

MARTIN HEIDEGGER

# POETRY, LANGUAGE, THOUGHT

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
ALBERT HOFSTADTER



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## PREFACE

I have benefited enormously—the word is not strong enough—from the generosity of J. Glenn Gray in recurrently reviewing the translations down to their last details. Professor Gray's work with Heidegger on them, renewed over and over again, gives me the assurance that they may be submitted to the reading public with the feeling that at least some of Heidegger's own thinking comes through.

Hannah Arendt has been particularly liberal with suggestions for improvement; the present text contains many changes due to her.

Here and there are some verses—of Heidegger himself and also of C. F. Meyer, Rilke, Trakl, and Hölderlin. Because of the closeness with which Heidegger treats other poets, they needed original translation, and so for good or ill and *faute de mieux* they are all from my own hand.

In addition to the enduring and tireless encouragement of my son Marc and my wife Manya, I have special reason to refer here with love and gratitude to Evelyn Huber, whose courage and loyalty those know best who have come within her gentle sphere.

*Santa Cruz, California*

ALBERT HOFSTADTER

## INTRODUCTION

Assembled in this book are seven writings that seem to be directly or indirectly concerned with art. But appearances can be deceiving.

These pieces should not be thought of under the heading of "aesthetics," nor even under that of "philosophy of art."

Heidegger's thinking about art is not concerned with the work of art as the object of *aisthesis*, that is, of the sensuous apprehension, in the wide sense, which goes by the name of aesthetic experience. His estimate of the significance of such experience, and a fortiori of aesthetics, can be judged from the Epilogue to "The Origin of the Work of Art." And his thinking, not only about art but about all else as well, is not philosophy in the sense of metaphysics, or of a universal theory about the nature and characteristics of things that exist, whether art works or anything else. His estimate of philosophy may be gauged from the remark in "The Thinker as Poet" (p. 8) that, of the three dangers threatening thinking, the bad and thus muddled one is philosophizing.

Heidegger's thinking about art, as about all else, is—a thinking that memorializes and responds, *ein andenkendes Denken*. Like poetry and song, it grows out of being and reaches into its truth ("The Thinker as Poet," p. 13). The being that is its origin is the being to which authentic human being belongs. Some understanding of its nature will be gleaned from Heidegger's accounts, in several of the essays, of the being of world, of thing, of art work, of man, of language.

One should first of all, perhaps, note his advice to the young student, Mr. Buchner, who had asked whence thinking about Being receives its directive ("The Thing," pp. 183f). To think being, Heidegger says, means to respond to the appeal of its presence, in a response that stems from and releases itself toward the appeal. But this means to exist as a human being in an authentic relationship as mortal to other mortals, to earth and sky, to the divinities present or absent, to things and plants and animals; it means, to let each of these be—to let it presence in openness, in the full appropriateness of its nature—and to hold oneself open to its being, recognizing it and responding to it appropriately in one's own being, the way in which one oneself goes on, lives; and then, perhaps, in this ongoing life one may hear the call of the language that speaks of the being of all these beings and respond to it in a mortal language that speaks of what it hears.

To understand how man may think in this way, recalling to mind the being that has, according to Heidegger, long been concealed in oblivion, one must understand the nature of the language by which thinking is able to say what it thinks. Hence the inclusion of "Language," the first essay in *Unterwegs zur Sprache*. The speech of genuine thinking is by nature *poetic*. It need not take the shape of verse; as Heidegger says, the opposite of the poem is not prose; pure prose is as poetic as any poetry. The voice of thought must be poetic because poetry is the saying of truth, the saying of the unconcealedness of beings ("The Origin of the Work of Art," p. 74). It bids all that is—world and things, earth and sky, divinities and mortals—to come, gathering into the simple onefold of their intimate belonging together. ("Language," pp. 206f). It is the topology of being, telling being the whereabouts of its actual presence ("The Thinker as Poet," p. 12).

