

# Language and Responsibility: The Possibilities and Problems of Poetic Thinking for Environmental Philosophy

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*There is a sense in which poetry can re-inscribe humans in their natural surroundings, but language—even poetic language—is also always problematic. In conversation with and in response to recent works by David Abram, I will delineate at least two ways in which poetic language separates and distinguishes humans from nature. I also argue for the importance of what is implicit or invisible (as opposed to tangible and sensuous). Language is a mode of human responsibility for the world, not just a sign or result of being part of it.*

“Surely any genuine phenomenology, after Merleau-Ponty, must also take form as a poetics,” writes David Abram in “Between the Body and the Breathing Earth.”<sup>1</sup> His earlier book *The Spell of the Sensuous* urged environmental philosophy toward a more attentive, poetic engagement with nature. But what is “poetics”? In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram traces the gradual alienation of the West from nature through the development of writing from pictograms to the Greek alphabet. Indigenous cultures, in contrast, exemplify alternative ways of living out the relationship between humans and the “more-than-human world” that are less anthropocentric and more attuned to the sensible world. While I agree with Abram that humans should understand themselves to live in a world full of other beings who communicate, experience, and express our shared world, I challenge two claims drawn from Abram’s book and more recent article. These claims suggest a dangerous misunderstanding of the sense in which poetry and literary works of art can help to “re-inscribe” humans in their surrounding world. My paper is an attempt to explain the strange sense in which poetry can do this, but I will first delineate two ways in which it *cannot* do so.

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1. David Abram, “Between the Body and the Breathing Earth: A Reply to Ted Toadvine,” *Environmental Ethics* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 171–90.

First, Abram claims that poetry does not draw attention to itself but rather moves the reader or hearer directly to the sensible world. One of Abram's main concerns is to show how conceptual or scientific language does *not* do this, because the signs that evolved from pictograms drew attention toward themselves instead of directing attention toward the sensible world. The human task becomes, through poetic language, to re-inscribe ourselves in this sensible world by understanding it as communicative and expressive. In the next section, I will argue—drawing on Aharon Appelfeld, Robert Sokolowski, and Mikel Dufrenne—that poetry does the opposite of what Abram hopes: it draws attention to itself rather than turning it toward the visible world. In other words, I will argue that poetry can be even less a means of directing our attention back to the natural world as an ordinary sign. Second, and closely related to the first point, Abram argues that poetry heals a divide that should never have existed—and did not always exist—between mind and world. I will argue in reply, drawing primarily on Martin Heidegger, that the tension and conflict between mind and world, possible and real, belongs to all language—*especially* to poetry. It does not appear (as if from nowhere) with the development of a certain kind of language, such as writing. Instead, the experience of separation between consciousness and its surrounding world is intrinsic to all language because it is intrinsic to experience itself. In all language—*especially* poetic language—that schism, conflict, or tension finds its expression or embodiment. My thesis, then, is that poetic language neither (1) directs our attention back to the real, sensible world nor (2) heals a divide between abstract thought and experience. I do agree with Abram that poetry plays an important role in understanding the human place in nature, but for opposite reasons. I will describe how poetry awakens human consciousness from the real *to* and *for* the possible (or even *impossible*). In this way, poetry acknowledges, expresses, and even affirms a gap between mind and world, possible and actual, thinking and being, that belongs essentially to human experience.

### **What is Poetry?**

I would like to address Abram's two claims in more detail before moving on to what I think is a better description of the human relation to the non-human (or "more than human") world. Abram carefully traces the evolution of signs from pictograms, detailing how humans distanced themselves from the sensible world with each change. For instance, with the introduction of vowels in Greek writing, written words became nearly self-sufficient, whereas Hebrew writing had depended on the reader to supply the "breath" of the vowel sounds.<sup>2</sup> Without turning history backward, Abram does think that poetry can restore participation of the senses in reading. Poetry draws on imagination, feeling, and memory of the sensible in ways that prosaic or scientific writing

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2. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Random House, 1996), Ch. 4, esp. 102.

does not. However, I do not believe involving the senses in these ways directs attention any more authentically or concretely to the real, sensible world. In fact, several philosophers of literature argue the opposite: poetry is expressive of human experience precisely because it does not point toward real objects in the world but instead to the possible, impossible, and imaginary.

