

On the Challenge of Art to Philosophy: Aesthetics at the End of Epistemology *

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Is there a visible sense in which art represents today a challenge to philosophy, more specifically and strongly than at any other time in our history? This challenge seems to have existed in every period of the history of our western culture, from ancient Greece onward. I nevertheless think that in our epoch this "eternal" challenge has assumed specific traits. To recognize this fact- if it is such- means also to proceed a step forward in the position and discussion of our problem. In fact, if we recognize that in our time the challenge of art to philosophy is taking place in new and specific forms, we shall have to recognize also the profound transformation undergone by philosophy itself. All this means that there is no "eternal" or natural essence of philosophy and art, which by nature would be opposed to each other. To put it in Heideggerian terms: art and philosophy, like any other sphere of activity, or kind of being, have an essence only in the verbal sense of the German word *Wesen*: each one *Weset* such and such a thing at this particular moment of the history of Being. Now, the change in the meaning of "essence" which is marked by *Wesen* is exactly the transformation of philosophy in relation to which we are trying to re-think the position of works of art. It may be interesting here to recall that the first essay in which Heidegger develops his idea of the "history of being", of a possible plurality of *Welten*, is precisely the essay *On the Origin of the Work of Art*¹; at least, in one of the decisive thinkers of our century, the discovery of the verbal- historical, eventual meaning of "essence" takes place in connection with the reflection on art. Let me try to summarize a first hypothesis: the challenge of art to philosophy, no matter which sense it had in previous epochs within our tradition, takes place today in a situation marked by the transformation of philosophy; this transformation, I maintain, is describable in terms of the "eventuality" of being and of the "verbal" meaning of *Wesen* developed by Heidegger in his late writings.

This same situation, leaving aside for a while the "vagaries" of the philosopher of the Black Forest, can also be described in other terms: those of Richard Rorty's book on *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979)². Rorty's thesis, very roughly summarized, is that the transformation of philosophy with which we are confronted today is the end of its "epistemological" form, the end of philosophy thought of in terms of epistemology. This most recent form of philosophy was the last echo of the *Prote philosophia* which Aristotle had put

at the basis of all human knowledge. *Prote philosophia* meant to Aristotle a knowledge which catches the totality of being by catching the first and most general causes and principles (and Nietzsche called it "the main"). In modern times, no specific field of being, as the first principles or causes, is left for philosophy; philosophy, therefore, has tried to keep its supremacy by means of the "Critical" analysis of knowledge as such, transforming itself into epistemology and methodology. But also this last disguise of metaphysics has undergone a crisis in contemporary thought, for reasons and in forms that I do not want to (and cannot) analyze here. This crisis has also involved that part of philosophy which, under the name of aesthetics inaugurated in its present sense by Kant, had imagined its task as that of describing the "conditions of possibility" of the experience of art and beauty. Aesthetics too, at least in a large part of its modern development, has been a sort of "epistemology" or methodology of art and beauty. Almost all of the texts on which aestheticians were educated and still work (except, of course, Hegel's *Aesthetics*) are methodological and epistemological: under the dominating influence of neo-Kantianism of the late 19th and early 20th century, what aestheticians generally discuss is the problem of defining the specific traits of aesthetic experience.

As I said, I am not trying to discuss here the reasons and meaning of the end (if it is, as I believe, an end) of the epistemological determination (*Bestimmung*: vocation, definition, configuration.) of philosophy. In the field of aesthetics, the end of epistemology is not the mere consequence of what has happened in the rest of philosophy; it has some specific characteristics which I shall try to analyze, in order to understand the meaning of art's challenge to philosophy, and the possible task of philosophical esthetics in this situation.

The end of epistemology in aesthetics, in our century, is deeply related to the experience of the historical avant-garde of the beginning of this century with all its consequences until now (until Postmodernism). It was avant-garde which violently challenged the tranquil certainty of philosophical aesthetics at the beginning of the 20th century. While academic philosophers (like the German neo-Kantians and phenomenologists, the Italian neo-idealists, but also realists and pragmatists like Dewey) engaged in defining aesthetic experience, which was generally thought of in terms of Kantian disinterestedness, avant-garde art conceived of itself as a full experience of truth: this is the case, in different senses, of Futurism and Surrealism, Expressionism and Dada, and of the poetics of political engagement (Brecht), as of the "abstract art" of Klee and Kandinsky. Poets and artists refused to accept the "insulation" in which philosophical aesthetics, and social conventions too, confined them.

