

## Social Affairs: A Journal for the Social Sciences

ISSN 2478-107X (online)  
www.socialaffairsjournal.com



# WHAT DOES POETRY DO TO US?

**Puja Ghosh\***

Department of Philosophy, Central European University, Hungary

### ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to find an alternative approach to engaging with philosophy. Given that the pursuit of philosophy from ancient times has been the comprehension of truth, it attempts to look for possibilities in alternative ways of truth comprehension through poetry. The paper is devoted to the analysis of the epistemic interpretation of a particular kind of poetry as proposed by Martin Heidegger. It strongly argues for the epistemic validity of the knowledge that is arrived at through poetry of a kind, and in the process raises questions about analytical accounts of truth given in ancient philosophy wherein truth seems to be a propositional idea and the epistemic categories and methods used in these cases are mostly logical tools or empirical scientific methods. Thus the paper attempts to argue for the capacity of poetical discourse to be a means of philosophical truth, and to clarify the special nature of such poetry, as opposed to poetic discourse in general. The first task will be to clarify the kind of truth poetry makes manifest, and this will include differentiating poetic truth from propositional truth, and defining it in terms of the Heideggerean notion of *aletheia* (unhiddenness of Being). An attempt will be made to look at Heidegger's notion of truth and how it is different from the propositional idea of truth, and to defend that idea of truth in epistemology. A phenomenological hermeneutical and critical method will be employed in this exercise.

**Keywords:** Truth, Poetry, Alternative Knowledge, Heidegger

---

\*Author e-mail:

pujamitraghosh@gmail.com

©2016 Social Affairs Journal. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

Take this kiss upon the brow!  
And, in parting from you now,  
Thus much let me avow-  
You are not wrong, who deem  
That my days have been a dream;  
Yet if hope has flown away  
In a night, or in a day,  
In a vision, or in none,  
Is it therefore the less gone?  
All that we see or seem  
Is but a dream within a dream

A Dream Within A Dream  
Poem by Edgar Allan Poe

Can poetic discourse possibly serve as an epistemic category and be explained in terms of a methodology through which we are able to grasp truth? If that be possible, then it can be argued that poetry can be a means to knowledge.

From ancient times, one of the major pursuits of philosophy has been the comprehension of knowledge in the form of truth. In fact the whole enterprise of Western philosophy was largely regulated by the concern for truth and its comprehension as knowledge. Given this background, the origins of Greek philosophy in Plato's idealism can be seen to solely rest on the notion of truth comprehension, and such comprehension has been understood as knowledge itself. It served thus as an unquestioned epistemology for the longest of time in Western philosophy. There was never a question about 'the nature of truth' itself as comprehended by Western philosophers.

Heidegger, by enquiring the nature of truth itself, became one of the first Western philosophers to re-consider the way knowledge claims were made. In this article, I am trying to bring to light the formulation of truth by Heidegger and attempting to

argue how that formulation itself is a kind of revelation of a different paradigm of knowledge (contrary to the way knowledge was usually comprehended in Western philosophy).

I propose that poetry is capable of revealing a certain kind of truth and therefore should be considered as a kind of knowledge—a knowledge which requires a paradigm fundamentally different from the ones in which knowledge-claims are traditionally made. For this purpose I rely on Heidegger's theorization of poetry in the later development of his thought.

The claim of poetry as something that can express, reveal or access truth has always been received with a certain degree of suspicion within academic discourse, especially philosophy. After all, poets themselves might be careful of making any such claims, and moreover poetry itself traditionally belongs to the domain of the arts and rhetoric. But on second thoughts we may ask—is poetry merely something peripheral to the question of truth, merely a subject matter of aesthetics capable of inciting noble or beautiful feelings but nothing more? At least one major Western philosopher, Martin Heidegger, has taken issue with such an understanding of poetry, and in the later part of his life provides a formidable critique of such a position. This he does by re-envisioning both the Western notion of truth as well as the Western idea of language and its relationship with the world. In the process he unfolds a new relationship between thought and poetry that brings the latter closer to what has been traditionally the object of philosophical enquiry and discourse.

