

Week 2: 'What are poets for?'

Art

- In Heidegger's early work (e.g. 'The Origin of the Work of Art'), he thinks that art is historical: the art of an era is marked by that era's most basic assumptions
- We need to pay attention to socio-historical context to return to 'being' (remember that a being is, for Heidegger, anything that exists; anything, from a pebble to a star, is a being, *something* that exists)
- Being always reveals itself in a specific context, and art reveals that context: art reveals 'the earth', that out of which they are made; and 'the world' (the unity that makes up any given era or age)

Poetry

- After the war, Heidegger focuses only on poetry, what he thinks of as *the* art-form of modernity
- For Heidegger, art has become merely an opportunity for pleasure in the modern world: it has lost the central social role it once had
- He seeks to return us to the age of the Greeks, in which art was a way of grasping truths about human life
- The poet's job is to diagnose the malaise of the present age in order to prepare the way for the (unlikely) possibility that Western culture will be able to return to an authentic relationship to being

The festival

- For Heidegger, our age (the 1940s, but his argument, one could propose, applies also to now) is a time of night, winter and destitution
- We are in this age of destitution because there are no gods to gather men and things into a relationship – the gods (Greek, Christian etc) have all fled the world
- Hölderlin recognizes that the meeting of gods and men we have lost once occurred in the Greek festival
- Festivals are holidays, or holy-days, in which one could set oneself outside of everyday activity and work and access our true essences (and recognize the essences of others: to recognize also means to care for)
- Human 'essence' is set against human usefulness: for Heidegger, the modern world only sees people in terms of use-value, or as 'resources'
- In the festive mode (mood), however, we stand not just in the 'essence' of things but also in their 'wonder' and into gratitude for the fact that they are and that we are among them
- In the festive mood, things possess a special 'gleam' (*Glanz*), the shining of the essential
- Things then show up as belonging to a *sacred* order and since they themselves share in this sacredness, command of us love and respect

Gestell

- The solution is to found a new festival – the poet’s goal is the arrival of the ‘coming’ festival
- This is near impossible because of the fact we live in the dis-encharned world of *Gestell*: *gestell* means ‘something put together’, a ‘framework’, a ‘stand or rack’ and is used by Heidegger to indicate the essence of modern technology
- *Gestell*, or ‘framing’ (enframing) means trying to compartmentalize everything, put everything into boxes and control/classify experience into categories
- Technology makes us think in this way because it demands we find a precise, controllable knowledge of things to explain and systematize it
- Technology is not bad in itself; rather, the danger is the thinking it engages us in, one which converts being into a ‘standing reserve’ of energy or resource and allows only ‘instrumental’ thinking
- This is what’s new about the modern age: we *store* what we create, rather than using it as needed (e.g. a windmill derives energy from the wind to use it and so works with the wind; a hydroelectric plant uses the river to store up energy and in doing so, pollutes the river)

What are Poets For?

- The essay, also translated ‘Why Poets?’ was written in 1946 amidst the rubble of the Second World War and the shadows of the Cold War and hydrogen bomb
- He says we live in a time of nameless sorrow, confusion, peace-lessness because there is no shared commitment to anything, only a ‘will to power’
- Poets are not quite philosophers (although they explain our place in the world); not quite moralists (they don’t tell us how to live); but they do articulate the relationship between internal and external worlds, being and dwelling
- For Heidegger, Hölderlin’s concern is to outline the task of *future* poets and think forward by staking out the site for future artworks and festivals (and Hölderlin’s madness probably resulted from his keeping a lonely watch for his people, creating truth for them, even as no one cared)
- Thinking about what we have been, and may again become, provides a measure against which we can remain alive to the ‘destitution’ of the present and prevents us falling into complacency
- While we cannot make the gods return, we can care-for the coming gods by waiting on them and promoting their return by cultivating the ‘intimations of their coming’
- Rilke also assists Heidegger in poeticizing a mode of being that can divinize the world in its immediacy and now-ness and feel ‘at once’ with nature (or, in other words, write nondualistically, as if there is no division between nature and consciousness, the world and us)
- For Rilke, nature is as vulnerable as we are and so we must become attuned to it; the things of the earth must become our familiars