I am perfectly aware of the risks involved in proposing a general interpretation of the meaning of the artistic avant-garde of the beginning of this century. But Ernst Bloch, *si licet parva...*, did just this, in one of his first, illuminating works *Geist der Utopie* (1918 and 1923)³, which is one of the sources of the *kritische Theorie* of the Frankfurt School. What Bloch, himself strongly influenced by expressionism, called the self-assertion of the rights of the spirit, and the emerging of the "Gothic" assertion of the rights of the spirit, and the emerging of the "Gothic" essence of art, can also be called, less emphatically, the claim of art to represent an experience of truth. Artists who claimed that automatic writing (*écriture automatique*) revealed the depth of inner life; artists who wanted to catch objects in movement, in an epoch in which the whole world was put into a general movement, by the spread of technology; artists who looked at the forms of the objects of the so-called primitive cultures in order to find more essential ways of representing our own reality; and again artists who, by the very nature of the "products" they exhibited as a work of art (*Duchamp's Fountain*) obliged people to re-examine all their pre-conceptions of art and of its social framework-- all these artists could not conceive of themselves as being engaged in a "disinterested" activity; they felt deeply committed to an experience of truth.

I do not intend to discuss whether or not this is still the atmosphere in today's art; certainly not, from various points of view, as post-modernism can be understood as the "claim of art to truth", provided that we develop all the consequences which, for the notion of truth itself, are implicit in the avant -grade experience. I mean that the challenge of avant-garde art to (academic) philosophy of the beginning of this century was a challenge to a specific notion of truth, which-- as Gadamer above all has shown in *Truth and Method* saw it merely in terms of art, philosophy had to revise its "scientific" notion of truth.

We can, I think, describe the situation of philosophy after the fall of its epistemological *Bestimmung* in terms of Dilthey's essay *on the Essence of Philosophy*, 1907⁴. Dilthey thinks that his, and also our, position in philosophy is characterized by accomplished dissolution of both the ancient idea of metaphysics (Aristotle's *prote philosophia*) and the modern one (metaphysics in Cartesian and Kantian terms: self-evidence of reason as the basis for all truth). As Dilthey has a sort of cyclical view of the history of philosophy, what is happening in our epoch is analogous, for him, to what happened at other moments of the dissolution of metaphysical systems, like late antiquity and the end of the Middle Ages. As in those epochs, in ours too, philosophy, having left its systematic structure, tends to become what Dilthey calls *Lebensphilosophie*, philosophy of life -- which has nothing to do with the sort of vitalistic metaphysics usually denoted by this

term, but is simply a kind of thought intimately related to "lived experience", and -- this is important -- which expresses itself in literary and artistic forms rather than in the form of scientific demonstrations. Dilthey retraces the origin of this current in Schopenhauer (who is, incidentally, one of the inspirers of his own interpretation of Kant), and sees its developments in authors such as Ruskin and Emerson, Nietzsche, Tolstoy and Maeterlinck. In other works of these "poet-philosophers", says Dilthey, "the methodological claims to universal validity and foundation weaken, while the process which, from the experience of life, draws an interpretation of it, takes on ever freer forms"; so that life "receives an explanation in the form of aperçus unmethodical but full of "impressivity" (eindrucksvoll)"⁵. It is this kind of thought, says Dilthey, "which represents the center of the interests of the new generation". Within the global context of Dilthey's essay, this form of philosophy is considered as a provisional one, which should prepare a new, more powerful and logically rigorous, form of philosophy. But if one considers the themes of this essay in connection with the numerous problems Dilthey left open in his work, and the final incomplete state of many of his writings, a reasonable hypothesis might be this: although Dilthey strove to build a "systematic" philosophy, in the form of a transcendental psychology of the *Weltanschauungen*, i.e. of all possible aperçus which build different philosophies around a specific interpretation of life, he never succeeded in persuading himself and his readers that this philosophy was really better than the poetic, unmethodical expression of *Erlebnisse*, which so much interested his contemporaries. One of the reasons for the incompleteness of so many of Dilthey's works is, in my view, the difficulty he found in defining this ideal of a systematic philosophy once he had recognized that the metaphysical essence of philosophy was no longer a practicable path. The sometimes enthusiastic description he gives, in *The Essence of Philosophy*, of the *Lebensphilosophie*, which he considers characteristic of his epoch (preferring it, one should note, to other possible references) shows that he was, at least, deeply divided as to the evaluation of the task of philosophy.

