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Religious Language as Poetry: Heidegger's Challenge

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This paper examines how Heidegger's view that language is poetry provides a way of conceptualising religious language. Poetry, according to Heidegger, is language in its purest form, in that it reveals Being, whilst also showing the difference between word and thing. In poetry, Heidegger suggests, we come closest to the essence of language itself and encounter its strangeness and impermeability. What would be the implications of viewing religious language in this way? Through examining Heidegger's view that poetry is the purest form of language, I suggest that it would also be possible to view religious language as 'poetry' in this way, in that it also shows the transcendence of what cannot be brought to presence in language, except as concealed. Such a view of religious language leads to the view that it is not a special, unique or distinctive category of language, but rather a mode of language that, like poetry, can draw our attention to the inarticulable relationship between word and world that Heidegger argues pervades all forms of language.

Introduction

And so each new venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
(Eliot, 1963, p. 203)

Martin Heidegger's later essays on language state that poetry is language in its purest form. In poetry, according to Heidegger, we come closest to encountering the Being of language, which nevertheless remains concealed. Poetry, for Heidegger, reveals the difference between thing and world, thing and word. The poet listens to language, lets language speak and reveal Being. Poetry is a 'raid on the inarticulate' in that poetry is original speaking, naming that which has not been named, a bidding to come into the clearing created by language. Poetry reveals this strangeness of language, its otherness and its nearness. In the paper, I will consider how Heidegger's exploration of poetry may lead us to reconsider the ways in which religious language has been conceptualized. Heidegger's writing on poetry challenges us to consider whether the nature of language can be conceptualized at all. I will suggest that Heidegger provides a new way of understanding religious language, and more importantly, shows us a way of listening to religious language, so that its nature is revealed as hidden and unconceptualizable, yet at the same time providing an opening to the wholly Other.

I. The Nature of Poetry

Before we can explore the idea of religious language as poetic language, it is necessary to provide a sketch of the elements of Heidegger's writings on the nature of poetry. Heidegger sees poetry as pure, originary language. But what exactly does he mean by 'poetry'? Heidegger uses the verbal form *Dichten*, often translated as

poetry, as well as *Dichtung*, but can we be more specific about what these terms mean? Furniss and Bath (1996) point out that within literary theory there is no agreement as to what poetry is. Neither does Heidegger give us a precise definition of what he means by poetry. It is not limited to verse: ‘Pure prose is never “prosaic.” It is as poetic and hence as rare as poetry’ (*PLT*, p. 208). Heidegger suggests that art may be subsumed under the category of poetry:

All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth, is, as such, *essentially poetry*. The nature of art ... is the setting-itself-into-work of truth. (*PLT*, p. 72)

Poetry is not seen as an expression of the poet’s views or experiences: ‘In its essence, language is neither expression nor an activity of man.’ (*PLT*, p. 197) Poetry, as pure language, speaks itself:

What is spoken purely is that in which the completion of speaking that is proper to what is spoken is, in its turn, an original. What is spoken purely is the poem. (*PLT*, p. 194)

We therefore need to listen to the poem itself. ‘It is language itself and not the arbitrary individuality of the poet that really speaks in the poem.’ (Pattison, 2000, p. 169) Thus the poem goes beyond the poet’s intention. The poetic word itself is never exhausted, never closed; when opened up by interpretation, there remains a hiddenness to the word. ‘The poetic work speaks out of an ambiguous ambigousness.’ (*OWL*, p. 192) This is a fundamental aspect of what poetry means to Heidegger.

If we ask, *Was heist Dichten?* one answer lies in its density or impermeability, its earthliness, its resistance to penetration by analysis, its uncontainability within grammar, rhetoric, or poetics – its essential darkness ... its otherness. (Bruns, 1989, p. 4)

We can see this in Heidegger’s treatment of poetry, for example, that of Trakl, Hölderlin and George. We witness a very close exegesis of the language of the poem, as he opens the poem up to find new resonances, a new speaking: ‘like an old midrashist, he finds matter for thinking in every jot and tittle, every mark or wrinkle of the text’ (Bruns, 1989, p. 3).

