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## **The Difficult Work of Re-membering: Heideggerian Time and Contemporary Aesthetics—Reclaiming and Revisiting the Past**

We live, admittedly, in a posthumanist age--an age in which the verities of the humanistic tradition have been subjected to radical questioning, if not subverted and discarded altogether. Some of the most important philosophical thinking and cultural critique in the twentieth century have tried to convince us that humanism is now drawing to an end. It is claimed that humanism compromised the very lofty goals that it set for itself; that humanism was a local, decidedly Eurocentric event, and one of the major proponents of a certain antihumanism claimed that man “will be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea”(The Order of Things, 387); that it is, last but not least, epistemologically bankrupt.

It is not my goal here to rehearse the well-known criticisms leveled at the humanistic tradition. Whether we take a stance for or against the dislocations we are witnessing, preconceptions about time will inevitably underpin our judgment. In much thinking about culture, the historical moment has been explained and extrapolated from a center that lent it consistency but was positioned outside of the temporal as such. Thus various conceptions of temporality (and progress) have been used to legitimate discourses of both emancipatory and conservative casts, yet always implicated in what has been called a metaphysics of presence—whether they derive their logic from God, Spirit, man etc.

Contemporary debates over the nature of postmodernism and its adversary, the humanism of late modernity, are played out against a background that is ultimately historical and memorial. The tension is between a cumulative appropriation of knowledge and a teleology of cultural progress (in its American version this is a utopia spelled out most forcefully by Dewey), and, on the other hand, a thinking that struggles to remain attentive to the “emerging sway of Being.” The latter was most forcefully articulated by Heidegger in his thinking on Being and presence. Besides questioning the value of the Cartesian humanistic subject, Heidegger’s thought tries to avoid the hubris inherent in a certain tradition of emancipatory thinking and its tendency toward totalization—his is a thinking that tries to speak difference in its memorial figuration and pins its hopes on the future rather than on the present. Yet past and present here are anything but clearly defined—Heidegger’s project will be to articulate a historicity that gauges qualitative changes in the history of humanity rather than measuring a linear progression of time prevalent in more specialized discourses.

Of course, what seems on the surface to be a purely epistemological question is at bottom, or supervening upon it, a political and ideological one. Bringing Heidegger’s thinking on time to bear on contemporary American culture and its own set of pragmatic rules would not mean that the gap that separates those two traditions will necessarily be less conspicuous. As Rorty has remarked, some of the problems of German philosophy remain “exclusively German” (176), hampering meaningful communication with an Emersonian rhetorical tradition that considers the philosophy of history to be, in David Wittenberg’s words, “the ongoing production of occluded rhetorical appeals to audiences” (196). In this latter sense, the politics are foregrounded to an even greater

extent and what is being lost then is not be the essence of an idea dear to academics, or the essence of culture as such, but the nature of a practice embedded in certain socio-historical conditions and thereby power relations.

In the discipline of English studies there have been recently attempts to question the short-lived ascendancy of a posthumanism, elucidated originally in the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger and forming much of what has come to be thought as postmodern thought. In this attack on posthumanism (the latter is taken to mean overarching concern with ideological critique, rather than with aesthetics and the formal qualities of works of art), it is generally admitted that a change has occurred that has radically transformed literary criticism. I borrow the word 'posthumanism' from Neil Badmington's introduction to a reader on cultural studies. Badmington is here duly concerned about authorizing yet another 'ism.' How can one encompass the difference and multiplicity of viewpoints that have dominated the last half-century in a neologism, however apposite? Yet, attempts have surely been made and critics have managed to lump together vastly incommensurate accounts in a way less sympathetic way than Badmington's. The former have voiced concerns over the dissolution of traditional concepts of universality, of community and aesthetics, of the subject and moral values. The argument is, very schematically, as follows: French theory and continental philosophy attack the foundations of Western civilization; in doing this they make manifest a myopia, an irresponsibility in failing to replace the severed social bonds that secured the well-being of the community and were exemplified in a common aesthetic tradition the preservation of which literary studies has taken as its chief goal. Thus George Levine, one of the major exponents of this position, claims that aesthetics is the