Dilthey's essay on the essence of philosophy can help to understand, perhaps in a less "prophetic" but a more useful way, the sense of the dialogue between poetry and thought, which Heidegger considers a sort of destiny of philosophy at the moment of the end of metaphysics. Let us not forget that the connection of Heidegger's work to Dilthey's is very substantial: Heidegger says in a page of *Sein und Zeit* that, in his own researches, he only wants "to develop and enlarge the views of Dilthey and to favour their assimilation by the present generation, which has not yet assimilated them" (paragraph 72). What I am suggesting is that we can improve our understanding of Heidegger's idea of

Gesprach between thinking and poetry by referring it to Dilthey's notion of *Lebensphilosophie*. Of course Heidegger is a severe critic of any reduction of philosophy to *Weltanschauung* and to the expression of *Erlebnisse*; no one doubts this. But - the more he develops, after *Sein und Zeit*, the consciousness of the destiny of metaphysics and of the problem of its *Ueberwindung*, the more too he develops a conception and practice of philosophy as dialogue with poetry (and not in order to build a "system of *Weltanschauungen*", as Dilthey still believed, but in order to expose himself to the experience of the truth which speaks in poetry...). What I want to emphasize is that Heidegger's interest, as philosopher, in poetry was not at all the interest of an "aesthetician", in the "epistemological" sense of the word; nor the interest which, at least problematically, was Dilthey's, i.e. of a thinker who hoped to build a sort of system out of "the given" of the poetical views of the world. His interest, rather, may be described as a *dialogical* one. What is involved in Heidegger's notion of a dialogue between philosophy and poetry is that they speak as partners, and poetry is no longer an "object" to philosophy. This dialogue, I suggest, is possible only at the end of metaphysics, and is the only way given to philosophy at the moment in which it is no longer conceivable as epistemology.

Among the many questions which remain open at this point, I shall try to discuss the following three: a) Why should philosophy be a dialogue with poetry and not, or rather at the same time, with the sciences? b) What kind of truth can be found in poetry and art? c) Should philosophy merge completely into poetry and art; and if not, why? -- as one can see, these questions arise directly from what I have been maintaining above, and can be taken as introducing possible alternative conclusions.

To come, then to the first question: why should the only way out for philosophy at the end of metaphysics be the dialogue with poetry instead of that -- preferred by positivists -- with science, be it the natural sciences or the human sciences? I don't think that Heidegger's position on this point is inspired by a generic preference for the humanities, for the humanistic tradition and so on. As one can also see in the essay on Dilthey, the end of the metaphysical dream, which was also a dream of *objectivity*, orientates philosophy towards a dialogue with what Hegel called the forms of absolute spirit. At the moment in which it is no longer conceivable as the knowledge of a specific field of reality (the first principles) or as a foundational metaknowledge (epistemology, methodology, analysis of language, etc.) philosophy has to recognize its kinship with the forms of the interpretation of the world -- then, in a very broad sense, with *Weltanschauung* -- and cannot try to recover its metaphysical, i.e. objective, cognitive, content *via* a privileged dialogue with the sciences. Not, at least, until the "aesthetic"

character of the sciences themselves is not made completely explicit; it is clear by now that after Kuhn and Feyerabend, the sciences have become more and more "aesthetic", forms of interpretation and not (or not only by this means) forms of "knowledge" in the positivist sense of the word. At this point, which is mine and not Heidegger's, it is possible for science to become also a dialogue-partner for philosophy. This is, in my view, the ultimate sense of the difference between epistemology and hermeneutics proposed by Rorty: it is no longer a difference between knowledge and interpretation, but rather between two kinds of interpretation, normal and revolutionary (in the terminology Rorty borrows from Kuhn). The essence of poetry, wrote Heidegger in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, is *Dichtung*, invention; philosophy, then, can choose its partner "poetry" wherever it finds *Dichtung*, invention; and consequently in "revolutionary" science as well.

The two final questions (final for this paper) these are, as usual, the most difficult and, in my view, meaningful. If we assume that, at the moment of the final dissolution of metaphysics, the only chances remaining open to philosophy is to expose itself to the truth which is experienced in poetry and art, what kind of truth may we expect to *find* -- or better, to experience -- in this dialogue? As I noted above, while speaking of Gadamer when philosophy admits the very possibility of an experience of truth off the path marked by scientific methodology, the way is open for a re-definition of truth itself. It is not only a question of names, which could be dissolved by stipulating that we call truth only propositions that have been verified (or not falsified, given the possibility of that occurring) by controlled scientific experiences. Artists will nevertheless continue to call their experience "truth", indicating by this a relation which philosophy, obedient to the stipulation I mentioned, would simply leave aside, with a completely "unscientific" *escamotage* ... I think it is more constructive for thought to consider the double meaning of truth which Heidegger discusses in *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*. In that lecture Heidegger opposes truth *qua orthotes* or *adaequatio intellectus et rei*, i.e. the proposition that pictures the state of affairs, to truth *qua* openness, freedom, i.e. the opening of a horizon within which *res* and *intellectus* can relate and can be compared in order to control the correspondence of the proposition to the state of affairs. Heidegger thinks that truth as correspondence is made possible only by truth as openness; we can call a proposition true or false only by the application of a set of rules which can be called true or false in the same sense, but are given to us with our *Dasein*; and which are radically historical, in the sense that they are not a "structural", Kantian *a priori* of human reason.

