## Is art worth more than the truth?

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My title is derived from Heidegger's 1936–1937 lectures, *The Will to Power as Art*, and my discussion is keyed to two of the Nietzschean remarks on art which Heidegger discusses. The first is: "The phenomenon 'artist' is still the most *perspicuous*" (*Nietzsche* 69), and the second is: "The will to *semblance*, to illusion, to deception, to becoming and change is deeper, more 'metaphysical,' than the will to *truth*, to reality, to Being" (*Nietzsche* 74). Heidegger reformulates them as: "Art is the most perspicuous and familiar configuration of will to power," and "Art is worth more than the truth" (75). I propose to tease out what these aphorisms imply for Heidegger's answer to the panel question: "What is a work of art?/*Was ist ein Kunstwerk*?<sup>1</sup>

I will argue that Heidegger's aesthetic is formalist and mimetic – despite the fact that the Nietzschean aphorisms on which he builds his aesthetic are motivated by an expressive and affective aesthetic. To put it another way, Nietzsche's aesthetic is romantic, while Heidegger's is modernist. In addition to *The Will to Power as Art*, I will discuss "The Origin of the Work of Art," a lecture series first delivered in November 1935, but repeated at Frankfurt in the Fall of 1936 concurrently with the Nietzsche lectures. Since there does not seem to be any clear consensus on the extension of these terms, I will set out what I mean by them.

An expressive-affective aesthetic is one that accounts for the features of a work of art by appeal to its causes and effects. Put at its crudest, such a theory holds that a sad symphony is sad because it renders its hearers sad, and that it does so because the composer was sad, or at least, intended to render his or her hearers sad (and knew how to do so). Readers of Peter Kivy will be familiar with arguments for the "expressivity" of musical works which ingeniously avoid such a simplistic paradigm. Kivy's arguments (like Heidegger's) are designed to preserve "expressivity" – that is, the representation of emotional states – within a mimetic-formalist aesthetic. Nothing I say here undermines Kivy's arguments. Nor, on the other

hand, do his arguments undermine my characterization of an expressive-affective aesthetic as one that accounts for the features of a work of art by appeal to its causes (artist, muse, or inspiration) and its effects (enlightenment, persuasion, movement to action).

The classic statement of an expressive-affective theory is found in Plato's *Ion*. Speaking to the rhapsode, Ion, Socrates observes:

This gift you have of speaking well on Homer is not an art; it is a power divine, impelling you like the power in the stone Euripides called the magnet.... [Like the magnet the muse] first makes men inspired, and then through these inspired ones others share in the enthusiasm, and a chain is formed, for the epic poets, all the good ones, have their excellence, not from art, but are inspired, possessed, and thus they utter all these admirable poems. So it is also with the good lyric poets; as the worshipping Corybantes are not in their senses when they dance, so the lyric poets are not in their senses when they make these lovely lyric poems. No, when once they launch into harmony and rhythm, they are seized with the Bacchic transport, and are possessed.... (Ion 533d-534a)

Although Plato uses these observations to discomfit the rhapsode's claims to knowledge, rather than to justify the works of Homer, this statement of the ecstatic expressive-affective aesthetic has found many adherents – among them Nietzsche.

A mimetic-formalist aesthetic, on the other hand, endeavors to account for the features of the work of art by appeal to some conformity between that which is represented and the work – a conformity which is "formal," that is, some equivalence between the internal relations of the representans and the representand. At its crudest such a theory holds that the work of art is a "copy" or resemblant of that which it represents – that the work (the representans) shares formal features with the representand. The classic statement of this theory is also found in Plato – in the famous argument of the three beds in Book X of The Republic, which concludes that "the mimetic art is far removed from the truth.... because it touches or lays hold of only a small part of the object and that a phantom" (Republic 596a–598e). In Plato's construction, the observer of a mimesis is not carried away in rapture as is the listener to Ion, but rather is in a state of contemplative illusion, deceived by a painting of a cobbler or a carpenter which he or she takes to be a real cobbler or carpenter (Republic 823c).

