

AS

SENATE HOUSE  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON  
THE WOBURN SUITE

2018-2019  
139TH SESSION  
VOLUME CXIX

CHAired BY JONATHAN WOLFF  
EDITED BY GUY LONGWORTH



PROCEEDINGS OF THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY

*Heidegger's Fountain:  
Ecstasy, Mimesis and Engrossment in  
the Origin of the Work of Art*

STEPHEN MULHALL

HOSTING AND PUBLISHING TALKS IN PHILOSOPHY SINCE 1880

PROCEEDINGS OF THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY  
139TH SESSION

ISSUE NO. 2  
VOLUME CXIX  
2018-2019

HEIDEGGER'S FOUNTAIN:  
ECSTASIS, MIMESIS AND ENGROSSMENT IN  
THE ORIGIN OF THE WORK OF ART

STEPHEN MULHALL  
NEW COLLEGE, OXFORD

MONDAY, 18 MARCH 2019

17.30-19.15

NEW LOCATION:  
UCL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION  
20 BEDFORD WAY  
LONDON WC1H 0AL  
UNITED KINGDOM

*This event is catered, free of charge  
and open to the general public*

CONTACT  
[mail@aristoteliansociety.org.uk](mailto:mail@aristoteliansociety.org.uk)  
[www.aristoteliansociety.org.uk](http://www.aristoteliansociety.org.uk)

© 2019 THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY

#### B I O G R A P H Y

Stephen Mulhall is Professor of Philosophy and a Fellow of New College, Oxford. His research interests include Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Nietzsche and Sartre; moral philosophy; the relationship between philosophy, theology and religion; and the relationship between philosophy and the arts (especially film and literature). His most recent publications include: *The Great Riddle: Wittgenstein and Nonsense, Theology and Philosophy* (OUP, 2015), and *On Film: 3rd Edition* (Routledge, 2016).

#### E D I T O R I A L   N O T E

The following paper is a draft version that can only be cited or quoted with the author's permission. The final paper will be published in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Issue No. 2, Volume CXIX (2019). Please visit the Society's website for subscription information: [aristoteliansociety.org.uk](http://aristoteliansociety.org.uk).

HEIDEGGER'S FOUNTAIN:  
ECSTASIS, MIMESIS AND ENGROSSMENT IN  
THE ORIGIN OF THE WORK OF ART

STEPHEN MULHALL

HEIDEGGER'S 1935-6 text *The Origin of the Work of Art* is as full of mysteries – as resistant to readerly engagement – as any of his later writings, despite its origins in a set of three lectures delivered to the *Freies Deutsche Hochstift* in Frankfurt, hence to a largely extra-academic audience<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, some things about it are now a matter of common knowledge, part of what anyone who knows anything about Heidegger's view of art cannot fail to know: for this is the text in which, on the basis of his consideration of a Van Gogh painting and a Greek temple, he advances the claim that a work of art sets up a world and sets forth the earth, instigating and realizing the strife between them. More precisely, '[T]he work-being of the work consists in the fighting of the battle between world and earth... the battle in which the unconcealedness of beings as a whole, or truth, is won' (OWA, 49, 55).

To open up a world is to make it possible for us to dwell in a particular way amidst the overtness of all things: it is by the opening up of a world that 'all things gain their lingering and hastening, their remoteness and nearness, their scope and limits' (OWA, 45). The earth is set forth insofar as the art work foregrounds its materials – 'the massiveness and heaviness of stone, the firmness and pliancy of wood, the hardness and lustre of metal ...' (OWA, 46) – and thereby overcomes their inherent tendency to resist disclosure or unconcealment (for example, by disappearing into the usefulness of a tool). The world thus grounds itself on the earth, and the earth juts through the world: the world strives to surmount the earth it rests upon, because as self-opening it cannot endure anything closed; but the earth, as essentially self-sheltering and self-concealing, tends to draw the world into itself and keep it there. Hence, in their striving, each incites the other into a fuller self-assertion of their natures: 'The earth cannot dispense with the Open of the world if it itself is to appear as earth in the liberating surge of its self-seclusion. The world ... cannot soar out of the earth's sight if, as the governing breadth and path of all essential destiny, it is to ground itself on a resolute foundation' (OWA, 49). This is how truth happens in the work of art.

---

<sup>1</sup> I will be working with Albert Hofstadter's translation of the text, published in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

One way of attuning oneself to the rhythms and trajectory of this thinking would be to explore how Heidegger's terminology at once reiterates and reformulates terminology and patterns of use originating in his early masterpiece *Being and Time* (in which a cognate concept of 'world' is already active, although 'earth' remains unnamed). Another way (one suggested not only by his guiding invocation of a Greek temple, but also by the fact that whilst composing these lectures, he was also lecturing on Nietzsche) would be ask whether what Heidegger names as 'world' and 'earth' are what the early Nietzsche (in *The Birth of Tragedy*<sup>2</sup>) calls 'Apollo' and Dionysus'. Heidegger's 'world' is surely Apolline insofar as it discloses all things as the things they are, hence at once individuates them and relates them to one another in a spatio-temporal whole, and simultaneously individuates the one to whom they present themselves whilst relating that one to her fellow-inhabitants of that world; and his 'earth' is Dionysian insofar as the worlds grounded on it are populated by individualities rather than individuals (*the* peasant woman, not any particular peasant woman), and insofar as the earth precedes, grounds and exceeds the limits of all possible modes of world-disclosure, whilst nevertheless needing the disclosure of some world or other in which to manifest itself as essentially resistant to disclosure, hence as transcendent to and transgressive of world. One might, then, risk saying that the intimate enmity of Apollo and Dionysus that Nietzsche sees as attained only in Attic tragic drama (and hopes for in Wagnerian opera) exemplifies the strife between world and earth that Heidegger finds not only in Greek temples but in every work of art insofar as it works to make truth happen.

