

LANGUAGE AND REALITY IN MARTIN HEIDEGGER

A reflection on the relation between language and reality in Martin Heidegger's thinking is an invitation to watch first of all a retrieve of the primordial nature of language, and then see its relation to reality put in proper perspective. It is an exposure to a way of thinking quite different from our everyday thought process. Before going into the details of Heidegger's account of language and reality, it would be useful to point out that he makes a distinction between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seienden*). Being is the ground (*Grund*) of beings, that by which and in which beings come to be and become what they are. Being is that which makes possible the coming to presence, the emergence of beings. The difference between Being and beings is what Heidegger calls the Ontological Difference. In this paper the term reality is used to refer to Heidegger's beings (*Seienden*). It covers what people normally refer to as objects, entities, things or beings.

I

According to our habitual way of looking at things, language is a meaningful sound or sign that man uses to express and communicate his ideas as well as feelings about things. If what language asserts about things is found to be really the case, then it is believed to have expressed truth. According to this view, the relation between language and reality would seem to be one of straight-forward description. In other words, it would seem that man comes across a pre-existing, already constituted entity or state of affairs and tries to describe in precise language what he has discovered. This means among other things that language describes but does not cause reality. This account of the nature of language and its relationship to things is what Heidegger calls "the current view" the "natural attitude." This is the kind of attitude adopted by many people. It is Heidegger's conviction however that a popular opinion or attitude in matters requiring serious reflection is generally suspect because real thinking (*Denken*) as different from reckoning and calculation calls for a sustained mental exercise and a pious disposition towards the object of thought, conditions not usually found among the

generality of people. Heidegger maintains that language properly understood is not an expression, nor is it strictly speaking of man's making. Besides, the original and therefore authentic relationship between language and reality is the exact opposite of "the current view." And just before we protest against the above assertions, we are reminded that in order to have many meaningful dialogue with Heidegger, it "might be helpful to us to rid ourselves of the habit of always hearing only what we already understand."¹ Wanting to hear what one already understands may flatter one's ego, but it can hardly be expected to advance one's progress along the path of Heidegger's thinking. We have to be prepared to follow a thought-path (*Denkweg*) which is essentially a "meditative thinking", a form of resignation (*Gelassenheit*). In this thought-path, in the true spirit of phenomenology, the things we come across in our meditation are allowed to appear the way they are without any subjective-objective presuppositions on our part. In other words, in inquiring into the nature of language, we must not impose on language. If we hope to get anything out of language concerning its nature, we have to approach it with the proper disposition namely, humble attitude and respectful silence.

To reflect on language thus demands that we enter into the speaking of language in order to take up our stay with language, i.e., within *its* speaking, not within our own.

Only in that way do we arrive at the region within which it may happen—or also fail to happen—that language will call to us from there and grant us its nature.²

We have to learn to listen to language if we would like to discover its nature. The one thing we should not do is listen to our own speaking. We have to stay "within *its* own speaking, not within our own." What all this means is that according to Heidegger language *speaks*, and man speaks also. Man must however listen first and then speak afterwards. It is perhaps legitimate at this stage to ask Heidegger what is the nature of language, *how* and *where* it speaks. Heidegger would consider these questions legitimate as long as his attempt at answering them would not be construed as a definition of the nature of language. A definition, like a formula, can be dangerous when it arrogates to itself a comprehensive insight into the essence of what is defined and a capacity to condense it into a handy capsule for "instant" consum-

ption." All formulas are dangerous. They force whatever is said into the superficiality of instant opinion and are apt to corrupt our thinking. But they may also be of help, at least as a prompting and a starting point for sustained reflection." (*On the way to Language* p. 197). It is in this sense of a beginning of "sustained reflection" that we should consider what Heidegger says about the nature of language, how and where it speaks.