Heidegger's project in these two works is to reconcile Nietzsche's romantic (ecstatic and expressive-affective) aesthetic with his own modernist (contemplative and mimetic-formalist) aesthetic. His argument turns on the meaning of the term "truth" for Nietzsche and for himself. By "truth" Nietzsche is said to mean, "the 'true world' of the supersensuous, which conceals in itself the danger that life may perish" (*Nietzsche 75*). If truth is

transcendental and metaphysical, then art, being sensuous and experiential, must be its contrary. Heidegger makes this point explicitly in the Nietzsche lectures:

If ... Nietzsche's philosophy is [a] reversal of Platonism, and if the true is thereby affirmation of the sensuous, then truth is the same as what art affirms, i.e. the sensuous. [A little later] Nietzsche says that art is worth more than truth. It must be that Plato decides that art is worth less than truth, that is, less than knowledge of true being as philosophy (*Nietzsche* 162–3).

However, the other aphorism, "Art is the most perspicuous and familiar configuration of will to power," implies some friendliness between art and truth, if perspicuity and truth are understood to be closely related. The key terms in this remark are "perspicuous" and "configuration." I take the former to entail some variety of mimeticism, for what other sense can "perspicuous" have than that of adequacy of expression to a world?<sup>2</sup> And I take the second term to invoke a variety of formalism, for what can a configuration be other than a variety of form? I shall argue that Heidegger's aesthetic is precisely a reconciliation of the Platonic opposition between truth and art by means of his particular sense of truth as aletheia or "unconcealing," which does not involve an opposition between truth and the sensuous. This reconciliation is inevitably mimetic and formalist, but it is still anti-Aristotelian. For Aristotle's reconciliation of truth and the sensuous is based on an empirical epistemology, in which general truths arise from particular sensory information. Heidegger has no use for such a resolution, which he calls an "oblivion of Being" (Nietzsche 194).

Since I believe that Heidegger's argument is formulated by the tacit opposition of an Aristotelian aesthetic, let me briefly characterize my undersatnding of that aesthetic (an understanding considerably at variance with Joseph Kockelmans in his lecture on Heidegger's aesthetic, 10–13). In contrast to Plato, Aristotle assigns to the arts, to *techne*, the role of representation of the *epistemé* within the sensory manifold. Hence the embeddedness of the arts within the sensory world is not a fault or a failing. This is especially so in view of the empirical doctrine that all knowledge derives from sensory experience. The notorious corrigibility of sensory representation is not a problem peculiar to the arts since all varieties of knowledge are subject to the same empirical limitations. The Aristotelian aesthetic even provides a defense for artworks that are avowedly false or fictional, for they provide a harmless outlet for the beclouding passions.

Heidegger uses Nietzsche as a means of separating himself from Platonic "supersensuality" without recourse to an Aristotelian empiricist aesthetic. For Aristotle the *work* performed by the artist is the transformation of the apprehended world into some sensory medium of representation – sound

and rhythm for music and dance, color and form for painting and architecture, and words for poetry. For Aristotle, the greatest and most perspicuous transformation of the sensory manifold is achieved in the abstract form of words. Of course, all of this derives from his empirical epistemology, which Nietzsche and Heidegger reject. All of them ground their aesthetic in the sensuous, but Heidegger's understanding of the "sensuous" differs from every one of his three predecessors. He regards the sensuous as a prophylactic that serves to protect humankind from the opiate of the "supersensuous" or metaphysical, which "lures life away from invigorating sensuality, drains life's forces, weakens it. When we aim at the supersensuous, submission, capitulation, pity, mortification, and abasement become positive 'virtues'" (Nietzsche 75).

Heidegger argues that art is worth more truth for Nietzsche because Nietzsche still holds a Platonic understanding of truth as "supersensuous." Thus Nietzsche can respond to Plato only by overturning him:

Against Platonism, the question "what is true being?" must be posed and the answer to it must be, "the true is the sensuous." Against nihilism [Nietzsche's position according to Heidegger], the creative life, preeminently in art, must be set to work. But art creates out of the sensuous. (Nietzsche 161)

