Language, Writing, and Truth


There is much to recommend in Gert-Jan van der Heiden's The Truth (and Untruth) of Language: Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Derrida on Disclosure and Displacement. Most remarkable is the clarity of thought and expression, especially considering the level of difficulty of the figures and issues that are treated by van der Heiden. In fact, this book is so clear and accessible that I would consider it as a required secondary text for any of the three thinkers with which it is concerned. Composed of four chapters and a conclusion, the book begins with a chapter concerning Heidegger on truth or disclosure and language. This is a very fitting beginning, for van der Heiden’s study is situated squarely within the Heideggerian discourse concerning the issues stated in the book’s title. While chapter one is concerned almost exclusively with Heidegger, chapter two is more issue oriented, taking up the problem of writing in Plato, Ricoeur, and Derrida, and an occasional glance at Heidegger’s purported dismissal of writing in favor of speech. The discussion of Ricoeur in this chapter is especially satisfying, and van der Heiden supplies an extremely interesting set of analyses that serve to both present Ricoeur in an appealing fashion and distinguish him from both Heidegger and Derrida. I have never wanted to return to Ricoeur with such an invigorated passion than through van der Heiden in this chapter and in chapter three, which discusses metaphor in Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Derrida. Here again, van der Heiden’s ability to situate Ricoeur and Derrida with regard to Heidegger is on full display, and what he accomplishes here is impressive and surprisingly clear given the difficulty of the texts under view (especially those of Derrida, which include “White Mythology” and “Le retrait de la métaphore”). The fourth and final chapter, “Mimesis in Myth and Translation,” is largely oriented around the problem of translation, for translation is a specific case of mimesis. Van der Heiden sees Heidegger as occupying a very classical position with regard to mimesis—“Mimesis can only be understood as the (distorting) repetition of this original disclosure” (186)—a position that is then replicated with regard to the problem of translation. That is, translation, for Heidegger, is a problem of the translation within a single language,
such as the demand for a translation within Greek, before all thought of translation from one distinct, empirical language to another. This translation within a single language seemingly gets displaced into the errancy of translation from Greek into Latin, and then a more original translation from Greek to German in the absence of errancy, and finally the translation within German that is resistant to any translation beyond the German language. This last transition is prompted by Derrida’s concern for the untranslatability of *Geist* in Heidegger’s treatment of Trakl.

This arrangement of chapters and concerns is befitting to van der Heiden’s purpose. That he begins with a chapter devoted to Heidegger is a way of preparing the stage for all that will follow, for what follows is his remarkable insight and acuity in relating Ricoeur and Derrida to Heidegger in light of disclosure and displacement. Thus, the validity of what van der Heiden shows in these relations is first to be grounded in the degree to which he gets Heidegger right. My review, then, will consist largely of a treatment of van der Heiden’s presentation of Heidegger. That being said, anyone who reads van der Heiden’s book, which really deserves a wide readership, will learn a great deal from the many analyses that relate Ricoeur and Derrida to Heidegger.

Gert-Jan van der Heiden ends his book, *The Truth (and Untruth) of Language: Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Derrida on Disclosure and Displacement*, appropriately enough, with a nine-page conclusion that, despite a claim to the contrary, retraces the analyses provided earlier of each of the book’s three figures of concern. Each of the three sections of the conclusion is devoted to the three thinkers announced in the title in the order in which they appear in the title. This is to be expected. And yet, something a bit strange occurs in section three, the section devoted to Derrida. That strangeness is due to a kind of displacement, a kind of double displacement. In the midst of treating the displacement that is treated by Derrida in his analysis of the preface in “Hors livre” from *Dissemination*, there occurs what can only be described as a kind of displacement of the conclusion of van der Heiden’s book. That is to say, the conclusion is displaced by an appeal to a kind of preface (“Hors livre”) concerning the preface, a preface that is itself a displacement. Did I say a double displacement? Let’s make it one short of a home-run and call it a triple. For the displacement that is addressed in Derrida that serves to displace van der Heiden’s conclusion is also an attempt to graft onto an earlier discussion concerning displacement in Heidegger in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” a displacement that is itself bound to disclosure, bound to the disclosure concerning truth that the work of art puts to work. As such, the third displacement displaces disclosure in favor of displacement. All of this in the attempt, of course, to disclose