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You had to be there (2009)

Being profound and seeming profound. — Those who know that they are profound strive for clarity. Those who would like to seem profound to the crowd strive for obscurity. For the crowd believes that if it cannot see to the bottom of something it must be profound. It is so timid and dislikes going into the water.

— Nietzsche: *The Gay Science*, §173.

Demogorgon: If the abysm
Could vomit forth its secrets. — But a voice
Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless;

— Shelley: *Prometheus Unbound* [2.4]

Carnap dismisses Heidegger as a failed poet, but this is no more fair than dismissing Carnap as a failed scientist. — Heidegger is actually quite a good poet; albeit one who suffers from a world-historical case of logorrhea.

Examples might be multiplied beyond number, but to pick an instance at random, consider the *Black Notebooks*,¹ his *Nachlass* from his Hitler fanboy years. These are mainly gibberish — “Being is to be set more deeply into Dasein through the actual question of the essence of *language*.” — “Philosophy is *the* science, and precisely for that reason it makes no sense to speak of ‘*scientific philosophy*’” — “Only if we are actually errant — actually

¹ *Notebooks 1931-1938*, translated by Richard Rojcewicz. [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016.] — The editors have meticulously assembled several more volumes, but this is representative.

go into errancy, can we strike up against ‘truth’.” — “The essence of *time* is to be questioned disclosively in order to find ourselves in our moment.” — “Fortuitiveness and groundlessness and width and breadth of the future of being.” — worst of all “Only someone who is German can in an original new way poetize being and say being—he alone will conquer anew the essence of θεωρία [‘theory’, ‘beholding’] and finally create *logic*.” [Gödel was Austrian. Close. Tarski was Polish. A little farther off. Turing was British, Church was American. Way off.] — But then out of nowhere I happen upon “*Staunchly into the ineluctable!*” and crack up, because this makes up for the rest of it. — Maybe just *amor fati*, maybe the translator added a bit of his secret sauce (“Unbeirrbar ins Unumgängliche!” doesn’t seem to have the same ring to it), but this one line isn’t bad.

Then finally I come across “Write out of a great reticence,” which reduces me to helpless laughter and puts a period to the exercise. — Dude, this is Volume 94 of your *Gesammelte Werke*. Reticence failed you a long time ago.

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So we accept that Heidegger has some value. But of course any writing *about* Heidegger, which by definition will take him seriously, is completely worthless.

(This included, of course.)

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One thing that Heidegger, like Wittgenstein, seems to understand, at least as well as anyone could before Tarski, is that the language we employ to discuss the foundations of our thinking cannot be the same language we employ within the sphere of phenomena; within science. That in fact it *would* be

strange if you could talk about the relation of language to reality within the same language.² Thus the *Tractatus* is written very much in the Parmenidean manner, as a series of oracular and deliberately cryptic pronouncements; as a sort of poem in philosophical logic.

Heidegger on the other hand resorts to glossolalia, an attempt at speaking in tongues: his incessant babbling is — well — self-indulgent and largely vacuous, but still obviously deliberate, forced, contrived, as if he had some intuition that a process of free association might lead, finally, to a new mode of articulation in which the things we cannot utter in our language will become expressible. — And he is, clearly — anyone who has studied Catholic theology can see the formative effect it had upon his thinking — expecting some kind of Pentacostal revelation, literally the descent of the Holy Ghost. — The revelation of Being.

But he tries too hard to be really convincing. If he could flop around on the floor, roll his eyes back into his head, and foam at the mouth, he obviously would.

Thus though he sometimes says things that are surprisingly beautiful (and occasionally even apropos to the nominal subject of discussion, though this is rarer), most of the time he is simply babbling; e.g.

To philosophize means to exist from ground....the important thing is that we do it proper justice, we always transform each and every thing in ourselves and to ourselves. ... the freedom toward ground is the outstripping, in the upswing, of that which carries us away and gives us distance....the human being is a creature of distance.... only by way of the real primordial distance that

² Though in fact you can. But admittedly it *is* strange.

the human in his transcendence establishes toward all beings does the true nearness to things begin to grow in him. And only the capacity to hear into the distance summons forth the awakening of the answer of those humans who should be near.³

To which compare “Surfin’ Bird” by The Trashmen:

Pa-pa-ooma-mow-mow
Pa-pa-oooh-mow-mow-mow
Pa-pa-ooma-mow-mow
Pa-pa-oooh-mow-mow-mow
Well dontcha know
About the bird?
Well everybody knows that the bird is a word

und so weiter.