Nevertheless, taking that risk would, I believe, be premature. For such comparative exercises presuppose that the basic elements of what everyone knows that Heidegger claims about the work of art really can be extracted from the text of his lectures with some confidence that we understand both them and Heidegger's own relation to them (his confidence about the aptness and depth of their attunement to the matter at hand). But the idea of a work of art as the site of strife between world and earth is one which is broached only in the second lecture; and its presentation is preceded, and so prepared for, by an introduction and first lecture whose primary aim seems to be that of forcing us to question our confidence in assuming that we grasp the extent to which Heidegger means – that is, stands behind the truth or validity of – any given claim that he puts forward.

For the path from the beginning of his text to the end of the first lecture is highly non-linear (digressive, meandering, essentially errant). He begins by noting a potentially bewildering, mutually presupposing

---

2 R. Geuss and R. Speirs (eds.), R. Speirs (trans.) *The Birth of Tragedy* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1999) – hereafter BT.

circularity between the concepts of art, the artist and the artwork, and the potentially treacherous extent to which our understanding of the ontology of artworks are shaped by concepts – such as allegory and symbol – which have been generated in the history of art, as if art itself has shaped our ways of comprehending it; but he also takes initial guidance from the intuition that artworks foreground their materiality or thinghood, which leads him to discuss the difficulty of locating works of art amidst all the other kinds of thing we ordinarily encounter. Then he introduces three influential philosophical accounts of thinghood (in terms of subject-accident, aggregate of sensations, and in-formed matter), each of which is presented as initially tempting but proves to lead us astray. He claims that the third such account currently prevails, as an ontology of things in general and of artworks in particular; but - partly due to religious conceptions of the world as created, partly due to the ubiquitous familiarity of human artefacts – it amounts to misinterpreting thinghood in terms of equipment (the kind of thing that appears to have deep affinities with as well as differences from both material objects and works of art). Grasping the power of this misinterpretation will therefore require a better grasp of the weirdly intermediary or dual aspect status of equipment; and Heidegger proposes to do this by attending to a Van Gogh painting of two shoes. It is only in the aftermath of this encounter that references to other artworks (including a Greek temple, and various works of literature) suddenly proliferate.

So the discussion only comes to focus specifically on art, and so on specific artworks, some fifteen pages after it begins; and such progress as that prefatory discussion makes is marked and motivated by a series of claims about highly disparate things (from rifles, hats and knapsacks to potatoes, beetles and blades of grass), and about thinghood in general, that are no sooner apparently sincerely advanced than they are revised, subverted or otherwise left behind. Locating the author's actual convictions within or behind this conflicting chorus of more or less briefly inhabited voices is no easy matter; but it seems clear that this chorus constitutes a context (or nest of contexts) without which Heidegger thinks that his readers will fail to appreciate either the nature of his approach to his topic or the rationale for his choice of examples. So achieving a better understanding of how this orchestration of others' views gives expression to Heidegger's own is indispensable if we are to understand not only the first lecture but the series as a whole, and so a proper grasp of his later claims about art, world and earth.

Here and now, I can hardly do more than establish an initial purchase on those opening complexities, trying to find my feet with its deliberately disorienting acts of ventriloquism. But given Heidegger's culminating

claim in his third lecture that all art is essentially poetry, it seems fitting to pay particular attention to one element of his first lecture that has been almost entirely overlooked<sup>3</sup>. So my guiding question throughout this essay will be this: why is it that the only art-work Heidegger cites in its entirety in the entirety of this text is the following poem by C.F. Meyer (1825-98)?

Der römische Brunnen

*Aufsteigt der Strahl und fallend gießt  
Er voll der Marmorschale Rund,  
Die, sich verschleiernd, überfließt  
In einer zweiten Schale Grund;  
Die zweite gibt, sie wird zu reich,  
Der dritten wallend ihre Flut,  
Und jede nimmt und gibt zugleich  
Und strömt und ruht.*

*Roman Fountain*

The jet ascends and falling fills  
The marble basin circling round;  
This, veiling itself over, spills  
Into a second basin's ground.  
The second in such plenty lives  
Its bubbling flood a third invests,  
And each at once receives and gives  
And streams and rests.

I. ECSTASIS AND NULLITY

In order to answer this question in a manner appropriately sensitive to the first lecture's careful preparatory nesting of contexts, an indirect approach will be necessary, since the poem only appears in the wake of the traumatic disruption inflicted on Heidegger's text by his invocation of a Van Gogh

---

<sup>3</sup> I know of only two commentators who do more than mention the poem in passing. Karen Gover has a ten-page discussion of it in "The Overlooked Work of Art in "The Origin of the Work of Art"" (*International Philosophical Quarterly* 48/2, June 2008 – pp 143-53); and Iain Thomson devotes two pages to it in 'Heidegger's PostModern understanding of Art', a chapter in his *Heidegger, Art and PostModernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Given the torrent of secondary literature devoted to this aspect of Heidegger's later thought, and to this text in particular, this lacuna is a very striking fact, about which Gover herself has interesting things to say. And her interpretation, although concise and sometimes telegraphic, is generally sensitive and sophisticated. She certainly registers some of the textual and contextual nodes that will be central to my discussion, although she constellates them differently; so I will note points of convergence and contrast as we go on. Thomson's discussion I found far less helpful, and I will try to explain why in my conclusion.

