

## ON POETIC IMAGINATION

Sunnie D. Kidd

Gaston Bachelard's conception of poetics as a phenomenology of the soul is included in likeness and contrast to Martin Heidegger's position and is used to highlight the basic existential structures of the poetic imagination. Their works reveal the nature of the poetic moment where Being illumines itself and show the reciprocal movement involved between the advancing truth of Being and the poet's readiness to abandon him-*self*<sup>†</sup> to that which appeals to him in his work. Distinctions are then made between the words which the poet writes (poesy) and the essential act of forging the Word (poetry in the essential sense). The act of naming what Heidegger calls the Holy, in essence, Being, is the basis for all forms of creativity and art where a part of truth is revealed and at the same time conserved by the artist, the poet and his work-of-art. The work-of-art then becomes a time and space of truly creative work in accord with its ability to touch the souls of others who gaze upon it with the life which fills its expression. Essential structures of the poetic imagination, the poetic moment and the place of the poet in this work reveal the process whereby man the mortal stands between the divinities and his own finitude on the horizon which lets the birth of Being come into existence through what is already familiar.

In his philosophy of art Heidegger sees the artist as poet and the work-of-art as a co-constituted structure of Being. As artist, the poet resides in a circle of Being with the earth, the work-of-art and the Holy. Each helps define and reveal the other. In seeing beyond, in looking to the origin, in struggling to glimpse the unknown, to reach into the ethers out of which all emanates, the poet is led toward the Holy. The Holy is that unknown which rests beyond each new horizon as it appears. It cannot be grasped as it is. The Holy becomes manifest through the poetic imagination, through the poet and his work-of-art. The poet forges new words, he creates new realities in founding a poetic image. Being is born through the poet and his work-of-art. Heidegger's philosophy of art describes a process of revelation, a revelation of Being. For example, he describes this process of the revelation of Being in his discussion of Van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes.<sup>1</sup> Humanity lives in those shoes as nature lives in the sky, the earth and trees. Being is revealed, gathered up, conserved, in this one poetic image. This revelation is a lesson, one which teaches the meaning of standing *in* truth, standing open *for* truth, letting-things-be-as-they-are. This reveals. The essence of the dynamic image is revelation. It is a moment of origination. A moment of the world has been revealed, brought out of its concealedness and frozen in time for all to behold. Time is the medium for revelation in the work-of-art. The artist reveals truth in the physical manifestation of an inspired moodedness,

---

<sup>†</sup> Freidrich Hölderlin.

in his contact with Being. The work-of-art becomes a dynamic, living symbol. This symbol, the poetic image, is a-live. It collects meaning through time yet never loses the moment of its origin, the founding meaning of revealing what was previously concealed. The founding image is dynamic as it works in the work-of-art and evokes truth in those who experience it. The poetic imagination becomes the channel for a great downpouring of light. It lights up, it reveals, it discloses new aspects of Being. But from the poet as the one who sees and forges the new word, from him is demanded *self-sacrifice*. He submits to the Holy. He responds. He becomes a vessel for and a channel through which energies of the universe become manifest as Being. This *self-sacrifice* consecrates the Holy. It is by standing silent in the great Open that the newness or freshness of Being is revealed. The poet stands in the clearing, in the light of Being. In this way, “the poet names the Holy.”<sup>2</sup> The Holy becomes the Holy through the *self-sacrifice* of the poet. As poet, he is created only through his ability to abandon him-*self* to the name of truth:

“. . . In a work of art, (then), comes-to-pass this opening-up, sc. the revealing, sc. the truth, of beings. . . .”<sup>3</sup>

As an opening-up by standing in the beacon of light which shines forth from Being as it illuminates itself, the work-of-art becomes a battleground for truth. The poet is a soldier upon this battleground. The revelation of Being through battle in the work-of-art is what lets the other who sees it be startled. The other is anyone other than the artist, someone who either sees or reads the work-of-art. Each may be surprised by the truth which has been hidden and now stands revealed in the work-of-art. Others are surprised by the Holy. Others are jolted by the revelation of Being:

Being comes to be when an existing Da-sein within its transcendental horizon illumines the things that are.<sup>4</sup>

