Presence in language or presence achieved against language?

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"From Language to Logic – and Back," the title of Ruediger Bubner's opening lecture for the Hegel Congress 2005 had a structural similarity to the movement that I propose (and have been invited to) to pursue here. I will start out from language and try to reach something that is not language; then I want to return to language from that something which is not language. Instead of "language," however, that which is not language, in my essay, will be what I have come to call "presence."

I will divide the presentation of this simple back and forth movement into three parts. The first part contains four premises that will lead us from language to presence[1]: they are the briefest possible explanation of what I resent and criticize within the hermeneutic tradition (a), which critique will make transparent my conceptions of "metaphysics" and of a "critique of metaphysics" (b). These notions will justify my use of the word "presence" (c) and the typological distinction that I propose to make between "presence culture" and "meaning culture" (d). The second part of my brief reflection will trace a way back (or a variety of ways back) from presence to language, by describing six modes through which presence can exist in language or, in other words, six modes through which presence and language can become amalgamated (the metaphor of "amalgamation" points to a principally difficult, rather than "natural" relationship between presence and language). These modes are: language as presence; presence in philological work; language that can trigger aesthetic experience; the language of mystic experience; the openness of language toward the world; and literature as epiphany. In the third, retrospective part I will ask whether these six types of

[1] These premises are laid out and argued in much greater detail by my recent book: *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey.* Stanford. 2003 (German translation under the title "Diesseits der Hermeneutik. Die Produktion von Praesenz. Frankfurt/M. 2004). Regarding a possible place of this reflection on presence in today's philosophical debates, see my essay "Diesseits des Sinns. Ueber eine neue Sehnsucht nach Substantialitaet," in: *Merkur* 677/678 (2005), pp.749-760.

amalgamation between presence and language have led us to a horizon of questions and problems similar to the one that Martin Heidegger tried to address when, in the later stages of his philosophy, he was using, with ever growing insistence, the metaphorical evocation of language as "the house of Being."

1

When my colleagues, the literary critics and literary theorists, speak of "language," they normally think of something that requires "interpretation," something that invites us to attribute well-circumscribed meanings to words. Like some other literary critics and, I believe, even more philosophers of my generation (among whom Jean-Luc Nancy may be the most outspoken)[2], I have grown weary of this intellectual one-way traffic as it has been based on and upheld by a certain, narrow and yet totalizing understanding of hermeneutics. I also have long experienced the absolutism of all post-linguistic turn varieties of philosophy as intellectually limiting, and I have not found much consolation in what I like to characterize as the "linguistic existentialism" of Deconstruction, i.e. the sustained complaint and melancholia (in its endless variations) about the alleged incapacity of language to refer to the things of the world. Should it really be the core function of literature, in all its different forms and tones, to draw its readers' attention, over and again, to the all-too familiar view that language cannot refer, as Paul de Man seemed to claim whenever he wrote about the "allegory of reading"?

These are, in hopefully convenient condensation, the main feelings and reasons that made me become part of yet another movement within the Humanities that has a (perhaps even well deserved) reputation of being "worn out." I am referring to the "critique of Western Metaphysics." At least I can claim that the way in which I use the word "metaphysics" is more elementary than and therefore different from its dominant meanings in contemporary philosophy. When I say "metaphysics," I want to activate the word's literal meaning of something "beyond the merely physical." I want to point to an intellectual style (prevailing in the Humanities today) that only allows for one gesture and for one type of operation, and that is the operation of "going beyond" what is regarded to be a "merely physical surface" and of thus finding, "beyond or below the merely physical surface," that which is

[2]See, above all, his book: *The Birth to Presence*. Stanford 1993 (some other contemporary examples for this tendency are mentioned and discussed in: Production of Presence, pp. 57-64).

supposed to really matter, i.e. a meaning (which, in order to underline its distance from the surface, is often called "profound").

My departure from "metaphycis" in this very sense takes into account and insists on the experience that our relationship to things (and to cultural artifacts in specific) is inevitably never only a relationship of meaning attribution. As long as use the word "things" to refer to what the Cartesian tradition calls "res extensae," we also and always live in and are aware of a spatial relationship to these things. Things can be "present" or "absent" to us and if they are "present," they are either closer to or further away from our bodies. By calling them "present," then, in the very original sense of Latin "prae-esse," we are saying that things are "in front" of ourselves and thereby tangible. There are no further implications that I propose to associate with this concept.

