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**A Note on: 'Heidegger's Temple: How Truth Happens when Nothing is Portrayed', by
Shane Mackinlay. *Sophia* 2010 49 499-507**

He's a terrible fellow, but at least
he's got substance.

Erich Auerbach on Heidegger.

My esteemed colleague Purushottama Bilimoria drew my attention to Shane Mackinlay's 'Heidegger's Temple: How Truth Happens when Nothing is Portrayed'. My friend wondered whether my piece on, 'The Origin of the Work of Art: Heidegger' in *Sophia* December, 2012 51, 04: pp.465-478 was a reply to Mackinlay. It was not.

I had not in fact read Shane Mackinlay's elegant essay. Having read it now I do not entirely agree with it: Nor he with my essay, no doubt. The Republic Letters is wide open.

The point perhaps that Bilimoria wanted me to consider was that Mackinlay makes much of 'nothing', as did Bilimoria himself in his arrestingly titled, 'Why is there Nothing rather than Something?' (*Sophia* December 2012, 51, 04 pp.509-530). He, in conversation, has wanted me to make more of – the concept of? – 'nothing' than I am accustomed to do. I doubt if I can rise to the challenge, beyond the Oxbridge 'I don't quite understand...'. If ever I manage to, I may even write a note on, 'Why is there Nothing Rather than Something?'

'Nothing' Portrayed ?

Shane Mackinlay shows some doubt about the philosophical mileage to be got from Heidegger's: 'A pair of farmer's shoes and *nothing* more'. He is right to doubt so. Van Gogh's pictures of shoes (there are at least three at the van Gogh museum) are close-up renditions of pairs of shoes. No landscape, room-scape or whatever situates the shoes. They are not elements in any still-life composition. They are 'portraits' of shoes. One pair – possibly the one Heidegger refers to – was bought second-hand and worn by the painter himself, and used in the rain – it is speculated – in order to *feel* his solidarity with the working-manⁱ. Van Gogh himself was notoriously poor. Indeed down at heel. Nothing much can be made of the 'nothing' in which the shoe images are situated. It's a mere function of the close-up view. '*Nothing*' is not '*Portrayed*'. *Shoes, only shoes, are.*

That Heidegger is generally interested in 'Nothing' does not authorise one's taking the 'nothing' around the shoes as theory-impregnated. It's not.

What seems to be the case is: The merely negative space around the boots has been conflated with ‘*nothing*’. On to this virtual ‘dream screen’ of ‘*nothing*’ has been projected – by Mackinlay or the philosopher himself – Heidegger’s long reverie on the peasant woman’s life.ⁱⁱ

Das Nichts selbst nichet

With ‘*das Nichts selbst nichet*’ we are well away from the shoes in negligible surroundings. That *Nothing* (in the Heideggarian sense of ‘nothing’) self-nihilates has a *koan* feel. Nothing may: (i) nihilate itself: otiose since there is/was “nothing” (in the English idiomatic sense) there in the first place to be nihilated. Or: (ii) it may do something else. But, how? I have a vague recollection of a neo-Thomist philosopher making something of ‘nothing’ as the condition of e.g. physical objects having plenty of room to move about in, and for a free field to be had in which *potency* may become *act*.

I learned to drive a Model T Ford in an empty paddock. An empty paddock might be construed as: a lot of nothing to get in the way of a novice driver. But ‘a lot of nothing’ here is jocose and of no great philosophical interest.

With Heidegger’s rich-to-overripe reading of the van Gogh painting of shoes I have already dealt in my previous essay. Mackinlay reproduces the Heidegger passage (on p.502) and refers to it: ‘The painting shows itself to [Heidegger] as *portraying* a peasant woman’s whole existence’. (Italic added.) It may very well ‘portray’ thus to Heidegger. For my part the *belle lettristic* passage reads as an over-rich-to-over-ripe – *quasi* – description. Mackinlay and myself may beg to differ as to its merits. To Heidegger’s *point* I would simply remark, *ironice*, ‘Tell me about it!’. Mackinlay however, playing for real the Heidegger game, is entitled to ‘Truth happens’. Not but that I find it less than gripping.