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Which is, incidentally, a more natural direction to take the argument: to say, as Nietzsche did in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that there are things that can be expressed in music that lie beyond the grasp of language. Though whether Wagnerian music-drama or atavistic surf music is the more natural vehicle has yet to be determined.

³ Selected at random from *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, translated by Michael Heim, Indiana University Press, 1984. This is not the only work of Heidegger that suggests Burroughs was not the first to cut a manuscript into pieces and splice it back together in arbitrary order.

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Absurd though it must sound, my original intention in reading Heidegger was to clear my head. Obviously this is something like chugging a bottle of whiskey to cure a hangover,⁴ but — honestly — at the time it almost made sense.

I was thinking about molecular biology, and wondering how one might define life in the most general sense. It seemed to me that Nietzsche had understood something when he said that life was will to power, and though I thought I knew what it was, I wasn't completely sure, and since this was an idea that had evolved as Nietzsche was talking about it, it seemed a reasonable supposition that whatever intuitive goal he had been aiming at might have been better articulated by one of his commentators than by Nietzsche himself — who, after all, had left his work unfinished and his conceptual framework incomplete. — So it made a certain sense to read Heidegger's lectures on Nietzsche; in four volumes surely he must have said something useful about this? Anyway the joke was too good to pass up.

The first thing I discovered was that, contrary to popular belief, the only way to read Heidegger is very rapidly, in fact as rapidly as possible. It's no use getting caught up in trying to understand the argument, because there is none. Instead you must place yourself in the kind of receptive state that will allow you to scan the text while remaining alert to the possibility of a moment of poetic insight; over which you may then profitably linger. Otherwise you have to go as fast as you can turn the pages. — Thus I went through four volumes on Nietzsche in three days, and escaped with only a splitting headache. Any longer would have courted brain damage.

⁴ Jerry Lee Lewis once claimed that at the height of his career he went through four fifths of whiskey a day, and sobered up for the evening gig by drinking a fifth of Tequila. Perhaps that is the appropriate comparison.

As it turned out though Heidegger immediately seizes on the will to power as Nietzsche's *only* idea — because every great philosopher has only one idea — because — well — there is no because — he doesn't understand it, and in that respect the effort was fruitless. He does say some insightful things about the Being/Becoming issue, and how Nietzsche was emphatically of the party of Heraclitus — though, being Heidegger, elsewhere in a commentary on Heraclitus himself he insists that what Heraclitus says is exactly the same as what Parmenides says, because The Greeks/unity of divine inspiration/unfiltered Voice of Being/p if and only if not p/usw (insert creative mistranslations⁵ as needed) — but gets hung up on the idea of Eternal Recurrence, which he also doesn't understand (not that Nietzsche did either).⁶

But after that I was hooked. — Or sort of. — As the guy who gave me my first joint said, “First one is free.” — The two jokes are of roughly equivalent order. Utter nonsense is not exactly addictive, but it does satisfy a certain need.

⁵ One useful thing I learned from Nina, who was fluent in the classical languages, was that when Heidegger pretends to be translating his sources he is often just Making Shit Up.

⁶ Nietzsche seems to have thought that the laws of mechanics imply that any finite system will return to its original configuration in finite time, and at one point contemplated a formal study of physics, to provide himself with the means to prove it. This is not exactly true, though in some circumstances one can expect a near-periodicity (Poincaré's recurrence theorem). — What made the idea important to him, as Heidegger almost manages to state, was that it seemed to show that Heraclitean flux/Becoming could in its own way exhibit the same invariance as Parmenidean stasis/Being. — What he might have thought of modern cosmology, who entertains both recurrent and non-recurrent possibilities, is only the matter of speculation, but I expect he would have sided with Bondi, Gold, and Hoyle against “the exploding-universe boys”, and authored polemical commentary that would have been fun to read.

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Take as another example, from *The Essence of Reasons* [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969], this ode to negation: “The nihilating Not of Nothingness and the nihilating Not of the Difference are not,⁷ indeed, identical. But they are the same in the sense that both belong together insofar as the Being of being reveals its essence.” — Clearly this is the fault of the translator,⁸ and we should consult the original German. — “Jenes nichtende Nicht des Nichts und dieses nichtende Nicht der Differenz sind zwar nicht einerlei, aber das Selbe im Sinne dessen, was im Wesenden des Seins des Seienden zusammengehört.” — A marvel of lucidity! the more so, of course, if you know no German.

Or something like this:

Science, on the other hand, has to assert its soberness and seriousness afresh and declare that it is concerned solely with what-is. Nothing — how can it be for science anything other than a horror and a phantasm? If science is right then one thing stands firm: science wishes to know nothing of Nothing. Such is after all the strictly scientific approach to Nothing. We know it by wishing to know nothing of Nothing.

