

**[This is a preprint version of a book review of Krzysztof Ziarek, *Language after Heidegger*, published in *Review of Metaphysics* 68:3 (2015): 684–686, available at**

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ZIAREK, Krzysztof. *Language after Heidegger*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. xvi + 243 pp. Cloth \$45.00—Ziarek’s *Language after Heidegger* is a valuable new contribution to the relatively limited scholarship on Heidegger’s thinking of language. While previous studies on the topic have tended to concentrate on *Being and Time* (1927) and the texts from the 1950s compiled in *On the Way to Language*, Ziarek’s work focuses on the relevant texts of the “middle” Heidegger of the 1930s and 1940s, some of which—for instance, volumes 71 and 74 of Heidegger’s *Gesamtausgabe*—have been published only in recent years. It thus casts new light on the development of Heidegger’s perspective on language during this period. Instead of looking simply at Heidegger’s account of language, Ziarek’s specific strategy is to flesh out the gradually deepening linguistic character of Heidegger’s thinking, the dynamic of which becomes increasingly attentive to and interlaced with that of concrete language in its materiality and historicity. It is this progressive coming to terms with the fundamentally language-embedded nature of the human receptivity to meaningfulness that, from the mid-1930s onwards, informs the famously performative and experimental nature of Heidegger’s later discourse. For the later Heidegger,

Ziarek emphasizes, words (*Worte*) as the essential linguistic elements no longer function as mere referential symbolic or signifying terms (*Wörter*) denoting determinate portions of reality (beings), but rather enact the process of the linguistic articulation of (meaningful) being as such. “Words” constitute the “preverbal” dimension of language that precedes reference and signification in the narrow sense and “by giving being to beings . . . makes room for signification and signs.” Heideggerian language thus has an essentially poietic, that is, constitutive and not merely expressive, function: “[L]anguage for Heidegger enacts thinking and does not simply determine or convey it.”

Accordingly, as its title indicates, the book is not simply or primarily a study of language *in* Heidegger, but also an attempt to formulate an outlook inspired by the later Heidegger’s preparatory suggestions, an approach to language *after* Heidegger. In spite of the clear kinship between Heidegger’s and Derrida’s explorations of the materiality, context-sensitivity, and differential structure of discourse, Ziarek insists that the post-Heideggerian look at language he is outlining must be distinguished from poststructuralist approaches, that is, ones that take their cue from Saussure’s analysis of signs. While ostensibly belonging within the compass of the so-called linguistic turn in twentieth-century thought, which “examines the way in which language constrains and influences what thought can conceive,” Heidegger’s approach, Ziarek argues, is distinguished by its emphatic break with the general anthropocentric and epistemological perspective of linguistic philosophy. Heidegger locates language not simply in human beings and their faculties, but in the event (*Ereignis*) of being (in the postmetaphysical

sense as “beyng,” *Seyn*) that reciprocally involves human receptivity to meaningfulness as well as a dynamic of meaning-constitution beyond human control.

The book is divided into four main chapters. Chapter one, “Event | Language,” lays the foundations for the study by examining the way in which Heidegger, since *Contributions to Philosophy*, comes to regard his question of being—now gathered around the title of “event,” *Ereignis*—as intrinsically linguistic: “[T]he event of being transpires as language, by coming to word.” Ziarek’s unfolding of the different connotations of *Ereignis* includes a highly salient discussion of the singularity, or, as Ziarek prefers it, the “one-time occurrence” (*Einmaligkeit*) of the event and its linguistic implications. Chapter two, “Words and Signs,” argues for Ziarek’s distinction between the Heideggerian and the post-Saussurean takes on language, emphasizing the distinction between signifying word-terms with relatively stable referents and the foregoing process of the “wording” or “coming to word” of meaningfulness. Drawing particularly on the texts assembled in volume 74 of the *Gesamtausgabe*, Ziarek discusses Heidegger’s notion of words as instances of “evental showing/disclosing” (*ereignishaftes Zeigen*) and studies the later Heidegger’s radicalized notion of the ontological difference, not as a relation between determinate relata, but as a process of differentiation, as the “taking-leave” (*Abschied*) of the event of being from its outcome, beings. Chapter three, “Poetry and the Poetic,” examines the poietic, that is, inventive, constructive, and productive, dimension of Heidegger’s linguistic thinking. It emphasizes the need to take into account the performativity and materiality of Heidegger’s discourse as a dynamic strategy for avoiding the

objectification of that which it is “about,” or rather, “issues from”—the event—into an ultimate referent or “transcendental signified.” Ziarek also illustrates the fruitfulness of applying the Heideggerian approach to readings of experimental poetic discourse with two examples from contemporary American poetry, Susan Howe and Myung Mi Kim. Finally, chapter four, entitled “Language after Metaphysics,” explores the ramifications of Heidegger’s “postmetaphysical” linguistic thinking, suggesting that the Heideggerian emphasis on a desubjectivized, “de-powered” or “impoverished” linguistic relationship to the event of being—the “critical shift . . . from the relations operating in terms of power to relations engaged in the manner of responsiveness”—contains rich intellectual possibilities even for political thought.

While Heidegger’s precise position within the context of twentieth-century philosophy of language and linguistic philosophy and his relationship to the heirs of structuralism in particular obviously remain a complex and multifaceted topic, *Language after Heidegger* makes an important case for the originality and the considerable innovative potential of the linguistic aspects of the Heideggerian heritage.—Jussi Backman, *University of Jyväskylä*