As the veil is lifted light shines in through the work-of-art. The poet lights up a void in the other. The work stands *as* truth only to the extent that it holds this capacity to en-liven, to light up Being. Truth is not only revealed in the work-of-art but is at the same time conserved by the work-of-art. It is gathered up. Being is preserved through its revelation. The Holy inspires the soul of the poet to dis-close a divine revelation of truth, of Being. There is this process of revelation in a double movement:

Being advances unto the There which has been thrown-forth by Being itself and is met by the project of There-being which forces it into disclosure as the given work of art.<sup>5</sup>

In the poetic moment the end is present in its beginning. The project advances toward the There and Being moves toward the poet. The future

moves toward the moment. The Holy retires into a new horizon, it remains always in the unknown. In the poet's work-of-art there is a clash between the two, between advancing truth and There-being of the project. This is related to the structure of the horizon, earth and sky clash, they are at this moment poetizing Being. They are revealing the invisible in the familiar. The alien moves beyond the new horizon, retiring beyond into the unknown. This dynamic structure names the Holy, the work of the poetic image:

This is why poetic images are imaginings in a distinctive sense: not mere fancies and illusions but imaginings that are visible inclusions of the alien in the sight of the familiar.<sup>6</sup>

Each poetic image is a founding, an originative human language. It is a primordial structure of thinking. The truly poetic image brings things to life, it languages a truth of Being. The poetic is:

...“poetry in the essential sense,” as distinct from “poesy,” or “poetry in the narrow sense,” the sort of thing that poets write. It is only because language as such is the primordial poetizing that poesy, which uses language as its medium, enjoys a primacy among other forms of art.<sup>7</sup>

Naming the Holy, forging the word, poetizes Being. Origination *happens* as the poet names the Holy. The poetic moment becomes the ground for creation. Being is revealed. The “Word” has always been linked with the Act of Creation. A poetic moment is the origination of a reality, one instant of clash one moment of lighting up. It is authentic. The poet becomes a witness, a channel for the Holy. He abandons him-*self* to the unknown. The poetic imagination is the imagination which ignites the soul, it is inspired by the Holy and creates the world, it illumines Being as it is. The poet stands in the face of the unknown, in the clearing lit by Being, in the Open. The poetic imagination becomes a battleground between truth and non-truth. In a moment of clash between the two, something new is born. A new aspect of Being is revealed as it is. The Holy resides beyond the horizon of the known, dwelling in mysteries of the unknown, continuing to send its address to the soul of the poet.

Heidegger has made an important distinction between imagination and the poetic imagination. The imagination as it is usually thought of would be poesy or poetry in the narrow sense. The poetic imagination comes into the contact with the very foundations of Being. The poet works on the fringes, the horizon between the known and the unknown. As Being illuminates itself, the horizon of the known moves into the beyond. The Holy withdraws into that beyond of the horizon. It is in this way that the poetic imagination belongs to what the poet becomes as witness, a visionary, a dreamer. It is the poetic dreamer who contacts the essence of Being in his reverie. He dwells

with the mysteries of the Holy:

In effect, poetizing is a process in which the Holy (Being) addresses the poet and he responds by forming this address into words. From one point of view (that of Being), the address is a mittence in which the Holy conceals itself even in revealing itself, sc. is mystery.<sup>8</sup>

The poetic imagination gives rise to images in moments which poetize Being. It is the poet's response to an address sent forth by the Holy which names it. Bachelard makes the same distinction between imagination of poesy and the dynamic poetic imagination. The poetic imagination is a phenomenology of the soul. It is a dynamic process which results in creation of *new* images through dreams of the soul. For Bachelard expression of the poetic is an expansion of consciousness by revealing the new and in so doing, conserving the ancient. The ancient and the eternal are linked by poetizing Being. Its temporal structure is a layering of mysterious possibilities of the universe. The poet:

...in his word boldly presents what he has glimpsed, so as to tell in advance of the not-yet-fulfilled.<sup>9</sup>

It is in the not-yet-fulfilled, advancing truth, that the poet responds to the call of Being. In his response he sacrifices him-*self* in the name of the Holy. This consecrates. The poet *de-scribes*, becoming a scribe for the soul dimensions of Being. As a channel for Being through the work-of-art, textures and qualities of the Holy are manifest as thing. Heidegger's philosophy of art names the poet as a scribe for the human soul through revelations of Being which are conserved in the work-of-art. This is the same work of the dreamer described by Bachelard:

