

Speaking Differently: Deconstruction/Meditative Thinking as the Heart of "the Faculty of Observing"

**Aloysius Joseph**  
**Duquesne University**

The sentence, "Language is language," leaves us to hover over an abyss as long as we endure what it says.

Martin Heidegger, *Language*

The perfect man employs his mind as a mirror; it grasps nothing; it refuses nothing; it receives but does not keep.

*Chuang Tzu*

### ***Introduction***

Aristotle, in Book I, Chapter 2, of his *Rhetoric* says, "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (Roberts, 1954, p. 24). This probable ("may be") definition of rhetoric is significant. First, it lends itself to be read in many ways, and second, it shows us that what is at the heart of epideictic rhetoric is probability and not certainty. In this paper I offer a meditative (thinking) reading of the phrase, "the faculty of observing" in conjunction with discerning the available means of persuasion as posited in this definition.<sup>1</sup> At the outset it can be stated that meditative thinking/deconstruction<sup>2</sup> is not aimed at specifying a technique to choose "the available means of persuasion." Rather it is that which describes the "essence" of observation. Hence, in this paper I also wish to show that the genuine rhetor is one "who dwells" as one would in meditative thinking.

### ***Observation as meditative thinking: "a letting be"***

From a Heideggerian perspective, the phrase, "the faculty of observing" has significant implications for meditative thinking/deconstruction. If as Cicero says, "Eloquence is wisdom spoken wisely," then observation facilitates the rhetor to speak wisely so as to be able to persuade and stir up a disposition amidst the audience. Heidegger (1953/1996) alludes to this in his phenomenal work, *Being and Time*, when he writes, "Publicness as the kind of being of the they not only has its attunedness, it uses mood and 'makes' it for itself. The speaker speaks to it and from it. He needs the understanding of the possibility of mood in order to arouse and direct it in the right way" (138-139). Hence, to be persuasive a rhetor needs first of all to observe. It could then be said that "observation" is the *condition upon which* choosing the appropriate means of persuasion rests. But we may ask, "Is this not common sense?" It reminds us of the English proverb, "Look before you leap." Yet what is to be borne in mind is that because the rational-scientific framework has permeated common sense so much,

it cannot be taken for granted that observing or looking is merely a commonsensical activity. The technological and commercial *Enframing* of this epoch has such a powerful grip over every aspect of human life that common sense has lost its place as conventional wisdom. Besides, in trying to make human life comfortable and highly efficient, technology has succeeded in creating a desensitized human world. Looking or observing loses its passion in such a world that prioritizes distant, dispassionate and objective observation.

Hence, from a rationalistic and technological perspective, observation or looking is detached seeing. The goal of detached seeing is to arrive at certain knowledge and truth. The observer through detached seeing abstracts the essential qualities of a thing in the effort to understand and interpret it. This leads to clear and valid knowledge. But from an existential-phenomenological perspective, such an approach is impoverished. First of all, such a disengaged (detached seeing) activity robs a thing of its concreteness and its embodiment. Second, this process of abstraction/detached seeing (however convincing and certain it is) is oblivious to the context which makes the thing what it is. These two aspects make observation as detached seeing, in the rational-scientific system, a barren and passionless activity.

