

**Contemporary Philosophy** 

## Heidegger On Poetry And Thinking: Some Educational Implications

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**ABSTRACT:** I discuss some of the educational implications emerging from Heidegger's views on poetry, thinking, and language. Specifically, Heidegger's views on the neighborhood between poetry and thinking suggest that most accepted methods of teaching poetry are in error, because they ignore this neighboring relation. The importance of this relation is presented and clarified. I then discuss the implications of Heidegger's view for teaching poetry.

Heidegger's series of three lectures, later published as "The Nature of Language" has some very significant implications for education. (1) In this paper I focus on the second lecture. In opening his second lecture, Heidegger invites his listeners to think about the nature of language. Such thinking, he explains, has little to do with the quest for knowledge in the sciences. He cautions his listeners about the danger arising from the domination of method in scientific study and discourse. He cites Nietzsche who stated that what characterizes contemporary science is the victory of scientific method over science.

By contrast, thinking, including thinking about the nature of language, has to do with a quite unique region in which thought exists. It is not dominated by or based on a method. Thinking is not even governed by a specific theme. In today's science, Heidegger holds, even the theme of study is a part of the method. The field of Computer Sciences, with which Heidegger was not well versed, since it flourished -- exploded -- after his death, is a poignant example of a contemporary science whose theme is controlled by method. Heidegger's description of science has proved quite true in the four decades since he wrote the essay. Almost all contemporary methodological sciences are divorced from thinking. Thus, if we wish to inquire into the nature of language, if we wish to undergo a thinking experience with language, we must distance ourselves from scientific methods.

Thinking about language means entering a region where method does not reign. It means following a specific path in that region. But in thinking about the nature of language we encounter specific problems. When we speak of the nature of language, we are already using language to discuss its nature. Furthermore, we are already acquainted with the nature of language as people who use it, even if we cannot clearly articulate and define this nature. In short, we are entangled in a lagging behind the topic of our inquiry. There is a way out of our predicament. If we look around the region of thought, without taking the entanglement lightly, we will note that what Heidegger calls the "country" of thinking is open in all directions to the neighborhood of poetry. Thus, today, when scientific method tends to suffocate thinking, we can return to thinking through reading and listening to poetry.

To be specific, the fact that the country of thinking is open in all directions to the neighborhood of poetry, can often help a person follow those paths of thinking that concern him or her. How? Quite often if you read and listen to great poetry -- with an openness to the language and to the thoughts and experiences expressed in the poem, and with a comportment to think about what you heard, with care for the world, and with joy inexistence -- then certain poems or verses may engage your thinking and help enlighten a path of thought that may previously have concerned you. In other instances, encountering a poem may bring about a thinking experience with language in an area that has not engaged your thinking previously. Here are a few examples.

The question of Being and its relation to language concerned Heidegger throughout his life. In the first lecture in the series on "The Nature of Language," Heidegger already intimated that Stefan George's poem "The Word" is in the neighborhood of thinking. Listening to what the poet experienced may bring persons to think about the nature of language. Heidegger elaborated in detail how Stefan George's poem can help us think about the nature of language and ponder the link between language and being. Thus, "The Word" engaged Heidegger's thinking and helped to enlighten a path of thought that concerned him throughout his life.

But quite a few persons do not need Heidegger for such thinking experiences. Listening to Stefan George's poem, pondering it, may help a person who has never heard of Martin Heidegger to think about the nature of language. Such a reader will perceive that in writing the poem, Stefan George opened for his readers an area in which thinking about the nature of language can occur. Hopefully, the reader or listener will attempt to engage in such thinking. Heidegger indicates that opening an area in which thinking on the nature of language may occur is not confined to the poetry of Stefan George. At the end of his first lecture, he cited an additional poem which resides in the same neighborhood, "A Word" by Gottfried Benn, though he did not discuss Benn's poem. A person who reads Benn's poem may also be led to think about the nature of language.