painting of a pair of shoes. The vexed question of the significance of that canvas has of course dominated much of the best commentary on Heidegger's text, including the notorious exchanges between Schapiro and Derrida. They engage simultaneously with the question of which actual shoes were the occasion or model for Van Gogh's painting, to whom they belonged, whether they formed a pair, whether they are shoes of the peasant or the urban kind, and so on, and (at least in Derrida's case) with the rather more important question of whether the answer to any of those questions can help in grasping the role of Van Gogh's painting in Heidegger's thinking. But few, if any, parties to these debates stop to ask whether the voice Heidegger adopts in responding to the painting is fully or genuinely his own – that is, whether what it says and shows can simply be identified with Heidegger's settled vision of what a work of art does, and is; or whether it rather dramatizes or enacts one more erroneous staging-post on the dialectical path to deeper understanding. To see that there is a genuine question to be asked here, Derrida's response to Schapiro is helpful in one crucial respect; for he emphasizes that the proximate reason for the painting's appearance in Heidegger's argument is its apparent handiness as a prompt for a phenomenology of the equipmentality of equipment.

We choose as example a common sort of equipment – a pair of peasant shoes ... Everyone is acquainted with them. But since it is a matter here of direct description, it may be well to facilitate the visual realization of them. For this purpose a pictorial representation of them suffices. We shall choose a well-known painting by Van Gogh, who painted such shoes several times. (OWA, 32-3)

The duplicity of this moment is complex, but patent. By this point in his text, Heidegger has already castigated Western philosophy for attempting to grasp the thinghood of things in terms of three conceptions that do violence to their object: either they forcefully keep us at arm's-length from it – as when the 'subject-accident' model places the bearer of the artwork's perceptible properties beyond our direct apprehension; or they make it press too hard upon us – as when the 'aggregate of sensations' model dissolves the work into the totality of its affections of our subjectivity. He has also asserted that the prevailing form-matter model amounts to mis-interpreting thinghood as such in terms appropriate to specifically equipmental things; this, indeed, is precisely why he presents himself as requiring a proper understanding of equipmentality. But in order to gain that understanding, he proposes to treat Van Gogh's painting as a piece of equipment – as a (representational) tool to be made essentially subservient to the needs of his intellectual project, a means to the end of achieving supposedly thoughtful engagement with the work of art.

So we ought not to be surprised that the painting proves recalcitrant:

As long as ... we simply look at the empty, unused shoes as they merely stand there in the picture, we shall never discover ... the equipmental being of the equipment ... From Van Gogh's painting we cannot even tell where these shoes stand. There is nothing surrounding this pair of peasant shoes in or to which they might belong – only an undefined space. There are not even clods of soil from the field of the field-path sticking to them, which would at least hint at their use. A pair of peasant shoes, and nothing else. And yet from the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth, and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting within itself. (OWA, 33-4)

One might say that Heidegger here suffers a double rebuke: first the painting refuses simply to perform its representational task of conveying the equipmental nature of the two shoes, and then - well, then it transports or translates him, inducing an ecstasis that finds expression in one of his most notorious passages of prose (a passage that Derrida – or at least one of his interlaced voices – takes at face value, and accordingly finds it to be ridiculous and lamentable, at once impoverished and overloaded, the snigger-inducing kitsch of a Swabian museum guide ['Restitutions', p 291]). Reflecting on his own outburst a few pages later, Heidegger says: 'By bringing ourselves before Van Gogh's painting [t]his painting spoke. In the vicinity of the work, we were suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be' (OWA, 35).

Suppose we take seriously the fact that the reflective form of these remarks necessarily distances Heidegger, and so us, from the person before the painting who spoke in such a ridiculously lamentable way: then we might regard him as retrospectively characterizing, not how he really thinks the truthful work of an artwork is meant to happen, but rather what happens when a certain violence is done to it, and what we might learn about it from the form that its resistance to such violence takes. So understood, Heidegger's reflections declare that the result of attempting to make philosophical use of a work of art that supposedly represents a piece

of equipment is that it refuses either to be so used or to be defined by a particular (representational) mode of use, and instead assaults that which attempted to assault it, which means effecting a break or discontinuity in the thinker's line of thought, one which simultaneously places him in inordinate proximity to the painting (as it speaks from his location) and inordinately distant from it (displacing the speaker from the painting's vicinity). In the terms provided by later stretches of Heidegger's text, we might characterize this passage as his way of dramatizing a work of art's ability to bring forth a rift in both thinker and thought.

In this way, the painting's rebuke nevertheless holds open a certain possibility of genuine understanding for Heidegger; and another textual registration of this lies in his resorting to three variations on the word 'nothing' in as many sentences when characterizing the shoes in the painting – nothing surrounding them, no clumps of soil, the shoes and nothing else. This will remind some readers of Heidegger's inaugural lecture, in which he attempts to displace our attention from science to ontology by emphasizing the extent to which science concerns itself with objects 'and nothing else'. But in the context of that lecture, genuinely ontological insight comes from our willingness to stay with that 'nothing' as it is in itself – to patiently attend to the nullity that science presupposes and overlooks; whereas in the context of these lectures, Heidegger's attention is no sooner drawn to nothingness than he fills it with an uncannily overloaded painting in words of the world that is absent from the shoes in the painting, and so is absent from the painting – quite as if he cannot bear to suffer that absence, and so attend to what is truly present in the painting. The ecstatic outpouring that gives expression to this unwillingness is thus not so much the truth set to work in the painting as it is the truth set to work by the painting's being set to work in the wrong way; it amounts to a short stretch of Heidegger's longer path of thought about art that dramatizes or enacts what it is not to think about art.

