

## *Martin Heidegger, on the Hand and the Typewriter (1942-43)*

*Literature in a Postprint World*

Man himself acts [handelt] through the hand [Hand]; for the hand is, together with the word, the essential distinction of man. Only a being which, like man, "has" the word (μύθος, λόγος), can and must "have" "the hand." Through the hand occur both prayer and murder, greeting and thanks, oath and signal, and also the "work" of the hand, the "hand-work," and the tool. The handshake seals the covenant. The hand brings about the "work" of destruction. The hand exists as hand only where there is disclosure and concealment. No animal has a hand, and a hand never originates from a paw or a claw or talon. Even the hand of one in desperation (it least of all) is never a talon, with which a person clutches wildly. The hand sprang forth only out of the word and together with the word. Man does not "have" hands, but the hand holds the essence of man, because the word as the essential realm of the hand is the ground of the essence of man. The word as what is inscribed and what appears to the regard is the written word, i.e., script. And the word as script is handwriting.

It is not accidental that modern man writes "with" the typewriter and "dictates" [diktiert] (the same word as "poetize" [Dichten]) "into" a machine. This "history" of the kinds of writing is one of the main reasons for the increasing destruction of the word. The latter no longer comes and goes by means of the writing hand, the properly acting hand, but by means of the mechanical forces it releases. The typewriter tears writing from the essential realm of the hand, i.e., the realm of the word. The word itself turns into something "typed." Where typewriting, on the contrary, is only a transcription and serves to preserve the writing, or turns into print something already written, there it has a proper, though limited, significance. In the time of the first dominance of the typewriter, a letter written on this machine still stood for a breach of good manners. Today, a hand-written letter is an antiquated and undesired thing; it disturbs speed reading. Mechanical writing deprives the hand of its rank in the realm of the written word and degrades the word to a means of communication. In addition, mechanical writing provides this "advantage," that it conceals the handwriting and thereby the character. The typewriter makes everyone look the same....

Therefore when writing was withdrawn from the origin of its essence, i.e., from the hand, and was transferred to the machine, a transformation occurred in the relation of Being to man. It is of little importance for this transformation how many people actually use the typewriter and whether there are some who shun it. It is no accident that the invention of the printing press coincides with the inception of the modern period. The word-signs become type, and the writing stroke disappears. The type is "set," the set becomes "pressed." This mechanism of setting and pressing and "printing" is the preliminary form of the typewriter. In the typewriter we find the irruption of the mechanism in the realm of the word. The typewriter leads again to

the typesetting machine. The press becomes the rotary press. In rotation, the triumph of the machine comes to the fore. Indeed, at first, book printing and then machine type offer advantages and conveniences, and these then unwittingly steer preferences and needs to this kind of written communication. The typewriter veils the essence of writing and of the script. It withdraws from man the essential rank of the hand, without man's experiencing this withdrawal appropriately and recognizing that it has transformed the relation of Being to his essence.

The typewriter is a signless cloud, i.e., a withdrawing concealment in the midst of its very obtrusiveness, and through it the relation of Being to man is transformed. It is in fact signless, not showing itself as to its essence; perhaps that is why most of you, as is proven to me by your reaction, though well-intended, have not grasped what I have been trying to say.

I have not been presenting a disquisition on the typewriter itself, regarding which it could justifiably be asked what in the world that has to do with Parmenides. My theme was the modern relation (transformed by the typewriter) of the hand to writing, i.e., to the word, i.e., to the unconcealedness of Being. A meditation on unconcealedness and on Being does not merely have something to do with the didactic poem of Parmenides, it has everything to do with it. In the typewriter the machine appears, i.e., technology appears, in an almost quotidian and hence unnoticed and hence signless relation to writing, i.e., to the word, i.e., to the distinguishing essence of man. A more penetrating consideration would have to recognize here that the typewriter is not really a machine in the strict sense of machine technology, but is an "intermediate" thing, between a tool and a machine, a mechanism. Its production, however, is conditioned by machine technology.

This "machine," operated in the closest vicinity to the word, is in use; it imposes its own use. Even if we do not actually operate this machine, it demands that we regard it if only to renounce and avoid it. This situation is constantly repeated everywhere, in all relations of modern man to technology. Technology is entrenched in our history.

from *Parmenides* (1942-43), trans. Andre Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1992, 80-81 and 85-86.