

Heidegger's Hermeneutics and Parmenides

Frank, Luanne T. (University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, Texas)

Heidegger's *Parmenides*, a lecture course of Winter Semester 1942-43,¹ is an extraordinary--indeed, for Heidegger, a strange--work. Like other of his courses, as well as his treatises, meditations, and other lectures, it rewards re-reading. But in the main for reasons that are unusual. Its general argument is familiar (it pits a Heideggerian ontology against metaphysics), and so, for the most part, is its vocabulary. But it conducts itself differently. And although it looks upon, and uses, language in ways that are not unfamiliar, its language practices, however familiar, are often markedly exaggerated here, as are other forms via which Heidegger also conducts his argument.

In this study, I shall take particular note of only two of these forms: First, Heidegger's frequent repetitions of given words, though he in fact also uses many of the other, long-known forms of repetition available to him, and, second, his use of another form that, as it happens, is also well known to the ancient composer-conveyors of myth. This is the *Vorausdeutung*, or foretelling, which, in mythological narrative, explicitly or implicitly predicts, or hints at, events to come.

In the case of Heidegger's *Parmenides*, which presses a philosophical argument, it will be *meanings* to come, rather than events proper, that will be implicitly promised, predicted, hinted at—meanings rather than events in that the emergence, revelation, fulfillment of meaning *is* the philosophical “event” *par excellence*. But Heidegger, instead of revealing his meanings fully when first his lecture makes assertions requiring clarification, again and again moves on, leaving them unexplained, uninterpreted. Then, instead of providing clarification in full on his next approach to a matter gestured toward by a given *Vorausdeutung*, he parcels out his clarifications fragmentarily, withholding them in their fullness for shorter or longer—even very long—periods, sometimes from very early until very late in the semester. Again and again, Heidegger's return to the focus of a given *Vorausdeutung* still yields only a part of the meaning it has seemed to promise.

What I refer to as repetitions of given words here will be clear enough. What I am labeling *Vorasudeutungen* want a brief explanation. These will be the initial occurrences of statements requiring clarification, statements that, by virtue of their very emergence, imply the existence of a given understanding on Heidegger's part, though an understanding that he withholds. This understanding withheld prompts his listener-reader to suppose that the meaning gestured toward in the *Vorausdeutung* but still hidden will be forthcoming, and to await it with anticipation, even anxiety, maintaining an alertness to its possibly appearing, and all the while pondering its possibilities for understanding, until its intended meaning finally emerges. (Though it is not part of this paper's purpose, it may be useful to point out some of the functions of this procedure. It tightens the structure of Heidegger's argument, holds it together as it were by maintaining its dynamism [a meaning still requiring completion cannot be filed away as “assimilated”], specifies and maintains its foci, and holds its audience's attention through completions of its understandings.)

¹ Gesamtausgabe 54 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1982). [Engl: Tr. André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).]

These, then, are two of Heidegger's for-him-unusual unusual contributions to his lecture course, exaggerated repetitions of given words on the one hand, and innumerable *Vorausdeutungen* on the other, but *Vorausdeutungen* that fulfill their promises only partially, satisfying only bit by bit the reader's felt need to understand. It may require two, three, or more revisitations to the focus of a given *Vorausdeutung* before Heidegger provides the reader with a meaning fulfilled. As the clarification of a given *Vorausdeutung* progresses through its fragmentarily revelatory stages, it can serve to intensify interest by generating and maintaining suspense.

Erich Auerbach, as we know, made Homer's mythological narrative, the *Odyssey*, famous for its *absence* of suspense.² Heidegger, on the other hand, inserts strands, or bands, of tension (incomplete meanings awaiting resolution) everywhere, beginning already in the opening sentences of his opening lecture, dissolving the tension only gradually, and in more than a few cases, far into his semester—some well after its middle point and in one case not until the next-to-last session, the fourteenth, and running this long-awaited revelation into the fifteenth and final lecture.

An example of a statement whose meaning Heidegger only eventually reveals (after many intervening sessions) is this surprising observation in the introductory minutes of his opening lecture—nor is it the only or even the first among Heidegger's introductory remarks that must await explanation: "In essential history the beginning comes last," made on December 1, 1942.³ Readers closely familiar with Heidegger and his "beginnings" may immediately sense something of his meaning here, but his listeners less than thus familiar on the day he spoke these words will have had to wait through the Christmas vacation and beyond for clarification.

