continuous uninterrupted linguistic sense of language. The chapter then suggests a more radical reading of the sense of language in hermeneutics by exploring Celan's unfolding of his poetic language out of his relation and sense of the nonfigurative and nonlinguistic graphic works of his wife Gisèle Celan-Lestrange. The next and final chapter in the section takes up Derrida's lifelong engagement with the works of Antonin Artaud. The piece points out the opening as well as the limit of Derrida's strategic reading of Artaud's work as a site for the deconstruction of transcendental signification. This strategy is then confronted with the radical character of Artaud's language as it figures the undergoing of words in the flesh rather than in terms of signifying.

The three chapters that make up part 3 unfold senses of the political out of the sensibility of thought developed through the book, that is, in light of thought in the undergoing of its singularity and fecundity of sense and as a being exposed in language. Chapter 9 discusses Benjamin's idea of a politics of art in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Representation" as a nonideological thinking which ultimately exposes us to the bodily experience of the political. The second part of the chapter discusses a concrete example of such politics in Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais' film, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. The penultimate chapter explores three ways of understanding ethics and the possibilities of human community out of experiences of the overflowing of sense. The three figures of "Spirit" I discuss, come from close readings of Hegel, Frantz Fanon, and Gabriel García Márquez. The closing chapter is

a short study on Italo Calvino's *American Lectures*. This is a reading of this work as an opening towards a politics arisen out of a sense of diversity found in thinking through the ephemeral singularity and lightness of the fragile relations between individuals, experiences which underscore signification in language and political ideologies.

Milano, January 2008

## PART 1

# Unbounded Thoughts: Fecund Overflowing in Philosophy's Finitude

Finally, it must not have been  
Easy to be there, as now, in its hours,  
In language's very unreality or ocean,  
Swimming, from the shock of the wreckage,  
                                Toward uncertain islands  
That no map, up to then, had made known.

("Segovia," Juan José Saer)

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## CHAPTER 1

# Four Meditations on Heidegger's Undergoing of Thought's Finitude

One of the most direct encounters of conceptual thought with its finitude, and perhaps the most violent, occurs in the work of Martin Heidegger. In his early work, *Being and Time*, time appears as the transcendental horizon of all determinations of senses of being, be they conceptual or physical. Indeed, already in this work, Heidegger seeks to think towards temporality in order to think the ground of the ontological difference, between entities and ideas, that serves as the foundation for the history of metaphysics, and Western thought in general. Thus, in *Being and Time* and thereafter, Heidegger seeks a thought that occurs in light of its (thought's) finitude or temporality. In his second major work, *Contributions to Philosophy*, Heidegger's project continues through a shift in the way of his project. This refers to a shift in the very situation of thought in relation to the issue of temporality. In *Contributions*, Heidegger seeks to think in light of the temporality and finitude of thought in its coming to pass, rather than thinking towards time as the horizon of thought. In other words, the task of *Contributions* is to begin to think thought in its finite situatedness, that is, to think in and with the temporality of thought. However, this cannot mean engaging in either a purely conceptual nor in a pragmatic or historiographical explication and analysis of thought; already since *Being and Time* such ontological difference would not serve us to understand Heidegger's work. Thus, in Heidegger's *Contributions* we find an attempt to engage thought's temporality through the specific undergoing of the temporality of thought as such, and to do so in a manner that will not simply re-inscribe the undergoing of philosophical thought within either side of metaphysics. Heidegger calls this thinking beyng-historical thinking (*seynsgeschichtliches Denken*).<sup>1</sup> The abstruse terminology in English requires an immediate clarification: the archaic spelling of being that uses the "y" (*Seyn* rather than *Sein*), indicates a move underneath or back to the undergoing of thought that remains beyond, yet underlying, the history of metaphysics. The term "historical" (*geschichtliches*) points to a specific concern with thinking