Heidegger and the historical-political character of the artwork

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The present text discusses the historical-political character attributed by Heidegger to the work of art. By analyzing the development of Heidegger’s thought between *Being and time* and texts from the mid-thirties such as *The Rectorade’s address* and the three different versions of his essay published under the title of *The origin of the work of art*, I intend to discuss some oscillations that characterized his political and philosophical reflections during that period. It is known that art had no particular relevance in the project of fundamental ontology, just as much as politics was not at the core of Heidegger’s theoretical interests in 1927. It was only around the period in which Heidegger became Rector of the Freiburg University (1933-34) that he established a fundamental connection between philosophy, history, politics, art and language. At the early thirties, Heidegger started revising his prior understanding of historical happenings as ontologically rooted in *Dasein’s* temporal Being, as he had done in *Being and Time*. Now, he tried to think history and its changes as being rooted in the opening of a new epoch of Being itself. Philosophy, the artwork and the founding of States were then understood as privileged sites of this opening. In this respect, texts like the *Rectorate’s address* and *The origin of the work of art* constitute eloquent examples. However, the main point of my text is to argue that the essay on the origin of the work of art is not to be considered as a mere reiteration of Heidegger’s disturbing political-philosophical decision of 1933. As I will argue, between these two texts there are slight, although theoretically important, terminological oscillations in the way he understood the possibility of a historical change.

The hypothesis that I would like to propose is that in the short period between 1933 and 1936 the status of the relationship established by Heidegger between philosophy, history and politics begins to change. This is the path of thinking that would lead from his prior ontological understanding of history, as developed in *Being and time*, to the later thesis concerning his epochal hermeneutics of Being (*Seinsgeschichte*). The essay on *The

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origin of the work of art constitutes a decisive moment in the course of this theoretical turn (Kehre). Incidentally, it is noteworthy that this theoretical turn also affects the character of Heidegger’s 1933 political-philosophical expectations towards a more cautious and interrogative attitude concerning National-Socialism, although these shifts are still rather incipient around 1936. To avoid misunderstandings, I would like to emphasize that this text is not interested in discussing the empirical evidences of Heidegger’s proximity or dissociation from National-Socialism. Rather, what concerns me here is to consider the new “legibility” of Heidegger’s texts after the re-opening of the so-called ‘Heidegger affair’. As interestingly put by Christopher Fynsk, “The controversy … concerning Heidegger’s political engagements marks an event for the text that no reading henceforth can ignore. The constraint is not simply one imposed by the order of the day. Any responsible reader will recognize that the text now offers itself in a new manner” (Fynsk 1993, p. 230).

Heidegger’s consideration of the artwork is very far from traditional philosophical approaches that understand art as part of the aesthetic domain. By radically questioning what art is, whose origin does it have and what does it mean to be an artwork, Heidegger was also inquiring on the possible relationship between art, politics and history: “We inquire into the essence of art. Why do we inquire in this way? We inquiry in this way in order to be able to ask more properly (eigentlicher) whether art is or is not an origin in our historical existence, whether and under what conditions it can and must be an origin” (Heidegger 1993a, p. 202). This question calls for a more decisive one which remains unanswered in the essay, a relevant matter for the argument I want to develop: “Are we in our existence historically at the origin? Do we know, which means, do we give heed to, the essence of the origin? Or, in our relation to art, do we still merely make appeal to a cultivated acquaintance with the past?” (Heidegger 1993a, p. 203). These questions are genuine questions in the sense that Heidegger has no definite answer for them. By pondering the possibility of the happening of art in his own present Heidegger was inquiring about the possibility of a genuine appropriation of history in his own time. Briefly, Heidegger wanted to know if the German people was or was not at the verge of instituting a founding leap (Sprung) toward the origin. The fact that his final reflections concerning Hegel’s statement about art as a thing of the past also remain without answer also indicates that in 1936 Heidegger was not confident anymore about the meaning and the
results of the essential political and philosophical decision that he had assumed in 1933. If that is so, then his essay on the essence of the artwork does not constitute an ontological justification of the decision taken three years before, as stated by Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe (Lacoue-Labarthe 1990, pp. 17-18) among others. Much to the contrary, they seem to render problematic the philosopher’s previous certainties about the relationship between politics, history and philosophy.

