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"An Apology for Language"

Author: Duane Williams

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An Apology for Language*

DUANE WILLIAMS

In *On Interpretation*, Aristotle explores the relationship between language and logic. Beginning with a brief description of what language is, Aristotle writes:

Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of—affections in the soul—are the same for all, and what these affections are likenesses of—actual things—are also the same.¹

With reference to how the structure of language is understood in this passage, Martin Heidegger argues that the Greeks of the Classical Age saw language as a showing that brings to light, while the later Hellenistic Age saw language as an instrument of designation directing the mind from one object to another object.² Heidegger argues that this altered view of language has its roots in the change of the nature of truth, and began with the Stoics. Generally speaking, the Stoics understood speech to be thought in sound, and held that words arise from the nature of things.³ Saying that words arise from the nature of things tells us that for the Stoics a word is not a ‘conventional’ sign that signifies by agreement, but rather a ‘natural’ sign that bears a causal relation to its object. Jeffrey Bardzell, for example, writes:

For their part, the Stoics are ‘staunch’ in their support for the theory of natural signification . . . Evidence of the Stoics’ adherence to this

* This essay is based on a lecture presented to the Temenos Academy, 20 November 2013.

1. Aristotle, *Peri Hermēneias*, chapter 1, 16a3–8; trans. J. L. Ackrill in *A New Aristotle Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 26.

2. *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 115.

3. J. O. Urmson and Jonathan Rée, ed., *The Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1960), p. 310.

doctrine is available in Origen: 'the primary sounds [are] imitations of the things of which the names are said'.⁴

This being so, the Stoic theory of language might not be quite so far removed from what we will explore of Heidegger's own causal view of language as he might have supposed. However, there remains the issue that for the Stoics language is merely thought in sound. Thus Dirk Baltzly writes in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

With respect to language, the Stoics distinguish between the signification, the signifier and the name-bearer. Two of these are bodies: the signifier which is the utterance and the name-bearer which gets signified. The signification, however, is an incorporeal thing called a *lekton*, or 'sayable' . . . They define a sayable as 'that which subsists in accordance with a rational impression'. Rational impressions are those alterations of the commanding faculty whose content can be exhibited in language. Presumably '*graphei Sôkratês*' and 'Socrates writes' exhibit the contents of one and the same rational impression in different languages.⁵

Drawing on the *Logos* principle formulated by Heraclitus (flourished c. 500 BC), the Stoics emerging around 300 BC distinguished between three *logoi*, namely: the *logos spermatikos*, the *logos endiathetos* and the *logos prophorikos*. The *logos spermatikos* is universal 'generative reason' as the creative power of God, which acts in otherwise inert matter to bring order and differentiation to all things. The *logos endiathetos* is the same pure unlettered reason immanent in humankind, corresponding to the Latin *ratio* (the source of the English words 'reason' and 'rationality');⁶ while the *logos prophorikos*, referring to speech upon the lips, is seen as the mere expression of *ratio*, namely, *oratio*.⁷ This view that reduces language to articulated sounds carrying

4. Jeffrey Bardzell, *Speculative Grammar and Stoic Language Theory in Medieval Allegorical Narrative: From Prudentius to Alan of Lille* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 28.

5. 'Stoicism', section 4: 'Logic', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2014 edition). <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/stoicism/>>; accessed 5 April 2014.

6. The word *endiathetos* means 'residing in the mind', 'conception', 'thought' and 'immanence'.

7. The word *prophorikos* means 'pronunciation' or 'utterance'. It also refers to 'proposition' in the sense of 'going forth'.

pre-existent meanings has, says Heidegger, 'remained basic and predominant through all the centuries of Western-European thinking'.⁸ An example of this predominance is provided some three centuries later by Philo of Alexandria (30 BC–AD 50), who writes in *The Worse Attacks the Better*:

The intellect is the fountain of words, and speech is its mouth-piece, because all the conceptions which are entertained in the mind are poured forth by means of speech, like streams of water which flow out of the earth, and come into sight. And speech is an interpreter of the things which the mind had decided upon in its tribunal.⁹

This echoes Plato, who in the *Timaeus* argues: 'The river of speech which goes out of man and ministers to the intelligence is the fairest and noblest of all streams.'¹⁰ In *On the Migration of Abraham*, Philo argues that: '. . . without someone to offer suggestions, speech will not speak; and the mind is what suggests to speech, as God suggests to the mind.'¹¹ This structure of God, mind, and speech parallels the three *logoi*: *spermatikos*, *endiathetos* and *prophorikos*. Philo adds that speech, being born through the tongue and mouth, conveys conceptions abroad. In a similar fashion, and again moving forward approximately 300 years, Saint Augustine (AD 354–430) says of language:

With thyself, O man, a word in thy heart is a different thing from sound; but the word that is with thee, in order to pass to me, requires sound for a vehicle as it were. It takes to itself sounds, mounts it as a vehicle, runs through the air, comes to me and yet does not leave thee. But the sound, in order to come to me, left thee and yet did not stay with me. Now has the word that was in thy heart also passed away with the passing sound? Thou didst speak thy thought; and, that the thought which was hid with thee might come to me, thou didst sound syllables; the sound of the syllables conveyed thy thought to my ear; through my ear thy thought

8. *On the Way to Language*, pp. 115–16.

9. C. D. Yonge, trans., *The Works of Philo* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 116.

10. *Timaeus* 75e; cited from *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 5 vols., 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1875), iii.659.

11. Yonge, *Works of Philo*, p. 261.

descended into my heart, the intermediate sound flew away; but that word which took to itself sound was with thee before thou didst sound it, and is with me, because thou didst sound it, without quitting thee.¹²

Influenced by Augustine, Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1328) says much the same in one of his sermons. (Note again how the ‘word’ in the following passage is analogous to the *logoi* of the Stoics: *spermatikos*, *endia-thetos* and *prophorikos*). Eckhart says:

When the word is first conceived in my intellect, it is so pure and subtle that it is a true word, before taking shape in my thought. In the third place, it is spoken out aloud by my mouth, and then it is nothing but a manifestation of the interior word.¹³

Heidegger argues that this standard notion of language reaches its peak in Wilhelm von Humboldt’s reflections on language. He adds that Humboldt’s treatise, *On the Diversity of the Structure of Human Language and its Influence on the Intellectual Development of Mankind* (*Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaus und ihren Einfluß auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*) has ‘determined the course of all subsequent philology and philosophy of language’.¹⁴ For Humboldt, ‘articulated sound’ is ‘the basis and essence of all speech’.¹⁵ In one passage Humboldt says of language that: ‘It is after all the continual intellectual effort to make the articulated sound capable of expressing thought’.¹⁶ In another he writes of language: ‘It must be abstracted from all that it effects as a designation of comprehended ideas.’¹⁷ Humboldt also states that:

12. *Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St John*, xxxvii.4; trans. John Gibb and James Innes in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 7: *St. Augustine: Homilies on the Gospel of John* (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1888), p. 214.

13. Sermon 29, in *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, trans. M. O’C. Walshe, 3 vols (Longmead, Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element, 1987), i.215.

14. *On the Way to Language*, p. 116. The book was published in 1836, a year after Wilhelm von Humboldt’s death, by his brother Alexander. In what follows, I depend on Heidegger’s citations of this work. For the text in its entirety, see Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, trans. Peter Heath, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

15. See Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, p. 116. 16. *Ibid.*, p. 117. 17. *Ibid.*

If in the soul the feeling truly arises that language is not merely a medium of exchange for mutual understanding, but a true *world* which the *intellect* must set between itself and *objects* by the inner labour of its power, then the soul is on the true way toward discovering constantly more in language, and putting constantly more into it.¹⁸

For Humboldt, following the tenets of modern idealism, the soul here is conceived of as 'subject', and is accordingly, says Heidegger, represented within the subject-object model. Thus, for Heidegger, language as understood by Humboldt is deemed to be a 'world' developed by human subjectivity, as one means among many with which to express itself. Following this thinking, language is seen as a tool or an instrument with which to speak our mind about the world. However, where language is understood as a vehicle for transporting subjective and objective goods that already exist in their own right, it is not inherently associated with what it symbolises. Thus the linguist Simeon Potter, writing in the mid-twentieth century, spoke of language as being constructed by the mind as an unconnected substitute for things:

Primitive peoples still believe that word has power over things, that somehow the word participates in the nature of the thing. The word, in fact, is the symbol and it has no direct or immediate relation with the referend except through the image in the mind of the speaker. As Henri Delacroix once said (in *Le Langage et la Pensée*), 'All thought is symbolic. Thought first constructs symbols which it substitutes for things.' The symbol *sun* has no connexion with the celestial luminary other than through the thoughts or images in the mind of the speaker and the hearer.¹⁹

The same reasoning produces the following understanding of language, which likewise argues that all words fail to connect with what it is they say:

'This is a tree', obviously *this* and *tree* are not actually the same thing. *Tree* is a word, a noise. It is not this experienced reality to

18. *Ibid.*, p. 118. 19. *Our Language* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1950), p. 106.

which I am pointing. To be accurate, I should have said, 'This (pointing to the tree) is symbolised by the noise *tree*.' If then, the real tree is not the word or the idea *tree*, what is it? If I say that it is an impression on my senses, a vegetable structure, or a complex of electrons, I am merely putting new sets of words and symbols in place of the original noise, *tree*. I have not said *what* it is at all.²⁰

Accordingly, the true nature of reality is thought to be forever out of the reach of language, which as the mediating word obscures or conceals in that it only serves to depict or represent. Ernst Cassirer characterizes this view of language by saying:

The sound of *speech* strives to 'express' subjective and objective happening, the 'inner' and the 'outer' world; but what of this it can retain is not the life and individual fullness of existence, but only a dead abbreviation of it. All that 'denotation' to which the spoken word lays claim is really nothing more than mere suggestion; a 'suggestion' which, in face of the concrete variegation and totality of actual experience, must always appear a poor and empty shell.²¹

In a similar vein, Joseph J. Kockelmans writes:

What is said already exists before it is expressed. Either the meaning that is communicated through speech exists in the world (and man must accept that meaning in one way or another), or meaning is constituted exclusively within the domain of the mind or consciousness. In both cases this meaning is to be uttered at a later moment by means of language. In so doing man uses perceptible signs or symbols that in essence are merely conventional. In both views the multiplicity of the existing languages can be explained easily. In both instances speech is a sensory motoric phenomenon which in itself contributes nothing to the constitution of meaning. A word taken in itself is empty; it is effective either as a physical stimulus or as a perceptible sign that is added to the meaning from

20. Alan Watts, quoted by Anne Bancroft, *Twentieth Century Mystics and Sages* (London: Arkana, 1976), p. 26, who for her part took the passage from *Vedanta for Modern Man*, ed. Christopher Isherwood (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1952), p. 22.

21. *Language and Myth*, trans. Suzanne K. Langer (New York and London: Harper & Bros, 1946), p. 7.

the outside without being essentially related to it. Language is merely a means of communication in and through which man can convey meaning; but it can never be the source of meaning and of light.²²

According to this view the meaning of reality as understood by the mind already exists in its own right, and the role of language is to merely *stand for* that meaning so as to transport it. Thomas Kelly argues that language thus understood is seen as 'a mere handle on an already existing thing'.²³ Suggesting that language is nothing more than logistics, Kelly argues that it 'thus becomes a kind of calculus for efficiently storing and passing on information'.²⁴

Drawing on Heidegger, Richard Kearney argues that language has therefore tended to be understood by traditional philosophies as a method of *assertion*. Accordingly it has been used to *designate*, for example, 'this snow here'; to *predicate*, 'this snow here is white'; and to *communicate*, 'the exchange of designated or predicated information'.²⁵ In a manner that serves to elaborate our last quotation from Kelly, Kearney says that as a result:

Language thus became a matter of propositional logic concerned with the representation and classification of the world. Words were used impersonally to define or map reality as a collection of objects 'present-at-hand' (*vorhanden*). And in the process language was tailored to the requirements of a one-dimensional objectivisation. Henceforth it was only recognised in terms of its 'objectively valid character' – in the sense of words being deployed as a mere propositional calculus valid for regulating and standardising the relationship between word and thing.²⁶

The term 'present-at-hand' comes from Heidegger's word, *vorhanden*, which in his early work refers to those things that are available for objectification. According to George Steiner it refers to 'the character

22. *On Heidegger and Language* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 7.

23. *Language and Transcendence: A Study in the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger and Karl-Otto Apel* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 145.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

25. *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 45.

