Perplexity and Passion in Heidegger: 
A Study in the Continuity of his Thought

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In an Addendum to his own work, Heidegger tells us: “The whole essay, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art,’ deliberately yet tacitly moves on the path of the question of the nature of Being,” (PLT, 83). This means then, that just as he first approached the question of Being through Dasein, he has likewise mediated his consideration of Being viz. the work of art. The question at hand for our present inquiry is to discern how this is accomplished.

What, after all, does art have to do with all that has already been said about Being (at much greater length) in *Being and Time*? In his essay on art, there is no mention of Dasein anywhere to be found—he is talking instead about *things*, or more specifically, *works*. Of course, it is tempting to immediately reply to this by appealing to the fact that all works of art are created by an artist, and although this fact is nowhere denied by Heidegger, he advises us also that the artist *is* as such only insofar as the work deems him to be. We are thus left moving in a circle—a movement in which Heidegger is especially graceful.

In approaching art from the work rather than the artist, Heidegger avoids entering into his contemporaries’ dialogue on aesthetics, which had concerned itself for the most part with the ‘genius’ of the artist. Instead, we are given a highly original conception of the art work as that into which truth sets itself. Truth happens there. We are here of course referring to truth as *aletheia*. Truth takes place and shape (Gestalt) in the work of art as the interchange of concealment and clearing from which the Open is won. But just what kind of place is the Open? It is the arena wherein the world and earth strive against one another—it houses the *Rift (Riss)*.

The rift is that into which the strife of world and earth has been ‘fitted’. Heidegger likens it to the contention between two opponents striving against one another (so as to make manifest the relationship between *Streit* and *Streben*). “This rift does not let the opponents break apart; it brings the opposition of measure and boundary into their common outline,” (PLT, 63). The two are brought together in the rift just as much as they are *rent*—i.e. forcibly torn from one another. Moreover, in the creation of a work, the rift is “set back” into the earth so as to be

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1 Also referred to as “a conflict of measure and unmeasure” on page 70.
rendered. What does it mean to be set back in to the earth? Heidegger tells us that in the work’s being set into it, the earth “towers up” through the opened world. In order to understand this, we must ask ourselves how the earth—which is the tendency toward withdrawal and retreat into itself—can itself come to the fore; we must imagine concealedness itself being unveiled. It means this: It must be such as to make an appearance in the very sheltering of itself; undisclosedness must be just as integral to the truth process as is disclosedness. “But this,” Heidegger tells us, “signifies nothing else than that Dasein is already both in truth and in untruth. The way of uncovering is achieved only in … distinguishing between these understandably.”

Truth is the coordination of clearing and concealedness, wherein the earth is brought to bear as “the sheltered one”. Even concealedness must enter the clearing so as to be exhibited, and it is just as much essential to the nature of truth as is the tendency of the self-opening world. Gadamer puts it quite elegantly: “It is not only the emergence into the light but just as much the sheltering of itself in the dark. It is not only the unfolding of the blossom in the sun, but just as much its rooting of itself in the depth of the earth,” (Gadamer, 106). To carry the analogy further, we might point to Heidegger’s consideration both of the earth’s capacity for the bringing forth of bounty along with its “unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field.” (PLT, 34).

It was certainly no accident that Heidegger selected a work of art that depicts—i.e. opens the world of—the peasant in the charge of cultivating the land, whose equipment allows for response to the “silent call of the earth”. What do we suppose the earth urges in its silence? In “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” Heidegger tells us that *Cultura* is, above all, a preserving, in the sense of letting things come forth from the earth, “specifically to till the soil,” (PLT, 147). When we work the soil, we set up a space (a clearing) for the forthcoming and flourishing of those things that are brought to bear from the earth; we nurture them in this

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2 I.e. sketched or drawn out; given shape. This underlying relationship between ‘Rend’ and ‘Render’ in English is perhaps a tolerable counterpart to the German double-sense of ‘Riss’ as both ‘rift’ and the verb – ‘To draw’.

3 Here we reach for the help extended to the reader, like a life-line, by Heidegger himself, when on page 61 of “The Origin of the Work of Art” he refers us back to Section 44 in *Being and Time*, wherein we find the cited passage in 222/265. It is also worth noting here, (for future discussion below), that Dasein’s “being in untruth” is in the same section associated with its being essentially falling.
way. Moreover, this preserving is essentially the mode of dwelling for mortals. In other words, the earth beckons us toward our dwelling as the preservation of that which is yielded by its depth. So it is with the call of the work, which “pleads and waits for them [the preservers] to enter into its truth,” (PLT, 67). For Heidegger, art ‘truthing’ is just as much a matter of preservation as it is the act of creation.

