

A Place without a Form?

David Kolb, 1981

The old spiritual masters told us to be in the world but not of it. We moderns have given this a secular twist. We are in our world — we have values, ways of life, world pictures — but not of it — we are to be aware of our freedom, aware of the contingency of our world and its dependence on factors many of which are or will be under our control. We both inhabit our world and enjoy the status of distanced controllers. Or, if our lack of control and our dependence on historical and social factors is being emphasized, we are to inhabit our world with a certain knowing irony, since we understand the process by which it came about, even if we cannot change it. We have found ways to institutionalize this split-level identity.

Such institutions posit a separation of form and content. In the free market, in procedural justice, in free speech we live out that separation. This parallels cognitive and volitional theories of Kantian and Utilitarian descent, which make the same separation. All these give us freedom by having us seek our identity in a formal process above all content, but at the cost of introducing distance and irony.

Martin Heidegger's response to modernity often sounds like a romantic flight from modern distances. He clearly wants to overcome our split-level existence, the uneasy balance of facticity and freedom, which for him is but another manifestation of the will to power which he fines lurking behind our tradition. But to what degree is his own overcoming of modernity also susceptible to split-level living and ironic distance?

More precisely, to what degree is Heidegger's strategy of locating modernity within the context of the history of being and *das Ereignis* itself a kind of formalism? Does it become a vehicle for romantic or ironic meta-positions?

I am invoking a Hegelian theme, for it was Hegel who saw in modernity a break between form and content which permitted the expression of a formal, empty subjectivity that dominated and swallowed all substantial content in its own self-affirmation by negation. This subjectivity shows up in modern religion, art economics and politics, and philosophy. Hegel tries to overcome this by showing that the dance of subjectivity and distance is located within the whole, whose movement does not allow an ultimate distinction of form from content.¹

For Heidegger such formalism and distance is a sign of the will to power and the metaphysical drive to total presence. It is the "age of the world-view" where we become the pure formal observer, one with the formal process of creating world-views, dominating any given view by power, or at least irony. This becomes institutionalized in our ways of teaching and reading, in our schools and museums. Heidegger would, however, reject Hegel's metaphysical solution to this plight. Yet his own approach shows affinities to both Hegelian holism and Kantian formalism.

In this essay I take it for granted that Heidegger does talk of modernity as one unified world whose manifestations can be seen in power lines, art museums, war-and-peace, and so on, "The wasteland grows..."² Most solutions offered are only the will to power replayed. Heidegger pursues a strategy of locating modernity within a larger context.

What we experience in *das Gestell* as the constellation of man and Being through the modern world of technology is a prelude to what is called Ereignis. . . . For in *das Ereignis* the possibility opens to us of overcoming the simple dominance of *das Gestell* in a more original happening (Ereignen) (ID 101/36).

We can see modernity whole when we can hear it in the call of *das Gestell* (ID 116/50). We can live attuned to what calls. This gives us a dimension of ourselves that escapes the official meaning given us by that call.

In this larger context it would seem we might repeat the modern move, determining the form of our correspondence with *das Ereignis*, interpreting ourselves as pure "corresponders" and distancing ourselves thereby from the content or our epoch. Is the place where Heidegger locates modernity immune to this? Is it a place without a form?

The kind of formalism possible within Heidegger's "step back" bears on the question to what extent Heidegger is a transcendental philosopher. Though he is not fond of the label "transcendental" his step back into more primal spaces has a transcendental look to it. In Identity and Difference the pervasive image of a road or way travelling into ever more comprehensive spaces appears on the first page of the first essay. This way leads to the region (*Bezirk*) within which we live, and from there to the realm (*Bereich*) which surrounds our local region (ID 102/38, cp. WHD 57/33). The Kantian flavor of this repress is enhanced by the repeated injunctions to reverse our conception about what determines what. Things that seem to be independent turn out to be determined by what we had thought were their results. (Cf. the discussions of identity and difference, of belonging together, and so on.) There is much talk of the "earlier" and the "primal"; when we stop hearing this as Platonic it sounds Kantian. More primal than the concrete manifestations of modernity is *das Gestell*, and more primal still *das Ereignis*. The final realm is not without a kind of structure. There is the circling of beings and Being (ID 138/58), and the pervasive relation of presence and absence within the correspondence of man's nature and *das Ereignis* (ID 137/53). Though this is a realm where metaphysical language fails us (ID 140/71), it is here that thinking is brought into its own light (WHD 10/28). This is the objectless (ID 132/64) realm that is nonetheless the source of all measure (WHD 153/132).

