

ESSAY ONE

Poetic Art in the World

“Who the painter really is, and who his model is, that woman in blue, posing but reserving something for herself: these are unknowable, in the painting as they would be in life. All we can know is that Vermeer saw these persons in this way. The idea spoke to Proust, who insisted that an author’s true self is revealed only in his books, and whose novel dramatizes the gap between individuals. Artworks show their maker by manifesting the unique way the world appears to that one person. Without art this difference ‘would remain the secret of every individual.’ Vermeer’s secret is that he unlocks everyone’s secret – in the all-encompassing but inexpressibly individual ‘how’ of our perception of the world.”¹

J. L. KOERNER, 2019

“All art is in essence poetry.”²

M. HEIDEGGER, 1956

We begin with an instance of what may broadly be called a phenomenological reading of a concrete instance of a philosophical interpretation of a literary artwork, Martin Heidegger’s (1889-1976) reading of one of the many poems of Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843). The point of this description is

to exhibit a basic assumption behind a particular reading, which I want to argue is central to the nature of any major literary artwork and which has strong ethical implications. Since however Heidegger's reading of the artwork at issue here does not involve sufficient detail, I go on to provide a fuller description by situating Heidegger's analysis of the essence of poetry in the broader context of his analysis of the nature of the artwork.³

I then take up the issue of evaluating Heidegger's theory of the artwork with a view to deciding just where these views require reconstruction. Criticisms must also be taken into account.

In concluding I suggest that the consequences of Heidegger's account for the task of providing a positive description of the nature of some poetic artworks is to call attention to the nature of putative literary truths and to several of their ethical implications.

1. The Witnesses of Poetry

Martin Heidegger's many readings of the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin have not gone unnoticed. Given the extent of the secondary literature, this observation is an understatement. The highly individual interpretations Heidegger has indulged in, however, have been seen as only a little less disconcerting than the peculiar discourse in which Heidegger has presented them.⁴ What distinguishes for example the first of his 1936 essays on "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry" (HEP) is the extent of the unusual linguistic experimentation Heidegger explores in his persistent concern with thinking what he calls the essence of artworks.⁵

After *Sein und Zeit* appeared in 1927, Heidegger attempted to articulate what he called the phenomenon of the human being as a radical openness to being. Persons, he claimed, are to be properly characterized by their capacity to "witness" to their inwardness,

to their capacity for transcendence. Such witness can take many forms. And one of these forms is the creation through art of a world which brings into form the consciousness of temporal order and hence of history itself. "All art," Heidegger writes in *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* and cited as an epigraph above, "is in essence poetry."

The interpretations of Hölderlin unwind from a central principle implicit in Heidegger's thought since the emergence of the modern hermeneutic problem during the years that *Sein und Zeit* was taking form.⁶ In an important exchange of correspondence with Heidegger which Emil Staiger published in 1951 under the title *Zu einem Vers von Mörrike*, a basic interpretive principle is formulated. The interpreter is to meditate on the work in such a way that what has remained concealed might now be articulated linguistically – it might now, Heidegger would say, come to pass in language. More simply, the interpreter is to articulate what still remains unsaid in the text.

This interpretive principle indicates that part of the importance of Heidegger's writings on Hölderlin is his early attempt to formulate a meditation upon certain capacities of language. Behind all the obscurity of an oracular style, we find an important initial crystallization of Heidegger's understanding of the relationship between language and being.⁷

The question Heidegger asks in his *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (EHD) is "what is the essence of poetry and of the poet?"⁸ He understands by "essence" not, as standardly today, the basic nature of a thing,⁸ but what he first calls the "essential nature" (*das wesentliche Wesen*) and later specifies as the "historical essence" (*geschichtliches Wesen*) (290).

This gloss however remains obscure. Although it might seem that the essence of poetry could be isolated only through a comparative study of the greatest possible diversity among poems and

poets, Heidegger wants to claim that such a set of common features, even if it could be clearly formulated (which for him is highly problematic), would never amount to what he calls “the essential nature” (271).

This is to be found rather by examining the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin, because his poetry “was borne on by the poet’s vocation to write expressly of the essence of poetry” (274). Hölderlin’s poetry forces a decision on our part as to whether or not we are going to take poetry seriously. For Heidegger, Hölderlin is the poet’s poet because his work is devoted both to the nature of poetry and to what Heidegger calls the realm between gods and men where “it is decided (*entscheidet es sich*) who man is and where he is settling” (28989).

Heidegger’s examination of Hölderlin’s poetry is, he concludes, not ideal; but at least it attempts to reflect on Hölderlin’s own thoughts about poetry, which Heidegger formulates in five statements which he thinks can show just what we are to understand as the essential essence of poetry:⁹

1. *Dichten: Dies unschuldigste aller Geschäfte (III, 377).*
2. *Darum ist der Güter Gefährlichstes, die Sprache dem Menschen gegeben . . . damit er zeuge, was er sei . . . (IV, 246).*
3. *Viel hat erfahren der Mensch. Der Himmlischen viele genannt, Und Hören können voreinander (IV, 343).*
4. *Was bleibt aber, stiften die Dichter (IV, 63).*
5. *Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch wohnet Der Mensch auf dieser Erde (VI, 5).*

What poetry essentially is, Heidegger believes on the bases of these texts, can be grasped by considering the two “integral laws” which poetry, “as the act of establishing being” (*Stiftung des Seins*), is subject to (287).