II

The word *language* is generally taken to have come from the Greek *legein* "to speak" and *logos* "speech", "discourse." Heidegger argues that this meaning is only a later development, and that originally in Greek literature and philosophy, *logous* did not mean speech or discourse, nor did *legein* mean to speak. *Lego*, *legein* he explains, signified "to gather", "to collect", and *logos* meant "gathering". In Homer's *Odyssey* xxiv 106, he continues, Agamemnon was reported to have said: "If one were to gather (*lexaito*) the best men of a *polis*, one could make no other choice."³ He informs us that Aristotle in his *Physics* 1,252 a 13, uses *logos* in the sense of gathering: "*taxis de pasa logos*, "all order has a character of bringing together." (*An Introduction to Metaphysics* p. 5). Heidegger takes one step further and maintains that for the Greeks *legein* "to gather" meant also "to reveal", "to disclose". He quotes Fragment 93 of *Heracitus* where gathering is used in the sense of revealing. "The rulers whose prophesy occurs at Delphi *oute legei outo kryptei*, neither gathers nor hides, *alla semainei*, but gives hints." Heidegger then explains: "Here gathering stands in opposition to hiding. To gather is here to disclose, to make manifest." (p. 143). So language, as Heidegger understands it, is a speaking that gathers, a gathering that reveals. What language gathers are beings in their totality. What is revealed is their rootedness in and differentiation from Being. Original language is thus the disclosure of Being as the unconcealment in whose openness beings are summoned into existence.

With regard to how language speaks, Heidegger tells us that "*Language speaks as the peal of stillness.*"⁴ Stillness is here taken to mean much more than "the soundless" since soundlessness in itself is simply the absence of the audible. What is implied in this case, among other things, is "somethings genuinely tranquil." A peal is usually understood as a heavy, loud, thunderous but

smooth sound. It can also be taken as an abbreviation for *appeal* in the sense in which a person is called by name and summoned to appear. Heidegger incorporates both meanings in such a way that language as "the peal of stillness" is the thunderous call that summons beings from the tranquil concealment of non-Being and makes them appear in the open horizon of Being. What Heidegger is saying is that originally there reigned an eternal silence of undisturbed tranquillity, a stillness that is synonymous with the mysterious darkness of non-Being. Language speaks as the primordial breaking of this stillness, a breaking that is the initial emergence, the primary manifestation of beings, the first appearance and coming into being of reality as a whole. Heidegger distinguishes between essential language as the peal of stillness and "mortal speech." The former lays claim to the nature of man, and make him "linguistic", that is, appropriated to the essence of language. Thus man is used by essential language as a vehicle to break the eternal silence of its concealed stillness. Essential language needs and uses man to sound and be audible. "Such as appropriating takes place in that the very *nature*, the *presencing*, of language *needs and uses* the speaking of mortals in order to sound as the peal of stillness for the hearing of mortals."⁵ Since man is essentially "linguistic" in the sense of being appropriated by essential language, he is under its command and control. He can speak only by abiding in it and by listening to its command. Mortal speech is a speaking that has listened and responded to the command of essential language in such a way that any authentic utterance written or oral is a breaking of the stillness.

To find where language speaks, we have to go to what has been spoken to us in an original way, where something is "spoken purely." This is realized in a poem. Heidegger takes poetry in a broad sense to mean an original and therefore authentic utterance whether in prose or verse. He does not therefore make the distinction that most people do between prose and verse because as he says: "The opposite of what is purely spoken, the opposite of the poem, is not prose. Pure prose is never "prosaic." It is poetic and hence as rare as poetry."⁶ However, he excludes from original speech the banality and chatter of everyday language as well as the technicality of scientific language. In the first case, it is not a question of linguistic ambiguity resulting from "lax imprecision" of thought; nor is it a question of not being well hung. No, it is much more

