

Martin Heidegger and the Rhetoric of Silence

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I wish to thank Dr. Walker and the Colloquium for inviting me here to speak today, and for Deepika Bahri for chairing this afternoon's session. And I want to thank all of you for your indulgence. As I have worked on this paper I have realized more and more that what I present here will be very preliminary.

I will be speaking today of Martin Heidegger. Appropriately, first and foremost for this context, because of the deep and instructive work Heidegger undertook on the subject of *rhetoric*. He wrote and lectured extensively on the rhetorical works of Aristotle and Parmenides, as well as contributing his *own* constructive arguments to this discourse about discourse.

I will also be speaking today about silence: and because the time is brief, a very particular silence. I wish to speak about the "silence" which surrounded Heidegger (or with which Heidegger surrounded himself) regarding the *Shoah*—the mass extermination of the marginal peoples of Europe by the Third Reich—and his close involvement with that regime while he was rector at the University of Freiburg. It is a silence about which there has already been much speech, and for that reason I shall endeavor somewhat to speak *obliquely* (so that I may in some way call this speech "my own"). Others have written to grasp this silence, to condemn or legitimate it, on the basis of Heidegger's *philosophy* or perhaps his political *naïveté*ⁱ. These are important questions, and I want to affirm them, but that is not my task here. I wish to take a slightly different tack, and

examine this silence in relation to some of Heidegger's work on *rhetoric*. Is there a sense in which *this* silence, for us, can be *rhetorical*? A way to ask, not what the silence *meant*, but what the silence *means*. What does it *mean to be silent*—here, now.

I begin with a quotation from Lao Tzu, from the 5th surrah of the *Tao Te Ching*, for your consideration:

*Much speech leads inevitably to silence. Better to hold fast to the void.*ⁱⁱ

I begin here not merely because it speaks to the heart of our question, but because it recalls for us *Todtnauberg*, the Black Forest villa to which Heidegger retired in the years of his silence. It was this small house at Todtnauberg which he had left in 1933 to respond to the call of Hitler's SS, to accept the University rectorate. And later, in 1967, it was here that Heidegger received an extended visit from Paul Celan, the German-Jewish poet, who cordially attempted to pierce the silence for an *answer*, a *word in the heart*ⁱⁱⁱ of Heidegger that would bring meaning, only to leave in frustration. It was here that Heidegger would retreat to concentrate on his work, his work on language, on Being, and perhaps even his 1924 lectures on rhetoric.

We are recalled to this place by the quotation because it was here, in his final years at Todtnauberg, that Heidegger began to translate the *Tao Te Ching*.

And he would have encountered this passage—much speech leads *inevitably* to silence—in a context not unlike our own here today. A context in which questions of language, of Being, and their relationship to the ancient art of rhetoric, hang together in a tight confederacy.

While I have not found anywhere that Heidegger has made a published comment on this particular passage, and while I do not feel comfortable commenting on it *for him*,

I do hope to come to a place where I can venture to comment upon it *for us*. But that will come in a moment.

First, as a way into the discussion, let's examine a comment Heidegger *did* make, in a lecture series entitled *Was heisst Denken?* (*What is called Thinking?*) In those lectures Heidegger makes the claim that "Language shows itself first as our way of speaking."^{iv} Now, for Heidegger, *speaking*, through rhetoric, is inextricably tied to *being*, as we see from this passage from *Being and Time*:

"Contrary to the traditional orientation, according to which rhetoric is conceived as the kind of thing we 'learn in school' this work [, the *Rhetoric*] of Aristotle must be taken as the first systematic hermeneutic of everydayness of Being with one another."^v

For Heidegger, the *language* of Aristotle, Parmenides, and Heraclitus is not dead speech for the museum—and here one can think of all the rejoinders about "dead white men"—not dead speech but the living and lived perseverance of two thousand years of metaphysical tradition. Their words, by always already being ahead of us and shaping the language we *speak*, have conformed our worlds to certain areas of interpretive possibility.^{vi}

In other words, in Heidegger's reading of the text of the *Rhetoric*, wrapped within a discourse on proper speech, Aristotle has provided an *originary interpretive method* to apply to the question of Being—not an abstract theory of academics and students but the very bedrock of practical living. Put another way, we interpret the *practical* life, the *meaning of being* through our living-in this speech-world, this community of language we share with an *Other*. Thus, for Heidegger, speech and speech-tradition do not form,

as we often assume, a disclosed *past*, but mark out the concealedness within our *present*.^{vii}

This concealedness of speech is always already ahead of us—constraining us and opening up for us possibilities—again, not as a past, but *here, now*.

