Essay Three

Notes toward an Understanding of Heidegger’s Aesthetics*

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PART I
On Being, Essence, and Truth

One of the prevailing mysteries in contemporary discussions of phenomenological aesthetics is the paucity of attention given the relevant work of Martin Heidegger. Although his three lectures on Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes were delivered in the years 1935–36, first in Freiburg, then in Zurich and Frankfurt am Main,¹ they were not made available to the wider reading public until 1950, when they were published together as the first essay in Holzwege. And quite recently Heidegger’s war-long reflection on the philosophy of Nietzsche was published with one section devoted to this philosopher’s contribution to aesthetic theory. Even though the two volume work on Nietzsche did not make its

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appearance until 1961,² Heidegger's interpretation of the Will to Power considered as Art was composed in 1936–37. His reflections on art, then, have been known in restricted circles for about thirty years and should now become more widely, if not better, known than in the past.

In France, Mikel Dufrenne has made extensive use of Heidegger's first essay in his *Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique,*³ but came a cropper on one of its central ideas, the expressiveness of a nonobjective work; and at his death Maurice Merleau-Ponty left unfinished a work that was to continue the inspiration he felt from Heidegger, the signs of which had already begun to show in his introduction to *Les philosophes célèbres,*⁴ and became most apparent in *Signes*⁵ as well as in the last of his articles he saw published, "L'œil et l'esprit."⁶

In America, things have not been much better, even in phenomenological circles. In a curious paragraph on Merleau-Ponty's relationship to Heidegger, occurring in his introduction to the American edition of *The Primacy of Perception,*⁷ Professor James M. Edie states: "... what radically separates Merleau-Ponty's existential analysis from Heidegger's is precisely his thesis of the primacy of perception, and his acceptance of the perceived world as the primary reality, as giving us the first and truest sense of 'real.' "⁸ This was true of the earlier Merleau-Ponty (*The Structure of Behavior* and *The Phenomenology of Perception*); it was no longer true of the Merleau-Ponty of *Signs* and "Eye and Mind." For in these latter works Merleau-Ponty's central focus on the world had changed from an "acceptance of the perceived world as the primary reality" to an

ontologico-eidetic description of the manner in which human beings come to the notion of a single perceived world whose structures are revealed to a community of perceiving subjects. In a word, his interest in the world of perception was temporarily being replaced by a notion of transcendence which was larger in scope, embracing the intentional arc established between "brute being" and "wild-flowering mind." 9

What remained constant in the two periods of Merleau-Ponty's thought is the notion of mind as the integration of a corporeal schema. The cogito for him was always in the end a corporeal phenomenon; and the certitude for this cogito was guaranteed by the moment to moment perception of our own lived bodily schemata. The force of this cogito is so grounded in human experience that it would lead some unreflective philosophers of another persuasion to insist that the question of personal existence never arises. What Merleau-Ponty did not live long enough to explain, however, was the precise manner in which the human mind-body constitutes its world from a more fundamental relationship between itself and "brute being."

It is clear, from a first reading of "Eye and Mind," that Merleau-Ponty took the experience of painting as a direct revelation of "Being"; but it is also clear, from a sixth reading of the same essay, that he failed to provide the explanatory machinery necessary to show how the corporeal cogito is capable of developing the ontico-ontological distinction. What he does have to say on the matter reads like a careless repetition of Heidegger's Sein und Zeit. Thus, when Professor Edie continues—"For Heidegger, on the contrary, it is not this [the perceived] world but the Being of beings which is the primary reality, and any analysis of human experience, perceptual or otherwise, is only a means to pose the more fundamental question of this Being." 10—the disinterested scholar no longer knows what to believe; for the being of an existent thing is not the same as Being. The one is a question of ontics and the other of fundamental ontology. Moreover, Heidegger had long ago explained that human exist-

9. See McCleary, op. cit., p. xxxii.  
ence is nothing if not a manner of being in the world, and that any analysis of this being must be made on the basis of "explicata" proper only to it. This is a common phenomenological idea, shared by Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty.

Since the "categories" of the physical and biological sciences in particular are not proper for an analysis of the human being, Heidegger proposed a series of existentialia which he thought could do the job. The successful use of these explicative notions in the field of existential psychiatry would seem to constitute some evidence that he was not entirely mistaken. In addition, his analysis of a human subject's openness to the world (Erschlossenheit) clearly indicates the primacy of affectivity (Befindlichkeit) in our knowledge of both ourselves and the world. For what is affectivity if not a perception of ourselves caught in a certain pose before the objects of the world, if not one act of the corporeal cogito?

Yet Professor Edie insists, "Heidegger's 'thought of Being' escapes the methods of phenomenology altogether and certainly has nothing to do with perceptual consciousness." Like Merleau-Ponty in his later period, however, Heidegger insists that our experience of the phenomena of art belie this contention. One need only read the following—"'Techne' does not in the least mean a kind of practical accomplishment. Much more appropriately, the word names a way of knowing. To know means to have seen, in the broader sense of seeing, i.e., grasping what is present as it is present."—to understand that whatever may constitute "the methods of phenomenology," art and technics have to do with knowing, knowing with seeing, and seeing in its widest, most mysterious sense—the grasping of what is present as it is present to us. The objects we see are merely the closest at hand, not the most primary realities of human ex-

11. Ibid.
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experience. But this, too, Heidegger had said quite long ago. And, apparently, in the latter days of his career Merleau-Ponty was led to agree with him.

As for Professor Dufrenne’s aesthetics, whose “phenomenological” analysis of aesthetic objects includes three “worlds,” the second of which is that of representation, even for works of nonobjective art such as a Grecian temple, there are even greater scholarly lacunae. Since his theory calls for the appearance of some kind of representation, he had to come up with something and, faced with the facts of a nonobjective universe, could find nothing better than an “idea of a temple” as object of a temple’s representation. But the idea of a representational nonrepresentational work of art is a patent absurdity; and this is a logical, not a phenomenological, statement. Heidegger makes the same point somewhat differently in the very text Dufrenne cites: “But where and how then does this universal essence exist so that the work of art may correspond with it? With which essence of which thing, then, should a Grecian temple correspond? Who could assert the impossible, that in the edifice the idea in general of the temple is represented?”

Answer: Mikel Dufrenne.

