

THINKING WRITING THINGING

AN EXPLORATION OF HEIDEGGER,
FENOLLSA, POUND,
AND THE TAOIST TRADITION

徐 平
PING XU



WUHAN UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Introduction

In his *Of Grammatology*, referring to the “decentering” role of the Chinese ideographic writing system that has been developing “outside” of Western phono-logocentrism, Derrida writes:

In a different way: the necessary decentering cannot be a philosophic or scientific act as such, since it is a question of dislocating, through access to another system linking speech and writing, the founding categories of language and the grammar of the *epistémè*. The natural tendency of *theory* —of what unites philosophy and science in the *epistémè* —will push rather toward filling in the breach than toward forcing the closure. It was normal that the breakthrough was more secure and more penetrating on the side of literature and poetic writing: normal also that it, like Nietzsche, at first destroyed and caused to vacillate the transcendental authority and dominant category of the *epistémè*: being. This is the meaning of the work of Fenollosa whose influence upon Ezra Pound and his poetics is well known: this irreducibly graphic poetics was, with that of Mallarmé, the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition. The fascination that the Chinese ideogram exercised on

Pound's writing may thus be given all its historical significance. ①

In what sense does the "graphic poetics" championed by Fenollosa and Pound based on their rediscovery of the Chinese ideographic writing system contribute to "the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition"? How is the "philosophic or scientific act as such" related to "the founding categories of language and the grammar of the *epistémè*"? And why does the Chinese ideographic writing system constitute a "decentering" that is "necessary"? Within the context of *Of Grammatology*, what concerns Derrida is no doubt the question of disrupting the phono-logocentric view of language, which is at the same time the question of uncovering what he calls "ethnocentric presuppositions"② characteristic of the Western scientific or philosophical tradition. My focus here, however, will be the possibility of presenting a distinct way of thinking embodied in the writings of Heidegger, Fenollosa, Pound and some ancient Chinese thinkers, which represent something radically different from what is allowed by the Western *epistémè*, i. e., the traditional way of Western thinking.

I should make it clear from the outset that I use the word "Western" here both *with* and *without* reference to its geographical and historical denotations. I tend to consider "Western" as indicating something linked to a particular way of thinking, which has been associated with a certain geographical and historical location, i. e., the West, thanks to the political and economical advancement

① Derrida: *Of Grammatology*, p. 92.

② Derrida: *Of Grammatology*, p. 91.

within the location in the past few centuries, which is, historically speaking, accidental. Thus, while it is certainly true that the traditional way of Western thinking is typical of the West in the geographical and historical sense, it is by no means confined within such a geographical and historical location. The same also can be said with regard to the term "Eastern". Therefore, what I call "Eastern" here can be within what is Western in the geographical and historical sense, and what I call "Western" can also be within what is Eastern in the geographical and historical sense.

The purpose of this book, then, is to explore an "Eastern" way of thinking by looking into the tripartite theme of thinking/writing/thinging,^① which, I believe, is at the very center of Heidegger's meditation, Fenollosa/Pound's poetics and a Chinese literary and philosophical tradition under the influence of Taoism. Particularly, I will focus on Heidegger's articulation of thinking in terms of Being, thinging and poetizing, Fenollosa/Pound's interpretation of the Chinese written language in its peculiar relation to the thing and thinking process, and the Chinese literary and philosophical tradition that consistently dwells on the essential relationship between thinking, writing and thinging, and evolves around the fundamental notion of philosophical Taoism— *ziran* (自然), whose original mean-

① The term "thinging," actually used by Fenollosa in one of his early editorials to characterize what he considered as genuine thinking ("synthetic thinking" as opposed to "analytical thinking"), is used here to render both Heidegger's "dingen" and the Taoist verbal expression *wù* (物, "thingen", if I may coin a word here). While it is one of my tasks to let its meaning unfold in the process of the following discussions, it should be noted here that the term "thinging" indicates a fundamental relation with the world, where the thing is treated as a thing, not a merely usable object.

ing in philosophical Taoism I will attempt to retrieve here.

