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“Philosophical Ideas and Artistic Pursuits in the Traditions of Asia and the West” is the title of the National Endowment for the Humanities Workshop Series held at College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, IL, during the academic year 2007-08. This piece will attempt to provide a brief introduction to a few of the lectures and a dialog by Martin Heidegger which may well provide the quickest access to his later thought, which in turn might be of help to faculty who would like to be able to draw upon Heidegger as a resource for thinking about “Philosophical Ideas and Artistic Pursuits in the Traditions of Asia and the West.”

The lecture that comes to mind immediately is entitled “A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer,”¹ which took place during 1953-54. The “Japanese” is a Japanese professor of philosophy, and the Inquirer is Martin Heidegger, and the piece is written exactly as a dialog, with the Japanese identified as “J:” and the Inquirer (Heidegger) identified as “I:” and written as though it were a transcript of an actual dialog/conversation, complete with “interruptions” and completing each other’s sentences. The dialog should be seen in the context of two of the most important lectures from what has come to be known as the later Heidegger after “the turn” in his thinking from the earlier Heidegger of *Being and Time*, which is beyond the scope of this introduction. Those lectures are “On the Essence of Truth” (lectures throughout the decade of the 1930s) and “The Origin of the Work of Art (lectures during 1935-36).”²

“On the Essence of Truth”

For Heidegger, on the way toward the essence of truth, “freedom...reveals itself as letting beings be.”³ “To let be--that is, to let beings be as the beings which they are--means to engage oneself

with the open region and its openness into which every being comes to stand, bringing that openness, as it were, along with itself. Western thinking in its beginning conceived this open region as *ta alethea*, the unconcealed. 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.”⁴ Thus, “[t]he essence of truth reveals itself as freedom.”⁵ “The proper non-essence of truth is the mystery”;⁶ “...not a particular mystery regarding this or that, but rather the one mystery--that, in general, mystery (the concealing of what is concealed) as such holds sway throughout [humankind’s] Da-sein.”⁷ However, “[humankind’s] flight from the mystery toward what is readily available, onward from one current thing to the next, passing the mystery by--this is *erring*”--“to wander from the right way.”⁸ As will soon be evident, this provides the background for the next lecture.

“The Origin of the Work of Art”

According to the Introduction by Prof. David Farrell Krell to this essay, “Heidegger...relate[s] the matter of art to truth as *Aletheia* or unconcealment. ... [B]eings that are works of art manifest their origin in a special way. Heidegger therefore calls art the becoming of truth, the setting to work of the truth of beings.”⁹

“Truth, as the lighting and concealing of beings, happens in being composed. *All art*, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of beings, is as such *in essence poetry*. The essence of art, on which both the art work and the artist depend, is the setting-itself-into-work of truth. It is due to art’s poetic essence that, in the midst of beings, art breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual.” ... However, ... “language alone brings beings as beings into the open for the first time. Where there is no language ... there is also no openness of

beings, and consequently no openness either of nonbeing and of the empty.

“Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance.

“Art lets truth [unconcealment] originate.”¹⁰

“A Dialogue on Language”

Heidegger’s works have been characterized as a massive attempt to overcome metaphysical thinking, which can be seen as a focus on “... the difference between a sensuous and a suprasensuous world. This is the distinction on which rests what has long been called Western metaphysics.” Somewhat similarly, Japanese/Asian thinking says “*Iro*, that is color,” and says “*Ku*, that is emptiness, the open, the sky” and says: “without *Iro*, no *Ku*.”¹¹

According to Heidegger, “This seems to correspond exactly to what Western, that is to say, metaphysical doctrine says about art when it represents art aesthetically. The *aistheton*, what can be perceived by the senses, lets the *noeton*, the nonsensuous, shine through.”¹²

Already on the first page of the dialog the Japanese philosopher uses the Japanese word *Iki*, as the focus of a colleague’s lectures on the aesthetics of Japanese art and poetry. However, both Heidegger and the Japanese philosopher are aware that a too precipitous attempt either to translate the word or even understand what it may mean or reveal or unconceal will only result in yet another Western metaphysical reduction of it to a Western aesthetic.