Heidegger connects the artwork to the realm of history through the key-notions of truth and opening – Eröffnung; Offenheit, not Erschlossenheit, Dasein’s fundamental character of Being in Being and time. The artwork is the opening of a being in its truth, alétheia, understood as the unveiling or uncovering towards the clearing of Being (Entbergung; Unverborgenheit). The artwork is the “happening of the truth” (Geschehen der Warheit) inasmuch as it brings a being into the “steadiness of its shining” by opening the clearing of Being (Lichtung des Seins) in which all beings can be what they are. If truth is ontologically conceived as the happening of the uncovering of Being, then truth can only be thought of in historical terms, a connection rendered clear in the German language since Geschichte and Geschehen have the same radical. Thus, the essential space of the artwork is not the museum, a recent invention, but rather its own historical world. In its own happening the artwork opens and establishes the historical world of a definite historical people. It is the Greek temple that first opens and reveals the fundamental determinations of the world of this historical people, keeping it abidingly in permanence and force. At the same time, it also gathers and brings forth the earth where this historical people establish its dwelling place. For Heidegger, the artwork is the happening of truth conquered in and from the strife (Streit) between world and earth.

Heidegger is not anymore interested in the “problem of the temporal transcendence of the world”, as it was the case in Being and time, since world is now “the ever non-objective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into Being. Wherever those utterly essential decisions of our history are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecognized and are rediscovered by new inquiry, there the world worlds” (die Welt weltet; Heidegger 1993a, p. 170). Regarding the earth, a concept altogether absent in Being and time, it is understood as “that whence the arising brings back and shelters everything that arises as such. In the things that arise, earth
occurs essentially as the sheltering agent” (Heidegger 1993a, p. 168). Through the artwork, the earth finds its access to the open of a historical world. By erecting and founding a world, the artwork “sets forth the earth” in the sense that “the work moves the earth itself into the open region of a world and keeps it there.” (Heidegger 1993a, p. 172). World and earth are intrinsically related in the artwork and belong to each other in the mode of the strife.

It is through the artwork that the openness of the open is given position (Stand) and permanency (Ständigkeit), so that the clearing of Being first acquires its historical delimitation. In other words, truth acquires a historical form inasmuch as creation or production (Hervorbringung) fixates truth into the artwork’s figure (Gestalt) (Heidegger 1993a, pp. 194-195). This fixing of the truth also operates in other essential ways through which truth happens, namely, in the foundation of States and in the philosophical pondering of Being. Truth, work, language and history are understood by Heidegger as disruptive forces which open up the space to the irruption of a new clearing of Being out of nothingness. In other words, the institution of truth in the artwork is always a gift, a donation and an overflow of Being itself and not the result of the activity of an artistic genius. Being the institution of truth as a free donation of Being that first opens the historical ground upon which historical existence is already thrown, the artwork is also a beginning (Anfang). A genuine beginning cannot be viewed in advance on the basis of that which already was, and this means that the artwork is a leap (Sprung) towards the origin (Ursprung) that has been silently and inconspicuously prepared. In each leap towards the origin there begins the future as the anticipation and repetition of more genuine possibilities of being which have remained unconsidered and veiled in the past. According to Heidegger “A genuine beginning, as a leap, is always a head start, in which everything to come is already leaped over, even if as something still veiled” (Heidegger 1993a, p. 201). This formulation is surely a reminiscence of Heidegger’s previous analysis concerning Dasein’s authentic temporality. However, in the essay on the artwork Heidegger’s focus has moved away from the early concerns of the existential analytic towards the new task of formulating a philosophically comprehensive understanding of Western history. A first formulation of this new exigency already appears in the 1935 so called second draft of the conference – note that is was conspicuously absent from the first draft, dated from 1931-32.
–, being later repeated with some minor changes in the printed version, the so called third draft, in which it reads as follows:

“Always when beings as a whole, as beings themselves, demand a grounding in openness, art attains to its historical essence as foundation. This foundation happened in the West for the first time in Greece. What was in the future called Being was set into work, setting the standard. The realm of beings opened up was then transformed into a being in the sense of God’s creation. This happened in the Middle Ages. This kind of being was again transformed at the beginning ad during course of the modern age. Beings became objects that could be controlled and penetrated by calculation. At each time a new and essential world irrupted. At each time the openness of beings had to be established in beings themselves by the fixing in place of truth in figure. At each time there happened unconcealment of beings. Unconcealment sets itself into work, a setting which is accomplished by art. (Heidegger 1993a, p. 201).

