

On the Truth of the Word

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I

One hears such expressions today as “deception by language” and the suspicion of ideology and metaphysics, so when I now propose to speak about “the truth of the word” it amounts to a provocation!² This is especially so if one speaks of “the” word. For when something appears certain beyond all discussion, then to speak about truth can have to do only with what Aristotle [in *On Interpretation*] called “the combined” (*en synthesesi aei*), that is, with the *sentence*.³ And if one takes perception, as the Greeks did, to be made up of specific sense qualities, and then labels “true”—*alethes*—the “what-content” of what is intended, then it becomes pointless to speak of the truth of the word since it is only the intended content of speaking. In fact, there would no longer be a word at all, if a word simply as a word could be false. A discourse, which is made up of words, can only be false or true when the opinion expressed by the words can be questionable with regard to a state of affairs.

Nevertheless, “the” word is not just the individual word. Nor is it just the singular form of “the words,” or of the words that constitute the discourse. Rather, this expression is linked to a usage according to which “the word” has a collective meaning and implies a social relationship. The word that is said to you or that someone gives you, or when someone makes a promise and you say, “I have your word?” this does not mean just one word; even if it is only the one word “yes,” it says more and infinitely more than just giving an opinion. When Luther uses “the Word” in the prologue to the Gospel of John to translate *logos*, behind this stands a whole theology of the word which stretches back at least to Augustine’s explication of the Trinity. For the ordinary reader, too, it is a redeemable word, that Jesus Christ is for the believer the living promise that became flesh. So when we inquire into the truth of the word in what follows, it is not a particular word—not even that of the promise of salvation—whose content is meant, but one must nevertheless keep in mind that the Word “dwells among men” and that in all its forms of manifestation, in forms where it completely is what it is, it has a constant and a reliable being. In the end, it is always the word that “stands,” whether one keeps one’s word or stands by it, as the one who said it, or as the one who has taken another at his word. The word itself *stands*. In spite of its being spoken only once, the word is perduringly there: as the saving message, as blessing or curse, as prayer—or also as commandment and law and proclaimed judgment, as saga written by a poet and basic principle held by the philosopher. It seems more than a superficial fact that one can say of such a word, “it stands written” and it documents itself. It is with regard to these ways of being a word, which in accordance with their inherent validity “do things” rather than merely communicate something true, that the following question

poses itself: What can it mean that these ways of being a word are true and are true as word? I am referring in this connection to J. L. Austin's well-known formulation of the question in such a way as to make clear the ontological status of the poetic word.

In order to see the significance of this question, we must come to an understanding of what "truth" [*Wahrheit*] can mean here. It is clear that the traditional concept of truth as *adequatio rei et intellectus* has no function where the word is meant not as a statement about something but rather as something existing in itself lifts and grants itself a claim to being. On the other hand, the extraordinary uniqueness, the singularity, that belongs to "the word" also contains an essential logical inadequacy within itself, in that the word points beyond itself to an inner infinity of answering words which are all—and therefore none—"suitable."⁴ Here one needs to consider the Greek word *aletheia*, whose seminal meaning Heidegger has taught us to see. What I am referring to is not the privative meaning of *a-letheia* as un-concealment [*Unverborgenheit*] or as dis-closure [*Entbergung*]. To point this out, as such, was not such a new assertion, for it has long been known that in connection with verbs of saying *aletheia* has the sense of unconcealment (e.g., Humboldt): Zeus says to Hera, "Don't go behind my back!"—and here the rich fantasy and enormous eloquence of the Greeks already in Homer had caused the characterization of *aletheia* as nonconcealment to be singled out and noticed. What makes Heidegger's renewal of insight into the privative sense of the word significant is the fact that this Greek word is not limited to the sphere of discourse but was also used where the meaning was "genuine" in the sense of unadulterated. Thus, one also says in Greek: a true friend, that is, true like genuine gold that does not give the false appearance of being gold. In such contexts *Entbergung* takes on an *ontological* meaning, that is, it characterizes not the behavior or the self-expression of someone or something but rather its *being* (for *aletheia* can also mean having sincerity or uprightness as a feature of one's personality). Is it not astonishing that one can not only characterize a being that is capable of speaking, play acting, and even lying, by the word *aletheia*, but also an existent thing as such—like gold? What can it be that is hiding there or is obscured there, such that the non-concealing—and not through our doing—can be attributed to existing things? How must being "be" when the existent thing "is" such that it can be false?

The answer will have to take its start from the well grounded experience that what comes forth is something that resides in itself. It is not accidental, therefore, that Heidegger paid special attention to the Aristotelian idea of *physis*, which described the ontological status of what arises from out of itself. But what does it mean that being itself is such that the existing being must come forth as that which it is? And that it can even be "false," like false gold? What kind of *hiding* is it that belongs just as much to the existing being as the *disclosure* through which it steps into presence? The unconcealment that comes to the existing being and in which the existing being emerges seems indeed in itself to be an absolute "there" like the light in Aristotle's description of the *nous*

poietikos and like the *Lichtung* that is formed in being and as being.

So long as Heidegger was still trying to pose the question of being on the basis of an existential analytic of Dasein, it was hard to avoid the conclusion that the authentic Dasein is its "there" and is "there" for the other. Heidegger was determined to contrast his analysis of the historical situation of Dasein, with its structure as a thrown project, with the idealism of transcendental subjectivity and its illusory representations. The care-structure of Dasein as well as its structure as "thrown project" was to be fundamentally distinguished from Idealism's guiding concepts of a "consciousness in general" or an "absolute knowledge." Nor should we fail to note that *both* authenticity and inauthenticity belong, and belong "equiprimordially," to the structural whole of Dasein, and therefore mere small talk belongs to Dasein just as much as the word and remaining silent. A sense of what the early Heidegger means by authenticity [*Eigentlichkeit*] or genuineness [*Echtheit*] merges with what he had called "*angstbereite Entschlossenheit*"—"resoluteness prepared to face anxiety." It is not only silence but the breaking of silence, the word. And indeed already in *Being and Time* he had taken up the challenge that the Greek concept of the *logos* had represented for the "Christian theologian." (By the way, this is a term Heidegger used in reference to himself when he was a *Privatdozent* in philosophy pursuing his lifework.) Language, too, even as early as this, was thought of as an *Existential*, that is to say, as a determining factor of a Dasein singled out by its understanding of Being. But just as the essence of truth in the preservation of Dasein and its insistence on the "secret" and its absolute hiddenness was always related to Dasein's other, so also the word and language possess an existential relationship to hearing and keeping silent. But what was "true" there and what "came forth" there was precisely one's *Existenz*, namely a Dasein with its being standing before nothingness. Certainly here the word was also not merely the making of a statement as found in the Aristotelian *apophansis*, which, as something said just vanishes into what it says and points to; rather, the word in Heidegger had the temporal character of uniqueness and of an event [*Ereignis*]. But what was *Ereignis* here? And what "took place" there? Already at that early date Heidegger had seen clearly how the "word," owing to an inner necessity, had suffered a decline into "idle talk," and that it was the fate of thought to be subject to authenticity and decline, being and appearing. Nevertheless, the word as word is not only disclosure but must, just as much and precisely for that reason, be hiding and sheltering. This was something that could not be grasped by means of the transcendental analytic of Dasein. Even in the famous confrontation at Davos with the author of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*,⁵ Heidegger still defended the self-understanding of Dasein over against the between-world of forms.