Therefore it is necessary to look at Heidegger's reconceptualization of truth and meaning in poetry through his reflections on the poetic works of various poets such as Hölderlin, Georg Trakl, and Rainer Maria Rilke. This re-conceptualization will engage

with and try to answer some questions such as what constitutes the process of the comprehension of truth, from where does poetry receive its capacity to produce some sort of 'knowledge' through such truth, and what aspects of poetry may contribute towards recognizing it as epistemologically significant.

If the claim is made that poetic language is somehow capable of generating knowledge, it must be clarified that any such appeal involves a thorough transformation of what is meant by the words 'knowledge' and 'epistemology' in the context of poetry. We must speak of a different order of knowledge that does not subscribe to the traditional model of what usually counts as knowledge. To deal with these questions I will engage with the Heideggerean notion of truth as *aletheia* or unconcealedness/ uncovering. It is here that Heidegger reexamines the employment of the word 'truth' in philosophical discourse and recommends a more fundamental redefinition of it. The re-conceptualization of truth to address the issue of poetry as knowledge or as a mode of revelation will require integrating Heidegger's reflections on the nature of language with a discussion of *aletheia*.

Before we analyze Heidegger's own conception of truth, it is important to go through his critique of the predominant Western characterization of truth, since as mentioned before, the critique itself contains the key to what would be a more authentic theorization of truth. Its key insight is the idea that truth cannot be limited to the level of propositional truth, and therefore to the predicates of 'correctness' or 'falsity', according to traditionally conceptualizations in the history of Western philosophy. Thus it is statements of language that are either true or false, and this property depends on their success or failure respectively to correspond with reality, with what is actually

out there. This is the correspondence theory of truth, that a statement is true if and only if it corresponds to a particular state of affairs existing externally in the world.

Already in this way of thinking, epistemological concerns as to how knowledge is possible have become dominant, with many alternative theories (such as coherence or pragmatic theories of truth) that explain the generation of truth via language being offered. This may, in part, be due to the epistemological turn of philosophy since the time of Descartes and the Enlightenment, whose project is to seek the grounds for certainty about the self, world and God. But possibly, for Heidegger, this tradition of thinking precedes modernity and may be traced back to Greek thought and to Aristotle himself who develops his idea of truth on the model of physical nature and natural phenomena and at the same time works out a propositional logic according to which truth or falsity are functions of propositions. Therefore we must question the idea that unless we have found the 'correct' method or means of knowledge, we cannot venture into questions of metaphysics or ontology, an idea that has come to dominate philosophy since the Enlightenment.

Heidegger claims that the traditional understanding of truth is actually derivative from a more fundamental understanding of truth as self-manifestation, revelation or disclosure. The former still retains a certain validity and usefulness in a variety of contexts, but it is necessary to go further and arrive at a more fundamental and primordial understanding of truth, in which truth must be released from its confinement to propositional correctness. This conception he unfolds through the Greek conception of *aletheia*.

Heidegger proceeds to develop his own understanding of truth by appropriating and exploiting various meanings of the Greek term *aletheia*, (*a-letheia*, literally

'not concealed'). In doing so he translates and interprets the term variously as unconcealment, disclosedness, dis-covey, openness etc. As these terms suggest he wants to interpret truth as the very ground, the presence that makes all knowledge possible and in which it comes into light. The metaphor of light here is not incidental. It is not merely used as a metaphorical crutch to explain the phenomenon of truth. On the contrary, Being is seen as the very clearing in which all things and existents come into light, into view. Being is the 'open region' that, in a Kantian sense, comprises the very condition of possibility of experience. In his own words, "'Truth' is not a feature of correct propositions that are asserted of an 'object' by a human 'subject' and then 'are valid' somewhere; Rather, truth is disclosure of beings through which an openness essentially unfolds. All human comportment and bearing are exposed in its open region. Therefore man is in the manner of existence" (Heidegger 2008, p. 127). In questioning the primacy of the propositional truth he comes to suggest that the deeper pre-conditions of truth are experienced in the form of 'discovering' or disclosure. Therefore he says,

Comportment stands open to beings. Every open relatedness is a comportment...All working and achieving, all action and calculation, keep within an open region within which beings, with regard to what they are and how they are, can properly take their stand and be capable of being said. This can occur only if beings present themselves along with the presentative statement so that the latter subordinates itself to the directive that it speak of beings such-as they are... Speech that directs itself accordingly is correct (true). What is thus said is the correct (true) (Ibid, p. 122).

