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ART AS ONTOLOGY.
HEIDEGGER ON THE ORIGIN OF THE WORK OF ART

The publication of Heidegger's essay on *The Origin of the Work of Art* in the 5th volume of the *Complete Works*¹ contains the 'marginal notes' written by the philosopher in the margins of older editions of his works. The judgements, interpretations, references and clarifications contained in them express the development of his thought in the clearest and most vivid way. Above all, however, these notes are animated by Heidegger's attempt to interpret the work of the past in a way that would make it compatible with his present state of mind, i.e. by an effort to create the impression of continuity and a smooth and uninterrupted evolution, even where discontinuity and deviation (the so-called "Turn") seem to be beyond any doubt.

One of the rare exceptions to this attempt to smooth out the dramatic changes and shifts in the direction of Heidegger's thought can be observed in a 'marginal note', which, found on a copy of the 1960 edition,² comments on the very first word of *The Origin*...: "Misleading the word 'origin' ". This surprising statement would probably lead a loyal disciple to reject this essay, or at least to adopt a reading guided exclusively by this phrase. In other words, to a reading that would aim at depreciating the notion of "origin" or leading to its re-interpretation. We shall not let ourselves be misled into such an enterprise, and this for several reasons, some of which can be summarized in the following:

a) From Parmenides to Heidegger, 'disciples' or 'schools' of any kind have never exerted any positive influence on the development of philosophy. On the contrary, they rather effected a rigidity by reducing the philosophical concerns of their ancestors to stiffness.

b) An involvement in the history of philosophy that does not degrade itself to a mere “doxography” but claims to be productive should not be determined by the presumably “authentic” interpretations the great philosophers have tried to impose on their work, but by an effort to understand them “better than they understood themselves”.

c) The reception of Heidegger, while getting gradually rid of the reproach of the ‘Nazi philosopher’, is still determined, to a large degree, by the various ‘Heideggerians’, who — not only in Germany or France, but also in Japan and the United States, and to a lesser extent in Greece — try to imitate the rhetoric and the gesture of the philosopher and insist on interpreting his language, which is difficult, through their own language, which is sometimes utterly incomprehensible. It is my opinion that a confrontation with the essence of Heidegger’s thought will become possible only after these habits of philosophical mannerism are set aside and replaced by the work of interpreters who will espouse the conviction of another great philosopher in our century, Hans-Georg Gadamer, according to whom real understanding is always a different understanding.

Thus, instead of following the injunction of that ‘marginal note’, instead of rejecting the thesis of the essay or, at least, the legitimacy of the use of the word “origin” in relation to the Work of art,³ we shall accept the text as it stands and turn to its very first sentence: “Origin means here that from which and by which something is what it is and as it is.” (7/143). This definition seems at first glance difficult and cryptic, but its closer and more careful reading can make it clear and transparent — although not trivial or nonessential. The “origin” is twofold, naming that *from which* something comes and at the same time that *by which* something is what it is and as it is. In the next sentence, Heidegger identifies “what something is as it is” with its essence, its *οὐσία*; hence, “the origin of something is the source of its essence”. A being’s essence is decisively determined by its genesis, and the inquiry on the *τί ἐστιν* and the *οὐσία* of the Work of art will be defined as a questioning of its “origin”. Its twofold character denotes that *from which* something comes and that *by which* it is what it is — in other words: its *generation* and its *ground*. We encounter here an indirect but clear suggestion by Heidegger to translate “origin” into ancient Greek: he apparently uses the word as a synonym of *ἀρχή*. The origin of the Work of art is that out of which it is generated and, at the same time, that on which it lays grounded, deriving its substantial constitution.

To paraphrase Windelband and call Heidegger’s thought a series of footnotes to the Greek philosophy might seem exaggerated. It would not be an exaggeration, however, to indicate that Heideggerian philosophy derives its vitality and spirit from a continuous productive dialogue with the ancient Greek thought and its concepts. This is, in essence, the meaning of the Heideggerian “Destruktion”: not a decaying

dissolution of our philosophical tradition — in the manner of the much-celebrated ‘deconstruction’ — but a productive and constructive “destruction” that searches for meaning and creates sense, rather than distorting and perverting it.