An additional example of the neighborhood of poetry and thinking that is linked to Heidegger's writings, and not mentioned in his essay on the nature of language, is Rainer Maria Rilke's wonderful book of poems *Duino Elegies* published in 1923. (2) The reader of or listener to these magnificent elegies may undergo an experience with language that leads to thinking about questions that Heidegger explored in *Being and Time*, published in 1927. For instance, in the eighth elegy, you find the statement that unlike flowers, who can open endlessly into pure space, we human beings always exist in a world. This idea reminds me of Heidegger's formulation that each human being, each Dasein exists as Being-in-the-world. Thus, a basic idea in Rilke's eighth elegy accords well with the phenomenological analysis of Dasein that Heidegger presented in *Being and Time* and in other writings and lectures of this period. (3) Consequently, reading or listening to the *Duino Elegies* may have helped Heidegger in his thoughts about the being of Dasein. Today, these same poems may bring a person into the neighborhood of the thinking of Heidegger during this juncture of Heidegger's life.

Heidegger wrote little about love. If you engage in thinking about love, I suspect that you will find that Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Annabel Lee" is in the neighborhood of the region of your thought. Harkening to the poem's second stanza, I would suggest that great love includes a childhood innocence. Hence, "Annabel Lee" leads the person engaged in thinking about love to think about the necessity of childhood innocence for the emerging and existence of a great love. There is no method or theme to such thinking. A great love is the topic which engages your thinking, a topic which poetry can help you to illuminate.

I should mention that Plato, who was no great defender of poets, banishing most of them from his ideal republic, includes learning from poetry in many of his dialogues. For instance, in the *Symposium*, in which the God of love is praised by a circle of speakers, two of the speakers, Phaedrus and Agathon, recite verses of poetry to support their thinking. In the dialogue *Protagoras*, which discusses the question whether virtue can be learned, Socrates introduces his thinking by citing verses by Simonides. Evidently, without formulating it as Heidegger did, Plato recognized that the country of thinking is open to the neighborhood of poetry.

Another realm which can engage thinking, yet is *not* discussed directly in any depth in Heidegger's thought, is my personal responsibility for others in relation to concrete instances of evil. I mean my responsibility for those persons who now share the world with me, and also for the people of future generations. Heidegger's Nazi past, for which he never assumed genuine responsibility, may be a reason for his unforgivable neglect of this topic. It is ironic yet worthy to show, as a final example, that Heidegger's ideas on the neighborhood of poetry and thinking can also illuminate thinking in relation to my responsibility toward others, and specifically my responsibility to fight evil.

For several years, my thinking has often traversed the region of thought that deals with the question: What is my responsibility for those with whom I share the world, especially when I encounter evil and evildoers? To a great extent, this thinking has arisen because, together with others, I have struggled against the abuse of human rights in Israel by the Israeli government, and especially against Israeli evil in cruelly oppressing and brutally exploiting the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. In the course of these years of struggle, I have spent much time thinking and writing about the instances of evil that I encountered. Some of my thoughts, together with a few descriptions of the difficult struggles that we lay people undertook, have been published in three recent books that I authored. (4)

During this period, I have often wondered and repeatedly questioned myself as to what are my personal responsibilities, as an intellectual, when faced with so much evil in the world. Indeed, what are the limits of my responsibilities, or of any person's responsibilities, especially when confronted with the many complexities of contemporary society? It was refreshing to discover that the following stanza from Pablo Neruda's poem "For All To Know" is in the neighborhood of my thinking on each person's responsibilities toward others. I shall briefly show how this stanza from Neruda's poem helped me illuminate and articulate some of my thinking on personal responsibility.

Someone will ask later, sometimes searching for a name, his own or someone else's why I neglected his sadness or his love or his reason or his delirium or his hardships: and he'll be right: it was my duty to name you, you, someone far away and someone close by, to name someone for his heroic scar, to name a woman for her petal, the arrogant one for his fierce innocence, the forgotten one for his famous obscurity. But I didn't have enough time or ink for everyone. (5)

The poem does not deal directly with evil. Yet it throws light on some aspects of my responsibility toward those with whom I share this earth, including my responsibility to fight evil. Nerd's verses indicate that for an authentic person there are no abstract responsibilities. None! All human responsibilities are here and now and relate to persons who have names. These persons may participate in struggles, some of them perform deeds and have heroic scars, others are sad and passive, still others are arrogant and mean, while others seek and may find love. I must add that this requirement that I focus on concrete persons and responsibilities is quite true in fighting evil.

