

LOVE LANGUAGE LOST

Martin Heidegger and the Fall of Language

By Don Hudson

We build our worlds upon language. We love our lovers with words. We reach out to the other through story. Indeed language gives to us not only a sure footing in a chaotic shifting world, but also makes relationship possible. Without spoken and written words we would grope helplessly toward the face of the other.

For millennia now the Jewish community has understood the centrality of words, and it teaches us well. In fact, it thinks of the world itself as being founded upon the actual letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The individual letters of the alphabet are the very building blocks, or genetic code if you will, of this very real and weighty world wherein we live. I love this image if for no other reason than it gives great weight and substance to something as "small" as the letters of the alphabet. This alphabetic belief notes something very important that both Jews and Christians agree upon, that is, the incomprehensible belief that the word comes before the world, that language precedes creation, that God spoke the world into existence and not the other way around. Essentially what I am saying is rather quite basic and simple: language works. We base our very worlds on the everyday understanding that our words communicate meaning to one another, and we can make agreements, sign contracts, quote creeds, remember groceries, tell stories, argue passionately—all because we live by words.

By emphasizing the spoken and written word, I am not denying that there are other forms of language: sign language, body language, images, rituals—the list is limitless. However, there is something central to the word, and this centrality allows us to reason and reflect upon our existence. Without the spoken and written word our lives would be diminished. We would be left to grope and stumble and handle, but would never quite get a good look at anything or anyone.

But if you are reading me carefully here, or if you have some sense of post-modern thought, you might be thinking that I am approaching language quite naively, and to a degree you are right. When I make the bold state-

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ment, "language works," does this not beg the following question: "If language works then why are there so many places where language fails miserably"? We misunderstand and we are misunderstood, we lie to our lovers, we lie to ourselves, different churches have different interpretations of the very same Bible, and words have different meanings in different contexts. I suppose it is quite fair to say that to the degree language works is also to the degree language does not work.

The Problem of Language

More than ever, as we enter the third millennium, we are painfully aware both in our private lives and our public worlds that there is a problem with language. Language has left Eden, which means that language does not enjoy direct access to God, and so words live a nomadic existence bumping and jostling around from context to context. The Classical period—roughly that time from the ancient Greeks up to the fourth or fifth century A.D.—had an advantage over ours. Roughly speaking, language enjoyed a direct avenue to meaning. This phenomenon can be seen most clearly in the act of allegory. Words have a literal meaning, but words also contain a "spiritual" or higher meaning.

Thus, when Augustine stumbles upon Abraham's 318 servants, he immediately seeks to make meaning of this strange numerical point in the story (Gen. 14:14). In other words, "What is the significance of the number '318'?" Yes, Augustine would take the number literally; and yet, he would go on to seek the "real" significance, the "spiritual" meaning of the number "318." Augustine then danced a little interpretive jig, and came up with the idea that "318" represents the Trinity. Hence, the spiritual meaning of the text is this: the Trinity accompanied Abraham in his quest to release Lot from the kidnapers. Abraham went with God, or was it the other way around? At any rate, what Augustine did with this particular text was pure and simple allegory. Language has many levels of meaning. The literal leads to the "higher" spiritual meaning. Of course we see Plato's fingerprints all over this thing. Reality resides in the idea, the literal word leads to the higher world, and the higher, ideal world is the most important.

If the Middle Ages brought the allegorical method to its fullest expression, then the Middle Ages also began to slowly unravel the allegory web. The Reformers, in particular Martin Luther, questioned the very soul of allegory by ridiculing its innumerable excesses. I believe it is safe to say that this new shift in language was "back to the text itself." Essentially, when we read words we must stick to the literal-historical-grammatical meaning of those words. No more loosey-goosey readings, no more tomfoolery with the Bible. Luther and others introduced objective, scientific methods of interpretation. The text cannot mean anything and everything.

Perhaps a simple example here would be Luther's view of the "318" in Genesis. What does "318" mean in the text? Luther would most likely have answered this way: "318 servants means 318 servants." End of conversation.