Truth in art is not a matter of representation; for if we consult the things as they are we are forced to admit that works of art may be representational or they may be abstract, or they may be completely nonobjective and represent nothing at all. And “truth” need not be taken to mean “correspondence,” so that the question of the truth of art works may be separated from the kinds of universe they present. If our phenomenological analysis of works of art is to be effective we must produce a description of works of the various kinds, whether or not there is a single description of the “essence” of art. What is more, the notions of “truth,” “essence,” and “art” must be considered in the light of an experience we have of the meanings of these terms if our

analysis of the truth of art is to be "phenomenological" in any workable sense of this term. It behooves us therefore to return once more to sources and to re-examine Heidegger's claim to having found truth revealed in art.

II

"Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes" is an imposing title; we translate, "The Origin of the Work of Art" and immediately are faced with a host of linguistic problems. Why "the origin" and why "the" work of art? Is there only one source and only one work of art? Granted that many works of art could be traced to a common set of conditions—the creativeness of the artist, the Zeitgeist of his times, especially the socioeconomic conditions of his society, the level of sophistication and the aesthetic demands of the community of art consumers—what sense can be made of the attempt to reduce all works of art to a single description valid for them all?

What, for example, does a representational work have in common with a nonrepresentational piece, outside its sensuous surface? And can the notion of a sensuous surface exhaust, in its descriptive scope, all the felt expressiveness of works that represent objects realistically, abstractly, or do not represent objects at all? All these notions are important for a coherent theory of art, and Heidegger was not unaware of any of them. We can understand his answers to most of these questions by continuing to read beyond the title and to take the words Heidegger uses to mean what he says they mean. Most of the difficulty with understanding his philosophy seems to stem from his readers' refusal to take him at his word.

First, "der Ursprung." The origin of something need not be considered a cause in the sense of a prior set of conditions obtaining in the history of the natural world, or a reason by and through which the existence of something can be demonstrated to exist. The study of origins, in other words, need not be either "empirical" or "rational," as these terms are commonly used in
contemporary theory of knowledge. The method to be used is "phenomenological" in the sense that a correct reading of the experience of the given object will reveal what it is and the source from which it springs. Nor is the phenomenological analysis of the language used to express the content of an experience foreign to Heidegger's approach.

To understand this method we must recall his prior descriptions of man's openness to the world as affectivity, understanding, and speech. Affectivity is the modification of a human being's existence in its relationship to a world; to its world, to one of those worlds that "world" owing to the context of meaning relations established by the purposeful activity of human subjects. Before the establishment of the single, natural world, primarily by means of speech and the adoption of univocally meaningful vocal gestures, this is the only kind of world there is. A child lives in such a world before "learning its language at its mother's knee"; and many, too distressingly many, adults are driven back to the same kind of world by their own inability to adjust to the prescribed structures of the one world described in scientific discourse. We call them "abnormal" and can do so only on the prejudice of the primacy of the "normal," or scientific, world. And, finally, the works of creative artists will always appear to be abnormal, odd, or queer, if not to say "obscene" or "sick," as long as we, as viewers, continue to look at their works as putative representations of some aspect of the world of nature.

We "understand" our own affectivity, in the second place, by having the experience of the feeling in question. Concern, boredom, anxiety, are merely the most widely known of Heidegger's affective terms, since these are given metaphysical, or ontological, interpretation. This is not to say, but expressly to deny, that we understand our feelings only when we can state their causes, their reasons, or otherwise classify them according to a programmed list of emotions found on a depth psychologist's chart. At this level of experience, which is yet an understanding, there is no "carte du tendre" such as the one drawn up by Mlle. de Scudéry in the period of preclassical French literature. We
understand in this sense merely by keeping ourselves open to the
influence of the world we ourselves are instrumental in creating. 14

We speak, finally, not by repeating what is said by everyone
in their idle talk (Gerede), 15 but by giving tongue to those
sounds that express what is understood in the constant flux
of our own affective conditions. In our speech, moreover, im-
pression does not necessarily precede expression; or thought, the
word. The sounds are simultaneous with the words, and these
with meanings, or relationships to our experienced worlds.
Thought is a creative act. Thus Heidegger can claim that man
is the metaphysical animal, always living in the openness of
Being, and this affectively, whether he "knows" it or not.
Through man, Being is on the way to language (Unterwegs zur
Sprache), 16 where it comes to revelation in poetic and philosophic
thought.

These words are mysterious, but no more mysterious than the
process by which "colors" take on essential determination by
relatedness one to the other in a given visual context. Merleau-
Ponty was fond of stating that in a living language there were
no absolute counters, only sounds marking differences from other
sounds. It is the context which allows us to perceive the word-
sound entoned therein. For this reason I shall interpret the
"openness of Being" as the permanent possibility of the appear-
ance of new entities in the process of the world's becoming a
world (Die Welt weltet), 17 in the context of which men become
aware of things becoming things (Das Ding dingt). 18 These

14. Professor Werner Marx [Heidegger und die Tradition (Stuttgart: Kohl-
hammer, 1961)] finds Heidegger's interest in creativity one of the compelling
reasons for taking him seriously. See p. 17.
17. For the clearest presentation of this idea, see Sein und Zeit, pp. 63-88.
The "World" is considered in relation to human transcendence in Vom
Wesen des Grundes (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1955). A later essay,
"Das Ding," elaborates the relationship between our awareness of things
and our living in a world. See Vorträge und Aufsätze, pp. 163-85. Compare
things in their becoming constitute the objects of experience and
the referents of the words we use to point them out. Thus the
creative use of language presents a world to our experience and
need not represent anything definite at all within the context of
the real world, that world which forces our adaptation because
we live in a society of common-language users. But from the
foregoing it should be clear that life in a community of language
users is not always an unmixed blessing. Sometimes our fellows
can drive us mad.

The difficulty with Heidegger is that he insists upon using
language creatively even when talking about the creative use of
language. But this is determined by his method, which calls for
the description of the "essence" of things—of what and how
things are. This is not Husserlian "Wesensschau," true; there is
no imaginative modification of the objects of perception through
which there persists a single core of sedimented meaning. "The
revelation" is claimed to be direct, there to be seen or heard by
anyone who has eyes and ears through which to see and hear.¹⁹
In making translations, therefore, one must be careful to hear
the words as they grew out of the experience of the men who first
used (read "spoke") them in such a way as to make a new mean-
ing apparent.