Science wishes to know nothing of Nothing. Even so the fact remains that at the very point where science tries to put its own essence in words it invokes the aid of Nothing. It has recourse to the very thing it rejects. What sort of

⁷ The nature of this third Not is Not, alas, explained.

⁸ Terrence Malick, *mirabile dictu*; in his academic career a Heidegger maven. — Which does, as Stanley Cavell pointed out, explain a great deal about *Days of Heaven*.

schizophrenia is this?⁹

One might simply laugh that off, but oddly enough it is even more wrong if you take it semiseriously. Because, in fact, given that three-quarters of the mass-energy of the observed universe appears to reside in the vacuum, and it is this which drives the acceleration of the cosmic expansion, and no one can explain what fixes the so-called cosmological constant that measures this at its apparent small finite value, rather than at zero or something 120 orders of magnitude larger, one might say that though nothing is more important to cosmology than an understanding of Nothing,¹⁰ we know next to nothing about it.

Nor does Heidegger, of course. Though he *will* pretend.

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Incidentally the empty set can be defined as $\{x: x \neq x\}$. Make of that what you will.

⁹ "What is Metaphysics?" Translated by R.F.C. Hull and Alan Crick, in: *Existence and Being*. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1949; p. 359.

¹⁰ Ulam in his memoirs (*Adventures of a Mathematician*): "It was on the first or second day in Los Alamos that I met Feynman, and remarked to him my surprise that $E = mc^2$ — which of course I believed in theoretically but somehow did not really 'feel' — was, in fact, the basis of the whole thing... . Einstein himself, when he was first told before the war about radioactive phenomena showing the equivalence of mass and energy, allegedly replied, 'Ist das wirklich so? ist das wirklich so?' [Is that really so?] ... I told Feynman, 'One day people will discover that a cubic centimeter of vacuum is really worth ten thousand dollars — it is equivalent to so much energy.' He immediately agreed and added, 'Yes, but of course it will have to be *pure* vacuum!'" — This long since ceased to be a joke.

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And what made it seem deep to characterize life as will-to-power? It seems as though there is a missing principle, one dual to entropy, manifested in the perverse tendency of some systems to order themselves by disordering their environment.

As Nietzsche had begun to perceive, this has little or nothing to do with Napoleon, it is more like the principle apparent in the need of a root system to expand to gain more nutrition for a growing plant. — But it is curiously elusive.

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Negation

Panthea: I see a mighty darkness
Filling the seat of power, and rays of gloom
Dart round, as light from the meridean sun.
— Ungazed upon and shapeless; neither limb,
Nor form, nor outline; yet we feel it is
A living Spirit.

— *Prometheus Unbound* [2.4]

Compare Wittgenstein [*Philosophische Untersuchungen* #37]: “Wo unsere Sprache uns einen Körper vermuten läßt, und kein Körper ist, dort, möchten wir sagen, sei ein *Geist*.”

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About existentialism generally, of course it reminds you of the Dirac theory of the positron: if God is removed from theology, a hole remains, the presence of an absence; reasoning around it creates something like a movement of the negative image — the Nothing — the Absurd — whatever. — And there you go.

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Heidegger on Greek science

Greek science was never exact precisely because, according to its essence, it neither could be, nor needed to be, exact. Hence, it makes no sense at all to assert that contemporary science is more exact than the science of antiquity. Neither can one say that Galileo's doctrine of free-falling bodies is true while Aristotle's teaching that light bodies strive upwards is false. For the Greek understanding of the nature of body and place and of the relation between them rests on a different interpretation of beings. It determines, therefore, a correspondingly different way of seeing and questioning natural occurrences. No one would presume to say that Shakespeare's poetry is more advanced than that of Aeschylus. It is even more impossible to say that the contemporary understanding of beings is more correct than that of the Greeks.

On the one hand, this does reflect what at one point I derived from the reading of Kuhn and Quine, that the systems of science before and after a paradigm shift do not necessarily translate into one another.