But observation in a radical sense is *respect* for the phenomena. In his essay, "The Thing," Heidegger (1971b) points to this radical sense of observation which can be characterized as the "essence" of meditative thinking. He writes, "If we let the thing be present in this thinging from out of the worlding world, then we are thinking of the thing as thing" (p. 181). Observation as meditative thinking is radical because the rhetor lets the thing be thing in the way it shows itself -- in its concreteness ("thinging") and its situatedness ("worlding world"). But for the rhetor who affiliates with the rational-scientific tradition, an abstract, passionless and decontextualized observation has its payoffs. The persuasion that arises out of such an affiliation is commercially viable given the profit-oriented and competitive socio-cultural arena that every discipline (arts and sciences) has unwittingly bought into. Within such a structure, the skilful and persuasive speaker is one who possesses the skill to convince the listeners to concede to truth irrespective of its concreteness and situatedness. The monopoly over truth at which this approach arrives is gained through a process of elimination and exclusion such that the listeners are precluded from its multiple and genuine alternatives and possibilities. Through such exclusionary means the speaker and all those who subscribe to such a prescriptive approach to truth thereby become the sole owners of the truth by means of expropriation and exploitation. On the other hand, a rhetor (the one who observes with a passion) enables/facilitates/shows how we live and move in truth through inclusive and non-reductionistic ways. This is truly pedagogical and educative for it persuades by "bringing forth"; not because the speaker has a monopoly over truth, but because the listeners live and share in it

already. The work of the rhetor is to awaken them to what they already know. It is in this context that epideictic rhetoric is important. We have no new information introduced; rather, the quality of the phenomena is amplified.

From a Heideggerian perspective, observing takes on a different meaning as it is based on a radically different assumption. As Hoy (1993) writing on the hermeneutic turn in Heidegger points out:

Heidegger's strategy is different from the Cartesian strategy, which starts by assuming a basic ontological disconnection (e.g., between mental and physical substance) and then looks for instances of epistemological connection that cannot be doubted (e.g., the knowledge of the existence of a thinking subject). Heidegger's strategy is to see Dasein as already in the world, which suggests that what needs to be explained is not the connection, which is the basis, but the disconnection (p. 176).

The disconnection or the disruption is that which is appealing to the eye of the rhetor who observes by participating. Hence, observation as meditative thinking is to pay attention to the "disconnection" that shows itself in the activity of hovering over as long as we can endure it. To take this a step further, we could say that when the rhetor can endure or stay persistent with this unsettling experience, then the circularity of hermeneutics (through a persistent inhabitation of the phenomenon) gives way to an elliptical movement that is in "essence" elusive and indeterminate. Derrida (1973) calls our attention to this radical difference in what can be called a "project" of deconstruction. He makes an appropriate observation in this regard when he writes:

There is then, probably no choice to be made between two lines of thought; our task is rather to reflect on the circularity, which makes the one pass into the other indefinitely. And, by strictly repeating this *circle* in its own historical possibility, we allow the production of some *elliptical* change of site, within the difference involved in repetition; this displacement is no doubt deficient, but with a deficiency that is not yet, or is already no longer, absence, negativity, nonbeing, lack, silence. Neither matter nor form, it is nothing that any philosopheme, that is, any dialectic, however determinate, can capture. It is an ellipsis of both meaning and form; it is neither plenary speech nor perfectly circular. More and less, neither more nor less -- it is perhaps an entirely different question. (p. 128)

On the part of the rhetor who endures, the latter movement allows for a "re-cognition" of this elusive and disruptive/displacing nature of that which shows itself. In this sense, observation as meditative thinking/deconstruction is *respect* for the phenomena. In such a movement, we could contend with John D. Caputo (1987) that

the observer-participant rhetor is never in a privileged position or the sole owner in regard to what shows itself in meditative thinking/deconstruction. He observes:

In an a-lethic view, whatever shows itself, whatever comes forth, issues from hidden depths. We know we cannot touch bottom here, that we cannot squeeze what stirs here between our conceptual hands, cannot get it within our grip, cannot seize it round about. The mystery is self-withdrawing, self-sheltering. And that is what gives rise to respect. (p. 276)

Hence, in Heideggerian terms, observation could be seen as akin to letting go or "letting be," which is radical detachment or detached attachment. The genuine rhetor is one who cultivates a respectful disposition as regards the "faculty of observing" and "the available means of persuasion" vis-à-vis that which needs to be spoken about.