Since, moreover, we see and hear through (durch) rather than
with (mit) our organs of sense, we come into contact with the
objects of our world by their means whether we see or hear
words or the sensuous surface of actual things; all human ex-
pression mediated by seeing or hearing is so constituted as to
produce this contact with the world, and engages the entire
structure of the perceiving being. Like Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger
considers perception a corporeal phenomenon and sensation an
abstraction from the perceived thickness of things.²⁰ Painting
presents us with a world directly through the medium of vision,
and language presents a world in depth that may be sensuous,
supersensuous, or however a world may be, indirectly through the

²⁰. Holzwege, p. 15. See also Nietzsche, I, pp. 118–20, and Die Frage nach
ear. As Merleau-Ponty pointed out, it is for this reason that painting and literature can be reasonably compared: on the surface, each is a sensuous presentation of some kind of world: gestalt and symbol, neither of which is separable from the other without destroying the working of a work of art. In addition, according to Heidegger, both painting and literature are means of founding (eine Stiftung) a novel meaning, which, when successful, adds a new direction to the course of our cultural history.

Such in very broad outline is the direction of Heidegger’s musings on art. He has qualified his own work as an attempt to make clear the nature of “the riddle of art” and not as a solution to the riddle. It is therefore apropos for someone to fill out the sketch in an effort to discern to what extent he has succeeded in indicating a way in which the riddle could ultimately be solved.

The first step in this process is to proceed with the analysis of Heidegger’s terms. If the origin of a work of art is that from which (woher) and by means of which (wodurch) a thing is what and how it is, we need to consider as the second term of our explication the peculiar twist he gives the word “Wesen.”

Here again, we translate “essence” and chance to be misled by our knowledge of the history of philosophy, just as Sartre was misled. For an essence is not only what a thing is, the quiddity of a thing—“This indifferent essence (the essentiality in the sense of essentia), however, is only the inessential essence.”—but what the thing is with all its particularities: “The true essence of a thing is determined by a relationship to its true being, to the truth of the momentarily existing things.”

27. Ibid.: “Das wahre Wesen einer Sache bestimmt sich aus ihrem wahren Sein, aus der Wahrheit des jeweiligen Seienden.”
Although Heidegger owes this distinction to his earlier studies of Duns Scotus, the same distinction in meanings of the term "essence" is found in the ordinary English uses of the term. It may have a privative or a definitive sense.

We say, for example, "Don’t tell me the whole story; give me the essence of it," meaning thereby the essentials, the gist, the story with all the inessentials removed. We are asking for quite another thing when we demand to know the essence (say) of justice, and expect a description of the concept. Any deletion of detail here is likely to lead to miscomprehension. In an older logic, the essence of a thing was called the "comprehension" of the term used to refer to it.

The peculiarity of Heidegger's interpretation of the non-privative essence is his addition of "the manner in which a thing is" to the notion of what a thing is; "essence" is not only a substantive but an adjectival or adverbial qualification as well. If we continue to use "essence" as the univocal translation of "Wesen," which is a noun in general use stemming from the infinitive of a verb no longer commonly used in German, Heidegger's thought will remain all but incomprehensible. He intends the word to be understood verbally.

Etymologically considered, "Wesen" is a verbal substantive, and the qualification suggested by the "how" (wie) is in consequence mainly adverbial. An essence in this sense is a coming to be, taking place in a determinate manner; the word denotes a well-defined process in which something appears and remains as it is.

It was Hegel perhaps who misled Sartre by his laconic "Wesen ist was gewesen ist," since this is the view which interprets the essence as a finished process in the same way Sartre interprets the essence of a human transcendence completed in death. His Huis Clos is a dramatization of a triangle of essences: the coward, the lesbian, and the nymphomaniac (in the order of their appearance), who can no longer be anything other than what they have been.

But it is a mistake, claims Heidegger, to derive "Wesen" from the perfect participle of sein; its true source is the archaic wesen,
from the Old High German *wesan*, which means "to endure" (*währen*) or "to remain" (*bleiben*). It is for this reason that an essence names the manner in which a thing comes to be and remains what it is. Of the essence, then, is how things are in play (*im Spiel*). And Heidegger does not hesitate to use this archaic word in its original sense, as when he says, "Technics comes to be and endures in that realm where disclosure and unconcealedness, where *aletheia* or truth happens." Truth, too, is a "happening"; and it is more than a little ironic that some recent artistic events in America have been called by this name. For according to Heidegger it is the essence of art to "let truth happen."

The third and last term to be explicated is "truth" itself. Here, too, our love of substances or of nouns substantive may well lead us astray. Even if we assume, as we must, that truth is not a reified concept and that it is a shorthand expression used to name the condition of things that are true, our appeal to the adjectival sense may be misleading without further analysis. For what can be considered "true"? And what is the condition by which we know them as true? Ordinary usage is again of some help. We say, for example, that fool's gold is not "true" (or genuine) gold and that only something that corresponds to the essence of gold or has all the essential properties of gold can be truly so called. The question of truth in this concrete sense of the term, then, leads us back to the notion of essence, even if the essence is understood as a position in a chemist's periodic chart of elements.

But, speaking as logicians, we likewise say that only sentences are "true" in the technical sense of the term; and they are true only when what is said corresponds with matters of fact, i.e., when a representation gives, in some sense, a true picture of what is represented—the facts as they are. Such a view of the

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truth of sentences poses no problems if we can safely assume the oneness of the world and can have confidence in our manner of knowing what the facts are.

At one level of human experience, however, neither of these conditions obtains. They do not obtain each time it is asked what it means to say the world is one or, further, when it is said whether or not this statement is true. And these questions can be asked, as psychiatric evidence or the facts of scientific discovery and artistic creation attest. Any questioning of the facts in the case will once more repose the question of essence: "Every act of working and accomplishing, all acting and calculating, is maintained and stands in the openness of a context in the midst of which an existent thing, considered both as what it is and how it exists, can be expressly placed and referred to. This happens only when the existent thing comes to be represented in a declarative sentence, as the expression takes on itself the ordering which allows it to express what and how an existent thing exists."30 The declarative sentence, in a word, must mediate the conception of an actual existent.