All this can sound quite Kantian and formal. To some extent it must be truly so, or there will be no new self-interpretation beyond that offered by *das Gestell*. Yet we are given no new world, no new meaning of being, only *das Gestell* understood as a fate, a call. This, however, is just what the totalizing self-sufficiency of *das Gestell* denies; in living it as a call we escape its limits. But

this means that to some degree we live it as our content of a process or relation whose form could contain other contents. If there is at least this much formalism, there would seem to be room for ironic distance. I will argue, however, that though there is a kind of irony there is no room for assuming meta-positions and ironic distance.

In what follows I will criticize Heidegger's image of the way and its two stages, and the romantic, right-wing Heideggerianism it can lead to. *Das Gestell* is the first step on the journey it describes. Heidegger moves from modern incidents and symptoms to the unified sense of Being that underlies them, calling men and beings to dwell together in a certain way. The discussion of *das Gestell* parallels Hegel's move from definite cultural objects to the shape of spirit behind them. But a Hegelian shape of spirit is arrived at in two ways, from concrete phenomena and purely, in the Logic. A shape of spirit is a shape the whole assumes within its movement to itself. In any shape, definite poles are separated and united in definite ways. The shape has a determined genesis and internal tensions. *Das Gestell*, on the other hand, has no dialectical genesis. Nor is there any pure access to it; we come to it only by hearing it within what surrounds us. Nor is it the result of any dialectical mediation. It concerns us "*überall unmittelbar*," everywhere and immediately. It gathers us and beings into a space with special contours. But we were not there prior to the gathering, waiting to be given shape. Nor has this space been put together from poles, nor modulated from a previous space. It is not a concrete dialectical unity.

Each of the two members of the relation between man's nature and the Being of beings already implies the relation itself. To speak from the matter itself: there is no such thing here as members of the relation, nor the relation, for themselves [*für sich* - the moment of separation in an Hegelian dialectic]. Accordingly, the relation we have here named between the nature of man and the Being of beings allows no dialectical maneuvers in which one member of the relation is played off against the other...not only that all dialectic fails but that there is simply no place left for a failure of this kind (WHD 74/79).

All our motions of representation and willing take place within this space. There is no room for a move to a meta-position, or rather all meta -positions are moves within this space, not its transcendence.

While the parallel between *das Gestell* and a Hegelian shape of spirit is tempting, it is ultimately misleading because *das Gestell* is simple, without parts or aspects. It is the gathering within which even dialectic is possible.³ Yet for all its simplicity *das Gestell* brings determination.

Das Einfache bringt Mass und Gefüge, aber zugleich An-lass und Ausdauer.

The simple brings measure and structure, and also initial power and endurance. (WHD 153/132)⁴

Note that the role of bringing measure and structure and endurance resembles that the ancients assigned to "form". *Das Gestell* is like a form in some of Aristotle's uses of the word, but not a form in the modern sense of a structure to be isolated and brought forward. It has itself no contours to be traced; it is not a structural element of modernity. It has no form to be made present, though many forms and structures can be made present in the gathering it rules.

On the other hand, *das Gestell* is but one determinate gathering; it is a call opening a space. Others are possible. *Das Gestell* is not an ultimate; something more primal speaks through it (ID 100/36). There is a place beyond the ground it assigns (ID 104/39). In Heidegger's metaphor of the road, the way continues from our region to the surrounding realm. This suggests the kind of formalism where we live our relation to *das Ereignis*, with *das Gestell* as our (unfortunate) content of this relation. Our relation to *das Ereignis* is our true home. But this kind of formalism is out of place in Heidegger. Neither a formal nor a dialectical reading can be given of the relation between us and *das Ereignis*, if indeed it should be called a relation at all.

Any dialectical interpretation of *das Gestell* is prohibited because there is no structure of *das Gestell* to exploit. But either can there be a dialectic of the way from *das Gestell* to *das Ereignis*. That way contains a discontinuity. In ID Heidegger refers to the need for a leap; there is no bridge from the one to the other (ID 96/33). I interpret this Kierkegaardian language to mean that any epoch of Being, such as *das Gestell*, is complete. There is no gap in the world to be filled by the move to *das Ereignis*. There is no dialectical tension to be resolved by such a move. There is no structural connection where our epoch is completed by the transition. Any world is fully rounded on its own. It does not need to be made whole in some larger world. There is no larger world. The move beyond comes from hearing the arrival of the world, not from finding strains and cracks within it.