The first law we might call “the linguistic law.” It holds that poetic language which names the gods acquires its power of naming only when the gods first bring language to human beings. They do so by speaking from antiquity through signs (*Winke*) to which the manifestations of being are bound and which the poet boldly presents as a glimpse (*Erschaute*) of what is not yet fulfilled (287).

The second law we might call “the intersubjective law.” It holds that poetic language is only the interpretation of the “voice of the people,” Hölderlin’s phrase for the “holy sayings which are a reminder of the Highest.” These are the sayings in which a people remembers that it belongs to the totality of all that exists (144). This voice requires interpretation because what is true in these sayings is not evident. These two “laws” then set the framework for Heidegger’s inquiry.

The essential nature of poetry, however, is not only linguistic and intersubjective; it is also historical. Hölderlin understands the poet as someone who has been cast out (*ein Hinausgeworfener*) to stand between the gods and men at a special time. This time is a time of need because it is burdened with the consequences of a double absence, the nomore of the gods who have fled and the notyet of the gods who are to come.

Here, Hölderlin’s notion anticipates Nietzsche’s (1844-1900) eschatological concerns, which Heidegger thinks must still be ours.¹⁰ The essential nature of poetry “is in the highest degree historical, because it anticipates a historical time . . .” (289-90).

2. What Poetry Is Said to Be

On the model of Heidegger’s own interpretive practice, I want to select several ideas from this first and strongly representative essay of Heidegger’s many essays on Hölderlin as a way of trying

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to clarify his notion of the essential nature of poetry. Here then are five central statements from that essay, and an explication in Heidegger's own terms of the essence of these notions.

1. The essence of poetry must be understood through the essence of language.
2. Poetry is the actualization of language in conversation.
3. Poetry is "the inaugural naming of the gods and the essence of things" (282).
4. Poetry "is itself essentially inauguration - that is to say: an act of firm foundation" (286).
5. Poetry is Dwelling.

The essence of poetry, Heidegger asserts, must be understood through the essence of language. Language, Hölderlin writes, has been given to humankind that human beings might testify who they are (IV, 246). Human beings must, that is, offer in their testimony a warrant for the truth of what they declare. And they must testify specifically "that [they] belong to the earth" (274). Note that the idea here that humankind is part of what Hölderlin calls inwardness is similar to Heidegger's notion in his 1935 *Einführung in die Metaphysik* of the primordial discord which is manifest (*offenbar*) in *Dasein*.

Language is not a possession. It is not just a means for communication. Rather, language is something which alone "affords the very possibility of standing in the openness of what exists" (276). Hölderlin warns that such a reality is the most dangerous of possessions, for through language human beings run the risk of losing their relation to what exists, because language not only clarifies; it also confuses. Language can obscure the difference between what is essential and what is not.

Poetry, Heidegger goes on to suggest, is the actualization of language in conversation. Conversation, however, is not just a formal series of speech acts, but “the act of speaking with others about something” (277). In such a conversation, both “the ability to speak and the ability to hear are equally fundamental” (287).

The unity of such a conversation is in a word’s manifestation of what two persons agree upon. The individuality of a conversation lies in the manifestation of what persists and is present in the conversation. In turn, the persistent and the permanent, Heidegger claims, ultimately depend on “the moment when time opens out and extends,” that is, in a notion dear to Augustine, when the future and the past appear in the present (278-79).

A third idea we may quote directly. Poetry, says Heidegger, is “the inaugural naming of the gods and of the essence of things” (282). For the conversation humanity most basically pursues is this naming of the gods and the essence of things, what Heidegger calls “the transmutation of the world into words” (279).

The words which name the gods are always a response (*Antwort*) to words which the gods have addressed to men. Such a response arises from a poetic destiny. This sphere moreover is that of a decision “as to whether we are to yield ourselves to the gods or withhold ourselves from them” (280). A person enters this sphere insofar as any response at all must be dependent on “the process by which the gods bring our own being into language” (279).

Heidegger now tries to elucidate the process he believes he has uncovered in the relation between humankind and language. Poetry “is itself essentially inauguration, that is, an act of firm foundation” (286). This notion will remain vague until, in his 1939-1940 essay on Hölderlin, titled “*Wie wenn am Feiertage . . .*», Heidegger attempts to delineate the essence of poetry as the origin of being as truth. The later analysis is aimed at clarifying the temporal and thus

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historical quality of poetry's relation to language insofar as the initial appearance of truth is viewed as the approach of the future into the present through the past.

Here Heidegger says that poetry establishes what is permanent by means of language and in language. "The permanent" means what makes the transitory as such possible and thus "supports and dominates the entirety of what is" (281). "Inauguration" means the manifestation of being, which in turn is equated with naming, the poet's speaking of the essential words which make things manifest as what they are. Inauguration is a free act of giving, of creating.

Such an establishing is the condition for anything to be known as existent. Accordingly, inauguration is "the firm basis of human existence on its foundation" (282). Or, as Heidegger tries to put the matter more generally, "in poetry. . . human beings are gathered up (*gesammelt*) in the foundation of their existence" (286).

A final idea Heidegger propounds here is the notion that poetry is dwelling. The notion of dwelling is barely elaborated in *HWD*, although fifteen years later in his August lecture of 1951 entitled "*Bauen Wohnen Denken*," Heidegger returns to this subject.¹⁰ In this essay he writes, "Existence is poetical insofar as it is inaugurated." "Thus existence is not a recompense but a gift (*Geschenk*)" (282-83).