## II. MIMESIS, TRANSLATION AND RIFT-DESIGN

The poem that is my ultimate concern appears only after Heidegger has invoked and responded to the Van Gogh painting; more specifically, its citation is provoked by a rejoinder Heidegger anticipates to the claim he derives from that response. His claim is that

[i]n the work of art, the truth of an entity has set itself to work. 'To set' means here: to bring to a stand. Some particular entity, a pair of peasant shoes, comes in the work to stand in the light of its being. The being of

the being comes into the steadiness of its shining. The nature of art would then be this: the truth of being setting itself to work. (OWA, 36)

He immediately imagines an interlocutor thinking that this claim 'intends to revive the fortunately obsolete view that art is an imitation and depiction of reality' (OWA, 36). Heidegger's response is complex, and so worth quoting in full.

The reproduction of what exists requires, to be sure, agreement with the actual being, adaptation to it; the Middle Ages called it *adequatio*; Aristotle already spoke of *homoiosis*. Agreement with what *is* has long been taken to be the essence of truth. But then, is it our opinion that this painting by Van Gogh depicts a pair of actually existing peasant shoes, and is a work of art because it does so successfully? Is it our opinion that the painting draws a likeness from something actual and transposes it into a product of artistic production? By no means.

The work, therefore, is not the reproduction of some particular entity that happens to be present at any given time; it is, on the contrary, the reproduction of the thing's general essence. But then where and how is this general essence, so that art works are able to agree with it? With what nature of what thing should a Greek temple agree? Who could maintain the impossible view that the Idea of Temple is represented in the building? And yet truth is set to work in such a work, if it is a work. Or let us think of Holderlin's hymn 'The Rhine'. What is pre-given to the poet, and how is it given, so that it can then be re-given in the poem? And if in the case of this hymn and similar poems the idea of a copy-relation between something already actual and the art work clearly fails, the view that the work is a copy is confirmed in the best possible way by a work of the kind presented in C.F. Meyer's poem 'Roman Fountain' ...

This is neither a poetic painting of a fountain actually present, nor a reproduction of the general essence of a Roman fountain. Yet truth is put into the work. What truth is happening in the work? Can truth happen at all and thus be historical? Yet truth, people say, is something timeless and supertemporal. (OWA 36-7)

At this point, Heidegger breaks off his line of self-questioning to offer a concluding summary of his first lecture.

So the proximal cause of the appearance of Meyer's poem is the challenge of locating Heidegger's initial characterization of works of art in relation to mimetic theories of art that he says are 'fortunately obsolete'; yet (as Gover notes) he introduces the poem as confirming in the best possible way the view that the work is a copy, despite denying that it is either a depiction of an actually existing fountain or a reproduction of the general essence of a Roman fountain.

This stance makes sense only if we draw a distinction between the view that a work of art is a copy, and the view that it reproduces something already available – whether that something is the appearance of an actually existing thing or the general essence of some given kind of actually existing thing. The Van Gogh painting is re-invoked to rebut the former option; and the rapid invocation of a Greek temple and a Holderlin hymn is intended to rebut the latter. Heidegger further suspects that both options presuppose or hang together with the idea that a work of art is a product, the result of a (re-)production process, in just the way that shoes are products; to regard works of art as depictions is, he thinks, to attribute to them a representative function, and so amounts to regarding them as pieces of equipment – a means of transferring something from one medium or state or location to another.

The truth that is put into, that happens in, the work of Meyer's poem is held to confirm the falsity of both options, and so of the equipmental model of works of art that underlies them; but it is also held to confirm the truth of a view of which both options are (it now appears) no more than tendentious interpretations. In short, there *is* truth in the view that the work of art is mimetic, but that truth can only be acknowledged (put to work in thought) if we separate from the mimetic view any commitment to the prior existence of that of which the work is a mimesis, or to the work of mimesis as a matter of re-producing – duplicating or reiterating -- anything. That work must rather, it seems, be originarily productive or presentative, and productive at once of itself and of that which it presents or which makes itself present in and by the work's presenting of itself.

Some readers might now be able to see how Heidegger could move on from this disclosure of mimesis as productive rather than re-productive, or presentational rather than re-presentational, to the matters broached in his later lectures. But for the present, my interest remains with Meyer's poem. For if we *are* meant to distinguish the mimetic theory of art from certain kinds of interpretation of it, then when Heidegger denies that Meyer's poem is either a depiction of an actually existing fountain or a reproduction of the general essence of a Roman fountain, he need not be taken as denying that a mimetic relation of some kind holds between the poem and either some actually existing fountain or the essence of such fountains (or both), and is indeed essential to understanding the way in which truth happens in it.