This is quite unlike Hegel, where limited worlds give way due to internal strains, revealing their larger context. For Heidegger the terror of *das Gestell* comes precisely from the fact that it is complete, a seamless whole within which all can come to presence, albeit a presence which enforces a forgetfulness of its own *geschicht-lich* character. But that *Geschehen* is not a missing item within the world.

So no dialectical transition can be made in either direction from *das Gestell* to *das Ereignis*. This seems to leave open, the possibility of a more Kantian relation of content and form between them. But there can be no Critique of the History of Being. Heidegger has no transcendental method which provides access to a pure form of man-in-the-history-of-Being. In ID Heidegger makes this point by adapting one of Hegel's images. A man asks for fruit and is offered apples, bananas, and pears, but refuses them because none of them are fruit. For Hegel this brings out the necessary distinction and connection of universal and particular, which connection is, when understood, the pure form of the universal, Heidegger applies the image to the relation of Being and its various epochal coinages.

There is Being only in this or that particular historical coinage (geschichtlichen Prägung): physis, logos, hen, idea, energeia, substantiality, objectivity, subjectivity, will, the will to power, the will to will. This also holds valid for the experience of the current coinage of the difference between Being and beings.... What has been said holds true above all for our own attempt to step back out of the forgetfulness of the difference as such (ID 134-5/66-7).

Our thinking of *das Ereignis* remains within the sway of our own epoch. This is one reason there is no pure form of man-plus-Ereignis available for various transcendental or modern maneuvers of analysis and distance.

But Heidegger has a kind of formalism nonetheless. He continues the above passage by citing the ways we think about our correspondence with *das Ereignis* in terms of concealing and revealing, transcendence, presence and absence, endurance. He notes that the Western era speaks through these words. Then he adds

Perhaps this discussion of the difference between Being and beings in terms of perdurance (Austrag) as the approach (Vorort) of their essence brings to light something pervading which pervades the history of Being from its beginning to its completion. Yet it remains difficult to say how we should think this pervading, if it is neither a universal which is valid for all instances, nor a law guaranteeing the necessity of some dialectical process (ID 135-6/67-8).

The mention of "completion" suggests the history of being here spoken of is the era of metaphysics; nothing is said directly about what happens beyond that completion in *das Gestell*. But taken together with Heidegger's use of categories drawn from the pre-Socratics to describe our relation to *das Ereignis* (as in WHD and other works), this passage does put forth a point of view we can call "formal." While there is no dialectical form of transition, nor any set of formal conditions of possibility for an epoch of Being, there is the steady belonging together approached in the ID lectures. What is together yet different yet belonging to each other is familiar: man's nature, Being, *das Ereignis*, presence and absence, nearness and appropriation and correspondence. Heidegger discusses these under many names. Despite his changes of terminology we recognize that structure when we hear it, and we wait for all the pieces to be produced in any given essay.

There is something going on here we can legitimately call formal and transcendental. The elements which belong together have not been gleaned by an historical survey or analysis of various epochs; they are encountered as the conditions of the possibility of any epoch. They are not like Kantian formal conditions, present everywhere as rules of synthesis. Nevertheless even after all the appropriate precautions have been taken we can make a distinction of form and content between the belonging together of the elements Heidegger discusses and any given epoch such as *das Gestell*.⁶

The romantic interpretation of Heidegger fastens on this species of formalism. It sees us as called to an ontological level of existence beyond the ontic content of this or that epoch, called to a dwelling with *das Ereignis* akin to the religious demand to dwell with God or the German Idealists' call to be one with the process of the Absolute. This is to free us from *das Gestell* by bringing us into a larger project and a deeper dwelling as man-in-the-history-of-Being. Perhaps we might someday be sent the pure land, granted an epoch that is transparent to *das Ereignis* as far as possible.

Heidegger does talk of our achieving a more original dwelling with things, and he does dream at times of the return of the gods. But he does not call upon us to dwell with *das Ereignis*, or to identify ourselves with the formal process of man in history. Such an injunction would fall into the pit discerned by Hegel: *das Ereignis* by itself would be empty, form and content would remain distinct, and we would be forced to oscillate between a pure identification and a resigned acceptance of the sad world. Our situation would be that of the Stoic in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

But the problem raised by this romantic interpretation is genuine, for Heidegger does provide a kind of formalism plus a denial of any link between the form of the process and the content of any given epoch. We seem caught in between, forced to live on both levels at once. Split-level modernity seems to be our only home and modern language kindly provides a split-level house of Being, complete with meta-levels and formal balconies.