So, for Heidegger, poetry is not merely verse; it speaks independently of the poet, and possesses a hiddenness that means that its interpretation is never closed. Another key feature of poetry for Heidegger is that, as pure language, it names. This naming is not a designation: ‘This naming does not hand out titles. It does not apply titles, but it calls into the word. The naming calls.’ (*PLT*, p. 198) The naming calls what is concealed to come to language as unconcealed. The role of the poet is to name things as they are, to show their Being:

When the gods are named originally and the essence of things finds its word, so that things first shine out, human existence is brought into a firm relation and set on a ground. (Heidegger quoted in Bernasconi, [1985] 1989, pp. 37-38)

Bernasconi, in *The Question of Language in Heidegger's History of Being*, explores how in Heidegger's later works, Being is instituted in language. We can see this in *The Origin of the Work of Art*:

Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings *to* their beings *from out of* their being. (PLT, p. 73)

This idea of poetry as naming / founding / bringing to Being does not mean that the poet has the power to *create* Being, for it is language that speaks. It articulates and so reveals our life-world, but it does not create it. As Pattison emphasises:

Language is led not only by itself... but by what we apprehend by means of our sensory and motor interaction with the world, by what lies beyond language and, in a sense, precedes or transcends language. (Pattison, 2005, p. 146)

Language in this sense as poetry allows things to appear as thing, *finds* the essence of the thing, creates an opening for it to appear.

Poetry ... is not an aimless imagining of whimsicalities and not a flight of mere notions and fancies into the realm of the unreal. What poetry, as illuminating projection, unfolds of unconcealedness and projects ahead into the design of the figure, is the Open which poetry lets happen, and indeed in such a way that only now, in the midst of beings, the Open brings beings to shine and ring out. (PLT, p. 72)

Poetry, pure language, as Naming is also termed Saying. In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger sees poetry as fundamental Naming / Saying in that it can speak that which is unspoken:

Projective saying is poetry ... Poetry is the saying of the unconcealedness of what is ... Projective saying is saying which, in preparing the sayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable *as such* into a world. (PLT, p. 74, italics mine)

This is why poetry is language in its purest form. It shows the unsayable *as such*, revealing it as *other* than the word, or not already ready for language. Yet poetry speaks; thus the unsayable, while revealed in its being as unsayable, preserves a hiddenness. The unsayable can never be fully brought to language; something of its otherness always remains untapped.

This is one type of difference revealed in poetry: the difference between word and thing. The term 'dif-ference' is left open by Heidegger. Bruns suggests that 'dif-ference' can be understood as all of the following: diaphora, *Ereignis*, dimension, pain, *Riss*. 'The effort to say what dif-ference is, exactly, is misguided, or at all events doomed to fail.' (1989, p. 90) In *Language*, Heidegger explores the difference between world and thing, and presents the dif-ference as what bids, stills, calls into presence, and holds apart in intimacy. It is language that establishes this difference: 'Language, the peal of stillness, is, inasmuch as the dif-ference takes place. Language goes on as the taking place or occurring of the dif-ference for world and

things.' (*PLT*, p. 207) For Heidegger, this stillness can be heard by listening, and poetry calls us to listen to this stillness, which reveals thing as thing, world as world, and the intimacy between the two. But '[t]he peal of stillness is not anything human' (p. 207). It is other than us and other than that which it names. Saying reveals the difference between world and thing and between itself and world.

It is because of this tension, this ambiguity in the relation between thing and word, that poetry allows us to experience language in its purest form. Bruns eloquently highlights this feature of Heidegger's theory in *Heidegger's Estrangements*. We cannot escape language to say what its essence is. This is the subject of Heidegger's lecture *The Nature of Language*. There we read:

We speak and speak about language. What we speak of, language, is always ahead of us. Our speaking merely follows language constantly. Thus we are continually lagging behind what we first ought to have overtaken and taken up in order to speak about it. Accordingly, when we speak of language we remain entangled in a speaking that is persistently inadequate. (*OWL*, p. 75)

So we can speak about language, but we cannot pin it down to a system of signs or meanings, as its essence, its relation to things and world, is ever elusive, veiled. Attempts to conceptualize the relationship between word and thing arise from the misguided assumption that word and thing fit together in a definite relation that we can grasp. In reality, the word is something mysterious. This essence, as mysterious, and the mysterious relationship between word and thing, Saying and Being, is shown in poetry.