The overturning of Plato is achieved by abandoning the "metaphysical" sense of truth as correspondence or adequacy, and substituting Heidegger's term, aletheia, which Heidegger defines as "the unconcealedness of beings" ("Origin" 51: "die Unverborgenheit des Seiendens" Ursprung 39). Truth for Heidegger is a gnosis, a manifestation of Being, rather than a mere perspicuous relationship between representation and represented or between knower and known. Truth is thus a "happening" (ein Geschehen), an event; it is historical, in time. It is a "clearing" or "lighting" (eine Lichtung). In language reminiscent of the Gnostic description of the divine pleroma as a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere, Heidegger describes aletheia as an "open centre ... not surrounded by what is: rather, the lighting centre itself encircles all that is, like the Nothing which we scarcely know" ("Origin" 53). Such a truth reveals itself only very shyly, as a refusal, a dissembling, a denial: "The nature of truth," Heidegger writes, "that is, of unconcealedness, is dominated throughout by a denial. ... Truth, in its nature, is un-truth." Heidegger has not "intended to state that truth is at bottom falsehood," but rather that truth "is always also its opposite" ("Origin: 54–5).

When Heidegger defines art as "the creative preserving of truth in the work," and as "the becoming and happening of truth" ("Origin" 71), it is not *veritas* that he has in mind. In this way he saves the aphorism: "Art is

the most perspicuous and familiar configuration of will to power," for we are to understand "perspicuity" not as transparency, but as "radiance." We learn this in Heidegger's discussion of the *Phaedrus*, where he cites a Latin translation of Plato in which the term *perspicua* occurs. It is translated as follows: "But true beauty alone has been destined to be the most transparent of things and the loveliest of all." Heidegger comments: "Plato does not mean that the beautiful itself, as an object, is 'perspicuous and lovely.' It is rather what is most luminous and what thereby most draws us on and liberates us" (*Nietzsche* 197). In this way we have reconciled the two aphorisms: art is both perspicuous *and* worth more than the truth.

However, art does *not* offer an Aristotelian or Scholastic supersensual truth, a truth Heidegger characterizes as "agreement with what *is*" ("Origin" 36). Nor, of course, is it the Platonic truth Nietzsche had in mind.<sup>3</sup> Platonic and Aristotelian mimetic or representational truths are worth less than art because they can only *agree with* or *conform to* beings, but cannot "unconceal" them. Here one can see how close Heidegger is to the high Modernist formalist principle of aesthetic autonomy: "nothing," he says, "can be discovered about the thingly aspect of the work so long as the pure self-subsistence of the work has not distinctly displayed itself" ("Origin" 40). Only the "thingly aspect of the work," its happening, or sensuous phenomenality, is genuinely artistic. The representational aspect takes us down a false road leading "from thing to work," as opposed to the true road leading "from work to thing" ("Origin" 39).

Heidegger does not follow Nietzsche's rejection of the mimetic; he inverts it. For Heidegger artworks do not mirror the world; they constitute it. As he puts it, "art is by nature an origin," and not a consequence ("Origin" 78). At the same time the artwork is an apprehendable origin, a sensuous origin – that is to say, it is a form or Gestalt ("Origin" 64, 84) which shows forth, manifests, or unconceals some other – beings (Seienden), or perhaps even Being (Sein). This inversion of Plato has predecessors – notably Plotinus. For Plotinus, instead of sensuous forms occluding or beclouding the "supersensuous," they show it forth. But for Heidegger the artwork is a sensuous form that does not "represent" – neither other sensuous forms as is the case in the Aristotelian aesthetic nor the "supersensuous." Instead of representation, we have instantiation: "to create is to cause something to emerge as a thing that has been brought forth. The work's becoming a work is a way in which truth becomes and happens" ("Origin" 60).

Heidegger parts company with Nietzsche on the question of his "nihilism," that is (in Heidegger's words),

the historical development, i.e., event, that the uppermost values devalue themselves, that all goals are annihilated, and that all estimates of value collide against one another. ... There is no longer any goal in and through which all the forces of the historical existence of peoples can cohere... (Nietzsche 156-7)

Heidegger tells us that the cure for nihilism, is to be found in art, where the sensuous and the true "repose":

Against Platonism, the question "What is true being?" must be posed, and the answer to it must be, "The true is the sensuous." Against nihilism, the creative life, preeminently in art, must be set to work. But art creates out of the sensuous.

