

Poetic Uncovering in Heidegger

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Yet us it behooves, you poets, to stand
 Bare-headed beneath God's thunderstorms,
 To grasp the father's ray, itself, with our own hands,
 And to offer to the people
 The heavenly gift wrapt in song,
 For only if we are pure in heart,
 Like children, are our hands innocent.
 —Hölderlin

The Western philosophical tradition assumes that there are right answers. Much of the work done since Plato has been "essential searching" for right answers and arguments for and against those answers once they are "found." Martin Heidegger disagreed with the idea that truth means "getting it right." Starting with *Being and Time*, and continuing through his whole intellectual career, Heidegger tried to resurrect the idea that philosophy should be about *uncovering*. Where Plato turned truth into "the correctness of apprehending and asserting,"¹ Heidegger would call it "disclosure of beings through which an openness essentially unfolds."² As Heidegger advanced in his thinking, he found the language of philosophy to be essentially inadequate for the delicate task of uncovering the world. Richard Rorty puts it this way, "One way to describe what Heidegger does in his later work is to see him as defending the poets against the philosophers."³ Heidegger's focus turned from philosophical to poetic language as best-equipped to reveal being.

The "Truth" Misunderstanding

One of Heidegger's main critiques of Plato and the resulting Western philosophical tradition is that they have completely misunderstood the notion of truth. Plato's allegory of the cave set out a new notion of truth clearly, but incorrectly. According to Plato (as Heidegger reads him) we find truth as our "gaze becomes more correct," and "through this correctness, seeing or knowing becomes something correct so that in the end it looks directly at the highest idea...Truth becomes the correctness of apprehending and asserting."⁴ Rorty reads Heidegger as questioning Plato's premises (assumptions which set up truth as adversarial) as having "something to do with evidence, with being clear and convincing, with being in possession of *powerful, penetrating, deep* insights or arguments...."⁵ Ever since that assumption of primacy, philosophy has been engaged in dialectic, with proving and disproving, with "getting it right."

The consequences of such a system are today's philosophical buzzwords, words like "verificationism" and "correspondence." When we assume that there is some most correct way of apprehending we get caught up in the struggle to define minutely what that most correct way is. We struggle with the proving of the being instead of with the being itself. Instead of concerning ourselves with beings themselves, we concentrate incorrectly on "human comportment toward beings."⁶ Heidegger laments the loss, claiming that the idea of "being in the world" (Heidegger uses the term *Dasein*) has faded and virtually disappeared with all of its advantages as philosophy has become more "right."

Heidegger goes back to the pre-Socratics in search of a term that better defines what we should look for when speaking of truth. The crucial turn came, he says, with Plato's misuse of the term *aletheia*. Plato used it in the way defined above, as "truth," but Heidegger reads the original meaning as "unconcealment." He says,

If we translate *aletheia* as 'unconcealment' rather than 'truth', this translation is not merely 'more literal'; it contains the directive to rethink the ordinary concept of truth in the sense of the correctness of statements and to think it back to that still uncomprehended disclosedness and disclosure of beings.⁷

He believes that Plato misdirected us and we have been stuck trying to "get it right" while ignoring the beings themselves. As a consequence, Heidegger does not want to talk about the right way to get at something. In fact, he claims that there is no "right" way to get at beings at all, only better ways of uncovering them. Heidegger outlines his conception of truth most clearly in the following lines:

Truth is not a feature of correct propositions that are asserted of an "object" by a human "subject" and then are "valid" somewhere, in what sphere we know not; rather, truth is disclosure of beings through which an openness essentially unfolds.⁸

He does not even want to start his discussion of truth from within the subject-object argument prevalent since Descartes began questioning his own existence.

Within this new (but actually old) understanding of *aletheia*, we begin to see why Heidegger will propose a turn from the technical language of philosophical inquiry toward the subtler, more revealing language of poetry.