However, if disclosure and concealment are really conceived as structural moments of "being," if temporality belongs to being and not just to the existing being that holds open the space for being, then "to be there" certainly remains the distinguishing mark of man; and likewise, man is not just himself at home in language, but rather "being" is there in the language that we speak with each

other. All this is not just due to an existential decision that a person could also leave behind, but rather because the being-there of Dasein is resoluteness, a standing open to the "there." This does not entail that one should think only starting from this resoluteness, in the sense that the authentic word would be defined as the word belonging to authenticity and not the word of idle talk. Rather, what is authentically *word*—the word as true word—is determined from the direction of being as *the word in which truth happens*. So one can link this point up to a later insight of Heidegger and pose the question of the truth of the word. Perhaps posing this question will allow us to move closer to Heidegger's insight in a concrete way and to understand such puzzling figures of speech as the "clearing of Being."

II

What is the "authentic" word?⁶ This does not mean, for example, the word in which something true, or even the highest truth, is said, but rather what is the "word" in its most authentic sense. To be a word means to be a word that speaks, a *telling* word. To be able to sort out from among the innumerable kinds of words those that are most telling, let us think a bit about the distinguishing characteristic that makes a word truly "a word": that *it stands* and that one *stands by it*. Obviously this contains already the idea that the word, along with what it says or does in saying, makes a lasting claim to be valid. Here I can refer already to the mystery of writtenness which substantiates this claim. On the basis of this, it is not quite as arbitrary or absurd as it might sound if I specify a word that truly speaks as a "text." Of course this term has only a methodical sense here. I do not mean to dispute the genuineness, primordially, meaning power, or decision announcing power [*Entscheidungsgewalt*] that resides in living speech, or in prayer, in preaching, in blessing and curse, or in political speaking. Rather, we will be allowed, by doing this, to isolate methodically what it is that causes a word truly to be a word. The fact that texts regain their character as words only in the living process of their being understood, delivered as lecture, or proclaimed, in no way changes the fact that it is the content of the text and nothing else that again springs to life, that is the potential word that *says something*. Asking *how* the word is there when it is "text" will render visible its saying, i.e., what constitutes its being as saying.

I call the word's being-as-saying, which we have now isolated, a declaration, a statement [*Aussage*]. For in fact the declaration or statement, with all the problems of its use and misuse—for instance in the trial procedure—is by its nature something definable. Even though such a legal declaration is not unretractable, it is accepted as valid until further notice unless it is retracted. Its validity includes that what is said holds true in itself and only for what is said, so any dispute about the unambiguous content of a statement and whether the reference to it is justified, indirectly corroborates its claim to a single meaning. It is undisputably clear, of course, that a witness's declaration before the court actually only has truth value in the context of the investigation. Precisely for this

reason the word *Aussage* has come to be widely accepted in the hermeneutical context, for example, in theological exegesis or in literary aesthetics. Why? Because treating the text as *Aussage* makes it possible to deal purely with what is said there as such without recourse to the occasionality of the author, and to have nothing but the explication of the text itself as a whole to make its meaning clear. What is seriously missing, however, is the fact that through such a concentration on the text, which as a whole constitutes the declaration, the event-character of the word has been weakened. Yet it is only through the event that the text comes forth in its full meaning.

Now certainly there are written transcriptions of what is spoken that are not texts in the sense of being the word that stands, for example, private written notes, reminders, and summaries of what has been spoken, all of which merely serve to reinforce our memory. Here it is clear that the written note gains life only with the decrease in memory. This kind of text does not put forward its own statement and therefore would not, if it were published in itself, be anything that says something. Such a text is only the written trace of a fuller memory that subsists already in itself. In contrast to this, it becomes clear in what sense there are texts that really have the nature of *Aussage* and are a "word" in the above designated sense, a word that is *said* (and not just something that is passed on to us or conveyed). Thus we may determine more closely what the "word" as saying is by noting the fact that it is uttered or written as saying something. Again we ask: Which word, uttered in this way, is the most telling and can to this degree be called "true"?

III

We distinguish among three kinds of texts that are *Aussage*: the religious, the juridical, and the literary text. The last should perhaps be further subdivided in order to distinguish such different forms of literary assertion as the poetic word, the speculative sentence of the philosopher, and the logical basic unit of the predicative judgment. Even the predicative judgment belongs within this category because the general character of the word is to say something, and for this reason we are not allowed to exclude judgment, which is the pointing that merely causes something to be present, if it stands in the context of an argument.

Now when we differentiate among these ways of the word, this should come from what resides in the character of the word itself and not from the circumstances under which it is uttered. This applies to "literature" in all its forms. For what characterizes literature is precisely the fact that its being in written form does not represent a diminution of its original, living, oral being, but rather its written form is the original form of its being, which, for its part, allows and in fact demands the secondary fulfillment of being read or spoken. One can categorize the three basic ways of being a text under three basic forms of saying: acceptance or promise [*Zusage*], announcement [*Ansage*], and *Aussage* taken in the narrower sense of a statement, and when *Aussage* is taken in an eminent sense it will be a saying-forth [*Aus-sage*], that is to say, saying carried

to its true end, and thus, the most telling word.