26. *Ibid.*

of the object "out there." It characterizes the matter of theoretic speculation, of scientific study. Thus "Nature" is *vorhanden* to the physicist and rocks are *vorhanden* to the geologist.²⁷ Kearney says: 'In assertion, therefore, words are frequently treated as little more than lifeless entities for the abstraction and computation of reality.'²⁸ Discussing the implications of this, Michael Inwood argues:

Assertions emerge from talk. Instead of saying 'Too heavy—the other one!', I say 'The hammer is too heavy', and eventually 'The hammer is heavy'. Talk becomes increasingly detached from concrete speech situations . . . A hammer is seen no longer as ready-to-hand, as a tool to be used or rejected, and in its place alongside other tools, but as present-at-hand, as a bearer of properties severed from its involvements with other tools. We end up taking such a sentence as 'Snow is white', which occurs more commonly in logic textbooks than in down-to-earth talk, as a paradigm of significant discourse. Such assertions are seen as the locus of truth.²⁹

This passage marks a major turning-point in our argument, and from here on we begin to see language in a different light. The reason for this is that to Heidegger's thinking, concrete speech (as opposed to abstract speech) is seen as the more primordially authentic and offers a different perspective on truth. This more authentic form of speaking is interpretive discourse (*Rede*), which has an existential foundation in that the language genuinely concerns the Being of the individual's Being-there. Things are thus interpreted and spoken of *existentially* and not *propositionally*. This is to say that speech is of the actual snow as it is existentially witnessed, so that a child, for example, seeing snow for the very first time looks out of their bedroom window and says with wonder: 'The snow is white'. This is very different to the logical proposition mentioned above, taken as a paradigmatic truth, which says: 'Snow is white'. A difference, we might say, between actual lived interpretation *through* the language, and abstract logical assertion nebulously *suggested by* language.

Language, then, as interpretive discourse, relates to those things that make up the world (such as the hammer in the above example),

27. Heidegger (Glasgow: Fontana, 1978), p. 89. 28. *Modern Movements*, p. 45.

29. Heidegger: *A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 47-8.

as instruments ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*). This existential concern and active-lived-knowing of the hammer is prior to any abstract, theoretical, or objective notion of it. Heidegger writes: 'These items constitutive for discourse are: what the discourse is about (what is talked about); what is said-in-the-talk, as such; the communication; and the making-known. These are not properties which can just be raked up empirically from language.'³⁰ Kearney says of language as interpretive discourse:

Discourse does not simply *assert* that the rock is there (designation) or that it possesses a series of objective characteristics such as weight, colour, width, etc. (predication); it also and more fundamentally interprets the rock *as* something which is useful or meaningful for my existence—the rock is interpreted in its existential everydayness as something to be employed by me as a weapon, barrier, sculpting stone, building block, or whatever.³¹

Here then we get a glimpse of how language changes from speaking *by means of* something ready-to-hand to speaking *about* something present-at-hand. In the process, the change of language from 'existential interpretation' to 'logical assertion' alters our relation to those things spoken of, so that the concrete *to-hand* becomes the abstract *at-hand*. Accordingly, the ready-to-hand is veiled by linguistic assertions that transform things into characteristic properties present-at-hand. When this happens, a thing is seen *as* a thing in an entirely different way. As Heidegger argues:

When an assertion has given a definite character to something present-at-hand, it says something about it *as* a 'what'; and this 'what' is drawn *from that* which is present-at-hand as such. The as-structure of interpretation has undergone a modification. In its function of appropriating what is understood, the 'as' no longer reaches out into a totality of involvements. As regards its possibilities for articulating reference-relations, it has been cut off from that significance which, as such, constitutes environmentality. The

30. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 206.

31. *Modern Movements*, pp. 45–6.

'as' gets pushed back into the uniform plane of that which is merely present-at-hand.³²

Hans-Georg Gadamer had much to say concerning this uniform plane, which is merely present-at-hand and cut off from environmentality.³³ Kearney refers to this uniform plane as the 'abstract quarantine of the timeless present', therefore seeking to encapsulate the universal propositions that logical assertions tend to hanker after.³⁴ But, however much we desire such a presuppositionless knowledge that is free from any form of cultural, existential, or historical prejudice, Gadamer, akin to Heidegger, appears to argue that it is not possible, and that the desire for such knowledge is itself a prejudice based on a cultural presupposition, namely, that we can have presuppositionless knowledge.³⁵

René Descartes, in his *Discourse on Method* (1637), argued that by following our reason we would all end up with the same answers from a rationalist critique, leading to an abstract rational consensus of knowledge. Generally speaking, in his philosophy Descartes suggests that there is a pre-linguistic rational formula, namely, mathematics. But both Heidegger's and Gadamer's thinking taken as a whole seems to argue that this rational consensus is not possible, the reason being that we cannot detach ourselves from our respective linguistic cultures or worlds. Most of our thinking is conducted in language and not mathematics, and because of this we cannot help but take on board the language we use with all its inherent presuppositions. This forms a critique of the notion of language as assertion dealing with 'logical propositions'.