Let us then turn back to the first sentence of the essay, which epitomizes and previews in a few words the direction and purpose of the whole inquiry. The central question — what is the Work of art, what is its *οὐσία* — will be answered if we elucidate its origin: its generation and ground. But where can we find such an origin (*ἀρχή*) of the Work of art? Heidegger here remains Aristotelian in his method, starting the approach to his topic from the *ὑπόληψις*, i.e. the common convictions, opinions and beliefs that apply “for the most part” on a certain subject. The most important and natural opinion would locate the origin of the Work of art in the person of the artist. Heidegger will challenge this conviction, pointing at the circle that arises out of it. If the origin of the Work of art is to be located in the artist, what is then the origin of the artist himself? If we define the Work of art as the product and result of the art, i.e. should we not also define the artist as a creator of Works of art?

The circle we are led to is, however, not necessarily vicious (*malum*), is not to be avoided or rejected, as is the case with the *petitio principii* of the logicians. Not infrequently Heidegger elaborates his thought in such a circular movement, applying thus what *Being and Time* (pp. 152-153; henceforth *BT*) clearly and persuasively had described as the “circle of understanding”. The same he will perform now. He will reject the circle arising out of the definition of the Work of art through the artist and vice versa, but only with the purpose of replacing it with another one. This latter circle identifies the Work of art and art itself as its poles and references: *the origin of the Work of art is art*. In this assertion Heidegger has certainly not yet answered the question, neither has he satisfied the inquiry initiated by the title of the essay, but opens the issue — without ignoring the new problems that now arise, residing in the second circle just detected. If, in our effort to conceive the Work of art, we evoke art, how could we conceive of art, if not through the Works of art?

The replacement of the previous circle (Work of art <=> artist) with the new one (Work of art <=> art) is nonetheless substantial. In this very first step of his syllogism, Heidegger releases himself decisively and definitely from the long tradition of Aesthetics, which explained art as a subjective achievement and as an expression of the inner emotional world of the creative ‘genius’. As for this initial identification of art as the origin of the Work of art, an attentive reader of Heidegger who is also versed in Platonic philosophy will not miss the close relation to the first and fundamental contention of Platonic philosophy: the hypothesis of Forms. Despite Heidegger’s intention to “overcome metaphysics”, his attempt to release himself from the metaphysical tradition and anticipate the “other Thought” and his repeated reproach

that the Platonic philosophy of Forms has been the first, categorical and irreversible ratification of the deviation of philosophy to the path of the “forgetfulness of Being”. Heidegger here — as elsewhere in his work — is undoubtedly ‘platonising’ in the clearest and most obvious manner. Art as the origin of the Work of art is nothing but the *Form of Art*. Like every other Platonic Form, this Form of Art is not simply a “collective idea”, nor does it “exist only on the basis of the actuality of Works and artists” (7/143-4). Precisely as the Form of Justice is not identical with the sum of just actions and men but has its own substantial reality and gives meaning, significance and content to every single just action or property, so this Heideggerian Form of Art makes up the *ἄρχη* and the *αἴτια*, the substantial origin and the condition of the possibility of existence of any Work of art and any artist. The latter “exist only because art exists as their origin” (7/144).

Nevertheless, this *χωλολογία*, which is the primary and necessary condition for an approach to the nature of the Work of art, does not give birth to a second, ideal and autonomous world of Forms. (For this matter, neither does this happen with the Platonic hypothesis¹). Immediately afterwards, Heidegger will insist on “follow[ing] the circle”, i.e. conceiving the interdependent character and the interrelation of *χωλολογία* and *μέθεξις*, announcing a method similar to that of Platonic Socrates: “In order to discover the essence of the art that actually prevails in the Work, let us go to the actual Work and ask the Work what and how it is” (8/144).