On the other it's simply ridiculous: Eratosthenes measured the circumference of the Earth; Aristarchus estimated the distance from the Sun to the sphere of the fixed stars — in effect the radius of the universe; the science systematized in the presentation of Euclid (and taught from that exact same text into the twentieth century) was called "geometry" because it originated in land measurement. — Even we can play at etymology. — Archimedes, the first true mathematical physicist, the idol of Leonardo, Galileo, and Leibniz, the peer of Newton and Gauss, pioneered the techniques of the calculus, mastered

the mechanics of levers and pulleys, built engines of war that baffled the Romans, and famously solved the problem of determining whether a crown made for King Hiero was pure gold or an admixture of gold and silver without melting it down while sitting in his bath, and ran naked through the streets of Syracuse shouting “Eureka!” to announce his triumph. — The only difference between the Ancients and the Moderns is that we know more than they did; their methods differed from ours little if at all.

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Greek mathematics did, however, employ a somewhat different language to express its results. Euclid eschewed numbers in favor of magnitudes represented by lines, and proved everything with diagrams; a modern can find it difficult to decipher his presentation of the famous Euclidean algorithm for finding the greatest common divisor of two whole numbers, for instance, because it’s all done in pictures. — An existential panic had seized Greek mathematicians when the Pythagoreans discovered the existence of incommensurables, what we call irrational numbers. (The name itself preserves the idea that these simply did not *make sense*.) We can’t claim to have resolved all the difficulties in the idea of the continuum, but we do have a deeper understanding of it; and of course possess far superior notations for arithmetic and algebraic manipulation.

In any case the Greeks employed a picture-language for mathematics, which requires no translation; let alone labored exegeses relying on questionable interpretations of Greek vocabulary and grammar. — Legend has it Archimedes was killed by a Roman soldier who interrupted him as he contemplated a diagram he had sketched in the sand. — “Do not disturb my circles!” he shouted. How might Heidegger have parsed that.

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Really it seems like that, the antithesis of the Newtonian view of the history of thought and speculation. We see that we stand on the shoulders of giants; Heidegger wants it the other way around, and so looks at intellectual history standing on his head.

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The Heideggerian fallacy

Nietzsche remarks:

“In the beginning.” — To glorify the origin — that is the metaphysical aftershoot that breaks out when we meditate on history and makes us believe that what stands at the beginning of all things is also what is most valuable and essential.¹¹

About which he doesn't judge for or against. But he identifies the tendency and remarks upon it. Heidegger never even seemed to notice this was what he was doing. He just took it for granted that was the proper mode of analysis. The only possible methodology.

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In real life discoveries are not made by the blinding light of inspiration. More often discovery is like bumping into something in the dark; it takes a while to figure out what it is. — Witten said about the discovery of string theory that it was “a piece of the physics of the twenty-first century, that fell by accident into the twentieth.” And no one has understood it yet.

Taking the Ancients as oracles. — Imagine insisting that the real map of the Americas must be derived from the logbooks of Columbus. — That the perfection of astronomy was attained by Stonehenge.

¹¹ *Human, All Too Human*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; II.3, p.302.

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Though the idea that everything must be understood at its source is not absurd per se, and has had distinguished adherents. Andre Weil, e.g., notes in his autobiography

That same year [1922, his first at the *Ecole Normal*], I began to read Riemann. Some time earlier, and first of all in reading Greek poets, I had become convinced that what really counts in the history of humanity are the truly great minds, and that the only way to get to know these minds was through direct contact with their works. I have since learned to modify this judgment quite a bit, though I have never really let it go completely.¹²

which is certainly Heideggerian.

But Leibniz, one should note, held exactly the opposite opinion, and confessed that he hadn't even read Descartes but learned his philosophy from commentators — because (I can fill this in for him) as a dilettante and polymath his main concern was to try to absorb ideas as quickly as possible, and difficult authors slowed him up too much.¹³

¹² André Weil, *The Apprenticeship of a Mathematician*, translated by Jennifer Gage. Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1992; p. 40. — Compare Goethe: “Works of nature and of art one does not get to know as they are finished; one must catch them in their genesis to understand them to some extent.” [Letter to Zelter, August 4, 1803]

¹³ Leibniz doesn't even seem to have read Euclid before making his contributions to mathematics. Apparently like Grothendieck he learned more from conversation than from reading or directed study.

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In any case it's very easy to understand how the early Greek philosophers (the philosophers of nature) came by their problems. You might be more impressed by invariance, like Parmenides, or with flux, like Heraclitus, but the question of how the world keeps changing while somehow remaining identifiably the same is an obvious one. (The old puzzle of the Ship of Theseus was a formal expression.)¹⁴ The imaginative leap to atomism (Feynman remarks at the outset of his *Lectures on Physics* that if you had to summarize everything known to modern science on the back of an envelope, you'd write down the atomic hypothesis) still looks amazing, but there is something inevitable in the idea (there has to be, it's right), and — more important here — it is something conveyed not in words but in pictures. So the Greek constructions Heidegger loves to construe are completely irrelevant.