Thus, *Aussage* in its full compass is not to be so limited that it excludes, for example, a religious text, or also a legal text. They are also *Aussage*. They contain within the manner of their givenness as written language the specific nature of their saying. It is not the case, then, that a statement that is not yet a *Zusage* first becomes such when someone promises it to somebody, as, for example, in consolation and promising. Rather, the *Zusage* is a kind of statement that has in itself the character of promise and has to be understood as a promise. But this means that in the *Zusage* language goes beyond itself. In the Old Testament or the New Testament, the promise does not fulfill itself just in being made, the way a poem fulfills itself in being read. Therefore, the announcement of a promise in a way finds its fulfillment in its acceptance in faith—as indeed every promise becomes binding only if it is accepted. Likewise, a juridical text, formulating a law or a judgment, is binding as soon as it is enacted, but it is fulfilled as enacted not in itself but in being carried out or enforced. Also, a merely “historical” report differs from a poetical one in that the latter fulfills itself. Take the Gospel as an example. There the evangelist tells a story. A chronicler or historian also could tell such a story, or a poet. But the claim resident in the saying, which is ascertained with the “reading” of this story—and every reading of the same story is basically a lesson—possesses from the outset its own saying power, which I have called *Zusage*. For it is the Joyful Message [*die Frohe Botschaft*]. One can certainly read the same text in a different way, say with the interest of an historian who wants to test critically its value as a source. But if the historian were not to understand the statement of the text in its character as promise, then he would not even be able to make an adequate critical use of it! As we say in hermeneutics, the text has its *scopus* on the basis of which one must understand it. Likewise, one can read the *Zusage* text in a literary way, looking at the artistic means that give life and color to its presentation, looking at its composition, the syntactical and semantic means used in its style, and unquestionably there is high poetry, especially in the Old Testament, whose style is striking. And yet even a text like the Song of Songs, say, stands in the context of the Holy Scripture, that is, it demands that one understand it as promise and acceptance—*Zusage*. Certainly it is here the context, but as that it is again a purely linguistic textual givenness, which lends a love song the character of a promise and acceptance. To the same *scopus* we must also relate texts which from a literary standpoint are very modest and artless, like the synoptic gospels. One will have to deduce the nature of the text as affirmation or promise from the *scopus* indicated by the context.

One may ask oneself here whether it is the religious character of such texts, texts that speak from themselves, that already constitutes their character as *Zusage*, or whether it is the special character of religions of revelation and redemption like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which are book-religions in the authentic sense of the word, that lends their scriptures their character as *Zusage*. In fact, it is possible that the world of myth, that is to say, of all religious traditions that do not have something like canonical texts, will open up a

completely different hermeneutical problematic. For example, there are the *Aussagen* that one may discover behind the poetic texts of the Greeks in their myths and legends. Admittedly, these do not yet have the structure of a *text*, that is, of the word that stands. Nevertheless, they are legends, that is to say, they speak through nothing more than their being spoken. Would we recognize or come to recognize such worlds of religious tradition at all if they were not standing, so to speak, within literary forms of tradition? With all due respect for the methods of structuralist study of myth, I would say that the hermeneutical interest in them begins not so much with the question of what the myths betray [in terms of hidden structures] as what they say to you when you encounter them in poetry. What they say to you resides in the declaration which they are, and which necessarily presses forward toward determinate form, perhaps even crystalizing into myth-interpreting poetry. In this way the hermeneutical problem of myth exegesis finds its legitimate place among the forms of the literary word.⁷

With regard to the character of the *Ansage*—the announcement—a similar examination can be carried out. *Ansage* seems specifically appropriate to declarations of law. In its broad compass it includes rules and regulations that are publicly announced, the enactment of laws, and finally even books of law, written constitutions, judicial verdicts, and so forth. The many levels of text that run through this category and the way that handing down the law historically takes on the character of literature, very clearly manifest and maintain a particular way of saying. These texts utter something that is valid in the legal sense of the word and can only be understood within the *scopus* in which they can claim to be valid. It is evident here that the claim of such a word to be valid is not just increased through its writtenness; the codifiability of these validities is also not accidental or extraneous. The meaning of what is said in such announcements is only to a certain extent brought to fulfillment there. The fact that a directive by the court or a general law in the fullest sense of its meaning as word can be fully fixed in writing apparently rests on something else: the fact that it is not to be altered and that it is applicable to all. It stands. That it is *there* and that it *stands* there so long as it is not repealed apparently constitutes the essence of the being accepted as valid which belongs to such utterances. In keeping with this one speaks of the “proclamation” of a law or its being made public as the beginning of its acceptance as valid law. That the interpretation of such a word or text is still a creative legal task does not change the fact that the assertion in itself intends to have a single clear meaning or that its force is legally binding. The hermeneutical task that is posed in this regard is a *juristic* task and may in a secondary way have a legal-historical and even a literary-historical side. In any case, even in this form of *Ansage* the word embodied in *Aussage* lives on, because as *word* it wants to be true.

If we turn now to *Aussage* in the eminent sense of the word, that is, to declarations or statements that belong above all to literature in the narrower sense of that term, we find in this category that the number of ways of making an *Aussage* is positively bewildering. In light of this fact it seems to me justifiable methodologically to limit our inquiry here to what is called “belles lettres”

[*schöne Literatur*], that is to say, to texts that we do not see as belonging to any other context of meaning—for example, cultic, legal, scientific, or even philosophical texts (although one might make a few exceptions here). Ever since ancient times the sense of what is called the beautiful, the *kalon*, is that it is always desirable in itself, that is to say, it is persuasive not for the sake of something else but solely on the basis of its own appearance, which naturally demands applause. However, this does not at all mean that the hermeneutical problem in reference to such works needs to be taken up into the realm of competence of aesthetics. On the contrary, when we address the question of the truth of the word in reference to the literary word, we do so in full consciousness that in the realm of traditional aesthetics the question of truth has not been given any right to feel at home.