That which is opened up, which a true statement

corresponds to, is a being that opens up in an open comportment. Thus the opening up lets beings be as they are. It seems that things as they appear to us are somehow related to how human beings comport themselves towards them. This however should not be read as some kind of indifference, as if there are 'things' out there waiting to be discovered by a subject—"to let be means to engage oneself with the open region and its openness into which every being comes to stand, bringing that openness, as it were, along with itself" (Ibid, p. 122). Moreover he further says, "Western thinking in its beginning conceived this open region as *ta alēthea*, the unconcealed...if we translate *alēthea* as 'unconcealment'...this translation is not merely more literal; it contains the directive to rethink the ordinary concept of truth in the sense of the correctness of statements and to think it back to that still uncomprehended disclosedness and disclosure of beings" (Ibid, p. 125). Thus we can begin to see the reason behind Heidegger's discomfort with the traditional conception of truth. Propositional truth for Heidegger is derivative, since it rests on a more fundamental 'disclosedness' of beings in the open region, the *Lichtung*. Only when beings are already so disclosed or manifest is it possible to measure up the truth of a statement against what is thus objectively given.

Heidegger suggests that "truth (disclosedness) must always be wrested from beings. Beings are torn from concealment" (Heidegger 1996, p. 127). The understanding, dispositions, and skills that *Dasein* has in his everydayness are the banalized understandings, dispositions, and skills of the one. Unconcealment thus seems to be the only way for *Dasein* to know, to realize its own truth. This is one of the pregnant conceptions of thinking about truth that can make it possible to bring the domain of poetry closer to the domain of truth. When we talk about the relevance of poetic discourse to

truth and truth-seeking, the notion that we are appealing to and invoking falls outside the traditionalist conception of propositional truth. It verges closer to the ability of poetry to 'manifest' truth, in the sense of the disclosedness of Being, as we will see in the subsequent chapter. Thus Heidegger carries over into his later thought some very crucial insights, such as truth as disclosedness, in order to talk about poetry, writing and language. As opposed to the view of some that Heidegger's thinking changed towards the later part of his life, it is evident that even in the later Heidegger, unconcealment seems to only find a new articulation as the 'clearing or opening of being' through art and language.

It is appropriate to begin with Heidegger's discussion of art in the seminal text *The Origin of a Work of Art*, although poetry itself is not its primary subject matter. Heidegger discusses the theme of art, whose observations and conclusions equally well apply to poetic discourse. Not only that, as we will see, Heidegger in this work itself speaks of poetry as the consummate example and paradigm of art, as something more foundational than the arts (painting, sculpture etc). This has to do with poetry being situated within the ambit of language itself, as an art of words themselves.

Heidegger is crucially negotiated through the intervention of an artwork—the work of art lets us bear witness to the thingly character of the thing. Heidegger takes the example of the well-known painting of a pair of worn-out boots by Vincent Van Gogh. It is through the artwork that we 'know' what the shoes are in truth. How? This knowledge of course does not belong to the order of propositional or subject-object knowledge that has already been set aside earlier. Rather, such a knowledge is lived, experienced in the emergence of the being of the pair of shoes through their depiction in

the work of art. Their being goes unnoticed outside the frame of the painting; their thingly character is typically never seen for what it is except through the work of art. In all their everyday familiarity, they resist the revelation of their full being. Thus knowledge of their being coincides, is in fact synonymous with, their disclosure as what they are. Knowledge does follow after the fact, as a record of an extra-linguistic fact. It co-substantiates the emergence of the thingly character of the thing as such. Its emergence is only made possible through the being of Dasein that is nothing but openness or disclosure, or rather, the clearing in which any disclosure takes place.