On the side of the dreamer, constituting the dreamer, we must then recognize a power of poetization which can well be designated as a psychological poetics; it is the poetics of the psyche where all the psychic forces fall into harmony.<sup>10</sup>

The work-of-art emerges from the poetic imagination, from a unity in Heidegger's four-fold structure, the square [*Gevierte*] of dwelling: The Earth - The Heaven - The Divinities - The Mortal. It is in the act of naming the Holy that the psychic forces synthesize soul dimensions of Being as thing, as work-of-art. Heidegger also distinguishes between the philosopher and the poet. The poet *names* the Holy, while the philosopher (thinker) *pronounces* Being. The thing (work-of-art) is the center whereby the four-fold qualities of unity are gathered in the name of the Holy and are pronounced Being. The thinker or philosopher:

...discovers at the root of the essential thinking the freedom of

Dasein which makes possible the origin-out-of-nothing of new interpretation.

[While the poet:]

...in bringing the Word to be, places the thing in the dimension of greatest reality, where past and present and future meet, to transcend this man or that, this time or that - the dimension of the pure act of illumination itself, which in its total reality transcends the thing, the man, the epoch to become what is lasting - for that is what is "Holy."<sup>11</sup>

Earth provides the base for things-that-are. It is the very ground out of which man builds. Heaven is the light which shines. Divinities are messengers of the Divine. Mortal is man in his finitude. The coming together of these four lets the revelation of Being happen. The invisible becomes visible. The ancient and the eternal transpose one another. The poet as the soldier of truth responds to the address of Being through bringing the word to be, through creation of the poetic image. The artist in his work-of-art acts as a scribe for Being. As Bachelard earlier said, this is a poetics of the psyche (soul) where all the psychic forces fall into harmony. It is here that Being is revealed as a *living symbol* in the poetic image. The truly poetic image ignites the mortal soul. The poet stands facing the Open in the clearing where the light (Heaven) shines forth. This is an authentic facing and dynamic response to an address by the Holy. It has the ring of truth in its silence. Tones of the human soul's responsiveness are struck by the poet's words as they peal out in the darkness, shining light where there was void. The poet's resonance with Earth, Heaven, Divinities and Mortal brings Being forward. This sounding of truth demands the *self*-sacrifice of the poet. But paradoxically, in this act, the *Self* is revealed and given expression. The soul of man comes to life in his *de-scribing* the revelation of the Holy's address in his work-of-art. The poet brings the word to be.

The Holy opens up the world through illumination of itself in the work-of-art. The artist's response to the address by the Holy is concretized in the work-of-art as conservation of the ancient and simultaneous revelation of the eternal. The Holy has already retired beyond the new horizon it has revealed into the not-yet-fulfilled as mystery.

As the exemplar of the poets for Heidegger, Friedrich Hölderlin's, "poetically, man dwells"<sup>12</sup> describes yet another form of dreaming where glimpses of the Holy are revealed in the worlds of the Mortal. It is in letting-things-be-as-they-are that the Holy's address is heard. It is dreaming of the unknown in what is known that mysteries of Being become word. The poet forges new words.

It is by the Mortal's measurement of him-*self* against the Holy that the poet moves into authentic listening:

The poet calls, in the sights of the sky, that which in its very self-disclosure causes the appearance of that which conceals itself, and indeed *as* that which conceals itself. In the familiar appearances, the poet calls the alien as that to which the invisible imparts itself in order to remain what it is - unknown.<sup>13</sup>

Through the poetic imagination the poet bespeaks the Holy, Being. The soul of the Mortal is imagined in the poet's dreaming and given expression in the work-of-art as thing.

In conclusion, Heidegger's philosophy of art is based on the poetic imagination where the poet's responsiveness to the call of the Holy (Being) gives rise to what is new. In this act (process), what is ancient yet eternal becomes manifest in the poetic image. The truly poetic image touches the soul of others with the life which fills its expression. It is a philosophy of resonation and action, where the sacrifice of the mortal self consecrates the illumination of Being, of things-as-they-are. It is in this sacrifice that the Holy becomes what it is revealed to be. Heidegger's philosophy of art concerns itself with the creation of the new, of the mutual response and address between the truth of Being and the finitude of man the mortal. The horizon upon which they meet gives birth to Being.