Is there in the end any fundamental difference between the thinking poet and the poetic thinker? The poet need not think; the thinker need not create poetry; but to be a poet of first rank

there is a thinking that the poet must accomplish, and it is the same kind of thinking, in essence, that the thinker of first rank must accomplish, a thinking which has all the purity and thickness and solidity of poetry, and whose saying *is* poetry. In these essays, as they advance in date of composition, one may discern at the same time an increase in the poetic quality of their language. It is not an accident; it goes along with the growth of the author's vision of truth and being, and of man's life in the context of truth and being. In order to say what he must say, reporting what he sees, relaying what he hears, the author has to speak of the gods, mortals, the earth, shoes, the temple, the sky, the bridge, the jug, the fourfold, the poem, pain, the threshold, the difference, and stillness as he does. In truth, this is not philosophy; it is not abstract theorizing about the problems of knowledge, value, or reality; it is the most concrete thinking and speaking about Being, the differing being of different beings and the onefoldness of their identity in and with all their differences; and it is one with the being of the thinker and speaker, himself. In this thinking, which is the thinking that responds and recalls—*das andenkende Denken*—the thinker has stepped back from thinking that merely represents, merely explains, and has taken up his stance in "a corresponding which, appealed to in the world's being by the world's being, answers within itself to that appeal" (*"The Thing,"* pp. 181f).

Out of the experience of such thinking comes the first piece. I have entitled it in English "The Thinker as Poet" because in it the thinker does what a poet does—*dichtet*. We have no word for it in English. I had tried "poetize" for *dichten*, but it has the wrong connotation and excites annoyance in those who feel for the language, suggesting affectation. *Dichten*—to write or compose poetry or other literature; to invent something fictional, make it up, imagine it. So it gets translated rather as poetry, or the writing of poetry, and often, where the word "poetry" appears, it is well to remember its sense as a verb, as naming



the act of composing and writing—as, for example, in “The Thinker as Poet” (p. 13), where poetry is the activity that corresponds in a neighborly way to singing and thinking.

Heidegger’s original title for this piece was *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*—“From the Experience of Thinking”—and one should read it as such, as the uttering of realizations that have come out of a long life of discovery of a way of thinking that belongs to life in its fullness as genuinely human. Every sentence in this thinking poem is pregnant with meaning. He who has read the entire book and then returns to it will find that what first seemed new, strange, difficult, now rings out with the clarity of a purely-wrought bell, letting one begin to hear the voice of thought, stilled in its being by having become unable to say what must remain unspoken; it is a speaking that, like all genuine poetry, says more than it speaks, means more than it utters. Perhaps then the reader will, some fine moment, understand what it means to say: *Segen sinnt*—“Blessing muses.”

This poem fittingly begins a series of essays in which a main theme is that poetry opens the dwelling life of man. In “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935–36) Heidegger had already pointed to the function of poetry as the founding of truth: bestowing, grounding, beginning. He conceived of poetry as projective utterance—“the saying of world and earth, the saying of the arena of their conflict and thus of the place of all nearness and remoteness of the gods . . . the saying of the unconcealedness of what is” (p. 74). This understanding of poetry remains throughout and is more and more developed as his writing progresses.

From early to late, too, we find the comprehension of the fundamental identity of art and language with poetry. All art, we learn from “The Origin of the Work of Art,” is essentially poetry, because it is the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is (“Origin,” p. 72). And poetry, as linguistic, has a privileged position in the domain of the arts, because

language, understood rightly, is the original way in which beings are brought into the open clearing of truth, in which world and earth, mortals and gods are bidden to come to their appointed places of meeting ("Origin," pp. 74f).

Authentic language, which has not lost its magical potency by being used up and abused, is poetry; there is no significant difference between them. That is why, when Heidegger attempts to state in the essay "Language" what language is and does, namely, what it does when it speaks, he chooses something "spoken purely," rather than any random spoken matter. What is spoken purely is—a poem, and indeed, to help us best a poem that shows in its very speaking what language does when it speaks: Georg Trakl's "A Winter Evening."

Through the reading of this poem we become aware of how language, in speaking, bids to come the entire fourfold world of earth and sky, mortals and divinities, by bidding the things to come—window, snow, house, table—that stay the world, and bidding the world to come that grants things their being; it bids to come the intimacy of world and things—their difference, which appropriates them to one another. What unites opposites is the rift, the *Riss* (cf. "Origin") that has become the difference, the pain of the threshold that joins. ("Language," p. 204).