Needless to say, as far as this tripartite theme is concerned, there has been no substantial influence between Heidegger's meditation, Fenollosa/Pound's poetics and the Chinese literary and philosophical tradition, in spite of some knowledge the three "Westerners" had about this tradition. But, to extend Wai-lim Yip's observation of the Taoists and Heidegger, I find Heidegger, Fenollosa, Pound and those ancient Chinese thinkers "sharing, and even speaking, the same language."^① This language, much like the Chinese language itself, was virtually unknown to the West for centuries, precisely because it was a *foreign* language, *foreign*, that is to say, to what Derrida calls "the founding categories of language and the grammar of the *épistémè*," to "the natural tendency of *theory*", to "the most entrenched Western tradition", that is, to the traditional way of Western thinking. This language, I believe, ought to be asserted forcefully today, against the comfortable conception of the "thing", against the tendency to instrumentalize language, against the traditional way of Western thinking, and, indeed, against the very condition of our present existence, which is fundamentally Western.

In some sense, this book can be described as a Heideggerian reading of Fenollosa, Pound and the Chinese literary and philosophical tradition. Heidegger's unfailing meditation on the essential relationship between thinking, writing and thinging, considered as a systematic effort to bring the entire problematic into the Western philosophical consciousness for the first time, provides this book

① Yip: *Diffusion of Distances: Dialogues between Chinese and Western Poetics*, p. 93.

with not only the starting point but the very framework. On the other hand, this book can also be characterized as an effort to link Fenollosa, Pound and Heidegger to the Chinese literary and philosophical tradition in an effort to present a distinct way of thinking. In other words, Fenollosa, Pound and Heidegger will all be seen as “repeating”^① the tripartite theme characteristic of the Chinese literary and philosophical tradition, a systematic examination of which I will provide here as well. And, as an integral part of the book, the chapter on Fenollosa and Pound also intends to shift the controversy surrounding their interpretation of the Chinese written language to a different level where the interpretation is evaluated not in reference to the linguistic “facts” about the language but in reference to the essential relationship between thinking, writing and thinging, and to the Chinese literary and philosophical tradition that consistently dwells on the relationship. In a word, the main concern of this book is about a distinct way of thinking, whose embodiment is the works of Heidegger, Fenollosa, Pound and those ancient Chinese thinkers.

This book will consist of four chapters, with the first three chapters examining Heidegger, Fenollosa/Pound, and the ancient Chinese thinkers, respectively, and with the fourth chapter being an exploration of the poetic characteristics of the distinct way of thinking. Each of the first three chapters will essentially be a re-reading of Heidegger, Fenollosa/Pound, and the ancient Chinese thinkers, which is a critique of conventional or traditional views about these

① I am using this word in the sense of “wieder-holen” as it is used by Heidegger in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (p. 39), where he states that, to go back to the Greek is “to recapture, to repeat <wieder-holen>, the beginning of our historical-spiritual existence, in order to transform it into a new beginning.”

figures and at the same time sets the stage for the exploration of the poetic characteristics in the fourth chapter.

In Chapter One, I will consider Heidegger's rediscovery of "*physis*" in its relation to truth, poetry, thinking, language as well as the "thing", in order to set up a framework where the tripartite theme of thinking/writing/thinging occupies the center stage. In Chapter Two, I will look into Fenollosa/Pound's "graphic poetics" by focusing on the genesis of Pound's well-known "ideogrammic method". This chapter, itself a re-reading of the genesis and the "graphic poetics", will not only further clarify the relation between thinking, writing and thinging, but also introduce the issue of the Chinese language in an attempt to show the differences between "ideogrammic thinking" that Fenollosa and Pound have tried to define and the Western traditional thinking informed by what Heidegger calls "the grammatical view of language." In Chapter Three, following the framework established in Chapter One and furthering the discussions concerning the Chinese language and poetry in Chapter Two, I will explore the notion of *ziran* as it is embodied in philosophical Taoism as well as in classical Chinese literary theory, providing a systematic examination of the Chinese literary and philosophical tradition around the tripartite theme of thinking/writing/thinging. In Chapter Four, the concluding chapter, I will focus on the characteristics of the distinct way of thinking that I, following Heidegger, call "poetic thinking". This, however, is not merely because of its association with poetry, or even with writing in general, but because it defies "scientific" ways of thinking by questioning the logic, grammar, knowledge, and metaphysics characteristic of what is commonly called thinking.