In this light, poetry can be seen as something more than the expression of a culture, for in inaugurating the existence of humanity, poetry is "the foundation which supports history" (283). Standing in this realm of founded existence is to the poet, the one "who has been cast out . . . between gods and men" (288). In the two 1943 essays on Hölderlin's poetry, "*Heimkunft/An die Verwandten*" and "*Andenken*," Heidegger clarifies the notion of what stands between both gods and human beings as the difference between being and beings, what he calls the ontological difference.¹¹

3. The Incompleteness of the Understanding of Poetry

Now this understanding of poetry in five of Hölderlin's sayings remains incomplete, says Heidegger, unless we comprehend the essence of poetry. We can do so by combining the two apparently contradictory statements that poetry is "the most innocent of occupations" and that language is man's "most dangerous possession."¹²

The danger of poetry lies in its proximity to the divine. "The poet," Heidegger says after Hölderlin, "is exposed to divine lightning" (284). It is the poet's duty, as Hölderlin writes in "*Wie wenn am Feiertage*," to grasp in his own hand the very gift of the gods whose brightness seems in the end to drive the poet into the dark night of madness. Hölderlin himself went mad.

This aspect of poetry Heidegger takes as the precariousness of any manifestation of being. Ultimately the poetic awareness of the ontological in everything introduces a radical tension into the poet's life between the ontic, which must be accepted and yet cannot be satisfying, and the ontological, which seems to demand everything or nothing. And this is the fatal tension that plagues Hölderlin in his final hymns before madness ensues.

Still, the writing of poetry seems to be harmless, ineffectual, and lacking in seriousness. Hence, the poet as such is protected against everyday life. Poetry is innocent in its apparent irrelevance.

For Heidegger, however, the essential nature of poetry is far from harmless, ineffectual, and frivolous. That essential nature is linguistic, intersubjective, and historical. Moreover the essential nature of poetry is revealed in language and actualized in conversation. It is a naming of the gods, an articulating of the essence of things, an act which inaugurates existence, and a way of dwelling on the earth.

It needs saying that almost all of this seems confusing for any philosopher who may be considering Heidegger's attempt to find

the essence of art in the meaning of poetry. Clearly, Heidegger's own language is confusing. Yet his point is simple although controversial: that the world of language is a world both in some measure independent of mind and yet much more than a set of objects only; it is a world where everything that matters, fundamentally, appears to remain beyond the reach of words in silence.

Heidegger is trying to find a way of indicating if not expressing what remains in silence. He does not ask whether such a wordless dimension exists; rather, he takes for granted the difference between everything that is, and what he thinks of as that which lets things be what they are. Words themselves are part and parcel of what is. His question, therefore, is whether or not words are also part and parcel of what lets things be what they are.

Heidegger's assumptions here underlie the fact that his interpretations of both poets and philosophers are not characteristically concerned with what is usually meant by objectivity. Rather, they are concerned with how we are to understand what thinking about such wordless realities could ever come to. In these early attempts, however, Heidegger's success is questionable.

One problem is that just as "*Dasein*" in *Sein und Zeit* was considered to be a selfauthenticating process with no norm for its truth, so now it would appear in his writings on Hölderlin that poetry is also selfcertifying. More consequential is the realization that Heidegger's understanding of poetry may well escape the error of subordinating the ways in which beings become manifest to thinking, only in the end to subject them to speaking. What ultimately may seem of most interest in the Hölderlin writings, however, is the clear indication of Heidegger's later problematic, the problem of how to think of truth in nonsubjective terms.

4. Non-Subjective Truths

It was already clear in *Einführung in die Metaphysik* that Heidegger had moved definitively beyond the contours mapped so painstakingly in *Sein und Zeit*. “*Dasein*” in its finite, temporal, and ecstatic character preoccupied his reflection. Here in the Hölderlin essays, the primacy has shifted from where being is manifest to being itself. “*Dasein*” was an expression designed to transcend the subjectobject polarity that had initially provoked much of Heidegger’s concern for hermeneutics. In these essays, however, it becomes a way of talking about where being allows individual entities to be manifest.

Heidegger had already argued that philosophy had lost its Greek inspiration and that the history of Western metaphysics had fallen, through its preoccupation with things, into a forgetfulness of being itself. *Sein* had been mis-constructed as *Seiende*. The new task for philosophy Heidegger thought he understood clearly. “The misunderstanding and misuse of thought,” he wrote in *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, “can be overcome only by a thought that is genuine and original, and nothing else . . .»¹³ His first essay on Hölderlin is one attempt to pursue this kind of thinking.

Persons, we have seen earlier, are now taken as entities who must affirm their belonging to the earth in all its conflict and opposition, its unity in opposition. This affirmation is always a work of both creation and destruction that is possible in turn only as a work of free decision. Freedom in this realm means grasping what is necessary and taking upon oneself “the supreme obligation,” as Heidegger understands the matter, to bear witness to the ontological fact that as a person one belongs to all that exists. Such a witness must be a work of language, and since language is historical, man’s freedom is actualized as history through language.

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But if language has “the task of making manifest in its work what is and preserving it as such” (295), something in turn is already manifest to language and through language to human beings. Insofar as this something is manifest as existent, it “afflicts and enflames human beings in their existence;” insofar as this something is manifest as nonexistent, it “deceives and disappoints” (275). The point of Heidegger’s remark, therefore, is that only through language can human beings stand in the openness of what is.

