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Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity by Iain D. Thomson (review)

Irene McMullin

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Capobianco sees this only as evidence that *Sein* is *die Sache* and dismisses its “separability” from beings. “Ereignis: (Only) Another Name for Being Itself” continues this rejoinder to (a) and (b) which see *Ereignis* as what “gives Being,” insisting that “Being itself [should] be thought as Ereignis” (49).

The core of *Engaging Heidegger* (chapters 3–6) offers us compelling surveys of Heidegger’s thinking about being “at home,” *Angst*/astonishment, and *Lichtung*/light that adduce evidence of a change in Heidegger’s thinking. Here Capobianco is at his best; for example, chapter 3 artfully leads us from Heidegger’s early identification of *Unheimlichkeit* (“uncanniness”) with *Dasein*’s relation to Being, to the middle *Heimkehr* (“return home”) revolving around readings of Sophocles, to the later, untroubled *Heimat* in *Gelassenheit* (“home in letting-be”). This coheres well with the chapter “From Angst to Astonishment,” which details a similarly nuanced movement from the anxious self-alienation of the early to more pacific, joyful later Heidegger. Similarly, in two chapters on *Lichtung* (“light”), Capobianco shows the early Heidegger’s move, by way of the Greeks, from *Da-sein* as the lighting of Being to the later, non-photic clearing of Being, where ‘clearing of Being’ is read subjectively, rather than objectively (which would make room for claims made by [a] and [b]).

Chapters 7 and 8 do not seem integral to Capobianco’s argument and lack the scholarly tone we see in the earlier chapters. The seventh chapter, on dwelling and architecture, is a polemic against deconstructionism/postmodernism and modern architecture that caricatures the former as little more than nattering nabobs of negativism and the latter as having “no presence and power” (130). In contradistinction to the book’s core, his conclusion that “a strong and even vehement resistance to identity, meaning, and place still holds sway in contemporary postmodern thinking” (129) lacks circumspection, nuance, or much documentation; the cramped view that favors Victorian architecture against, apparently, everything modern sells both Heidegger’s philosophy of art and architecture short, to say nothing of deconstruction or postmodernism.

The final chapter yoking together Heidegger and Lacan via *Antigone* is the oddest and possibly destabilizes Capobianco’s position. Capobianco’s Heidegger is a thinker of plenitude, dwelling, identity, joy; Lacan is, if anything, a thinker of lack, painful *jouissance*, absence permeating the symbolic order, and the darkness of the Real.

Engaging Heidegger succeeds in advancing the cause of establishing *Sein* as the unchanging *Sache* of Heidegger’s thinking. Whether the matter is settled remains open, as does the question of how *sachlich* Heidegger’s thinking was of the *Sache*.

REGINALD LILLY

Skidmore College

Iain D. Thomson. *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xix + 245. Paper, \$27.99.

Iain Thomson’s *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity* is an exceptional piece of Heidegger scholarship, providing detailed, informative analysis while remaining highly readable.

Thomson begins by reprising the argument from his earlier *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education* (Cambridge, 2005), namely, that the concept of ontotheology is key to understanding Heidegger’s thought. Ontotheologies comprehend “the intelligible order in terms of both its innermost core [ontology] and its outermost form or ultimate expression [theology]” (10). Thomson examines Heidegger’s claim that these understandings of reality change over time, a history of being comprised of distinct metaphysical “epochs” of intelligibility. Thomson recounts Heidegger’s project as an attempt to overcome ontotheology, particularly its modern and late-modern forms, in which entities appear solely as objects for control or resources for optimization.

Doing so requires cultivating a plural realism whereby entities are recognized as richer in intrinsic meaning than we can capture. Thomson shows that Heidegger’s analysis of

art—particularly Van Gogh’s “A Pair of Shoes”—is aimed at demonstrating how art overflows conceptual boundaries and thereby reveals this plural givenness of meaning. With startling originality, Thomson both explains the use of the three artworks in “Origin of the Work of Art” in terms of Heidegger’s history of being and refutes Shapiro’s famous criticism, arguing that Heidegger is not suggesting that the painting simply represents a peasant woman’s shoes. Rather, it represents both the shoes and a plurality of other possible meaning gestalts suggested by the umbra of “nothingness” that surrounds the shoes—the unformed textures and colors of the background—one of which is the figure of a woman.

The work prompts a gestalt shift from shoes to woman, encouraging us to recognize possibilities of meaning in the inchoate forms surrounding the shoes, and thus (Heidegger hopes) realize the inexhaustibility of meaning and the structure of intelligibility itself: namely, the ontological tension between earth and world, revealing and concealing. Any representation is only one of the many conceptual possibilities present, and art helps us accomplish a postmodern “active receptivity” that responds adequately to the inexhaustibility of being as such.

The latter half of Thomson’s book engages in “applied Heidegger”: the examination of particular works to demonstrate the fruitfulness of understanding Heidegger in this way. By analyzing U2’s *Achtung Baby*, Moore’s *Watchmen* comic series, and (in a particularly informative chapter) Heidegger’s *Contributions to Philosophy* qua philosophical fugue, Thomson is able to pursue the implications of what “postmodernity” means for Heidegger and why it should be considered appealing.

Thomson’s thought-provoking and informative book should prompt a great deal of discussion. In particular, one can ask whether such a “postmodern” condition represents what Thomson and Heidegger hope it does. Thomson suggests throughout that escaping late-modern optimization and control narratives will encourage us “to approach all things with care, humility, patience, gratitude, and perhaps . . . awe, reverence, and love” (212). But why should we suppose that recognizing meaning’s excessiveness and multiplicity should produce such *positive* responses? Is it not equally plausible that it would prompt a kind of desiccated ennui, an inability to care or commit that is rooted in the sense that there is no right answer, no right way to be? One wonders if living with such recognition is even possible, considering the view espoused throughout that intelligibility depends on tension between revealing and *concealing*. What is the proper place for the view that no framework of intelligibility is right or adequate, but merely captures one facet of possible meaning? Is this compatible with existentialism’s characterization of humanity in terms of the need to commit to projects that delimit a normative horizon through which the world can show up as intelligible?

Further, though it seems clear that cultivating a poetic responsivity to the given plurality of meaning will help overcome Western nihilism—i.e. the view that there is *no* inherent meaning—it is not clear that it will move us beyond *ontotheology* as Thomson suggests: “[T]he radically pluralistic, postmodern age will be the ‘last’ age . . . insofar as it constitutes a permanent openness to other possible interpretations, and so to the future” (9n4). But Heidegger’s account also offers an understanding of what entities are (i.e. an ontology), namely, the locus of being’s different modes of manifestation. Indeed, one can argue that with the notion of the “future ones”—those awestruck lovers of meaning plurality—Heidegger also offers a “theology”: namely, “an understanding of that ‘highest’ . . . entity that embodies this kind of being most perfectly” (15).

It is a mark of the book’s strength that it prompts such questioning. *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity* is filled with compelling insights not only about Heidegger, but also about the nature of art, modernity, and humanity’s hopes for the future. Thomson has remarked that when one speaks of ontotheology or postmodernity philosophers tend to look for the door. This excellent book will surely change that.

IRENE McMULLIN

University of Arkansas