So it may be worth noting that – despite scholarly doubts about the supporting evidence<sup>4</sup> – rumour amongst the reference-works has it that the

---

4 cf M.Sutton, 'C.F.Meyer and R.M.Rilke: Which Roman Fountain?' in *German Life and Letters* 40/2 (Jan 1987), pp 135-42.

particular Roman fountain which inspired or at least occasioned Meyer's poem (or more precisely, which occasioned over a period of twenty years some seven poems, or seven drafts of this single poem, of which the one Heidegger quotes is the seventh, dated 1882) was the '*Fontana dei cavalli marini*' ('The Fountain of the Horses of the Sea'). This is still to be encountered in the grounds of the Villa Borghese in Rome, but was first erected in 1791, sculpted by Luigi Salimei (or perhaps Vincenzo Pacetti) after a design by Cristoforo Unterberger. It might also be relevant that it replaced another fountain; that the Villa in whose gardens it resides was begun in 1605 by Cardinal Borghese, on a site associated with the gardens of Lucullus, whose importation of Persian gardening practices so horrified late Roman society; and that by the time Meyer first encountered it the Villa's gardens were being reshaped once more, this time in accordance with English landscaping models. Or is it more relevant that, in order to learn this, one needs to look outside the poem itself – that the fountain in the poem carries no traces of its putative original, its originators, or of the identity, nature, or the multiple, historically- and culturally-sedimented origins and originators, of the gardens and Villa it inhabits?

Well – not exactly 'no' traces: the poem's title (assuming for the moment that this is part of the poem) tells us that it is a Roman fountain; and the body of the poem tells us that it has a central jet, and three basins arranged underneath one another in order of increasing size (assuming that lower basins must be larger if they are to catch the overflow of the higher ones), of which at least the highest and probably all three are made of marble. But there is no trace of the actual fountain's base, the horses leaping from the waves that give it its (merely conventional or denotative?) name. The poem's fountain thereby soars free of its support, as if essentially self-supporting, presenting itself as resting within its endless stream of water given and received.

This way of imagining the poem's mimesis of an actually existing fountain involves apprehending the poem's fountain not as a painting in words of that actual fountain, but as incarnating the structural or functional essence of a certain kind of fountain, as if stripping away those aspects of its actual material reality that make no essential contribution to its being a fountain. So understood, it anticipates a later development of Heidegger's understanding of the strife of earth and world; for in his third lecture, he re-interprets that strife as a rift which carries world and earth into the source of their unity<sup>5</sup>. This rift is, he tells us, 'a basic design, an outline sketch that draws the basic features of the rise of the lighting of beings ... bringing the opposition of measure and boundary into their

---

<sup>5</sup> Gover brings the idea of the rift into her discussion, but does not develop it in the way I propose here.

common outline' (OWA, 63); and this idea of an outline sketch is then further interpreted as the work's figure, shape, or gestalt: 'figure is the structure in whose shape the rift composes and submits itself' (OWA, 64), the work's particular placing or framing.

This in turn prompts a quotation from Durer, who remarked: 'For in truth, art lies hidden within nature; he who can wrest it from her has it'. Heidegger responds as follows:

'Wrest' here means to draw out the rift and to draw the design with the drawing-pen on the drawing-board. But ... how can the rift-design be brought out if it is not brought into the Open by the creative sketch as a rift, that is to say, brought out beforehand as a conflict of measure and unmeasure? True, there lies hidden in nature a rift-design, a measure and a boundary, and, tied to it, a capacity for bringing-forth – that is, art.

But it is equally certain that this art hidden in nature becomes manifest only through the work, because it lies originally in the work. (OWA, 70)

Heidegger's quarrel with Durer is a variant on his quarrel with the traditional versions of mimesis theory. Durer posits art as pre-given in nature, and the artist's work as a matter of extracting it from nature in order to re-give it in the artwork; but Heidegger problematizes both the chronological and the logical ordering of this position, asserting rather that the art hidden in nature lies originally in the work of art, which means denying that either mode of art's manifestation is prior to the other. But his reformulation of Durer's thought retrospectively gives us a way of characterizing the non-reproductive mimesis enacted by Meyer's poem: for it allows us to say that the poem's fountain brings forth the rift-design, the basic features of an actual Roman fountain, and thereby creatively sketches the gestalt or figure of Roman fountains as such, the opposition of measure and unmeasure that their common outline makes manifest.

So much for the mimetic body of the work; but it also has a mimetic title. Meyer's poem names its fountain as Roman; and it thereby invites us to recollect not only its creator's deep attachment to the world of classical and Renaissance Italy, but also the role assigned to Ancient Rome and its language in Heidegger's immediately preceding genealogy of the establishment and stabilization of Western culture's prevailing conception of the thinghood of things.

The process begins with the appropriation of Greek words by Roman-Latin thought. *Hupokeimenon* becomes *subjectum*; *hupostasis* becomes *substantia*; *sumbeikos* becomes *accidens*. However, this translation of Greek terms into Latin ones is in no way the innocent process it is considered to this day. Beneath the seemingly literal and thus faithful

translation there is concealed, rather, a *translation* of Greek experience into a different way of thinking. *Roman thought takes over the Greek words without a corresponding, equally authentic experience of what they say, without the Greek word.* The rootlessness of Western thought begins with this translation. (OWA, 23)

Read against this background, we might want to say of Meyer's poem that its presentation of its fountain as deprived of its concrete, detailed particularity, and in particular as floating free of its support or basis, reinforces the rootlessness of prevailing Roman ways of conceiving thinghood. But we might equally well say that the truth that is happening in this work is not our current rootless or ungrounded mode of disclosing things in their being, but rather a wresting of the basic outline or gestalt of authentic fountainhood from this Roman translation of it. So the question is: does the absence from the poem's fountain of the actual fountain's marine horses constitute a continued avoidance of the occluded ground on which this, and any other, thing reveals itself, or rather an implicit critique of the actual fountain as lacking authentic (call it metaphysical) support, and so a drawing forth of the rift-design still hidden within it?