If the first notion of truth is genuineness (Echtheit), the second is correctness (Richtigkeit). And in our common sense view, a sentence is correct, or true, when what it says is correct, i.e., when it represents a true state of affairs. So far, common sense agrees with logic. But if this is so, it is false to assume that only statements are true; common sense here begins to diverge from logic, for statements can be true only if existents are revealed, and this in conformity to some concept so that the correspondence between reality and concept (or word) may in its turn be perceived. In his usual manner, Heidegger states the solution to this problem in an apothegm: "... das Wesen der Wahrheit ist die

Wahrheit des Wesens"—the essence of truth is the disclosure of being.

What at first reading appears to be a play on words, if not an explanatory circle, Heidegger states as an ultimate truth, for the upshot of his discussion is that truth is not primarily either of the senses heretofore denoted. Truth is not primarily a logical or scientific concept, but only secondarily so. There can be logical or scientific truths only because truth is metaphysical, implicit in all man’s dealings with his world. And so, metaphysics points the way out of our circle.

Metaphysical truth is primary, and this truth is experienced as the disclosure (Entbergen) of an essence, of what and how a thing is. In this disclosure man first becomes aware of an existent thing qua existent (ein Seiendes). Moreover, each awareness of an individual thing takes place in situation—i.e., in an open field in which to reveal itself an object must conceal others (Verborgenheit)—as well as the totality of the field itself. This is the source of Heidegger’s notion of Seinsvergessenheit, in which, according to him, contemporary philosophy has been stagnating in the past thirty years, as well as the basis of his interpretation of truth as the unconcealedness (Unverborgenheit) of existent things. The unveiling of the individual existent conceals the universe of existents considered as a whole (das Seiende im Ganzen).

The openness of the field of consciousness in which disclosure and concealment take place is the metaphysical precondition of having any truths at all. Heidegger refers to this openness as an illumination (die Lichtung des Da). In this light, in this relation of man to being, truth happens. And it happens in such a way as to conceal at the same time it discloses, for man cannot be aware of everything at once. When we are aware of anything, something lies unconcealed in the open field of human consciousness, while the rest of the field remains hidden; and when something appears as something it is not, man is led into error.

In sum, truth is neither an “objective” term qualifying the existence of a genuinely appearing object nor a “subjective” one qualifying man’s knowledge as presented in correct sentences. It, too, is an existential explicative notion describing the conditions under which man lives in his world—in the truth as in untruth. Thus, Heidegger can say, “‘Truth’ is no mark of the correct sentence, expressed of an ‘object’ by a human ‘subject’ and then somewhere—it is not known exactly where—holds as valid; it is rather the disclosure of a being by means of which an openness comes to be and endures. In this opening all human conduct and behaviour is exposed. It is in this way, therefore, that man is the ecstatic existent he is.”

Truth in short is a phenomenon of human existence transcending itself toward a world and not strictly speaking the exclusive result of scientific or logical inquiry.

This last and most basic meaning of “truth” is what the Greeks, according to Heidegger, always called aleteia. It remains to be seen how this “truth” happens in art.

PART II
On Truth in Art

Phenomenological aesthetics, as it has developed in Europe, is a curious patchwork of diverse points of view. Ingarden describes a work of literary art as a multilayered yet “polyphonic harmony” of sound and sense, the latter itself composed of three strata: propositions, represented objects, and concretizing imagery. His descriptions contain many insights into the struc-


33. Das literarische Kunstwerk (Halle: Niemeyer, 1931).
tures of the various strata but give little or no information on
the manner in which the harmony of the whole is experienced.
Sartre's phenomenological study of the imagination describes a
work of art as the "absent" object to which the purely physical
construct of the artist refers. In this procedure the sensuous sur-
face of the work is reduced in importance to the function of a
stimulus. Merleau-Ponty on the other hand begins with the
analysis of the sensuous structures of the work as a perceptual
object and is in his turn hard put to explain how the surface
"thickens" into an experience of the depth content. Sensation,
perception, conception, representation, and imagination—each
is a phenomenon of human consciousness and hence amenable
to the techniques of phenomenological analysis, yet the de-
scription of the phenomenon in which all these "conscious-
nesses" flow into a single experience is singularly lacking.
Heidegger's aesthetic writings may be viewed as an attempt to
supply this want.

He will describe the essential structures of a work of art in
metaphysical terms without, however, prejudging what must be
found in a particular work of art. To avoid overemphasizing the
surface qualities at the expense of the depth and vice versa, he
will examine the expressiveness of an objective painting, a poem,
and a Grecian temple; for the essence of art, if such there is,
must be found in works of art and not in the lives of artists.
This primacy of the work is well attested in the critical practice
even of those "biographical" critics who realize that whatever
hypothesis they have gained from the knowledge of the author's
nonartistic life must be checked against the facts of the art work's
unique context of reference. The work is the thing, and if it
can capture the conscience of a king the reason is that it is a
work or a play only because it does engage the consciousness we
call aesthetic: "Only this one thing in the work which reveals
something else, this one which unites with the other, is the thing-

34. See my An Existentialist Aesthetic (Madison: The University of Wis-
35. Holzwege, pp. 7–8.
like quality of an artwork." Thus, works of art are like the other things we meet in our everyday lives, but what constitutes their essence is the way in which they work as allegory or symbol, i.e., as they function to reveal a second dimension of meaning.

How then does the perception of a thing become the experience of a work of art? Not, as some aestheticians have maintained, by a special attitude on the part of the perceiver, for “the aesthetic attitude” is not what makes a work of a thing; it is the work which controls the attitude. Our question is badly put. It should read, “How does the experience of a work of art come to be that of a thing?”

In Heidegger’s metaphysical terms a work is not a thing that is transmuted by the magic of consciousness into something other than a thing grasped in an act of perception. A work of art exhibits its own way of being a thing, and this can be understood only by a “destructive” analysis of “the thingness of things” (die Dingheit, das Dinghafte der Dinge). And if this is true aesthetics cannot, any more than logic, be divorced from a sound metaphysical analytic. Aesthetics so pursued is the pursuit of philosophy in art.