Thus Heidegger says, "Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, is in truth. The entity emerges into the unconcealedness of its being. The Greeks call the unconcealedness of beings *aletheia*. We say 'truth' and think little enough in using the word. If there occurs in the work a disclosure of a particular being, disclosing what and how it is, then there is here an occurring, a happening of truth at work" (Heidegger 2001a, p. 35). Already Heidegger is uncoupling the notion of truth from the traditional theories about truth. Truth is a truth-making activity in the sense of truth happening in a work. Truth occurs. And in the knowing of this truth alone does a thing fully come into its own and emerge "in the steadiness of its shining" (Ibid). Thus we see that Heidegger is questioning the basic assumption within philosophy that truth belongs to logic, while beauty is reserved for aesthetics. For him a work of art reveals, makes known, the general essence of the thing—"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" (Ibid, p. 36).

But what precisely is the process by which a

work reveals this essential being of a thing? How does truth happen as unconcealedness in a work of art? Heidegger explains that before there is a world, before there is anything (before but to beyond), something else happens. As he says, "In the midst of beings of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting" (Ibid, p. 55). But, thought of with reference to what is, to the beings, this clearing is in a greater degree than are beings. "This open center is therefore not surrounded by what is; rather, the lighting center itself encircles all that is, like the Nothing which we scarcely know" (Ibid, p. 51). But although the same process is at work in all things and all creation, it is through a work of art that it is made transparent. Art is the privileged manifestation of truth, that which makes manifest the Being of beings in all its fullness;

Thus in the work it is truth, not only something true, that is at work. The picture that shows the peasant shoes, the poem that says the Roman Fountain, do not just make manifest what this isolated being as such is—if indeed they manifest anything at all; rather, they make unconcealedness as such happen in regard to what is as a whole. 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 among with them. That is how self-concealing being is illuminated. Light of this kind joins its shining to and into the work. The shining, joined in the work, is the beautiful. Beautiful is one way in which truth occurs as unconcealedness (Ibid, p. 54).

The prolific use of the vocabulary of light—unconcealedness, manifestation, disclosedness, clearing, illumination etc—

already hints at the subjective dimension of the setting of work of truth. We have seen that Heidegger himself does not explicitly discuss man's being in terms of consciousness or awareness, partially due to the problems associated with its theorization in Husserl which he first pointed out. What precisely was the problem? It may be worthwhile to point out the specifics of the issue. It is from a phenomenological analysis of what is given to experience that Husserl aims to discover the structures of knowledge and ultimately 'save the appearances' by formulating a theory of essences that attempts to arrive at the objectivity and reality of the external world, which, for all methodological purposes, lies in a metaphysical suspension or epoché.

For our purposes let us observe that existence has been compartmentalized into a conscious subject and a problematic object-domain that exceeds what is immediately given to experience. And it is the first-person stance that is supposed to open up access to the realm of immediate experience. Reactions to this whole way of thinking tend to assert that what is given to experience is indeed the external world itself, thereby rejecting both representational as well as phenomenological formulations of the problem. Heidegger completely eschews discussion of Dasein from the point of view of consciousness due to the above-mentioned problems. His skepticism of the presuppositions and motives of such a project prevent him from developing a possibly crucial dimension of Dasein's existence. Not only does he find problematic the idea of an inner picturing of an outer world, but, more crucially, what is at stake is the dualism of inner-outer that haunts the entire Western conceptualization of consciousness. Consciousness, as the prerogative of the knowing subject, is interpreted as an inner faculty of the self and something absolutely fundamental to it by virtue of which it is aware of internal and external phenomena. This is naturally problematic because the self

has been separated from the world into its own cocoon, while for Heidegger, Dasein is always already engaged in the world.

But is it not possible to speak of the structures of consciousness without falling into the trap of any of the above problems? Picking up the traces of this discourse and making it explicit may help us to negotiate the path between Heidegger's conceptions of poetry as the place where truth sets itself to work. Already we can ask whether Heidegger's prolific use of similar motifs and principles (of light and manifestation) suggest something about the language of poetry. It is knowledge so understood that the poet helps to realize and make possible. For if art is one privileged manifestation of truth, as we have seen, then poetry is the very essence of all art. "All art, of the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry" (Ibid, p. 70). Heidegger speaks of poetry as the 'illuminating projection', as the Open which poetry lets happen. At another instance he says, projective saying is poetry. Here we come to an important motif regarding the nature of poetry—the idea of poetry as a Saying. This has to do with the fact that poetry alone, for Heidegger, is authentic language. Its authenticity is due to the fact that the use of words in poetry is not practical, meant to serve this or that particular function within society, of communicating, making truth claims, expressing emotions and so on. Rather it consists of the building of the world that we inhabit, in the letting be of things, and as seen before, in the constitution of a thing's general essence. These themes are developed in the many other works he dedicates precisely to poetic discourse.