The art of the word, poetry, has been a special object of reflection since ancient times, and in any event long before other kinds of art were thematized. If one wants to count Vitruvius at all as a great ancient art theorist, or someone in the field of music, these are both doctrines with regard to practical arts, and thus basically the writings of both in these areas are *ars poetica*. For the philosophers, poetry has above all become the object of consideration, and this is not accidental, for poetry rivaled the claims made by philosophy. This is indicated not only by Plato's critique of the poets but also by Aristotle's special interest in poetics. In addition, poetics was generally placed in the neighborhood of rhetoric, an event that happened quite early in reflection directed to the understanding of art.⁸ This was a productive association in many respects and was fundamental to the formulation of numerous concepts in the field of the investigation of art. The concept of style, of the *stilus scribendi*, provides persuasive evidence for this.

Nevertheless, one needs to ask whether poetry has ever been given the attention it was due within the realm of aesthetics. The reigning idea in aesthetics for two thousand years has been that of *mimesis*, *imitatio*, of imitating or copying something.⁹ Originally, *mimesis* was closely linked to the transitory arts of dance, music, and poetry, and it was applied above all to the art of the theater. But already in Plato visual arts like sculpture and painting are brought in, and likewise in Aristotle. Above all, using the ocular concept of *eidos*, Plato interpreted the existing world as a copy, and poetry as a copy of that world, thus as a copy of a copy. In this way, however, the concept of *mimesis* was completely wrested from its origins. Even Hegel's definition of the beautiful as the sensible appearance of the idea echoes Plato, and all the proclamations of a universal poetry in the Romantic period did not resolve the predicament that squeezed the art of words in between rhetoric and aesthetics.

So our inquiry into the truth of the word has not received any rich advance preparation. In Romanticism, and above all in Hegel's systematic placement of the arts, one finds only undeveloped beginnings. It was Heidegger's breakthrough that went beyond the traditional conceptualities of metaphysics and aesthetics and opened up a new access to art, in that he interpreted the artwork as the placing of truth in a work and defended the sensory and moral unity of the

artwork against all ontological dualisms.¹⁰ In this way he brought new respect for the Romantic insight that poetry occupies a key position in relation to the other arts. On the basis of Heidegger's essay it becomes far easier to say how in a picture the true being of the colors emerges, or in architecture the being of the stones, and to see the similar way that in poetry the true word comes forth. This is the locus of our question.

What does it mean to speak of the "coming forth of the word" [*das Hervorkommen des Wortes*] in poetry? Just as color in a painting is more shining than elsewhere and stone in architecture is more weight-bearing, so in poetry the word speaks more tellingly than anywhere else. That is my thesis. If I am able to make it convincing, then the question of the truth of the word can be answered on the basis of this its highest form, its perfection. But what does it mean when we say that the word is "more telling" [*sagender*]? Our methodical linking together of word and text is a good preparation for this question. Obviously it is not the dead letter of the writing but the resurrected word (spoken or read) that can be assigned to the being of the work of art. Still, passing through its fall into writing gives the word the transfiguration that can mean its truth. In this context the question of the historical and genetic significance of writtenness can be left to one side. What the passage into writing does here methodically is simply bring to light the characteristically linguistic way-of-being of the *word*, and in particular of poetic statement. We will have now to check on whether the passing into and through writing in the case of *schöne Literatur* does not bring something else yet to light than what can be validly claimed for other forms of actual text.

First of all, what they hold in common becomes visible; for example, the disappearance of the author or his transformation into the ideal figure of a speaker. In religious documents this ideal figure is often heightened into a fiction, as if God were the speaker, and in legal verdicts they expressly say, "In the name of the Law...." To understand such texts certainly cannot mean what many people have been saying since Schleiermacher, namely that to understand is a reproducing of the productive act of its creation. We should draw the same conclusion from this with regard to the literary text, namely that the psychological interpretation does not have the hermeneutical appropriateness that has been ascribed to it. In both of these cases the assertion made by the text is not to be understood as an "expressive phenomenon," as an expression of the author's inner soul. (In fact, the text in many cases cannot be traced back to an individual originator anyway.) Likewise one may note that there is a wide variety of ideal speakers: there is the one who makes a *religious* promise to you, or the one who speaks to you in the name of the *law*, or.... Yet at this last "or" one hesitates; one is brought up short. Should we really say: "those who as poets speak to someone"? Would it not be more appropriate if one only said that *the poem speaks*? And I would add that the poem speaks better and more authentically through the listener, the viewer—or even just the reader—than it does through someone who is actually there speaking something as the resuscitator, the actor, or someone who is reading a lecture. For such speakers doubtless find

themselves performing a secondary function (even if it is the author himself, who takes on the role of a speaker or an actor), as they likewise do when compelled to give a lecture after just having read it through a single time. Also, one hopelessly mistakes what literature is when one tries to go from the literary construction back to the psychological act of intending it, to which the author gave "expression." Here we find a striking and persuasive difference between a literary text and the notes the author may have made to himself, or the communications he had with another person. The literary text is not secondary in comparison with a prior, original speaking that intends, the way that notes and other communications are. Quite the reverse is the case, because every subsequent interpretation of the text—even the author's own—is oriented to the text, and not in such a way that the author possesses some dark recollection of something that he had wanted to say, such that he can refresh his memory by going back to his preparatory work. Certainly, having recourse to variants is often indispensable to the reconstruction of a text. Every construing of a text is preceded by an understanding of it, and whoever fears for the objectivity of interpretation because of this had better ask whether tracking the meaning of a literary text back to an opinion of its original creator expressed in a text does not destroy the artistic meaning of literature as such.

Admittedly, this is initially only a negative differentiation through which the autonomy of the word as text becomes persuasive. Now on what do we base this autonomy? How can the word be so very telling and say so much that the author himself or herself does not know how to interpret it but must once again listen to the word? When one determines the autonomy of the word negatively, as we have done, we certainly do find a first sense of the eminent being of saying [*Sinn des eminenten Sagens*] that belongs to a literary text. What is truly unique is the fact that a literary text raises its voice from itself, so to speak, and speaks in nobody's name, not in the name of a god or a law but from itself! Now I maintain the following: The "ideal speaker" of such a word is the ideal reader! The next step would be to go more deeply into the matter and to show that my thesis also entails no historical restriction. We can at least note that it remains true that even in pre-literary cultures, for example, in the oral tradition of the epics, one finds such an "ideal reader," that is, a listener who through all the recitations (or a single recitation) listens to what only the inner ear perceives. By this standard, he or she is able to judge the rhapsodes, as we see in the ancient practice of competition among singers. Such an ideal listener is like the ideal reader.¹¹ If we went more deeply into this matter, we could show that and why reading, in contrast to giving a lecture or presenting a recitation, is *not a reproduction of an original* but rather shares in the ideality of the original; for reading is not contingent at all on making a reproduction, and does not require it. In this respect the investigations of the Polish phenomenologist Roman Ingarden into the schematic character of the literary word have pointed the way for further work.