Truth as Strife of Earth and World

Shane Mackinlay has something very interesting to say about this. One is in part sympathetic, and in part critical. I quote:

Beyond the sum total of what is given to us in the way that beings are at any particular moment, there is an excess and abundance that makes possible the infinite variety in the other ways that beings might be. *Thus*, what ‘is’ emerges out of,

and is intimately related to, what^α ‘*is not*’ – in other words, ^β*to nothing*. As Heidegger puts it in *What is Metaphysics?*: ‘Nothing is the making possible of the manifestation of beings as such for human *Dasein*. ... In the being of beings the nihilating of the Nothing happens [*geschieht das Nichten des Nichts*]’ (Heidegger 1998, 91*).

(Mackinlay, p.503

(Italic, bold, and Greek letters added.)

One cavils at the ‘*Thus*’: ‘*Thus* what “is” emerges out of, *and is intimately related to what is not*’. In a crowded room at a noisy party what one *is* concerned with is one’s conversation with NM. One *tunes out* the noise. One’s conversation is not ‘*intimately related*’ to the surrounding babble. The ‘what is not’ part of one’s own talking is ‘related’ only as mere static. One seeks to free one’s conversation from it. This is all a matter of attention, rather than one of *B/being*. One wants one’s conversation isolated – like van Gogh’s pair of shoes. I must concede that if I formed a romantic attraction to NM at the noisy party, the party might become important, memorable and so forth. But this would not entail my going all the way with Heidegger’s ‘intimately related’. One’s second cavil is at Mackinlay’s:

Thus what ‘is’ emerges and is intimately related to what, (α) ‘is not’; (β) – in other words *to nothing*.

α) My conversation with NM which *is* (and is at this particular time totally pointful to me) is not intimately related to ‘is not’. What I do with *what is not my conversation* is that I tune it out. I (an)nihilate it as far as is possible to me. I do this: not the Nothing obligingly negating itself for my convenience.

β) ‘– in other words *to nothing*’. My conversation is *not* intimately related ‘– *in other words to nothing*’. Oh that it were. Silence, at last.

With Heidegger and Mackinlay one agrees that:

Nothing is the making possible of the manifesting of beings as such for human *Dasein*... in the being of beings the nihilating of the Nothing happens: (*geschieht das Nichten des Nichts*’).

(Heidegger
1998, 91*)
(Mackinlay, p.503)

Once again iff all that this cashes out at is: e.g. 'The potatoes spring up in the bare garden'. I might agree. However Nothing does not *noth* itself: the potatoes do it. And – as we say in English – 'for nothing'. The *Nothing* was no more than the absence of things to get in the spuds' way. It did not of itself go away – this Nothing – it was negated by the appearance of the vegetables. Nor did *Nothing* need to negate itself as a precondition of the becoming of the potatoes: the vegetables did all the work by themselves.
Beings, being, drive away Nothing, as the dawn the night.

* * *

'I hope nothing gets in the way of our picnic'
'Well if it does get in the way we can just drive
through it.'

* * *

Mackinlay writes:

What appears to us is (i) always only a glimpse of what could appear, but does not. (ii) We never see completely, in a way that would allow us to grasp a being and entirely contain it in our understanding of it.

(Mackinlay, p.503: numerals
added)

Any *one* being is all too much. Being as *Being* is, too: in spades.
Two points emerge: (i) We can not intuit the world as a completed whole, as Kant reminded us. Quite a lot of stuff never even 'appears' to us. (ii) On the ungraspability of the absolute *being* of even *a single being* Mackinlay and I are bound to agree. We both read Gerard Manley Hopkins. Inscapes, like landscapes, have each their own – for want of a better word – *tone*. Uniquely. Perhaps it was Heidegger's early study of Duns Scotusⁱⁱⁱ which left him with his almost neurotic anxiety about 'the humble *thing*'. Inscapes are for Poets, not for Philosophers, even if a Philosopher influenced Hopkins.

Absolute Nothing?

A general remark on Heidegger in 'The Work of Art' essay: He seems to want two things at once; (i) The ever problematic thingness of a thing – 'resting in itself', *inscaping* its inscape – and at the same time, – (ii) The thing(s) – boots in the painting – to ramify into a whole way of life. A World. This is virtually the cramp in which the British Idealists found themselves, where the 'internal relations' of X were a function, when unpacked, of X's 'external relations'. All that this can lead to – and did – is talk of 'The Absolute'. Such talk 'solved' the problem by making it disappear into a non-intelligible but allegedly all-resolving 'Something'. This something might just as well be *Nothing*. But *pace* my colleague Purushottama Bilimoria, not into an *interesting* nothing. Just a dull one; dull since once one sees how the Absolute was generated, one sees not *it*, but *through it*.