Based on the historical observation, however, that certain cultures, like our own "modern" culture for example (whatever we exactly may mean by "modern"), have a greater tendency than other cultures to bracket the dimension of presence and its implications, I have come to propose a typology (in the traditional Weberian sense) between "meaning cultures" and "presence cultures." Here are a few of the (inevitably and without any bad conscience "binary") distinctions that I propose to make[3]. In a meaning culture, firstly, the dominant form of human self-reference will always correspond to the basic outline of what western culture calls "subject" and "subjectivity," i.e. it will refer to a body-less observer who, from a position of eccentricity vis-à-vis the world of things, will attribute meanings to those things. A presence culture, in contrast, will integrate both spiritual and physical existence into its human self-reference (think, as an illustration, of the motif of the "spiritual and bodily resurrection from the dead" in medieval Christianity). It follows from this initial distinction that, secondly, in a presence culture humans consider themselves to be part of the world of objects, instead of being ontologically separated from it (this may have been the view that Heidegger wanted to recover with "being-in-the-world" as one of his key-concepts in "Being and Time"). Thirdly and on a higher level of complexity, human existence, in a meaning culture, unfolds and realizes itself in constant and ongoing attempts at transforming the world ("actions") that are based on the interpretation of things and on the projection of human desires into

[3]For a more fully developed version of this typology, see: *Production of Presence*, pp. 78-86.

the future. This drive toward change and transformation is absent from presence cultures where humans just want to inscribe their behavior into what they consider to be structures and rules of a given cosmology (what we call "rituals" are frames for such attempts to correspond to cosmological frames).

I will abandon this typology here for I trust that it has fulfilled the function that I have assigned to it within the larger context of my argument: I wanted to illustrate that, on the one hand, language in meaning cultures does cover all those functions that modern philosophy of European descent is presupposing and talking about. On the other hand, it is much less obvious what roles language can play in presence cultures (or in a world seen from a presence-culture perspective). The six types of "amalgamations" between language and presence that I want to refer to in the second section of my text, are intended to present a multifaceted answer to this very question.

2

The first paradigm is *language, above all spoken language, as a physical reality* and it highlights the aspect in relation to which Hans Georg Gadamer spoke of the "volume" of language, in distinction from its propositional or apophantic content[4]. As a physical reality, spoken language does not only touch and affect our acoustic sense but our bodies in their entirety. We thus perceive language, in the least invasive way, i.e. quite literally, as the light touch of sound on our skin, even if we cannot understand what its words are supposed to mean. Such perceptions can well be pleasant and even desirable – and in this sense we all know how one can grasp certain qualities of poetry in a recitation, without knowing the language that is being used. As soon as the physical reality of language has a form, a form that needs to be achieved against its status of being a time object in the sense proper ("ein Zeitobjekt im eigentlichen Sinn," according to Husserl's terminology), we will say that it has a "rhythm" – a rhythm that we can feel and identify independently of the meaning that language "carries"[5]. Language as a physical reality that has form, i.e. rhythmic language, will fulfill a number of specific functions. It can coordinate the movements of individual bodies; it can support the performance of our memory (think of those rhymes through which we used to learn some basic rules of Latin grammar); and by supposedly lowering the level of our alertness, it can have (as

[4] *Hans Georg Gadamer: Hermeneutik, Aesthetik, Praktische Philosophie* (edited by Carsten Dutt). 3. Auflage. Heidelberg 2000, p. 63.

[5] This description is based on my essay: "Rhythm and Meaning," in: H.U.G / K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (eds.) *Materialities of Communication*. Stanford 1994, pp. 170-186 (original German version in: *Materialitaet der Kommunikation*. Frankfurt/M. 1988, pp. 714-729).

[6] See my analysis of some old high German charms ("The Charm of Charms") in: David Wellbery a.o. (eds.): A New History of German Literature. Cambridge, Mass 2004, pp. 183-191.

[7] The Powers of Philology. Dynamics of Textual Scholarship. Urbana and Chicago 2003 (German translation under the title "Die Macht der Philologie. Ueber einen verborgenen Impuls im wissenschaftlichen Umgang mit Texten," Frankfurt/M. 2003).

Nietzsche said) an "intoxicating" effect. Certain presence cultures even attribute an incantatory function to rhythmic language, i.e. the capacity of making absent things present and present things absent (this indeed was the expectation associated with medieval charms[6]).

A second, very different type of amalgamation between presence and language lies in the basic practices of philology (in their original function as text curatorship). In a short recent book[7], I have argued that – much counter to the traditional image of the philologist – his activities are preconsciously driven by very primary desires that we can describe as desires for (full) presence (and I understand that a desire for "full presence" is a desire without the possibility of fulfillment – which precisely makes it a desire from a Lacanian point of view). Collecting textual fragments, in this sense, would presuppose a deeply repressed wish of, quite literally, eating what remains of ancient papyri or medieval manuscripts. A wish to incorporate the texts in question (to play them like an actor) might underlie the passion of producing historical editions (in all of their different philological styles) – think of an act as basic as "sounding out" a Goethe poem and discovering that it will only rhyme if you pronounce it with a (more than slight) Frankfurt accent. As they "fill up" the margins of hand-written and printed pages, erudite commentaries, finally, may relate to a physical wish for plenitude and exuberance. It would probably be very difficult (if not impossible) to disentangle, in all detail, such cases of intertwinedness between presence-drives and scholarly ambitions. But what matters to me, in this context, is the intuition that they do converge, much more than we normally imagine, in many forms of philological work.