What, however, is manifest? Heidegger first answers: a unity and a singleness. When time opens out, then what persists and is present in the mutuality of our conversation with one another begins to shine and thus brings to pass the appearance of permanence as perpetuity (27879). “Only after ‘ravenous time’ has been riven into present, past, and future does this possibility arise of agreeing on something permanent” (279).

Heidegger’s thinking at this point suddenly shifts its attention to the manifesting itself. Since the passage is pivotal for understanding Heidegger’s later thinking, I quote at some length his own words:

“ . . . die Gegenwart der Götter und das Erscheinen der Welt sind nicht erst eine Folge des Geschehnisses der Sprache, sondern sie sind damit gleichzeitig. Und das so sehr, daß im Nennen der Götter und im Wort-Werden der Welt gerade das eigentliche Gespräch besteht, das wir selbst sind. Aber die Götter können nur darin ins Wort kommen, wenn sie selbst uns ansprechen und unter ihren Anspruch stellen. Das Wort, das die Götter nennt, ist immer Antwort auf solchen Anspruch. Dieses Antwort entspringt jeweils der Verantwortung eines Schicksals. Indem die Götter unser Dasein zur Sprache bringen, rücken wir erst ein in den Bereich der Entscheidung darüber, ob wir uns den Göttern zusagen oder ob wir uns ihnen versagen .”¹⁴

What appears to be asserted here initially is the simultaneity of what is manifest to language and what language manifests. Language,

that is, not only manifests the presence of the gods and the appearance of the world; language also is that milieu where something already is manifest.

This first assertion is immediately qualified by a second. What is manifest to language has a priority over what language manifests. Heidegger here insists that both the naming of the gods and the transmutation of the world must follow upon a previous phenomenon he designates by the expression *ansprechen*.

This word usually refers to addressing someone or making a claim upon someone, with the added suggestion in the substantive form of an appeal. In his 1941 lecture course on Nietzsche (part of which appeared as “*Die Metaphysik als Geschichte des Seins*”), Heidegger used this word in connection with that process by which the forgetfulness of being in metaphysics was to be overcome, the process of “recollection.” Persons are to answer attentively the soundless voice of being as it makes its claim (*Anspruch*) upon human beings. Additionally, in the Epilogue added to the 1943 *Was ist Metaphysik?*, Heidegger writes of “ . . . *das Sein den Menschen für die Wahrheit des Seins in Anspruch nimmt . . .* »

The sense here is that being’s address to *Dasein* both leaves *Dasein* eminently free and yet makes heavy demands. There are other places, notably in *Brief über den Humanismus* and in *Gelassenheit*, where Heidegger expresses something like these thoughts. But his remarks cited here seem clear enough to give us some sense of the importance in *HWD* of the shift from what we might think of as the simultaneity of meaning and manifestation, and yet of the priority of meaning as address, claim, or appeal over what language makes manifest.

Even more important is a final assertion that human beings, it would seem, can achieve authenticity (in the language of the early Heidegger) or resolve (in that of the later) only insofar as they enter

that sphere where the priority of being's claim can be recognized as such. It is here finally that the decision can be made whether to think *das Sein* or *das Seiende*, to attempt an escape from the hermeneutic circle or to resign oneself to silence. For *das Sein* must be disclosed, Heidegger thinks, if *das Seiende* is to appear (*HWD* 281).

A suggestion as to the basic sense here can be found in Heidegger's remark that dwelling poetically, as standing in the presence of the gods (*HWD* 282), involves some kind of attentiveness to the priority of being's negative manifestation in the address of the gods. The point is touched on again just briefly when Heidegger speaks of the poet intercepting the language of the gods in signs from antiquity and catching sight of what is yet to come. Hence he will insist most basically that "the establishment of being is bound to the signs of the gods" (*HWD* 287).

5. The Nature of Artwork

If we are to get some critical perspective on Heidegger's repeated discussions of the essential nature of poetry, we must situate these remarks in the larger context of his discussion of the nature of art. The key text is Heidegger's influential essay, "The Origin of the Artwork." Although this text was first printed in 1950, its composition goes back to late 1935. The text, therefore, with the exception of an appendix added in 1956, is of roughly the same period as the Hölderlin essay. The former was first presented November 1955 in Freiburg im Breisgau, whereas the latter was first presented 2 April 1936 in Rome. Thus even though Heidegger wrote about art on a number of different occasions, it is not unreasonable here to privilege "The Origin of the Artwork." In moving back from a consideration of the Hölderlin essay to a consideration of the origin essay we are in part then retracing the genesis of Heidegger's own ideas.

Heidegger's essay, "The Origin of the Artwork," continues to occasion much comment. It is not necessary then to detail all the particulars of the essay here. Rather, we need to recall briefly the major lines of inquiry in that essay, and then situate our concern with the nature of poetic artworks accordingly. Thus the approach must be selective with the consequence that many of the interesting speculative comments Heidegger makes will be left here without comment.

What then are the major ideas in Heidegger's essay? I think we can summarize these ideas not unfairly under Heidegger's own speculative headings of things, world, earth, strife, and truth.

Heidegger begins his essay with a series of considerations on artworks as things. The starting point, it should be noted, is not arbitrary. For many artworks indeed do resemble art things (cf. Rilke's *Kunstdinge*) insofar as they are material objects like sculptures or architectural works or are instantiated through material objects such as musical scores or lithographs. The question which arises, then, is in precisely what sense we may say that artworks are more than things? Answering this kind of question requires attaining clarity about what we mean by the word "thing."

