

HEIDEGGER'S INTERPRETATION OF HOLDERLIN

Ritwik Ghosh

Department of English
St. Xavier's University,
Kolkata (West Bengal)

Abstract

This paper argues that Heidegger's interpretation of Holderlin is not only of historical significance but has relevance as a living tradition of literary criticism by which to understand ontology in literature. The paper analyses a number of the late Odes of Holderlin to show they manifest a strange understanding of being. The paper investigates Heidegger's interpretation of Holderlin as a historical phenomenon that can be of relevance in the future in the understanding of being as revealed in poetry.

Keywords: Heidegger, Holderlin, Odes, Being and Time, Ontology, Poetry.

Introduction

The question Heidegger addresses in *Being and Time* is the meaning of being. For him being is not an entity nor the totality of entities. For Heidegger being is our understanding of being. He was interested in how we experience and understand ourselves. For him time is the transcendental horizon for the question of being. Heidegger investigates the question of being and time by going through a phenomenology of human understanding. For Heidegger ontology is only possible as phenomenology. For him phenomenology must be hermeneutical. By about 1930, he had begun a radical stylistic and methodological shift called the "turn". For Heidegger the worldly unconcealment in which we live can be brought out into the open in the creation of great works of art such as the Greek temples of Athena and Hera in Paestum (Heidegger, 2008, p. xii). According to Heidegger what is genuinely important about a work of art is that it discloses the world itself. Art unearths something that hides itself, something that refuses to be drawn out into the light of day. The work of art lets the earth be an earth (Heidegger p. xiii). Being is not independent of man. Heidegger questions the radical idea of subjectivity which underlies the metaphysical meaning of modern humanism, which he is resolved to question and resist. Heidegger prioritized '*existentia*' over '*essentia*'. Heidegger came to believe that Western metaphysics had moved beyond the cartesian-Kantian subjectivism that projects the world as objective (Heidegger p. xv). He thought modern technology was the self-organization of entities into mere resource material. For him modern technology is something happening to us as it is something we ourselves carry out (Heidegger p. xv). Heidegger attempted to describe humble nontechnological things and cultivate humble nontechnological practices. He tried to cultivate a nontechnological form of reflection (Heidegger p. xvi). Heidegger desired a meditative thinking responsive to the question of being. Thinking meditatively requires a new relation to language (Heidegger p. xvii).

Heidegger became seriously preoccupied with Holderlin in the 1930s (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 1). Heidegger was interested in a recuperation of the thinking he found implicit in Holderlin. Holderlin occupies a place in Heidegger's departure from earlier philosophy and his revisiting of thinking because he is concerned with the demand to think language in its relation to humanness (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 3). For Holderlin the limits of philosophy are the limits of sayability (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 4). Heidegger's insights into poetic language promise a rehabilitation of thinking. Heidegger found in poetic language an alternative to the violence of technological rationality (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 6). Holderlin is for Heidegger the essential poet and the poet of the Germans (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 10). Heidegger finds in Holderlin the promise for a recovery from the technological violence of modernity and from reductive forms of thinking (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 11).

For Heidegger, poetic language is the shelter of truth, and it finds truth in recollecting an essential-destinal origin (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 61). To him Holderlin is the essential poet who thinks the poetic task as the renunciation of subjectivity and the recollection of Being (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 64).

Heidegger chooses Holderlin because Heidegger learns that the making of poetry is a matter for thinking (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 67). Holderlin's poetry is a thinking poetry and articulates the essence of poetry. Heidegger illuminates the sense of lostness in Holderlin's hymns (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 67). For Holderlin, the absence of the gods marks the failure of reason to grasp the holy. The locales in Holderlin's poetry, landscapes, rivers, particular sites, are rendered by Heidegger as the intimacy of Being and its eschatological coming (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 67). For Heidegger poetry is a matter neither of popular consumption nor of mass production but of thinking.