In the Origin he says, "Language is not poetry because it is the primal poesy; rather, poesy takes place in language because language preserves the original nature of poetry. Building and plastic creation, on the other hand, always happen already in the

Open of saying and naming. It is the open that pervades and guides them. But for this very reason they remain their own ways and modes in which truth orders itself into work. They are an ever-special poetizing within the clearing of what is, which has already happened unnoticed in language. There is no real difference between the terms 'poesy' and 'poetry' themselves, often the two being synonymous, but it seems that Heidegger wants to use the former word in this passage in order to distinguish poetry as authentic language from poetry in general. If poetry is making claims to knowledge, such a privilege rests only with a certain kind of poetry (the kind that Heidegger also takes up) and not the broader poetic genre as such.

We can gather the importance of poetry as the art par excellence from the above verse. It has this status because it deals directly with words and with language. Thus the poet serves a special function. If poetry is truth setting itself to work, it is the poet who does the work of making truth happen, of letting the world be—by his Saying. Earlier while speaking of the fountain, an image that occurs in the poetry of Hölderlin, we saw that for Heidegger, the poet 'says' the fountain. What does this mean? Let's look at the following passage from a later essay *What Are Poets For*:

Being, as itself, spans its own province, which is marked off by Being's being present in the word. Language is the precinct (templum), that is, the house of Being. The nature of language does not exhaust itself in signifying, nor is it merely something that has the character of sign or cipher. It is because language is the house of Being, that we reach what is by constantly going through this house. When we go to the well, when we go through the woods, we are always already going through the word "well", through the

word “woods” even if we do not speak the words... All beings... each in its own way, are qua beings in the precinct of language (Heidegger 2001b, p. 106).

Language, therefore, mediates one's experience of the world; in fact, it founds the very world we inhabit. Language, elsewhere, is characterized as the “world-moving saying” (Ibid, p. 107), that which gathered the world, in its fourfold, and unites it in itself. Heidegger uses the example of a pouring jug to speak of this gathering. The pouring jug becomes a symbol of the gift. In this gift of the outpouring jug—earth and sky, divinities and mortals dwell together at once. The jug essences as thing; in it the earth, sky, gods and mortals are united “in the single fold of the unifying fourfold” (Ibid, p. 171). That is, the jug itself comprising the four elements partakes in the four-fold—it is composed of the earth, yet contains space within itself (sky), owing to which it is able to nourish the mortals and thereby constitute a spectacle for the divinities.

The concept of the four-fold is said to be a somewhat more mystical aspect of the later Heidegger and we cannot go into it at length here. Suffices to say that for Heidegger, upon each of them (the fourfold) is reflected (mirroring) the essence of the rest. Mirroring here implies the illumination of each of them in the fourfold, each of them thereby gaining their own essence. Thus, in the essay *Language* he says that “this gathering, assembling, letting-stay is the thinking of things. The unitary fourfold of sky and earth, mortals and divinities, which is stayed in the thinking of the things, we call—the world. In the naming, the things named are called into their thinking. Thinging, they unfold world, in which things abide and so are the abiding ones... thinging, they, gesture, gestate the world” (Ibid, p. 197). Thus it is clear, through a description of the four-fold and the thinging that poetic discourse is what lets us dwell in the world. This it does by building—“Poetic creation,

which lets us dwell, is a kind of building” (Ibid, p. 213). Poetry is the experience that accompanies this world-ing. This is as far as Heidegger goes. That things, the whole world, come to their full unconcealedness via poetry or poetry-as-world-making only means that knowledge—as unconcealedness—rests within this fundamental world-making activity of the poet. All other knowledge, that is, particular knowledge, assumes this unconcealment.