We would do well at this point to clarify what it is that Heidegger means by ‘preserving’. It is essentially the letting-happen of truth in the work; it is standing within the conflict and letting it be (Gelassenheit) a work as such. This letting-happen should not be taken as an indication of “doing nothing at all”; it is, on the contrary a “doing to the highest degree,” (PLT, 83). Heidegger speaks of restraint with regard to our approaching the work; it involves a determination not to enter into the superficial prattling that goes on about the ‘qualities’ of a given piece. Our coming to know the work is also a matter of willing. Such a willing “makes its home in the work’s truth and only thus remains a knowing, does not deprive the work of its independence … and does not degrade it to the role of a stimulator of experience,” (PLT, 68).

It is not up to us to demand such gratification from the work, nor is it to set ourselves upon it by charting its merits and defects. Heidegger tells us that to do so would be an objectification which would represent nothing more than our opportunity for using beings. Art works are just those things which are distinguished in their being brilliantly useless—those things which can be “forced to do nothing” 4 Colour shines only in its privacy of its being left to its shining, playfully.

Does this mean that, in preserving the work as work, we are to remain entirely silent? In a sense, we can say as follows: “Talking extensively about something covers it up and brings what is understood to a sham clarity—the unintelligibility of the trivial. But to keep silent does not mean to be dumb 5,” (BT 168/212). Gelassenheit in this case is quite simply the priority of hearing over speaking.

The work of art is not something that works out its truth merely by laying it bare and plain for all to see. On the contrary, great works of art outshine others in their unfathomableness, (i.e. their depth). That is, anything which lends itself to being conveniently summed up—described

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5 This is, as the Taoist might call it, the ‘usefulness of the useless’.
and explained away—is not thus preserved in its being let ‘stand-in-itself’, but rather leveled off and disabled in its capacity for bringing about wonder and estrangement; it is dragged down in connoisseurship to the realm of commonality (i.e. the unextraordinary) and commodity (i.e. the ‘art business’). It is masticated so as to be served up as fodder for idle talk.

We must understand that, for Heidegger, something’s becoming familiar and ordinary in this way is tantamount to its fading out of sight. This is exactly what does not take place within the work: “The setting-into-work of the truth thrusts up the unfamiliar and extraordinary and at the same time thrusts down the ordinary and what we believe to be such” (PLT, 75), while “The publicness of the ‘They’ suppresses everything unfamiliar,” (BT, 192/237). It is clear that we are now approaching a point of contact between the two texts in question.

Once again we follow the clue left conspicuously in Heidegger’s second direct reference back to Being and Time. The reference is placed (at first glance, seemingly out of place) within a description of the ‘knowing as willing’ involved in restraint (in preservation). What do the two have to do with one another? Resoluteness, we are told, is a distinctive mode of Dasein’s disclosedness “… in which one is ready for anxiety,” (BT, 297/343). Likewise, in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger says that knowing-as-willing, (i.e. restraint)—“is a being resolved; it is standing within the conflict.” (PLT, 68). We must ask ourselves at this point whether it might be that we are here dealing with two different senses of “being resolved,” or if they are the same from one text to the other. The sheer fact that Heidegger himself makes explicit reference back to his exposition of resoluteness in Being and Time at this point in the essay should be evidence enough for the latter. If such is the case, then we might ask in which conflict Dasein stands in its Being-resolute. In reply, we should answer: It is that conflict which lies closest to the heart of Dasein, from which anxiety permeates.

Heidegger tells us that that in the face of which anxiety arises is Dasein’s being-in-the-world itself. Moreover, anxiety is the primordial mood of Dasein, and it is so because it points towards the strife which

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6 In English, we can appreciate the pun between being ‘dumb’ as being ignorant and as being incapable of speech, which is certainly not the case in one’s restraining from comment. “The resoluteness intended in Being and Time is not the deliberate action of a subject, but the opening up of a human being, out of its captivity in that which is, to the openness of Being,” (PLT, 67).