In standard texts of elementary logic, however, it is argued that language is concerned with propositions that are objective entities. For example, the English proposition: 'It is snowing' can be translated universally into other languages, such as the French 'Il neige' and the German 'Es schneit'. These phrases all identify one proposition, suggesting that the same meaning can be expressed and experienced in

32. *Being and Time*, pp. 200–201.

33. If I am correct, the term 'environmentality' is related to the word *Umwelt* (environment), which is used by Heidegger to refer to 'the world around us'. See for example Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 31, 181. We will explore the word 'environment' as it is understood by Gadamer in more detail below.

34. *Modern Movements*, p. 46.

35. This is an overall characterisation of Gadamer's views, as set out in his *Truth and Method*.

different linguistic terms. Crucially, the sameness is said to be guaranteed by the proposition, not the language itself. But contexts arguably exist where one cannot give universal translations of the same proposition.

An example of this comes from an experience I once had in Norway. While I watched in astonishment as they made a table and benches from snow, my Norwegian friend spoke with his father about the different types of snow present. First he distinguished between the *nysnø* (new snow) and the *gammelsnø* (old snow). He then identified different types of the old snow according to their useful and meaningful qualities. For example, there were two types of old snow that were not useful for making the table and benches. These were *kornsnø* (corn snow), referring to a grainy snow that has no hold, and *råtten snø* (rotten snow) that in addition to having no hold is also dirty. From the last example alone we can say that 'Snow is *not* white'. The snow he was after was *kramsnø* (cloggy snow), which is easily formed into shapes because it is dense and wet. This snow being heavy is sticky and so distinct from *løssnø* (loose snow), which is light and so too loose.

My Norwegian friend identified 'snows' in ways that I had never even conceived of, given my own environment and language where snow is more or less simply snow that comes and eventually goes. This example illustrates the argument that we think within the language of our own environment and the environment of our own language. The difference between my friend's rich understanding of snow and my own limited understanding was determined by the language of our respective cultures with all their inherited presuppositions. We did not think without language about snow, rather our different interpretations were guaranteed by different linguistic presuppositions and not a single, pre-linguistic, presuppositionless logical proposition. This seems to suggest that there are no pure meanings beyond the language. Thus my Norwegian friend insists that to say 'it is snowing' (*det er snø*) in Norway is not the same as saying 'it is snowing' in England. In fact it is not even the same across Norway, owing to local variations in dialects related to specific weather conditions in each particular area. An observation of Inwood's is relevant:

Might words have meanings independent of the things they apply to and refer to, so that we can say that what corresponds to a fact

is a meaningful sentence or a proposition? No. A word such as 'hammer' or 'culture' does not have a single determinate meaning or connotation; its meaning depends on, and varies with, the world in which it is used . . . There is no pre-packaged portion of meaning sufficiently independent of the world and of entities within it to correspond, or fail to correspond, to the world. Words and their meanings are already world-laden.³⁶

On the surface this appears to do no more than make the argument a relative one. It says that language is relative to different existential circumstances, rather than conventionally associated with a single proposition—such as the seemingly invariable meaning of snow. This is so, and yet as stated above this existential relativism that Heidegger calls environmentality *connects* the word with the world. The words are world-laden. Therefore we must not overlook what is in fact meant by 'relative', for it means that one thing is considered in relation or in proportion to something else. And this means that just as words are world-laden, so too is the world word-laden. Gadamer writes:

Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a *world* at all. The world as world exists for man as for no other creature that is in the world. But this world is verbal in nature. This is the real heart of Humboldt's assertion (which he intended quite differently) that languages are worldviews. By this Humboldt means that language maintains a kind of independent life vis-à-vis the individual member of a linguistic community; and as he grows into it, it introduces him to a particular orientation and relationship to the world as well. But the ground of this statement is more important, namely that language has no independent life apart from the world that comes into language within it. Not only is the world world only insofar as it comes into language, but language, too, has its real being only in the fact that the world is presented in it. Thus, that language is originally human means at the same time that man's being-in-the-world is primordially linguistic.³⁷

36. Heidegger: *A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 49-50.

37. *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975), p. 459.

