



From Refusal to Renunciation as Saying: Heidegger's Changing Interpretation of Stefan George's "The Word"

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Abstract— In his 1939 reading of Stefan George's "The Word," Martin Heidegger excludes renunciation in order to foreground the self-refusal of the event of appropriation. In his later lecture, however, he redefines renunciation as a mode of Saying. By comparing these two interpretive moments, this article argues that the shift differentiates the word's refusal from the poet's renunciation. The former withdraws in advance from complete availability; the latter withdraws the demand to control names. Together they form an asymmetrical claim-response structure in which poetic speech is neither the sovereign production of meaning nor a passive conduit for language. It is a responsive agency whose measure is received from language yet whose task of articulation remains the poet's responsibility. This reconstruction clarifies why renunciation could re-enter Heidegger's later thinking without displacing the priority of linguistic withdrawal. It also redefines the relation among poet, language, and Saying, revealing the finite yet irreducible place of human speaking in Heidegger's later philosophy of language.



Keywords— Heidegger, refusal, renunciation, Saying, Stefan George, "The Word"

I. INTRODUCTION

Heidegger's later reflections on language repeatedly return to Stefan George's poem "The Word," especially its final line, "Where word breaks off no thing may be" (George, 1919/1971, p. 60).¹ Yet his readings assign strikingly different roles to the poet's renunciation (*Verzicht*). In the 1939 seminar notes published as *On the Essence of Language*, Heidegger interprets the breakdown of the word as the self-refusal (*Sichversagen*) of the event of appropriation (*Ereignis*) and adds an emphatic qualification: "no 'renunciation'" (*kein 'Verzicht'*; Heidegger, 2004, p. 61). In the later lecture "Words," by contrast, he maintains that the poet must relinquish control over names and redefines this renunciation as Saying

(*Sage/Sagen*): "As self-denial, renunciation remains Saying" (Heidegger, 1959/1971, p. 147).

Existing scholarship provides a substantial conceptual basis for addressing this tension. Backman (2011, pp. 63–66) argues that the disappearance of the nameless "jewel" teaches the poet that human beings depend on language without being able to master language itself as an object; renunciation therefore marks a passage from subjective control to releasement (*Gelassenheit*). Ziarek (2010) emphasizes that language withholds itself even as it makes speech possible, so poetic language can answer this withdrawal only through listening and restraint. Centering on Heidegger's proposition that "language speaks" (*die Sprache spricht*; Heidegger, 1959/1971, p. 124), Wu (2022, pp. 159–171) shows how the ontological approach changes the point of departure from which language is questioned: human beings must experience language's own occurring through listening, the relation between poetry and thought, and an entry into the Saying of language. Sun (2022, pp. 37–41) further describes Heidegger's later view in terms of Saying's disclosure of

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from Heidegger's 1939 seminar follow Wanda Torres Gregory and Yvonne Unna's translation (Heidegger, 2004). Quotations from "The Nature of Language" and "The Way to Language" follow Peter D. Hertz; quotations from "Words" follow Joan Stambaugh (Heidegger, 1959/1971). The English translation of George's "The Word," printed on pp. 60 and 140 of the same volume, is by Peter D. Hertz (George, 1919/1971). German terms are supplied where conceptually decisive.

world and things, to which human speech listens and which it brings into sound.

Less attention has been paid to the altered status of renunciation between the 1939 notes and Heidegger's later interpretation. Why did he initially need to exclude renunciation in order for the word's failure to disclose the self-refusal of *Ereignis*? Why could renunciation later return as a mode of Saying? I argue that this shift reconfigures the relation between the agency of language and human agency. The word first refuses to become an object or instrument subject to exhaustive command; the poet then responds by withdrawing the demand that words function as representational names available on command. These movements form an asymmetrical structure of claim and response (*Anspruch–Entsprechung*). Human speaking accordingly appears neither as the sovereign production of meaning nor as simple submission to language.

II. THE EXCLUSION OF RENUNCIATION: THE WORD'S REFUSAL IN 1939

Heidegger's 1939 notes begin from George's final line, "Where word breaks off no thing may be" (George, 1919/1971, p. 60), and advance three propositions: only the word can let a being be; the word must be understood as name or naming; and the essence of the word is intrinsically equivocal (Heidegger, 2004, pp. 60–61). This equivocity prevents the word from being treated as a sign appended to an object already constituted in independence from language. The word grants a being the determinacy through which it can appear as this particular being. The word itself, however, cannot in turn be grasped as one more determinate thing. The breakdown of the word thus raises the question of the source of linguistic determinacy.