For Heidegger, there are three basic interpretations of this term in the history of philosophy, but none of these suffice, Heidegger claims, in offering an adequate account.

Artworks are not 'things' in the sense of substances, for artworks are much more particular kinds of realities than those merely general entities which are nothing more than bearers of accidental properties. Nor are works of art things in the sense of unified manifolds of sensible qualities. For artworks are much more concrete kinds of realities than those merely abstract entities which are nothing more than collections of sense data. Finally, pieces of art are not things either in the sense of matter. For artworks may

be considered to differ from artefacts precisely in being more than simply matter distributed spatially.

In other words, the first view in relying on the substance-accident model and hence on the subjectpredicate schema, Heidegger believes, disallows distinctions between artworks and other things. The second view is based upon a misconstrued theory of perception, which would disallow distinctions between artworks and any complex of sensations whatsoever. The third view in its reliance on the classical schema of matter and form besides sharing the defect of the first view in being overly general has the further disadvantage of disallowing any account of the piece's uniqueness.

None of the three major philosophical accounts of things thus presents a suitable interpretation of the artwork as thing. All of these accounts, Heidegger claims, leave out two distinctive features of the artwork.

In order to formulate at least one of these features, Heidegger turns his attention from the relationship between works of art and mere things to that between artworks and artefacts. In a famous passage Heidegger chooses the example of shoes. In order to complicate the issue somewhat, however, he chooses not to describe just any pair of shoes but to describe the representation of a pair of shoes in a painting, Van Gogh's (1853-1890) "*Les Souliers*" in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

. . . nach dem Gemälde von van Gogh können wir nicht einmal feststellen, wo diese Schuhe stehen. Um dieses Paar Bauerschuhe herum ist nichts, wozu und wohin sie gehören könnten, nur ein unbestimmter Raum. Nicht einmal Erdklumpen von der Ackerscholle oder vom Feldweg kleben daran, was doch wenigstens auf ihre Verwendung hinweisen könnte. Ein Paar Bauernschuhe und nichts weiter. Und dennoch: Aus den dunklen Öffnung des ausgetretenen Inwendigen des Schuhzeuges starrt die Mühsal der Arbeitsschritte. In der derbgediegenen Schwere des Schuhzeuges ist aufgestaut die Zähigkeit des lang-

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samen Ganges durch die weithin gestreckten und immer gleichen Furchen des Ackers, über dem ein rauher Wind steht. Auf dem Leder liegt das Feuchte und Satte des Bodens. Unter den Sohlen schiebt sich hin die Einsamkeit des Feldweges durch den sinkenden Abend. In dem Schubzeug schwingt der verschwiegen Zuruf der Erde, ihr stilles Verschenken des reifenden Kornes und ihr unerklärtes Sichversagen in der öden Brache des winterlichen Feldes. Durch dieses Zeug zieht das klaglose Bangen um die Sicherheit des Brotes, die wortlose Freude des Wiederüberstehens der Not, das Beben in der Ankunft der Geburt und das Zittern in der Umdrohung des Todes. Zur Erde gehört dieses Zeug, und in der Welt der Bäuerin ist es behütet.¹⁵

With this painting freshly in the mind's eye, Heidegger claims that the two essential features of the artwork which the previous analyses overlook are its relation to a world and its relation to the earth.

The artwork's relation to a world comes clear if we reflect for a moment on the contrast between the way the shoes present themselves to the farmer and the way the representation of the shoes presents them to the observer of the artwork.

In the first case, the shoes are completely taken for granted. They are merely a kind of equipment which the farmer makes use of in getting on about his daily work. They are unobtrusive. In the second case, the shoes stand out for our inspection. They cannot be taken for granted. The shoes are independent of the peasant farmer and sufficient in themselves. Their representation attracts our interest and ultimately stimulates our imagination.

What stands implicit in the peasant farmer's reliance on the service of his shoes is a world. But it is only in the representation of those shoes in a painting that the dependability and the serviceability of this equipment is made explicit. The artwork in short makes a world manifest. Van Gogh's "*Les Souliers*" makes the world of the peasant woman manifest.

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This world is both the all-encompassing horizon in which the peasant woman passes her life as well as a particular moment in the gradual succession of historical epochs. In this sense, the peasant woman's world is also the world of a form of life, an historical, lived world.

The second feature of the artwork, its relation to the earth, is more obscure. But when we reflect again on Heidegger's extended example, we notice that, however much of a world an artwork reveals, an artwork nonetheless always leaves something still implicit.

In representing the shoes, the painting brings about the appearance of the world of the peasant woman. But this world is always presented in necessarily an incomplete way. For that world to be completely manifest, we would require an infinite series of artworks, each one of which representing still some further feature, perspective, emphasis, etc. of the peasant woman's world. And what astonishes us in the contemplation of such an infinite series is our realization that talk of infinity here is perfectly appropriate. For the world of the peasant woman is only those elements of an endlessly receding, finally incomprehensible whole which have become explicit.

The range of the implicit of what has not become manifest but which possibly could become manifest is indeed infinite. It is this infinite extent of the possible that remains inexplicit which Heidegger has in mind by speaking and emphasizing the earth over against the world. The earth out of which the world of the peasant woman becomes manifest is necessarily inexplicit. The earth is concealed, while a world is unconcealed.