perennial preoccupation of English studies. In his words, “ in the current critical scene, literature is too often demeaned, the aesthetic experience denigrated or reduced to mystified ideology” (Introduction, III-IV). The same preoccupation with continuity, with averting a major rift, is voiced by Martha Nussbaum in her Poetic Justice. She goes back to Charles Dickens to recuperate forms of social bonding that have been obscured since the advent of theory. For Martha Nussbaum again, Whitman’s poetry is much more conducive to creating responsible citizenry than empty theoretical discussions embodied in critical theory. Another point hovering above these critical remarks and giving them a sense of consistency as well is that— and Levine expresses this well when he says that at a time of “constricting budgets,”(Introduction, I), as he puts it—the use of theory is ever more questionable. On Elaine Scarry’s account, (On Beauty and Being Just), aesthetics has been unjustly driven out of the academy and replaced by theory that creates invidious divisions, erodes commitment to social values and circumscribes ways of experiencing the world that have long enjoyed preeminence in the West. I want to suggest that this double bind between tradition and being futural is rather the enduring question that a culture has to deal with rather than a sense of lost aesthetic sensibility that arrives only as an effect.

The problem of temporality is also impossible to disengage from that other one of choosing between the beautiful and the sublime. Not that there have not been precedents—Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France and the role his monarchic, gothic, chivalrous beauty plays in sponsoring a return to the past is probably the most striking. In a crucial way, for Burke beauty will promote the social good even though his

conservative assessment of the French Revolution bespeaks his error. The moment of danger emerges when consensus in the perception of beauty is undermined and hence the efforts to bring beauty to its pride of place. Beauty as encountered in artistic representation is the thin veil that hides the unattractive nature of social relations and is for this reason subversive. Thus, it would seem that the will to aestheticise always comes at the expense of the historical, of emptying out the historical of its inherent tensions. The attack on the aesthetic has provoked what Peter Osborne has called the “re-naturalization” (80) of experience that we are witnessing today. Recent debates only highlight this historical tendency and present pragmatic beauty as sanctioned from outside of aesthetic discourse, from the realm of the political as such--this time couched in the contemporary idiom of Rawlsian justice as fairness.

The thesis that historical narratives have played a key role in advancing and legitimating important projects of the emancipatory kind would be banal. Yet time is still the unthought in Western culture, preoccupied as it is with and enveloped in linear homogeneous time. Enlightenment rationalism founders precisely when it faces up to temporality. As late as the 1800s, Hegel, whose philosophy of history has been castigated as totalizing (but one might claim that Hegel’s dialectic was a response exactly to this accusation) had to counter the claim that philosophy introduces arbitrary concepts into the empirical study of facts; for, the claim goes, philosophy and history are opposites. This is the same question that becomes central for Heidegger. Indeed, Heidegger will ask, what is the relationship between philosophy and history and will answer that only by embracing temporality does philosophy become anything at all. It might also be helpful

to remember Marx—Marx's example is also instructive in that a mode of remembering authorizes teleological claims. Thus history and tradition are always in danger, we learn. The assumption is that something of crucial importance for our heritage will be lost—an essence, a sensibility. For the critics who want to sponsor a return to the past in the form of aesthetics, the past can easily be revisited; it is certain, determinate, open for everyone to see.

I would like to juxtapose the above of conception of historicity with one that welcomes change and difference and thus avoids the narcissistic urges of the present to replicate its concerns in the past. Heidegger, inevitably, also looks back but with the intention of seeing a point of departure and not a return. In an early lecture, The Concept of Time, Heidegger elaborates his idea of time, which, according to him, cannot be described as either philosophical or theological. It does not turn time into a thing, a concept which would give us the satisfaction that we have rationally grasped it. Time's essence is not enclosed between, say, sixth century BC and first century AD—it is not the amount of time that passed in this interval that matters but the specific unfolding of Being. The accent on the temporal as such, the idea that time is temporal, a proposition that would be recognizable to the Greeks and tautologous for us, removes the prosthesis of an entity extraneous to time through which it is thought—like God, the subject, the good etc. What becomes visible once we disavow the external reference point are differences, rather than old the linearity of time. Heidegger's understanding of history tries to remain true and attentive to a sense of the unfolding essence of humanity rather than search for a point of reference to postulate a teleological end. The difference is important; even in such presumably anti-foundationalist accounts of art as John Dewey's,