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Indeed if anything can be said “to *stamp* Becoming with the character of Being” — and thus express “the *highest will to power*” — Nietzsche's words which Heidegger pronounced “the summit of the completion of Western philosophy” — it is the atomic hypothesis; and this, too, was invented by the Greeks, albeit the ones to whom Heidegger pays no attention.

Indeed the Pythagorean insight is the most remarkable of all, but so far as I can discern Heidegger never says anything about

¹⁴ Basically a paradox of the transitivity of identity: the ship consists of a finite number of planks; if you replace one, it is apparently the same; continue step by step until you have replaced them all. — Variations might include building identical ships side by side and then exchanging their constituent planks one by one: which is then which?

him.¹⁵ Nor are there any commentaries on the *Timaeus* that I can discover. The deepest contributions of the Greeks seem to have sailed straight over his head. — Mach begins *The Science of Mechanics* with Archimedes, and moves seamlessly into arguments of Lagrange and Galileo; but that there was a deep and fundamental continuity there, between the Ancients and the Moderns, is something Heidegger simply cannot admit.

Moreover (to belabor the obvious) the Pythagorean theorem did not appear out of nowhere: the Egyptians had known it as a rule of thumb, and used it to construct right-angled triangles to square the foundations of their construction projects; indeed Weil in his history of the theory of numbers¹⁶ traces it back to Babylonian tablets dating from 1600 B.C. (The first known statement of the *general* solution can be found, of course, in Euclid.)

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Many will argue, not entirely tongue in cheek, that the perfection of the idea of the automobile, the Platonic ideal, was the 196x Corvette, where the value of x runs from 2 to 9 according to taste. — I myself adhere to a deviant sect that worships the Shelby Cobra. — But no one in his right mind will claim the perfection of the automobile is only to be found in its origins, in the workshop where Ford built the first Model T; let alone write “Model” with an X over it, or babble incoherently about the carried-carrying of carriage, the etymology of “wheel”, and the dire Fate of Man, now become not simply God-less and Home-less, but Horse-less....

¹⁵ Not quite true: there is a brief (and dismissive) summary of the tenets of the Pythagorean school in the lecture notes published as *Basic Concepts of Ancient Philosophy*. [Translated by Richard Rojcewicz. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.]

¹⁶ Andre Weil, *Number Theory: An Approach Through History*. [Boston: Birkhäuser, 1984.]

Nor (to club the thing to death) was the perfection of the human organism to be found in its earliest antecedents, not least because you wouldn't know where to stop: Cro-Magnon?

Australopithecus? the earliest mammals? some ancestor in the Cambrian explosion? the first eukaryote that could metabolize oxygen? — If we like we can carry this back to the choice of elementary particle vacuum that determined the structure of the universe and created the *possibility* of carbon chemistry.

It is always fascinating when one can identify a moment in intellectual history when a great idea first appeared. But the birth of a notion is usually some kind of breech presentation, and it takes a while to tell which end is which. The meaning of the calculus was still being sorted out two centuries after its invention; Darwin's idea of natural selection only really made sense after Mendel discovered the gene, and the gene only made sense after Crick and Watson explained its molecular basis; even in the most obvious case of one great man having one great idea, Einstein's theory of gravitation, eight years of mathematical and conceptual confusion lay between the original inspiration and the final formulation.

So even though we accept that the Greeks started us upon the path of intellectual progress, it is a climb, not a descent.

And what is Heidegger trying to insinuate by taking this attitude? by saying the opposite? — That inspiration is divine, that its recipients are the favored of the gods, and that its light dims in proportion to our distance from it.

I refer again to Cervantes: this is the myth of the Golden Age, of entropic decline in the chain of cause and effect; it is inherently pessimistic, a narrative of decline. It denies the possibility of evolution, indeed of life and growth in any form.

But all of that is wrong, of course. Inspiration begets inspiration; novelty is self-perpetuating; An idea is not an end in itself, but rather the beginning of a process.

Staunchly into the ineluctable, indeed.

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The Anaximander Fragment

The reductio ad absurdum of Heidegger's ancestor-worship is his 51 page essay on the Anaximander fragment.

This begins with [DFK's translation of] Nietzsche's translation from the Greek:

Whence things have their origin, there they must also pass away according to necessity; for they must pay penalty and be judged for their injustice, according to the ordinance of time.¹⁷

and concludes with Heidegger's truncated reformulation:

... along the lines of usage, for they let order and thereby also reck [Old German *Ruch*, which he pulls out of his ass for the occasion] belong to one another (in the surmounting) of disorder.