Consider just a few thoughts arising from Neruda's poem that relate to instances from the last quarter century where people and writers may tend to be abstract when faced with evil. In my research on evil and evildoers, I have found that few writers and intellectuals are willing to directly brand evildoers in the realm of politics. They will never dare to say that Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, or Henry Kissinger are evil persons. Instead, if they mention the word "evil," they will talk abstractly about evil existing in the world, and, at best, direct our look to the plight of the oppressed, the homeless, the impoverished, and other people who suffer.

To *not* be abstract, we must learn from Neruda and begin by admitting that it is our responsibility to remember the name of every person killed by evildoers. Here are some examples. It is our responsibility to remember those innocent people murdered and mutilated by the death squads, trained by the United States, in El Salvador. We should not forget those simple people who struggled for justice and were "disappeared" by the generals in Argentina in the 1960s and 1970s. We must remember those innocent people tortured and killed by the Tontons Macoute in Haiti, who were armed and sanctioned by the United States and who for decades terrorized this poor island state. It is our responsibility to not ignore the hundreds of thousands of people massacred in East Timor, a massacre conducted by the Indonesian army in the past two decades with the explicit support of the United States, Australia, and other Western powers.

We must always remember that every evil person who performed these atrocities had a name. Yes, every single member of the brutal Tontons Macoute in Haiti has a name, which should be added to the list of evildoers of this century. Neruda's poem teaches me that in my thinking about evil and fighting it, my responsibility is to denounce every single atrocity, to name every victim, and to seek to condemn every evil person who committed the crimes and supported them. Thus, my condemning wicked people should include evil persons, like Henry Kissinger, who promised and delivered United States support for the evils mentioned in the previous paragraph, and who firmly supported many other atrocities performed in Third World countries.

These insights, stemming from Neruda's poem, accord with a locution from Heidegger that appear in his essay "Letter on Humanism": "Man is the shepherd of Being." (6) If we accept this locution, then we must conclude that every person, and especially a thinking humanist, is responsible for every being in the flock of Being.

Neruda's poem goes further. It suggests that my responsibility is even greater than that of most men and women, because, like Neruda, I am an intellectual who writes and teaches. Some of my writings will remain, perhaps, in libraries, where later, people may read them. Hence, say, in fighting evil, I should attempt to list the many names of the evildoers and of their victims. But I must know my limitations. As Neruda pointed out in the poem, I will not have the time or the ink or the strength for every "you" toward whom I am responsible. In my writings, I will never be able to name all the victims or all the evildoers. Still, the poem suggests, I am not allowed to flee that responsibility into any abstraction. The limits of my concrete responsibilities can only be determined by the limits of my powers, by the concrete exigencies of my situation, and by other sincere personal limitations that I may have here and now.

Someone may ask: Did Neruda endeavor to live the responsibilities that you have briefly outlined? From his memoirs and from other historical documents, the answer is a resounding Yes. Thus, the verse quoted is not a mere outpouring of feelings, or an expression of empathy. The poem is an authentic expression of Pablo Neruda's Being-in-the-world. Here is one example of Neruda's personally assuming responsibilities in fighting evil.

While serving as consul in Spain in 1936-1937, Neruda firmly supported the republican government of Spain against General Franco and his evil fascist forces. In 1937, the government of Chile had to remove him from his consular duties in Madrid after the city was captured by the fascist army. In Paris in 1939, Neruda struggled against pro-fascist Chileans in the embassy who tried to thwart his work on behalf of the Spanish refugees who fled Spain following the Republican defeat. After much frustration and battling against adamant bureaucrats, who, by citing various regulations, tried to halt his activities, Neruda convinced the Chilean authorities to accept as legal emigrants a few thousand Spanish refugees. In the course of a few months, he gathered these refugees and organized them aboard the ship *Winnipeg*. Again after many battles with Chilean bureaucrats in Paris, he succeeded in having them transported to Chile. He thus saved the lives of these refugees.