* * *

A quite different point which I made in my earlier essay: the 'truth' that 'happens' in Heidegger's almost-a-short-story is 'truth', but is so obvious as to be banal. As the de Goncourt brothers had it: 'A picture generally hears a lot of nonsense about itself'. Heidegger's remarks are not nonsense: but they are not very interesting, at least for those who never played, or once tried but opted out of, the Heidegger language-game.

The Temple

In my earlier piece I gave the Temple short shrift. That temples are built – ideally, and in fact, in Greece – on rock is well known. Much of what Heidegger writes about the Temple is true, however his overwrought style does little for the truths (truisms?) which he sets out:

It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of *this historical people*...

Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the work draws up out of the rock the mystery of that rock's *clumsy yet spontaneous support*. Standing there, the building holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm itself manifest in its

violence. ...The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air. ...We call this ground the *earth*. (Italic added).

The temple-work, standing there, opens up a world and

at the same time sets this world back again on earth, which itself only thus *emerges as native ground*.

(Heidegger 1971, 42: Mackinlay p.504)

It is the '*native ground*' phrase which, by History's hindsight, may seem, along with '*this historical people*', septic. See the end of the present essay.

What one will not concede Heidegger is his:

The temple in its standing there, first gives to things their look, *and to men their outlook on themselves*.

(Italic added.) (Heidegger: *Basic Writings*, p.168:

Hutchings in *Sophia* (ed.cit) p.476)^{iv}

In my earlier essay I insisted that the Greeks made the Temple, not the Temple the Greeks – and I'll not resile. Greek geometry was the prior condition of the Acropolis. Not *vice versa*. What as a matter of good taste I did not earlier say – what under the hermeneutics of suspicion I suspected – I'll say now. Reading Heidegger's subtext – the '*native ground*' and the, '*and to men their outlook on themselves*', and so on – I came up with a totally ungenial Temple scenario. I venture it now only because I recently saw the motion picture '*The Book Thief*': book burnings and *Kristallnacht* in an innocent small town hung with those un-innocent flags in red, black, and white.

Scenario: in a place once not Germany Speer sets up a Mad Martin scale Temple in kitsch Art Deco, at its centre as 'the god' is a sculpture, by an artist totally forgettable, of the Unspeakable Paperhanger. This would make an, alienated, place '*native ground*' – for some. Thank God it did not happen.

END

Endnotes:

The epigraph is from 'The Book of Books: the making of "Mimesis"', by Arthur Krystal, in *The New Yorker*, December 9, 2013, pp.83-88, see p.84^c. Krystal combines two quotations from an Auerbach source which I have not sighted.

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- ⁱ My wife found this for me on a Wikipedia. Also, the Australian painter John Peter Russell owned a van Gogh painting of *three* pairs of shoes. See: Anne Galbally, 2008, *A remarkable Friendship: Vincent van Gogh and John Peter Russell*, Melbourne University Publishing. The three pairs of shoes to be seen on the Internet do not quite amount to a still-life composition. All you get is a triple 'portrait'; this is contextless as a function of the close-up view.
- ⁱⁱ For my own part I am extremely interested in the interface, the edge-to-edge-ness of literature, the fine arts and philosophy. So the conflation of negative space and '*nothingness*' almost appeals to me: almost. However if I gave in too far I would have to read – much of – Heidegger as *poetic* rather than as *philosophical*. He might not have objected to that.
- ⁱⁱⁱ I have somewhere a banknote from the Irish Republic with a picture of Duns Scotus on it. There were none of these when – 'inscape' – Hopkins lived in Dublin. Scotus was, we Irish insist, Irish. Hopkins liked Duns Scotus, but not the Irish. To be an utter individual 'incommunicable' in the scholastic sense is essentially to be Irish. Essentially, I readily concede, to be – any – Human Being.
- ³ Mackinlay and I are using different editions of 'The Origins of the Work of Art' essay (but the same translation though 'farmer's shoes' seems to have replaced 'peasant shoes'). The edition which Mackinlay uses – and which I once marked-up in a moderately genial way – I have mislaid. So I bought *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger* (Revised and expanded edition) ed. David Farrell Krell, London & New York, Routledge (etc) 1995, cf pp.139-212, I have, as my previous essay indicated, much

cooled from my once almost cheerful reading of Heidegger's – still seminal – work on the Work of Art. That he ever explained the '*Origin*' of works of art I never believed, even when I, still, enjoyed his essay on the topic.

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