Such a halting procedure of incompletions is profoundly uncharacteristic of Heidegger's mode of argument. Otherwise, and characteristically, he offers a statement, provides its intended meaning and develops additional meanings related to it, and, these developments completed, if not indeed, as is often the case, exhausted, moves on to the next. Hans-Georg Gadamer, in a late interview,⁴ takes special note of what he calls this "step-by-step" progression on Heidegger's part in conversation and of his insistence on maintaining it, on *not* moving on to another, even related, thought, before developing the earlier one thoroughly. Gadamer's noting this may serve to point up the atypical nature of Heidegger's *Parmenides*, where the progression is anything but step by thoroughly-completed step.

² "Odysseus' Scar," *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, tr. Willard Trask (New York: Doubleday, 1953), 1-20.

³ *Parmenides* 2/1. The course's lecture dates and numbers provided here are not insignificant, and not only for the light they shed on the timing of revelations Heidegger gestures toward and withholds. The German defeat at Stalingrad (January 31, 1943) falls during the course and Heidegger includes here more than a few derogations of Nazism, though the most outspoken are disguised. Moreover, both Heidegger's sons were at this time on the Eastern front. Neither the German nor the English editions mark these lecture numbers and dates, which are from Siegfried Bröse's transcriptions of the course in the Heidegger holdings of the Deutsche Literatur Archiv in Marbach and were provided to me there by Theodore Kisiel.

⁴ Probably 1999, but documented only as taking place between 1999 and 2001. "Heidegger as Rhetor," in *Heidegger and Rhetoric*, ed. Daniel M. Gross and Ansgar Kemmann (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 50.

Instead, a step initiated again and again hovers, uncompleted, in mid-air, tracing its trajectory haltingly, bit by bit.

A memorable example of such step-by-step progression is *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, of 1929-30, two of the four parts of which are so extensively developed before Heidegger moves on that, though they are intended to be understood with the others as parts of a progressing whole, are typically dealt with separately by scholars.⁵ Another example is *What is Called Thinking*, of 1953, in its also notably deliberate step-by-step interpretation of a line from Parmenides, though its steps are far shorter and more numerous than those in *Fundamental Concepts* and cannot stand alone. But the earlier *Plato's 'Sophist,'* of 1924-25, and *Being and Time* as well, also exemplify Heidegger's careful clarifications of his meanings as he moves along.

Heidegger's exaggerated repetitions, of which a few examples will follow, and his *Vorausdeutungen*, which we also note, necessarily briefly, are both characteristic of ancient mythological styles. Repetitions are a quintessential mark of poetry and myth, according to students of both, such as Juri Lotman and Eleazar Meletinsky, for example, and *Vorausdeutungen* are characteristic of mythological narrative in its epic form in particular. Heidegger's uses of these, as well as of numerous other forms we cannot review here, bear significant resemblances to those in the mythologies laid out in the writings of Homer and Hesiod, deep into the works of both of whom Heidegger plunged in preparation for this course, as his many references to them here make clear.

The above-noted stylistic characteristics, as well as much else that scholars of myth alert one to, prompt this paper's chief argument: that what Heidegger effects in this lecture course pressing a philosophical argument is at the same time and perhaps more importantly a myth. Better said, it is a myth told in the guise of a lecture course in philosophy, and is essential to the argument the course presses. It is essential in uncovering insights that metaphysics has missed, among these, on the one hand, the profoundly dual character of truth as unconcealedness, of *Alétheia*, as *lethe* itself as well as the non-*lethe* to which its significance is conventionally limited, and, on the other, the intimate relation, amounting to an identity, between *Alétheia* and Heidegger's lifelong theme: Being.

First, and perhaps most important here among the memorable resemblances to the work of the ancient myth-recorders noted as well as to their ancient and medieval followers, though these resemblances can be readily discounted by some as mere poetic vehicles and subservient to his philosophy, are Heidegger's immediate emphasis on the bona fide divinity of his central focus, *Alétheia*, and his shaping his work across the ancient mythic theme of the journey, a journey he and his students and readers share with Parmenides.

Heidegger insists at the outset that *Alétheia* is not a figure of speech, not a personification of an abstract idea as has been assumed, nor merely a fancy of the "primitive," or pre-rational, mind, but a deity proper, and, importantly, not a goddess "of" something (such as the hunt, or justice), but herself, Truth, a deity, a deity, moreover, whose words Heidegger

⁵ Sections two and three, on boredom and animals respectively, are the cases in point, each in its own right, as it were, having amassed a significant bibliography.

and his philosophical forebear Parmenides, unlike “philosophers” who privilege their own words, are neither reluctant to repeat nor to be guided by. This early focus on deity, though emphatic enough, may, as already noted, nonetheless seem, and seem to remain, merely incidental to Heidegger’s philosophical argument for the reader whose chief hermeneutical situation is that of philosopher. And Heidegger does not immediately press the point.