Saying and Being, word and thing, belong to each other in a veiled way, a way which has hardly been thought of and is not to be thought out to the end. All essential Saying hearkens back to this veiled mutual belonging of Saying and Being, word and thing. (*OWL*, p. 155-156)

Heidegger does not present his case through logical argument. Bruns defends his method thus:

In order to avoid speaking about language (conceptualizing it), and also in order *not* to avoid speaking about it ('We must incessantly strive to do so'), ... Heidegger appropriates the discursive secrecy proper to ancient theories of wisdom, where it is said that one can speak of the highest (of anything) by not speaking, that is, by speaking strangely or in strange tongues or by exploiting in radical and even shocking ways the 'weakness of the logos'. (1989, pp. 55-56)

In his essays *Words* and *The Nature of Language*, Heidegger reaches his conclusions on the nature of language through his meditations on the poem *The Word*, by Stefan George. Heidegger listens to the poem as saying that there is no word for the word, and explores what this might mean. The absence of the word, does not mean that George or Heidegger remain silent: they continue to speak to expose the strangeness of language and the relation between word and thing. As Bernasconi writes:

The renunciation that the poet learns arises from his entrance into the realm of the unsayable ... Nevertheless the poet is not silent in consequence. He still writes the poem and in it tells us that he learned something from what had happened. He did not learn *about* language; the poet is not a philosopher of language. He learns to speak differently. ([1985] 1989, p. 53)

Heidegger's challenge then is to speak differently, which in fact means to listen differently, to hear language speaking. Through poetry, it is language that speaks: *Die Sprache spricht*. In listening to language, things appear as things. In their naming, they come to the clearing created for them by language. Language allows beings to become what they are. It both frames and founds Being:

The poet names the gods and names all things as what they are. This naming does not consist in supplying with a name something already known, but, in that the poet speaks the essential word, the being is first named to what it is through this naming. Thus it becomes known as a being. Poetry is the founding of Being through words. (Heidegger quoted in Halliburton, 1981, p. 84)

The poet is the one who is gifted in being able to listen to language. The poet, as the one who receives revelation, is called forth to witness to truth. Heidegger's quasi-biblical tone is apt. Truth, in Heidegger's view, is an unconcealment. Heidegger draws on the original Greek word for truth, *alētheia*, taking the *a-* as a negative prefix and drawing attention to the central root of the word in the term *lath*: 'to be concealed.' Pattison suggests how this notion of truth as unconcealment presents 'the world as shining forth in its own natural luminosity' (2005, p. 73), and this unconcealment in both the Greek and Heidegger's views takes place through language:

The primary medium of truth was, for them [the Greek philosophers], language, *logos*, itself. Language was not then experienced as an instrument, an ensemble of purely conventional signs that could be 'used' to describe things or express thoughts. Language was itself the illuminating power (p.73).

It is, therefore, through listening to the speaking of language, as Heidegger suggests, that we can see the world shine forth in this way, whilst also revealing its hiddeness.

My outline of Heidegger's conception of poetic language has been necessarily brief, and I have chosen to focus on those aspects that I believe are most illuminating for an understanding of religious language. It would be useful to explore further Heidegger's concept of the fourfold, and the relationship between Being, the Holy and Language, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. Let us now examine how far religious language might usefully be understood within the new way of seeing language presented by Heidegger.

II. Religious Language as Saying

There is not scope within this paper to provide an overview of the different theories of religious language that have been entertained since the twentieth century.

What I wish to focus on are the specific aspects of Heidegger's understanding of poetry which bring a distinctive voice to the ongoing dialogue on the nature of religious language. Although professing himself neither theist nor atheist, Heidegger's later writings do refer to 'the gods' and 'God' in relation to poetry, for example his essay on Rilke. The poet, in hinting at the presence of a deity, reveals their absence. David White points out that Heidegger's language may be seen as problematic for theology, for example his 'apparently random references to "God" ... and "the gods"' (1978, p. 122). To explore Heidegger's own theology is beyond the scope of this paper, and I wish, moreover, to focus on his conception of poetic language and what this might mean for the study of religious language, irrespective of Heidegger's theology. The most likely reason, I believe, for the neglect of Heidegger's views on language in the study of religious language has been because of the desire in theology to say something concrete about the relation between words and the Holy, to pin down the nature of religious language. Implicit has often been the desire to defend theological discourse against claims of meaninglessness stemming from the discourses of logical positivism. An example of such a concern can be seen in the work of Janet Martin Soskice on religious language:

The theist can coherently claim that his language is referential ... The theist can reasonably take his talk of God, bound as it is within a wheel of images, as being reality depicting, while at the same time acknowledging its inadequacy as description. This, we believe, is the position a critical theological realist must take. (Soskice, [1985] 1989, p. 141)

In order to engage in the debate on the nature of religious language, we need to take seriously the challenge Heidegger poses, that we won't be able to conceptualize it, putting aside concerns about the challenge this might present to the rationality of discourse about the nature of God.