It would also be enlightening to compare the problem of absolute music and its notation, which gives it a fixed form on paper, and to compare it with the

reading of an eminent text. This would show, I think, as musicologist Thrasybulos Georgiades has done,¹² what a difference exists between note-script in the one case and manuscript in the other, between word in poetry and tone in music, and therewith also between the literary work and the musical score. Without question music has the characteristic that one must make the music, and that even the listener to music must participate in it, almost like someone who sings a song along with the singer. Also, reading a musical score is not like reading a linguistic text. This would be so only if one inwardly were performing the score while reading it, and if one, like the reader, were not constrained but rather retained one's freedom of imagination. In the case of music, however, the interpretation of the score is in nearly all cases already pregiven to the listener by the performer, no matter how great the freedom may be that the listener can exercise. The musician, as performer and in some cases as conductor, occupies a middle position: he has to be an interpreter in the truest sense between composer and listener. This is the same as what we are familiar with in the theater: the performance is an interpretation that stands between the poetic text and the spectator. For the spectator this is not the same kind of task as reading something out loud. You are yourself the person who "reproduces," who sets something in being from out of yourself. When one is simply reading aloud to oneself, *sotto voce*, which was the way that reading was always done in antiquity and up into the Middle Ages, then in reality one is just carrying out the reading for oneself, not for another person who is listening to one read the text and understands it in his or her own way. Even reading aloud to another individual is not a real "reproducing" but a service to someone who wants to understand it as if he himself had been reading it. For this reason the text sounds quite different if one is only reading it aloud or only reciting it than if one reads it like an actor who tries to bring the text forth radiantly anew. There are admittedly borderline cases that cross over from one to the other here. A genius at interpretive reading like Ludwig Tieck, above all when he read Shakespeare aloud, seems to have had such complete control over the possible variations in speaking that he was like a one-man theater.

But how is it with real theater, the literary theater that brings to the stage a poetic text? There, mimes have their role to play more or less in harmony with the director's concept. Only in ideal cases can the director so fully convey to his actors the whole of his own interpretation of the poetry that his interpretation shapes along with the actor the embodiment of an individual role. Whether with or without the director, and with or without the conductor in the case of music, the performance becomes an interpretation that is presented to the spectator as the actor's or musician's own achievement.

All this must give way to the even more pressing question to be addressed to the "telling" [*sagende*] word: What is it that makes the word so telling when it is telling in the eminent sense? Here the range of literary and stylistic differences in literature overwhelms us: epic, lyric, and dramatic poetry; artistic prose, naively told stories, and the simple ballad; forms of expression that are mythic, fairy-tale-like, didactic, meditative, reflexive, hermetic, or reportage-like, all the

way to *poésie pure*. If every one of these can be called "literature," that is to say, that in them all the word speaks as word with the autonomy described above, then the ideal speaker or reader that we were seeking to construct now completely dissolves and is no help at all with regard to the question of how the word is "telling" in those occurrences we have been trying to address. Certainly not only the diversity of what the word in literature says and the different ways that it speaks its word give us pause here. It seems evident from the outset that the word that is able to address us cannot be characterized just in terms of the content to which it refers. The same is true of the visual arts and for the same reasons. Someone who only looks at the objective content of a painting often looks right past what makes it a work of art. The nonobjective art of today makes that clear to everybody. The information value of a copy of a flower in a plant catalog, for example, is certainly far greater than the orgy of colors in a picture of flowers by Emil Nolde.¹³ On the other hand, one can understand from this example why colorful compositions that leave behind all objective depiction, such as a still life of flaming flowers, can nevertheless be so appealing. Indeed, it seems as if hints of meaning, echoes, possible links to our customary objective seeing are all in play, but they do not steer us toward themselves but turn our gaze toward new ordering structures that make such a composition of colors a picture without making it a copy of something. The practical lifeworld, which is governed by its own purposes, does not offer us anything like this. The same thing seems to hold for the poetic word. It can never stop consisting of meanings that arise out of the words, or parts of words, that have meaning and that form a unity of a spoken whole or a totality of meanings. This is true even for the famous French *poésie pure*. The ordering structure that informs them, however, can no longer be opened up by the customary directions of meaning found in grammatical and syntactic speech, rules that govern our forms of communication.

The extreme situation in modern visual art seems to me likewise to be methodologically helpful in dealing with the question of the truth of the work of art—and in our case, of the poetic word. It teaches us to reject a wrongheaded orientation directed basically to the communicative content. But it also protects us from the opposite mistake: assuming that what we may recognize in what is presented or said has no relevance at all. The word that speaks to most people is certainly not a word that just pops up and strikes one as merely a structure of sound. Saying is not just there in itself; rather, it says *something*, and when what is said in the saying is completely *there*, then the word is telling even when something would be unlikely, and indeed when the sound of the word has faded away and perhaps was not even noticed.

When our attention is focused primarily on the manner of the speaking, on how beautifully it is said, then, as with all fine-sounding rhetoric, the power-of-being that resides in the word and the force of the matter being spoken of are lost. On the other hand, that a text speaks from itself necessarily depends on the how of its being said as such, though not in such a way that the structural form all by itself is the artistic statement, leaving totally aside any consideration of the

intended meaning of the speaking or of the thing represented in the picture. Precisely the objective content of the work is raised to an absolute presence through the art of language or visual art, to such a degree that all relation to real being or even past being fades away. Indeed, even the displacement of focus onto the how of the presentation fades away along with it. It seems as if the how of the artwork's being said, which doubtless distinguishes art from nonart, shows itself only to rise above itself—and this is also the case even when something is apparently "not saying anything," but is rather an ordered structure composed of images or elements of meaning and sound, as in the modern hermetic lyric. The word of a poem or the image in a picture is not made more telling through a foregrounding of form and of content: *Ars latet arte sua*—art loves to hide its art.¹⁴ Scientific method can deal thematically with much about the work of art, but not with the one and all of its *Aussage*.

