

‘The Work Lets the Earth be an Earth’ (*The Origin of the Work of Art*). Heidegger and Poetry.

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Abstract

What makes a work of art a work of art? Whether by music, or painting, or sculpture, or poetry, we all have a susceptibility to be moved profoundly by art, so when we are asked what it is that makes ‘this’ ‘art’, why are we left with so little to say? In fact, we are often left somewhat dumbfounded that a suitable answer is not more forthcoming, and the more thought we put into the problem the more baffling the experience seems to become. ‘You know art when you see it’, is the usual explanation we eventually concede to but of course we can see, even if we don’t want to admit, that this is no answer at all. For Heidegger, art is one area that best exemplifies his overall project concerning the ontological examination of Being and our comportment to our reality. By unpacking the Heideggarian lexicon of ‘*On the Origin of the Work of Art*’, I aim to elucidate and make coherent Heidegger’s explanation for this, one of our most consistently bewildering questions.

Keywords: Art; Heidegger; Poetry.

Essay

A rather difficult aspect of Heidegger’s philosophy in *The Origin of the Work of Art* is coming to grips with his particular usage of the words ‘earth’ and ‘world’. While they both retain their common everyday meaning, within Heidegger’s work they are also there to refer to a conceptual relationship. A relationship that is inherently transcendental, meaning, Heidegger wishes to show

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us the unconcealment of being as a whole, beyond common thought or experience, to show us the happening of truth. While at first glance the line ‘The work lets the earth be an earth’ (Krell, 1977) may seem like airy vacuous nonsense, what this line really signifies is the culmination of some very profound thinking about our world and our existence in it. In this essay I will make clear Heidegger’s intentions for his meanings of ‘earth’ and ‘world’ and use them to illustrate why for Heidegger, poetry is the highest form of art possible and how through poetry works of art are able to ‘let the earth be an earth’.

Heidegger begins by asking us to consider what it is that makes a work of art, art. If we think about it for a moment our response to this would likely be to say: ‘Well, I know what a work of art is when I see it.’ We may not be able to articulate what specifically makes a work of art but we may all recognize art when we see it.

However, this recognition does not answer Heidegger’s initial question. We still have nothing to say about what it is that ‘makes’ a work of art. This could be problematic. It appears that in order to *consider* something a work of art, we must already *recognize it* as such. Logic dictates that such circular thinking is a problem but Heidegger uses this circular nature of the essence of art to underpin his dialectical conception of earth and world in order to reveal the ‘truth’ that is art. For Heidegger the truth of art is not in representation or mimesis of life. Rather, Heidegger is referring to ontic truth, truth that is the essence of the lived relationship we have with what really is, truth that is made coherent from within the work of art itself. ‘Thus in the work it is truth, not merely something true, that is at work’ (Wrathall, 2005).

‘Letting the earth be an earth.’ When first coming to this thought, and considering it on its own, one might consider the language here. Where ‘the’ earth seems inert, little more than a dead rock on which everything is found, simple material, ‘an’ earth, on the other hand, sounds alive, has connotations of home, as a place from which everything comes, a contrast to the above. ‘An’ earth, rather, has the feel of being a world.

World, for Heidegger, is a rather complex concept. World is our reality, within which we operate. We interact with each other, we interact with things around us and it is all made possible by our world. It refers to our language, our culture, our social norms, our customs and traditions as well as the decisions we are able to make and even the possibility of random chances that may affect us. Because of who and how we are, it is the paths that can open up for us in our interactions with the

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things of our world and with each other. World is the coherent unity of our entire existence. So what then is earth?

In the most common sense earth does refer to ‘substance’ such as soil. As when a plant shoots from the earth, grows out from it. But also there is the settling back into the earth, as with the plants, there are the roots. The plant comes forth from the earth but is settled into it via its roots in an essential way. The plant could not come forth as if it were without this essential settling into the earth. Heidegger talks of all things being in a relation with earth which is identical to that of the plant. All things come forth into the world and are rooted in the earth. This is not an easy concept but it is made much clearer through Heidegger’s attention to understanding what it is and how it is that art should do what it does.

The Greeks had the word ‘aletheia’ which means unconcealed or unconcealment. An artwork is not something that just comes out into the open; it changes the Open in which it appears. The work reveals the Open as it really is, as the meaningful existence of the world, the unconcealment in relation to what is concealed.

The opposite of this unconcealment is not concealment in the regular sense but is rather a ‘lack of access for simple intending’ (Wrathall, 2005). I may over hear a couple speaking in Japanese but it is concealed for me as I don’t understand Japanese. I can hear that it is speech but I cannot hear the conversation. The essence, the ‘worlding’ nature of the conversation is concealed for me.