So, can we see religious language as poetry, as pure language? If we return to Heidegger's conception of poetry, we saw that it was not limited to poesy, that all art was in essence poetry. Therefore we do not have a problem with locating religious language in its form within poetry. Heidegger writes:

Poetry proper is never merely a higher mode (*melos*) of everyday language. It is rather the reverse: everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer. (PLT, p. 208)

Religious language therefore needs to discover its essence as poetic for us to hear it speaking, to prevent it from becoming dull, 'used-up'. The idea that religious language is poetic is not new. Austin Farrer (1972), for example, explored the nature of religious language as poetry and thus as metaphor. Levinas has also touched on the nature of religious language as poetic:

What the multiple expressions of religious language have in common is the claim to be inexhaustible in references to the world from which the signification of words, propositions and discourses is woven. How do we open to language the borders of the given reality in which we live? ... In the poetic imagination, the unheard can be heard, called out to and

expressed ... metaphor can lead beyond the experiences which seem to have created it (Levinas, [1982] 1994, p. 86)

Such theories are helpful in that they demonstrate the open-endedness of religious language. There are however two problems with such conceptions of religious language as poetry. The first is that these traditional positions tend to assume that all religious language is metaphorical or figurative. This is mistaken in its attempt to ground poetry in what eludes us: a theory of the nature of language. Heidegger's view of poetry leads us away from this. As Bruns writes:

Heidegger means to cure us of this addiction to theories of meaning and signification, but it is still too early for him to succeed. ... [T]he whole purpose of 'The Origin of the Work of Art' is to emancipate us from the traditional language of figurality. A theory of metaphor is precisely what we no longer need in order to reflect on the otherness of the work of art. (1989, pp. 41-42)

The second way in which previous conceptions of religious language as poetry have been misguided is that they assume that religious language belongs in a special category of language as an attempt to speak at the limits of language. This view is problematic because it rests on the assumption that 'everyday' language operates as straightforward signification, word signifying thing or idea of thing. On this view, religious language is problematic because the signified is absent, or not at all obvious. Therefore it needs to be seen as different, 'poetic' rather than 'prosaic', placed within its own language game. If we reject this view and follow Heidegger, we see that religious language is not different from other language, but rather the very essence of language itself, as words reveal their very opacity and thereby reveal what is otherwise concealed.

So, we can see religious language as poetry, but not as it has usually been conceptualized, as thereby necessarily metaphorical or symbolic. If we could learn to see religious language as poetry according to Heidegger, we would not treat it as a special category of language, but as itself pure language. Heidegger might be criticised on the grounds that he does not prove his case or argue for the primacy of poetry. But he has, in poetry, found a crack in theories of word / object relation, and through this crack he has opened up a space for wonder in which the essence of language itself is revealed as mysterious whilst also revealing the transcendent as such. Thus Heidegger draws attention to how language brings to presence what cannot be brought to presence, the excess that remains beyond the limits of language.

Another key area of Heidegger's views on poetry that has implications for religious language is his view that it is language, not man, who speaks. 'Language speaks. Man speaks in that he responds to language.' (PLT, p. 210) John Macquarrie (1967) points out the parallels between Heidegger's view of poetry and the concept of revelation, both regarding the word which reveals truth as a gift to the poet / prophet. Macquarrie thinks it is a mistake to see Heidegger as presenting the poet as the passive receptor who only acts as a channel for language. In many ways, however, this is precisely what Heidegger *is* saying: the poet listens for the voice of Being. In religious language, this could be a dangerous view, since many things that are spoken in the name of religion are false, and it is perhaps a failing of Heidegger's theory that it does not account for this. What is important for religious language though is the idea that language, the work, speaks, and we need to listen to it. Whilst it is important

in trying to understand religious language, particularly scripture, to explore its historical context and authorial intention, we must not think that we have ever reached a definitive interpretation. The word, ‘living and active’, needs to be allowed to speak, not closed down to what the author wanted to say at a particular time.

Another way in which religious language can be seen as inhabiting the domain of poetry is that it continues to speak of that which is elusive. Heidegger speaks of the poet as the one who names the holy. ‘Holy’ literally means ‘set apart’¹; the poet, naming the Holy, names what is Other. The poet, in bidding difference, allows the Holy to emerge as Other. It hints at the unsayable while revealing it as such.

[P]oetry is ... veiled, a sign rather than a statement. Playing on the double meaning of the German ‘Wink’, which means both ‘hint’ and ‘wave’ ..., Heidegger says that such a hint / wave is ‘a holding on to a closeness in the course of increasing distance and, conversely, the revealing of the distance still to be covered in the joyful proximity of the one arriving.’ (Pattison, 2000, p. 171).