Eventually, the Japanese philosopher refers to Heidegger’s phrase characterizing language as the “house of Being.” The Japanese philosopher believes “... that it touches upon the nature of language *without doing it injury* (italics added).”¹³ And this is/will be the key to “unlocking” the meaning of *Iki* and ultimately, perhaps, to an understanding of artistic pursuits in the traditions of Asia and the West. For Heidegger, “[t]he phrase gives a hint of the nature of language.”¹⁴ A hint,

rather than a *confining definition* of language. In keeping with hints, they are enigmatic. For Heidegger, “[h]ints and gestures belong to an entirely different realm of reality.” They rest on “... shy reverence.”¹⁵ If language is the “house of Being,” then we would be inclined to say, and humankind speaks language, but elsewhere Heidegger says language speaks us in that our thinking is virtually governed by the language/s available to us, regrettably often only one or a few. Nevertheless, humankind “... is the message-bearer [in the Greek sense of the word hermeneutics] of the message which...unconcealment [especially in works of art] speaks to [humans].”¹⁶

Near the end of the dialog the Japanese philosopher believes he is ready to try a translation and thereby an understanding of *Iki*: “*Iki* is the gracious,” that which allows all presence to be as unconcealment in the “Saying” of language.¹⁷ Yet “the mystery of Saying,” of language, is still veiled/concealed from us. For Japanese people, “[a] mystery is a mystery only when it does not even come out *that* mystery is at work.” For Heidegger, “[t]o guard the purity of the mystery’s wellspring seems to me the hardest of all.”¹⁸ As it applies to art, we may say: To guard the purity of the mystery of art, rather than to “confine it to a definition” or “capture” it in a pre-conception, may be the most difficult, the greater challenge to our all-too-human desire to “know it all.”

Parallels in the Dialog for
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Asia and the West”

In what follows I am adding my commentary as a “*parallel*” to what Heidegger and the Japanese philosopher have to say and how it might be applied more directly to the topic of this piece.

Heidegger: “Speaking *about* language turns language almost inevitably into an object.”

Parallel: Speaking about art (of any kind) turns it almost inevitably into an object. And if art is to be art in Asia and the West, it must not be turned into merely an object.

Japanese philosopher: “And then [language’s] reality vanishes.”¹⁹

Parallel: If we “objectify” art, its reality vanishes.

H: “We then have taken up a position above language, instead of hearing from it.”

Parallel: If we objectify art, we take up a position above it rather than hearing from it--we subject it to our aesthetics rather than letting it speak to us.

J: “Then there would only be a speaking *from* language...”

H: “...in this manner, that it would be called *from out of* language’s reality, and be led *to* its reality.

Parallel: When we let art speak to us, we may then speak from it, from out of its reality, and be led to its reality.

J: “How can we do that?”

H: “A speaking *from* language could only be a dialogue. . . .

J: “It seems to me that now we are moving in a circle. A dialogue from language must be called for from out of language’s reality. How can it do so, without first entering into a hearing that at once reaches that reality?”

Parallel: A speaking from art can only be as a dialog with the work and with a conversation partner or partners, after having heard what the work has to say, what it reveals, what is thereby uncovered, what its “truth” may be.

H: “I once called this strange relation the hermeneutic circle.”²⁰

(Earlier, Heidegger “...makes it clear that hermeneutics means not just the interpretation but, even before it, the bearing of message and tidings.”²¹)

H: “The message-bearer must come from the message. But he [/she] must also have gone toward it.”²²

Parallel: Whoever wishes to speak *from* art must be the message-bearer from the work but must have also gone toward it by being open to what it has to say.

In the context of this dialog on language Heidegger says *of--not about--*language that it is "... needfully used of its very nature."²³ And "[t]hat nature will never be found as long as we demand information in the form of theorems and cue words."²⁴ Concluding the dialog, Heidegger says language/saying ... gathers what endures ... and "...needs us as messengers."²⁵

Parallel: If our dialog with art is merely at the level of information and words that correspond with their objects, we shall not have conversed with or about art. If we do indeed dialog with art and our fellow human beings and speak *of* art, then that art may endure because we have been its messengers and preserved it in language.

By taking the kind of respectful approach to language and art that Heidegger and the Japanese philosopher have proposed to us, we may discover, uncover, have revealed to us, at least some of the "truth" of art in the context of "Philosophical Ideas and Artistic Pursuits in the Traditions of Asia and the West."

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- ¹ In Heidegger, Martin: *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 1-54.
- ² In Heidegger, Martin: *Basic Writings* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), ed. David Farrell Krell, rev. & expanded ed., pp.113-187.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 127-28.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-33.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p.135.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-86.
- ¹¹ Heidegger: *On the Way to Language*, p. 14.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-47.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*