Whether Heidegger speaks of truth establishing itself in the beings that it opens up ("Origin," p. 63) or of world and things being joined through the pain of the rift of their difference, he is thinking always of the opening up of the possibility of authentic human existence—of a life in which man does not merely go on blindly, writhing in the grip of a basically false meaning of being, as in our twentieth-century life of *Gestell*, framing, but rather a life in which man truly *dwells*.

Dwelling is one of the basic thoughts in these writings. In "Building Dwelling Thinking"—note the absence of commas, intended to enforce the identity of the three—Heidegger develops the essential continuity of being, building, dwelling, and

thinking. Language makes the connection for us: *bauen*, to build, connects with *ban* to dwell, and with *bin*, *bist*, the words for be. Language tells us: to be a human being is to be on the earth as a mortal, to dwell, doing the "building" that belongs to dwelling: cultivating growing things, constructing things that are built, and doing all this in the context of mortals who, living on earth and cherishing it, look to the sky and to the gods to find the measure of their dwelling. If man's being is dwelling, and if man must look to the way the world fits together to find the measure by which he can determine his dwelling life, then man must dwell poetically.

So in what Heidegger cites as a late poem of Hölderlin's, the one beginning "In lovely blueness blooms the steeple with metal roof," there occurs the phrase ". . . poetically man dwells . . ." which becomes the subject of the final essay in this volume. For how the world fits together, the appropriating of mortals to divinities, earth to sky, things to places and functions—how all is rightly measured out—can be determined only by the upward glance that spans the between of earth and sky, the dimension. It is poetry that takes the measure of the dimension, that is the standard by which all other measures—of this or that or something else—are themselves measured. The poet it is who, looking to the sky, sees in its manifestness the self-concealment of the unknown god, bidding the unknown to come to man to help him dwell. At the basis of man's ability to build in the sense of cultivating and constructing there must be, as primal source, his poetic ability, the ability to take the measure of the world.

Even what is apparently so simple as a simple thing—a jug, for instance, or a bridge, or a pair of peasant shoes—has to be seen in the light of the disclosure of the appropriation of beings to Being, the Open, the clearing of truth, if man's relationship to it is to be authentically human.

The remarkable essay on "The Thing" (and "thing" is another of the basic concepts in Heidegger's thought) makes

indelibly clear and vivid what a thing can be—a jug, as he deals with it here, or, as he notes, a bench, a brook, a bull, a book. He takes hold of the Being of things in the concretest way, a way he learned originally from the phenomenology of Husserl, according to which one's vision is addressed to things as they show themselves in the fullness of their appearance. What was a puzzle in "The Origin of the Work of Art" becomes transparently evident in these later essays.

There is a world of difference between man's present life as technological being under the aegis of *Gestell*, frame, framing—in which everything, including man himself, becomes material for a process of self-assertive production, self-assertive imposition of human will on things regardless of their own essential natures—and a life in which he would genuinely dwell as a human being. This time of technology is a destitute time, the time of the world's night, in which man has even forgotten that he has forgotten the true nature of being. In such a dark and deprived time, it is the task of the poet to help us see once more the bright possibility of a true world. That is what poets are for, now. But it means that, as poets, they must free themselves completely from bondage to the time's idols; and Heidegger's examination in "What Are Poets For?" of the poetry of Rilke, as on the way but not yet there, as still involved in the toils of the metaphysical view of reality, is of special timeliness.

So poetry—together with the language and thinking that belong to it and are identical with it as essential poetry—has for Heidegger an indispensable function for human life: it is the creative source of the humanness of the dwelling life of man. Without the poetic element in our own being, and without our poets and their great poetry, we would be brutes, or what is worse and what we are most like today: vicious automata of self-will.

It is not aesthetics, then, that one will find in this book. Rather, it is fundamental thinking about the constitutive role that the poetic has in human life. Aesthetics, as we know it from

the history of philosophy, is a talking about appearances, experiences, and judgments, useful no doubt, and agreeable. But Heidegger here thinks through the basic creative function that obtains its creativeness from its willingness to stop, listen, hear, remember, and respond to the call that comes from Being. He does here, and in all his writings, what thinking is called upon by nature to do: to open up and take true measure of the dimension of our existence.