Poetry reveals the depths of the hiddenness of the one it names in the process of revelation. ‘[T]he god who remains unknown, must by showing *himself* as the one he is, appear as the one who remains unknown. God’s *manifestness* ... is mysterious.’ (*OWL*, p. 220) This intimacy between hiddenness and revelation is the essence of religious language. Religious language reveals the Holy as ever beyond us, whilst at the same time revealing its nearness. It is precisely in language itself that the revelation of God as Other occurs. As Walter Benjamin writes, in scripture, ‘language and revelation are without any tension.’ ([1955] 1992, p. 82) We may also speak of ritual and ceremony as types of poetry in that they also reveal God as Other, and in themselves point away from themselves. All these types of religious language are pure language in that they show the otherness of Being from language, the distance, the veiled relation, between Saying and Being.

Thus seeing religious language as poetic helps us to realise the rift between word and thing, but encourages us to go on speaking in order to bring the Holy as concealed to presence. As Graham Ward writes, religious language is: ‘both necessary and performs its own deconstruction ... It is necessary because ... the Word of God is not immediately present to us. What is present to us ... is the absence of immediacy’ (1995: 153). The role of poetic language is to bring to presence that which is otherwise hidden from us. Religious language is thus a new speaking, a calling, an originary naming.

Heidegger’s view of poetry encourages us to see language as opening the Holy in its otherness.

The poet calls, in the sights of the sky, that which in its very self-disclosure causes the appearance of that which conceals itself, and indeed *as* that which conceals itself. In the familiar appearance, the poet calls the alien as that to which the invisible imparts itself in order to remain what it is – unknown. (Heidegger quoted in Bruns, 1989, p. 185)

Heidegger therefore sees the concealed Other as coming to presence in language. Can we say how this takes place? We have already seen that for Heidegger the

¹ Heidegger uses the term almost synonymously with ‘Being’, cf. Halliburton, 1981, p. 95

relationship between Saying and Being is veiled, so can we explore how the concealed is unconcealed in language? Benjamin provides a hint as to how we might understand the process of unconcealment: ‘All language communicates himself.’ (cited in Ward, 1995, p. 3) It is by listening to language and hearing its very materiality and strangeness that the gap between thing and word emerges, and the thing emerges as thing. Language itself remains other, ‘language flatly refuses to express itself in words’ (*OWL*, p. 81), and thus conceals itself, remains dark and mysterious. Bruns writes:

The task of exegesis is not to eliminate darkness or enigma but to enter into it and abide with it, because illumination always occurs *within* darkness, not in opposition to it ... The darkness of poetry is not a defect of its language but the essence of it. (1989, p. 40)

This then is perhaps how religious language presences the Holy, through its darkness and opacity. We do not see clearly through language, rather we dwell in it. This idea of religious language as dark is seen clearly in the study of parables. The Hebrew term *mashal* which is translated as ‘parable’ can equally be translated as ‘riddle’ or ‘dark saying’. These ‘riddles’ are presented as a means of revelation, for example in Matthew 13:35:

I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter things hidden since
The creation of the world.

Parables hide in order to reveal. Frank Kermode writes: ‘Parable, it seems, may proclaim a truth as a herald does, and at the same time conceal truth like an oracle.’ (1979, p. 47) This simultaneous proclamation and concealment is what Heidegger claims for poetry. Thus religious language can be seen as pure language in that it eludes us, while bringing to presence that which is Other as such.

III. Some possible objections

Before drawing this paper to a close, it is worth pausing to consider some of the objections that could be raised against viewing religious language as poetic in this Heideggerian sense.

The first challenge is whether Heidegger so stresses the incomprehensibility of the Other, that, by the Leibnizian principle of the ‘identity of indiscernibles,’ it slips past transcendence and into some brand of irrationality, close to Nietzsche’s ‘Will’. This relates not just to Heidegger’s emphasis on the incomprehensibility of the Holy, but also to his notion of truth as unconcealment: it is possible to see how his view of truth as unconcealment might be interpreted as leading to a total relativisation of the question of truth. Pattison explains this interpretation of Heidegger and its similarity to Nietzsche as follows:

this might be read as saying that all views are equally true, that, in effect, ‘view’ = ‘true view’, so that, in fact, no real distinction between true and false is possible any more. Instead, how we see ourselves comes to depend on some kind of arbitrarily willed choice. ‘I willed it thus!’ is Nietzsche’s Zarathustra’s answer to the question concerning the continuity

and coherence of the self... Is Heidegger himself doing more than giving a cloak of philosophical formality to Nietzsche's renowned perspectivism? (2005, p. 163)