Heidegger's translations, of course, tend toward the fanciful. But, he says, "when a translation is only literal it is not necessarily faithful." — Faithful to what? one might ask. — "It is faithful only when its terms are words which speak from the language of the matter itself." — And where is *that* language to be found? — Well, Heidegger is going to make one up ...

¹⁷ Translated by David Farrell Krell, in Martin Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking*. [New York: Harper & Row, 1975.] — Burnet says this is actually Theophrastos quoting (and casting shade on) Anaximander, and renders the passage in full as "And into that from which things take their rise they pass away once more, 'as is ordained, for they make reparation and satisfaction to one another for their injustice according to the appointed time,' as he says in these somewhat poetical terms."

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As for what the author himself meant by this cryptic utterance, that is more than adequately explained by Burnet, who points out that, like his predecessor Thales, Anaximander was concerned with the philosophy of nature — indeed was known to have fabricated sundials and may have drawn the first map — and sought a more acceptable answer to the question of what constituted the universal substance than “water”; he is said to have hypothesized a *prima materia* which he called “the Infinite”, from which the existing elements had been differentiated, and the quoted passage could be read as an early intuition of the conservation of energy. — This is not ontology on acid but cosmology, in other words, an early essay in fundamental physics, and historically of a piece with the organic development of the scientific world-picture which fills Heidegger with such uncomprehending horror.

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Though of course an appeal to history is pointless because “Hegel is the only Western thinker who has thoughtfully experienced the history of thought” Others, it must be presumed, have experienced this history thoughtlessly, or have thoughtfully experienced the history of thoughtlessness. — We should also note that on the important question of Midwestern thinkers Heidegger is conspicuously silent.

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But grant the hypothesis (I feel that I am being played for a sucker here) that Heidegger has a theory. Then what is it?

It is that the logic and language of the early Greek philosophers lacked the artificial restrictions imposed upon them later, and

had direct access to a more primitive, more plastic, and more authentic conception of the nature of things. That the gods had not yet fled, and just as Athena counseled Achilles directly, so did Being speak to Anaximander. — The point is somewhat like what Brakhage says about the visual perceptions of the infant, that they encompass a world of possibility far more extensive than the learned constructs imposed by Western conventions of seeing. — One must picture the first Greek thinkers as gifted with a kind of polymorphous perversity: everything was infused with Being, as everything for the infant is infused with libido; and that their engagement with reality was more authentic accordingly — why not stick your dick in a pie, after all, to impregnate pastry?¹⁸ — In the case of Anaximander, he is trying to deny the reading as natural philosophy. The confusion remarked by Theophrastus, between natural things and poetic conceptions of justice, vanishes if these distinctions did not exist, and in this Edenic state Thinking confronted Being directly; unhampered by the filters that have been imposed by a couple of millennia of intellectual degeneration. — “If the presupposition that the fragment makes statements about things of nature fails,” says Heidegger, “then so does all foundation for the assertion that what ought to be represented strictly in terms of the natural sciences is interpreted morally and juridically.” In fact then “science”, “ethics”, and “jurisprudence” did not exist, no boundaries existed to demarcate them, and “the way we normally think within a range of disciplines (such as physics, ethics, philosophy of law, biology, psychology) has no place here ... there is no possibility of trespass or of the unjustified transfer of notions from one area to another.” And yet, he insists, “boundless indeterminacy and flux do not necessarily prevail... .” — Here he waves his hands and quibbles over the translations of a few words and triumphantly concludes “this way of letting manifold being in its unity come into essential view is anything but a kind of primitive and anthropomorphic representation. ... Beings are

¹⁸ In re which compare the speech of Henry Burlingame in Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*.

spoken of in such a way that their Being is expressed. Being comes to language as the Being of beings.”

(I am momentarily intrigued, and translate that into Pythagorean: “Numbers are spoken of in such a way that their Number is expressed. Number comes to language as the Number of numbers.” — But there *is* no “number of numbers”, that would be the cardinal of the set of all sets, and there is none such, Cantor settled that a long time ago — Oh well. Back to Fantasyland...)

With which he summons what would ordinarily be quite justifiable skepticism about the validity of translations from the early Greek; and, of course, once all normal correspondences have been unplugged and any continuity between ancient and modern language denied, no tether remains.