Now for the first time it becomes clear to what extent art and truth, whose relationship in Nietzsche's view is a discordance that arouses dread, can and must come into relation at all ... Art and truth, creating and knowing, meet one another in the single guiding perspective of the rescue and configuration of the sensuous. (*Nietzsche* 161)

Thus, Heidegger resolves the conflict or "discordance" between art and truth by redefining the true as an "unconcealing" which takes place within art.

The question remains: what is the ontology of artworks? How, then, is art distinct from other forms of the sensuous – from the erotic, the ascetic, the athletic, the psychedelic, the ecstatic, the gustatory, and so forth? Surely "On the Origin of the Work of Art" is intended to answer this question.

In providing an answer Heidegger removes the focus of aesthetics from the mute arts of painting and music and places it on the loquacious art, poetry. This step is an archaism in that it reverses the depictive bias that has dominated aesthetics since the Renaissance by a return to the dialectical bias of Plato and Aristotle, for whom poetry was the paradigmatic case of art.<sup>4</sup> However, once again, Heidegger distances himself from Aristotle, since for him poetry is not story or *mythos*, as it was for Aristotle, but language itself.

To get the full force of this extraordinary feature of Heidegger's thought we have to turn to another work of the same period, *The Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935):

The origin of language is in essence mysterious. And this means that language can only have arisen from the overpowering, the strange and terrible, through man's departure into Being. In this departure language was Being, embodied in the word: poetry. Language is the primordial poetry in which a people speaks being. (*Metaphysics* 171)

There is something strongly Viconian in Heidegger's picture of the manifestation of language in a moment of terror. But of more immediate interest is the idea that artworks are to be thought of as events, as "happenings," rather than as artifacts or even life-styles (*Lebenformen*), as the contemporaneous

Bauhaus had it. A dozen years later, Heidegger intensifies the doctrine in the famous remark: "Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home" ("Letter on Humanism" in Basic 193).

The genius of Heidegger's aesthetic is that he manages to take Nietzsche's expressive/affective and ecstatic aesthetic and adapt it for his own mimetic/formalist and contemplative aesthetic. Nietzsche bases his aesthetic on a performance art, Greek tragedy, that is, on an artwork which is literally a "happening." The ecstasy or rapture of the participants in Greek tragedy is rather like that of participants in a religious rite in that the distinction between artist and work, work and audience is collapsed. As Nietzsche puts it in *The Birth of Tragedy*: "the genius in the act of artistic creation ... is at once subject and object, at once poet, actor, and spectator" (*Birth* Ss 5).

A mimetic and formalist aesthetic is normally hostile to notions of rapture and ecstasy, since within it, aesthetic appreciation is based on a discernment of the successful adaptation of the representation to the represented. Heidegger's singular achievement is to overcome this disharmony between mimesis and rapture. He achieves it by re-interpreting Nietzsche's ecstasy as a contemplative vision. The "unconcealing of Being" or aletheia is now imported into the discussion as simply the beautiful:

Truth is the unconcealedness of that which is as something that is. Truth is the truth of Being [Sein]. Beauty does not occur alongside and apart from this truth. When truth sets itself into the work, it appears. Appearance – as this being of truth in the work and as work – is beauty. Thus the beautiful belongs to the advent of truth, truth's taking of its place. It does not exist merely relative to pleasure and purely as its object. The beautiful does lie in form, but only because the forma once took its light from Being as the isness of what is. (Origin 81)<sup>5</sup>

The last remark is symptomatic of Heidegger's anxiety that his formalism might be mistaken for Aristotelian formalism with its stress on the artifact and its production, on *technique*. He attacks the problem with one of his esoteric etymologies, which identifies *techne* with "unconcealing" rather than craft or industrial technique:

The word techne denotes rather a mode of knowing. To know means to have seen ... to apprehend what is present, as such. For Greek thought the nature of knowing consists in aletheia, that is, in the uncovering of beings. Techne ... is a bringing forth of beings ... techne never signifies the action of making. (Origin 59)

Despite these assertions there are compelling reasons to suppose that Plato did mean technique or craft skill by *techne*.