This leads us to the major point regarding the philosophy of language and the ontological role of language in the creation and self-revelation of the world, thereby attesting to the unique function of the poet. The poet is not only a truth-maker, in the sense discussed before, but simultaneously the one who contributes in the self-revelation of the world by his poetic activity. A radical turn made by Heidegger in respect to language, which is regarded now not as a determination of reality, but as its own self-revelation... demands from a person—and not only from a poet but also from a philosopher—the ability to listen and to hear what is being prompted and suggested by language. This has been captured by a quote of Leonardo da Vinci where he says “painting is poetry that is seen rather than felt, and poetry is painting that is felt rather than seen”.

Poetry is nothing short of authentic language itself, and the poet is not someone who conjures up fancy images or metaphors or who rouses our feelings a certain way, but someone who lets us have an experience with language. This ‘experience’ is nothing less than the experience of the wording of the world, the way in which things come to be and dwell as they are. The poet makes manifest, he makes known; he makes known by making manifest. That is why the first speakers of a language were, for Heidegger, all poets. They experienced language as the intimate relationship between the word and

the thing, and not as a system of signs used to 'represent' or convey an outside, objective state of affairs. A very similar concept is evoked in Vedantic discourse (in eastern philosophy), in terms of the unity of the name and the thing— *nāma* and *rūpa*. The two, in fact, are inseparable. As Heidegger discusses the being of a jug, the Chandogya Upanishad (1963) likewise takes up the example of a clay pot, to show that the being of the pot is interwoven into its linguistic signification. Thus the term 'authentic language' should not be relegated to a debate of interpretation as it rests on the significance of a genuine engagement of the self with language *per se*. An example would be somebody who is able to look beyond the mundane nomenclature of the wording of the table being called a table. Thus, the use of metaphors or poetic language is an authentic language as it is only through the use of the 'unusual' vocabulary or nomenclature that the subject can see the same object with much more meaning. This also requires the self to delve in an imagination that does not function according to pre-given ideas of the way labels hold true for the meaning of words. Language cannot reveal Being in the sense of representing or just depicting it in words, but it is still the mode by which Being itself manifests. And by the use of certain kind of poetry or authentic language, Heidegger is largely emphasizing the relationship between self and language to a point where language serves to go beyond everyday wording leading to an authentic languaging. This is not to say that all poetry assumes this status of yielding knowledge. In fact Heidegger would be very skeptical of such a claim. Only sometimes is poetry capable of reaching or attaining this status given that the way to authentic languaging requires genuine engagement of the self. Secondly, Heidegger may only be referring to a certain kind of poetry (in line with the tradition of poets he wrote about) as opposed to the numerous genres and styles that are constantly redefining what it even means for a passage to count as an instance of poetic

discourse. Further, although we cannot go into the details of this point, Heidegger will not be equally enthusiastic for other literary genres (like novels) to have the same status as poetry, not in the least because such genres are 'fictional' in the sense in which poetry is not. Their function will seem to exceed the truth-making activity of the poet so as to serve other literary purposes. Notwithstanding these qualifications, we have presented an interpretation of the poet's activity as a kind of knowing, if only one amongst others, but nonetheless a significant one—a knowing that is at the same time a truth-making.

Hence, poetry lets us enter into a domain of truth that is otherwise never understood. Poetry of a certain kind, the one with authentic language as Heidegger has elaborated, thus leads us to a comprehension of the state of affairs and an understanding of truth that is not just a simple endeavor given our modernist world. Perhaps, it is because our definition of truth as stated above is just not about the rightness or wrongness, but about a deeper knowing that manifests through the language of poetry.

## REFERENCES

- Chandogya Upanishad. (1963). *The Upanishads*. (Swami Nikhilananda, Trans.). New York: George Allen and Unwin
- Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and Time*. Stambaugh, J. (Ed.), Albany, NY: State University of New York Press
- Heidegger, M. (2001a). *The Origin of a Work of Art*. (Hofstadter, A. Trans.). New York: Harper Perennial
- Heidegger, M. (2001b). What Are Poets For. In *Poetry, Language, Thought*. (Hofstadter, A. Trans.), pp. 87-140. New York: Harper Perennial
- Heidegger, M. (2008). *On the Essence of Truth, Basic Writings*. Krell, D.F. (Ed.), New York: Harper Perennial