### ***Deconstruction/meditative thinking as "hovering over" and "enduring": the heart of observation***

The quality of enduring or staying persistent was already introduced in the previous section. I propose that it is this very quality that is at the heart of observation in the case of epideictic rhetoric. This will be clarified in the light of Derridean deconstruction.

The vulgar understanding that deconstruction is destruction or chaos is a misnomer. The "strategy" of deconstruction is not to replace or displace something with an alternative and a better other. Therefore, to think of deconstruction/meditative thinking as the new ground upon which one should start thinking or philosophizing is undoubtedly to make a grave mistake. What, then, is deconstruction/meditative thinking? Simply put, meditative thinking/deconstruction is radical phenomenology because while a phenomenological *epoche* is still within the realm of seeking for origins, meanings or foundations, radical phenomenology is an infinite deferral of meaning. Derrida points out this radical difference in a concise manner. He says, "Rather we would have to speak of an *epoche* of the epoch of meaning, of a-written-putting between brackets that suspends the epoch of meaning: the opposite of a phenomenological *epoche*, for this latter is carried out *in the name and sight of meaning*" (Derrida, 1978, p. 268). From a hermeneutic perspective, the latter is a dialectical strategy. But as John D. Caputo (1997) points out, deconstruction (and meditative thinking) is radically different. He says:

Derrida will not, in the manner of Hegel, look for some uplifting, dialectical reconciliation of the two in a higher third thing, a concrete universal, which contains the "truth" of the first two. Instead, he will look around -- in the text itself -- for some third thing which the distinction omits, some untruth, or barely true remnant, which falls

outside the famous distinction, which the truth of either separately or both together fails to capture, which is neither and both of the two. (p. 84)

"Looking around" for the remnant and keeping it in perspective without losing sight of it is observation as deconstruction/meditative thinking. This is precisely what "constitutes" the work/play of a rhetor as one who looks for the available means of persuasion. Such thinking/looking is inclusionary and non-reductionistic because the other is preserved in its radical otherness. In other words, from a Heideggerian perspective, we could say that "keeping it in perspective" is to let the thing be thing. Heidegger (1971a) refers to this event as Appropriation or *Ereignis*. He writes:

*The moving force in Showing of Saying is Owing.* It is what brings all present and absent beings each into their own, from where they show themselves in what they are, and where they abide according to their kind. This owing which brings them there, and which moves Saying as Showing in its showing we call Appropriation. It yields the opening of the clearing in which present beings can persist and from which absent beings can depart while keeping their persistence in the withdrawal. (p. 127)

In meditative thinking, the rhetor is called to yield/participate in "the opening of the clearing" that allows for the speaking/showing of what has been "re-discovered" in the event of appropriation.

From a Derridean perspective, this "*moving force*" is endless play (or infinite deferral of meaning). It is, thus, simultaneously pattern creating (presencing) and pattern disrupting (absencing), similar to the flow and flux of a river. Derrida (1978) in *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, observes, "Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence" (p. 292). In the context of epideictic rhetoric, we could say that the rhetor is called to participate in this endless play -- a hovering over, a witnessing, a *wu-wei* (non-doing)<sup>3</sup> -- which is indeed a great responsibility.

In the above sense, deconstruction/meditative thinking is a "decentering experience" that engages/disengages the rhetor in persistent playfulness that is similar to unknowing. Unknowing is an unsettling experience. To dwell playfully in unknowing is an uncanny (*Unheimlich*) experience. (This is very similar to the *Abgrund* [abyss] of Meister Eckhart, the Dominican mystic whose sermons and teachings have influenced the meditative thinking of Heidegger and, indirectly, Derrida's deconstruction. I cannot help hearing the word *Sunyata* [Absolute Nothingness] of Mahayana Buddhism). Dwelling, enduring, and persisting in unknowing is what stands in the neighborhood of meditative thinking/deconstruction.