From the foregoing analysis of Heidegger’s discussion of essences (Part I, II), it is clear that a thing is a thing owing to the manner in which it “things,” i.e., to the way in which it detaches itself from the context of meaning relations constituting the “world” of a human transcendence. But this is an idea that has come late upon the scene and not before philosophy had made a series of detours, having considered a thing as a substance bearing properties, some of which were essential and some accidental; as the unity of a manifold of sense impressions; and finally, as formed matter.

The difficulty of each of these conceptions is the assumption that a thing is a composite, understandable through the manner in which elements achieve summation. Our experience of the world indicates that things are given as they are and can only

36. Ibid., p. 10: “Allein dieses Eine am Werk, was ein Anderes offenbart, dieses Eine, was mit einem Anderen zusammenbringt, ist das Dinghafte im Kunstwerk.”
later be analyzed or decomposed into their elements. The same is true of our experience of works of art: all our aesthetic categories must be derived from our primary experiences of works. Even the notion of a sensuous surface is the result of aesthetic analysis and not a means for constructing an aesthetic experience in the first place.

Yet it is obvious that an artist constructs his work of art with the sensuous elements of his medium. The difficulty with this commonplace is that it leads no place; it merely serves to point out the thinglike understructure of works of art, which may, in a moment of theoretical aberration, be reduced to light and sound waves of a given frequency. Artists do not, however, work with waves of any kind or of any frequency. They create with pigments or stones or sound-producing machines, perceiving what they have already done and imagining what must be done on the basis of what has been perceived of the work in progress; in artistic creation, a thing comes to be within the artist's world out of a world that is as yet only a possibility. This is the view of artistic creation that comes to light in Heidegger's metaphysical analysis of things, tools, and works.

We may begin this analysis by considering his destruction of traditional metaphysics. Let us take first the thing as property-bearing substance. Expert opinion on this subject necessarily differs, for it is impossible to decide whether things appear as substance and attribute because our language is what it is or whether the subject-predicate sentence structure of declarative statements is what it is because things appear as substance and attribute. Moreover, experience once again indicates that no substance ever appears, as the trenchant analyses of Berkeley and Hume succeeded in pointing out. But then this proposition had already been admitted by Descartes (*Principles* LI–LII).

If what appears is only the properties of things, it no longer makes sense to speak of "properties." A thing, then, is the unity of a manifold of sense impressions; and it matters not whether this manifold be interpreted as a "sum," a "totality," or a

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"Gestalt"; the sensations of which we speak are abstractions from the appearance of a thing: "Things themselves are closer to us than all sensations. In the house we hear the door slam, and never acoustical sensations or sheer noises. In order to hear a pure noise, we have to hear 'away from things,' to take our ear away from them; that is, to hear abstractly." Concrete perception, it is claimed, must yield the thing itself.

The third and last interpretation of the thingness of things is not the most recent. It is merely the most persistent, and it has persisted because of the seeming success it has achieved in explaining how matter takes on form in aesthetic as well as in non-aesthetic contexts. So conceived, a thing is formed matter.

Form is the rational, matter the irrational, element of the thing, since form gives a determinate essence to the formlessness of matter. Thus, the artist's creation may be explained in terms of a rational process of introducing order into chaos. Unfortunately, however, the notions of matter and form are not unambiguous, especially in an aesthetic context. For what is matter, the sensuous stuff or the content of an experience? Is form the frame around sensuous materials or an ordering of content? Jugs, axes, and shoes have matter and form in the one sense but not in the other. Each has the form of a tool, which is determined by the purpose served in using the tool: the form of the jug, by its function to hold and pour water; of the ax, to cut wood; and of shoes, to protect feet.

Following this line of argument, Heidegger repeats the conclusions of his earlier philosophy. The being of a thing on hand (ein Vorhandenes) is not a primary object of awareness; things are primarily at hand (ein Zuhandenes) and are known essentially in their use. Is the work of art a tool?

38. Ibid., p. 15.
39. Ibid.: "Veil näher als alle Empfindungen sind uns die Dinge selbst. Wir hören im Haus die Tür schlagen und hören niemals akustische Empfindungen oder auch nur bloße Geräusche. Um ein reines Geräusch zu hören, müssen wir von den Dingen weghören, unser Ohr davon abziehen, d. h. abstrakt hören."
In one sense, yes; in another, no. It is not a tool in the sense that its material stuff will be used up in serving an ulterior purpose. Jugs, axes, and shoes wear out in use, while works of art preserve their materials in the achievement of form in the sense that form makes the materials visible as functioning in the context of the work. Moreover, when all the purposes or ends of an activity are internal to a single context, it hardly makes sense to speak of "means" and "ends" except within that context. The experience of art is a consummatory phenomenon, an enjoyment. If the work is its own end (autotelism) or contains its own end (endotelism), the work itself, considered as an experience, is never used for an external purpose.

Yet the working of a work does serve a purpose in the lives of both artists and appreciators. In "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes" this purpose is explained as the revelation of truth, and in *Nietzsche I* the revelation of truth is considered as a means of intensifying our sense of life. If art is an experience in the series of experiences we call a "life," art does serve a definite purpose; but at the same time the context of reference would have been modified from that of the work itself to the working of the work in the developing lives of art's connoisseurs. The context would have changed from the tool (open-ended means-ends complex), which cannot be taken for a work, to the work (closed means-ends complex) taken as a tool.

One context at a time. What is a tool? "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes" gives the answer in what can only be called an explanatory tour de force: Heidegger finds his answer by analyzing a painting by Van Gogh, *Les Souliers*, representing a pair of peasant's work shoes (see Fig. 1). If he is right, the toolness of these tools is there to be seen; and when it is seen, he will have made his point that paintings work as the revelation of a truth.

What we see in the painting is a pair of shoes worn in service, without wearer, placed in an indefinite space. The entire painting is done in monochromatic browns—somber, heavy, and oppressive as only work in the field can be. In the field alone

are those shoes the tool they were designed to be. They stand out, and their dignity is precisely in having been worn into the state they are in. In standing out they hide part of the earth, and at the same time reveal the relationship between the shoes and their wearer to the earth, which yields its harvest only to those not allergic to hard work. The crushing weight of the human body against the hard surface of the earth has produced these shoes. And all this can be seen in the painting if we look closely and allow it to engage our imaginations. Serviceability, dependability, contact with the earth—such is the toolness of a tool.