If you follow, as I tend to do, at least regarding present-day western culture, Niklas Luhmann's suggestion for a characterization of aesthetic experience (Luhmann, within the parameters of his philosophy, tried to describe what was specific about "communication" within the "art system" as a social system), then *any kind of language that is capable of triggering aesthetic experience* will appear as a third case of the amalgamation between presence and language. Communication in the art system, for Luhmann, is the one form of communication within which (purely sensual) perception is not only a presupposition but a content carried, together with meaning, by language. This description corresponds to an experience of poems (or of literary prose rhythms) as drawing

our attention to those physical aspects of language (and their possible forms) that we otherwise tend to bracket. Counter to a long prevailing (and still dominating) opinion in literary studies, however, I do not believe that the different dimensions of poetic form (i.e. rhythm, rhyme, stanzas etc.) function in ways that subordinate them to the dimension of meaning (for example, as the so-called "theory of poetic overdetermination" suggests, by giving stronger contours to complex semantic configurations). Rather, I see poetic forms engaging in an oscillation with meaning, in the sense that a reader / listener of poetry can never pay full attention to both sides. This, I think, is the reason why a cultural prescription in Argentina excludes the dancing of a tango whenever the tango has lyrics. For the choreography of tango as a dance, with its asymmetry between male and female steps, against which harmony needs to be achieved at every moment, the choreography of tango is so demanding that it requires full attention for the music – which state would be inevitably reduced by the interference of a text that would divert part of this attention.

Mystical experience and the language of mysticism is my fourth paradigm. By constantly referring to its own incapacity of rendering the intense presence of the divine, mystical language produces the paradoxical effect of stimulating imaginations that seem to make this very presence palpable. In the description of her visions, Santa Teresa de Avila, for example, uses highly erotic images under the permanent condition of an "as if." The encounter with Jesus, for her, is "as if being penetrated by a sword," and at the same time she feels "as if an angel was emerging from her body." Rather than taking these forms of expression literally, however, literally as the description of something, i.e. of a mystical experience that truly exceeds the limits of language, a both secular and analytic view will understand mystical experience itself as an effect of language and of its inherent powers of self-persuasion.

Yet another mode of amalgamation can be described as *language being open toward the world of things*. It includes texts that switch from the semiotic paradigm of representation to a deictic attitude where words are experienced as pointing to things, rather than standing "for them." Nouns then turn into names because they seem to skip the always totalizing dimension of concepts and become individually attached, temporarily at least, with individual objects. Francis Ponge's thing-poems use and cultivate this potential of language. I recently had a similar impression when I was reading

* Erwin Schroedinger: Autobiographical Sketches. In: *What is Life?* Cambridge 1992, pp. 165-187.

an autobiographical sketch by the great physicist Erwin Schroedinger[8] whose obsession with descriptive preciseness seems to have rejected the effect of abstraction that is inherent to all concepts. Nouns therefore seem attached to individual objects in Schroedinger's text and thus begin to function like names, producing a textual impression that is strangely remindful of medieval charms. In a different way, certain passages in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's novels seem to be specifically open to the world of objects. There, the rhythm of the prose copies the rhythm of movements or of events to be evoked and thus establishes an analogic relationship to these movements and events that also bypasses the digital principle of representation. If texts like Ponge's poems or Schroedinger's autobiographical sketch seem to reach towards things in space, Céline's texts appear open to be affected by and resonate with things.

Finally, whoever is familiar with the 20th century tradition of High Modernity knows the claim, central above all for the work of James Joyce, that *literature can be the place of epiphany* (a more skeptical description, would once again rather speak of the capacity of literature to produce "effects of epiphany"). In its theological use, the concept of epiphany refers to the appearance of a thing, of a thing that requires space, a thing that is either absent or present. For a conception of language that concentrates exclusively on the dimension of meaning, epiphanies, in this very literal sense, and texts must be separated by a relation of heteronomy. But if we take into account, as I have suggested throughout this series of examples, the phenomenology of language as a physical reality and, with it, the incantatory potential of language, then a convergence between literature and epiphany seems to be much less outlandish. To concede that such moments of epiphany do occur but do so under the specific temporal conditions that Karl Heinz Bohrer has characterized as those of "suddenness" and "irreversible departure"[9], may be a contemporary way of mediating between our desire for epiphanies and a modern skepticism that this desire cannot completely outdo.