Much could be written about the language of Heidegger's thinking. It has created its own style, as always happens with an original thinker. Often a sentence or two is all that is necessary to distinguish Heidegger from, say, Wittgenstein, Russell, or Whitehead. The style is the thinking itself. It comes out of the German language and partakes of that language's genius. Schelling and Hegel spoke proudly of the natural fitness of the German language for philosophy; and in Heidegger's writings, increasingly with their chronological advance, we have a vivid example of this aptitude. It is by staying with the thinking the language itself does that Heidegger is able to rethink, and thus think anew, the oldest, the perennial and perennially forgotten, thoughts.

This does not mean that he wilfully resorts to etymological or pseudo-etymological factors to play an arbitrary language game. He uses etymology as much to uncover human misadventures in thinking as to bring to light what has been obscured in history. An example is his account of the words for "thing"—*das Ding, res, causa, cosa, chose*, where from the fundamental original sense of "gathering" there is a movement toward "that which bears on or concerns men," "that which is present, as standing forth here," eventually leading to "anything that is in any way," anything present in any way whatever, even if only in mental representation as an *ens rationis* ("The Thing," p. 176). The ancient thought of gathering falls into oblivion as the later thought of abstract being and presence takes over and occupies the foreground of thinking. Yet the ancient

thought—an original discovery of the poets and thinkers who spoke the Indo-European languages into being—is the one that is truest to the nature of the thing as it is knowable in and from living experience.

Read what Heidegger has to say about the thinging of things, that is, the gathering and uniting—or as the German says so directly and strongly, *das Verweilen*, the letting-while or letting-dwell—by which the world is stayed, in virtually every sense of “stay,” and you will begin to re-collect in your own thinking a basic human grasp of the meaning of things, which will open up afresh a basic human relationship to them (e.g., the jug in “The Thing,” the bridge in “Building Dwelling Thinking,” the snow, the bed, the house in “Language”). As over against the modern concept of the thing which sees it primarily in its relation to human understanding as an object of representation and in its relation to human will as matter or product of a process of production or self-imposition—a concept, then, not of the thing in its own thingness, but of the thing in its subservience to human preoccupations—Heidegger finds in language the thought of the thing as thing, that is, as gathering and staying a world in its own special way. Hence he is able to use “thing” as a verb and, by this new coining and recoinng of the ancient word and its meaning, to think recallingly and responsively the being of the thing as man has authentically lived with things from the beginning.

Call this primitivism, if you will; it can also be called a recalling to origins, a reversion to the primeval, as Rilke describes what happens to everything perfect in one of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* (cf. “What Are Poets For?”—p. 97). It represents a movement away from the thin abstractions of representational thinking and the stratospheric constructions of scientific theorizing, and toward the full concreteness, the onefoldness of the manifold, of actual life-experience. This is the sort of response that Heidegger has made to the old cry of Husserl, “Back to the things themselves!”

Heidegger's thinking, *Denken*, is a re-thinking, *Andenken*, a recalling, remembering, memorializing, and responding to an original call coming from the central living presencing of the being of the world, and of men and other beings in the world. It calls for the complete opening of the human spirit—what otherwise gets fragmented into intellect, will, heart, and senses—to the ever-present possibilities of the truth of being, letting the world light up, clear up, join itself into one in manifold self-appropriations, letting us find in it a real dwelling place instead of the cold, sterile hostelry in which we presently find ourselves.

This is what causes the difficulties, and also the joys, of translating him. For to find the right English words one has to learn to think the German thoughts. The dictionary often is useless for this purpose. No ordinary dictionary can explain what Heidegger wants to say by *wesen*, *ereignen*, *verweilen*, *Gestell*, or fifty other such words. Take the verb *ereignen* with its associated noun *das Ereignis* as example. In his earlier writing, as in "Origin," he tends to use the dictionary senses—to happen, occur, take place, and event, occurrence, happening. But as time goes on, searching to find the right expression of the meaning of Being, he discovers in this word what is not present in other ontological words like *sein* and *wesen*. The sense of "to be present" that is carried by *wesen* especially in the form of *anwesen*, though weighty, is inadequate to reach the primeval. Although presence is already very important in early Greek thinking about being, it is mixed up with presence for representational perception and presence as result of a process of bringing forth and disclosing here. The problem is to express a being's *own* way of occurring, happening, being present, not just *for* our understanding, will, and perception, but as the being *it* itself is. And Heidegger eventually finds the answer in *ereignen*.