In the context of the working of Van Gogh’s work, we perceive how and what the represented tool is: “The truth of the being
has been set in the work of art. And ‘to set’ here means to bring to a stand. A being, a pair of peasant’s shoes, comes to stand in the work in the light of its being. The being of the being is brought to the permanency of its appearance.”41 This is the sense in which art “lets truth happen.” An essence appears as uncovered, as standing out from the rest of the world. And this can happen only because the work of art creates a world of its own—here, a world of human instrumentality.

Can this description be generalized? The first impulse is to answer no, for the painting represents an object and can be judged as true in the same sense that declarative sentences are judged true. Consider in comparison the imagistic poem, Meyer’s “Der römische Brunnen” (The Roman Fountain):

Up jets the stream and falling flows  
To fill the marble plate so round,  
Which, disappearing, overflows  
Into a second shallow ground;  
Too full it wells, and so pours forth  
Into a third its streaming jets;  
Each takes and gives—there is no fourth—  
And flows and rests.42


42. By C. F. Meyer, entitled *Der römische Brunnen*. Heidegger, *Holzwege*, p. 26:

Aufsteigt der Strahl und fallend giesst  
Er voll der Marmorschale Rund,  
Die, sich verschleiernd, überfliesst  
In einer zweiten Schale Grund;  
Die zweite gibt, sie wird zu reich,  
Der dritten wallend ihre Flut,  
Und jede nimmt und gibt zugleich  
Und strömt und ruht.
Does the poem picture an actual fountain or the essence of a Roman cascade? To answer yes is to forget the relation of the picture to the manner in which the words themselves "flow" and yet "remain at rest." To answer yes is to forget the experience of the poem in favor of the memory of an object seen.

The point may become clearer when we consider the manner in which an architectural masterpiece is said to let truth appear (see Fig. 2). Stone, mass, and empty space can hardly be taken as a picture of reality. Rightly ordered, however, they can become a work of art.

The temple performs a double function: it opens up a world at the same time it produces "an earth." The world is that of the godly. Experience the tranquillity of the Greek, the rising darkness of the Romanesque, the soaring pinnacle and flying buttresses of the Gothic, the somber austerity of the early Protestant,

![Figure 2. The Temple of Hera at Paestum.](image)
and you are in the presence of so many different gods, so many different forms of worship. Words such as “the altar,” “the sanctuary,” “the holy of holies,” or simply “God’s house” indicate the seriousness of this world, which, if it can be desecrated, is so only because it has previously been consecrated by a people’s faith and an artist’s work. Without the religious faith and artistic activities of the builders this world is nothing but a heap of stone, a museum, or a ruin and dead relic of a past way of life: “The god is present in the temple by means of the temple.” And He can flee from it, as He does when the religious way of life is lost.

Through the temple God comes down to earth, but not to the planet on which we live. The earth, our planet, is itself only a symbol for what takes place, a fixed point of reference for the “worldling” of the godly world. The stones and columns shimmer in the light as they rise; the horizon is cut into a significant form; day and night are measurable by lengthening shadows; and darkness follows dusk as death follows life. Around the holy ground, the human and nonhuman life finds its place—a nature, a living-ground, and a final resting place: “The earth is that to which the rise of everything rising falls back as such; its essence is to endure within the rising openness as the enclosing ground.”

In such passages as these Heidegger’s language exhibits a lyricism and degree of metaphorical statement rarely found in the writings of professional philosophers. He is in fact approaching the limits of meaningful expression. But, again, he is proceeding according to plan. He has excluded the physical notion of a thing as irrelevant to his subject, the working of a work of art.


44. *Ibid.*: “Die Erde ist das, wohin das Aufgehen alles Aufgehende und zwar als ein solches zurückbirt. Im Aufgehenden west die Erde als das Bergende.”

art. Contemporary aestheticians know and speak of this experience as “expressiveness,” which is precisely what cannot be expressed in symbols other than those of the medium being discussed. Heidegger can, therefore, only suggest and hope that his metaphors can turn the trick.

And they may, if we keep two further considerations in mind: he moves to the expressiveness of a temple by way of the temple's customary use, to house religious activity and to relate to other ordinary human activities, like living and dying. So far he is consistent in his moves from thing to tool to work. What he must yet do to complete his analysis is to cash in the metaphors he uses to explain the total expressiveness of religious architecture and then apply the concepts he has gained to the experience of a representational piece. Since the temple is nonobjective, he can rely on no representational imagery. "World" and "earth" must be given their metaphysical interpretation; and he proceeds to do just this, undaunted by our hesitations to follow: "The setting up of a world and the placement of the earth within are two essential characteristics in the being of the work."46

The explanation of these terms follows, first in the metaphysical and then in an aesthetic context. It is in this way we shall have tested the relevance of his thought for working aesthetic inquiry.

II

If a world and an earth are made to appear in a successful work of art, it should be possible to give a reasonable description of each of these, even if their relationship would at first blush seem to fall within the ineffable, within the area of our direct, consummatory experience. Aesthetics has traditionally attempted to treat of such experiences, and Heidegger's Sein und Zeit elaborated a technique for their analysis. He called it "Daseinsanalytik." "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes" merely repeats the conclusions of the earlier treatise, placing them in a specific aesthetic context.

46. Holzwege, p. 36: "Das Aufstellen einer Welt und das Herstellen der Erde sind zwei Wesenszüge im Werksein des Werkes."
The analysis of human existence (*Dasein*) begins with the relationship of transcendence to a world, which already obtains when the question of the being of this entity is posed. The question arises, then, on the basis of an original, implicit, yet unclear understanding of what it means to be in a world. The purpose of ontological analysis is to make the understanding consequent, explicit, and clear.

Heidegger describes our everyday experiences of objects in a passage that might have been written by Merleau-Ponty: “One existent heaves up before another, the one veils the other as the first overshadows the second; a little closes off much, and the isolated element disavows the whole. The concealment here is not this simple denial; the existent truly appears, but reveals itself as other than what it is.” 47 What appears hides what does not and draws attention away from the entire context in which it does appear. Thus uncovering implies a double covering over. A figure appears on a ground but prevents the ground from appearing as a figure. Figure and ground each deny (*Versagen*) the other, yet neither can exist without the other. They exist in tension of strife (*Streit*), and as they come together in tension before our awareness (“perception” is too limited a notion to cover what is intended), the context of meaning relations which is a subject’s world must itself recede into a background.