At this point, Heidegger temporarily interrupts his dialogue with Greek philosophy and undertakes an exchange with the predominant philosophical trend of his time: Neokantianism.⁴ The Neokantian belief in the priority of “Things”, which make up the ultimate elements of reality and the condition of possibility of purely scientific (the only real and undiluted) knowledge, leads to the assumption of a “thingly character” within the Work of art, to the conjecture that the Work of art is in principle a Thing among others, to which an additional ‘aesthetic’ content and function is consequently attached. The Work of art becomes thus a Thing that *ἄλλο ὄνομα*, something in which the Thing is “brought together” (*συμβάλλειν*) with something else: a symbol or an allegory (9/145-6).

Heidegger will reject this approach, insisting that “the Work is at bottom something else and not a Thing at all” (10/146). He will not state this rejection dogmatically, but by attempting a detailed treatment of three approaches to the Thing, as they have emerged in the philosophical tradition. In a fresh broadening of his perspective, Heidegger now turns to the interpretation of Thing: a) as an *ἰτροκειμενον* — bearer of traits; b) as *αἰσθητόν* — unity of a manifold of sensations; c) as a piece of *ἔργον* that has obtained some *μορφή*. Having rejected the first two approaches as unable to grasp in an “immediate” way the essence of the Thing (12-16/148-152), Heidegger turns to the third, which at first glance might seem to apply particularly to the thingness

of the Work of art: Indeed, thingness could be located in the “matter”, which is subsequently creatively “formed” by the artist. Even though traditional Aesthetics embraced this pair of concepts (form-matter) long ago and made use of this “conceptual machinery” (17/153), Heidegger does not hesitate to deny its relevance for art, rejecting particularly the contention that the thingness of the Work of art can be found in the matter out of which it has been created (16-17/153). Undertaking a further step, he asserts that the pair *ἔργον-μορφή* does not arise out of a consideration of the Thing, but descends from the “Piece of equipment” (17-20/154-156). We thus gain the conceptual triad ‘Thing-Piece of equipment-Work of art’, by means of which the argumentation of the essay will further proceed.

In *Being and Time* (§ 15-18), the Piece of equipment was the fundamental ontological category and starting point of the approach to the phenomenon of the World. The first and leading mode of manifestation and perception of beings consists there in their function as useful objects that serve a certain purpose and in their usage refer to other beings/Pieces of equipment. A web of signs and interrelations is thus constituted, grounded in “everydayness” and the practical intentions of every individual Dasein and making up the World of each of us. The Piece of equipment as a being “‘ready-to-hand’ and its ‘usefulness’ (Dienlichkeit) are qualified in *BT* as more ‘primordial’ than the ‘simply present’ Thing and its neutral (theoretical or scientific) ‘sight’”. The Piece of equipment is primary, the Thing is derivative and descendant, and the World is “a characteristic of Dasein itself” (*BT*, 64). As for the Work of art, the conceptual narrowness of *BT* is unable to embrace or even approximate it.

In the *Origin*... we witness a spectacular reversal of this account, confirming thus once more that (after the ‘failure’ of *BT*’s) the famous “Turn” did indeed take place — notably not as a mere adaptation of Heidegger’s thinking to new questions or topics but as a fundamental shift in the direction of his thought. The Piece of equipment now is not an ‘organ’ or ‘instrument’. Its primary distinction is not a practical “usefulness” (Dienlichkeit) anymore, but its familiarity and “reliability” (Verlässlichkeit) regarding the user. The most significant modification, however, is the following: the Piece of equipment does not embrace and designate the primordial and fundamental relation to beings anymore, but its understanding itself requires a further condition. What is this condition? Having expressed his intention to grasp the Piece of equipment in an “immediate” way (20/156) and without the interference of “any philosophical theory” (22/158), Heidegger now undertakes a sudden, unexpected and surprising move. In order to describe a common Piece of equipment, like a pair of shoes, he turns to a painting by Van Gogh, which (in the author’s opinion) depicts the shoes of a peasant woman, and he searches there for their essence. *If we want to conceive the truth of the Piece of equipment — and of the Thing as well — we thus need the Work of Art.*