It must be acknowledged that Heidegger's emphasis on the ultimate incomprehensibility of what is brought to presence in language as concealed could be interpreted in this way. It must also be stated that speaking about God in this way could not be reduced to any kind of project or managed system of knowledge. And yet this approach to the real, although at the perimeter of knowledge, must be seen as part of the activity of discourse, through its being spoken as an address from one person to another.²

In order to develop this idea of language as part of the activity of discourse, as a corrective against the view that a Heideggerian approach to religious language leads to irrationality, let us turn to a significant critic of Heidegger: Levinas. It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine the somewhat oedipal relationship between the phenomenology of Levinas and that of Heidegger, and it has already been well documented. If we consider their approaches to the nature of language, we might see Levinas as highlighting the fact that Heidegger does not draw enough emphasis to the idea of language as part of the activity of discourse, or conversation.

There are both strong parallels and points of departure between Levinas and Heidegger's views of language. For both, to be human is to have language, and we can see Levinas taking up Heidegger's phraseology in his interpretation of this idea in 'Meaning and Sense': 'There never was a moment in which *meaning first came to birth out of a meaningless being*, outside of a historical position where language is spoken. And that is doubtless what was meant when we were taught that language is the house of being.' (Levinas, 1996, p. 38) We can also see the influence of Heidegger when Levinas describes language in its expressive function as poetry: 'Language qua expression is, above all, the creative language of poetry' (p. 41). Both Levinas and Heidegger emphasise that the unsayable is brought to presence as unsayable through language. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas states that 'The signified is never a complete presence; always a sign in its turn, it does not come in a straightforward frankness.' (Levinas, [1969] 2004, p. 96) However, although Levinas states here that what is signified is in some sense both present and absent in the process of signification, there is rather a different emphasis on the unsayable in Levinas compared to Heidegger. Levinas's concern is to show that the signifier, the Other, the one who addresses me is beyond language, as the forever inaccessible origin of language. This we can see clearly in 'Meaning and Sense':

The Other (*Autrui*) who faces me is not included in the totality of being expressed. He arises behind every assembling of being as he to whom I express what I express. I find myself facing the Other (*Autrui*). He is neither a cultural signification nor a simple given. He is *sense* primordially, for he gives sense to expression itself, for it is only by him that a phenomenon as a meaning is, of itself, introduced into being. (Levinas, 1996, p. 52)

² See Cristina Lafont's *Heidegger, Language, and World-Disclosure* (2000) for a very rigorous examination of how Heidegger's approach to language is a form of meaning holism, drawing on Putnam in order to show similarities between both their approaches to language.

The term *sens* used in the statement that the Other is ‘sense primordially’ can be translated as both ‘meaning’ and ‘direction’. Thus the Other while bringing me meaning is also my direction, as I am always in movement towards the Other, oriented towards the Other. And as I turn in this direction of the Other who always escapes me, my world is always unfolding and being given new meanings. For Heidegger, the emphasis is less on the signifier who lies beyond signification or expression, situated at the opening of signification and meaning, than on the simultaneous absence and presence of the signified.³ While Heidegger leads us to consider the nature of language itself as beyond conceptualisation, Levinas shows us how language is invested with meaning by the fact that it is spoken by one who is vulnerable to my response to that speaking. Thus while Heidegger emphasises that it is language that speaks in the speaker, or the poet, for Levinas, this speaking is inextricably bound up with the offering of the word by the Other, the interpellation of the Other. It is not that Levinas would necessarily disagree that it is language that speaks in the Other or in me. Indeed language as brought to me from outside myself, by the Other, suggests that in a sense language does ‘possess’ me. Nevertheless, Levinas’s emphasis on the Other speaking, and the fact that it is the Other speaking to me that founds my world and my meanings and a common world of objects and objectivity shows the ethical nature of language in a way that is different from Heidegger’s concern to show the unsayableness of the relation between Saying and Being, the veiled relation between word and thing. John Llewelyn summarises the difference between them thus:

Prior to my being possessed by language, Levinas maintains, is my possession by the human being who speaks to me.... For both Heidegger and Levinas [sociality] is linguistic, and a way of being possessed by language. But, to repeat, whereas for Heidegger possession by language is a way of *being with others*, for Levinas it is also a *possession by others*. This latter possession disrupts my being possessed by language as this is understood by Heidegger. (2002, p. 123)