The failure then of the analysis of the artwork as thing has cleared the way for an attentiveness to the fact that the artwork makes manifest a world, yet any world is only a naturalization of an infinite set of possibilities. We need however to try to explicate somewhat further the relations between the world and its ground, the earth.

Heidegger resorts to metaphor once again in discussing this relation. In particular he makes use of the PreSocratic term "strife." The term is not only a suggestive one insofar as it relates the discussion of the essential nature of artworks to ideas which articulate the crystallization of philosophy into a conceptual inquiry only. The term is also apt, for Heidegger is trying to capture the tension between actuality and possibility.

Something, an artwork, is actualized only to the extent that its contraries and contradictions are not actualized. The shoes become explicit to the extent that the plough, the bucket, the scythe, the wagon, the straw do not become explicit. The fact of such a tension reveals something new about the relationship between world and earth, explicitness and implicitness, "unconcealedness" and "concealedness." For in becoming explicit, an actual entity not only leaves other possibilities implicit; the fact of its appearance also obscures the subsistence of these possibilities.

Thus what was only concealed becomes, on the appearance of a world, something now hidden. The artwork shows things, and through them a world, that of the peasant woman; by that very token, the artwork, precisely in the realization of such a presentation, obscures an infinity of possible worlds which were previously only hidden. What was hidden is now, on the appearance of the artwork, no longer just hidden; it is now obscured as well.

This discussion of the relation between world and earth becomes the vehicle for Heidegger's final theme here, that of truth. I focus on the main points only. Here is a convenient summary of those points. ". . . If we are careful," W. Bossart has written, "to distinguish truth as disclosure from truth as correspondence, we may say that in a work of art there comes to pass the opening up, the disclosure, the truth of particular beings. This disclosure does not take place through one representation of the shoes; rather the painting

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reveals their being by rendering explicit the world in which they take on their serviceability. Art then is that process in which the truth of beings (i.e., being itself) comes to pass in a work.”¹⁶

In short, a work of art discloses in a unique way part of the play between world and earth, between the finiteness of actual entities and their ground in the infinity of the possible. Truth as disclosure is the unconcealedness of what has been hidden and previously obscured.

In his essay on the origin of the artwork, Heidegger is claiming that the work is not a thing but the manifestation of a world. This manifestation is grounded on a disclosure of being itself in one of its instantiations as a particular entity. Such a disclosure uncovers something which has been concealed. But this unconcealment, this revealing, in itself obscures other possibilities.

If these are the major ideas in Heidegger’s essay on artworks, how do they fill out our understanding of the essential nature of the literary artwork described in his essay on Hölderlin?

To situate our reflection properly, here in conclusion is a brief summary of the relevant ideas in the Hölderlin essay which we have already examined. Language in this essay is taken as that which defines human beings.

Language “serves to communicate his experiences, his modes, and his resolutions. But the essence of language is not exhausted in giving information, for language can report only what has already been disclosed. Disclosure, however, takes place within the context of a world, and it is poetizing which establishes what endures in experience in and through the constitution of a world. The poet names the gods and all things which are, but this naming itself is historical, and the context of meaning which he finds becomes, through the passing of tradition, the world of a particular historical people. . . . Furthermore, though it is closely tied to history, poetry is not the product of historical forces. On the contrary, it is poetry which first makes histo-

ry possible by originating an image or metaphor which constitutes the world in which historical events come to pass."¹⁷

6. Criticisms and Replies

This then seems to be the substance of Heidegger's views about the artwork in general and the poetic work of art in particular. We need now briefly to weigh the merits of these views. A number of qualifications should be acknowledged, however, before one tries to evaluate Heidegger's account. To begin, we need to remind ourselves that almost any evaluation is necessarily based on a general rather than on a detailed analysis of Heidegger's texts. The latter is the only adequate basis for evaluation. Unfortunately, I do not think we yet have a detailed and at the same time finally coherent enough analysis available.

There are many essays about Heidegger's views on art: few, unfortunately, have faced the meta-philosophical issues involved in trying to formulate those views in other than Heidegger's own terms. And of those few treatments which are at least sensitive to this issue, I do not believe that any has yet resolved this meta-philosophical issue satisfactorily. Accordingly, evaluation here must be understood rather broadly as an attempt to illuminate several of the central issues which seem to be in evidence so far.

A second qualification is also in order. We can see this point by distinguishing two features of the previous one. There are not only questions of evaluation, but also questions of understanding the basic issues. The two of course are in some sense closely related, for each to some degree entails the other. Nevertheless, we can still claim that evaluation must always be evaluation of something.

In this case however it is at least arguable that we do not know exactly what Heidegger is saying. For the central expressions in his discussions – expressions like "thing," "world," "earth," "truth," to stay

with the obvious ones only – are used in nonstandard ways. Moreover, we do not know how to determine in just which nonstandard ways they are employed. So we might well ask: if we do not know what Heidegger is saying, in the sense that we cannot agree on just which paraphrases of his non-standard kind of talk most suitably embodies his views, how are we ever to evaluate what those views are?

At least one further point needs mention. One might want to restrict evaluation to a more or less formal procedure whereby appraising whatever claims Heidegger might be asserting would be left aside in the interests of evaluating only those claims for which Heidegger presents arguments. Etymological arguments, empirical arguments, implications, and so on might thus be the stipulated range of evaluations.

This procedure, however necessary at some stage in appraising Heidegger's reflections on art, will not and indeed cannot work here. The bald fact is that Heidegger most often does not argue his central claims. And those claims he appears to propose (with etymologies for example) are in no way comprehensible as conclusions to arguments of any traditional kind whatsoever.