As a result, the Work of art is being placed at the center of human experience and now functions as the most important link that renders every relation to beings possible. This does not mean, of course, that science, philosophy or everyday activities do not denote relations to beings and to the world. This view does not suggest that artistic activity should be expanded and does not require that every aspect of life and knowledge become the object of an aesthetic approach. Especially the last assumption would be completely wrong. First, because Heidegger never formulates any requirements, never makes appeals or expresses visions; secondly, because the importance ascribed to the Work of Art does not concern its "aesthetic" dimension but another, completely different function it fulfills: according to Heidegger, in the Work of art "the truth of beings has set itself to work" (25/162).

Science and quantitative operations, everyday praxis and pure theory all relate to beings and are concerned with them. What they cannot conceive and state as their explicit task, however, is the *truth* of beings. Heidegger here assigns this task to art. We have to comprehend this enterprise in its entire significance, depth and consequences. Art is not faced primarily as an expression of the inner world of the artist, nor as a factor of an aesthetic experience and pleasure of the listener or the spectator. It is not placed within certain frameworks, categories, fashions or schools, nor classified according to techniques or styles. Heidegger does not enter such subjects and certainly does not want to deprive artists and Aesthetics, art critics and museum scientists, art schools, art dealers and historians of these domains. Without doubt, all of them can still continue producing, interpreting, selling, exhibiting and dealing with Works of art. Nevertheless, as Heidegger states, they will never be able to grasp the true origin of a Work of art. This origin is detected in the art itself, in the Form of Art, which "sets truth to work". In this way Heidegger bares art of its aesthetic dimension and approaches it exclusively as a bearer of truth. Yet, what is truth?

Heidegger's denial to accept the traditional explication of truth as an 'adaequatio', as a resemblance and conformity of our sayings and knowledge with objects, is well-known. He maintains that such conformity presupposes a previous revelation and manifestation of the being in talk. Well-known is also Heidegger's persistence in reminding us of the etymology of the Greek "truth" (ἀλήθεια), stemming from the privative ἀ- and ἄληθι ("concealment"), and his consequent insistence on understanding "truth" (Wahrheit) as "unconcealment" (Unverborgenheit). But what is the intention of this insistence and the emphasis on the privative character of truth? How could we synoptically determine the fundamental features of truth qua unconcealment?

(1) Heidegger perceives ἀλήθεια not statically but dynamically: not as a fait accompli, but as a process.

(2) This process does not comprise an exclusively positive dimension, nor does it imply a constant progress towards a continuously extending elucidation. On the contrary, it takes place as a continuous "strife" between ἀλήθεια and ἄληθι, between concealment and revelation: the very "truth, in its essence, is un-truth" (43/179);

(3) The unveiling dimension of truth qua ἀλήθεια is not primarily performed as an activation of the subjective cognitive, intellectual, mental or lingual faculties of man, but as a readiness for attentive, participating and "obedient" apprehension of the unconcealing process, which originates prior to man and leads beyond man.

The temptation to ask where this process finally comes from and where it concludes is certainly difficult to evade. A first answer to this question should mention Being and its History, its manifestations (as "Ereignis") and withdrawals, its appeals to man, thought and language. Such an answer would not be a philosophical one. This would not bother Heidegger, who in his late thought maintained that metaphysics and philosophy in general have exhausted their sources and should give place to "Thought", which would prepare an "other commencement" of the History (of Being). However, it probably bothers us, or at least those among us who are not persuaded of the inescapable end of philosophy and still resist the endmost consequences of Heidegger's thought, as well as the similar-sounding (and ill-sounding) 'post-modern' Strains.