#### Notes

- 1) Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 32-34. The image of the peasant shoes calls into existence a living reality of a whole people. The shoes "speak" the quality of this existence, of its ruggedness, its hardship and its simplicity, as well as the finitude which is illumined for the one mortal which fills them. Heidegger uses this image to illustrate the transcendence of the poetic image beyond the life of one man, of one time, of one epoch to illustrate what is lasting.
- 2) Thomas Langan, *The Meaning of Heidegger: A Critical Existentialist Phenomenology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), p. 115. Naming the Holy is the specific job of the poet according to Heidegger. But the act of illumination (the naming) is that moment of contact which gives rise to the words of the poet which then becomes poesy, that which the poet writes. It is the act of naming which illumines Being. Langan's interpretation here is consonant with the main thrust of the article and is therefore included.

- 3) William Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, second edition (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), p. 405. The work of the poet reveals truth for beings by showing the others a possibility for authenticity. According to Heidegger, it is through the opening-up in the work-of-art that this comes-to-pass. The poetic image lets this opening-up experienced by one come-to-pass for others. We can see this rooted in Heidegger's earlier thought:

But because Dasein is *lost* in the "they", it must first *find* itself. In order to find *itself* at all, it must be 'shown' to itself in its possible authenticity. In terms of its *possibility*, Dasein *is* already a potentiality-for Being-its-Self, but it needs to have this potentiality attested. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 313.

- 4) Langan, *The Meaning of Heidegger: A Critical Existentialist Phenomenology*, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
- 5) Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, *op. cit.*, p. 409.
- 6) Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, *op. cit.*, p. 226. In this quote Heidegger begins to reveal the true *work* of the poetic image and alludes to the way that the invisible comes clothed by the word as the poet names the Holy. But what is surprising to the other who sees the work-of-art is that the new is revealed in terms of the familiar.
- 7) Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, *op. cit.*, p. 410.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 472.
- 9) Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry", trans. Douglas Scott, *Existence and Being*, ed. Werner Brock (Chicago: Regnery, 1949), p. 287. Here Bachelard and Heidegger are both referring to the act of illumination, of naming that which approaches the poet. For Bachelard this is "dreaming." For Heidegger it is "standing open for truth." In these moments each says that the poet works with the mystery of Being. This is the essence of poetry.
- 10) Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, trans. Daniel Russell (New York: Orion Press, 1969), p. 16. Bachelard's conception of the harmony achieved in the poetic moment or the poetic imagination stands apart from the clash which happens in Heidegger's conceptual

moment of poetry. Heidegger sees the poet as standing “between” these structures, working with them as a part yet being in-between them as a distinct part of the structure.

- 11) Langan, *The Meaning of Heidegger: A Critical Existentialist Phenomenology*, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
- 12) Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), p. 601. Poetically, man dwells, in the poem “In Lovely Blueness” by Hölderlin refers to the mode of the poet’s being, of man’s potentiality for acting as a scribe for Being, of naming the Holy. As half-god, from dwelling on the earth and looking toward the sky man is not at one with either but in-between as part of both. Richardson reveals the emphasis upon the structure of the poetic moment and the poet’s active role in the moment Being illumines itself:

The poet is a “half-god.” This means that he is endowed with a special prerogative by which he is more than a man but less than a god, for he dwells in a privileged domain that lies in-between ordinary humanity and divinity. Richardson, *Heidegger Through Phenomenology to Thought*, *op. cit.*, p. 447.

The special prerogative endowed upon man is that of dwelling, of being near to beings, in a sense becoming the one whose task it is to name, to act, to do a measuring. In this space in-between, between the mortal and the divine is where Being reveals itself to the poet. Richardson brings to clarity how Heidegger uses Hölderlin’s poem to show that man finds himself “between”:

The Hölderlin poem that Heidegger interprets here permits him to say that if man dwells “on the earth,” he also looks up toward “heaven.” Hence effectively he dwells “between” heaven and earth, just as we saw that the poet is a half-god because he dwells “between” man and the gods. *Ibid.*, p. 589.

- 13) Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, *op. cit.*, p. 225.