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Heidegger on Poetry, Gods, Metaphysics and Technology

Heidegger begins his essay entitled "What are Poets For?" (*WAPF*) by quoting Hölderlin: ". . . and what are poets for in a destitute time?" noting that the "destitute time" of Hölderlin's elegy is our time, the time of the world's darkening, perhaps its darkest night, a night that began when the gods Herakles, Dionysos and Christ left the world, defined by the "default of God," the failure of God to arrive, so that "no god any longer gathers men and things unto himself . . . , and by such gathering disposes the world's history and man's sojourn in it" (*WAPF*: 91). Continuing:

> The era is so destitute that even its destitution is destitute: The time is destitute because it lacks the unconcealedness of the nature of pain, death and love. This destitution is itself destitute because the realm of being withdraws within which pain and death and love belong together. Concealedness exists inasmuch as the realm in which they belong together is the abyss of Being. But the song still remains which names the land over which it sings. What is the song? How far is a mortal capable of it? Whence does it sing? How far does it reach into the abyss? (*WAPF*: 97)

The song will be the song that the great poet sings when the poet has reached far enough into the abyss (abyss because we live in our destitute time without foundation or ground): the destitution of our destituteness consists in our unawareness of it, in the "forgetfulness" of Being. The song is what the great poet sings when the poet has learned that the song or saying does not come from his power of speech, her power over language, but is the gift of speech, of language, to the poet: speech sings the poet's song, saying speaks to and in the poet.

In almost all of the lectures translated into English under the title *On the Way to Language*, Heidegger explores the kinship between the poet and the thinker and their common dependence (in the sense just specified) on language. *Logos* calls both; in their valid responses to the call of *Logos*, the thinker utters Being and the poet names the Holy ("What is Metaphysics?" at *EB*: 360). According to Heidegger, it is language, words, speaking, and

naming that makes beings be there: the poet is one who, with the thinker, "has been brought face to face with the word's mystery, the be-thinging of the thing in the word" ("Words" in *OWTL*). The poet is the one who has been given the same responsibility of naming the Holy, the gods, after having learned through reaching the abyss (which is the way Being is concealed and unconcealed in a destitute time). This aspect of the poet's response to the discipline of her vocation is best explained in the discussion of the poem "Words" by Stefan George, a poem that ends with the line: "Where word breaks off no thing may be." As Heidegger notes, "Only the word lets the thing be as a thing" (*OWTL*: 148).

For Heidegger, naming (*Nennen*) is putting into words; it is Saying (*Sagen*), and Saying is Showing (*Zeigen*). Only after the great poet has arrived at the Silence beyond his "assurance that he will on demand be supplied with the name for that which he has posited as that which truly is," (*OWTL*: 146-147) "will the gathering of Saying in song" (*OWTL*: 148) that great poetry is, be spoken through him.

James Perotti has glossed this point in Heidegger:

> The poet, in order to name what is holy, must stand in a unique relation to Being, one in which Being discloses itself as holy. Such an experience of Being is withheld from the greater majority of men – but then the greater majority of men are forgetful of Being. Heidegger's relation to Hölderlin . . .is rooted in such . . .acknowledgment of the poet's gift. (Perotti 1974: 100)

Here it is clear that "gift" does not mean "talent."

According to Hölderlin's song, the holy is the place of the god, the creator who sustains life on earth. Earth and sky, the gods and mortals belong together. The holy is high above the earth and the god is higher, is highest. But there are messengers – "gods" – angels from the highest who bear tidings to those, poets, who are able to receive them. But the highest god has not given enough of himself to the poet for the poet to name him; the poet's proper response is a wordless song:

> To grasp him, our joy is scarcely large enough.
> Often we must keep silence; holy names are lacking. . .
> (Hölderlin, "Homecoming")

The poet's inability to name the god is not the poet's failure. It is the failure or "default" of the god. According to Heidegger, Hölderlin is the

pre-cursor of poets in our destitute time, pre-cursor in the sense that "no poets of this world era can overtake him . . .he arrives out of the future in such a way that the future is present only in the arrival of his words" (*WAPF*: 142). But one of the words that arrives to us in our destitute time from its future is that "the world's night is the holy night."