If we try to transform these (almost poetic) narratives of Being into philosophical Logos, we primarily have to draw a parallel between the Heideggerian rejection of the omnipotence of human subjectivity and the demonstration of Dasein as the region of the manifestation of Being ("Da des Seins") with all those cases in the philosophical tradition that have opposed the boundaries of reason to the claim of an absolute knowledge, the acknowledgement of shades to the endeavor of limitless clarification, a man-part of History to the man-creator of History, an awareness of human finitude to the arrogance of subjectivity. By this I do not only mean Kierkegaard, for whom Heidegger felt such proximity that he had to disparage him as a "religious thinker".⁶ I also have in mind the constant Platonic interweaving of γυθός and λόγος and the subsequent insight that conceptual Platonic interweaving of γυθός and λόγος and the subsequent insight that conceptual Platonic interweaving of γυθός and λόγος, beyond which only myth may carry us. And, furthermore, Kant's continuous insistence on the impossibility of a knowledge of the "thing in itself", as well as his famous description of the unavoidable adventures of Reason, in the "Transcendental Dialectics" of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Heidegger's overall approach to truth as ἀλήθεια of Being certainly justifies the importance he ascribes to art and his decision to regard it as the area of the disclosure of truth *par excellence*. Indeed, and in accordance to the aspects distinguished above,

(1) The Work of art does not exist as a static construction, in which a given material takes its definite shape, but as a field of dynamic conjunction and strife

altogether — as a “repose” which does not “exclude motion from itself, but rather includes it” (37/173).

(2) This strife occurs as a linking, interrelation and confrontation of World and Earth. World is not anymore “my own World” of *BT*, nor “the mere collection of the countable or uncountable, familiar and unfamiliar things that are at hand” (33/170). World is the disclosure and openness achieved in the Work of art, in which beings, Things or Pieces of equipment, men and gods all reveal themselves in their essence. Earth, in its turn, denotes that cryptic and unapproachable element that resists to our grasping, that keeps beings at a distance, conceals and shelters them at the same time.⁷ The struggle of World and Earth in the Work of art is the clearest and most typical articulation of the struggle between truth and concealment, between $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\upsilon\alpha$ and $\lambda\acute{\alpha}\theta\eta$. Heidegger, however, does not regard World and Earth as irreconcilable opposites, nor does he identify them with truth and concealment respectively: “the World is not simply the open region that corresponds to the clearing, and the Earth is not simply the closed region that corresponds to concealment. Rather, the World [...] bases itself on something not mastered, something concealed, confusing [...] The Earth is not simply the closed region but rather that which rises up as self-closing” (43-44/180). Consequently, the strife does not only take place between the two ‘trivals’, but also within them. The properties of the Work of art to reveal and conceal at the same time, to unveil while hiding and to hide and shelter in the open, to change in the course of time through the different modes and ways of its “preserving” (“Bewahrung”, 54-55/191-192), to enter into a dialogue with us, to call us and avoid us — these properties of the Work of art raise it to an exceptional field of unfolding the strife between unconcealment and forgetfulness and turn art into to the region of $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\upsilon\alpha$ *par excellence*.

(3) The “origin” of the Work of art is not the artist, but art itself. This means that the truth intrinsic to all great Works of art is not set “to work” *by* the creator, but somehow *through* her. We might assume that Heidegger does not regard the artist as an autonomous and genius subject, but rather as a *talented* human: as somebody who has received a gift to be treated according to the conditions prescribed and functions as an initiate and a minister of the struggle within $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\upsilon\alpha$. Heidegger does not view in the person of the artist an effective cause of the Work of art, nor does he investigate here the formation of some pre-existent material that leads to the production of the Work of art as a final cause of the artistic activity. Explicitly or tacitly, Heidegger here rejects the significance of all four Aristotelian causes in an approach to the essence of the Work of art. In particular with regard to the artist as efficient cause, the author asserts: “In great art — and only such art is under consideration here — the artist remains inconsequential as compared with the Work, almost like a passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the Work to emerge” (29/166).