Heidegger thus does seem to leave us in the situation Hegel described. We find ourselves within some formally described process of man in history, but since there is no connection with the content of our world, we live at best an ironic distance. Hegel overcomes this split by making these separations a moment within a larger movement. "Getting the form of man in history purely present" is itself the form of the whole. If we try to enforce an ultimate separation of form and content we only imprison ourselves in a past stage of spirit and refuse to dwell concretely where we already are.

For all their profound differences, Heidegger's way is parallel to Hegel's here. Heidegger too avoids the separation of form and content by trying to show that in the ultimate place where we already are, such a separation is impossible. Yet for both of them, that separation is, in a sense, re-enacted and also healed by our dwelling there.

It is true that, for Heidegger, there is a pattern among what belongs together: man's nature, *das Ereignis*, Being. The "relations" among these persist and are conditions for any epoch. But we cannot appropriate this as a "form" of the "whole" and use it to define a meta-position on the "process." It is not the right sort of form for that, and we are not the right sort of thinkers.

Four considerations support this conclusion:

(1) To dwell in the ultimate realm means to let it and ourselves be what and where we are (WHD 18/44, 104/169). But *das Ereignis* recedes. Where it truly is, its own space, where we must let it be, is *Vergessenheit*, *Entzug*, withdrawal (WHL 5/9). It is present only as withdrawn and enabling; there is nothing further to make present and dwell alongside. We are with it when we receive our world as a gift or call and dwell questioningly open to the withdrawing event. Thinking the mutual belonging and mutual need of man's nature and *das Ereignis* is the hardest task; it cannot be thought out. Still less does this mutuality have a presentable form that will support a meta-position.

(2) Like Kant, Heidegger discerns the form of the "process" from the inside. Both in his interpretation of Kant and in his own philosophy he rejects the German Idealist demand to specify a meta-position from which transcendental method is accomplished, but, unlike Kant, that form is not ours, nor the form of some subjective process. Nor, as in Hegel, is it a form of pure thought. It is not the form of anything. That is the point of the discussion or belonging together, of Identity and Difference.

(3) In thinking the definite character of our correspondence with *das Ereignis*, Heidegger does not connect it with any drive to final unity or wholeness.

the finitude of Being, of *das Ereignis*...is no longer thought in terms of relation to infinity, but rather as finitude in itself: finitude, end, limit, one's own -- to be secure in one's own.⁷

The multiplicity and finitude of our correspondence with *das Ereignis* is not itself a way station. In Kant there is the totalizing synthesis of Reason, in Fichte the formless drive of the Ego. Even in Hegel, who rejects his predecessors on this point, the logical category of "determinate being" gives way to the dialectic of *Sollen* and *Grenze*, drive and limit.⁸

Heidegger wants to think' definiteness and determination, and thus form, without thinking it as the limit of some transcending that reaches beyond it. This is the break with the tradition which reaches from Plato's *eros* to Nietzsche's *will*.⁹ In his works of the SZ period Heidegger tries to develop a concept of transcendence that is not an example of a drive overreaching a limit. There is therefore nothing we can ride to a meta-position.

(4) Earlier we saw that any epoch is complete, without structural gaps or dialectical tensions leading to a larger world. This is related to the point about limits made just above. But there is a further implication: like our world, we are complete. Our projects are within the world granted along with us. Granted along with us, not to us; we and the world are called to presence together. We have no project of receiving a world from *das Ereignis*. In the language of SZ, our task is to live ourselves authentically as thrown projects. Our awareness of the contingently fateful character of our epoch does not derive from experiencing our epoch as limiting a pure project of relating to *das Ereignis*.

If we read Heidegger's urgings to a deeper dwelling, for example the Memorial Address in *Gelassenheit*, as saying we can lift our core selves out of *das Gestell* into some purer relation, we will be back at the romantic impasse. It is things we are to dwell with, not *das Ereignis*, though we can dwell in it by our caring for what we are given, as such.

Das Ereignis als Er-eignis denken, heißt, am Bau dieses in sich schwingenden Bereiches bauen. Das Bauzeug zu diesem in sich schwebenen Bau empfängt das Denken aus der Sprache....insofern unser Wesen in die Sprache vereignet ist, wohnen wir im Ereignis.