My treatment of Heidegger will start from “*physis*” as he rediscovered it in classical Greek thought, which bears significant similarities to the notion of “*zìrán*” in the sense I will describe in detail in Chapter Three. In fact, these similarities will serve as one of my major claims and set the stage for a dialogue between Heidegger’s meditation, Fenollosa/Pound’s poetics and the Chinese literary and philosophical tradition with regard to the tripartite theme of thinking/writing/thinging. ①

The word *physis*, according to Heidegger, denotes “self-blossoming emergence”, “opening up” and “unfolding”. And, as “being” and “becoming” at the same time, it is “the realm of things that emerge and linger on.” ② As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, speaking about “*physis*” as the emergence of things, as “being” and “becoming” immediately points to the very essence of the notion of *zìrán*, to the “thing”-character of the Chinese written language as Fenollosa and Pound understood it, and to the very center of the Chinese literary and philosophical tradition. And as we will see in details, Heidegger’s preoccupation with the “thing” informs, to a great extent, his meditations on poetry, language as

① And a comparison between the fate of “*physis*” and that of “*zìrán*” in the West and China, respectively, will also reveal what is at stake with the ordinary view of Nature as well as the traditional way of thinking. If, as Heidegger points out, the Latin translation of the Greek word *physis* as “Nature” destroys the actual philosophical force of the Greek word and marks our alienation from the original essence of Greek philosophy (Heidegger: *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 13.), the modern interpretations of *zìrán* in the sense of “Nature” have also seriously narrowed the scope of the fundamental word as it was used in philosophical Taoism as well as in classical Chinese literary theory.

② Heidegger: *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 14.

well as thinking.

"What is a thing?" This is a question repeatedly asked by Heidegger throughout his career as a philosopher and thinker. According to Heidegger, what is problematic with the tendency to take a thing as merely an object to be manipulated and put into service is that it misses precisely the "thing" itself, preventing the "thing" from coming into being as a thing. Moreover, such a tendency is that which characterizes science, technology, metaphysics and our ordinary existence in the world. In other words, our ordinary existence, or our "dealing" ("trafficking") *requires* or even *demand*s such a tendency in that it efficiently ensures the maintenance and continuation of the existence itself. In this sense, science, technology and metaphysics are but extensions or ramifications of the tendency, which is at the center of the traditional way of Western thinking. The "destitute" condition, as Heidegger names it, calls for a fundamental turn with the human condition, and with the traditional way of Western thinking, an important part of the call being that we ought to take the thing as thing. As Heidegger says, "if we let the thing be present in its thinging from out of the worlding world, then we are thinking of the thing as thing. Taking thought in this way, we let ourselves be concerned by the thing's worlding being. Thinking in this way, we are called by the thing as the thing."①

It is in relation to the emergence of things that poetry or the work of art comes into play in Heidegger's meditation. In *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, he says explicitly: "The work of art is a work not primarily because it is wrought, made, but because it

① Heidegger: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 181.