It follows from this that the genuine rhetor (from the deconstructive/meditative thinking perspective) lets the uncanny be uncanny. However this is a difficult task because, to use an analogy, when one is used to living on the land for a long time (metaphysical certainties), the sea (Flux/Mystery/Groundless ground/Language) is dangerous, because there is only water and in water there is nothing on which to cling. But a *wu-wei* response would call for a different mode of being in water in which one would let go and cease from flapping one's arms frantically. From a Taoist perspective, swimming for a swimmer is not mere survival but the appropriate response to water. When the rhetor responds likewise, technique ceases to be technique and the speaking is transformed into an "effortless effort" which is perhaps what is at the heart of play. Heidegger (1971a) marks this moment when he traces the path to an experience of language, in his essay, *The Way to Language*. He observes, "It ceases to be a formula, and unexpectedly becomes a soundless echo which lets us hear something of the proper character of language" (p. 113). When technique ceases to be technique, the rhetor "re-cognizes" the unity-in-difference that was always already there in one's relatedness to Language/Flux/Groundless ground. The relatedness that one "re-cognizes" in this experience is not an arrival at an end product through an accumulation of efforts; it is always at-hand and transforms who we are. In another essay, *The Nature of Language*, Heidegger (1971a) points to the above experience. He writes:

To experience something means to attain it along the way, by going on a way. To undergo an experience with something means that this something, which we reach along the way in order to attain it, itself pertains to us, meets and makes its appeal to us, in that it transforms us into itself (pp. 73-74).

If the rhetor opened herself to the experience of "observation," she would be transformed. This transformation, which is like that of an ecstatic dancer (where it is difficult to distinguish the dancer from the dance) or a swimmer who is at one with the water, will give birth to and inscribe patterns of movements on this new "ground." In the case of the rhetor, her transformation is the path by which the available means of persuasion will show up/inscribe itself in the very activity of observing.

And so meditative thinking/deconstruction in "observation" is an indefinable moment because it eludes any formulaic description. Yet it is an experiential moment which happens in humility, respect and openness. Such a moment from a Heideggerian/Derridean perspective recognizes that the saying of Language is a mirroring of the flux and flow of Mystery and the play of presencing and absencing. So the rhetor who finds herself in attunement to the saying of Language/Tao/groundless ground is enabled to speak wisely and persuasively. Zimmerman (1993) in consonance with Heidegger, Mahayana Buddhism and a deep

ecologist Arne Naess points out that "Care" (*Sorge*) or genuine compassion (*Karuna*) (and what can be added here now is observation as meditative thinking) is an experience of "direct insight into the interconnectedness of things, insight that transforms the very structure of the one 'person' gifted with the insight" (p. 263). In other words, the transformation of the rhetor will be the region in which "the available means of persuasion" will show up.

### ***Conclusion***

Rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" is not merely an empirical activity. It does not consist only in sorting out the pros and cons of an argument in a calculating way. The rhetor as the one who observes is not a cogitating ego standing apart from the phenomenon that calls or claims her to respond rhetorically, but is one who always already is in intimate relatedness to the phenomenon that claims or calls. It is this relatedness, this finding oneself in such a disposition (attunement) that calls for observation. This disclosure impels the rhetor to respond. Observation as meditative thinking allows for this experience of inter-relatedness, an experience that constitutes the hinge, or the condition upon which the available means of persuasion shows up. For this a rhetor is called to "let things be" (*Gelassenheit*) so that she can demonstrate in the mode of a craftsperson/dancer/swimmer. The crux of the matter is that in all cases it is in the surrender and openness to the resources available that lets the thing be thing. This reminds me of a story that I read some time back:

There was once an art competition in New York and each student was given a cubic foot of plaster of Paris. The winner, a girl, looked at the cube and asked herself, "What does this cube want to be?" At that moment, it appeared to her, it did not want to be anything. She dropped it to the floor. After looking at the partly shattered cube she said, "I see what it wants to be now." (Keightley, 1986, p. 142)