These new, enlightened thinkers radically shifted the nature of reading and using language. The letter of the text, the literal meaning, ruled the day. Luther took note of the problem of wrong interpretation (i.e. allegory), and he would also emphasize that the problem with interpretation resided within the darkened minds of men and women. Luther and other reformers did not, in the end, practice this literal reading of language which they so passionately promoted. If we read Luther on Psalm 8 for instance, we will discover that he leaves the text at times only to read Christ into this Hebrew Psalm. Nevertheless, Luther's view of language gave rise to the rationalistic, scientific criticism of the Bible so prevalent for centuries in Germany.

Luther's reading of the text led to good and undiscovered places, but also carried with it an insidious virus. After centuries of rigorous readings of the "letter" of the text, we more or less collapsed into absurdity and lethargy.

The twentieth century ushered in a great upheaval in language. Going back to the Classical age, philosophers and theologians questioned the word itself, the literal meaning of the word, and in so doing, those from this era found solace in the higher, spiritual meaning. They solved the problem of language by jumping to a higher level of meaning—the text would be a springboard into the celestial playground. The Modern age (roughly from Luther to the early 1900s) would question this diving maneuver and would instead plunge deeply into the text itself. According to the Moderns, à la Luther and those who followed, the problem of interpretation was located in bad methodologies (i.e. allegory) or biased thinking. In their minds, the secret to solving the problem of language, then, is to select the right methodology or to correct our thinking—this would surely get us to truth. However, rather than bringing us to the promised land of truth, we entered the twentieth century exhausted and disillusioned with language. Furthermore, language experienced a breakdown in the early part of the century and turned to horrendous violence. Words were used to destroy the other. In the end language failed.

What path, then, do we take? We have gone both ways to escape the limits of the text: we have gone beyond the word and we have plunged into the word, but both paths have led us to dead ends. Basically the twentieth century has finally begun to note the fall of language, and this fall leads us up the pathway to the front door of Martin Heidegger's hut. It was Heidegger who would open the door to a whole new way of looking at language.

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Being and Time

Born in 1889 in Messkirch, Germany, the young Martin Heidegger began his formal training by studying for the priesthood. At some point in his studies, philosophy captured his imagination, and Martin turned to a formal study of philosophy. In 1927, Heidegger, in his late thirties, published his magnum opus, the internationally celebrated *Being and Time*. In this work he takes on the problem of language and what it means to live in a world after the failure of the Classical age and the Modern age. According to Heidegger, ever since the Socratics (i.e. the beginning of the Classical tradition) we have left off or “forgotten” the most basic question of all—the question of Being. Who are we? What does it mean to exist? What does it mean to be? In Heidegger’s thinking, for almost three millennia, we have done all this work on the problem of language, but we have not dealt with the simple question of who we are and what it means to live authentically in this world.

Language and the philosophy underlying language have assumed the definition of “being” and in so doing have covered over the meaning of being. Heidegger foremost is concerned with what he calls “the being of Being” and sets out to forge a new language by returning to the root of language in his attempt to recover “Being.” His critique of Hegel as “the last Greek” is Heidegger’s breaking point or rupture from the modern view of language. Heidegger’s discourse will be a rejection of the philosophic tradition, that is, western metaphysics from the Socratics to Hegel.

Thus Heidegger summons the western world back to the original meaning of “truth.” This “new” thinking faces the Herculean task of overcoming what Heidegger calls an “ontotheology.” Philosophy must now proceed from the *destruktion* of ontotheology. For this reason, “Heidegger is generally regarded as the first postmodern thinker because of his declarations about ‘overcoming’ metaphysics and the ‘end’ of philosophy.”¹ If the question of Being is to have its own history made transparent, we need to dismantle, break up, destroy whatever has stood in the way of seeing and understanding our existence in the world. We have used language in such a way that we have covered over the truth, and as a result we live inauthentic lives. The “ontotheology” Heidegger is discussing was his belief that both the Classical and Modern traditions have charged simple words with magical, supernatural powers. Or perhaps we can put it this way—words have been a “direct” access to God, a veritable “bat phone” to truth which, in the end, uses words idolatrously and takes our lives away from what is authentic and mysterious. If words and language usher me into the presence of God, the holy of holies, then life this side of heaven is severely diminished thus reducing life to scientific analysis or extreme mysticism. Essentially, Martin was echoing B. B. King—“the thrill is gone.”

1. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), p. 44.