art is deployed to ensure the cohesiveness of the community against the aggressive qualitative leaps of science. The loss that inheres in presence, the forgetting of what constitutes the presence and the essence is as a result obscured for the sake of progress.

While Heidegger's attempt at resolving the pressing questions of modernity is far from error-free, it seeks something fundamentally different from the apologists of beauty—difference with respect to tradition. As philosopher Charles Scott reminds us, "[t]he retrieval of the question of Being is as fraught with danger as the forgetfulness of it is" (178), remarking on Heidegger's flirtation with National Socialism. Only by being historical (and for Heidegger this means aware of possibilities opened up by the future) can we attain the meaning of the past: "The past will remain closed off from any present so long as such a present, Dasein, is not itself historical" (The Concept of Time, 19E). Being 'historical' points to the effort to unseat and overcome tradition and not to the mere contemplation of the events from the past which according to Heidegger is 'inexhaustible.' It is here that Heidegger will claim to live authentically is to be mindful of history and change, not chronology. Authentic time inheres in the 'how' and not in the 'what.' "It is something to which I can return again and again" (The Concept of Time, 19E) precisely because it is not determined. This return, therefore, is radically different from the one that is sanctioned by scholars who feel comfortable within the humanistic tradition. Elaine Scarry claims that a concern with beauty has always underwritten discourses on justice in the West. Thus to cast beauty out of the academy would be, to say the least, dangerous. This re-inscription and rehashing of cultural elitism and the canon is given respectability by an appeal to John Rawls. Uncannily enough, John Rawls himself spoke out in defense of a tradition precisely at the moment when it was

questioned. An organic community of the liberal kind presupposes a fundamental belief in the sanctity and beauty of tradition. The past is a site of solace and consolation; it holds the key to our identity. Augustine, Homer and numerous other illustrious examples, according to Scarry, lead us to the conclusion, according to Scarry, that the contemplation of beauty is indeed a precondition for social justice and we are thereby reassured that, as long as we think similarly, we are not amiss.

Both Heidegger and Derrida have spoken eloquently against the conflation of culture and humanism and especially against humanism as the vindication of culture. Both will claim that the ontotheological tradition is one that inflicts violence on Being; that it is a thinly veiled will to power--whether it be in phallogocentrism or metaphysics. Heidegger's "Letter On Humanism" repeatedly denounces the humanism that has defined the humanities in modernity. In this sense, the two opposed terms are not aesthetics and ideology as Levine would have it, but rather two different versions of aesthetics, one propped up by the humanist subject and the other not. Or, again, the difference is between beauty and the sublime. Of course, one cannot emphasize enough the centrality in Heidegger's writing that art assumes—"The truth that discloses itself in the work can never be derived from outside" (Basic Writings, 276). Art is to let come into presence "a new and essential world"(277), it must be capable of keeping pace with the coming into being of the world. This has been a lead taken up by Foucauldian historiography to show that it is precisely the essence of culture that needs to be interrogated because it forgets that facts are memorial constructions that have been singled out out of the multiple possibilities that were also possible directions. For Heidegger, this open-ended relationship with Being must be described as originary as opposed to the one that invokes

the past to vindicate the present. If there is a privileging of the future, it is only because through the future can we hope to attain the past—“in being futural Dasein is its past. It comes back to it in the ‘how’”(19E). For Heidegger time comes from the future and only in the past is it accessible, mistakenly, as a fact:

Our asking of the fundamental question of metaphysics is historical because it opens up the happening of human Dasein in its essential relations--that is, its relations to beings as such and as a whole—opens it up to the possibilities not yet asked about, futures to come, and therefore binds it back to its inception.  
(Introduction to Metaphysics, 47)

Or, to put it differently, in the language that defines contemporary debates about aesthetic, this is the sublime aesthetics of Lyotard pitted against the Arnoldian aesthetic of beauty and bourgeois ideals.