We departed from the question on the origin of the Work of art, which found its first answer in art itself, in the Form of Art, uncovering thus a completely new perspective for the understanding of artistic creation. The Form of art certainly requires its embodiment in Works, in order to perform its ‘methectic’ function. This need is nevertheless neither primary nor autonomous. It is interwoven with the general need of truth to be “established” within beings as $\alpha\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ (49), to obtain a stable form and content. The most substantial $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ of truth is its “impulse toward the Work as one of truth’s distinctive possibilities, by which it can itself occur as being in the midst of beings” (50/187). Art does not represent or imitate, does not contain material nor does it ground on a Thing as its basis. It does not originate from a creative subject and does not derive its substance from the participating perception of the spectator or listener. Art is not “art for the sake of art” either. This does not mean, however, that art has to serve some social, political or other purposes, to be *avant-garde* or ‘committed’ art. Heidegger rejects here ‘l’art pour l’art’, only with the purpose of substituting for this ‘l’art pour la vérité’: “Beauty is one way in which truth essentially occurs as unconcealment” (44/181).

The lectures on which the *Origin*... is based were first given in 1935/36. Heidegger had meanwhile reconciled himself with his inability to complete *Being and Time* and had started interpreting this as a consequence of the general inability of metaphysics to grasp the truth of Being, or even as the last result of the widespread “forgetfulness of Being”. Having carried out his famous “Turn” (1930), and after the pitiful failure of his political involvement, he will now constantly search for new paths to articulate his thought, for new ‘conveyors’ to bring him closer to “the overcoming of metaphysics” and the preparation of the “other commencement” of the History of Being. His most important and productive inquiries will concern art and poetry. In 1934, shortly after his resignation from the post of the rector at the University of Freiburg, he will give a course entitled “The overcoming of Aesthetics in the question of art”. This title epitomizes in an excellent way the undertaking of the *Origin of the Work of Art*. Art is not a mere aesthetic phenomenon anymore. Moreover, the question of art and its origin undermines Aesthetics and eliminates its claims.

Facing the dead ends of traditional metaphysics, Heidegger will attempt a double challenge. First, he will declare the definitive end of traditional ontology. Secondly, he will try to release art from its solely aesthetic dimension and will declare it as an excellent region of the manifestations of truth as $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\upsilon\alpha$ of Being. Heidegger’s statement in the Addendum attached to the essay in the 1960 edition is characteristic and revealing: “The whole essay on *The Origin of the Work of Art* deliberately yet tacitly moves on the path of the question of the essence of Being. Reflection on what *art* may be is completely and decidedly determined only in regard to the question of *Being*.” (GA, vol. 5, p. 73 / 210). The traditional ontology dealing

with beings is substituted here by the manifestations of the truth of Being, as they occur in art. Art compensates for the loss of traditional ontology, takes over its duties and fulfils its function, and, finally, transforms itself into a distinct ontology.

NOTES

1. *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5, Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 1977, pp. 1-74. The volume contains the collection of essays called *Holzwege* (*Ways in the forest*, first printed in 1950; the first of these is *The Origin...* In quoting *The Origin...* I refer to the pagination of the 1950 edition (also indicated in the *Gesamtausgabe*), followed by the pages of the English translation in *Basic Writings*, Routledge 1993, pp. 139-212. (Alterations of this translation are not pointed out.)
2. The pocket edition printed by Reclam (Stuttgart 1960), also containing Heidegger's "Addendum" and H.-G. Gadamer's "Introduction".
3. Heidegger often writes simply "Work" (Werk), instead of "Work of art" (Kunstwerk). In order to avoid complications, I always translate "Werk" into "Work of art". The initial capital serves to stress the terminological use of "Work": the same will be the case below with the terms "Thing" (Ding) and "Piece of equipment" (Zeug).
4. See H.-G. Gadamer, *Zur Einführung, in Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, 1960, pp. 102-103.
5. The word "failure" is here set in quotes, taking into account the fact that, although *BT* remained unfinished and completely failed to fulfil its declared intention ("the explication of Time as the transcendental horizon for the question of Being"), it still remains the most important (and no doubt the most influential) philosophical work of our century.
6. *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5, p. 249.
7. Heidegger denotes this double function of Earth with the verb "verbergen" ("conceal"), which also includes "bergen" ("conceal", but also "shelter", "save").

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