The relation between renunciation of subjectivity and destiny is articulated in Heidegger's interpretation of Holderlin's poem "Andenken" (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 72). Heidegger resists an imagistic reading of the poem. For Heidegger the richness of the poetic word lies in its simplicity, a simplicity which is not simplistic (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 75). The poem gathers the poeticized, the ontological-historical role in founding truth. Heidegger rejects the images and experiences they might evoke and the subjective dimensions of Holderlin's language (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 76). For Heidegger the poem and what it poetizes belong to the history of Being and its founding (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 78). Heidegger claims that poetizing and thinking is the authentic searching for the highest, the "Vaterland" (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 82). Heidegger understands the poet as a figure who alone is called to the origin. For Heidegger Holderlin's poetry is the recollection of an origin that is ontological-historical.

Heidegger's lecture course on "Der Ister" is an illumination of the relation between poetic language and *Ereignis* (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 92). In the lecture course on "Der Ister" Heidegger thinks the unity of time-space and history-dwelling according to the simplicity of the destiny demanded by historical dwelling (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 97). In poetic language the elusiveness of being can be brought to the fore, can be brought to virtual appearance (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 99). For Heidegger this causes a historical founding and a sheltering relation to earth. Heidegger claims this unique capacity of poetic language eschews subjectivity.

One of the aims of Heidegger's poetics is to counter the technological attitude toward an objectified earth by offering the poetic as an alternative human dwelling (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 144). Heidegger's views of poetic dwelling vacillate between reference to factual life and a striving toward pure ontology. Heidegger describes dwelling alternatively in *Gelassenheit* terms

and in terms of an original violence (Gosetti-Ferenci p. 171). Both terminologies of dwelling are rooted in Heidegger's arguments for the ontological significance of artworks. Heidegger articulates a poetic-philosophical reverence for the things of the earth. Poetry beckons us to a more essential engagement with the world, for the sense of the holy that Holderlin finds (Gosetti-Ferenc p. 172). Authentic poetic language comes only when the human is prepared for poetic dwelling. Dwelling must be learned (Gosetti-Ferenc p. 173). Heidegger claims poetry arises not from the artist as subject, but from the concealing-revealing nature of truth, from the destiny of being itself (Gosetti-Ferenc p. 174). Poetry is placed into the strife between world and earth, between the destiny of a people and its sheltering foundation. The relationship between world and earth is a violent one, and is instigated by the work of art, of which poetry is the essence (Gosetti-Ferenc p. 174). The work of art fights the battle between world and earth. Poetry is the continually self-overreaching gathering of the world's agitation (Gosetti-Ferenc p. 174). Art is truth setting itself to work. The artwork opens up a world. The work accomplishes both the setting up of a world and the setting forth of the earth. Holderlin is the poet who speaks to the Germans as an essentially historical people and confronts them with the decision whether or not to yield to this violent founding of truth (Gosetti-Ferenc p. 176). Heidegger's reading of Holderlin's poem "Germanien" reveals his conscious discord with Holderlin's own political views. Heidegger argues that the poem has to be read not according to Holderlin's worldview (Gosetti-Ferenc p.189). Heidegger's philosophy disqualifies the modern subject and the anthropocentrism and humanism of an existential self (Gosetti-Ferenc p. 202). His poetics eschews subjectivism.

For Heidegger language is what makes it possible to articulate the meaning of being (Allen p. 91). Poetry is the means by which the word of language can itself be articulated. Heidegger's study of "As when on a holiday" was originally delivered as a private lecture before being published in 1941. Heidegger's commentary on it inquires into the relationship between nature and the poet (Allen p. 92). Heidegger in reading Holderlin is seeking to allow the presencing of its language to appear. Heidegger by raising the horizontality of language raises the possibility of appropriating its resistance as a means of approaching the limits of language (Allen p. 97). By finding a way of speaking at the limits of language, we are engaged in the limits of being.