> To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods. . . . It is a necessary part of the poet's nature that, before he can be truly a poet in such an age, the time's destitution must have made the whole being and vocation of the poet a poetic question for him. Hence poets in a destitute time must especially gather in poetry the nature of poetry. (*WAPF*: 94)

What Heidegger proceeds to do in the essay "What Are Poets For?" is to give his reading of an occasional poem by Rilke, whose first two lines in English read:

> As Nature gives the other creatures over to
> the venture of their dim delight . . . .

According to Heidegger's reading, Rilke, a lesser poet than Hölderlin, one still enclosed in the world view of Western metaphysics as brought to its completion by Nietzsche, gathering in poetry the nature of poetry, effects a remarkable conversion or turn from within of the willful, manipulative, objectifying stance of Western science/technology/metaphysics to one of unselfish love in, to, and for those beings which have been ventured into being, by Being.

Heidegger fortifies his reading of Rilke's poem by drawing on the whole body of the poet's work to elucidate such crucial terms as "open," "the draft," "the parting," "Nature," "breath," and, of course, "Angel," though Heidegger says that we are not yet in a position to interpret the *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*, works he characterizes as Rilke's "valid" poetry. He also uses in his elucidation of Rilke's terms and ideas a number of letters, one of which I will quote, as it illustrates both the grounding of Rilke's work and the distance between Heidegger's and Rilke's viewpoints, however, close they are in other ways. Rilke wrote in a letter of 1925:

> To our grandparents, a "house," a "well," a familiar steeple, even their own clothes, their cloak *still* meant infinitely more, were infinitely more intimate - almost

> everything a vessel in which they found something human already there, and added to its human store. Now there are intruding, from America, empty indifferent things, sham things, *dummies of life* . . .A house, as the Americans understand it, an American apple or a winestock from over there, have *nothing* in common with the house, the fruit, the grape into which the hope and thoughtfulness of our forefathers had entered. . . . (*WAPF*: 113)

Heidegger comments:

> Yet this Americanism is itself nothing but the concentrated rebound of the willed nature of modern Europe upon a Europe for which, to be sure, in the completion of metaphysics by Nietzche, there were thought out in advance at least some areas of the essential quesitonability of a world where Being begins to rule as the will to will. It is not that Americanism first surrounds us moderns with its menace; the menace of the unexperienced nature of technology surrounded even our forefathers and their things. Rilke's reflection is pertinent not because it attempts still to salvage the thingness of things. Indeed still earlier – on March 1, 1912 – Rilke writes from *Duino*: "The world draws into itself; for things, too, do the same in their turn, by shifting their existence more and more over into the vibrations of money, and developing there for themselves a kind of spirituality, which even now already surpasses their palpable reality. In the age with which I am dealing [Rilke is referring to the fourteenth century] money was still gold, still metal, a beautiful thing, the handsomest of all." (*WAPF*: 113-114)

In his poem Rilke sees all the non-human beings – ventured by Being – placed at risk in the Open, which stands as object over against "us" (technological humans). Yet "we" are ventured by Being too, and "we" are more adventurous and eager to venture than creatures in dim delight, more daring by a breath – and Heidegger, though he waits until the last of his discussion to reveal that this "more daring by a breath" refers to the poet's spirit-empowered speech or song, does interpret this to be a "poeting" giving of form to what is poetic about poetry, the power to receive the life-giving word.

So instead of leaving us caught in the Cartesian, technological-human orientation of will to power dominating the realm of beings from which the knower-dominator is separated, through willing more, through a more ventureful and dangerous willing that is purified of the willful, manipulative "framing" attitude, the realm of beings is internalized into the imaginative space of the poem. "We" are more vulnerable than the nonhuman beings, and by affirming and venturing our vulnerability we can reach a kind of wholeness.