[9] Karl Heinz Bohrer: *Ploetzlichkeit.* Zum Augenblick des aesthetischen Scheins. Frankfurt/M. 1981, and: *Der Abschied.* Theorie der Trauer. Frankfurt/M. 1996.

3

Passing through six modes of amalgamation between language and presence, we have covered the distance between two extremes that the title of my essay tries to pinpoint. We started out by drawing attention to the always given but, within modern culture, systematically overlooked or even bracketed physical presence of language, and we have arrived at the claim that language can produce epiphanies, which claim evokes an exceptional situation and achievement that has to be wrested, so to speak, from and even against the grain of the normal functioning of language. Certainly, in the growing complexity of our different paradigms, the different relations between language and presence do not obey the structural model of the "metaphysical" two-levelledness that distinguishes between "material surface" and "semantic depth," between "negligeable foreground" and "meaningful background." But what could then be an alternative model that allows us to think through the rather tense than harmonious oscillations between language and presence in their variety?

Given that I believe in a convergence between Heidegger's concept of "Being" and the notion of "presence" that I have been using here[10], I do indeed see a promise in his description of "language as the house of Being," a promise, however, whose redemption may well end up departing from what Heidegger meant to mean with these words. There are four aspects of his metaphor that I am specifically interested in. Counter to its current understanding, I want to highlight, in the first place, that a house makes more often invisible than visible those who live in it. In this very sense, language is not so much a "window," not the expression of the presence with which it can be intertwined. Nevertheless and secondly, we take a house to be the promise (if not the guarantee) for the closeness of those who are inhabiting it. Think, for example, of the language of mysticism. It may not make the divine fully present and it is certainly not an expression of the divine. But in reading mystical texts some of us feel that they are approaching the divine. What I thirdly and above all appreciate about the metaphor of "language as the house of Being" is its spatial denotation. Different from the classical hermeneutic paradigm of "expression"[11] and its standard implication that whatever will be expressed has to be purely spiritual, seeing language as "the house of Being" (or as the house of presence) makes us imagine that which inhabits the house as having "volume" and thereby sharing the ontological status of things.

[10] See *Production of Presence*, pp. 65-78.

[11] See the outlines for a history of this paradigm in my essay "Ausdruck." In: Karlheinz Barck a..o. (eds.): *Aesthetische Grundbegriffe*. Vol. I. Stuttgart 2000, pp. 416-431.

This does not imply, however, that I understand Heidegger's concept of "Being" as a – perhaps slightly embarrassed – return of the "Ding an sich." Rather, I hold that the concept of "Being" points to a relationship between things and "Dasein" in which "Dasein" does no longer conceive of itself as eccentric, as ontologically separated from the things and their dimension. Instead of cutting off our rapport to the things, as the "linguistic turn" had proposed us to do, "language as the house of Being," language in its multiple tension-filled convergences with presence, would then be, finally, a medium in and through which we can hope for a reconciliation between "Dasein" and the objects of the world.

Is it realistic at all (or simply illusionary) to assume that such a reconciliation between "Dasein" and objects might ever occur? I do not feel confident enough to try and answer this question. But it is worth for me to think about the fact that, in the contemporary cultural situation, I am far from being the only intellectual who asks such a question[12], a question that, only a few years ago, must have looked so utterly naïve that nobody dared to ask it. Now, longing to recuperate an existential closeness to the dimension of things, may well be a reaction to our contemporary everyday. More than ever before, it has turned into an everyday of only virtual realities, into an everyday where modern communication technologies have given us omnipresence and have thus eliminated space from our existence, into an everyday where the real presence of the world has shrunk into a presence on the screen – of which development the new wave of "reality shows" is but the most tautological and hyperbolically helpless symptom[13],

For those among us who hold the positions of the linguistic turn to be an ultimate philosophical wisdom, this desire for the presence of the world must appear to be a desire against better philosophical insight. But the lack of belief in the possibility for a desire to be fulfilled, does of course not imply that it will necessarily disappear sooner or later (and even less does it imply that such a desire is pointless). What could then be a viable relation to language for those who find implausible what I believe, namely that language may become (again?) the medium of reconciliation with the things of the world? The answer is that they may still use language to point to and even to praise those forms of experience that keep alive our desire for presence. Which of course suggests that it is better to suffer from an unfulfilled desire that to lose desire altogether.

[12] For such resonanting voices, see the 2005 special issue of the magazine "Merkur," dedicated to new intellectual quests for Reality.

[13] For more detailed descriptions focusing on the existential effects of new communication technologies, see my essay "Gators in the Bayoo. What we Have Lost in Disenchantment?" Forthcoming in: Joshua Landy / Michael Saler (eds.): *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age.* Berkeley 2006.