fundamental than all that. In everyday language, language does not speak as language any more. There is so much inauthenticity, too much chattering. There is no more listening to the command of essential language. When this happens, we go on talking without really saying something of ultimate significance. We fall into the absorbing routine of daily activities. We are too busy making a point, negotiating a deal or hiding our true motive, and so fail to pay any attention to the nature of language. In the case of scientific language, the consuming emphasis is on something quite different. We are so concerned with our demonstrations and proofs, with our informations and analyses that it never occurs to us to question ourselves about our language, nor to reflect on the nature of language itself. In both cases language "never takes the floor." In the poem as original utterance is preserved the primordial meaning of Being as well as "the relation between word and thing." Since the question of the meaning of Being is the central theme of Heidegger's philosophical endeavour, it would be good to see what primordial language reveals about the meaning of Being before considering the relation between language and reality.

III

From Heidegger's point of view, the way a particular people and humanity in general understand the meaning of Being determines their destiny. A people's understanding of the meaning of Being can be found in their primordial language, before it was used-up and watered down, that is, in their philosophy, poetry and in the basic words of their language. It is from these sources that we gather their original experience of Being. The early Greek philosophers, who were the first to raise the question of the meaning of being, understood being as *physis*. This key word in Greek philosophic experience of being was translated by the Romans into Latin as *natura* in the sense of "birth" or "nature." However, the Roman experience of *natura* did not quite correspond to the Greek experience of *physis*, and so the force and the impact of the original Greek experience got lost in the Latin translation. This happened in the translation of almost all the other key words of Greek philosophy. This was the beginning of our loss of contact with and alienation from "the original essence of Greek philosophy". Today we have a notion of nature, coming from the Romans

through Christian Middle Ages and Modern Philosophy, that has gone through a "whole process of deformation and decay." So *physis* has become nature which is taken to mean "material things", the object of modern physics. The transition from *physis* to modern physics has not only lost what the Greeks experienced in *physis* but also introduced a series of oppositions unknown to the Greeks. Today we oppose the psychic to the physical, the natural to the historical. The Greeks did not place any such restriction on or opposition to *physis*. To them it meant being, understood both as that which manifests itself and endures in the manifestation, as well as the process of this manifestation: "...the word *physis*... denotes self-blossoming emergence..., opening out, unfolding, that which manifests itself in such unfolding and perseveres and endures in it..." (*An Introduction to Metaphysics* pp. 11-12). The two notions of being in early Greek thought as the permanent, a fixed substance, and as a process, are all contained in the notion of *physis*. The Greek understanding of *physis* incorporated both being and becoming. It included everything, both the spiritual and physical, the natural and the historical. "Hence *physis* originally encompassed heaven as well as earth, the stone as well as the plant, the animal as well as man...and ultimately and first of all, it meant the gods themselves..." (p. 12). It meant more than beings in general (Heidegger's *Seienden*). It also meant the ground of beings, the Being (*Sein*) of beings. "*Physis* is Being itself, by virtue of which beings become and remain observable" (p.12).

It is unfortunate that today we have lost the original meaning of the Greek *physis*. It is more unfortunate that the distinction between Being and beings had been completely forgotten. This is much more than just a harmless loss of a nuance in translating a word. Man cannot remain indefinitely unmindful of the ground of his being without serious consequences. "Thus if Being itself is to be disclosed and grounded in its original differentiation from beings, an original perspective must be opened...what is at stake is nothing less than a humanity, a being-human determined by the essence of Being (*physis*), that we are trying to open up." (p. 17). Heidegger maintains that the way back to the ground of our being, that is, to being, is through language. Language is one of the ways through which Being manifests itself as Being. The Greeks themselves did not come to the knowledge of *physis* through scienti-

fic analysis but rather through poetry. It was through poetic inspiration that they came to experience Being as *physis*, as that which manifests itself. Being was for them the Open Horizon, the unconcealment, the permanent. This is very important for Heidegger because the meaning of Being is more than just another word in our vocabulary. It is a question of the future and the destiny of humanity.