Ultimately, Levinas’s philosophy of language, like Heidegger’s, suggests that language is the ‘house of being’, but for Levinas, this being is always founded in an orientation and desire for the Other who addresses me and thus founds language, and this particular ethical orientation is not present in Heidegger’s discussion of language. Even the use of the term ‘house of being’ by Heidegger emphasises this difference: in language, for Heidegger, I dwell poetically. For Levinas, my abode as a subject is a tent rather than a house as I do not dwell but rather move always towards the Other. Although Levinas is in many ways critical of Heidegger, perhaps, ultimately, it is possible to treat their approaches to language as complementary rather than in competition. While Heidegger draws attention to the unsayableness of the world, and the impossibility of stepping outside of language to be able to give a full account of the nature of language, Levinas’s approach allows us to add to this discourse by seeing that language comes from our condition of being addressed by others, itself a condition of responsibility that lies beyond representation in language. It is because of my prior receptivity and responsibility to the address of the Other, that I can have language at all. For Levinas, the opening of language is the Other’s address to me. All language, objectivity and truth are made possible by the Other’s teaching, which

³ Although Heidegger does not use the terms ‘signified’ or ‘signification’ to describe these ideas

manifests infinity, bringing me more than I contain. It is only through the interpellation of the Other and my response that commonality and community are founded. Thus perhaps we could interpret Heidegger's approach through a Levinasian lens: language may be unthematisable, but the activity of speaking means that we can see language as following from the address by the Other, and thus the world is founded *in common*, and it is this idea of language as discourse that could prevent Heidegger's approach from slipping past transcendence into irrationality. Language as discursive means that speech is a public act and therefore the way we speak about God and understand religious language is submitted to discursive rules, just as any other form of language is. Pattison explains this idea of speaking and interpreting as a shared task within his interpretation of religious language as a subjunctive mode of speech:

The hermeneutic task is public and dialogical through-and-through, right from the beginning all the way down. If the filter of parataxis allows the essential brokenness of religious language to come to expression in, with and under the medium of subjunctivity, dialogue points to the responsibility we have, in speaking, for what we say, for the one (or for those) to whom we say it and for ourselves in saying it... [D]ialogue, speech, talk, conversation ('turning things round together'), is the way in which we first learn to speak – about anything, and here, particularly about God. The words we use are not some kind of personal possession we can take out and spend according to a fixed rate. (2005, p. 144)

Thus seeing language as an activity of discourse, conversation, an address, as emphasised by Levinas and Pattison, shows that we have responsibility for what we say, a point that perhaps Heidegger neglects to draw attention to. What we can say about God is always determined by this condition of responsibility, as Levinas emphasises. Thus language is a gift from outside and human subjectivity is only possible through this gift of language that reveals the world and the Holy as beyond the word yet brought to presence through the word.

A further criticism that might be raised, which has previously been levelled against other apophatic theologies, is whether Heidegger's approach to language makes talk about God meaningless or might incline towards atheism. Heidegger's approach to language might be seen as typical, in some ways, of the *via negativa*, given that within his notion of language as poetry, the word reveals the difference between word and thing, and reveals what cannot be brought to language. Pattison points out that from the standpoint of ecclesiastical theology, negative theology and its associated mystical traditions 'cannot but be suspect, as they seem to imperil certain key affirmations about God that Christian theologians want to insist on' (2005, p. 128), such as that God loves us, God exists. This has led many to see negative theologies as a type of atheism. As Pattison writes:

From a certain angle of vision radical apophatism and atheism seem scarcely distinguishable.... Once the claims of transcendence are raised to such heights, isn't everything that can be said equally valid and equally worthless? Might we not just as well speak of God by speaking about something else altogether? (pp. 128-129)

While it is possible to place a greater emphasis on the notion of poetic language as a form of discourse, as suggested above, to answer the accusation that Heidegger's approach would lead to a meaningless irrationality, it must be admitted that Heidegger's approach does present a challenge to orthodox theological and philosophical attempts to affirm certain attributes of God. If we are to approach religious language as poetic in the Heideggerian sense, then there will always be certain indeterminacy of meaning and this does lead to an approach to the divine as irreducible to a certain type of conceptual thinking. Pattison articulates this well:

This [approach] allows for and even insists on a certain inbuilt imprecision, since thinking about God is not, simply, thinking God, that is to say, it is not a mental event that can be imagined as simply and unproblematically transparent to its object. It is not a straightforward cognitive act (p.243).