It has become usual for rhetorical criticism to say that Heidegger tells a story—in his case the story, which according to this reading must bear the elements of the sublime, is one of the gradual restriction of Being from antiquity. It is not a story that makes for beautiful and pleasurable experiences. There is urgency to it, a sense of impending doom, of a tragic sense of separation from Being. On the other hand for Scarry the narrative is contrapuntally consoling--

one can see why beauty—by Homer, by Plato, by Aquinas, by Dante (and the list would go on name by name, century by century, page upon page, through poets writing today such as Gjertrude Schnackenberg, Alan Grossberg, Seamus Heaney—has been perceived to be bound up with the immortal...”(30)

The incantatory quality of the passage, its repetitive, amplifying nature seeks a palliative and comforting effect. Heidegger will question precisely the logic of this

continuity; he will foreground the ability to dwell on the question as more than enough for thinking because this is where the real struggle and drama take place. All the answers are provisional and secondary in their concern with beings rather than with Being. For this very reason Heidegger introduces in The Concept of Time an understanding of time in which the ‘how’ plays a most crucial role. The passing of time is not to be measured by the clock of science but by the qualitative shifts as they occur. For Heidegger, time and historicity are defined by the ‘how’ of time rather than by the homogeneity of measured time and cultural continuity. It is only this ‘how’ that gives us the measure of authentic time.

Remembering is, thus, always already a forgetting. It is both an ontological forgetting that Heidegger describes in his ‘Letter on Humanism’ and forgetting that bears more immediately on the institutional structure of society, a forgetting that cultural studies takes up. The Romans, when they translated certain Greek words that were to build the foundation of their own humanism and the one that was revived in the Renaissance, according to Heidegger, lost the originary experience that defined the Greek relationship to time. Thus we find the following observation in The Concept of Time—“the possibility of access to history is grounded in the possibility according to which any specific present understands how to be futural. This is the principle of all hermeneutics” (19E). Do we not forget how to be historical precisely when we evoke history to claim validity for timeless nature of the problems facing the present? When we search for mere replication of present concerns in the past? Indeed for Scarry, one of the abiding characteristics of beauty is replication— the perceiver, upon seeing a beautiful object tries to replicate it. Is not the call for a return to the good old aesthetics a failure to think

what Heidegger frames in the question “Where does the opening come from?” That is, it fails to think historicity as such in a gesture of naïve abdication in the face of change and difference and the demands that they place on us? How does having a genuine desire for being futural engage the claims for a return to a past, a simple continuation to be revisited? Isn’t the failure to come to terms with the changing nature of the discipline a misunderstanding of time? For this and other reasons according to Heidegger, Hegel was a more through-going materialist than Marx. Marx’s insistence on practice divorces thinking from what is most important in it—attending to Being and to change in all its complexity. Heidegger wants to keep the past “certain but indeterminate,”(20E), because by barring transcendence from the realm of thinking, history remains the only site of meaning. The past is never more in danger than when we try to save it; the past is, above all, questionable. For Levine, on the other hand, a return to “[t]he formal qualities of literature” is necessary because it is “precisely what a determinedly ideological criticism threatens to miss”(Introduction, XXIII). The same tension between return and difference is consciously invoked when Levine wants to be properly antifoundationalist (“all my anti’s,” he says, “are impeccable”); yet in the same gesture he is willing to reclaim a past predicated on foundational models (2).