Rilke is able to accomplish this by incorporating both death and mortality – which have been banished (or forgotten) from our technology (metaphysics) dominated world – into a *rounded* inner vision. If Rilke's vision of Being is deficient, still framed in accordance with Western metaphysical concepts of the Whole and Nietzschean Will, at least it attains a kind of "second best" representation. Of course, as Heidegger reminds us, Being is not an object, and is certainly not a non-object, but for Rilke is a sphere which is brought together from both sides, the inner and the outer, by a presiding presence, an Angel:

> This being is drawn into the pure draft by one side and the other of the globe of Being. This being, for whom borderlines and differences . . .hardly exist any longer, is the being who governs the unheard of center of the widest orbit and causes it to appear. This being, in Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, is the Angel . . ., that creature in whom the transmutation of the visible into the invisible, which we achieve, seems already accomplished. The Angel of the Elegies is that being that assures the recognition of a higher order of reality in the invisible. (*WAPF*: 134)

In fact, Heidegger assures us:

> Only a more primal elucidation of the nature of subjectiveness will serve to show how, within the completion of modern metaphysics, there belongs to the Being of beings a relation to such a being, how the creature which is Rilke's Angel, despite all difference in content is *metaphysically the same* as the figure of Nietzsche's Zarathustra. (*WAPF*: 134)

Without commenting on this last pregnant remark, a remark that opens some doors to Heidegger's reading of what he calls "the

completion of modern metaphysics," and overcoming of or deconstruction of metaphysics, I will note the significance of his reading of Rilke's poem as a sort of turn or conversion from within "completed modern metaphysics" by a gathering "in poetry of the nature of poetry," a conversion that moves from the visible, framed and objectified "beings" of "science"/technology/metaphysics to the purified sacred inner space of the poem, established by the saying that speaks in the silence the poet has reached, who has ventured far into the abyss of her language's use.

Rilke accomplished, or was given, a conversion from within which amounts to a deconstruction of his culture's habitual world-view. But, according to Heidegger, he remained within that habitual world, as we all do. There was, there is, no place else to go, except the future, and, contrary to what readers of *Being and Time* may have thought, we do not make the future. It must come to us, and the only way it can come to us in our destitute time is by the messages it sends through the great poet Hölderlin or others like him. Still, the poetic saying of a Rilke does help to free us from the stranglehold of the objectifying-manipulative framing of nature that turns both human and nonhuman beings into a standing reserve of "things." The poet does mediate between the gods and us. We do not write or talk or see as we did before Heidegger taught us to read Rilke or Nietzsche in the light of Hölderlin.

There has sometimes been talk among writers about whether there is any essential difference between prose and poetry. There are certainly examples of "conversion from within" or "turning" that occur in writings that we would not call verse, written by writers whom we would not ordinarily call poets. Take as an instance the famous paper by John Wisdom which he called "Gods." Wisdom began from the point of view of mid-century Anglo-Saxon empiricism with its emphasis on verification and verifiability. "What could we observe about a garden that would tell us whether a gardener whom we have never been able to discover at work really tends it after all?" The believer in the invisible gardener cites several things. The disbeliever is able to explain them away, and cites disproofs. The disputants remain unconvinced. The believer continues to profess belief in the invisible gardener; the disbeliever continues to disbelieve. Toward the end of the paper Wisdom quotes Wordsworth's "Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey," and admits they are powerful, but suggests that their appeal to us is that some parent figure is there secretly watching over us. But in one of the sudden shifts–or turns–that made his writings often so educative for his readers, Wisdom suddenly is found writing:

> Many have tried to find ways of salvation. The reports they bring back are often incomplete and apt to mislead even when they are not in words but in music or paint. But they are by no means useless; and not the worst of them are those which speak of oneness with God. But in so far as we become one with Him He becomes one with us . . . . This love, I suppose, is not benevolence but something that comes of the oneness with one another of which Christ spoke. . . . And what is oneness without otherness? (Wisdom 1944: 214)

More than a half-century after these words and this paper were written by Wisdom, some Anglo-empiricists, for example, Richard Swinburne, are still looking for traces, or tracks, of the gardener, for instance, something that might violate or go beyond the laws of nature: a miracle. But it should be a well-attested miracle.

It would be instructive to demythologize what Heidegger says about what the poet does, by translating it into the language that R.G. Collingwood used in *The Principles of Art* to tell us what happens in creating, or appreciating ("recreating") a work of art. According to Collingwood, the poet, the painter, the musician, the dancer bring to consciousness through imaginative expression aspects of our experience of which we were not conscious. Often we are not conscious of them because they are painful, complex, or in some ways threatening. Often we are not conscious of them because we are "forgetful," our sensitivities are dulled. Brought to consciousness, they inform, enliven, open, they may even shatter, the frames through which we daily live and die. I do not think there would be much difference between the significance of what the poet does as read by Collingwood and what Heidegger has said. Still, Heidegger's words and works show us more powerfully that every interpretive frame is at risk and ultimately can be and must be shattered by a poet's turning. And though Wisdom and Collingwood did not write in verse, I take it that when the "conversion from within" happens, poetry does too. Or, rather, the conversion is poetry.