Let us stay with the word of the poem: What is it that is there in everything that is said and comes to stand before us, when the *Aussage* takes place or happens? I think it is self-presence, the being of the "there," and not what is expressed as its objective content. There are no poetic objects, only poetic presentations of objects (allowing ourselves here to alter a well known saying of Nietzsche).

But that would be only a first step in the unfolding of our problem. For now the question arises as to how the poetically presented object is to become poetic through language. When Aristotle made the convincing statement that poetry is more philosophical than history, which means to say that it contains more actual knowledge, more truth, because it presents things not as they really happened but as they could happen, this poses the question: How is poetry made? Does it present the idealized instead of what is concretely real? But in this case the riddle is why precisely does the idealized thing emerge in the poetic word as concretely real, indeed as more real than what is real and not, as the idealized, afflicted with the paleness of thought directed toward the universal. And in addition how does everything that shines forth in the poetic word share in this transfiguration into the essential (which one can only badly call "idealized")? To answer this question it is necessary for us not to be confused by the diverse differentiation of poetic speaking; it makes the task more specific. We are only asking about what it is that makes all these various ways of saying into texts, that is to say, what is it that gives them the "ideal" linguistic identity that is absolutely capable of making each of them a *text*. In this connection, then, we can pass over the wide range of modes of presentation that have developed into different genres of text, each with its own requirements. They have in common that they are all "literature." What is written is scarcely ever completely without linguistic coherence. There is, however, a type of linguistic expression fixed in written form that is a text, but scarcely meets the basic requirement of linguistic identity that generally pertains to a "text." This is a kind of "text" whose wording is randomly changeable, as occasionally holds in the case of artless scientific prose. One can put the matter this way: it is possible for it to be translated without sacrifice, even by a computer, because it has to do only with

the informative function, the informational content, of the text. It may serve as an ideal boundary case. It stands on the threshold to non-language, artificial symbols, whose employment as signs is just as random, because this has the advantage (and disadvantage) of being unambiguous, in that the sign stands in a firmly established classification system for what is designated. For this reason, in the natural sciences the publication of results in English immediately follows. But this is also very instructive as a borderline case, namely as the zero-point over against the high level of coherence belonging to individual words that belong to literary texts. In them the word has the very highest coherence with the whole of the text. We do not wish here to go into the different levels of coherence within literature. The breadth of difference becomes clear in the untranslatability that culminates in lyric poetry and especially *poésie pure*. The following remarks only want to make visible the bonding agent which links texts together with their linguistic identity, and we want to try to draw a conclusion about the "being" of such texts, that is to say, about the "truth of the word."

We have been concerned here throughout with the linguistic medium, the medium by means of which language is bound back to its own or inner resounding, no matter how much in being-given-away it resolves into the spoken, and the medium which brings it about that this being-given-away possesses the unique evocative impact that characterizes literature. Rhythm belongs to these linguistic means as a pure becoming of form by time. Rhythm is also at home in music, but in the realm of language it is subject to its own tense relationship to the meaning that is being referred to, and thus generally cannot be restricted to precise forms of repetition. It is hard to say what it is that this poetic rhythm so articulates that when reading something aloud we notice very clearly where it falls short of its goal. One can say that basically it has to do with a balance one can feel between two motions: the movement of the meaning and the movement of the sound. Both motions, which always blend into a single motion—and sometimes not without compulsion—have their specific syntactical means that they employ. In the realm of sound these means extend from blatant forms of measuring time (meter) and rhyme all the way to figurations of sound that remain below the threshold of conscious notice and are drawn over it via this more or less thick network, these more or less inexpressible logical links of meaning. What thereby comes into being, in which the coherence contributed by poetic language is clearly presented, is what I would like to call with Hölderlin the *tone*. The tone holds out throughout the whole of the linguistic construction, exhibiting its tenacious power of determination above all in instances where discordant tones arise. A discordant tone is not only a false tone but a tone that detracts from the whole mood. In literature it is no different from life in human society. It is, conversely, the enduring tone that holds together the unity of the construction—with all the differences and degrees of difference in sensitivity to disturbance and density of coherence that are possible. This tone, which endures, binds to one another the elements of the discourse. It joins together the construction in such a way that this kind of construction stands out against other discourses (so that we can, for example, recognize a quotation by the tone). It

stands out above all against every kind of discourse that is not "literature" and that does not have its harmony in itself but must search for or find this harmony outside itself.

In critical questions, such borderline cases are always the most instructive. For instance, the way that Pindar introduces into the context of his songs the praise of the current victor contains an occasional element. But the power and coherence of the linguistic form is evident precisely in that the poetic construction knows full well how to carry this dedication, as is also the case with Hölderlin, who follows Pindar in his hymns. Still more instructive than cases of such occasional parts in a text the same question arises where the text itself and as a whole relates itself to a reality that stands outside language, for example, in the historical novel or the historical drama. One cannot hold that a genuine literary work of art causes this relationship to extra-linguistic reality to disappear completely. The claim to historical reality undoubtedly resonates as a kind of overtone in the formed text. The material is not simply invented, and the appeal to poetic license, which entitles the poet to alter the real relationships indicated in the historical sources, only confirms this. For the fact that the author is allowed to alter them, indeed to fabricate far beyond every limit of the genuine historical relationships, shows how much in the shaping of his poetry the material of historical reality is transformed [*aufgehoben*], even where the poet is using history. This clearly differentiates the artistic element from the case demonstrated by the historian's art of representation.

Along the same lines there is the important issue of how far the conceptuality of rhetoric is actually relevant to the bonding means that we have been describing in works of art. First, the devices of rhetoric are the devices of discourse, which as such is not originally "literature." An example that shows the difficulty of the problematic is the concept of metaphor. The poetic legitimacy of the concept of metaphor has rightly been contested—but not in the sense that metaphor (or every other figure of speech in rhetoric) could not be used in poetry. Rather, the point is that the essence of poetry does not lie in metaphor and the use of metaphor. Poetic discourse is not attained by taking unpoetical speech and adding metaphor. When Gottfried Benn fought against the poetizing use of "like" in poetry, he was certainly not mistakenly referring to the highly expressive and magnificently developed epic metaphors of Homer. Actually, in Homer metaphor and comparison are so well carried by the tone of the bard that they are completely a part of the world he evokes. Poetic irony, which inheres in the contrasting tensions contained in Homeric comparisons, evidences exactly the perfection of their construction. So one can say not only in the case of Kafka, where the fictive realism of the narration especially motivates it, but about the poetic word as a whole, that it has the character of an "absolute" metaphor, that is, it stands in contrast to everyday speech as such.