But when later in the work he again and again notes that myths tell the stories of gods, it may dawn on the reader that laid out before her is precisely such a story; that what Heidegger has constructed here is in fact a myth; that his course is at its ground, at its most fundamental level, a myth, a guise and only secondary level of which is its identity as a lecture course in philosophy, and one that benefits from the techniques of myth to press its points; and that it is understandable first and foremost as a theogony, though, unlike that of Hesiod, it tells the story of but a single deity (though other deities that figure in her provenance do come to mention here).

The most immediately notable of the techniques Heidegger uses in the *Parmenides* is repetition, and for a comprehensive idea of the range and variety of the repetitions available for Heidegger to draw from, for example in Hesiod, Cora Angier Sowa’s “Verbal Patterns in Hesiod’s *Theogony*” is illuminating.⁶ To make the most of our necessary spatial limitations here, however, we note but repetitions of individual words, and emphasize but three of these.

It is important to note before attending Heidegger’s repetitions that in poetry and myth repetitions only atypically function as “mere” repetitions, as exposures of sameness, of a bankrupt poetic imagination. Rather, they function as enhancements of meaning. And in the emphasis that they lend to a point being made, they can in part take the place of argument. We shall return to this.

We hear at the *Parmenides*’ outset, as its opening sentence in fact, that the two names named as the sentence’s first words, Parmenides and Heraclitus, are “two *thinkers* who at the outset of Western *thought*...belong together in *thinking* the true. Before the end of this, his short opening foray, Heidegger will have spoken the words “thinking,” “thought,” “thinkers,” and “think” no fewer than forty-three times. The words “essence,” “experience,” “will,” “will to power,” “subjectivity,” and, briefly but notably “renunciation,” as well as, eventually, “light,” “clear,” “free,” “freedom,” the “open,” and still others come in for their own numerous repetitions. But the most salient examples of this course’s revisitations to a single-word are those to “look” [Blick] and its variants, with sixty mentions in the course of two pages (152-4/103-4).

Difficult to overlook is also the strange, shifting career of the oft-repeated word, “ordinary.” Describing the thinking--“ordinary thinking” [das gewöhnliche Denken]—that we are to renounce if we are to “achieve the dignity allotted to man out of history” (this spoken in the recapitulation of Lecture One, on December 8, 1942 [10/7], this word later (in Lecture Eleven, February 23, 1943 [149-52/101-2]), in a sequence in which it appears twenty-four times, becomes a sort of holy word, its contents deserving of the awe [*aidos*] of

⁶ Harvard Studies in Classical Philology 68 (1964), 332-44.

which Heidegger has let us hear Pindar speak in his seventh Olympic Ode (109/74). The reason for this shift? This insight: "The uncanny [here closely aligned with *Alétheia*], as Being," "can *only* present itself *in* the ordinary..." [emphases added].

To the *Vorausdeutungen* that we can point to briefly belong the withheld meanings gestured toward in lines some of which we have noted in part above: in the variants of "true" from Heidegger's opening sentences ("Parmenides and Heraclitus...belong together in thinking the *true*," "to think the *true* means...to know the *truth* of what is *true*"[1/1]; the meanings of the puzzling observation we let sound here again: "In essential history the *beginning comes last*" (2/3 [emphasis added]); in the nature of that "dignity allotted to man out of history" (4/3) to which we are to aspire and to which Heidegger enigmatically refers in his opening lecture; and in the precise identity of the "thoughtful word" that, also there, one is encouraged to "heed." Heidegger effects these encouragements as much through his many iterations of "heed" [achten auf](three times) and its variants ("pa[y] heed" [twice]), "the heeded (once)," "heedfulness (four times) as through argument. For clarifications of the meanings of all of these *Vorausdeutungen* the listener-reader will wait as Heidegger gradually uncovers them.

The most extended of the bands of tension binding the course's outset and the ultimate fulfillment of the *Vorausdeutungen* set out there, however, are those pointing on the one hand to the coming visit of the course to *lethe* proper, the *topos daimonios*, which Heidegger again and again predicts or hints at and again and again edges closer to, but still withholds, and, on the other, to the prediction of a fourth directive, pointed to implicitly in the second lecture (December 8, 1942 [19/13]) and explicitly in the third (December 15, 1942 [28/19]) but withheld until the fourteenth (March 16, 1943 [200/134]) and extending, for its full unfolding, through the fifteenth and final lecture (March 23, 1943 [especially 212-25, 237, and 239-43/142-51, 159, and 161-63]). Criss-crossing these are the multiplicitous other *Vorausdeutungen* I have referred to but not cited, some spanning a few paragraphs, others spanning several or, as noted, a dozen lecture sessions.