This hiddenness of speech which is also in some way *ahead* of speech, is an aspect of what Heidegger called *thinking*. So we are presented here with a tension: Our language is an inherited aspect of our *nach-denken*—our thought which comes *after* speech. Yet our thinking is also an *Anzeige*—something which lies beyond or before our power of expression.^{viii}

This tension is underlined by Heidegger himself, in fact. Heidegger addresses this tension in a sort of “last word” on the subject. I say last because this comes from the *Der Spiegel* magazine interview commenced a few months before his death in 1976 and published posthumously. Here he says, “It may be that the path of thinking has today reached the point where *silence* is required to preserve thinking from being jammed up.”^{ix}

What I am interested in here is the event-moment of a slippage.

In what we call thinking, speech is *primary*. But in the final word, thinking requires *silence*. What we find in this is most interesting: the primacy of the spoken word strangely and continuously pre-empted by the un-spoken. Much speech, leading inevitably to silence. But this slippage is totally troubling to us—*precisely because* we are inheritors of the works of Heraclitus, Parmenides, Aristotle, and on down the line. We want the *presence* of speech, as primary *and* final word, period.

So when Allen Scult, for example, comes to the problem of Heidegger’s silence in his paper “On the Hermeneutics of Heidegger’s Speech,” he feels compelled to freeze the

slippage—and as such Heidegger's *silence* is transmuted into Heidegger's *saying nothing*. Very interesting. And Scult is not a-typical. Silence, equivocation and duplicity are here all subsumed together as modes of *speech*. Silence *becomes* its opposite: a mode of speech. Silence becomes a mode of speech *about nothing*.

Yet the author's voice—Heidegger's voice in this *particular* case—is *not* a *privileged* voice! It *cannot* be, for it is *not* a voice. Strangely, it is now his *absence* of voice which has become the privileged. His *absence* of voice is *strangely privileged*. He has remained *silent*, yet—be they through direct comment or academic proxy—our attempts at speech *about* that silence *now legitimate it—as if in fact something had been said*. Or it may be helpful to look at the matter this way: It's as if I were to stand here, at the lectern, *mute*, for my full allotted twenty minutes, as each of you—here, now—*interpreted me*; shouting (publishing?) your readings of what my intention *was to have been here, now*.

Such an imaginative exercise might be a funny gag to pull—and watch out, I might try it sometime—but it is also illustrative. There is the fact of a body of hermeneutic and commentary that desires to pierce a *meaning*. Only now in our search for this meaning there is no illusion of an *anchor*, is there? *There is no speech*. Yet we orate, we rhetorize, we argue *around speech*, is it not so? (Heidegger says it is so.) Rhetoric must anchor in speech, that is the foundation here. And rhetoric guides us in finding the meaning of our Being with another, that is the position taken on this foundation within Heidegger's reading of our Western metaphysic. *So there must be speech*. But we are caught in the continual slippage: there is no speech. I posit to you,

there is from Heidegger, on this matter, only silence. And, speaking rhetorically, we have no idea how to speak to this silence on its own terms.

Yet, effective rhetorical practice—*good* rhetoric—*demands* silence. Actually, let's nuance that statement a bit. It is not *silence* which is demanded. If that were the case one could employ rhetoric *anywhere, without the need for another, an audience*. Effective rhetoric demands *keeping* silent. My rhetoric, for it to be effective, demands *you be here*, and that you *shut up*. Rhetoric depends on the keeping-silent of an audience—an audience who always already has been asked the implicit question and thus is always already answering *yes*.

I will posit here that the implicit question that is always already being answered in this rhetorical context can be paraphrased, but never quoted. It can be measured through the trace of its effects only.

So the task of localizing this particular silence—Heidegger's silence—*in time* becomes increasingly difficult, with the uncomfortable realization that when we speak *rhetorically* of this silence we are speaking *simultaneously* of a particular, localized, event/advent of silence and of a general, de-localized, disinterested silence.

