

The End of the Word

Some afterthoughts, in advance of its appearance, on my book *Giving Way*. (February 2019)

The end of the word may not yet be nigh, but there are signs abroad of the beginning of that end. Are we abandoning language? Surely not. What we see around us today must surely strike us as an apotheosis of language. Individual languages may be dying out, but language itself seems everywhere to be securing its dominion: in its subjection to code, and the demonstration of its legibility as code, the world is being comprehensively, and all-comprehendingly, languaged. As a result, the gap appears to be closing between language and things, in a secular actualisation, if anything is ever quite secular, of the Johannine *verbum caro factum est*, as Michel Serres has observed (Serres 2001, 78). But if everything can be language, nothing can be any more.

We think of language as one medium among others. But is language a medium? Isn't it better understood as a kind of body, a kind of situation, a kind of world, and we do not usually think of such things as the means of performing actions. The mediatizing of language may begin to disclose the fact that it is not, or has not been heretofore, much like a medium, that is, a way through which things may be done. But in a world constituted exclusively of media, mediation becomes immediacy.

If language has no essentially 'linguistic' features, if it is just a bundle of ways of behaving, a bundle that is all the time being retied, with different threads and different kinds of knot, what could it possibly mean for it to retire, essentially, or all at once? Why might it just not carry on doing what it has always done, namely blending and transforming? Yes, it can and certainly will. But it may transform in such a way as no longer to be continuous with what language once was and did. What that was may now be coming to an end.

What are we abandoning language for? Performativity. Gesture. Action. Code. And, above all, Discourse, that all-consuming word for the word at work in the world. All these are ways for language to perform operations, to do things in and on the world, to make things happen, or in fact to be the happening itself. Language is being taken up into the many things that may be done with words. It is being made over into medium, or media. We may see this as the beginning of the great dedistantiation, and unimpotentiation – the abolition of the word's abeyance, the annihilation of its distance and impotence. There will still be poetry when it is no longer true that poetry makes nothing happen, in fact there may well be for that reason more of the stuff than ever. But it will be the end of the particular predicament of inactuality that has occasionally been of interest to some poets. Word is being swallowed up in world, gone extinct in entirety.

This is to say that, when we have lost the word, or been lost to it, we will not have lost the resource of language, we will have put beyond use the indigence of this, the coldest of cold media.

Yet surely ‘in the beginning was the Word’? Surely words have been tied to power, have been power itself, from the very beginning? Of course, we do things with words, words have been entangled with power, and have been everywhere the means of exercising it. Perhaps the first thing that a helpless human infant learns is the power to demand, command and refuse, that is given to it, in both senses, through language. Power is exercised through language, and at the beginning of life is exercised only through it, and the idea that there could be such a power itself comes through language.

But this is magical thinking, the thought of magic, the thought that thinking could have magical power. And such a thought depends on the word, even as the word depends on it. We must read ‘In the beginning was the Word’ as ‘In the beginning is the power that the word gives to itself, through itself – the power, for example, to conceive the idea of “the beginning”.’ But this can never be the beginning, because the word can never be present at its own beginning. It will always have been there from the beginning, which means in some way there already, in principle, *in principio*, before beginning to be.

The apotheosis of the word as medium means the fulfilment, which must therefore mean the end, of the projects of magical thinking that have given rise to religion and the prospects of redemption and eternal life it programmes and propagates. Magic can only be magical if it doesn’t work, but it is just this inoperativity that is fading out.

What is the most remarkable, yet least remarked fact about the history of language? It is surely the difficulty that language has always had in saying what it itself is, that is, in coinciding with itself. This is the arbitrariness of language as such. Arbitrariness is not the celebrated fact that individual elements of the language have no necessity in themselves to take the forms that they do, since they depend only on the fact of their differentiation from each other within relational systems. The arbitrariness of language is a deeper and at the same time more absurd arbitrariness; it is the fact of the ungraspable, inarticulable, wholly unnecessary having-to-be, and having to be wholly unnecessary, of language. It is the word as flaw, anomaly, outlaw, prodigy and monstrous birth. The apophatic disposition sees divinity as beyond the power of language fully to articulate it: but one might perfectly well invert this, to say that the very notion of divinity is a side-effect of the essential ineffability of language itself, its power of being incapable ever of fully coinciding with what it indicates, of doing what it says and saying what it does. Divinity is not inaccessible to the word, it is the dissimulated form of the essential inaccessibility of the world to the word and the word to itself. There is nothing mystical in all this, even though it is the constitutive defect of language that is the source of all mysticism.

Being apart from the world, words could and perforce had to add to it. Propagating into the world, constituting more and more of the world, the word can no longer add anything of its dense unbeing to the world, can add nothing to the world except more of it. The worded world means the loss of the unworldly word, the loss of the word as unworld. The word is rescinding its alienation from the world, its power to say to the world, and necessity of saying, ‘I banish you, there is a world elsewhere’.

Distance is not a quality, to be identified with 'critical distance' or the capacity for resistance. Distance is a position, a condition, a predicament, a worldhood, the uncloseable distance from our birth and death at which we are put by our words for them.

So when we lose or leave behind the word, we will not lose a power, gaining every kind of power as we will. We will lose a liability, or link to a lack; we will lose a liability to loss, we will have given away our power of giving way. There will therefore be no cause for lament, since we are unlikely to experience the loss of the word as any kind of enfeebling. We will have lost, and may already have abandoned, the habit of mind, a habit allowed by language, that can see a loss of a weakness as anything but a gain in power. We will have lost the weakness with which once the word performe consorted.

So we will not feel the loss of the word; for the word, expanded into world, will have left behind the people of the word, and reseeded the world. We will notice nothing of the end of the word, for we will have been cured of the infirmity imparted to us by it.

We suppose ourselves to have moved away from a condition of actuality into one of virtuality. In fact, it is the virtual that will be deceased with the passing of the word into pure action. Language used to be a second nature, but that secondariness is fading out. The withdrawal I have started calling [abstition](#) is itself withdrawn as language becomes ever more universally constitutive.

References

Serres, Michel (2001). *Hominescence*. Paris: Le Pommier.