That art should bring forth this unconcealment of the world allows us a better understanding of world and earth in our everyday lives. Take skills for example, like learning to use chopsticks. The beginner is all too aware of trying to coordinate his or her movements; there is an awkwardness, a required concentration, but as skill grows one finds using an item like chopsticks becoming ‘second nature’, as the saying would go, which simply means: ‘I am doing something without any real awareness being necessary for me to do it.’ With skill, all the things about the chopsticks the beginner was so aware of before, disappear. The skill settles into the body and into the equipment we use the very way the roots settle into the earth, so that our bodies and the equipment we use, like the chopsticks, work in unison and in such a way as to be completely absent from our direct consciousness. All our activities are like this, once we learn a skill we do it without being aware of it. Writing and typing are like this also, there is no need to be aware of it happening (see Wrathall, 2005: 76-8); in fact being aware of the act can interfere with it. Typing is certainly an act or skill

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that needs to be done on a semi-subconscious level, thinking about how one types and trying to be aware of the act of typing, trying to explain it as one does it for example, makes it almost impossible to type with any of the normal form or speed one has when one is not thinking about how it is they are able to type. If we consider writing, the ability to write settles into the body and roots itself into the equipment we use, like the pen. The body and the pen each supports the action of writing, they work as one. This is what Heidegger refers to as letting the world ‘world’. The act of writing is not *for us* in a conscious way but, rather, an act that *happens*. For Heidegger all perceivable entities are entities of the ‘earth’, and ‘world’ is the intelligible ordering of things, so the act is a *happening* between entities and what is produced, certainly for Heidegger in the case of poetry, is art.

Where the earth then ‘rises up’, is the positioning, or rather discovery of, the physical limits of the worldly things. With writing, I cannot write forever, my pen will run out, my hand will get tired; the earth imposes limits on what the world does. This is what Heidegger refers to as the ‘essential strife’ between world and earth. Both world and earth appear in the light of the way they impose conditions and constraints on each other (Wrathall, 2005: 78-9). Earth limits the ambitions of world and as such, world, arranging and organizing within such limits, is able to impose itself on earth.

The work (of art) lets an entity ‘shine’, which is the coming together of all the separate entities that make up the entity that is the work itself. It appears as beautiful and thus brings us to feel the world differently, to recognize the truth of how things are, beauty being one way truth essentially occurs for us. It is only when something ‘shines’ for us, that we start engaging in the practices that will let the new way of being which is presented by the work, this new ‘world’, settle into the earth like a new skill, a new ‘second nature’, a process which then repeats itself again and again. We can see this process is circular and also that it is the process of truth disclosing itself. Heidegger has three key terms describing this process: *Streit*, *Riss* and *Gestalt*. The dialectical relation here is of truth giving rise to art.

Streit is Strife, the struggle between earth and world where world pushes earth to its limits and earth then brings world back into it. The world tries to surmount the earth while the earth tends to draw the world into itself and hold it. *Riss* is the ‘rendering stroke’, the conflictual union of the world and earth, world truth materially embodied.

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Gestalt is the configuration taken by Streit and Riss, it is the particular artistic form taken by this conflicted union of world and earth. This Gestalt displaces what it was, its former configuration, through a dialectical process, as it creates a new framework for people by bringing forth what was concealed within its former configuration. What was settled back into the earth, what was forgotten about, comes forth into the 'Openness', our being conscious of the 'world' (Haar, 1993: 98). What this dialectical process shows Heidegger is that the truth of our world, our comportment to our reality, is available to us all the time, though its unconcealment requires a certain interplay of world and earth. It is art, such as painting, music and poetry, that most readily and easily creates the conditions for the unconcealment of truth to be available to us.

The work lets the earth be an earth out of the opaque but not shapeless realm of the earth. There are latent but not predetermined forms, real but not actualized, existing in the earth. As an example, think of the sculptor with his block of marble; he can really bring forth something from the marble but the characteristics of the marble, its size and shape, will be better for some works than for others. So the work is not predetermined but it is latent, a work that isn't so great may be weak and break, or be off balance and fall over, in such cases the artist will have exceeded the limits set by the earth, where the great work will appear to have 'come forth' from the marble, where there is a natural perfection, where quite possibly even the arbitrary patterns in the marble block itself take on the appearance of being in the sculpture 'on purpose', truth revealing itself.

If we think about the poem as another form truth can take, then the poem can be taken as truth condensing itself, pre-disclosing itself (Strife) while being prefigured in the stroke (Riss) so to give rise to this 'figure' of poetry (Gestalt). Like the marble, truth is revealed through the crafting of the materials, in the case of poetry, through the words, the paper and the ink. This is 'truth' tending towards the work. What the poem unfolds into unconcealment is the 'Open' which brought the poem forward in the first place.

The work lets the earth be an earth. With relation to poetry and while considering the material and thingly nature of the word set out above, I considered the statement again this time substituting 'word' for 'earth'. The work lets the word be a word. The material nature of the word, the simple markings which make up text on a page, the earthly nature of a word and worldly nature of language set up meaning, a coherent reality that allows us to be aware of, and consider, where it is and how it is we as a people exist. The setting forth of the earth. Unconcealment.