This discovery is a curious one and shows clearly how Heidegger's dealing with language, far from being a mere etymologiz-

ing, is a creative employment of its possibilities in order to express *de novo* thoughts that belong perennially to human life but that have been more and more clouded over by the artificialities of the modern imprisonment of man in a culture dominated by the will to power and the technical-technological brain.

In the "Addendum" (1956) to "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935-36), and thus at a more advanced stage of his comprehension, Heidegger refers to *das Ereignis* as that by which the meaning of Being can alone be determined ("Origin," p. 86). *Das Ereignis* is *the event*, in the dictionary sense, the *happening* or *occurrence*. But this translation makes little sense in the context. The suggestion is that we can only find the meaning of Being in something called *das Ereignis*. What is this *Ereignis*?

We begin to gather the word's import for Heidegger from his use of it in a decisive passage of "The Thing" (*Vorträge und Aufsätze*, pp. 178-79), where he is concerned to describe the world and its presencing, its "worlding." This is decisive because, if Heidegger gets close to saying what the Being of beings is, taking them all together, in their world, it is in and through this description of the world's being as such, the true and sole dimension of which is "nearing" ("Thing," p. 181).

Heidegger there defines the world as: *das ereignende Spiegel-Spiel der Einfalt von Erde und Himmel, Göttlichen und Sterblichen*, "the *ereignende* mirror-play of the simple onefold of earth and sky, divinities and mortals" ("Thing," p. 179). The force of this participial adjective is given by the context. The four members of the fourfold—earth, sky, divinities, mortals—mirror each other, each in its own way. Each therewith reflects itself, in its own way, into its *Eigenes*, its own, within the simpleness of the four. The mirroring, lighting each of the four, *ereignet* their *eigenes* presencing into simple belonging to one another. It is clear that Heidegger here is making use of the "own" meaning of "*eigen*" to read the sense of the verb



*ereignen* as to make one's own, to appropriate. But instead of "appropriate" in the sense of one's own appropriating of something for oneself, for which the verb *sich (etwas) aneignen* is already available, Heidegger wants to speak of an activity or process by which nothing "selfish" occurs, but rather by which the different members of the world are brought into belonging to and with one another and are helped to realize themselves and each other in realizing this belonging. Johannine Christianity speaks of God as Love, the love that binds spirits into true community and that is the source of all harmony of being. Heidegger finds in the world's worlding that nearing by which its fourfold can be gathered, nestling, conjoining, in a round dance of appropriating and self-appropriating, in which the four, fouring, can unite in their belonging together. *Ereignen* is the verb that names the appropriating by which there can be a meaningful mutual entrusting and belonging of the four to each other.

But that is only one side of the coin. The verb *ereignen* was not in historical fact constructed out of the prefix *er-* and the adjective *eigen*, own. There was an earlier verb *eräugnen*, to place before the eyes, to show, connected with the noun *Auge* for eye. Some pronunciations sound *äu* like *ei*, and so it became natural to sound the word as *ereignen* and thereupon to read its meaning accordingly. *Ereignis*, the noun, is similarly related to *Eräugnung*, *Ereignung*. Heidegger must have had this connection in mind. And it ties in with his most essential thinking. He had started, coming out of phenomenology, with the idea of truth as evidence, opening up, clearing, lighting, the self-showing of beings in overtness. This sense of truth dominates "The Origin of the Work of Art," and consequently much more emphasis is placed there on the lighting-clearing of the Open than there is on the appropriating of beings to beings, on light than on right. Similarly the art work, and a fortiori the poem, is more dominantly conceived as that in and through which truth as clearing-lighting occurs than as something in which,