“The Flower of the Mouth”: Hölderlin’s Hint for Heidegger’s Thinking of the Essence of Language

FRIEDRICH-WILHELM von HERRMANN
Universität Freiburg i. Br.

I. On the Metaphysical Determination of the Sound Character of Language

In his lecture trilogy “The Essence of Language” Heidegger seeks a thinking experience of the essence of language, directed by the words “The essence of language: The language of essence” (US, 176). Taken as a directive, these words function as a guide for the path of thinking—a path which, as such, proceeds in the neighborhood, or nearness, of thinking and poetizing. Their nearness to each other relies on the excellent relation that each has to language and its essence. But, at the same time, this nearness is determined by a “delicate, but clear difference” (US, 196), which excludes their blending, or the assimilation of one by the other. The word-directive “The essence of language: The language of essence” contains a directive for thinking. These words are to direct thinking as it experiences and thinks the essence of language.

Taken as a directive, these words have the character of a hinting. “A hint hints away from the one toward the other” (US, 202). The hinting which occurs in this word-directive is, therefore, a hinting away from and a hinting towards. This hinting hints thinking away from the first phrase, before the colon, hinting towards the second phrase, after the colon. Thus, in its hinting away, this hinting initially refers thinking to that from which it hints away.
The phrase "the essence of language" articulates the traditional determination of the essence of language—and this determination must first be considered, with regard to its insufficiency. However, such a critical approach is possible only on the basis of a prior understanding of a more originary and root experience of language. This prior understanding is articulated in the second phrase of the word-directive, "the language of essence." But the second phrase of the word-directive hints towards the possibility of an original experience of the essence of language only haltingly. To get thinking involved in this possibility, thinking must first engage in a critical reflection on the basic traditional representation of language which is expressed in the first phrase. According to the traditional representation we view language as the vocal utterance of inner ideas and thoughts. We grasp the vocal utterance as a phenomenon of the human body which, together with the body as a whole, belongs to the realm of sensibility. What gets expressed in vocal utterances (the content of language, its sense and meaning) we take as the spiritual part of language. We then imagine the spoken and written language to be the unity of sensible sound and spiritual meaning.

This basic representation of language harks back to the old and traditional representation of man as animal rationale, as the living being who is endowed with reason. As a living being, man belongs to the realm of the sensible, which he shares with all other, nonhuman living beings. As ratio man is a thinking, reasoning being and belongs to the realm of the spiritual. Through ratio man raises himself above the realm of a merely existing being, differentiating himself from nonhuman living beings. The basic representation of language as the unity of what is vocal, bodily, and sensible with what has a spiritual content or meaning and is expressed therein—this basic representation stems from representing the essence of man as a living being who is endowed with reason.

This essential conception of man seems to be well-founded and untouchable as long as a more original experience of man is not manifest. But this more original experience occurs only when thinking realizes that the traditional determination of the essence of man as animal rationale is formed within the horizon of an understanding of being that is developed by looking at an extant being, by not viewing man as man. The traditional, metaphysical determination of the essence of man shows itself to be guided by a conception of being which covers over and conceals the most proper way in which man is man. If the traditional, metaphysical representation of language corresponds to the metaphysical determination of the essence of man, this representation of language, too, is formed by that understanding of being which is developed outside the view of man as man.

To what extent is the essential determination of man as animal rationale guided by an understanding of being which does not have its origin in man as