The Hermeneutical Circle

Heidegger's *Being and Time* is also a critique of naive transcendence, whether the concept occurs in philosophy or theology.* "Truth" hails from the Greek word *aletheia* which means "uncovering of that which has been covered over." "Truth is the unconcealedness of that which is as something that is." The modern interpretation of Being is dominated by the logical approach, and so modern views of language emphasize logic and correctness rather than the unconcealment or the revelation of Being. Reading for truth is a process of discovering both that which has covered over and that which has not been covered over, and this type of reading is open to wonder and mystery. Language, then, continues by placing our thinking "onto a path," not by bringing us to the destination. This path of language will hopefully lead the thinker to the expected destination, but unlike western metaphysics—whether in the Aristotelian or Platonic tradition—there is no final guarantee that the chosen path will lead to absolute truth. Heidegger makes the important point that the path, wherever it may lead, must move in and through the forest. In other words, there is no escaping the forest, there is no pristine thought outside of language, there is no a priori theology.

Furthermore, every human being is thrown into the world and enclosed within the hermeneutical circle, and even worse, no human has a vantage from where he or she might view the world as one. Steiner defines this dilemma of the hermeneutical circle as the "attempt to define a thing by the use of attributes that already presume a definition."² Indeed. This circle, this place of language, can be a prison or a home. On the whole, western philosophy has been one grand flight from this circle because the circle brings limit, humility, and death. And here is the crux of the matter. There is an infinite irony to the limit of reason. Humanity cannot live by reason alone. Western metaphysics has frantically attempted to escape the circle by transcending the circle with the result that the philosophical and theological endeavors have ended in a cul-de-sac of nonmeaning. Linear thinking alone will lead to the cycle of oblivion. What is it, though, that has been lost? Being—we have lost Being in many senses of the word. Moreover, what is most tragic is the loss of presence. The major passion of Heidegger's writing moves toward Anwesen, "Being coming into presence."

Reading, then, in Heidegger's tradition is a reading that seeks the revelation of Being, but more so, requires the openness of my Being. But the possibility of Being's revelation is much more scan-

* Heidegger calls this (philosophy in debate . . . with its own subject, straining against itself) the 'end of philosophy.' This 'end' is the folding back of a genesis which touches its own closure—which thus, in a certain sense, ceases to generate or be regenerated, but which also frees, within the hollow of the fold, quite different possibilities, possibilities of a leap which would amount to throwing oneself *elsewhere* (as if another world would open up) but rather leaping in place." Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Deleuzian Fold of Thought," in *The Deleuze Reader*, p. 109.

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2. *Being and Time*, p. 20.

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dalous. In the first place, the one who stands before me or whatever stands within my vision remains concealed. There is a profound mystery to vision or appearance. Hence, every moment, every text, every person is hidden and uniquely mundane. There remains, though, the venture of presence. What is required of me, the reader, is a different vision to begin with, a way of being, not just a well thought out methodology. Consequently, Van Gogh's painting of the peasant shoes is more than a great artistic painting:

A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. And yet—From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. On the leather lies the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field.³

This may be Heidegger's most beautiful, lyrical writing. Living, breathing, reading somewhere within the "And yet—" What stands before me is merely . . . "And yet—."

Still, more is required. Most importantly, our humanity must remain open to the openness of Being. "Only, certainly, by granting the thing, as it were, a free field to display its thingly character directly. Everything that might interpose itself between the thing and us in apprehending and talking about it must first be set aside. Only then do we yield ourselves to the undisguised presence of the thing."⁴ Reading is death. "Death strolls between letters."⁵ But death unto life. This leads us into one of Heidegger's greatest insights. The logos is not "logic," in other words, reason, rationale, judgment, or grounding, but is instead "discourse." It is here that Heidegger takes us back to the time of the pre-Socratics, in particular Heraclitus, before western philosophy was burdened with Classical and Modern understandings of language. The logos proceeds from the Greek word *legein* meaning to speak or to discourse with, "laying out, exhibiting, setting forth, recounting, telling a tale, making a statement."⁶ To have discourse, that is, to use language, is the disclosure, the giving of, the venturing forth of my being to another being. Reading the text is not standing over, or above, or under, or apart from, but being in relationship with, being entangled within the text, being present in the present. Reading is also a passionate act of love. Language does not exist to give me guarantees in the face of a fallen world. Language is intercourse with another being, a wild, rapturous dance with another being. Language can and does lead to God, but language can never apprehend, encircle, encompass, or enclose God. There is a great difference between being ensnared in love and being embraced in love. One murders mystery, the other lets love go. The Logos was not a rational principle in a world gone mad, but a

3. *Being and Time*, p. 33-34.

