Inventing Heidegger's Fluid Ontology


In *Heidegger and the Romantics*, Paul Vandevelde traces a parallel between the poetic project of the early romantics (Schlegel, Novalis, and Schleiermacher) and Heidegger's works of the ’30s and ’40s. Both the romantics, who around 1800 experimented with a new kind of writing and thinking, and Heidegger understood poetry as an “invention” of meaning (15). Vandevelde uses the term “invention” as indicating something similar to what Heidegger calls *erdanken* or *ersagen*, i.e., an inventive thinking and saying that neither simply make up new meaning nor address something already there. As Vandevelde puts it, inventing means something “between discovery and fabrication” (22). Vandevelde argues that Heidegger supplies what the early romantics were missing, an ontological project through poetry, and I believe that the main achievement of Vandevelde’s book is his ability to “carve out” (I may even say “invent”) with remarkable scholarship, lucidity, and force an ontology in Heidegger’s thinking of the ’30s and ’40s that addresses things in their being as becoming.

In the first part of his book, Vandevelde exposes the project of the romantics, which moves beyond the division between literature and philosophy and takes *Dichtung*, or poetry, not only as a subjective linguistic activity but also as “a potency lying dormant in nature, things, and people” (20). The early romantics practiced a new form of fragmentary writing that demands for continuing completion of the work of poetry in a “symphilosophy” that replaces the idea of a single author with that of a community including writers, readers, and critics. Their poetic practice aimed at unifying disciplines like art, philosophy, and poetry—while “subverting” established practices—and aimed as well
at breaking down the barriers between art and life (23). The activity of the artist reveals nature itself as an organic process the artist completes (26–28).

For the romantics, language not only belongs to subjects but also to things; it thus has an ontological dimension. Vandevelde writes: “Things themselves embody a form of subjectivity; they are ‘counter-subjects,’ as Schlegel famously says. As such they have something to tell us and even have their own language” (37). Words, then, do not have simply a referential function, but they express “an overlap between subject and object” (37). Poetry is a metaphysical activity that has an effect on the being of things; it is “a configuration of reality,” and Vandevelde writes, “The operation on language was only a subsidiary operation aimed at recovering the overlap that words always already have with things” (37). What allows the poet to express the language of things is that the poet (or humans in general) “always already” overlaps with things, something that is testified by “mood or feeling in general,” which make us amenable to being touched by things (38).

After clarifying the “overlap” between words, things, and subjects, Vandevelde moves towards the broad understanding of translation that Schlegel has, which takes translation in a more literal sense of “carrying across.” For Schlegel, in poetry the physical realm is translated, which implies that “there is in the world itself, in things and people, a potency or a force that can be transposed—carried over, translated. . . . If a thing (through knowledge), an event (through historical recounting), a work (through linguistic translation) can be translated in the broad sense, it is because the thing, the event, and the work were themselves a first crystallization of a primordial translatability” (47). Translation does not carry over an already made, fixed content but configures and transforms a potency lying in things and subjects. We thus gain a little more insight into how poetry lies dormant (namely, as a potency) in nature, people, and things, and how at the same time poetic practice (which occurs as a translation) is inventive in the sense indicated earlier.

I will not summarize, here, Vandevelde’s account of Schlegel’s metaphysics, which is treated under the heading “transcendental poetry,” since for Vandevelde, this was a failed attempt to supply the methodology of the romantics with a metaphysics that could sustain this methodology. Instead, I will proceed right away to Heidegger’s “ontology,” as Vandevelde calls it, which—so his thesis—filled the gap left by the romantic project.

According to Vandevelde, in the 1930s and 1940s Heidegger pursued the “huge and daring enterprise of developing an ontology,” which led Heidegger to reconsider thinking in terms of Dichtung (78). If we consider that for Heidegger ontology means the question of the being of beings—a metaphysical question