Philosophy versus Poetry

Because philosophical dialectic assumes the reality of a Platonic "right" answer, the language the dialectic employs has gradually shifted in that direction. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the example of grade-school discussions about the scientific method. We start with a hypothesis, something we think we can prove or disprove through a series of tests, and we work through until we have found the hypothesis to be right or wrong. A pragmatist might say that the system is fine because it works, and we have accomplished marvels as a result. A scientist might never even question the system, saying essentially the same thing: that the system has worked obviously well for thousands of years. Where is the compelling reason to change? Heidegger would not deny any of that, but would probably say that the system is more fundamentally concerned with technology than with understanding, real unconcealing.

In his essay "What Calls for Thinking," Heidegger relates thinking to the lost art of uncovering and makes this point clear: "The role of thinking is not that of an opponent. Thinking is thinking only when it pursues whatever speaks *for* a matter."⁹ He would have us abandon the opposition-oriented searching in favor of speaking "for a matter," in favor of uncovering. The opposite of uncovering is, of course, covering or concealing, and the more we focus on "getting it right" about a being, the more we conceal many other aspects of the being. Heidegger responds to philosophy's tendency to conceal beings by advocating a different approach, by advocating the "original" approach. He suggests that we "let beings be." In his vocabulary this "letting be" is "(1) not in the negative sense, but granting — preservation; (2) not as an ontically oriented effecting. Heeding, taking heed of being as being."¹⁰ The idea does not even promote an *approach* (passive or otherwise) to the world. It emphasizes, instead, *Dasein's* need to interact simply, even organically, with beings. Essentially, instead of pulling beings out of the world to look at them and "figure them out," the directive is to let *Dasein* engage the world, let beings show themselves to *Dasein* in their unconcealedness. From here we see easily why Heidegger would want a non-technical language to describe the world.

Though poets themselves may not think in Heideggerian terms, their primary task lies in uncovering the

world, depicting and exploring the various relationships between beings and *Dasein*. David Krell, in his introduction to Heidegger's "What Calls for Thinking," summarizes the idea this way, "Calculative kinds of thinking...do not fulfill all the requirements of man's thinking nature. Poets demand of us another kind of thinking — less exact but no less strict."¹¹ By employing the full range of a language's expressive power a poet can draw on nuance and metaphor in expressing. Philosophy has gone the other way by trying to make terms as specific as possible and then quibbling endlessly over the exact meaning of any given word.

Heidegger himself thinks that we often take the easy road, "erring" by fleeing "from the mystery toward what is readily available . . . passing the mystery by."¹² Philosophy has set up the "easy" system where there are pat answers and closed books that assume all has been written and nothing remains but to cross the 't's and dot the 'i's. The poets claim, along with Heidegger, that we cannot close any books. With six billion people in the world, all engaging existence in different ways, only extreme presumption could claim that the erudites have a monopoly on truth and its relation to humans. This takes us back to some lines from the Holderlin poem above: "Yet us it behooves, you poets...to offer to the people/The heavenly gift wrapt in song." By admitting variation and remaining more concerned with the wonder of the gift, poets do more justice to the world's being; they paint more telling pictures.

By being more concerned with Heideggerian "uncovering" than with Platonic "truth," poetry gets closer to *Dasein*. We should be careful to understand that Heidegger does not suggest that philosophy and poetry be combined or that either be eliminated. Their respective tasks are different, and that is just fine. In *Nietzsche I*, Heidegger explains his position more precisely:

All philosophical thinking, and precisely the most rigorous and most prosaic, is in itself poetic, and yet is never poetic art. Likewise, a poet's work — like Holderlin's hymns — can be thoughtful in the highest degree, and yet it is never philosophy.¹³

Poetry and philosophy have their places, each important, so the emphasis is not on replacing philosophy, but on emphasizing poetry's importance in accessing truth in the world.