Aesthetics, despite growing awareness of its of historical contingency and the various uses to which it has been put, is to play a much more ‘sublime’ role according to George Levine. Aesthetics must serve as a suprahistorical overcoming of the passions that rule the day; it is expected to rise above the mundane and thus the political. In the introduction to Aesthetics and Ideology he says: ”the aesthetic remains a rare if not unique place for almost free play, a place where the very real connections with the

political and the ideological are at least partly short-circuited”(Introduction, 17). Yet, he goes on, “the aesthetic is not outside of politics. But it makes its way by indirection and by infusing all questions with affect”(Introduction, 17). This might remind us of the autonomous realm that Kant postulated for art in eighteenth century Prussia, a Kant compelled to set art apart only in an effort which figures his own *as if* philosophy—that is, art is indeed the realm of displaced politics which the monarchy, by denying the rights of its citizens to participate meaningfully in the political process pushes into the realm of aesthetics. What is forgotten here is that aesthetics has never been suprahistorical. What Levine’s reference to the rise of the autonomy of aesthetics elides is precisely its historical nature—the latter is a response to a political exigency as Kant saw it. It is this desire that seems to aspire after a suprahistorical essence that is opposed to politics. As Peter Osborne has said, “[f]or art to function as the historical experience that it (potentially) is, what is required is “critical discourse” (84). Isn’t this the movement that Lyotard describes in postmodernism—art as becoming more and more cerebral and artists, indeed, approximating philosophers. Contra Levine, we can say that the role of art in contemporary society has changed. All we can do is register the change and try to think through, assess what is at stake in this change rather than fall back on tradition and well worn-out routines.

A thinking along the lines of Heidegger’s would not make a clear-cut distinction (or would be aware of it) between Being and becoming. It would forego the essence of a truth that is need of being defended. Philosopher Charles Scott reminds us that much misunderstanding stems from Derrida’s description of a changing episteme in which phonetic writing gives way to radical interrogation of writing itself. In this shift which is

hardly championed by any supreme suprahistorical consciousness, writing is not seen any longer as a prosthesis for thought and presence which is embodied in primordially in speech; writing, rather, comes to be thought as severed from presence, just as, as a result, speech and its claim to presence also becomes contaminated. This is what was forgotten in the first place. Heidegger explains that when we glance into the past from the vantage point of the present we “cultivate not the authentic futural being of the past but the future that the present cultivates for itself because the past as the authentic future can never become present” (16E). Thus, *pace* contemporary humanism—to be overly concerned with the present would mean to steal from the futuricity of mankind “out of care for the development of mankind, culture (The Concept of Time, 6E).” An examination of the past with a view to the “how” of things would always figure difference.

Needless to say, cultures are constantly thought to be in danger. We are constantly reminded of thinkers who conceived of their time as one that experiences momentous dislocations. It is at this point that we need to remember Lyotard and the legitimation of narratives—a narrative is legitimated by the mere fact that it sets the conditions according to which statements can be judged as being truthful. It seems that in contemporary American debates there is an anxiety that the culture might give in to forces that have historically been alien to it. This causes the humanities to close in upon themselves and invoke ipseity and tradition. Thus, Levine believes theory has destroyed the traditionally pleasurable (aesthetics never leaves the purview of traditional criticism) activity of reading by infusing ideological readings into texts that previously enjoyed the status of Arnoldian artifacts. Thus he claims that he welcomes change, but not the change he is

witnessing.

Not surprisingly, little has changed in this resistance to theory since the 1970-ies. In repudiating the formalism and the sequestered study of literature, aesthetic criticism has revamped itself in line with the times in more pragmatic language—now, the claim is, literature and art actually make for a better life, they can be put to good use in advancing the social good by not losing sight of traditional values that theory gleefully deconstructs.

In this sense nostalgia figures in both discourses: in the question asked by Heidegger--How is it that the question of Being has been forgotten (and thus a mode of cultural transmission?), which presumes that an origin has been obscured, a prior state of affairs has given in to contamination, and in that question asked by contemporary aesthetics—how is it that traditional, time-tested modes of socialization have come to be denounced so vehemently? It has not been my intention to show that Heidegger restores to its proper place the question of time and Being but that, to the extent that his path of thinking aims to shed more of the metaphysical weight of the tradition, it might also engage it in a more authentic way. Needless to say, this is an authenticity stripped of moral overtones.

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