### III. BEHOLDING ENGROSSMENT

Suppose that we have at least begun to grasp the sense in which Meyer's poem really should be thought of as a copy, and so as standing in a mimetic relation to a particular fountain (or kind of fountain). How might this alter our understanding of the work of art whose invocation prompted this discussion of mimesis as well as the citation of that poem, and which also appears to have what some might call 'representational content': Van Gogh's painting of two shoes?

Even to ask this question raises an obvious worry about Heidegger's citation of Meyer's poem: that it risks repeating his earlier (melo-) dramatized error with that painting, insofar as the poem is also apparently invoked as a means to philosophical ends, as a way of serving a purpose outside itself. On the other hand, Heidegger's text offers no grounds for thinking that the poem rebukes his approach to it – he enacts no stubborn refusal on its part to confirm the point he wishes to make, and undergoes no ecstatic outburst derailing his line of thought. This might be because its role is not so much to support a misbegotten line of thought as to disclose a kind of truth in a line of thought that has been generally overlooked or dismissed (the idea of the work as a mimesis). But it may also be because this poem (unlike Van Gogh's painting) is a mimesis of a *fountain*: that is, not a piece of equipment but rather something ornamental, decorative,

even beautiful – something capable of being (and in the case of the ‘Fountain of the Horses of the Sea’, actually being) a work of art.

After all, once Heidegger recovers from the assault made upon him by Van Gogh’s painting, he gathers that it discloses what the equipment it depicts is in truth; that is, it discloses the particular kind of equipment it is and the distinctive being of equipment as such. So by parity of reasoning, from a work of art that depicts a work of art one should be able to gather what the work of art it depicts is in truth; it should disclose the particular kind of work it is, and the distinctive being of works of art as such. We have already seen how Meyer’s poem might be said to disclose the being of a Roman fountain; so how might it be seen as disclosing the distinctive being of art works?

The point that Heidegger emphasizes, when he returns explicitly to the poem in the second lecture (the only other mention of it in this text), is one which again aligns it with the Van Gogh painting.

The more simply and authentically the shoes are engrossed in their nature, the more plainly and purely the fountain is engrossed in its nature – the more directly and engagingly do all beings attain to a greater degree of being along with them. That is how self-concealing being is illuminated. Light of this kind joins its shining to and into the work. This shining, joined in the work, is the beautiful. (OWA, 56)

The fountain in the poem is certainly engrossed in itself, manifesting itself as a circular flow of giving and receiving, in which endlessly streaming water finds unceasing rest. But this self-engrossment indicates more than the capacity for self-refusal, the stubborn evasion of thought that Heidegger senses from the outset of his discussion is internal to the work-being of the art work. For ‘engrossment’ could equally well be translated as ‘absorption’ – and anyone who knows the path-breaking work of Michael Fried on the generative dialectic between absorption and theatricality in the pre-history of pictorial modernism will be able to see how this transposition might open a path along which Heidegger’s elucidation of work by Van Gogh and Meyer might prove to be as responsive to, and illuminating of, their distinctive historical epoch as to the historical epoch to which his other primary example of a work of art (the Greek temple) belongs.

Fried attempts to locate Manet’s achievement in relation to the history of French, and so European, painting by developing a particular reading of the way in which Diderot (amongst others) understood the contemporary condition of that enterprise<sup>6</sup>. Fried’s Diderot recognized the primordial

---

<sup>6</sup> *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1980) - hereafter AT; *Courbet’s Realism* (University of Chicago

convention that paintings are made to be beheld, but felt that the presence of a beholder was not any longer something that a painter could simply take for granted. Contemporary paintings must rather attract, arrest and enthrall the beholder, hold her there as if spellbound; but if, in so doing so, they betrayed too blatant an awareness of the beholder's presence, they would thereby court theatricality, making the beholder aware of the illusion of reality by means of which she had been halted in front of the painting, and so breaking its spell. The tension could, however, be resolved if the beholder's presence could be secured by establishing the fiction of her absence – by depicting individuals and groups utterly absorbed in what they are doing, and so utterly oblivious to those looking at them (whether from within or without the fictional world of the painting). Hence Diderot's particular advocacy of history painting. The inherent drama of the scenes represented in such paintings could match the beholder's increasingly demanding need to be enthralled; and its orientation to past events made more plausible the illusion that the *dramatis personae* had determined their own positions and groupings (critical to what Diderot calls the painting's success as a dramatically unified composition or 'tableau'), unlike work in such genres as landscape and still-life painting.

Such absorptive strategies presuppose an ambiguity in the idea of 'the scene of representation': for this can refer not only to the scene represented in the painting, but also to the literal scene within which such representational fictions are encountered, the situation of the beholder standing before a painted canvas in order to see the scene it depicts. On Fried's analysis, painting's power to create convincingly realistic fictional scenes of representation was now seen as threatened by its embeddedness in the literal scene of representation; the beholder's absorption in the fictional scene could now be achieved only by somehow negating or neutralizing his presence before the canvas depicting that scene.

But of course, any such achievement could itself only be a supreme fiction. For the dramatic illusion of reality in painting can only operate in the context of the literal scene of representation, so the beholder's existence before the canvas could no more be negated or denied in any literal sense than could the canvas's existence before the beholder; indeed, to aim for the one would be to aim for the other. Consequently, the anti-theatrical tradition Fried sees as emerging with the painters who share Diderot's understanding of their situation in effect commits itself to the entirely incoherent aim of denying the material reality of its own works as well as the material reality of those who behold them.

---

Press: Chicago, 1990) - hereafter CR; *Manet's Modernism* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1996) - hereafter MM.