This occurs for us, *here, now*, because Heidegger has reversed the roles. It is he who is now—forever—keeping silent. Keeping silent about the *Shoah*, and silent about its meaning *for him*. In fixed silence, he is now the eternal audience to this question. So long as we are being with the other of this question, so long as we come to this question *rhetorically*, we become caught up in a growing rhetorical double-bind. We, standing outside the silence—a silence we have thus reserved as the privileged province of the

audience, are thus its eternal orators—offering poems or polemics—but all the time duplicitous.

Our duplicity is our unwillingness to admit the rhetorical double-bind that occurs when a privileged voice, a voice which authorizes *meaning* in some strange way for us, stands mute, refusing to perform its duty. We dissemble, we comment on this muteness *as speech*, because this double-bind strangely transforms *our* performance and duty into acts of sudden importance. *Our role in this game is becoming highlighted*, and our dissembling is a simultaneous effort to continue as if nothing had happened (which, under rhetoric, demands the void be filled with *some authoritative voice* – a voice which can now be only ours) while maintaining that we are *not* involved—we attempt to sovereignly maintain for ourselves that we are the *audience*. It is our place only to listen, and then comment *afterword*.

If the scholarly community, the general public, or whomever happens to find themselves in this bind goes to such lengths to put *meaning* into a void of silence (again, remember, by treating it as a form of performative *speech*) does that not in some way draw suspicion on the hermeneutics engaged in when an audience *does* encounter positive speech?

This simultaneity, this slippage between localized temporal event in the “past” and a contemporaneous present drives us, again, to ask not what the silence *meant*, but what the silence *means*. What does it *mean to be silent*—here, now.

Here, now, where the silence is evacuating space for my words.

Your silence *legitimizes* my speech here. It is not just politeness. Your silence becomes a *political* act. By standing at this podium, I have asked you the implicit

question. Before we began here today, a question has been asked of you. In your silence, you have not answered. Again, in your silence, you have not *answered*. *You are answering*—and that answer, *here*, is a continual *yes*.

This is framed well by Heidegger scholar Avital Ronell: if we are to reflect on this *question*—the implicit one you are *already answering*, we might do well to ponder, as she does, “What does it mean to answer...to make oneself answerable...in a situation whose gestural syntax already means yes, even if [that] affirmation should find *itself* followed by a question mark?”^x

Thus the *questioning answer*—“yes?”—this affirmation which is itself an *invitation*—*hangs over* the silence which is itself awaiting to be filled with the authoritative voice.

Thus the attempt to render Heidegger’s silence meaningful within rhetoric (which is to say, not as mere or totalizing silence, but as a silence interpreted *as speech*, as a *keeping silent*, not as a negative but as a positive event which can be hermeneutically pierced) will lead us to two possible outcomes.

The first, as we have observed, is a duplicity which will *imagine* a text when there is no text, and *fabricate* a series of meanings for *Heidegger’s localized silence in the past* while claiming all the while that it is merely “discovering” them.

The second possible outcome is the self-conscious realization that Heidegger’s silence is in fact no different from *our* silence. Any audience, through its *rhetorical* silence, is contemporaneously in the moment of the questioning answer: *yes?* And its baited awaiting of the authoritative voice *which can only follow that answer* binds us in a confederacy: for we have always already legitimated those actions to which we claim the

innocence of mere *spectators*. Much speech leads inevitably to the rhetoric of *our* silence.

And it is here, resolvedly, that we must face the void.

I thank you for your time.

ⁱ A good general introduction to this ongoing discourse can be found in *Martin Heidegger and the Holocaust*, edited by Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, Humanities Press International 1996.

ⁱⁱ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*. Translated by D.C. Lau, New York: Viking Penguin, 1985, page 61.

ⁱⁱⁱ A line torn from Paul Celan's poem "Todtnauberg," translated by Wayne Klein and found in the footnote of an essay of the same name in *Martin Heidegger and the Holocaust*, page 111.

^{iv} Quoted in Allen Scult, "The Hermeneutics of Heidegger's Speech: A Rhetorical Phenomenology" available online at <http://www.multimedia2.drake.edu/s/scult/rhet.html>.

^v Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. New York: Harper and Row, 1962, page 178.

^{vi} Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* New York, Harper & Row, 1968, page 75.

^{vii} Ibid, page 76.

^{viii} Heidegger, "Anzeige der hermeneutische Situation," 1921.

^{ix} Quoted in Scult, "Hermeneutics of Heidegger's Speech", page 3.

^x Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989, page 5.