He also struggled as a poet for the Spanish republic. In 1937, while the republican government of Spain was battling for its existence, Neruda wrote his book of poems, *Spain in the Heart: Hymn to the Glories of the People at War*. It was published in Spain as the defeat of the republican army became evident. In his memoirs, Neruda describes how, despite the defeat, republican soldiers learned to set the type, to mix together material to create paper, and, finally, to publish the book. They distributed the book to fellow soldiers, and as the army retreated to the French border every soldier put it in his or her knapsack. Marching to France in a column, they were bombed hundreds of times. The book of poems fell with the wounded soldiers; it often soaked up their blood. Those who succeeded in crossing the border to France were forced to surrender Neruda's book. All confiscated copies were burnt by French authorities in a large bonfire. (7)

Thinking is one of the gifts of language; poetry, its neighbor, is another gift. Heidegger holds that this neighborhood can be defined by what he calls Saying. Without Saying, without speaking a specific language, human beings could not think; nor could they compose poetry or listen to it. One aspect of the nobility and grandeur of being human is that, together with being thrown into a language at birth, we are granted its wonderful gifts, among them Saying, thinking, and poetry.

As Heidegger suggested, the gifts of great poetry are a wonder. In addition to a great poem presenting us with instances where the flow of language is crystallized into throbbing, shimmering, enlightening, beautiful phrases that articulate and reveal an aspect of reality, the poem itself resides in the neighborhood of thinking and often illuminates thinking. These gifts can help us, at times, to attain wisdom. Yet Heidegger repeatedly stresses that the rise of science and the reign of technology in contemporary life and in scientific thinking create a situation whereby people ignore the gifts of language. Thinking and poetry have been depreciated and often discarded. How can we counter this trend? I will soon return to this question.

At this point, someone may wonder, Can the seemingly abstruse and abstract thinking of Martin Heidegger on beings and Being, on resoluteness in facing my death so as to live authentically, on the essence of technology, be open to the neighborhood of poetry? Such a person may add: I can understand that reading or listening to a great poem can arouse thinking. But if thinking and poetry are neighbors, then, say, Heidegger's thinking should also be able to engage, and perhaps inspire persons who write poetry. Can you give some examples of poetry inspired by Heidegger's thinking?

Showing how and where Heidegger's original and enlightening thinking can be found in contemporary poetry is beyond the scope of this paper. It would probably require writing a lengthy book. In answer to the above question, however, I will cite one example, a sonnet by Hayden Carruth, which explicitly reveals the fact that Heidegger's thinking engaged the poet and emerged in his poetry.

Thy sting sufficeth, Death. If Heidegger first saw through the human consequence of Darwin's dread, the ingenious flight from Thee, his daring nevertheless was only everyone's coarsest intuition. Sufficiently, Death, thou partest lovers -- Cindy, how then I shall be abhorrent! -as sufficiently hath thine oppression driven all history in a flat-out surge from "durst not" to "civilization," to thwarted Being. Death, shall we thank thee? Cindy and I can love, love more than sufficiently, driven by Thee to extremest sexual refinement in our wrath and anguish. We do give thanks, we do. Reprove us not if we give lamely and philosophically. (9)

For Carruth, Heidegger's idea of Dasein authentically and resolutely facing its death leads to a greater appreciation of every single day of his love for Cindy and his life with her. It leads him to live his life fully. Caruth notes in the sonnet that Heidegger's thinking merely formulated "everyone's coarsest intuition," which may be true. But, the sonnet shows another truth: if this "coarse intuition" was never formulated previously with the concepts that Heidegger coined, then Heidegger's thinking has much to contribute to poetry. For Carruth, Heidegger's thinking and concepts also contributed to living a life of love fully, authentically. In any event, the sonnet reveals that the neighborhood of thinking and poetry is genuine; inspiration, ideas, thoughts, novel articulations flow from poetry to thinking and from thinking to poetry.