Perhaps the appropriate question that a rhetor could ask in her observation is: "What does this want to be?" That which happens in the persistence or dwelling with the question is perhaps what "is" at the heart of the "art" of rhetoric. It is a quality of openness that lets the rhetor be an "open clearing" in which the available and appropriate means of persuasion will show up. From a rational-scientific perspective, the "faculty of observing" would mean a concentrated and a calculated effort to find out the *correct* means of persuasion. The correct means of persuasion may involve a sincere struggle to discover ethical and aesthetic correctness that is based on the observance of and concordance with laws of rhetoric. But it would fail to come to grips with the elusiveness that is disclosed in observation as meditative thinking/deconstruction.

Observation as deconstruction/meditative thinking is to endure and persist in unknowing and uncertainty. Just as water eludes our attempts to possess it by grasping, the paradox of observation as deconstruction/meditative thinking eludes our efforts to know through grasping/concentrating. Paradoxically, the very effort to cease to know by grasping/concentrating calls for a different sort of effort, perhaps an "effortless effort" that happens when the rhetor "re-spectfully" persists with unknowing. Unknowing and uncertainty is the very ethos of observing as meditative thinking/deconstruction. The attunement that characterizes this ethos is "re-spect" and humility. The excerpt from the story that follows is illustrative of the elusive and paradoxical quality of observing as meditative thinking/deconstruction and the attunement that is called for. Towards the end of the novel *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse (1951), the ferryman, Vasudeva could not tell Siddhartha the seeker about the "other thing." The ferryman tells Siddhartha:

"You have already learned from the river that it is good to strive onwards, to sink, to seek the depths. The rich and distinguished Siddhartha will become a rower; Siddhartha the learned Brahmin will become a ferryman. You have also learned this from the river. You will learn the other thing too."

After a long pause, Siddhartha said: "What other thing, Vasudeva?"

Vasudeva rose. "It has grown late," he said, "let us go to bed. I cannot tell you what the other thing is, my friend. You will find out, perhaps you already know. I am not a learned man; I do not know how to talk or think. I only know how to listen and be devout; otherwise I have learned nothing." (pp. 84-85)

### ***Footnotes***

<sup>1</sup> The reflections in this paper are based on the pedagogical wisdom offered by Zen Buddhism, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I have also taken the liberty to use meditative thinking (Heidegger) as synonymous to Derridean deconstruction and Eckhartian *Abgeschiedenheit* (detachment) and *Gelassenheit* (releasement or living without a why). This similarity does not preclude differences among the three thinkers.

<sup>3</sup> Non-doing or non-interference is not laziness, inertia, passivity, or mere avoidance of effort. From a Taoist perspective, it is the wisdom associated with the path of least



resistance, which is akin to the manner in which a river meanders following the course of least resistance.

### ***References***

Caputo, J. D., (1987) *Radical Hermeneutics, Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Caputo, J. D., (Ed.). (1997) *Deconstruction in a nutshell: A conversation with Jacques Derrida*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Derrida, J., (1973). *Speech and Phenomena*. Trans. David B. Allison, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

Derrida, J., (1978). *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Heidegger, M., (1971a). *On the Way to Language*. Trans. Peter D. Hertz, New York: Harper and Row Publishers.

Heidegger, M., (1971b). *Poetry, Language and Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper and Row Publishers.

Heidegger, M., (1953/1996). *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Hesse, H., (1951). *Siddhartha*. Trans. Hilda Rosner, New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation.

Hoy, D. C., (1993). Heidegger and the hermeneutic turn. In C. Guignon, (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (pp. 170-194). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Keightley, A. (1986). *Into everything a little Zen must fall*. London: Wisdom Publications.

Roberts, R., & Bywater, I., (Trans.). (1954). *The Rhetoric and Poetics of Aristotle*. New York: Random House Inc.

Zimmerman, M. E., (1993). Heidegger, Buddhism and deep Ecology. In C. Guignon, (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (pp. 240-269). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