According to Heidegger's interpretation, Holderlin's poetry is not to be thought in terms of the self-knowledge of an infinite subject (Warminski p.45). Heidegger's antiaesthetic, anti-epistemological interpretation of Holderlin uses his poetry to articulate ontology with history (Warminski p. 46). Heidegger asks the question of the meaning of Being. For him, history is the destiny of Being's self-forgetting. Poetry is the founding of Being in words. Holderlin's poetry reveals and conceals Being. Poetry is marked by the articulation of the ontological difference between Being and beings (Warminski p. 46). Heidegger's interpretation of Holderlin aims to think that which is unthought, to experience that which remains unspoken in the poetry's saying. One of Heidegger's purposes is to determine the sway of poetry in the existence of a people. Heidegger quotes Holderlin's Hyperion on the role of art in ancient Athens. According to Hyperion, Athenian art, religion, philosophy, and government were the fruit of a tree, not the roots, the effects rather than the causes (Warminski p. 48). The cause of their splendour was the Athenians' growing up free of violent external influences of all kinds. The Greeks and the Athenians were naturally self-sufficient because they reflected that way, they became what they

were through their art and religion. Hyperion reflects on the historical distinctions between the Greeks on one hand and the Egyptians and Goths on the other. Hyperion claims that there is no philosophy without poetry, and that without poetry the Athenians would never be a philosophical people. Unlike the Egyptians and the Goths, who go to extremes in their religion and art, the Greeks keep an equilibrium, a balance, a harmony, of all drives and tendencies (Warminskip. 52). According to Hyperion, the Egyptian is not reflective, never learns reflection and is driven by fate outside himself. The cold North drives its inhabitants too much inside themselves and makes them too reflective too soon. The Egyptians and the Goths are too early and too late. Heidegger leaves out the Egyptians.

Heidegger claims that all art is poetry, and all art is linguistic in an ontological sense. Rather than assimilating poetry to art, he turns art into poetry. Heidegger in “Holderlin and the Essence of Poetry” focuses on the relation between poetry and language. The not and nothing, the *Nicht* and the *Nichts* define the relationship between the essence of language and the essence of poetry. The essay consists of a five-step commentary on five keywords taken from various texts by Holderlin. The first is a statement about poetry and the second is a statement about language (Warminski p. 58). The danger of language is twofold. First, language is dangerous because it creates the very possibility of danger. Danger is the threat to Being from beings. Danger is the threat to the ontological from the ontic and language which creates the very possibility of the ontic, also creates the possibility of a threat to Being (Warminskip. 59). According to Heidegger, language also bears another danger within itself which is the danger to itself. For Heidegger the essence of language is poetry. Heidegger thinks the essence of language on the basis of the essence of poetry. Heidegger thinks the ontologization of language and poetry.

Heidegger’s lecture on Holderlin’s “Germanien” reinterprets the poems opening. Heidegger determines the poems grounding mood as holy mourning. The poems opening is a mourning that is a knowledge of the gods who have fled. The grounding mood is an ontological category, and it provides the horizon of understanding for the poem. The question “What else does it want?” can be read as giving rise to another history. The reading of the question as rhetorical is decided on the basis of the grounding mood (Warminski p. 70). Heidegger attempts to efface the opening “Not” of the poem to read “Not them” as “Them”.

Holderlin’s Ode *Man* shows his deep understanding of being. He speaks of the emergence of the newborn Earth and of delightful islands. The newborn Earth gives rise to plants, smiling children and their mother. The child grows into a man. He longs to be like Nature. Man is a figure of activity and agency. Man struggles against fate. Being in the poem arises as a freshness and newness that man must contend with. Being in the poem struggles against the power of fate. The poem *Hyperion’s Song of Fate* concerns the immense power of fate which brings humans downward to the abyss. Being is overpowered by the destructive power of fate. In the Ode *In my boyhood days* the poet claims an affinity between his boyhood and the gods. The gods create without naming. The act of creation is nameless. The Ode *The Spirit of the Age* states that the God of Time is all powerful. The God of Time controls the destiny of men and seizes bad men. The God draws out the mind in the poet.