Which is probably why Heidegger’s free “translations” have a tendency to sound like Athanasius Kircher’s jazz improvisations on the text of the Rosetta Stone, and indeed the whole exercise — “thinking must poeticize on the riddle of Being” — is like nothing so much as one of Coltrane’s variations on a simple melody; an entirely legitimate art form, to be sure, but it is ridiculous to pretend this has anything to do with Anaximander or what he really thought. — *That* was pretty clearly stated by Theophrastos, a guy who was right there upon the scene, and it is obviously a fragment of an early philosophy of nature, not a Secret Clue to some demented poetics of ontology.

(Of course Heidegger protests that Theophrastus was already too far removed from the primordial thinking of Anaximander to appreciate his true meaning, but the idea that Heidegger himself, two thousand years further removed from the source, is supposed to have a better appreciation of what that meaning

was, is so fantastically absurd that I collapse in laughter. — No,
no. — Enough is enough —)

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Somewhere in the middle of Heidegger's rant about Kalchas, the seer Homer introduces in the *Iliad*, "who knew all that is, is to be, or once was" and whose description therefore is supposed to exemplify the translation of "being" appropriate to primordial data like the Anaximander text, he triumphantly concludes a paragraph of linguistic fantasy with "the seer is outside himself in the solitary regions of the presencing of everything that in some way becomes present," and it begins to alarm me that I have no difficulty in understanding him. — Good God, next I'll be talking to trees and serving tea and crumpets to the Underpants Gnomes.

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It occurred to me to ask, when first I read this, what interpretation a philosophical archaeologist two millennia hence might give to some piquant fragment of the 20th century — say, the last surviving sentence of Chuck Berry. It seemed to me that this would have to be

My heart's beatin' rhythm
And my soul keeps a-singing the blues

which is surely worth a treatise in itself. — Indeed one must wonder how many pages some future Heidegger might devote to the significance of the second apostrophe. —

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That there is a *poetic* validity in this kind of thing is undeniable. But it is seen less clearly in Heidegger than in, say, Werner Herzog, who insists that his objective in making films is to discover the “ecstatic truth” behind appearance, and whose own version of the Anaximander fragment appears in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* [2010], an exploration of the oldest known artworks, cave paintings discovered in the south of France which are thirty-two thousand years old. There is undoubtedly some deep mystery here, in that the capacity for symbolic representation sprang as it were out of nowhere; one would like to be able to interrogate the artist, to know what possessed him or her to produce these works, and why they took this form and were presented *here*, not somewhere else. — Herzog, quite naturally, speculates that the exhibition of art by firelight in what must have been a public space was an early version of cinema, and it’s as good a theory as any. — But it is clear that whatever it is Heidegger is looking for, if it does exist, first manifested itself long before the Greeks, and lies at a far deeper level than the indistinct mumblings of the early natural philosophers.

(I would call this, of course, the expression of a kind of natural necessity, a corollary of what might be called the will to power: the principle of the *sketch* — the mapping of the world without to the world within, echoed in description.)

Of course it is ironic that Herzog had to go *into* a cave to witness this revelation — the gods do have a sense of humor.

He notes, incidentally, that carbon dating has established that at least one of the paintings in the Chauvet cave was begun by one artist and finished by another five thousand years later. The moral this suggests about the ability of one author to perceive the

intent of another over a great distance in time is the opposite of the one Heidegger would draw.

{...}

Again:

Anaximander, Parmenides, and Heraclitus are the only primordial thinkers. They are this, however, not because they open up Western thought and initiate it. Already before them there were thinkers. They are primordial thinkers because they think the beginning. The beginning is what is thought in their thinking. This sounds as if “the beginning” were something like an “object” the thinkers take up for themselves in order to think it through. But we have already said in general about the thinking of thinkers that it is a retreating in face of Being. If, within truly thoughtful thinking, the primordial thinking is the highest one, then there must occur here a retreating of a special kind.¹⁹

One can imagine Heidegger giving a lecture course on the four elements. To treat fire he would have to address the problem of Prometheus, he would immediately insist that it is impossible to enter the mind of a Titan [to think Titan Titanically] and that his words and actions are incommensurable with modern experience, thus that no one can understand fire except in the moment when it first broke the darkness, etc., etc. — Whereas we know in real life that fire was first mastered by the precursors of *Homo sapiens* more than four hundred thousand years ago, and in fact the greater ease with which cooked food could be digested allowed evolution to shrink the human intestines and direct an increased flow of blood to the brain, which expanded to accommodate it. — Save, I guess, in certain parts of Germany.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*. [Translated by André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.]

{...}

“Being is to be set more deeply into Dasein through the actual question of the essence of *language*.”