IV

An analysis of the relation between language and reality within traditional philosophy has to take into account the relation between epistemology and metaphysics. Epistemology presupposes a form of metaphysics. Knowledge is always knowledge of something, and the object of knowledge must not only exist in order to be known, but also remain in existence if our knowledge of it is to be validated. In other words, our knowledge of something implies that the thing known enjoys some ontological status. For the realist, the thing we know exists independently of our knowledge of it. Consequently, language considered as an extension of epistemology, that is, as an articulation of our knowledge of reality presupposes the prior and independent existence of its object. Heidegger feels differently about all this. He thinks that the sequence of events has been reversed. We do not first discover things, and then give them names afterwards. Language furnishes reality with a name, thereby giving it existence and establishing it as a being. Things are constituted in the process of being named. To give a name to a thing is more than a simple designation. To name is to call forth in the sense of 'to invoke' in an essential way such that what is invoked is made to appear: "...something *is* only where the appropriate and therefore competent word names a thing as being, and so establishes the given being as a being." (*On the Way to Language*, p. 63). Heidegger illustrates his point by analyzing one of Stefan George's poems: "The Word." Here the poet gives an account of how a traveller to a "distant land" came across a precious object and wanted to take it home to his country. He did not have a name for it. On reaching his "country's strand" he waited for "the twilit norn" to find for it an appropriate "name within her bourn."

She sought for long and tidings told:

"No like of this these depths enfold."

And straight it vanished from my hand,
 The treasure never graced my land...
 So I renounced and sadly see :
 Where word breaks off no thing may be (p. 16).

The poem, Heidegger explains, tells us something about the primordial relation between word and thing. We are told in the last line : "where word breaks off no thing may be." In other words, when a word or name for a thing is lacking, the thing ceases to exist. We have to give up our habitual and cherished opinion that reality can and does exist even if there is no word for it. To see things, properly, we have to undergo a poetic conversion, an experience with language. We have to dwell in the neighbourhood of poetry and thought. And the poem tells us : "Where word breaks off no thing may be." Here the word "thing" is taken in its comprehensive totality meaning any thing that exists in any way. There is no exception, and whatever lacks a name lacks reality. There may seem to be in reality some exceptions to this, particularly in technological inventions and other areas of human creativity. In these areas, it would seem that names are nothing but signs that man attaches afterwards to things he has created. A typical example is the Russian sputnik. It would appear that the reality of the sputnik is prior to, and quite independent of the name. In fact, the Russians could have given it another designation or left it without a name. Heidegger maintains that all this is appearance and that the actual situation is quite the contrary. What a thing is that it is, and the way it is, are all dependent on its name, or language. It is language that summons man and orders him to calculate and create, to model and fashion spaceships and sputniks. Without the call of language and man's response to it, there would be no sputniks and no spaceships. If language "had not bespoken man and ordered him at its call, . . . if the word framing that order and challenge had not spoken: then there would be no sputnik. No thing is where the word is lacking" (p. 62). So there are no exceptions and whatever lacks a name "never graced my land," but rather vanishes into non-being because names are much more than mere decorations in which things are dressed. "It is in words and language that things first come into being and are". (*An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 11).