7 Also described as a “Being-guilty,” and as a “Wanting-to-have-a-conscience,” (See BT, 296-7).

8 See footnote 3 (above).
lies between facticity and projectedness, (that same tension we find as internal to the phrase ‘Being-ahead-of-itself-in-already-being-in-a-world’). Always present in one way or another, it is the way in which we find ourselves (Befindlichkeit) most essentially disposed toward our Being-in-the-world. That is, we are anxious with regard to our very existential situation—that of being a thrown projection. Once again, we follow Heidegger’s direction for the reader to Section 44: “The existential ontological condition for the fact that Being-in-the-world is characterized by ‘truth’ and ‘untruth’ lies in that state of Dasein’s Being which we have designated as thrown projection” (BT, 223/265).

That is, in authenticity as resoluteness, we come to see ourselves as radically contingent projects (geworfenen Entwurf). As such, we find ourselves thrown into a world and under incessant obligation to deal with the possibilities laid out for us in understanding, (there is no choice but to choose, as it is said). The Streit here spoken of, in other words, involves the conflict between being and becoming; there is a fracture-line between how Dasein finds itself and how it will be in the future. Authenticity is inextricably linked to anxiety because it brings Dasein to an apprehension of its alienation to the world—its Unheimlichkeit. It is the mode of being wherein Dasein finds itself situated in uncanniness toward what was otherwise most familiar. To discover oneself as abandoned in a world in progress, having to constitute and reconstitute one’s being from moment to moment, (without taking refuge in the solace of public approval), gives rise to uneasiness, disorientation; it is the feeling of having the ground swept out from beneath the feet. Seeing one’s life as one’s own handiwork, rather than as something which unfolds as a matter of course (i.e. in accordance to the grounds laid out by ubiquitous consent of the “They”), is to recognize the inherent groundlessness of every decision one makes. In the authentic mode, Dasein no longer grounds its tarrying along in being ‘this type of person’ or as simply ‘doing what the world demands’—authentic Dasein’s conscience speaks out against it.

We are especially prone to the sway of angst when genuine consideration is given to our own death: “As anticipation of death—resoluteness becomes authentically what it can be,” (BT, 305/353). Why does the thought of Dasein’s own-most being-at-an-end beckon it on toward authenticity? For one thing, it is because it poses for mortals the greatest of mysteries. Just as in the former case of the work of art, where the reticent bearing of strife gave rise to a ‘thrust into the extraordinary,’” the angst which resoluteness bears to us can turn the ordinary and

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familiar into the extraordinary. In the face of death as not-to-be-outstripped, the fact that “I am”—my Factum est—becomes a source of wonder; it “brings Dasein before the “that-it-is” of its “there,” which, as such, stares it in the face with the inexorability of an enigma,” (BT, 136/175). The creative motivation is, likewise, to bring out the beautiful in the commonplace—“That it is”.

It should be clear at this point just how the work of art can be seen to delineate the entire human predicament laid out in Being and Time. In the case of the former, when Heidegger speaks of restraint (as resolution) the work is preserved “so that strife may remain a strife” (PLT, 49), we can say, in the case of the latter, that in being resolute with regard to the anticipation of one’s own death, anxiety is, so to speak, preserved. Moreover, in both cases, strife is preserved so as to displace Dasein from the tranquilization of the ‘They’ (who “[do] not permit us the courage for anxiety in the face of death” (BT, 254/298) and who are likewise never satisfied to let strife be (in the work). We have seen also in both cases that in the letting-happen of strife (i.e. being-ready for anxiety), a sense of astonishment and perplexity is brought to bear. But we still have not answered the question with which we began; namely: How is it that Heidegger’s essay on the origin of art “deliberately yet tacitly move[s] on the path of the question of the nature of Being”?

In light of this, we might consider the project which Heidegger undertook in writing Being and Time. It should be understood, first off, that Heidegger went to great lengths to assure the reader that he was not prescribing for us the ‘authentic life’, or even that one should cultivate that mode of being; there was no ‘ought’ about it. We might ask ourselves, then, why he wrote about it at all; but then again, isn’t there a kind of ‘ought’ involved in the very writing of the book? That is, at the very least we can say without hesitation that Heidegger exposed the difference between authenticity and inauthenticity so that it might be brought to light—so that this difference might be thought of.