brings about being in an essence; it brings about the phenomenon in which the emerging power, *physis*, comes to shine.”^① According to Heidegger, it is in and through poetry or the work of art that a thing emerges into the unconcealment of its being, which is precisely what the Greek word “*alētheia*” means. “The establishing of truth in the work,” says Heidegger, “is the bringing forth of a being such as never was before and will never come to be again. The bringing forth places this being in the Open in such a way that what is to be brought forth first clears the openness of the Open into which it comes forth. Where this bringing forth expressly brings the openness of beings, or truth, that which is brought forth is a work. Creation is such a bringing forth. As such bringing, it is rather a receiving and an incorporating of a relation to unconcealedness.”^② In light of this understanding of “work”, I will explore Heidegger’s notion of truth in relation to the emergence of things, and pose a question concerning the relation between the work of art and what he calls “concealment” vis-à-vis the conception about the inseparability of “concealment” and “unconcealment”, that is: What is concealed in the work of art? This questioning in turn will help to reveal the ambiguity around the inseparability of “concealment” and “unconcealment” in the writings of Heidegger himself as well as that of his critics’, and to clarify the relation between *technē* and *physis* as Heidegger understands it.

The relation between the thing and the work of art, for Heidegger, also characterizes the relation between the thing and language and that between the thing and thinking. First, according to

① Heidegger: *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 134.

② Heidegger: *Poetry, language, Thought*, p. 62.

Heidegger, neither language nor thinking should be treated as an object of a scientific investigation characterized by the "logic" that has flourished in Western thinking. Second, both language and thinking are considered by Heidegger in terms of the showing of the thing, in terms of letting the thing emerge as a thing, that is, in terms of the act of "thinging". Actually, in Heidegger's meditation, poetry, language and thinking are considered as essentially in "neighborhood," which, as I will demonstrate, is not to be understood as a convenient analogy between the three ordinarily distinguishable categories, but to be seen as Heidegger's way of uncovering the truth of thinking by way of poetry, work of art, and language. And it is within the "neighborhood" of thinking, writing and thinging that a framework is to be set up for the entire book.

Pound's "ideogrammic method" has been considered as one of his major contributions to modern poetry. Unfortunately, however, this "method" has long been interpreted in such a way that only juxtaposition is emphasized while the importance of the "thing" tends to be forgotten or, at best, downplayed. Laszlo Géfin, for example, describes the "ideogrammic method" as "the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated particulars capable of suggesting ideas and concepts through their relation."^① Moreover, according to Géfin, "the genesis of the method" has to do with "a certain benign misunderstanding by Pound of Fenollosa's examples given in the lecture notes [about the Chinese written character],"^② one of the famous examples being the "rose-cherry-sunset-iron rust-flamingo" diagram in

① Géfin: *Ideogram : History of a Poetic Method*, p. 27.

② Géfin: *Ideogram : History of a Poetic Method*, p. 28.

one of Fenollosa's original notebooks. In fact, that Pound has misunderstood the diagram, therefore has misinterpreted the Fenollosa's manuscripts he edited and the nature of the Chinese written language in general has become such a commonplace in Pound scholarship that virtually no question has been raised concerning this issue. Meanwhile, nothing really convincing has been said about what Fenollosa meant to say with the diagram in the first place.

Drawing upon examples from classical Chinese poetry, I will propose a hypothesis about the meaning of the diagram: Fenollosa probably based the diagram on his observation and explanation of a practice widely found in the Chinese language, especially in classical Chinese poetry, that is, a written sign originally denoting a thing with a certain color is then used to denote the color itself. As he does throughout the entire essay on the Chinese written characters, Fenollosa sees the Chinese character denoting "red" (櫻) in terms of its original meaning: a cherry, a tree, that is, a "thing". In fact, this is how Fenollosa understands the advantage of the Chinese written language, especially in contrast with European languages, which, according to him, have been highly influenced by what he calls "the useless Logic of the Middle Ages"^① and therefore have become more and more abstract, more and more moved away from the "thing" itself.

As in Heidegger's writings, the idea about the essential relationship between thinking, language, poetry and the "thing" is one of the underlying theoretical standpoints of Fenollosa's pioneering essay "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry" that

① Fenollosa: *Ezra Pound Papers*, Box #92.