It is important to point out that the relation between word

and thing should not be identified with that between cause and effect. Cause and effect relationship presupposes a constituted thing producing another constituted thing or at least effecting some modification in it. It is not quite certain whether the word is such a constituted reality. The question is: since the issue is the relation between word and thing, and the scope of the thing is understood to include everything, is the word itself also a thing or is it nothing? It would seem legitimate to argue that since it is the word that provides the thing with being. It cannot itself be nothing. It has to exist first as a necessary condition for granting being to the thing. Even though this line of argument might satisfy the requirements of logic, it does not seem to agree with what the poet tells us: "Where word breaks off no thing may be." It is quite clear from the poet's point of view that word and thing are different one from the other. It would be even more untenable to hold that since the word is different from the thing it must therefore be nothing. We would have an absurd situation where nothing would provide the thing with being. Since the word is neither a being nor a non-being, and since our systems of thought have not yet discovered another realm of reality between being and nothing, it would seem that no "rational" explanation can be given regarding the nature of the word. Heidegger argues that as long as we base our thinking on traditional metaphysics and its principle of sufficient reason, there is no way out of the present logical impasse. A dialogue with Heidegger however, is not exactly an exercise in logic and traditional metaphysics. It is more a call to dwell in the neighbourhood of poetry and thought. And the poet tells us: "Where word breaks off no thing may be." In other words, a thing "is" only where and when a word for it can be found. Things "are" because they are provided with names by the word. So the word when it speaks as word, as that which names, is not something that "is". It does not provide itself with a name. The name for the word does not exist, is not something that "is". Even the "is" itself cannot strictly speaking be said to be a thing. "Neither the 'is' nor the word attain to thinghood, to Being.. But even so, neither the 'is' nor the word and its Saying can be cast out into the void of mere nothingness" (*On the Way to Language* p. 87).

Heidegger is not merely indulging in contradictions, nor is he trying to do away with traditional metaphysics and logic.

He is simply telling us first of all that metaphysical categories do run into various difficulties when thought makes a demand on them, especially when thinking goes beyond beings and their properties. Secondly, it remains a question whether the rational in the sense of the logical exhausts the realm of meaningfulness. There would seem to be more to reality than the calculations of logic, just as there is more to meaningfulness than the rational. Every deep and original thinker once in a while arrives at a point where reason and logic give way to contemplation, and where intuition, poetic or philosophical, points the way to the mystery of Being and its relationship to language.

Conclusion :

The general problem with hermeneutics as a "methodology of interpretation" is that one has to understand before one can interpret what is said. In the case of a thinker like Heidegger there is an additional problem. He is constantly deepening the meanings of his key words, always going beyond "the current view", in an attempt to retrieve their primordial meanings. An interpretation of Heidegger that stops half way runs the risk of missing both the direction of his thinking and the content of his message.

Heidegger argues that Being as the ground of beings, as the clearing in whose horizon beings are gathered and made manifest, is different from beings. This distinction has been forgotten. The meaning of Being has been lost. Man has reduced Being to a being and redefined reality to mean mere objects in the sense of raw materials at his disposal. However, things are not just objects of use for man's consumption. Things are beings, and as such are ontological, that is, related to Being. The proper attitude towards things is to acknowledge them as beings and to respect their nature.

Similarly, we can cultivate a sense of respect for language. This is much more than just speaking and writing well. It is a question of experiencing the civilizing effect of language. It means man "dwelling poetically on this earth." Language teaches us the nature of things, how to build, how to dwell and how to think. From language we learn how to build a home and not just a house, how to construct a meaningful world. Language teaches us how to dwell, how to be at home in our environment, that there is a

difference between mere nearness and neighbourliness. Two families separated from each other by a thin wall between their flats can still be miles apart. To dwell means more than to simply occupy a flat or a house. When we dwell we cultivate, we conserve, we preserve. Language shows us how to be human. Being human means building, dwelling, caring.