Nevertheless, the proponents of this tradition were responding to a real problem. They sensed that the beholders of paintings were becoming alienated from the objects of their beholding – no longer absorbed or enthralled by canvasses *qua* paintings, *qua* fictional scenes of representation; and they rightly saw such alienation as a sceptical threat to painting's capacity to maintain its status as a major art form. Their (metaphysical) error was to attribute this scepticism to spectatorship as such, rather than to the increasingly exhausted powers of traditional modes of creating absorption in the dramatic illusions of painting. They assumed that what was undermining the beholder's capacity to be absorbed by the dramatic illusion of any painting was the ineluctable fact of his existence as an embodied being standing before a pigment-smearred canvas, rather than some developing loss of conviction in a prevailing system of painterly conventions for creating this illusion. Consequently, their strategies of negating the beholder became increasingly extreme as previous ones necessarily failed to achieve their incoherent purpose, and thus ironically contributed by their resultant theatricality to the beholder's intensifying loss of conviction in the dramatic illusions of painting.

An alternative anti-theatrical strategy, which Fried primarily associates with Manet, would be to defuse the threat of scepticism by acknowledging the metaphysical constraints of the literal scene of representation – by producing work which finds a source of new artistic convention in the necessary physicality or embodiedness of painting and beholder, in the fact that the two face one another in space and time, and that any fictive or dramatic encounter they facilitate depends upon that fact and its implications. Since a painting is both canvas and depiction, its beholder is at once the beholder of a physical object and of a fictional scene of representation. Manet's mode of anti-theatricality acknowledges the ineliminability of this duality, and therefore aims to produce convincing representational works which simultaneously acknowledge their fictionality and their literality and invite their beholders to do the same.

And it turns out that this requires acknowledging a further dimension of the painting-beholder relationship. For a painting exists not just as physical object and as fictional scene of representation, but as product – as the result of meaningful human activity; the beholder not only perceives an object and is absorbed in a dramatic illusion, but confronts the work of another human being (with its implicit reference to the scene of his representational efforts – the studio). Accordingly, Manet attempts to produce works which acknowledge their origin in human action – paintings in which the act of painting is prolonged within the work itself (for example, by his unprecedented acknowledgement of the reality of the painter's model). He thereby aspires to acknowledge the beholder

*qua* beholder of a humanly-worked object whilst also acknowledging him as the beholder of a physical object and of a representation; and here, the notion of the *tableau* becomes central.

In Diderot, that term picks out an effect of unity, autonomy and absorptive closure achieved by the painting *qua* dramatic illusion or depiction, whether by the dynamics of human action (as in history painting) or otherwise. In so doing, it effects an instantaneous and enduring enthrallment in the viewer – offering immediate access to the depicted scene and holding the viewer indefinitely before the canvas depicting it.

Since Manet refuses the antitheatrical tradition which aimed at denying the beholder's existence by attempting to absolutize his absorption in the depicted scene, his work inevitably avoided its corresponding paradigm of the *tableau*. Instead, he developed a new conception in which what Fried calls 'facing' would be the *tableau's* operative principle – in which the instantaneity and strikingness which most contemporary critics saw as achievable only through absorptive closure would be achieved in other ways.

Thus, Manet systematically avoids depictions of people absorbed in what they are doing, tending rather to depict figures gazing directly out of the painting; he makes use of unintelligible subject-matter and internally disparate *mise-en-scene*; he combines strong figural gestalts with abrupt tonal contrasts in a way which stamps out the depicted image; he executes his paintings with a marked lack of finish, and so on. He thereby does all he can to dramatize or underscore the fact that paintings present their viewers with a representation consisting of marks placed on a physical surface by their maker, and thereby simultaneously acknowledges the three dimensions of the scene of representation (the painting *qua* physical object, painted object and/or depiction). But he does not demand that these elements form self-contained parts of a self-sufficient whole.

In that sense, where absorptive *tableaux* aim for a mode of closure which stands opposed to the fragmentary (to *morceaux*), Manet's anti-absorptive *tableaux* might also be called assemblages of *morceaux* – or better, as placing the *tableau/morceau* contrast in question. Fried's Manet sees the three conditions or dimensions of painting as engaged in a constant mutual confrontation or facing-off, each constraining and being constrained by the others, and each standing in need of acknowledgement by and through the others in a kind of productive and open-ended dialogue which can be brought to a provisional conclusion in particular works of painting, but for which no final, totalizing closure can ultimately be imagined.

I've gone into such detail about Fried's interpretation of pictorial modernism because the resonances between his account of the dialectic of absorption and theatricality and Heidegger's response to Van Gogh and Meyer are so numerous and so suggestive. To begin with, it allows us to understand what Heidegger calls the self-engrossment of Van Gogh's shoes as a kind of self-absorption that belongs more to Manet's anti-theatrical modernist project than that of its ill-fated predecessor, insofar as the painter's intense affirmation of their fictionality – their representational status – intensifies our sense of the reality of that which they represent. The paintedness of Van Gogh's painting of two shoes shows us what it might mean for a piece of equipment as opposed to a person to be absorbed in their own nature; and that self-engrossment – insofar as it involves their turning away from their usual accessibility to users – isolates the shoes from each other (hence the open question about whether they form a pair), hence from their equipmental world, and so from their viewers (whose suddenly problematic access to that world is the painter's way of acknowledging them as inevitably located outside it, before the canvas).