Art is an origin if we understand origin (Ursprung) as a leap (Sprung) which grants donation, foundation and the beginning of history at each time. It is now clear that Heidegger’s questioning of the origin of the artwork also implied questioning the possibility that history might begin and start over again through the openness of a new clearing of Being. Could Western history suffer a sudden thrust and thus happen again as the “transporting of a people into its appointed task as entry into that people’s endowment”? (Heidegger 1993a, pp. 201-202). Or had art become merely a “routine cultural phenomenon”? (Heidegger 1993a, pp. 203, 201-202).

Surely there are important terminological and thematic continuities between the Rectorate’s address and The origin of the work of art. For instance, in both texts there remained the argument according to which the happening of a historical novelty depended on the German people submitting themselves “to the power of the beginning of our spiritual-historical existence” (Heidegger 1993b, p. 31). In the same vein, we still find in the essay on the artwork the discourse’s conception that to will again the originary impulse of the Greeks implied becoming “completely exposed to and at the mercy of what is concealed and uncertain, that is, what is worthy of question” (Heidegger 1993b, p. 33). However, between one text and the other interesting and important changes can be observed in their terminology, as well as in the set of questions and problems that are being addressed in each case. For instance, in The origin of the work of art the early concern with
revolutionizing ontology and the worries about the fragmentation and crisis of all other ontic sciences now give place to the first formulations of a new theoretical problem, that of constituting an ontological hermeneutics of Being. More specifically, Heidegger had started thinking the mystery contained in the beginning of an epoch: How does a certain historical openness of Being comes into being or ceases to be? What is the fundamental metaphysical ground upon which history can or cannot start over again? Were the Germans at the verge of the thrust of a new clearing of Being? These questions were entirely new in Heidegger’s thinking so far. In *Being and time* those questions were absent because Heidegger did not define any historical concrete determination to his reflections on the temporal ecstatic character of *Dasein*’s Being. On the *Rectorate*’s address those questions were absent since Heidegger had then given an excessively concrete historical determination to his reflections on the possibility of revolutionizing science and history. In other words, in the 1933 essay Heidegger had thought that the inauguration of a new epoch of Being depended only on the self-assertion of the German people’s will to essence. Both in *Being and Time* and in the *Rectorate*’s address what was conspicuously lacking was the later effort to ontologically think modernity in its metaphysical provenance. This absence has much to do with Heidegger’s desires and hopes concerning the possibility of founding and grounding in his own time a new clearing of Being by means of a decision of the German *Volk*. Only after the failure of the Rectorate would Heidegger recognize the need to ontologically understand modernity and his own present time. Texts such as *The origin of the work of art* and *Introduction to Metaphysics* already show some evidences in this respect. In the essay on the origin of the artwork Heidegger already understands modernity as a new epochal figure of Being, one in which beings as a whole have been transformed into objects exposed to the subject’s technical and scientific domination. Gradually, this theoretical understanding will converge towards the later thesis concerning the devastation of nature and the earth under modern technology, a conception whose first clear notes are to be found in *Überwindung der Metaphysik*, written between the late-thirties and the mid-forties.

Heidegger’s mid-thirties focus on history, politics and philosophy are not to be understood as a continuous, flat and homogeneous theoretical movement with no important oscillations and transformations. It is certain that between 1933 and 1936 Heidegger still interpreted his own philosophy and National-Socialism as carriers of a fundamental
historical transformation. However, if one carefully reads the *Rectorate’s address* and *The origin of the work of art* an important oscillation between them makes itself clear. For example, the emphatic 1933 call for a historical decision understood as the call of a revolution that had already started, gives place in the 1936 essay to a more questioning and cautious attitude. Heidegger does not anymore seem to have a clear-cut answer to the question whether the German people is or is not about to found a State or to institute an artwork and thus presence the sudden renewal of Western history. This oscillation is related to Heidegger’s growing interest in trying to ontologically understand his own time, an effort that first appeared in his thinking during the mid-thirties. It is not by chance that when Heidegger finally achieved a more deepened formulation of his ontological diagnosis of modernity in *The age of the world picture*, from 1938, he was also finally able to understand National-Socialism as the aggravation of the Western metaphysical crisis and not as the inception of a new epochal turn.