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Earth and language, material language, is just the written markings that make up language; this is earth for Heidegger, the earth is the language itself. These markings and sounds have nothing in themselves; the meaning of the poem is not in the material language as such. The possibilities are not yet explicitly present but are still prefigured like the above example of the marble sculpture. ‘The material language is where the poetic work is embedded but to which it may not be reduced’ (Haar, 1993: 96). In other words, the work is made of language but cannot be reduced to mere language.

The relation to poetry comes from this earthly side of language, the ‘Sagen’ or ‘the naming power of the word.’ Earth in relation to a work of art like a painting or a poem ‘is’ the material the work is made from. Poetry is ‘made’ of language. The work of the poem brings forth the material language of our world in so far as it puts the world into a material language. However, where world is the meaning in the work, the earth is not ‘some merely acoustic body’ where this meaning is ‘mysteriously added’ (Krell, 1977: 55). Language is more than its physical presence; it has meaning in itself as it is a relation to the world.

Heidegger makes himself most clear in his description of a painting by Van Gogh of a peasant woman’s shoes. The art transforms the shoes, their mode of being, in which the essence of the shoes comes forth and is brought front and centre. In normal life the shoes are equipment, like the pen or the chopsticks, utterly invisible so long as they are doing their jobs.

When Heidegger writes of the world and of the earth and the Strife between the two he is not describing an empirically measurable concrete phenomenon. ‘The earth upon which the world is grounded cannot be understood and determinably conceptualized’ (Wrathall, 2005: 80). There is nothing of Van Gogh’s paintings, of art or artifacts of earth, nor, is there anything of one’s ability with chopsticks, of skill, or the ‘worlding’, that is quantifiable to directly support the claims and explanations Heidegger attributes to these things as belonging to and depending on world and earth. Heidegger is not trying to unfold an empirical experience for us. This dialectical relationship is given to our understanding through Heidegger’s *own specific* use of language, a poetic use of language. Poetry as the art of language helps fulfill the understanding of the world that is present in the artwork. It is only through language that the world can have any presence or reality of us at all. It is through language that we relate to the world. Language allows us to name things and in

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doing so bring them into existence in a sense. We can perceive and understand a rock or a plant because we can name, identify, and relate a rock or plant to ourselves as well as to each other. This ability afforded by language gives us our world. Creatures with no language have no such world, the squirrel that lives in a tree has no such world, it has no ‘tree’, it has no ‘living’, its world does not ‘world’. It is only within language can a world then ‘world’.¹ Heidegger’s description of Van Gogh’s painting of the peasant woman’s shoes is nothing short of inspired. He describes ‘stiffly rugged heaviness’ the ‘tenacity of her slow trudge’, a ‘far spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept raw by wind’, the ‘dampness and richness’ of leather and soil and the ‘loneliness of the field-path as evening falls’. Inspired language that paints an even greater and more detailed and vivid picture than the one this world is derived from. Heidegger’s language alone, in the form of a poem about these shoes of a peasant, could create this world for us without us ever having seen the painting. Meaning, the very truth unconcealed through the painting, could also be unconcealed for us through language. In fact, Heidegger’s description could even be about another world entirely. The sections quoted above seem aptly capable of describing a scene (or painting of the boots of a soldier) from the front lines of World War II rather than peasant boots. Furthermore, this is not simply mimesis, like when a novel represents or mimes a society. The idea of considering the work as mimesis here is far too simplistic, art goes further than this: ‘The work presents its own unique mode of being’. Heidegger’s description, like poetry, presents something for the reader to dwell within and not merely something to decode (Krell, 1977: 43). Heidegger makes art of his own language, displays the artistic power of language. He uses language to present a unique mode of being.

Poetry is the highest form of art for Heidegger because of its use of language. Language allows us to relate to each other and to other things, so poetry occupies this position of ‘privilege’ as it brings about this unconcealment for people. Where art is identified as the occurrence of truth, art is the way that people can see what it is that makes them a people, what it is that makes up the underlying coherence for their existence. It is in the naming power of language though that makes this unconcealing possible at all, the essence of poetry is where poetry as art can show us the underlying unity of our world and existence. One can understand more about life in 19th century London from Dickens than from straight forward historical facts and this is just because of the essence of the

¹ Heidegger uses this word as a verb.

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work, the unconcealing. The work interacts with us in a way that straight forward historical documents, such as official records and ledgers, may struggle (for most of us) to do. Another example: Nietzsche appears to have been best able to understand the Greeks by concentrating on the works of Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides, by understanding the insights provided by the art. His work is full of references to such works of art.

Great art makes a world possible by letting a certain style for organizing things 'shine' and attune us to them, this is unconcealment, the earth being an earth in poetry (Wrathall, 2005: 80). This is why Heidegger gives poetry the pride of place as the highest of the arts, it is language itself which makes the 'worlding' of existence found in art possible in the first place. For Heidegger poetry is the truest form of language and all other language is simply poor poetry.

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