One of the many noteworthy things Heidegger says in "What are Poets For" is the observation that, with the dawn of Cartesian rationalism, with a strict line drawn between objectified "nature" and observing consciousness, Pascal insisted on the greater profundity of "reasons of the heart." Many have insisted since that time that this split must be overcome. Where the split is between "technological" or calculating reason (as Paul Tillich called it) and the "reasons of the heart" (after Pascal often reduced

to instinct, prejudice or reactionary custom), there is the modern predicament that so repelled Heidegger. Every attempt to patch the two halves of Rilke's sphere together didn't succeed, deconstructed itself, as Kant deconstructed the world view of Newtonian physics when he tried to create a synthesis between it and Puritan morality. Heidegger's reading of Western metaphysics, though exaggerating the destitution of our destitute time, is helpful in showing that post-Socratic philosophical enterprises have always, or almost always, used the will to truth as a mask for the will to power. This was no doubt true of Socratic and pre-Socratic philosophy, and it is true of the later Heidegger's quest to go beyond the will to power by overcoming metaphysics.

But according to Heidegger, this could not have been and cannot be helped. (Interestingly, Sartre is another philosopher who attempted to overcome metaphysics, or ideology, by leaving *all* of his major works unfinished.) For Heidegger, if truth involves the unconcealedness of Being, it also inevitably involves concealedness. And given his vaunted overcoming of metaphysics, Heidegger insisted that "our" metaphysics exists in every department of the University, if not with the true thinkers (including Heidegger) and poets (Hölderlin).

Heidegger has frequently been portrayed as one who would reject technology. We know from all his later writings that this is not true. Had he really hoped that National Socialism would come to some satisfactory resolution of the issues raised by "the Encounter between global technology and modern man?" (*IM*: 199). That is not what he said. He came to see modern man increasing technological framing of the earth and all beings as destiny, as our fate. There is some truth in this idea of destiny or fate, though it was surely a mistaken inference if Heidegger thought that turning the Holocaust victims into a "standing reserve" of human smoke and ashes was really only taking to an extreme procedures already used in mechanized agriculture.

Perhaps Heidegger's greatest insight is that every technology contains a metaphysics, and the sooner we make a technology's metaphysics explicit, ordinarily the better. Can we doubt this when we consider the mindless technologies of learning, such as "learning at a distance," that are being hawked today? For a long time we have had learning at a distance: it was called *books!* Fortunately, we can console ourselves with another of Heidegger's insights: that every metaphysics and every technology finally deconstructs itself[1]. William Faulkner, one of the destitute time's best poets, spoke to this in similar but significantly changed words about why "man" will survive, even after the last technological ding-dong of doom. (Compare the Nobel Prize acceptance speech with the old general's confession of faith

in *A Fable.*) But a technology may deconstruct itself like the expelled demon of a gospel story and leave its metaphysical shell intact and inviting. Or a technological demon may have been relatively benign if it had not been metaphysically or technologically yoked to the seven new demons it has invited into its house. Maybe the demons could fend for themselves if we would truly learn to exorcize their bad habitats. But this is what Heidegger means by overcoming metaphysics. For if it is Heidegger's insight that every technology contains metaphysics, it also provides the space for poems, or a poem. And Heidegger was certainly correct: many or most of the best modern or postmodern poets have in many of their greatest poems expressed or attempted to express what it is that is poetry. These have not been "how to" works, like those on the art of poetry or rhyme written by Horace or Karl Shapiro. They have been born of meditation involving what poetry is, how it happens, and what poetry and poets are for. One need think only of Paul Celan, Czeslaw Milosz or Donald Davie or of Geoffrey Hill.

Note

1. Every technology deconstructs itself, most often by creating needs it cannot satisfy. Every metaphysic deconstructs itself by attributing reality or existence to things whose reality or existence it has already ruled out, or by ruling out things whose reality or existence it has already used in its constructions (for example, Wittgenstein's ladder).

References and their Abbreviations

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