Heidegger next speaks of the "word 'of' *Ereignis*" (Heidegger, 2004, p. 61). The genitive dislodges the human speaker from the position of linguistic origin: the decisive word belongs to the event of appropriation, whose self-disclosure occurs through the word. When the word breaks off, *Ereignis* refuses itself. Yet in this occurring of refusal (*Versagung*), it also shows itself in its refusal—as stillness (*Stille*), as the in-between (*Zwischen*), and as the there (*Da*; Heidegger, 2004, p. 61). What is shown is the inseparability of concealment and disclosure. Stillness names its nonpropositional mode; the in-between names the open region in which *Ereignis*, beings, and the human speaker can enter into relation; and the there names the site at which withdrawal can be encountered. *Ereignis* comes nearest to its essence when the failure of naming is experienced as its refusal of complete presence, not when it is captured by a successful name.

Heidegger then imposes the emphatic restriction "no 'renunciation'" (Heidegger, 2004, p. 61). George's poem presents renunciation as something the poet learns in sadness (George, 1919/1971, p. 60), which readily encourages a psychological reading: the poet desires a jewel, loses it because no name can be found, grieves, and finally accepts his deprivation. Such an account locates the decisive event in the poet's consciousness. Heidegger's restriction provisionally brackets the poet's own formulation and redirects interpretation. What occurs first is the self-refusal of *Ereignis*, not the poet's retreat. The speaker's sadness may register a loss, but it neither produces nor explains what happens in the breakdown of the word. The word fails because what is encountered cannot be placed entirely at one's disposal through naming. Psychological loss concerns a subject confronting what can no longer be possessed; the self-refusal of *Ereignis* concerns a more originary withdrawal that first determines whether something can appear and be possessed as a being. The latter is ontologically prior to the former.

Excluding renunciation therefore preserves the asymmetry between the event of language and the poet's response. If interpretation begins with renunciation, the human speaker may once again become the poem's organizing center. Beginning with refusal allows the word's failure to be heard as an event that addresses the poet in advance and unsettles the poet's subjective position. Heidegger accordingly calls George's language "transitional" and remarks that the poet speaks in this way while scarcely recognizing its import (Heidegger, 2004, p. 61). The restriction nevertheless leaves the human response conceptually underdeveloped. It establishes that the word's refusal cannot be reduced to resignation, but it does not yet explain how the poet can answer refusal without resuming a position of mastery. The later interpretation retains the priority of linguistic withdrawal while reversing the earlier exclusion: renunciation acquires philosophical force once it no longer means psychological surrender and is instead understood as a nonassertoric mode of Saying.

III. RENUNCIATION AS SAYING IN THE LATER INTERPRETATION

In the later lecture, Heidegger places both of the poem's final lines at the center of his reading. In Peter D. Hertz's translation, the stanza reads as follows:

So I renounced and sadly see:
Where word breaks off no thing may be. (George,
1919/1971, p. 140)

The colon dividing the lines is decisive. Its force becomes clearer when compared with the colon in the fifth stanza. There the punctuation introduces an indicative utterance: the Norn's declaration appears in quotation marks and states that no name can be found. At the poem's close, the quotation marks disappear, while the verb hovers between subjunctive and imperative force. The poet acknowledges that a thing enters poetic appearance only through the word and at the same time binds himself no longer to admit into poetry what has not been granted a word (Heidegger, 1959/1971, pp. 140–143). The colon thus marks a turn from demanding a name to accepting the measure of language and entering what Allen (2007, pp. 176–179) describes as the realm of language's withdrawal.

Heidegger's apparently paradoxical claim that renunciation as self-denial remains Saying means first that renunciation does not terminate speech. The poet neither abandons poetry because he cannot name the jewel nor bids farewell to words. He relinquishes a demand formerly directed at language: whenever he presents a thing, language should supply an apt name at his discretion. As self-denial (*Sichversagen*), renunciation changes the relation between subject and language. The poet ceases to act as the sovereign producer of meaning and becomes a participant in linguistic disclosure.

This transformation suspends a familiar form of linguistic subjectivity while making another mode of speech possible (Bartoloni, 2009, pp. 67–74). Renunciation is active because the poet must genuinely withdraw the demand to command language. It is receptive because the measure of speaking can be received only from the word's prior giving and refusal. The poet's action consists in making himself answerable to the disclosure of language.

This is why Heidegger calls renunciation Saying and distinguishes it from ordinary statement. He suggests that renouncing, although not a statement, may still be a mode of Saying (Heidegger, 1959/1971, pp. 142–143). If the poem's ending is reduced to the universal proposition that words are necessary for things, the poet's experience is compressed into a linguistic theory available for subjective possession. The relation opened by the failure of naming would then close again in a univocal judgment.

Saying means showing (*zeigen*). The poem's final sentence is Saying because it does not explain renunciation from outside; it performs renunciation through its grammar and punctuation. The line after the colon both articulates the thing's dependence on the word and determines how the poet will henceforth treat what has not been granted a word. Renunciation becomes renunciation only in this act of Saying. The poet's position, the relation between word

and thing, and the limits of naming are shown together in the poem's ending. To say that renunciation speaks itself means that the poet cannot control its significance in advance from a position outside the saying. Only by actually uttering the line does the poet enter the linguistic region opened by renunciation (Heidegger, 1959/1971, pp. 147–152).