Thus, poetic speaking has the suspension and the sustainedness that result from neutralizing all assumption of existence, and therewith it brings about the transformation into a construction. Husserl used the expression "modification of neutrality" in reference to this and said that in the case of poetry what he called

the eidetic reduction was "spontaneously fulfilled," but he is still describing the situation proceeding from the intentionality of consciousness. Such an intentionality is primarily positional. Husserl views the language of poetry as a modification of the straightforward everyday positing of being. In place of the relation outward to an object, the self-referentiality of the word enters the scene, which one indeed also calls the self-referentiality of the word. But exactly here we need to change our way of thinking, and here Heidegger's critique of transcendental phenomenology and its concept of consciousness proves to be a productive contribution. What language as language is, and what we here seek as the "truth of the word," cannot be grasped by taking the so-called "natural" forms of linguistic communication as the starting point; on the contrary, the possibilities of such forms of communication are better grasped by starting from the poetical manner of speaking! Poetic language formation presupposes the dissolution of all positive conventionally accepted rules (see Hölderlin). This means that in fact language is again in the process of becoming and not a rule-governed application of words, not a co-constructing of something along with convention. The poetic word *founds* meaning. The way the word in a poem "*herauskommt*" [comes forth, emerges, a Heideggerian term] is from a new saying-power which often remains hidden in that which is commonly accepted.

To give an example, in German the word *Geräusch* is just as colorless and insignificant a word as "noise" is in English, which we do not even recognize as coming from "nausea," sea-sickness. We see how it can live anew in George's line: "*Und das Geräusch der ungeheuren See*"—"And the noise, the rush of tremendous seas." This is anything but a poetizing application here experienced by an everyday word. It remains the everyday word, but it stands here so suspended in tension among relationships of rhythm, meter, and vocalization that it suddenly becomes more telling; it regains its original saying power! Through the word "tremendous" the word *Geräusch* [roar, noise, rushing sound] again *räuscht* [roars], and through the consonance of the "r" in *Rausch* and *ungeheuren* both words intensify each other. These intensifications at the same time set the word up, display it, and therewith set it free to be itself. This setting-up allows it to interact with the other in a new way—and certainly not without also bringing back into play with it other relationships of meaning, for example, the view of the coast of the North Sea and the world opposing it to the south.¹⁵ Through this the word speaks more strongly, and what it says is essentially "there" more than ever. Just as in another context I have spoken of the *Seinsvalenz des Bildes*¹⁶ [the power or valence of being resident in an image or picture], provided that what is represented by the picture gains being through the picture, so also here I would like to speak of a valence of being [*Seinsvalenz*] resident in the word. Of course there is a difference: It is not so much the thing said in the sense of an objective content that gains in being as rather *being as a whole*. Here there is a fundamental difference between the way that the variegated world is transformed into an image in a work of art and the way that the word sways and plays itself out. The word is not an element of the world like colors or forms that can be fitted into a new order of things. Rather, every word

is itself already an element of a new order of things and therefore is itself potentially and entirely this order. When a word resonates, a whole language and everything it is able to say is called forth—and it knows how to say everything. So what comes out in the word that “speaks” more is not so much a single sensory element of the world but rather the presence of the whole built through language. Aristotle designated seeing as the most excellent of the faculties because this is the sense that perceives the most differences, but in fact one can perceive even more with hearing, and thus hearing can more justly qualify for distinction because when we hear speech we are capable of perceiving simply everything that is distinguishable. The universal “there” of being in the word is the miracle of language, and the highest possibility of saying consists in binding its passing away and escape and in making firm the nearness to being. It is nearness, or presentness, not of this or that but of the possibility of everything. This is what distinguishes the poetic word. It fulfills itself within itself, because it is a “holding of the near,” and it becomes an empty word when it is reduced to its signifying function, for then it stands in need of communicatively mediated fulfillment. The self-fulfillment of the poetic word makes it clear why language can be merely a means of conveying information, but a mere means of conveying information cannot become a language.

We can take up here only in passing a question already touched on: whether the mythic word, the legend, and perhaps also the philosophical word in the form of the speculative proposition, do not all in truth share the distinguishing trait of the poetic word, namely, of being saying pure and simple [*das Sagende schlechthin zu sein*]. Considering this question will lead us to the final step in our presentation. The problem is clear. Legends are not written down and are not texts, although they do also enter into language and in it take on the form of a text. But legend as legend appears not yet to have entered into the firm stability of poetical-linguistic coherence, but rather drifts back and forth on a stream of wisdom of primeval origin, which feeds on cultic thinking. At the same time, it does seem reasonable to call legend in the excellent sense *Aussage*. The *Aussage* obviously resides not in the linguistic organization of its means of telling a story but at its core, in the names that are called, in whose secret naming power the telling of the tale is bathed. For it appears that it is in the names that the legend resides which is called forth in the telling of the story. To see this, it suffices to mention the fact that the name is in each story likewise at the null point of translatability, that is, of the separability of the saying from what is said. But what else is the name than the final thickening and condensation in which existence listens to itself? For it is the name that one hears and answers to, and one's own name is what one is and which one lives up to. So also the word of poetry is self-fulfilling—and it stands as if before its own self-unfolding in the speech of the thinking word. It is the “syntax” of poetry to be “in the word.” The degree of coherence of the words also determines the degree of translatability (see I. A. Richards).