Nothing mysterious is being claimed here; this has always been true in aesthetic perception, in which the balance of our lives is “bracketed” out of relevance as we attend to the qualities of a specific work. How do we move from this common-sense notion of everyday experience to an understanding of the “ontological” structures implicit therein?

The first step in answer is to notice that figure and ground form a *Gestalt* in the flow of our conscious lives. A new entity appears where before consciousness there was none; within the density of the world there appears a light, an opening; and “This opening

occurs within the [phenomenally] existent thing." 48 Something is there, and the rest of our world recedes into unawareness. It would be too easy, however, to associate the light with the openness of the world and the darkness of unconsciousness with the closedness of the earth. For the light, too, can be covered over, as it is when appearances are deceiving. 49 Since the essence of the truth is to cover over what it does not uncover, truth is likewise untruth (Verborgenheit). Truth and untruth happen simultaneously; because something is true, something else must be false.

The earth is, however, what closes in upon itself (das Sich-verschliessende), what comes to closure within the context of the opening world: "The earth rises up only through the world; and a world is grounded only on the earth in so far as truth, as the primordial tension between light and concealment, comes about." 50 And for this reason it is said that truth is at work (am Werk) in the work (of art). 51 Consider our three examples, the painting of Van Gogh, the poem of Meyer, and the Grecian temple: they "reveal—strictly speaking they state nothing at all—not only what the essence of this isolated existent is, but they also permit the disclosure, the unconcealed truth, of the whole of Being." 52 So interpreted, the appearance of truth in the work of art is beauty; and beauty is one of the essential ways in which truth comes to be.

Yet we know that a work of art comes to be in the activity of the artist. What is the relationship between the creativity of the artist and the happening of truth? The Greek word "techne" is both a clue and a snare for further inquiry. It is a snare if we interpret the failure of the Greeks to distinguish between

48. Ibid., p. 43: "Dieses Offene geschieht inmitten des Seienden."
49. Ibid., p. 42.
50. Ibid., p. 44: "Erde durchdringt nur die Welt, Welt gründet sich nur auf die Erde, sofern die Wahrheit als der Urstreit von Lichtung und Verbergung geschieht."
51. Ibid., pp. 44–54.
52. Ibid., p. 44: "[Works of art] ... bekunden nicht nur, sie bekunden streng genommen überhaupt nicht, was dieses vereinzelte Seiende als dieses sei, sondern sie lassen Unverborgenheit als solche im Bezug auf Seiende im Ganzen geschehen."
artisanry and artistry as a failure in thought or even as a disinclination to distinguish between making an object according to a predesigned plan and the discovery of a plan in the making of an object.

It will be remembered that Kant referred to this distinction as that between “industry” and “art,” and contemporaneously we distinguish between technique—whether it is found in science, art, or everyday life—and creative vision. To call an artist a technician is to slander him and his works; only in the realm of current pseudo-science and in some contemporary philosophies is scientific knowledge confused with technology. But to say of a successful business man—or even of a university administrator—that he possesses vision is to praise his estimation of a future state of affairs.

The clue provided by a translation of the Greek word for both “art” and “technics” is precisely its reference to knowledge as “seeing” in its widest sense, which, it may be repeated, Heidegger interprets as “the grasping of something present qua present,” even if what is present is so, in a paradoxical word of Sartre, only in “absence”; for to imagine is to see something that is not there to be perceived. Both the artisan and the artist must perceive and imagine what is to be done on the basis of what is perceived as both work their materials. Such is the essence of creativity, and one would be hard put to explain a premium to be placed upon the one or the other activity (perception or imagination) in the description of either art or technics.

Moreover, art and technics are not the only areas of human experience in which truth may be seen happening. Heidegger names others: the act of founding a state, living in the presence of being itself, an act of sacrifice, and philosophical questioning. If this last is a correct example, one can witness truth happening even when questioning the essence of art in the exercise of which the artist has, in the first instance, set truth in his work.

54. Holzwege, p. 50.
This does not mean of course that an artist must imagine what he will have done when his work is finished even before making a first stroke: "The arrangement of truth in a work is the bringing forth of such a being as that which before did not yet exist and which afterwards will nevermore come to be." The artist creates his work by forming a Gestalt of the tension between world and earth, between that complex of sedimented meaning structures he has inherited from his culture and the new object he sets therein. His creative problem is to know when to stop manipulating materials, and this he knows in the same way that an appreciator knows, not by his signature but by an experience of the tension between expressing surface (sensuous Gestalt) and expressed depth (pregnancy, significance of the Gestalt).

As the French philosopher and critic Alain put the matter, the artist is the first one surprised by his work. Heidegger puts it in a slightly different manner when he says, "But what is more usual than this, that a being exists? In the work of art, however, that it should come to be is precisely the unusual." To witness the unusual in the usual is to see, under one's hands as it were, truth having happened.

For the artist, this means that he must allow the work to be, once he has perceived the factum est. No more changes or additions are allowable; the work is there to be perceived and preserved. Thus if the manipulation of materials into the significance of a Gestalt is the first phase, preservation (Bewahren) is the second phase of the artist's activity; and here the artist is joined by his fellow man: "The preservation of the work does not isolate men within the sphere of their own lived experiences, but moves them all into a togetherness with the truth as it comes to be in the work, and thus establishes a foundation of an existence with and for others as the historical endurance of

55. Ibid.: "Die Einrichtung der Wahrheit ins Werk ist das Hervorbringen eines solchen Seienden, das vordem noch nicht war und nachmals nie mehr werden wird."
56. Ibid., p. 55: "Was aber ist gewöhnlicher als dieses, dass Seiendes ist? Im Werk dagegen ist dieses, dass es als solches ist, gerade das Ungewöhnliche."
57. Ibid.
human existence out of the relationship to truth.”58 The architects and masons had collaborated in making a temple, and they are joined by their fellow man in making the god descend.