Heidegger did not give an exhaustive account of Being, nor would he claim to have done so, (accordingly, the last lines of the book are questions). The question of Being is one which shatters all attempts

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9 We find our counterpart to such a development within “The Origin of the Work of Art” on page 65: “The simple “factum est” is to be held forth into the Open by the work … that such a work is at all rather than is not”.

10 We are reminded here of what was discussed above, especially with regard to “knowing understandingly” the difference between truth and untruth. See footnote 3 (above).
at solution, along with the claim that this is all there is to say about the matter. In the first lines of the book, we find the declaration of a newfound bewilderment in the face of Being. After determining the problematic as such, Heidegger indicates to us just what he is after: “Our aim in the following treatise is to work out the question of Being and to do so concretely,” (BT, 1/1). We ought to ask ourselves exactly what it means to “work out” a question. First of all, it does not simply mean to ‘answer’ it in the ordinary sense. The sense in which we must understand ‘answering’ here is comparable to how we use the term when we ‘answer’ the door.

In the analytic of Dasein, we saw the answer to “the call of conscience,” wherein life becomes a mystery to itself. Until a man has given his own death genuine consideration, we say, he has been taking his life for granted—as a given. Heidegger likewise accuses traditional metaphysics of taking the world just this way. Questions needed to be rekindled; indeed, the thinker’s work is to keep questions alive. That sense of urgency which inspired Plato and Aristotle into their craft has since given way to tranquilization—(in a sense, these two explained things too well). And yet, while the question of Being may not always make its full weight felt within us, it is forever an issue for us. Likewise, in the case of the work of art, even when it falls in oblivion, it is still calling out, “pleading” (the truth wills to take place), even if it is preserved in a deficient way.\(^{11}\)

In the four cases we have named—the ‘silent’ call of the earth, the call of conscience, the call of the work, and the call of Being—answering such a call always entails some sort of preserving; respectively: Cultura as letting the earth withdraw as it bears forth, Resoluteness as Being-ready-for-anxiety, Restraint as letting strife be strife, and Rekindling as letting the presence of the present be problematic. Hence, we are ready to give account of how “The Origin of the Work of Art” and Being and Time were essentially heading up the same project: “Beauty is one way in which truth occurs as unconcealedness,” (PLT, 56). That is, the preservation of art is one way of ‘truthing’, and “still another way in which truth becomes is the thinker’s questioning, which, as the thinking of Being, names Being in its question-worthiness,” (PLT, 62).

Heidegger was a man who loved questions more than answers; he resurrected them and preserved them in the domain of

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\(^{11}\) To complete the comparison, in terms of the analytic of Dasein, anxiety is always there under the purview of care, whether deficiently or otherwise.
thinking. Accordingly, in the first lines of the Epilogue to his essay, Heidegger explains the purpose of his work this way: “The foregoing reflections are concerned with the riddle of art, the riddle that art itself is. They are far from claiming to solve the riddle. The task is to see the riddle,” (PLT, 79)\(^\text{12}\). Being was, for Heidegger, a fleeting muse. As a thinker most irresistibly drawn by the call, he could not help but to chase her, though she could never be captured. This is the torment of the artist and the thinker alike; it is why the rift between measure and unmeasure is essentially painful. Being must remain forever a riddle to us, (just as Dasein’s concern for the question of its own being will never be satisfied). While Being is “presenced” in language, it remain nonetheless aloof. This is \textit{der ursprungliche Streit}. As Heraclitus tells us, \textit{Physis kryptesthai philei} (nature prefers to remain unknown), Heidegger might say that Being prefers to remain anonymous: “Thinking’s saying would be stilled in its being only by becoming unable to say that which must remain unspoken. Such inability would bring thinking face to face with its matter …”\(^\text{13}\)

Here, Heidegger’s poem should remind us of the way that the earth was characterized in his essay on art: “The earth appears openly cleared as itself [only] when it is perceived and preserved as that which is essentially undiscoverable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up,” (PLT, 40). The term ‘earth’ (\textit{Erde}) is itself shrouded in mystery. Indeed, contemporary scholarship leaves it for the most part untouched. (It is, however, for this reason all the more fascinating). In English, the earth is, literally, that which we live on and off of, in the sense of our living upon its surface and living (that is, “dwelling”) in by cultivating the land and allowing for growth. It is a very original use of metaphor in that, for both senses of the word already mentioned, there are two respective ontological aspects—that is \textit{Ground} (Grund), and \textit{Depth} (Ab-grund). Accordingly, Heidegger tells us that the world “grounds itself” in the earth, and in so doing, the earth juts through.\(^\text{14}\) But how can we say that anything is grounded in depth? After

\(^\text{12}\) It is interesting to point out that the same might have been said in reference to Being and Time simply by replacing the word ‘art’ with ‘Being’.