Let me turn to some ideas on what can be learned from Heidegger about relating to poetry and teaching poetry. From the last point presented, one simple conclusion immediately emerges. If poetry is a mode of Saying that can enhance human existence by showing, offering, lighting, and extending the World, it is wise to *recite* and to *listen to* poems often. Let me stress this point. Merely reading poems quietly, or analyzing them, or deconstructing them, as Heidegger himself has done, has almost nothing to do with the Saying crystallized in the poem. It does not lead to learning from this Saying. In contrast, learning poems by heart and reciting them out loud can be a manner of listening to the Saying of poems, and learning from their Saying. Heidegger's thoughts in this essay suggest that listening frequently to the Saying of poetry can bring us, the listeners, to the neighborhood of thinking and direct us to learn by existing in that neighborhood. It can lead us toward wisdom.

Yet, if you look around, you see that contemporary existence has pretty much eradicated almost all possibilities of reciting and listening to poetry. Few people who are not poets or critics, or perhaps professors at universities, still learn great poetry by heart. Rarely do simple people, like you and me, read poetry to each other when we gather with our friends. Infrequently do we recite poetry and listen carefully to the Saying of language emerging from the poem. From my experience, Heidegger is correct in his belief that where contemporary Western culture and its dedication to technology and science prevail, poetry has been marginalized, depreciated, and, in many cases, discarded. It is sad but true that today poetry plays a minor role in the lives of almost all people where the Western corporate-capitalist, scientific, and technological culture prevails.

The situation is indeed sad. A splendid gift exists, given to us by language and in the works of great poets. We have a marvelous heritage of great poems shining with the splendor of truth. This remarkable gift can lead us to the neighborhood of thinking, which is of the

essence of being human. Yet most people forget about this gift, or ignore it. Some even scorn it.

Someone may say, you have forgotten that in many countries poetry is taught at all levels in schools and colleges, from kindergarten until graduation. I have not forgotten. But the question should be raised: how is poetry taught? There is no general answer. In many classrooms, poetry is analyzed, broken down into key words, symbols, analogies, and statements; in other classes, poetry is recited by rote without any relation developed between the pupil reciting the poem and the verses being recited. Young pupils can be taught to recite poetry, as they learn to recite the multiplication table. When such occurs, they do not listen to the Saying of the poem. Lately, in some classes at universities and colleges, poetry is deconstructed or it is interpreted in accordance with the latest findings of disciplines of hermeneutics. It is quite dubious whether in all of these instances many of the pupils or students learn to relate to the gift of poetry.

What is missing? Here are a few brief answers. To relate to the gift of poetry, Heidegger has shown, you must establish a place for it in your life, and find the time and the openness to read and to listen to poetry. Establishing a time and place for poetry, however, is different than establishing a place and finding time in your life for, say, jogging, or for political involvement. To be true to the gift of poetry, Heidegger indicates, the place established for poetry in your life must be in the neighborhood of thinking. Consequently, in relating to poetry, you must distance yourself, and at times, cut yourself off from the scientific method that characterizes much of contemporary intellectual life. A major role of the educator is to help his or her pupils relate to poetry while distancing themselves, or perhaps cutting themselves off from the dominance of scientific method. Relating thus to poetry means listening to its Saying, its appeal to one's being, as a person who is the shepherd of Being. Only in this way can the educator hope to open students to the neighborhood of poetry and thinking.

In addition, the educator must advise his or her students that opening themselves to the gift of poetry requires orienting themselves to abandon the constant reckoning and busyness that prevails in contemporary life, which distances most persons from thinking. The educator must also explain that opening yourself to the gift of poetry requires deemphasizing the centrality of feelings. In the past few decades, the so-called crucial role of feelings has been come fashionable in fields as distant from each other as psychotherapy, economics, and ethics; at the same time the tendency to depreciate thinking, and poetry, has flourished. This emphasis on feelings at the expense of thinking and of listening to the saying of poetry has been promoted by many persons who call themselves humanistic psychologists. It has also been promoted by developments within society, especially the triumph of corporate capitalism.

Let me clarify the links between the above statements. The fashion and trend that emphasizes the so-called great significance of feelings eclipses thinking; consequently, it leads to a superficial existence. But this shallow existence well suits the *Weltanschauung*, based on blatant greed, exploitation, and alienation promoted by corporate capitalism. Thus, almost no place for poetry or thinking is left in our technology dominated, corporate capitalist, greed-oriented society. In a word, relating authentically to poetry today means rejecting and rebelling against the way of life promoted by corporate capitalism.