However, this world-word relativism does not simply amount to relativism in the philosophical sense of denying universality through difference. This is because *all* world-laden speaking, no matter what it says, speaks Being. Hence, for example, Heidegger in discussing Aristotle's *Categories* asserts:

For everything that is must of and in itself have the saying of οὐσία . . . We do not understand being so constituted in its most proper meaning unless we comprehend as well the being so constituted of something. This reference—'of something'—is part of the very make-up of the categories. The other categories are not only incidentally and subsequently connected with the first category by means of assertions, as though they could mean something independently; rather, they are always, in accord with their essence, *co-saying* the οὐσία.³⁸

Owing to this constant reference to Being, we might therefore say that the relativism spoken of above is in fact derivative (i.e. derived from different world-word circumstances), rather than fundamental (because Being is a universal circumstance), so that the latter might be argued to ultimately deny the relativism. However, this does not deny the relation and connectivity between world and word. This said, we can approach the question of relativism and universality from a different perspective. Gadamer points out that to have a linguistic world is to have an orientation toward that world.³⁹ This orientation means that a relationship with the world is different from being embedded in the environment as are all other living creatures. It also means that humanity is freed from the physical environment through the linguistic constitution of the world. Gadamer writes:

Man's freedom in relation to the environment is the reason for his free capacity for speech and also for the historical multiplicity of human speech in relation to the one world . . . Because man can

38. *Aristotle's Metaphysics Theta 1-3: On the Essence and Actuality of Force*, trans. Walter Brogan and Peter Warnek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 5. The Greek οὐσία is usually translated as 'substance' or 'essence'. Such a basic word will inevitably have many translations. But the fundamental one has to be 'being': it is an abstract noun derived from the verb 'to be'.

39. *Truth and Method*, p. 460.

always rise above the particular environment in which he happens to find himself, and because his speech brings the world into language, he is, from the beginning, free for variety in exercising his capacity for language. To rise from the environment has from the outset a human—i.e., a verbal—significance. Animals can leave their environment and move over the whole earth without severing their environmental dependence. For man, however, rising above the environment means *rising to 'world' itself*, to true environment. This does not mean that he leaves his habitat but that he has another posture toward it—a free, distanced orientation—that is always realized in language.⁴⁰

My point in quoting Gadamer here is to show that in terms of environment (as well as Being) we can share a universality, not only as humans, but also as living creatures. But in terms of different languages we can have relative orientations and thus different worlds. This means that, in the world known by my Norwegian friend's native tongue, the snowy peak of Ben Nevis may appear differently to how it appears to me. This is to say that he will see Scotland *through* the Norwegian tongue.⁴¹ This reclaimed sense of relation and connection between world and words brings us to an entirely different understanding of language as a sign-system, one that is arguably the more genuine.

As discussed, language throughout Western history has tended to be seen as that which merely designates or represents the 'thought' that precedes and determines it. But the question that must be put to this view, is how does thought identify that which is as yet unnamed? And furthermore, how is the thought itself known, if not linguistically? The word is said to symbolise the already existing thought, but how exactly does the thought exist in the mind that is understood to determine language? Anticipating Gadamer, Cassirer writes:

The concepts of theoretical knowledge constitute merely an upper stratum of logic which is founded upon a lower stratum, that of the logic of language. Before the intellectual work of conceiving and understanding of phenomena can set in, the work of *naming* must

40. *Ibid.*, p. 461.

41. This raises an altogether different project, exploring whether or not my Norwegian friend does in fact see Scotland.

have preceded it, and have reached a certain point of elaboration. For it is this process which transforms the world of sense impression, which animals also possess, into a mental world, a world of ideas and meanings. All theoretical cognition takes its departure from a world already preformed by language; the scientist, the historian, even the philosopher, lives with his objects only as language presents them to him.⁴²

For Heidegger, language does not simply communicate in a nebulous way thoughts and things, and nor is it a product of the human mind. It is not a man-made instrument of representation, a semantic prop, or a dead abbreviation, but is the primordial source of revelation. It is the reason why there are thoughts and things at all. Arguing this point, Heidegger refers to a poem by Stefan George titled, 'The Word' (*Das Wort*), which explores the nature of language. The final line of the poem reads: 'Where word breaks off no thing may be' (*Kein ding sei wo das wort gebricht*).⁴³ Heidegger writes:

Only where the word for the thing has been found is the thing a thing. Only thus *is* it. Accordingly we must stress as follows: no thing *is* where the word, that is, the name is lacking. The word alone gives being to the thing.⁴⁴

This is because, for Heidegger, saying is a showing. He writes:

In everything that appeals to us; in everything that strikes us by way of being spoken or spoken of; in everything that addresses us; in everything that awaits us as unspoken; but also in every speaking of *ours*—showing holds sway. It lets what is coming to presence shine forth, lets what is withdrawing into absence vanish. The saying is by no means the supplementary linguistic expression of what shines forth; rather, all shining and fading depend on the saying that shows.⁴⁵

Saying as showing reveals and so allows things to appear as things. Language's saying is a 'letting see' (*sehen lassen*). This 'letting see'

42. *Language and Myth*, p. 28. 43. *On the Way to Language*, p. 60. 44. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

45. *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 413–14.

allows things to arrive phenomenally. In this way, Being *per se* comes to be disclosed as this or that being. Kearney says of language that it is therefore

the horizon of meaning wherein all things appear to us *qua phenomena*. Consequently, if phenomenology is precisely the 'science of appearing as appearing' (*phainesthai*), language is its ultimate horizon: the act of bringing things to light as appearances (*phainomena*).⁴⁶

Hence Heidegger argues that for the Classical Greeks words had a direct or immediate relation with the referent. He argues:

In the Greek language what is said in it *is* at the same time in an excellent way what it is called What it presents is what lies immediately before us. Through the audible Greek word we are directly in the presence of the thing itself, not first in the presence of a mere word-sign.⁴⁷

Thus for Heidegger it is only through language's capacity to 'show' that things come to be as world. Our genuine being-in-the-world is therefore a living in language. For this reason Heidegger refers to language as the house of Being in which humanity dwells. He writes:

Language is the precinct (*templum*), that is, the house of Being It is because language is the house of Being, that we reach what is by constantly going through this house. When we go to the well, when we go through the woods, we are always already going through the word 'well', through the word 'wood', even if we do not speak the words and do not think of anything relating to language.⁴⁸

We have seen that, and I quote George Steiner: 'Heidegger intimates a condition of language in which the word was immediate to the truth of things, in which light shone through words instead of being fogged

46. *Modern Movements*, p. 39.

47. *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Jean T. Wilde and William Kluback (New Haven: College and University Press, 1956), p. 45.

48. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 132.

or bent by their dusty use.⁴⁹ Such a condition of language is conveyed, I believe, in Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, which we can safely assume to have been a significant influence on Heidegger. Rilke writes:

Perhaps we are *here* to say: house,
bridge, fountain, gate, jug, fruit tree, window –
at most: column, tower . . . But to *speak* them,
you understand, oh, you are to say them
with more intensity than things themselves ever
dreamed they would be.⁵⁰

A little further, Rilke continues:

Here is the time for what can be *said* – *here* its home.
So speak out and bear witness! More than ever,
things that we might experience are falling away,
and being elbowed aside and replaced by acts
without images.⁵¹

The title of one of Heidegger's late essays is taken from a line by the poet Hölderlin: 'Poetically Man Dwells' (*dichterisch wohnet der Mensch*).⁵² Poetry according to Heidegger is what really lets us dwell in language as the house of Being. Poetry is not, Heidegger argues, 'frivolous mooning and vaporizing into the unknown', nor is it a 'flight into dreamland'.⁵³ Poetry does not, he continues, 'fly above and surmount the earth in order to escape it and hover over it'.⁵⁴ Rather, it is poetry that first brings us onto the earth, allowing us to belong to it and thus be brought to our dwelling *in language*. As Steiner writes, quoting Heidegger: 'Authentic poetry, which is exceedingly rare, is "the real estate, the fundamental resource on earth, of man's habitation"'.⁵⁵ It is

49. *Heidegger*, p. 150.

50. *Duino Elegies*, trans. Martyn Crucefix (London: Enitharmon, 2006), p. 71.

51. *Ibid.*. The phrase 'acts without images', can also be translated, 'action without symbol'.

52. This line of Hölderlin's is taken by Heidegger from the *Grosse Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, ed. Friedrich Beissner and Adolf Beck, 8 vols (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1943-86), ii:1.372 ff.; also in *Hölderlins sämtliche Werke*, ed. Norbert von Hellingrath *et al.*, 6 vols (Munich and Leipzig: Propyläen-Verlag, 1913-23), vi.24 ff.

53. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 213.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 218. 55. Steiner, *Heidegger*, p. 143.

therefore in poetry that we are most at home in language as the house of Being. Heidegger tells us:

The more poetic a poet is—the freer (that is, the more open and ready for the unforeseen) his saying—the greater is the purity with which he submits what he says to an ever more painstaking listening, and the further what he says is from the mere propositional statement that is dealt with solely in regard to its correctness or incorrectness.⁵⁶

In order to speak we must first listen to language speak. But poets, says Heidegger, submit what they say to an ever more painstaking listening, which is why, for Heidegger, genuine poets are sayers of language to a greater degree. To explain how this is so, Heidegger interprets some lines of Rilke:

adventurous
more sometimes than Life itself is, more daring
by a breath . . .⁵⁷

It is the true poets who are for Heidegger more adventurous than Life (that is, Being) itself, because they are more daring by a breath. By the word 'breath', Heidegger understands Rilke to mean language. He takes his cue from a passage in Johann Gottfried Herder's *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Man* (1784–91):

A breath of our mouth becomes the portrait of the world, the type of our thoughts and feelings in the other's soul. On a bit of moving air depends everything human that men on earth have ever thought, willed, done, and ever will do; for we would all still be roaming the forests if the divine breath had not blown around us, and did not hover on our lips like a magic tone.⁵⁸

Heidegger writes:

56. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 216.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 131. Cf. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, 5 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1992), ii.261: 'wagender . . ./als selbst das Leben ist—, um einen Hauch/ wagender'.

58. Thus quoted in *On the Way to Language*, p. 139. Herder's *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772) had already served as the foundational formulation of Romantic conceptions of language.

Thinking our way from the temple of Being, we have an intimation of what they dare who are sometimes more daring than the Being of beings. They dare the precinct of Being. They dare language. All beings—objects of consciousness and things of the heart, men who impose themselves and men who are more daring—all beings, each in its way, are *qua* beings in the precinct of language. This is why the return from the realm of objects and their representation . . . can be accomplished, if anywhere, *only in this precinct*.⁵⁹

Genuine poets venture Being itself, by daring to venture into language, the precinct, temple or province of Being. For this reason they are the sayers. However, these sayers do not merely say as most people say. Thus Heidegger writes: 'The saying of the more venturesome must really venture to *say*. The more venturesome are the ones they are only when they are sayers to a greater degree.'⁶⁰ The saying of such sayers more truly engages in saying. Theirs is not a saying in terms of propositional assertions, mere idle talk, or psychological self-expression. As George Pattison writes: 'It is language itself and not the arbitrary individuality of the poet that really speaks in the poem.'⁶¹ Those sayers who say to a greater degree, therefore bear witness by saying existence. This means that *what* is said in language is at the same time what is spoken. Thus poets are, says Heidegger, 'the sayers who more sayingly say' (*die Sagenden, die sagender sind*).⁶² Their saying is not just a saying of any sort, but is a saying other than the rest of human saying.⁶³

CONCLUSION

We began with a passage from Aristotle telling us that written words symbolise spoken words, that spoken words symbolise affections in the soul, and that these are the images of actual things. The passage also argued that while spoken and written words are not the same to all, affections in the soul as well as actual things are the same to all. Heidegger says of this passage:

59. *On the Way to Language*, p. 132. 60. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

61. *The Later Heidegger* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 169.

62. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 140; German text cited from *idem, Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe Bd 5* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), p. 318.

63. *Ibid.*

Aristotle's text has the detached and sober diction that exhibits the classical architectonic structure in which language, as speaking, remains secure. The letters show the sounds. The sounds show the passions in the soul, and the passions in the soul show the matters that arouse them.⁶⁴

We can see here that Heidegger consistently replaces the words 'symbol', 'sign' and 'image' used by Aristotle with the word 'show'. The reason for this is that we can no longer hear what each of these words really says as a showing, rather than a representation. Thus it would appear Heidegger is suggesting that centuries of thought on language have misinterpreted and corrupted what Aristotle in fact meant by the words 'symbol', 'sign' and 'image'.

Furthermore, if we argue that the intertwining braces of the architectonic structure are upheld by a kinship between showing and what is shown, then as we have seen the passions in the soul and the matters that arouse them are only the same to all in a certain respect—that is, in the fundamental sense that all words speak Being. However, the passions in the soul and the matters that arouse them are *not* the same to all in the derivative sense of being phenomenally shown by language. In the latter sense they differ according to the concrete modes of the mouth that existentially interpret and reveal the earth as world. Accordingly language creates and upholds the ontological difference between the same concealed Being on the one side, and the various unconcealed beings on the other.⁶⁵

64. *On the Way to Language*, p. 115.

65. I am grateful to Dr Joseph Milne for our conversations regarding Aristotle, and to Dr Håkon Fyhn for our conversations regarding Norwegian snows.