We shall not go into a general discussion of the extent to which the philosophical statement is such a “legend” but only briefly offer a clarification in

reference to the "speculative sentence." The structure of the speculative sentence is an analogue to self-referentiality that belongs to the poetic word. Hegel in fact described the nature of the speculative proposition as completely analogous, and in this regard he did not have in mind just his own dialectical method but the language of philosophy as such, in so far as it exists in its authentic possibility. He shows that in the speculative proposition the natural reaching out of speech toward the predicate, which is ascribed as an other to the subject, is broken and suffers a counter-impulse [*Gegenstoß*].¹⁷ Thinking finds in the predicate not something other but rather the genuine subject itself. So the "assertion" [*Aussage*] goes back into itself, and that is what philosophical speech is for Hegel: the rigor of the concept holds fast to its *Aussage*, in that this rigor "works it out" dialectically in its appropriate moments. This means, however, that it goes ever deeper into the "assertion." It holds true not only for Hegel and his dialectical method that philosophy does not march straight ahead but instead returns in its striving to all of its paths and detours. The boundaries of translatability, which indicate when the saying does not conform with the thing to be said, are here quickly reached.

We call the being of the saying of a word the "holding onto the near" [*Halten der Nähe*], and we have seen that it is not this or that possible content of the discourse that is near, but nearness itself [*die Nähe selbst*]. This is, of course, not limited to the work of art of the word, but applies to all art. The silence of the Chinese vase,¹⁸ the stillness and puzzling peace which comes toward you from every really persuasive artistic construction, testifies that (speaking with Heidegger) truth has here been "set to work." And Heidegger has shown us that the truth of the artwork is not the speaking forth [*Herausgesagtheit*] of the *logos*, but is rather a "that it is" and a "there" at the same time, that stand in the strife of disclosure and sheltering concealment. The question that guided us here was how this looks especially in the artwork of words, where the sheltering and protecting in the "construction" of the art already presupposes its being-in-language and the in-dwelling [*Insein*] of being in language. The limit of translatability designates exactly how far the sheltering in the word stretches. In its ultimate concealedness it is the sheltering.¹⁹ Only someone who is at home in a language can experience the *Aussage* of the poetic word in its preserving itself and standing in itself, which in the unfamiliar shelters within itself another being-at-home. But who is "at home" in a language? It appears that what modern research calls "language competency" has to do more with speaking when it is not at home, with unlimitedness in the use of discourse—and that always prepares the way for its going unheard and unheeded.

For this reason the poetic word in comparison with every other work of art seems to me to have yet an additional determinant. It can claim not only the breathtaking nearness of all art but also it must be and is capable of capturing and holding onto this nearness, that is, to call a halt to what is fleeting. For speech is self-expression and escapes from itself. The poetic word, too, can never stop being speech (or stammering) in order ever anew to exhaust its possibilities of meaning. How else does the tone [we have spoken of] stand

within the system of tones? How does one situate painting or architecture in its place? In the holding onto itself and holding itself back, it seems to me, the poetic word has its enduring value, and that means, here it has its highest possibility. The word finds its fulfillment in the poetic word—and enters into the thought of the thinking person.

Notes

1. The basis of this text, Gadamer tells us, is a lecture or series of lectures presented in 1971 in Toronto on "The Truth of the Word." In 1993 he revised and published "*Von der Wahrheit des Wortes*" in Volume 8 of his *Gesammelte Werke*, which he titled *Kunst als Aussage* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 37–57. I wish to thank most sincerely Jeff Mitscherling for his extensive editorial corrections and suggestions for the translation. English translations have been added without comment to Gadamer's notes. [Trans.]

2. Gadamer may be referring here to Wittgenstein and Habermas. [Trans.]

3. Since a sentence "combines" subject and predicate. [Trans.]

4. The translation of *Ant-worten* as "answering words," which Gadamer hyphenates, calls our attention to the hermeneutic element involved in every instance of answering. An answer (*Antwort*) is always a response to a question, here represented as the word (*Wort*) that initiates the questioning. [Trans.]

5. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, trans. Ralph Mannheim, 3 volumes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953, 1955, 1957). [Trans.]

6. It should be clarified that in German, "*das Wort*" has a far wider range of meanings than in English. For instance, "*das bekannte Wort Schillers*" means "the well known quotation from Schiller," and "*Dr. Meyer hat das Wort*" means "It is Dr. Meyer's turn to speak." At the same time, there are some usages in English that do carry this sense of a whole sentence rather than one word, or of speaking in words, which we shall try to work into the translation when possible. [Trans.]

7. The significance religious tradition possesses for stimulating poetic style has entered general awareness since Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957). See also Paul Ricoeur's remarks on the critical limitations of structural "geometry." [Source not given.]

8. One thinks here of the *synagoge technon* of Aristotle.

9. On the concept of *mimesis* see nos. 8 and 9 in *GW* 8: “*Dichtung und Mimesis*” and “*Das Spiel der Kunst*.” [Both are translated by Nicholas Walker in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), as “Poetry and Mimesis” and “The Play of Art.”]
10. In this regard see “*Die Wahrheit des Kunstwerks*” in *GW* 3. [This essay, which served as Gadamer’s Afternote to his paperback edition of Heidegger’s *Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* has been translated under the title “Heidegger’s Later Philosophy” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), and as “The Truth of the Work of Art” in *Heidegger’s Ways*, trans. John W. Stanley (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994). In relation to the material that follows, see also “*Philosophie und Poesie*,” *GW* 8, translated in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* as “Philosophy and Poetry.”]
11. One finds this gone into more extensively in the following two essays: “*Stimme und Sprache*,” [“Voice and Language”] (*GW* 8) and “*Hören-Sehen-Lesen*” [“Listening-Seeing-Reading”] (*GW* 8). [Both not yet translated into English.]
12. See Thrasybulos Georgiades, *Nennen und Erklängen: Die Zeit als Logos* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1985).
13. German expressionist painter, 1867–1956. [Trans.]
14. See Lothar Spahinger, *Ars Latet arte sua*, a book on Ovid published in 1996 by Tübingen Verlag.
15. On the interpretation of this George poem as a whole, see “*Ich und du die selbe seele*” in *GW* 9. [Trans.]
16. In *Truth and Method*, *GW* I, 139–49, “The Ontological Valence of the Picture.” In *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 134–44.
17. In reference to this and also what follows, see my “*Philosophie und Poesie*,” *GW* 8.
18. Gadamer quotes this in English: “The silence of the Chinese vase,” apparently from a poem in English. [Trans.]
19. German: “In seiner letzten Verborgenheit ist es das Bergende.” [Trans.]