A person must rebel against many accepted trends in contemporary society if he or she wishes to relate to poetry and thinking. Put differently, the educator must repeatedly indicate that to establish a place for poetry in your life, you must abandon many of the accepted goals of contemporary corporate capitalist society and give much time to the solitude and concentration needed for thinking and for listening to the Saying of poetry. Such a decision will often open the path to relating in a worthy manner to poetry.

educator must recognize with his or her own being that teaching poetry without encouraging solitude and thinking, without describing the challenge of poetry and thinking, is a manner of ignoring the gift of poetry.

For persons to make a place for poetry in their lives they must also partially reject the prevailing attitude toward language. A new attitude must be adopted whereby language is not merely a means for everyday mundane communication. Heidegger has suggested that, as the abode of human beings, language opens paths by which we human beings can venture to approach Being. Language opens paths by which we may discover, comprehend, and relate to the essence and the Being of the beings we daily encounter.

Heidegger's writings constantly remind his readers that relating to language as a gift that can lead to thinking is central to a worthy human existence. Repeatedly, in writings that have little to do with poetry, he exposes his belief that language is much more than a means of communication and assertion. He frequently emphasizes the significance of adopting a more profound, more worthy attitude to language. For instance, in a series of lectures on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Heidegger pointed out:

The human being "has the word"; it is the way he makes known to himself his being, and the way in which he sees himself placed in the midst of beings as a whole.... To be empowered with language --; language, however, not merely as a means of asserting and communicating, which indeed it also is, but language as that wherein the openness and conversance of world first of all bursts forth and is. Language, therefore, originally and authentically occurs in poetry... -however, not poetry in the sense of the work of writers, but poetry as the proclamation of world in the invocation of god. But nowadays we see language primarily from the point of view of what we call conversation and chitchat; conventional philology is in accord with this. (10)

This passage again suggests that to teach poetry in accordance with Heidegger's insights means developing a different relation to language, whereby language is not just a means of asserting and communicating. Pupils and students can be shown that through reading and listening to great poems you can relate to language "as that wherein the openness and conversance of world first of all bursts forth and is." Heidegger would probably advise the teacher to point out to students how great poetry can assist each person to consider language as a source of perceiving beings and relating to Being from new perspectives. The teacher should indicate that listening to the Saying of great poetry is a manner of dwelling upon earth. Such has nothing to do with the accepted approach which views poetry as a manner of appealing to the reader's or the listener's aesthetic feelings. Heidegger would also probably hold that once the students can, at least partially, adopt such a relationship to language they will find themselves in the neighborhood of thinking. In that neighborhood, a person can often glean wisdom from great poetry.

## Notes

(1) Martin Heidegger, "The Nature of Language," in *On The Way to Language*. Trans. Peter D. Hertz, (New York: Harper & Row) 1971.

(2) Rainer Maria Rilke, Duino Elegies, trans. David Young (New York: Norton, 1978).

(3) Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962). Also *History of the Concept of Time*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1992).

(4) Haim Gordon and Rivca Gordon, *Sartre and Evil: Guidelines for a Struggle* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1995). Haim Gordon *Quicksand: Israel, the Intifada, and the Rise of Political Evil in a Democracy* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 1995). Haim Gordon, *Fighting Evil: Unsung Heroes in the Novels of Graham Greene* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997).

(5) Pablo Neruda, "For All to Know" in Pablo Neruda, *Winter Garden*, trans. William O'Daly (Port Townsend, Wash.: Copper Canyon Press, 1986) p.19.

(6) Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism" in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) p. 210.

(7) Pablo Neruda, *Spain in the Heart: Hymn to the Glories of the People at War*, trans. Richard Schaaf (Washington: Azul Editions, 1993). See Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs* (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1978), pp. 125-126.

(8) Heidegger, "The Nature of Language," p. 93.

(9) Hayden Carruth, *Collected Shorter Poems*, 1946-1991 (Fort Worden, Wash: Copper Canyon Press, 1992). p. 343.

(10) Martin Heidegger, Aristotle's Metaphysics, Bk. IX Ch.1-3: On the Essence and Actuality of Force, trans. Walter Brogan and Peter Warnek (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 109.