How Poetry Uncovers

In his discussion of thinking, Heidegger uses the analogy of a cabinetmaker's apprentice. In Heidegger's view this apprentice is not working on cabinets just for practice. He is not working merely in order to learn the trade. Learning the trade may bring these secondary results, but they are not primary reasons. The "true cabinetmaker," in his view, both answers and responds to different kinds of wood and to the shapes slumbering within the wood.¹⁴ This example stands as an effective illumination of how poetry uncovers. The world and beings in the world are like wood freshly hewn from a burl'd tree. Each piece requires a different response in order to bring out its best characteristics. If the aspiring cabinetmaker were to treat each piece exactly the same he could probably create functional pieces at the cost of sacrificing much of the wood's beauty or power. The unique shapes "slumbering" in the wood require *Dasein's* interaction instead of mere "work" from the outside. "Uncovering" requires the cabinetmaker to go into the wood, to let it be by highlighting its peculiarities instead of cutting through them. Without that "relatedness" to the wood "the craft will never be anything but empty busywork."¹⁵ A piece of wood, treated by a sensitive cabinetmaker, is uncovered in a very full sense.

The same thing stands with truth. As *Dasein* interacts with the world, beings are unconcealed in much the same way as wood. For our thinking and expression we need a craft that is more than just busywork, and we need to understand our relatedness to the world in much the same way as the cabinetmaker

understands his relatedness to the wood. Because poetry responds to beings in the world with more craft-like, sensitive, and flexible language, it is the more appropriate mode of expression for uncovering. In his translator's introduction to *Elucidations of Holderlin's Poetry*, Hoeller makes note of Heidegger's turn, and reasoning for that turn, toward poetic language:

What Heidegger discovered in the years following the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927 was that, if he is to retrieve the forgottenness of Being, he will also have to retrieve the language which will enable him to say the truth of Being, and that this language is a fundamentally poetic one.¹⁶

Returning to Heidegger's critique of epistemological power plays, Rorty explains why poetry in Heidegger's thought can be so effective in uncovering:

By contrasting powerful reality with relatively impotent appearance, and claiming that it is all-important to make contact with the former, our tradition has suggested that the fragile and the transitory can safely be neglected.¹⁷

There is something immanently important in words. Truth is often as fragile as the words it uses, and in bowling with purely philosophical terms we are as likely to knock down important pins unwantedly as we are to knock down the pins we were aiming for. Heidegger claims that the more frequently we use a term, the less we are able to *hear* it, the less we are forced to examine it in context for its appropriateness and suitability.¹⁸ We need to turn back to simple words, and "we need to hear them in the way in which a poet hears them when deciding whether to put one of them at a certain place in a certain poem."¹⁹ The emphasis here lies less with poetry as an end in itself, but with the necessary care a poet takes in constructing and communicating thoughts.

Even to the casual reader of poetry, these ideas about the importance of poetic language make sense. We have all read poems in general education from this or that period and by this or that poet. As casual (but sincere) readers we will find echoes of truth in all the great poems. Some speak louder because *Dasein* is more engaged with that topic, that time, and that language. Others will barely whisper, for while the truth is down there *Dasein* is just barely feeling around the edges of the depicted being. Because poets began ignoring Plato's interpretation of *aletheia* long before philosophers, they have had years to concern themselves more with uncovering rather than with absolute truth. Each of the great historic poets does something to properly uncover. Otherwise we would not still respond to what they have written.

Heidegger touches on why much of the deep meaning has gone out of language in his discussion of language itself. In an essay entitled "Holderlin and the Essence of Poetry" he writes,

Language is charged with the task of making beings manifest and preserving them as such — in the linguistic work. Language gives expression to what is most pure and most concealed, as well as to what is confused and common. Indeed, even the essential word, if it is to be understood and so become the common possession of all, must make itself common.²⁰

The problem with language, then, is that it has a double task. First, it must communicate the common, everyday work of the world. Second, it must communicate the deep, essential truths about *Dasein*. We have to use the same language to tell a barber how to cut our hair as we do to engage and describe the essence of beings. The advantage to this is that many of the world's deeper insights are available to any

who pass the initial test of speaking a common language. The disadvantage is that common language can be used too easily, causing the speaker and the listener to trivialize assertions. A common example that Heidegger uses is "the sky *is* blue." We hear that assertion all the time, but what does "is" mean in that statement? How does it unconceal? Is it metaphorical or literal? We find no pat answer when we begin to truly think about it, but instead fall easily in "erring," fleeing from the "mystery toward that which is readily available."