The Ode *Evening Fantasy* paints the being of a modest village cottage. The village is quiet. Boatmen make for the harbour pool. Friends in the garden await a glittering meal. There is a remarkable warmth and affection in the poem. The poet imagines all his late years will be for

serene contentment. The garden is full of buds and roses. The clouds are crimson edged. The poet conjures the being of a warm, paradisaal garden. Being as constructed in the poem is a refuge and a sheltering place. The Ode *In the Morning* gives us a picture of morning as active with the lawn glistening and the stream speeding onward. Around grey cloud banks reddish flames flare up. The sense of colour is uncanny and adds to the strangeness of the being. The poet hails the coming of the golden day. The poet desires the youthful morning. The poet desires to go with the ranging morning. The poet wishes to be blessed and to have his quiet pathway be brightened. The poet has a pantheistic approach to the morning, hailing the power of morning as beneficent and generously interpenetrative with the human soul. In the Ode *The River Main* the poet declares his cosmopolitan love of Greece. The poet paints a pastoral vision of Greece. The Being of the poet is one which is warmly unbounded and variously blessed. The sense of Being the poet provides is warmly calm and happily restorative.

The Ode *My Possessions* paints a warm and full picture of autumn. The Being of the poem is one of ripeness. Labour in the poem is rewarding. Light in the poem is temperate and friendly to humanity. The breeze wafts, flutters and plays in acts of friendship. The constellations are filled with memory and have a pathos to them. The poem praises the hearth and homeland. The poet recognizes the value of a native land. The mutable gods destroy the poet. The poet lives in a world of recollections, symbolized by dying leaves of a golden hue. The poet desires that his soul be not homeless. The longing for shelter characterizes the poet's outlook and the being that is being constructed is one which is sheltering. The poet finds the garden to be a balm for it does not wither and blossoms eternally. The garden is not particularly changeable, and its quietness is healing. The poet requests the heavenly powers that his possessions be blessed. The being that the poet desires to inhabit is a refuge, a sheltering, a home, that allows calm, healing, and dreaming to take place. Being as constructed in the poem is a place of safety.

The Ode *To Princess Augusta of Homburg* revisits Holderlin's theme of everlasting arbours and poetic orchards, which survive winter. To poet addresses the patron Augusta directly. The poet dislikes loneliness, with the sheltering home offering companionship. The poet welcomes the hero and men who are well matured, true and wise. The poem contrasts the singer and the ruler. The poem sets a tone of gratitude and joy towards royal authority. The ontology constructed in the poem is of a temperate and fraternal relationship between singers and rulers. In the Ode *Go Down, then, lovely sun...* the poet expresses love for the sun. The natural scene bowing down from the clouds blesses the poet. The construction of Being connects humanity with nature in a seamless connection. The Ode *To the Germans* asks the reader not to laugh at the child. The poem constructs Germany as Hellenic. Apart from its cultural nationalism, the poem valorises the creative spirit. The poem ends with a touching diminuendo. The Ode *Rousseau* claims Rousseau as a messenger of the Gods. The Ode *Heidelberg* expresses the poet's love for the city of Heidelberg. The city is depicted as busy with feet and coachwheels. The city is connected with the river, the castle, the hillside, the valley, the kindly forest and the fragrant gardens. The seamless connection between the city and nature makes it a homely sheltering of Being.

The Ode *The Neckar* talks of the poet's closeness and intimacy with banks, dells and hills. The sense of being avoids circumscription. The river is connected to mountain brooks. The river is connected with Greek antiquity. The river is loyal to meadows and willows and the poet recalls the river as the source of his origins. Loyalty to origins and to the home is a virtue in the

poem. Being in the poem is constructed as one of movement and travel. The Ode *Home* displays a longing to go home which is thwarted by poverty. Mountains are the homeland's revered and certain frontiers. The mother's house contains the healing embrace of a loving brother and sister. The poet suffers the grief of love which is a holy sorrow.

Conclusion

The poetry of Holderlin constructs a healing vision of home, which consists of nature, the house, and the loving embrace of family. The being which is constructed is that of a home and homeland which though imperfect shelters, heals and nurtures the poet in the midst of a family that is loving and fraternal.

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