When Heidegger speaks of the work of art as *ins Werk setzen der Wahrheit* (the putting of truth into the work) he unquestionably has in mind truth in the sense of openness. But it seems, then, that we are back here at a notion of truth as *Weltanschauung*, as a general "view" of the world, vague and pervasive; within which other more specific truths, in the propositional sense of the word, become visible. Such a reduction of truth to *Weltanschauung* cannot easily be attributed to Heidegger, because he is much more radical than Dilthey: for him, there is no "objective" view of the world compared too which poetry would be "only" *Weltanschauung*. Nevertheless, although Heidegger never considered his dialogue with poetry, to which he dedicated too much of his meditation in the late years, as a reduction of philosophy to the level of *Erlebnis* and *Weltanschauung*, what remains of his *Gesprach* with poets such as Holderlin, Rilke, George, Trakl, but also Sophocles, is not a set of philosophical propositions. The question: what truths, ultimately, did Heidegger find in poets? is unanswerable. Unanswerable too, in my view, is the question concerning the results of the application of a Heideggerian "method" (and the word here required many quotation marks) in the field of literary and art criticism. In poetry there is no truth which can be put into the form of a proposition. The truth which is at work in poetry is the *background* truth which Heidegger distinguishes from the *adaequatio* in *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*. We can say: the truth of an atmosphere, of a sound in the air, of a shared prejudice, of an *intermittence du coeur*; the truth of Proust's *madeleine*. We can call it truth because it de-termines, *be-stimmt* (gives tune and voice, also) to our experience in a sense which is deeper and more pervasive than the sense of the specific "truths" we are faced with within the world. In a certain way, this is a *weak* notion of truth -- which could refer to a beautiful page of Heidegger at the end of the lecture on *Das Ding*⁶, where he speaks of the ring of the world and of the *Ge-ring*, the marginal, poor etc. To point it out might help us to read Heidegger in a less "romantic" and emphatic way than we usually do. This, I admit, is something that may be interesting only for Heidegger's readers. Be that as it may; but the *weakening* of the notion of truth is probably a more general problem. At the moment of the dissolution of its metaphysical *Wesen*, philosophy experiences a sort of new kinship with poetry: it is the *Lebensphilosophie* of which Dilthey spoke. This experience, once Heidegger has radicalized Dilthey by dissolving the metaphysical element remaining in his theories, leads to the discovery of the background essence of truth. It is truth as background that is at work in works of art. Only on the basis of this notion of truth can art become a challenge to philosophy.

This leads us to a concluding question, which was also Dilthey's problem: if philosophy is no longer metaphysics, neither in the classical nor in the Kantian,

epistemological sense and truth reveals itself to be more "background" than thesis and propositions, why does not philosophy merge completely into poetry? Does philosophy still possess a specific characteristics, on the basis of which the *Gesprach* between *Denken* and *Dichten* can still have a sense?

I don't have -- and neither, I think, does Heidegger -- any answer to this question; except, perhaps, some negative hints, which can also be taken as the mere description of the present situation. Philosophy cannot simply merge into poetry because both poetry and philosophy are *still* defined in terms in which the metaphysical has *be-stimmt* (defined and determined) them. A merging of philosophy into poetry would only mean, in these conditions, a reversal, with philosophy assuming the limits of its "counterpart" (*Weltanschauung* instead of system) without any transformation of the "essence", the *Wesen*. Dialogue, *Gesprach*, means both more and less than this: less, because each of the partners remains faithful, sticks to its own specific and technical tradition (philosophy thus remaining an argumentative form of discourse, with its own vocabulary, syntax and rhetorics); and more, because what is at stake in the dialogue is precisely the re-examination (de- and re-construction?) of the inherited *Wesen* of both philosophy and poetry, and of the very notion of truth, which through the dialogue of philosophy and poetry begins to lose its metaphysical traits.

Notes and References

- * This text was presented, in a slightly different version, to the International Congress of Aesthetics held in Montreal in Summer 1984; and has been included in the proceedings of that Congress.
- (1) 'The Origin of the Work of Art' is an essay of 1936, published in Heidegger's *Holzwege*, Frankfurt, Klostermann, 1950.
 - (2) Cf. R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979.
 - (3) E. Bloch, *Geist der Utopie (Erste Fassung, 1918)*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1971.
 - (4) The essay on 'The Essence of Philosophy' (*Das Wesen der Philosophie*) was published in volume V of W. Dilthey's *Gesammelte Schriften*, Tubingen, Mohr (1914-36), pp. 339-416.
 - (5) Cf. '*Das Wesen der Philosophie*', cit., part II, sect. III
 - (6) Cf. '*Das Ding*' in M. Heidegger, *Vortraege und Aufsaeetze*, Pfullingen Neske, 1954.