Another feature of the Aristotelian formalist aesthetic is that the audience takes pleasure not only in the beautiful, but also in the recognition of the represented in the representation. This, too, Heidegger rejects, sneering at the "merely aestheticizing connoisseurship of the work's formal aspects, its qualities and charms" (*Origin* 68). On this point he is deeply romantic, agreeing with John Keats's sentiment in "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

Beauty is truty, truth beauty, – that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

But we should not allow these gestures to persuade us that Heidegger's theory is not mimetic and formalist. For him art *constitutes* the world rather than mirroring it, making *poesis* (which, like the Italian Renaissance, he translates as "making") far too serious a matter for pleasure or skill to be its measure: "Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to world and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings to their being from out of their being" (Origin 73).

Artistic creation is called "worlding," and Heidegger draws an analogy to the dedication of a temple and its precinct in the ancient world:

The temple, in it standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves. This view remains open as long as the work is a work, as long as the god has not fled from it. ... To be a work means to set up a world. ("Origin" 43)

If art is "setting up a world," then we can understand how it can be a cure for the "discordance" between truth and art that Heidegger has said "arouses dread" in Nietzsche. Art overturns nihilism through its "worlding," a making or *poesis* Heidegger characterizes as the outcome of the dialectic between "earth" (die Erde) and "world" (die Welt). "The world," Heidegger says,

is the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people. The earth is the spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing. World and earth are essentially different from one another and yet are never separated. The world grounds itself on the earth, and the earth juts through world. ... The opposition of world and earth is a striving. ... In the struggle each opponent carries the other beyond itself. ("Origin" 48–9)

Earth is the sensuous, but a very un-Aristotelian sensuous that is "self-secluding" rather than manifest to perception. World is the *Gestalt* or form through which earth, as Heidegger puts it, "juts," that is, by means of which it is perceived.

We can now understand what Heidegger meant when he said that the artwork is a happening (ein Geschehen) which manifests or unconceals a world. But some obscurity remains about the ontology of the artwork. If it is not a thing, but an event, what sort of an event is it? It is on this point that Heidegger's thought is most radical. The artwork understood as the "world's worlding" is for him nothing less than history, by which he does not mean our accounts or narratives of the past, but the working out of human destiny in time. History is the artwork which "juts up in the Open" through the "rift" opened by the conflict of earth and world, and which holds them in a dynamic harmony rather like the dramatic tension of a poem in New Critical theory:

This rift [ein Riss] carries the opponents into the source of their unity by virtue of their common ground. It is a basic design [ein Grundriss], an outline sketch [ein Auf-Riss], that draws the basic features of the rise of the lighting of beings. This rift does not let the opponents break apart; it brings the opposition of measure and boundary into their common outline. ("Origin")<sup>6</sup>

This modulation fo the residual Hegelian dialectical oppositions in Nietzsche – such as that between art and truth – into a productive hermeneutic dialogue is very characteristic of Heidegger's thought – although not much reflected in what Hans Georg Gadamer calls "the French continuers of Heidegger." Gadamer so characterized Deconstruction in his introductory remarks, "Text and Interpretation," to the conference bringing Gadamer and Derrida together that Philippe Forget organized in Paris in April 1981 (Michelfelder 24). The hermeneutic aspect of Heidegger's thought is most fully developed by Gadamer. It is roundly rejected by the French Heideggereans – notably Sartre, Foucault, and Derrida – who remain fiercely loyal to Hegelian dialectical cycle of a recurrent struggle between thesis and antithesis. The opposition is manifest in the celebrated "failed" encounter organized by Forget.