Many might feel uncomfortable with such an approach and it certainly falls short of what many philosophical theists would view as the fullness of the concept of God. However, if we do regard religious language as poetic, it does not follow that the concept of God is devoid of content, or that we can attach meanings or words as we choose. Tristan Moyle suggests that there is a certain necessity to the process of speaking in Heidegger's view:

This movement of language is not arbitrary or haphazard. The giving of Being orders and binds ('appropriates') man in its giving: it has the force of necessity. Hence the movement by which language 'speaks' possesses within itself an essential element of necessity or purpose. A movement is purposeful if it appears to follow rules. A movement without purposefulness or rules is meaningless. (2005, p. 64)

Thus what we can and cannot say about God is no wilful creation but determined by rules of community and the movement of Being that orders what can be said. And furthermore, it should be emphasised that according to Heidegger, all language, and not just religious language, could be seen as in essence poetic. So religious language is not a particular type very imprecise language: all language bears the trace of what cannot be said or thought.

Having paused to consider these objections to a Heideggerian approach to religious language, let us attempt to draw this paper to a close.

IV. Conclusions

The assertion of God's hiddenness (which includes God's invisibility, incomprehensibility and ineffability) tells us that God does not belong to the objects which we can always subjugate to the process of our viewing, conceiving and expressing. (Barth, 1957, p. 187)

If we conceive of religious language as poetry according to Heidegger, then religious language both reveals God's hiddenness and brings the Holy to presence. This takes place, as Barth says, by showing that the Holy does not belong to words / objects which we view. We are not the subjects of the process. Rather 'the Holy (Being) addresses the poet' (Richardson, 1963, p. 472). It is Being which announces itself, as

coming to unconcealment in language, showing its simultaneous concealment, and showing that it will return to concealment. The challenge that Heidegger presents for religious language is to consider that we might not be able to conceptualize what the nature of religious language is. Its nature is veiled. But that does not mean we cannot talk about it and contemplate it. It is revealed as ‘beyond the horizon of intelligible representation – silent, mysterious, perhaps divine.’ (Gall, 1987, p. 120)

Heidegger’s writing on poetry exposes the fault line of all language. Theology should not see religious language as a special case, but rather as poetry, language in its purest form, precisely where the fault line is revealed. Heidegger shows us, as St Paul writes, that ‘now we see in part’, as ‘through a glass darkly’. As poetry reveals hiddenness in openness, so, as Barth writes, we are always ‘on the way’ to revelation: even as it occurs, or remains future (Ward 1995).

Religious language as poetry may be called a ‘raid on the inarticulate’ in that it speaks the unsayable, and brings it to presence as such. Man is ‘he who walks the boundaries of the boundless’ (*OWL*, p. 41). In religious language, as poetry, the word is stretched, made strange, and it is in recognising this that revelation takes place. Paul Van Buren writes that ‘Religion arises from experiences of what surpasses language’ (1972, p. 62). I believe that we can challenge the use of the word ‘surpass’, and instead say that poetry, language itself, may reveal that experience of otherness found in religion and bring it to presence as concealed and unconcealed, present and absent. As Heidegger paradoxically challenges our understanding:

The default of God and the divinities is absence. But absence is not nothing; rather it is precisely the presence, which must first be appropriated, of the hidden fullness of what has been, and what, thus gathered, is presencing ... This no-longer is in itself a not-yet of the veiled arrival of its inexhaustible nature. (*PLT*, p. 184)

In coming to recognise religious language as poetry, in listening to language speaking, we may draw nearer to the mystery of the Holy. The challenge of such an approach, is to receive that hidden fullness as a gift and continue the Saying, to one another within community and thus allow speech to reveal again the mystery of the transcendent and to give that gift to others. The task of thinking about God in such a way is to recognise what has been covered over in the age of technology and recognise the world as a space for wonder. This is an ethical challenge:

For the most part, we fail to experience the world as *our* experience of Being; the world makes no claim upon us, nor do we recognise our living bond with it. However, the work of thought – ontology – re-shapes and re-orders the content of decaying nature; thinking offers a variation on the limit rhythm gives, opening up new and surprising forms of experience. As such, the labour of thought allows us to reclaim the world we have lost, to recognise in the alienated other the outline of a gift we have been given. In order to receive appropriately the gift of the world we must return the gift. (Moyle, 2005, p. 132)

To speak of God in this way is to pass this gift of revelation on to others. Speaking and thinking about God not only draws us closer to the Holy, but might also renew the bonds of community and show the presence of the transcendent as immanent within every address of I to an other. In the task of speaking about and thus revealing God,

the possibility is always present of building a space for us to dwell poetically and thereby a place for a community to gather and flourish.

Abbreviations used in the text

PLT *Poetry, Language, Thought*

OWL *On The Way to Language*

For details of these titles, see below.

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