But mythological techniques do not necessarily add up to myth. They are the heritage of writers from ancient times through the present. Still, Heidegger's focus here is not technique. His focus is a deity, and one that he can neither situate more appropriately than in the ancient mythological thematic of the journey, contextualize more appropriately than with the stylistic modes of myth, nor write the history of more appropriately than as myth.

Indeed, "the essence of *mythos* is...determined on the basis of *alétheia*. It is myth that reveals, discloses, and lets be seen..."(89/60).

"When [the Greeks] want to express the beginning of all that is[,]...what is said...is what is primordially to be said. It is authentic legend, the primordial word. *Mythos* is the Greek for the word that expresses what is to be said before all else." (89/60) And "'myth' [has] to do with the gods. 'Mythology' is *about* 'the gods'" (60/89 [emphasis added]). Myth is the legend *of* the gods. It names the gods and tells their stories. "The word, *as* the naming of Being, the *mythos*, names...*to theion*, i.e., the gods" (165/112). Lest one miss the profound significance of the name for Heidegger, he emphasizes that it is not to be taken as a mere sign.

With this work, preceded by a plethora of previous works in which Heidegger writes on Parmenides' *Alétheia* both as concept (*alétheia*) and as deity (*Alétheia*) but has not yet as thoroughly pronounced her the divine equivalent of Being as he does here, Heidegger arrives at telling indications that she is his deity of choice *as a philosopher*. This is one of the meanings of his casting her story, of recounting her history, the history of the "transformation of the essence truth and Being," which he understands as "*the* genuine event of history" (62/42 [emphasis added]) as myth. This is not to say that Heidegger has ceased to believe in his Christian god. But as Laurence Hemmings has shown,⁷ Heidegger is no atheist. He believes, indeed has always believed, in a Christian god. But as Hemmings makes it his purpose to demonstrate, Heidegger's Christian god is not the god of the theologians. Moreover, it is a god Heidegger cannot know, as Hemmings also shows.

Alétheia is a deity of a different order. Heidegger points to this unmistakably, and more than once, in the *Parmenides* when he emphasizes the existence of a profound difference between the Christian god (this will be the Christian god as conventionally understood, Hemmings' "god of the theologians") and the gods of the pre-Socratic Greeks (59/40; 89-90/60-61). *Alétheia* is a deity he *can* know, and the nature of which he reveals in his thoroughgoing interpretation of her name, his *Parmenides*, his hermeneutic of *Alétheia*. She is his philosopher's deity, whose history he thus casts in a mythico-philosophical mode.

Nor need this be a matter for unease. It may be altogether fitting that the new era of thought Heidegger ushers in, in significant part across his understanding of Being/*Alétheia*, recover its own, more fitting deity, a deity suited to it. This recovery marks a resurrection, the resurrection of a deity expunged, immured, and eventually recovered. This three-phased pattern is of course familiar in myth and religion: a deity exists, is expunged and immured (78/53), and then brought to renewed life. Heidegger provides names for these phases (113/76-77) in this, his myth of an ancient deity recovered and made contemporary: "Being and Word" (the pre-Socratic focus on *Alétheia*), "Being and ratio" (*Alétheia*'s immurement in the "debris"(78/53) of metaphysics, and "Being and Time" (her new beginning).

Heidegger concludes his course with words from Pindar's Fragment 205, which he had quoted in full in his *Besinnung*, of 1938-39. Pindar's word is *Ala-theia*, which Heidegger understands as "*Alétheia. Thea.*" It is no accident, nor merely incidental, that the words with which he concludes the *Parmenides* (243/163) are these: *Göttin Alétheia* [goddess *Alétheia*].⁸

⁷ Heidegger's Atheism: The Refusal of a Theological Voice (Notre Dame, Indiana: U. of Notre Dame Press, 2002).

⁸ Heidegger's longstanding hermeneutic of Parmenides' *Alétheia*, his repeated visitations to *Alétheia* and to Parmenides in his thought and his work have called attention to Parmenides of such a sort as he has likely never heretofore enjoyed, despite the fact of his fame as the father of Western philosophy, for his audience now includes not merely theologians and philosophers, but all humanists who read Heidegger. But this hermeneutic, which has widened and deepened Parmenides' audience has, not inexplicably, but nonetheless unfortunately, met with a non-resilient and ongoing opposition in the camp of classical students of Parmenides. I take the opportunity of this conference on the future of hermeneutics to take note of this.