Poetry comes as an answer to the difficulty, standing as a sort of golden mean between language too familiar and language too removed. Careful use of syntax and diction allows the poet to uncover beings because readers must think about every word, especially the simple words. This becomes apparent when we think about the difference between reading a common novel and reading a compendium of poetry. We can breeze over the words of novels, accessing just enough to follow a plot and understand an occasional image. We may also breeze over poetry, but conscientious readers do not, for they realize that uncovering comes eloquently through allusions, syntax, and unusual metaphors.

In "What Calls for Thinking" Heidegger describes our concealing linguistic familiarity as "common speech" and implicitly proposes that poetic language steps toward resolving that problem by using uncommon speech. According to him, "We meet [the common speech] on all sides, and since it is common to all, we now accept it as the only standard."²¹ When this common speech becomes "current speech" by invading the consciousness and the communication of the species we begin to conceal, to seal off options. That is part of the cost of quick, efficient communication: we no longer have to think very deeply about the words themselves. We rarely have to think deeply at all because the prosaic nature of our language does not call for it. Continuing the previous thought, Heidegger says this split from true thinking comes, "as soon as we regard the common as the only legitimate standard, and become generally incapable of fathoming the commonness of the common."²²

Holderlin interested Heidegger particularly because his poetry uses uncommon speech to depart; "to inhabit the formerly habitual proper speaking of language."²³ Along the lines of Heidegger's previous claim that the pre-Socratics used *aletheia* more as uncovering than truth, Heidegger thinks that humans used to speak much more carefully and properly in their communication. Referring back to Plato's fateful truth-as-supremacy turn, Rorty says that Heidegger wants to "direct our attention to the difference between inquiry and poetry, between struggling for power and accepting contingency."²⁴ Heidegger sees the Greeks as doing philosophy as much in the poetry of the language they used as in anything else. They had no previous tradition on which to draw, no "accepted" terminology about which to debate, so their language had to be particularly meaningful, particularly poetic.

In light of this, Holderlin's lines from a draft of "Mnemosyne" are particularly meaningful:

We are a sign that is not read,
We feel no pain, we almost have
Lost our tongue in foreign lands.

Common language does not require us to read signs very deeply, whether those signs be beings in the world or other humans. Heidegger sees us as losing "our tongue in foreign lands." We still communicate, certainly, but our tongue and heritage are not often enough the *aletheia* of the pre-Socratics, the tongue that spoke in the world instead of breezing over it.

Conclusion

Philosophy is not a fruitless field. Heidegger did not wish to abandon academic investigation in order to write inane verse about trees and the weather. He did, however, want to recognize one of the weaknesses of the philosophical endeavor as practiced by thinkers and scholars the world over; the language we use often conceals as much as it reveals. Our task, then, is to let beings be, to engage them and uncover them, not to wrest them from their place with lumbering technical terms.

Thoughtful poetry is a powerful vehicle for this uncovering. One of the reasons, and perhaps the main reason, it is read in state rooms and living rooms, on luxury jets and on city buses, to congregations and to cradles is that truth comes through language. Carefully considered truths about the world are often best articulated in the unofficial language of poetry, not the technical language of a scholarly journal. The language may be less strict, but unconcealing never depended on formulas. The words may be less formal, but truth never depended on an academic degree.

Notes

1. Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 177.
2. *Pathmarks* 144.
3. *Pathmarks* 33.
4. *Pathmarks* 177.
5. *Pathmarks* 30 – 31.
6. *Pathmarks* 177.
7. *Pathmarks* 144.
8. *Pathmarks* 146.
9. David Farrel Krell, *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993) 378.
10. *Pathmarks* 144.
11. Krell 366-67.
12. *Pathmarks* 150.
13. Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations of Holderlin's Poetry*, ed. Keith Hoeller (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2000) 13.
14. Krell 379.
15. Krell 379.
16. *Elucidations* 11.
17. Richard Rorty, *Heidegger, Contingency and Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

1991) 34.

18. Rorty 34.

19. Rorty 35.

20. *Elucidations* 55.

21. Krell 388.

22. Krell 388.

23. Krell 388.

24. Rorty 36.