The thorny problem of making such "worlding" commensurable with rapture remains. How can history – that is, human destiny – be a rapture? Heidegger begins his resolution of this problem by explicitly disassociating himself from Nietzsche's expressive-affective aesthetic, from his understanding of "the aesthetic state of the observer and recipient on the basis of the state of the creator" (Nietzsche 117). He then boldly turns Nietzsche on his head by declaring that "for Nietzsche rapture means the most glorious victory of form" (Nietzsche 119). The "most glorious victory of form" turns out to be history, the destiny of an "historical people":

Whenever art happens – that is, whenever there is a beginning – a thrust enters history, history either begins or starts over again. History means

here not a sequence in time of events of whatever sort, however important. History is the transporting<sup>8</sup> of a people into its appointed task as entrance into that people's endowment. ("Origin" 77)

Aesthetic rapture, then, is the fulfilment of the destiny of an historical people. Astonishingly, the march of events is said to be a work of art whose origin is *art*:

The origin of the work of art – that is, the origin of a people's historical existence, is art. This is so because art is by nature an origin: a distinctive way in which truth comes into being, that is, becomes historical. ("Origin" 78)

To sum up, Heidegger has a determinate and unambiguous answer to the question, "What is Art?". Art is poetry, and poetry is the naming of earth, which brings earth into language. Language is the house of Being, and constitutes a world. The world constituted by language is history, that is, the destiny of a world-historical people. In 1935 Heidegger identified the world-historical people as the Germans:

We are caught in a pincers. Situated in the centre, our nation incurs the severest pressure. ... it is the most metaphysical of nations. We are certain of this vocation, but our people will only be able to wrest a destiny from it if within itself it creates a resonance.... All this implies that this nation, as a historical nation must move itself and thereby the history of the West beyond the centre of their future "happening" and into the primordial realm of the power of being. (Metaphysics 38)

For Heidegger, then, the work of art is the historical rapture of an entire people, race, or nation – at least so he thought around 1936.

## Notes

- 1. A shorter version of this essay was delivered at the Learned Societies (of Canada) Conference in Ottawa on 1 June 1993, in a joint panel of the Canadian Philosophical Association and the Canadian Society for Aesthetics, entitled "What Is a Work of Art."
- 2. Heidegger's elaborated thought on mimesis is beyond the scope of this essay, but his discussion of the question in lecture 22, "Plato's Republic: The Distance of Art (Mimesis) from Truth (Idea)," indicates sufficiently in its title that he is not antipathetic to the mimetic conception of art. Heidegger summarizes Nietzsche's position as follows: "mimesis is the essence of all art. Hence a position of distance with respect to Being, to immediate and undistorted outward appearance, to the idea, is proper to art. In regard to the opening up of Being, that is, to the display of Being in the unconcealed, aletheia, art is subordinate" (Nietzsche 186). He then adds his own caveat: "We encounter

- here a distance. Yet distance is not discordance, especially not if art as Plato would have it is placed under the guidance of philosophy as knowledge of the essence of beings" (187).
- 3. As Heidegger puts it in *The Will to Powr as Art*: "Without deciding prematurely that Nietzsche's conception of knowledge takes one of these two basic directions Platonism or positivism or is a hybrid of both, we can say that the word "truth" for him means as much as the true, and the true [means] what is known in truth. Knowing is a theoretical-scientific grasp of the actual in the broadest sense. Thus the work of art is or is not true insofar as it is 'the reproduction of the thing's general essence'" (*Nietzsche 37*).
- 4. On hearing these views, Greg Scott reminded me that Aristotle placed diction fourth, and thought third after plot and character in the *Poetics*, and therefore could not be said to value the word as highly as I assert. I cannot deny the justness of these observations, but by placing plot or *mythos* first, Aristotle can still be said to have placed poetry or literature first, for the heart of literature is story or myth.
- 5. This passage is from the epilogue (*Nachwort*), which is undated in the translation I am using, but was presumably added some time after 1936. It is the 1950 *Holzwege*, unlike the "Addendum," which was added for Gadamer's 1960 collection on which the Hofstadter translation I am using is based.
- 6. We must not suppose that Heidegger's world could be an Aristotelian form (morphe), and his earth Aristotelian matter (hyle). He anticipated this misreading early in "The Origin," remarking that "the distinction of matter and form is the conceptual schema which is used, in the greatest variety of ways, quite generally for all art theory and aesthetics" ("Origin" 27, Heidegger's emphasis).
- 7. He cites from Will to Power (821) the following as an illustration of this Nietzschean error: "the effect of artworks is arousal of the art-creating state, rapture" (Will 434, Heidegger's emphasis).
- 8. The translator here translates "Entrückung" as "transport," although he elsewhere in the same text translates it as "rapture."

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