What is worse, the reasons why Heidegger does not argue his central claims are themselves not provided, or when provided are left without any justification of their own. Restricting evaluation to the appraising of arguments thus does not solve our problem. Consequently, evaluation must be taken more broadly than we might otherwise, given the choice one finally selects.

To summarize: evaluation here must be general, must be based on a general summary, and cannot be taken as final, given the indeterminacy so far of Heidegger's meaning.

With, at least these three important qualifications pointed out, we can nonetheless look in some detail at three basic criticisms which recur frequently in the secondary literature.

The first of these criticisms is that Heidegger's theory seems to be basically unacceptable because it starts from the assumption that artworks have essences. Thus when Heidegger in the poetry essay writes of trying to determine "the essential nature" of poetry or when in the artwork essay he writes of trying to determine "the essence of the artwork," he is committed to some version of essentialism. In this respect, this line of argument proceeds, his theory is simply naive.

For, since the work of Wittgenstein at the very latest (some proponents of this criticism would obligingly add Plato but with only very strict reservations), we have had at our disposal a series of considerations and arguments which purport to demonstrate that not every entity need be construed as having an essence. Thus, some entities, it has been argued, might have no essence whatsoever (religion is the usual example), whereas others may have more than one (examples here are admittedly hard to find, the story goes, but not logically impossible). In centering his theory on a search for the essence of artworks, Heidegger has in effect assumed that there are art essences to be found. But such an assumption is at best gratuitous and most probably just wrong.

This line of consideration, whatever its weakness when presented in a somewhat general form as here, should not be underestimated. It is a strong line of argument. Some defence, however, can be provided, for much depends on what we mean by "essence."

If we construe this difficult word as the set of necessary and sufficient conditions which constitute the strict definition of a particular entity, then we must concede the conclusion of this argument as unavoidable. Indeed, there do seem to be if not entities with multiple "essences" on this construal of the term, at least those like relation and most like art itself which do not have essences. No one has yet succeeded in defining art by providing a non-controversial and complete set of art's necessary and sufficient conditions.

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But we need not adopt such a rigorous understanding of essence. Moreover, in precisely Heidegger's case, such an adoption would be thoroughly inconsistent with the tenor of his repeated detailed and wide-ranging criticisms of the sense of traditional metaphysical categories. Whatever Heidegger may have in mind when he writes of determining "the essential nature" of artworks, it is surely not a set of necessary and sufficient conditions.

Further considerations could be added here – for example, reference to the use of Wittgenstein's (1889-1951) own concept of family resemblances to get around his criticism of essentialism, or more recent attempts to define the artwork with the help of some looser definition than the traditional one. The major counter to the essentialist charge, however, is the demonstrable inappropriateness from Heidegger's other work of the only construal of the sense of "essence" which makes his argument actually work.

If this retort can work the way I have suggested, why then is there a danger in "underestimating" the supposed force of such a line of argument? The danger I think lies in the possibility of redirecting the argument away from the presumed traditional sense of the cardinal term "essence" and towards the unavailability of Heidegger's nontraditional account of "essence."

If Heidegger wants to use his own central term in a nontraditional way, we might ask, then just what is his own sense of the term? And what reasons could there finally be, providing he could produce a coherent alternative account, for preferring his account to the traditional one? Such criticisms are not easily answered. And I think we can see better, if not completely, just why in the context of the second line of argument against Heidegger's view.

A second criticism then is that Heidegger's theory cannot be a satisfactory account of the artwork because the treatment of its central concept leads to solipsism.

When Heidegger in the Hölderlin essay writes of the disclosure of truth in the linguistic forms which a people adopts in a particular historical epoch, or when in the artwork essay he writes of the tension between concealment and hiddenness in the artwork's bringing about the disclosure of truth, he is relying on a metaphorical and idiosyncratic understanding of what truth is.

It is not required for this line of argument to hold that any adequate account of truth be expressed in nonmetaphorical terms or be either a correspondence or a coherence or a pragmatic theory of truth. All that is needed to make this argument work is agreement that Heidegger's account of truth is not an instance of traditional theories, and that whatever his theory is, it is nowhere stated unambiguously. These requirements must indeed be agreed to by any serious student of Heidegger.

But once it is conceded that Heidegger's theory of truth is idiosyncratic in at least these senses, it then follows that no one except Heidegger himself could discover any intersubjective evidence for the wellfoundedness of such a theory. If the evidence for such a theory is not antecedently available but becomes available, if at all, only once the theory is held, it is not unfair to claim that the theory entails an epistemological form of solipsism.

Unlike the previous objection – and this must be stressed – the present theory allows no way out. So long as the matter in question was the wellfoundedness of a particular theory of essence, other theories could be relied upon to provide criteria in the light of which the dispute in question could be judged if not resolved.

Here, however, since the very theory which is in question is precisely the one which must include an account of such concepts as criterion evidence and so on, no such move is possible without vicious circularity. And this is exactly why I have held above that there are at least some forms of attack on Heidegger's understanding of essence which should not be underestimated.

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A third criticism of Heidegger's theory has the merit if not the force of being much more specific. Thus, it is argued, when Heidegger discusses the essence of poetry and the nature of art finally in terms of world and earth, unconcealment and hiddenness, entities and being itself, his theory shows itself to be irrelevant to the treatment of one of the traditional concerns of aesthetics, namely, if not the definition then at least the description of the artwork.