What Heidegger's first lecture amounts to is a dramatized acknowledgement of how such a modernist reconception of a thematics of absorption actually works – to catch the attention of a beholder, and then to rebuke the wrong kind of attention. Heidegger approaches the painting simply as one amongst a range of equally appropriate depictive examples; then his attention is caught by its particularity, initially by the shoes' absorption in themselves as that declares itself in their refusal of their implied pictorial world, and then by their resultant refusal of his presence and interest in them; and finally, he finds himself transported into the absent world of the painting, as if its presence as a material object to which he is present has been obliterated. His theatrical conjuration of the peasant woman's world thus dramatizes his denial of the painting's attempt to acknowledge the fictionality of its shoes; and his equally theatrical dissolution of the beholder into that absent scene of representation dramatizes his denial of the literal scene of representation, rendering beholder and canvas so inordinately proximate to each other that their separateness (and so their relatedness) vanishes.

Heidegger's subsequent staging of his relation to Meyer's poem, by contrast, lacks any such theatricality; and this suggests that his encounter with the poem's fountain's mode of self-engrossment offers him (and so his readers) a model for approaching Van Gogh's shoes otherwise. This is because the poem – just like the painting, although less dramatically – acknowledges what Heidegger (later in the lectures) calls the creation and preservation of the work:

In the work, createdness is expressly created into the created being, so that it stands out from it, from the being thus brought forth, in an expressly particular way...

To submit to [the work's] displacement means: to transform our accustomed ties to world and to earth, and henceforth to restrain all usual doing, knowing and looking, in order to stay with the truth that is happening in the work... This letting the work be a work we call preserving the work. (OWA, 66)

Creating createdness into the created work sounds very like acknowledging the art work as the result of artistic labour. As we saw earlier, the poem's fountain does this by embodying the structural essence of fountainhood; and this mode of engrossment in its own nature detaches it from the particular fountain that inspired it, and so of that fountain's materiality and its cultural context. As we also saw earlier, Heidegger characterizes this feature of genuine art works in terms of figure, shape, gestalt ('figure is the structure in whose shape the rift composes and submits itself' [OWA, 64]); and these are exactly the terms Fried reaches for in characterizing the anti-absorptive transformation of the absorptive conception of the *tableau* achieved in Manet's paintings – works which stamp out strong figural gestalts, and in which the distinction between fragments and tableaux is problematized.

In other words, the self-absorption of Meyer's fountain acknowledges its supporting material and cultural context precisely by divorcing itself from it; it effects a mimesis of the constitutive rift between things and their earth-grounded world, and thereby supplies Heidegger (and so us) with the key to understanding the analogous anti-absorptive reconfiguration of the absorptive *tableau* in Van Gogh's painting. The mutual facing-off of the three dimensions of the representational or mimetic scene in both the poem's fountain and the painting's shoes is, one might say, how the strife between world and earth happens in the condition of modernism.

And by embedding that poem into his first lecture, Heidegger invites us to observe that – to adapt a thought of Karen Gover's – the language of Meyer's poem and that of his impending account of the work of art echo each other, and so that Meyer's poem also constitutes a figural mimesis of the text in which it is presented<sup>7</sup>. The springhead of the introduction

---

<sup>7</sup> By this I do not mean that the poem depicts or represents Heidegger's view of the artwork – as Iain Thomson seems to assume when he tells us that its three basins correspond to the three eras or epochs of human understanding of things and artworks to which the lectures advert: the ancient Greek, the medieval and the modern. This admittedly ingenious and tempting suggestion depends upon exactly the kind of mimetic thinking Heidegger condemns, and presents Heidegger as utilizing an artwork as an allegory of his own account of the history of metaphysics, when his introduction to his lectures

overflows into the first lecture, which overflows into the second and then the third, with the overlapping titles assigned to each lecture ('Thing and Work', 'Work and Truth', 'Truth and Art') showing forth their self-sufficient inter-relatedness, and implying what the later additions of the epilogue and addendum demonstrate: the unmeasured abundance of the stream, as if there is no end to its giving and receiving. In this sense, 'Roman Fountain' not only contains and constitutes a well or fount – being at once a mimesis of actual fountains as something human beings have artfully wrought or wrested from nature's bounty (its endlessly renewing springs), and of art works (such as fountains, such as poems) as bounteous self-originating sources, each an original point of origin. It also draws out the rift-design of Heidegger's thinking; it is a creative sketch of the way in which truth happens in the questioning of a genuine thinker – call it poetry's mimesis of thinking, in thinking's mimesis of poetry.

*Stephen Mulhall*  
*New College, Oxford*  
*Oxford OX1 3BN*

---

identifies allegory as one of the distorting background frameworks of our thinking about art. It also commits Thomson to a misreading of the poem's content, since this allegorical reading would require the poem to depict a progressive loss of plenitude or potency as the water falls from one basin to the next, when it embodies nothing of the kind, or rather, something like the reverse – a movement in which each level receives and gives as much as every other, and all are equally caught up in the fountain's strenuous rest.



THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY

PRESIDENT: Jonathan Wolff (Oxford)

PRESIDENT-ELECT: Helen Steward (Leeds)

HONORARY DIRECTOR: Rory Madden (UCL)

EDITOR: Guy Longworth (Warwick)

LINES OF THOUGHT SERIES EDITOR: Scott Sturgeon (Oxford)

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE: Helen Beebee (Manchester) / Clare Chambers (Cambridge)  
Nicholas Jones (Birmingham) / Heather Logue (Leeds) / Elinor Mason (Edinburgh) /  
David Owens (KCL) / Barbara Sattler (St Andrews) / Helen Steward (Leeds)

MANAGING EDITOR: Holly de las Casas

ASSISTANT EDITOR: David Harris

DESIGNER: Mark Cortes Favis

ADMINISTRATOR: Nikhil Venkatesh