{...}

Whorf draws a broad distinction in Hopi metaphysics between subjective and objective, manifesting/manifested, which sounds suspiciously like *noumenon/phenomenon*. Distinctions corresponding loosely to our concept of time are found in the former category. — “If we were to approximate our metaphysical terminology more closely to Hopian terms,” says Whorf,

we should probably speak of the subjective realm as the realm of HOPE or HOPING. Every language contains terms that have come to attain cosmic scope of reference, that crystallize in themselves the basic postulates of an unformulated philosophy, in which is couched the thought of a people, a culture ... Such are our words ‘reality, substance, matter, cause,’ and as we have seen ‘space, time, past, present, future.’ Such a term in Hopi is the word most often translated ‘hope’ ... The word is really a term which crystallizes the Hopi philosophy of the universe in respect to its grand dualism of objective and subjective ... It refers to the state of the subjective, unmanifest, vital and causal aspect of the Cosmos, and the fermenting activity toward fruition and manifestation with which it seethes — an action of HOPING ... which is forever pressing upon and into the manifested realm. As anyone acquainted with Hopi society knows, the Hopi see this burgeoning activity in the growing of plants, the forming of clouds and their condensation in rain²⁰

²⁰ “An American Indian Model of the Universe”, in Benjamin Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality*. [Edited by John B. Carroll. Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1956.]

One could not wish for a better description of the Will to Power.

Whorf's thesis is of course controversial, and subsequent scholarship has done its best to pour cold water on his (admittedly speculative) attempts at translation. But obviously the same objections apply, a hundred times more powerfully, to any attempt to decode a single sentence uttered by an early Greek philosopher two-and-a-half millennia ago.

And if "a streak of light must penetrate the misty confusion of errancy for translation to be possible," surely the fog will be more easily penetrated when the anthropologist can, as Quine put it, go native; become a Hopi himself — become impregnated with their ether, as Boswell might have put it.

As in fact Whorf did. Heidegger couldn't talk to Anaximander, and ask him what he meant. But Whorf could talk to the Hopi. He could learn their language at its source.

{...}

The Hopis did not have "philosophy" of the kind with which we afflict ourselves, but they had what is better, creation myths.²¹ Many feature Hurúing Wuhti, Hard Beings Woman, an Earth goddess who embodied the original hard surface, the seed about which the world was formed. [Grounding the ground!] In some versions she has separate incarnations in the East and West, and all creatures originate in their playful collaboration. — Quite a long and elaborate story has been told about this, much longer and more complex than anything that comes down to us from the preSocratics, and — best of all — Hopis who could recite it in the original language were still available in the twentieth century

²¹ See David A. Leeming, *Creation Myths of the World*. [Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010.]

for cross-examination on any fine points of interpretation that might puzzle the philosophical ethnographer. — For that matter they might have *sung* it, and acted out the story in a ritual dance while dressed in costumes representing the principals. They could have made it *come to life*. — They don't call them dead languages for nothing.

So: on the hypothesis that the whole development of Western language, philosophy, and culture has been a flight from the light of revelation as it fell upon the truly primordial thinkers, what better place to recover it than in the uncorrupted and emphatically unWestern teachings of a “primitive” (I use the quotation marks exactly as Heidegger would) culture whose logic and language, in particular whose conceptions of space and time, appear to be utterly alien to our own? — For them the gods have not yet fled.

And here was Whorf, upon the scene, trying to do just that.

But where was Heidegger? walking in the woods in the Black Forest, brooding over his (German Idealist) destiny — praying for the Sun to lay off his gray skin and put on the yellow fox skin that announces the bright dawn of the morning. — Pausing now and then to pick up an arrowhead or a shard of pottery left over from the philosophical Neolithic, while the great Ocean of Hard Beings Woman lay all undiscovered before him.

{...}

I tell myself that I ought to organize these notes into something that might at least masquerade as a coherent argument. But then realize, no, nothing could be more inappropriate. It would only spoil the joke.

{...}

History. Destiny. History as Destiny. Destiny as History.

Destiny I picture as some kind of slime-trail left by the Great Slug Being as it crawls through Time.

{...}

I enjoy reading Heidegger, of course. I find him soothing. But then again I have read all the novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs and have watched *Cat Women of the Moon* thirty or forty times. When I say there's no accounting for taste, my poster child is a selfie.

{...}

Being is Time. Time is Money. Money is Power. Power corrupts. Absolute Being corrupts absolutely.

And so we have black paintings and musical compositions which consist of silence. — Well. — Why *not*.

{...}

Cordelia Nothing, my lord.

Lear Nothing?

Cordelia Nothing.

Lear Nothing will come of nothing, speak again.