Where do these categories come from? Are we provided any analysis of the sensible qualities of artworks themselves which would not just be instances of such interpretation but rather evidence for the reconstruction of interpretive categories?

It is not enough to point to the example of Heidegger's discussion of the van Gogh "*Les Souliers*." For these discussions, although detailed and apparently descriptive in some sense, are not on any account instances of the kind of analysis required. Heidegger applies to the artwork a series of meditations whose genesis lies completely outside the realm of art in his reading of the history of philosophy.

In sum, Heidegger, under the guise of analyzing the nature of the work of art, does nothing more than use the artworks as extended examples of and indirect justification for his revisionary metaphysics. His theory is irrelevant then in the sense that his theory, however interestingly applied to art, does not arise out of philosophical considerations of the artwork as such. Heidegger's aesthetics are no more than a version of his *Seinsphilosophie*.

We need to concede again the fact that this line of argument is in some sense well directed. Any thorough examination of the central features of Heidegger's *Seinsphilosophie* and his philosophy of art which tries to go beyond respecting Heidegger's own metaphors in formulating these features concludes with an extraordinary similarity between the two.

Indeed, consideration of Heidegger's *Seinsphilosophie* and almost any other part of his philosophy (I omit his reflections on time) such as his philosophy of religion or his philosophy of language reaches the same conclusion. Heidegger himself has remarked that he has had only one thought to think, the question of being.

Can we further conclude, on this account alone, that Heidegger's theory of art is irrelevant just because of these similarities?

I do not think so. To make the charge of irrelevancy stick, we would need a second complementary argument. This argument would have to exclude the counter that such similarities, far from being coincidences, are in fact justification for the wellfoundedness of the theory. In other words a second argument is needed to refute the claim that the nature of art is what Heidegger's theory properly shows it to be, tributary to the nature of being. And such secondary arguments, to my knowledge, have not been provided directly.

There is good reason for this: instead of providing directly such a second argument, a rival theorist can proffer his own theory. He need then only claim that his theory explains the nature of the artwork better than Heidegger's. Heidegger, however, would counter that the function of an adequate meditation on art is not to explain the nature of the artwork but to let it appear as what it is. And that counter would in turn lead back to the central issue about truth as disclosure.

Envoi: Art and Truth

If we look back over these three basic lines of criticism – the arguments purporting to convict Heidegger's theory of essentialism, epistemological solipsism, and irrelevance – and remind ourselves of the qualifications which any attempts at evaluation must include, I think we must conclude as follows. There is at least one fundamental confusion in Heidegger's theory of art, whatever the merits

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and demerits which other lines of inquiry bring out into the open. This confusion concerns the relationship between Heidegger's theory of art and his theory of truth. And it is precisely this theme which is the most central and the most ambitious in Heidegger's theory. This theme itself, however, appears to depend on an oft-remarked absence in Heidegger's philosophy: sufficient reflective attention to the difficult matters of any philosophical ethics.

Any reconstruction we might attempt of this theory then must lend its most serious attention to reconstructing that relationship. Whatever substitution from ordinary language we may settle on for Heidegger's metaphors, whatever unambiguous formulations we may substitute for his central claims, whatever arguments we might articulate as justifications for those claims, are, in the end, to no avail if this central theme – poetics and ethics – is not addressed critically. The essays that follow here are mere modest gestures in that direction.

Endnotes Essay One

- ¹ This text is a revised and expanded version of an article first published in part only as “Heidegger on Hölderlin,” *Philosophical Studies* (Ireland), 22 (1974), 7-16.
- ² J. L. Koerner, “First Among Equals,” *The New Review of Books*, 7 February 2019, p. 11
- ³ M. Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in: M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, and Thought* (NY: Harper, 1950), p. 59.
- ⁴ For a discussion of Heidegger’s strange ways with the interpretation of poetry, see for example B. Allemann, *Hölderlin und Heidegger*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg im Breisgau: Atlantis, 1954).
- ⁵ Here, I follow generally the terminology in the English translations emending only in the light of the initial and extraordinary work on Heidegger’s terminology in the superb book of William J. Richardson, S. J. with a Preface by Heidegger, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, 1st ed. (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1963). Page references in the main text of this essay are from *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, 2 ed. (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1951) and cited as EHD.
- ⁶ For a useful recent overview of further reading on both *Sein und Zeit* and Heidegger’s work generally, see M. Inwood, *Heidegger: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2019), pp. 137 and xvii-xx, respectively.
- ⁷ “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry,” in Heidegger, *Existence and Being*, ed. W. Brock (Chicago: Regnery, 1949), p. 283.
- ⁸ See S. Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2016)
- ⁹ See M. Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1951). Heidegger cites from the edition begun by his friend Norbert von Hellingrath, *Sämtliche Werke*, 6 vols. (Berlin, 1913), an edition now superceded.
- ¹⁰ M. Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1954), pp. 145-162.
- ¹¹ *Erläuterungen*, pp. 9-31 and 75-144, respectively.
- ¹² *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1953), p. 94; Heidegger’s emphases.
- ¹³ *Erläuterungen*, p. 37.
- ¹⁴ M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche II* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1961), 399-457.
- ¹⁵ M. Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” as cited in P. McCormick.
- ¹⁶ William H. Bossart, “Heidegger’s Theory of Art”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, (Vol. 27: No.2, 1968).
- ¹⁷ Inwood 2019, p. xvii