4. *Being and Time*, p. 25.

5. Jacques Derrida, "Edmund Jabes and the Question of the Book," in *Writing and Difference*, p. 71.

6. *Being and Time*, p. 58, note 1.

passionate person, a fierce lover.

Heidegger does not invite us to understand as much as he does to experience—to experience the disclosure of Being. This requires the human to listen by “standing in the light of” Being. The essence of the Heideggerian discourse in this matter is this: the reader is open to the disclosure of Being which stands near at hand and yet remains strange and hidden. Astonishingly, the result of Heidegger’s mode of reading is a return to the seventeenth-century Pietist adage *Denken ist Danken*, “to think is to thank.” Our thinking leads us to deep gratitude. This thinking is *das Durchdenken* (“a thinking through”) and *das Bedenken* (“a thinking toward”). Heidegger does not begin the enterprise of interpretation with theory, but Being. Thinking is thanking, being grateful for and thinking toward the text; who I am is always what I read. And language humbles, mystifies, connects, disappoints, deceives, loves, and dies.

Heidegger and Nazism

I must end so I end with this. In my office at the seminary, besides my wife and son, I have hung two pictures of two of my heroes. One of those pictures is a shot of Martin Heidegger. As best as I can tell, Heidegger appears to be in his fifties. He stands behind a classroom lectern but is leaning casually on the lectern with his right arm. He is smartly dressed in a dark suit and patterned tie. But his face, that face, what a beautiful face. His gray hair is combed straight back and hard against his head, and a very large nose stands as a prominent guard over an almost angelic face. He leans into the light, and his eyes dance, they dance with a tango of boyish delight and deep mystery. The right side of his face is full in the light, and the left side of his face peers from the shadows. Behind him is a blackboard with Greek and German scrawled neatly. I love this picture of Heidegger; and yet, the picture haunts me. The time of this picture is undoubtedly a number of years after the publication of his elegiac magnum opus, *Being and Time*. But this picture is not many years after his complicity with the Nazis.

In 1938 Heidegger forged an alliance with the Nazi regime. Ironically, that same year he took the same professorship of his mentor, Edmund Husserl, a Jew. Husserl had been relieved of his calling and died soon afterward. Heidegger the Nazi took his place. It did not take long for Martin to grow disenchanted with the Nazis and he soon withdrew. But no matter, he failed to discern the evil hour. For the rest of his life Martin would essentially remain silent about his complicity. His eyes in the picture dance with delight but also seem to harbor a dark secret.

How could such disparate realities reside in the same man? This very question haunted the great poet Paul Celan even to the point

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that Paul paid a personal visit to Martin's hut. Paul Celan grappled with a singular question. "How could it be that a man with some of the greatest ideas of the millennium could lock arms with the apes of Nazism?" Recently, a new biography of Heidegger was published, and in this work the author suggests the possibility that Martin had seen for a moment what he thought could be the appearance of Being, the coming of the philosophical messiah. Finally comes the great prophet, the one who will redeem Germany—Adolph Hitler. In this move, Heidegger made the same tragic error made repeatedly in history. We want heaven on earth—now. Heidegger brought the twentieth century into one of the most beautiful moments and in the same gesture made a bargain with the devil. In one single life there resides the elegiac and the demonic. Apparently, as far as we know, Martin could not or did not answer Paul's questions on that day of his visit. Celan left with no answers, but he did leave with this haunting poem written to Heidegger:

Arnica, eyebright, the
draft from the well with the
star-crowned die above it,

in the
hut,

the line
—whose name did the book
register before mine?—,
the line inscribed
in that book about
a hope, today,
of a thinking man's
coming
word
in the heart,

woodland sward, unlevelled,
orchid and orchid, single
coarse stuff, later, clear
in passing,

he who drives us, the man,
who listens in,

the half-
trodden fascine
walks over the high moors,

dampness,
much.

7. "Todtnauberg," trans.
By Michael Hamburger,
Poems of Paul Celan.

Similar to the picture hanging in my office, the poem calls attention to the two worlds of this man. Like few figures of the last century in the second millennium, Martin Heidegger, the thinking man, embodied the triumph and tragedy of language.



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