To think *das Ereignis* as ap-propiation means to build on the structure in this realm that resonates within itself. Thinking receives from language the building tool for this structure that floats in itself... Insofar as our essence is ap-propiated in language, we dwell in *das Ereignis*. (ID 102/38)

We dwell when we are owned by what is spoken-given-revealed by language in the original sense. We build at the structure, but given Heidegger's use of *bauen* this also means we dwell caringly and thankfully in the home granted us. With all the overtones, the point is made that there can be no separation of form and content. *Das Ereignis* is not some separate happening, but is "experienced in the revealing done by language as that which allows it".¹⁰ Heidegger urges us to dwell in the ultimate realm, and what he does is study the Greeks and the poets.

We have been following the spatial imagery of ID, the way that leads to the region of *das Gestell* and finally to the realm of *das Ereignis* and our correspondence with it. This imagery needs to be severely qualified. In the ultimate realm there is no place to stand. *Das Ereignis* is not a place but the opening of a place. The place opened is definite, with content, but there is no prior opening of a pure space to be filled with content. The move we are urged is not to some formal meta-position but into a deeper retrieve of what we are given, as given, contingent, groundless yet claiming us to build and dwell.

There is room here for a kind of irony, not that of the superior viewpoint which affirms the self's elevation above it all, but the humbler irony of aware contingency and incompleteness, a bit rueful and a bit amused.

In Walden, Thoreau says:

I love to weigh, to settle, to gravitate toward that which most strongly and rightfully attracts me; --not hang by the beams of the scale and try to weigh less, --not suppose a case but take the case that is; to travel the only path I can, and that on which no power can resist me.¹¹

We split-level moderns try to suppose cases and weigh less; Heidegger urges us to take the case that is and increase our gravity by dwelling where we are and pondering its reception.

Hegel's philosophy suffered a split into right and left interpretations. Heidegger, too, can be seen from the romantic right or the deconstructionist left. I have tried to argue for a centrist Heidegger against the right, but I have said nothing about the left. That is another task, except for this: there are problems with the position I have just sketched. The problems concern the success of Heidegger's attempt to enclose dialectic within phenomenology, and the difficulty of linking the history of Being with ordinary ontic history, and, above all, the task of thinking positively the new notion of form and finitude without reference to limits and infinity. When these problems are faced, they push Heidegger's ideas away from their Hegelian side and towards their Nietzschean side. At this point the left Heideggerian reading becomes more possible and attractive, and the question-worthy withdrawal of *das Ereignis* is reworked as the simplicity of *das Gestell* is rethought. Any left Heideggerian view will make use of the notion of belonging together from ID to extend the critique of formalism into the ontic region as well.

Notes

Hegel's ideas are presented most compactly in the *Philosophy of Right*. I made a fairly elaborate comparison of Hegel and Heidegger on modernity in my "Hegel and Heidegger as Critics" (*The Monist*, 1981, 481-499). The present essay attempts an answer to questions raised in the last sections of that article.

2. This quote from Nietzsche is discussed at length in WHD, part I. References to that work and to ID will be incorporated into the text, with the German pagination followed by the English. For *Was Heisst Denken* the editions used are the third German edition and the Wieck and Gray translation in paperback, for *Identity and Difference* the Harper paperback containing the German text and the Stambaugh translations. I have often altered the translations.

3 Whether Heidegger succeeds in so locating dialectic within phenomenology and making the call of *das Gestell* simple seems to me importantly questionable. This kind of transcendental move may not itself be as ultimate as Heidegger would like.

4. The reference to "das Einfache" is to the unity that holds together the various meanings of the question about thinking. I think the extension to *das Gestell* is warranted.

5. In his lectures at the 1978 Collegium Phenomenologicum in Perugia, Reiner Schürmann discussed this form and Heidegger's varied approaches to it.

6 "Elements" is not a good word, but I cannot find one that does not carry too much independence. "Element" has one advantage, though, the connotation of the element we move and live within, as fishes water and birds air.

7. *Time and Being* (Harper paperback), p. 54.

8. Hegel too is trying to overcome the association of determination with limit, but how he succeeds on how one interprets the concepts of good infinity and universality. He removes the drive to the infinite by making it part of the concrete whole which is infinite in a new sense, Still, as my colleague Mark Okrent put in conversation, Hegel does this by a presence that enfolds any absence, Heidegger by an absence that allows any presence.

9. Yet both Plato and Nietzsche to some degree escape from this tradition.

10. *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (fifth German edition), p. 258, and *On the Way to Language* (Harper edition), p. 1-7. Translation quite modified.

11. Walden, "Conclusion". The excerpt is quoted by Henry Bugbee in his *Inward Morning* entry for July 28.

references

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