When one has travelled this far along Heidegger's meditative path, one begins to feel some vibrations of the mystery of Being and Language. Unfortunately, modern man living in a space age, an age of advanced and reliable technology, has persuaded himself that there are no mysteries, that everything or nearly everything can be explained rationally and scientifically. Well, Heidegger maintains that we are surrounded by mysteries if only we care to notice them. Given a proper disposition and a sustained effort at reflection, we should be able to make some progress along Heidegger's thought-path. It is not so much that there is no room for mysteries in a space age, but that we take so much for granted. Consequently, it never occurs to us to ask why there are things rather than nothing. This should be the first question "though not in a chronological sense." The next question, as far as our analysis is concerned, is about the origin of language. Here too, Heidegger sees something mysterious. He says explicitly: "The origin of language is in essence mysterious". (*An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 144). It would be good for us to stop and reflect occasionally on how man started speaking for the first time, how language as the peal of stillness broke for the first time the eternal silence that reigned over the universe. Man's first experience with language as a historical fact must have been tremendous and overpowering. We have completely lost its impact due to our daily and routine commerce with language. Once in a while however, we get a glimpse of what it was like, when for example, a child speaks for the first time, or when a dumb person recovers his power of speech. It is under such circumstances that we perceive as it were a distant echo of the mystery of language as a peal of stillness. As an original utterance it announces the meaning of Being. Language is an utterance after man has had an experience with Being. Being becomes audible in language. Language arose "through man's departure into Being. In this departure language was Being, embodied in the word: poetry. Language is the primordial poetry in which a people speaks Being." (p. 144).

These two mysteries, that of Being and that of Language, are really one. It is the mystery of the relation between language and reality. This mystery had been with Western thinking since its beginning among the ancient Greeks. It presents itself "in the form of the relation between being and saying. This relation...announces itself in a single word. The word is *logos*. It speaks simultaneously as the name for Being and for Saying." (*On the Way to Language*, p. 80).

It is in the Greek word for language that we find man's first experience of the mystery of Being and Language. The Greek *logos* speaks of language as a gathering in the original Greek sense of a gathering that reveals. What are gathered in this gathering revelation are beings (*Seienden*) in their collectedness in Being (*Sein*), in their relationship to Being understood, as the Open Horizon, the unconcealment. Being is the Open Horizon, the clearing where beings are gathered and revealed as beings and therefore as different from Being. However, the unconcealment of Being, presupposes a prior closure, a primordial concealment of Being which is the same as the mystery of non-Being, the unfathomable Nothing from whose eternal silence language speaks as the peal that summons beings from the darkness of their nothingness into the light of Being by giving them appropriate names and thereby projecting them into existence. If any being does not receive a name and the summons of language, it cannot emerge from the obscurity of non-Being into the clearing of Being and so does not exist. Properly understood, Nothing is not absolute negation but rather an ontological possibility. Nothing is a dynamic potentiality for the manifestation of Being as unconcealment. Nothing as a positive concept is the limit of Being not in the sense of the confine of Being but in the sense of limit as the point from where something starts. Nothing is the positive starting point of Being. Nothing as the limit of Being is the boundary where Being begins.

Heidegger does not say very much about the structure of Being itself except that it is the ground of, and so different from beings. However, he enjoins us to submit to its presence and manifestation. We cannot dictate the conditions or the time for the epochal manifestation of Being. It will grant itself to us when it please. Until then, we have to wait in prayerful meditation and silence. This mediative silence is not a mere suspension of

speech, it is not just the repressed loquaciousness of a dissipated head. It is the recollectedness of a unified personality, the controlled reserve of a disciplined mind. It is the resignation (*Gelassenheit*) of him who understands and submits to the fact that when Being holds back and withdraws, Language remains silent. Because the withdrawal of Being is the silence of Language.

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NOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*. Translated by Peter D. Hertz. New York : Harper and Row, 1971, p. 58. Future reference to this work will be to this edition and will be enclosed in parenthesis in the text.
2. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. New York : Harper and Row, 1971, pp. 190 — 191.
3. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New York : Anchor Books, 1961, p. 105. I find some inaccuracies in various parts of this translation, so I modify it in some places in order to stay close to the original German text. A specific example is where Heidegger's *Sein* and *Seienden* are translated being (small letter) and 'essents' respectively. The word "essents" is of a fictitious Latin origin (supposedly from *ens*, *entis* = "being", present participle of the verb *esse* = "to be"). Neither being for *Sein* nor "essents" for *Seienden* retains the force of the original...Subsequent references will be to this edition and will be enclosed in parenthesis in the text.
4. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 207.
5. *Ibid.*, P. 208.
6. *Ibid.*