The poet's sadness now also acquires a new meaning. It concerns the jewel's disappearance, yet it also marks the loss of certainty about language. The poet must accept that the word can withhold itself and that a thing cannot be forcibly preserved apart from the word. Sadness becomes an affective attunement that allows him to undergo giving and withdrawal as a single structure. It does not culminate in despair. Although the poet cannot carry the jewel back into his own domain, he thereby experiences the word more deeply. The word's refusal is a withholding: it declines to deliver the name while preserving what is withheld, and in this refusal its normally concealed power of bestowal comes near (Heidegger, 1959/1971, pp. 146–151). Formerly the poet saw the word only in successfully named things; he now experiences the word itself in the absence of a name. Heidegger thus preserves the poem's loss and vulnerability while reinterpreting them as a receptivity to language (Nowell Smith, 2013, pp. 174–180).

The later reading consequently reverses the 1939 exclusion of renunciation without relinquishing the priority of linguistic withdrawal. Reconceived as self-denial, renunciation becomes a nonpropositional Saying that answers the refusal of the word. The word initiates the experience; the poet responds.

IV. LANGUAGE'S REFUSAL AND THE POET'S RENUNCIATION

Language's refusal and the poet's renunciation occupy two sides of the linguistic relation. The former names language's letting things appear without fully objectifying the process of showing. The latter names the poet's changed posture of naming: he withdraws the demand that language serve representational purposes. Together they form an asymmetrical claim–response structure (*Anspruch–Entsprechung*). The word's refusal both occasions the response and sets its measure. The poet cannot decide upon withdrawal in advance and then use it to force language to reveal itself, for that would reinstate the sovereignty he seeks to relinquish. Nor can he predetermine what an adequate response must say. He can only preserve the word's unavailability without seeking to overcome it. Refusal and renunciation correspond without becoming equivalent: linguistic refusal belongs to the

event of disclosure, whereas poetic renunciation is the posture of speech that answers this event.

The priority of language does not reduce the poet to pure passivity. Heidegger's proposition that "language speaks" (Heidegger, 1959/1971, p. 124) may seem to transfer agency wholesale to an abstract linguistic force, and Duranti (2023, pp. 296–302) rightly identifies the attendant risk of linguistic determinism. Yet if the poet were merely an instrument, he would have no need to learn renunciation and could bear no responsibility for the form of his response. Renunciation shows that human beings can comport themselves toward language in different ways: they can reduce words to information and tools, or they can listen to language's claim.

Heidegger accordingly understands speaking as listening. Speaking is first a hearing because human expression always receives its measure from an already opened field of significance (Heidegger, 1959/1971, pp. 123–125). The poet must discern what calls to be said and bring what is heard into concrete words. Meaning is not fabricated *ex nihilo* by the poet, yet without human articulation it does not enter an audible or readable form. Human speaking therefore performs an irreplaceable mediating function.

Sun (2022, pp. 37–41) describes this process as the way-making of Saying: soundless showing is brought into voiced human speech, while human beings transform Saying into determinate utterance through listening. Such transformation is not the mechanical transmission of ready-made content. In a concrete situation, the poet must choose rhythm, tone, and words, and must answer for the possibility that these choices may either conceal or open meaning. Responsive speech thus receives its measure from language while retaining a human judgment that language cannot exercise in the speaker's place. Here the poet's renunciation diverges from passive obedience: what he gives up is sovereignty over language, not the tasks of discernment, expression, and responsibility.

Poetic agency is therefore responsive agency. The priority of language does not cancel human responsibility; it supplies responsibility's condition. The poet does not create disclosure, but he must decide whether to close it through mastery and simplification or to sustain its openness through restrained speech. The shift from 1939 to the later reading can now be stated more precisely. Heidegger initially excludes renunciation to prevent the word's breakdown from being reduced to human lack. He later affirms renunciation to explain how human beings participate in language without becoming its origin. The word's refusal retains priority; the poet's renunciation gives human speaking a finite yet irreducible place.

V. CONCLUSION

Heidegger's movement from excluding renunciation in 1939 to recasting it as Saying supplements the event of language with a dimension of response. The refusal emphasized in 1939 shows that linguistic disclosure depends on language's resistance to complete availability. The later account of renunciation shows how the poet can withdraw the sovereign demand for names and answer this withdrawal through nonpropositional speech. Their correspondence neither restores sovereignty to the poet nor demotes the poet to a passive instrument. Human Saying is a responsive agency: it receives its measure from language while still requiring the speaker's attentive and situated articulation. Heidegger's later interpretation thereby grants the poet a finite yet irreducible role. The poet does not originate linguistic disclosure, but language does not enter voiced saying apart from human response. Saying occurs within this unequal relation: the word withholds itself, and the poet answers that withholding by renouncing mastery.

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