\(^\text{13}\) Taken from “The Thinker as Poet”; Cf. page 11, PLT.

\(^\text{14}\) We are now in a position to answer the question we posed earlier (see page 2 above), namely: How can we imagine depth towering up through the opened world? We reply by saying that, in depth coming to the fore, the work of art is illuminated in (and great works are set apart by) the works presenting itself as unfathomable, beyond description. In other
all, depth is that one and only notion which defies ground—it is rather the Ab-grund, the Abyss.

In order to answer this question, we look to how Being can likewise be said to be the ground for all beings, while at the same time being groundlessness itself: “Being and ground: the same. Being as grounding has no ground, but as the abyss plays that game which, as mission, plays to us Being and ground” (SG, 188).

We should pause here to note that, while it is not here being submitted that ‘earth’ is equivalent to ‘Being’, the two are, no doubt, nonetheless intimately related. That is, the attitude of sheltering which was called ‘earth’ is the shyness of Being. It is portrayed in the conservation of its presencing—in a refusal to fully come out of hiding. It is perhaps a feigned shyness; we call it ‘playing hard to get’. It means to yield only so much as to intrigue, to entice. Being means to be wondered upon; it yearns to be named ‘question-worthy’.

Furthermore, Heidegger goes on to tell us that “The play is without “why.” It plays for the while that it plays. There remains only play: the highest and the deepest,” (SG, 188). In other words, the play of Being’s presencing stands in need of no justification. We here revisit the same sort of ‘groundlessness’ as was discussed in Dasein’s authentic encounter with itself as geworfene Entwur—i.e. in its encounter with freedom and the feeling of groundlessness (as expressed in anxiety) which accompanied. It is the sense of Grund, not only principio (in the sense of “grounding a claim” in words), but also as motivo—the sense in which we ground our actions in motives. To say that Being is “without-ground” in the first sense is say that it is ineffable, (as Heidegger does); in the second—it is to say that our motivations for acting as we do are groundless, foundationless—unjustified insofar as they are “without why”. This sense of groundlessness, and the anxiety which accompanies, comes to bear when Dasein is no longer consoled by the comforts of such things as “common sense,” which carries with it the strength of compulsion in its “obviousness”.

In this way, it might be said that Heidegger overcame nihilism by simply not acknowledging the legitimacy of the question “why?” He was never, so to speak, ensnared by the grip of the question of ground as motivo—he rather determinedly fixed his gaze upon Being mesmerized by the depth in which all things are grounded. There is no sense is

words, a great work exposes the materials into which it is set in such a way as to inspire wonder. It is thus that we are called to apprehend it as such.

15 See page 10 above.
demanding justification from the world; it offers none, and would be all the less wondrous if it did, just as the great work of art does not, like a temptress without discretion (i.e. no temptress at all), lay bare its treasure without contest. Likewise, nor was Heidegger caught in the trap of giving a ‘comprehensive analysis’ to the ineffable; he was not caught in the trap of grounding as principio. When Nietzsche complains of the metaphysician’s ultimate preference for “even a handful of ‘certainty’ to a whole carload of beautiful possibilities,” (Nietzsche, 10/16), Heidegger answers: “But it is more salutary for thinking to wander in estrangement than to establish itself in the comprehensible”16.

And so we see how it is that Heidegger can be said to remain “tacitly”—that is, with reverent subtlety—on the way to the question of Being. In both works we are brought back to Heidegger’s original estrangement; in neither case do we detect the ruminations of a rambling mystic, though we do find a man with a profound reverie for mystery. What is it to appreciate art as art? It is to savour the strife. The point of his work—indeed, the very act of his “working out” the question of Being—was never to prove itself complete, but rather to remain rigorously riveted to the amazing play of Being, to muse over the elusive and so stand in wonder of the ordinary.

“… That a thinking thing is, ever and suddenly—
whose amazement could fathom it?”17

Bibliography


17 See footnote 13 (Ibid.).