Heidegger’s thinking during the mid-thirties is half-way to that critical transformation. In the essay on the artwork, Heidegger had already questioned the central thesis of the *Rectorate’s address*, according to which the German people’s willing that science be put under the sway of the first beginning of Greek thought would in itself and by itself “create for our Volk a world of the innermost and most extreme danger, i.e., a truly spiritual world” (Heidegger 1993b, p. 33), thus impregnating the German destiny with a new ontological stamp. In the same vein, in 1933 Heidegger was still self-assured that avoiding the catastrophic happening of a break of the spiritual power of the West “depended solely (hängt allein daran) on whether we as a historical-spiritual people will ourselves, still and again, or whether we will ourselves no longer. Each individual has a part in deciding this, even if, and precisely if, he seeks to evade this decision. But it is our will that our people fulfill its historical mission” (Heidegger 1993b, p. 38; my emphasis). In the 1936 essay, however, when confronting Hegel’s saying about a supposed end of art – and thus a supposed end of Western history –, Heidegger did not seem to have any positive answer to solve the enigma:

… the question remains: Is still art an essential necessary way in which that truth happens which is decisive for our historical existence, or is art no longer of this character? If, however, it is such no longer, then there remains the question as
to why this is so. The truth of Hegel’s statement has not yet been decided; for behind this verdict there stands Western thought since the Greeks. Such thought corresponds to a truth of beings that has already happened. Decision upon the judgment will be made, when it is made, from and about this truth of beings. (Heidegger 1993a, p. 205).

Another interesting way to measure Heidegger’s terminological oscillations concerning the possibility of instituting a historical novelty in his own time is to compare his own different versions of these final remarks, as they are found in the three different drafts of the conference on the origin of the artwork. The third and last version, the one just quoted, insists in keeping open the interrogation concerning the end or the possible renewal of Western history. In this sense, it remains equally important to think what would follow from a yes or a no to that very question. Symptomatically enough, the prior versions establish a clear hierarchy between answering that question with a yes or a no. In both cases the German people is emphatically summoned up to decide and to will his own essential identity and thus to solve the riddle of Western history instituting a new epoch of Being. In the conference presented in 1935 to the Freiburg’s Society of Art Science, the so-called second version of the text finally published, the closing interrogation is expressed as follows: “what is to be decided is if we know what art and the artwork can be and must be to our historical existence: an origin (Ursprung) and so an anticipation (Vorsprung), or rather only an accompaniment (ein Mitgeführt) and so only a mere addition. This knowing or not knowing decides jointly who we are”. In the first draft of the conference, dated from 1931-32, the final questioning requires a clear decision from which the German Dasein would finally conquer the essential knowledge concerning his own identity and historical mission:

Knowledge about the essence (Wissen um das Wesen) is knowledge towards decision (Entscheidung) only. In the question concerning art is at stake (gilt) a decision: is art essential for us? Is it an origin and, henceforth, an instituting anticipation (ein stiftender Vorsprung) in our history, or merely a supplement which accompanies us as an ‘expression’ of the at hand (‘Ausdruck’ des Vorhandenen) and so a continuous business for the embellishment and the amusement, for leisure and exaltation? Are we or are we not at the proximity of the essence of art as origin? And if we are not at the proximity of the origin, do we know it or do we not know it and then only stagger in the face of the artistic enterprise? If we do not know it, then this is the First (das Erste) that we should raise up towards knowledge. For clarity
concerning who we are and who we are not is already (ist schon) the decisive leap towards the proximity to the origin. Only such proximity hides a truly grounded historical being-there (ein warhaft gegründetes geschichtliches Daseins), as genuine native rootedness upon this earth (als echte Bodenständigkeit auf diser Erde) (Heidegger 1989, p. 22, my emphasis).

These terminological oscillations between 1931 and 1936 have to do with Heidegger’s growing interest in formulating his epochal hermeneutics of Being. Once the thesis concerning the Seinsgeschichte was clearly defined, during the mid-forties, Heidegger would no longer think that a historical people is given the power and the strength to willing, knowing, deciding and thus revolutionizing its own time. Although Heidegger’s expectations for a new thrust of Being – and thus for a new historical epoch – pervade his thinking from the early thirties onwards, I think that these expectations suffer an important change along the way. Gradually, his reflections on the possibility of opening a new clearing of Being become more and more cautious and discreet – “Only a god can still save us”, he declared in 1966 – a carefulness which is related to his mature reflections on the metaphysical continuity that pervades Western history as such. From the early-thirties to the mid-thirties, Heidegger still conceived of history under the spell of finding in his own time the signs that announced the irruption of a new and essential world. Heidegger’s later thought, after the mid-forties, became more and more cautious in his questioning the mystery of Being and the riddles of history. Since then, his continuous effort to ponder the possibility of a new beginning lead his path of thinking towards his mature understanding of the essence of language, of the essence of thought and of the essence of technology. Heidegger’s mature thinking give us no final or easy answers concerning all those matters. However, in thinking them thru, he would disseminate new ways and new exigencies for us to think our own time.

Bibliography:

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