The making of a work of art is thus the establishment of a tradition: a gift, a foundation, and a profound modification of the world as it had existed before—in a word, a new beginning. The origin of a work of art is to be found in the essence of art as “the creative preservation of truth in the work.”59

III

Heidegger’s study of the origin of art works presents a clear alternative to the phenomenological treatment of aesthetic objects elsewhere on the Continent, particularly in France. If Sartre could find little or no place for perception, and Merleau-Ponty little or none for the imagination, in their descriptions of an aesthetic object, the reason was that each began his investigation by considering aesthetic experience from the wrong starting point, i.e., from an encounter between a subject, and an object considered as a thing. The thing became for Sartre the occasion for the contemplation of an imaginary object and for Merleau-Ponty, the expressive organization of the sensible into a meaningful *Gestalt* grasped in the first instance by the readaptive modification of the subject’s inner bodily schema. In terms of contemporary aesthetics, Sartre’s theory is “depth”-centered while Merleau-Ponty’s is centered on the “surface” of aesthetic expressions.

Yet at the time of his death, Merleau-Ponty was following a clue that might have led him beyond his “thin” doctrine of expressiveness. His “Eye and Mind”60 is replete with references to “Being” which have a peculiarly Heideggerian ring. Having


60. See *The Primacy of Perception*, Edie, ed., pp. 159-90.
imprisoned himself earlier within his doctrine of the “primacy of perception,” however, he was unable to provide a meaningful description of the ontological structures implicit in an act of artistic creation and appreciation. In every case his explanations return to the ground of the corporeal cogito: a result determined, if Heidegger is right, by the faulty point of departure. Any analysis of paintings which begins with the isolation of sensuous elements will have the same result: “In the experience produced by means of the sense organs of sight, hearing or touch; in the sensations of colored, of sounding, or rough and hard things, we are, literally so meant, attacked in the body.” It may come as somewhat of a surprise to reflect that these words are Heidegger's not Merleau-Ponty's. If we began our analysis of works of art as things, Heidegger claims, we shall be incapable of showing the particular manner in which works of art considered as works are things. And this is to say Merleau-Ponty of necessity failed to discover the “essence” of an artwork as it functions in the lives of artists and their audiences.

Heidegger accomplishes his explanation by seeking the essence of works of art as they function. He avoids Merleau-Ponty's problem of moving from the ontics of things to the ontological description of the being of things by reversing the order of procedure. The creation and the appreciation of works of art are “ontological” phenomena in that each of these activities affects a human subject's manner of being in the world. The world itself is the open context of sedimented meaning structures created in the first place by the purposeful activities of human transcendences. The ontological problem is to show how a single, newly created, meaningful structure comes to existence within this “world” because the artist and his society behave as they do.

That creative essences do come to being is hardly contro­vertible. Every successful work of art, as every other truly crea­

61. See the essay by this title, pp. 12–42.
tive act, is as brute in its factuality as the givenness of any other conscious (or corporeal) event. This is what Emerson meant when he said every institution is but the shadow of a single (creative) individual. Institutions and works of art are created, but they are not amenable to the same sort of description used scientifically or philosophically to explain the existence of the things of nature. Works of art, in sum, are "daseinsmässig," i.e., existential phenomena.

Now, according to Heidegger, Dasein or human existence is such that it lives, moves, and has its being in the presence of Being, i.e., in the openness of the "worlding" world. The explanatory trick, therefore, is to show how "the earth" comes to the fore in this swirling meaning complex which is the world of the artistic personality.

The earth, it will be recalled, is that self-contained, newly fixed meaning structure which comes to be in the closure of a sensuous Gestalt. Thus the "sensuous surface" of a work of art is a description gained from an aesthetic-ontological analysis of aesthetic phenomena and not an element by means of which art works are constructed by a mysterious kind of conscious summation. The thingness of a work of art is the last, and not the first, content of our aesthetic awareness: "When we consider the work of art as an object, however, what appears as a thing in the current acceptation of the term is the earth-dimension of the work as it is experienced before analysis."\footnote{Ibid., p. 57: "Was jedoch an dem als Gegenstand genommenen Werk so aussieht wie das Dinghafte im Sinne der geläufigen Dingbegriffe, das ist, vom Werk her erfahren, das Erdhafte des Werkes."} And this is only to say that our aesthetic categories must be derived from our experiences of authentic works of art; from those, in other words, in which the artist has succeeded in setting a truth and from which the truth shines, as much to the artist's surprise as to ours, as a beautiful "thing." Our aesthetic admiration is only an outward sign that we have witnessed this truth.

We must remember, however, not to confuse truth with the correspondence of statement to fact. Such a formulation of "truth" has vitiated most of the discussions of the appearance of...
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truth in art; for if this idea of the truth continues to hold sway, truth could be found only in representational art. It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty could say in truth that the controversy over the relative merits of figurative and nonfigurative painting, for example, misplaces the emphasis on one or the other of our conscious activities: on the seeing of the eye or on the understanding of the mind.

Merleau-Ponty remains one of the greatest of the phenomenological aestheticians; not, as Professor Edie has suggested, because he has accepted the perceived world as the primary reality—that is his weakness—but because he came as close as anybody to giving a description of "the working of a work." Heidegger has at least placed the inquiry in the context where fruitful investigation may take place. He has succeeded in showing what the problem is. For this reason, if for no other, he is worthy of being read.

But there are other reasons as well. If he is right, the ontological analysis of the working of works of art will yield still further results—call them "pragmatic" if you will. He has shown, for example, why it is fruitful to use paintings of healthy or of psychologically unbalanced persons to achieve an insight into the personality structures of the subjects involved. Margaret Naumberg has done this with great success. And she has done nothing but work out the implications of the existence of a work of art as a tension between the world and the earth, between the open and the fixed, which tension is the work of art as experienced.

And there is more: Heidegger's view of creativity gives the same sort of foundation for the interpretation of art as an institution in the general society. For if it is true that the artist introduces a new meaning into his world, he is profoundly capable of modifying the world of others as this new meaning becomes a sedimented structure of a common world, the one referred to by every occurrence of the linguistic expressions


going to make up "the common language." And this is to say only that art is a historical process uniting many human transcendences into a single "people."

Finally, if this view is correct the function of art criticism becomes the task of extending the scope of the society so created. Humanity is still in the making, and to be human in the fullest sense of this term we need only join in its further creation.