For example, in the decades following the Holocaust, Aharon Appelfeld explored language and poetry in search of a response to philosophers like Theodor Adorno who claimed that nothing could be said or written about the Holocaust. It was a singular, unspeakable, and indescribable event. Appelfeld, among others, argued that the way to restore the humanity and uniqueness of Jews who had been objectified and dehumanized was through literature, especially fiction. Even more than objective, factual, perhaps “truer” accounts, literature was able to preserve the unspeakable *as unspeakable*. In Appelfeld’s novel *For Every Sin*, the main character, Theo, wanders after being released from a concentration camp, encountering strangers and relatives, memories and the present, indiscriminately.<sup>3</sup> Despite the trauma everyone has suffered, the conversations revolve around “familiar” things (cigarettes, family, music) which in this context are out of place, even absurd. The novel suggests that what is needed is not a direct engagement with the event of the Holocaust (the unfamiliar) or even a return to normalcy (the familiar) so much as a restoration of the *boundaries* between familiar and unfamiliar in this next context, restoring the privacy and individuality of each person. Because literature is able to leave much of what it communicates implicit and unspoken, it is the kind of language that can restore such boundaries.<sup>4</sup> The task is not to face the event but to gather oneself apart from it, where it can remain firmly outside and not masquerade grotesquely as part of the everyday. Literature is the saving power not because it promises unity or directs the reader toward concrete events but because it restores the difference between the human world (of the writer and readers) and the (invented) events. Ordinary language, on the other hand, just because it is ordinary, cannot help turning what it describes into part of the everyday, ordinary, and public.

Poetry attracts thinkers like Abram for the same reason fiction appealed to Appelfeld: it deals with the unconceptualizable. It is a promising possibility for those concerned with domination of nature by humans and concepts. Unlike Appelfeld, however, who seeks a clear demarcation of speech and the unspeakable, Abram is arguing for a *similarity* among all beings as physical—perceiving and perceptible. Instead of conflict, there must be solidarity.<sup>5</sup> He thinks that poetry, by attuning us to the sensible qualities of the world, will re-direct humans to the sensible qualities of nature and restore a relationship

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3. Aharon Appelfeld, *For Every Sin* (New York: Grove Press, 1989).

4. For more explicit statements of these points, see Aharon Appelfeld, *Beyond Despair*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York: Fromm International, 1994), Lecture 3.

5. Abram, *Spell*, 93.

with it. But Appelfeld turns to literary language for the opposite reason—to achieve a *distance* from his subject (the Holocaust), setting it safely *outside* the realm of the human. Moreover, he hopes fiction and poetic language will restore the boundaries between individual persons, creating a private space that is not available to all (as numbers and empirical descriptions would be).<sup>6</sup> Appelfeld rejects more objective, statistical accounts of the Holocaust not because they “abstract” the teller from the events (as Abram would likely point out), but because it does not place them far enough away. That is, it does not protect a human, private, and creative space apart from the inevitable, “true” (i.e., factual) events of the Holocaust. Abram would likewise challenge the use of bare facts and numbers as more truthful than personal descriptions, but for different reasons. Abram emphasizes the communicative/expressive aspects of the sensible world, especially its possibilities for solidarity. For instance, it would not include such abstract meanings as “belief,” which cannot be depicted.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Appelfeld looks to poetry because it expresses the private and interior, or what can only be expressed in words, rather than what is visible to all.

Appelfeld’s use of setting and space in the novel embody what he believes creative literature can do. The reader has difficulty in describing any consistent geography. The setting of *For Every Sin* would best be described as shifting, disorienting, deceptive, unstable, and even impossible. It is quite clear that the novel does not intend to inscribe the reader into any physical, sensible space. Instead, the novel describes the human *interior* landscape of confusion and disorientation, suggesting rather that such inscription is impossible. Poetry is a way of engaging the events of the Holocaust not because it re-orient humans in the concrete, sensible world, but because it describes the experience of a singular, particular human being as separated from it. The depicted landscape mirrors the human interior, but not because the human being experiences empathy with what is external, as Abram suggests.<sup>8</sup> Instead, the landscape is remade into a geography that is physically impossible in order to *create* such a resonance or mirroring between human and world. In this case, poetry does not restore a solidarity or unity between humans and the natural world but rather restores the private space of individual stories. These stories and experiences cannot be made public or visible as a real landscape might—except through words, just because they present what is *not* sensible and could never be depicted.

What of Abram’s claim that a sign draws attention to itself while a picture directs attention to the real world?<sup>9</sup> Even if in special cases, such as engaging with the Holocaust, we want to distance ourselves from the real for the purposes of communication, is Abram not generally correct that ordinary prose,

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6. Appelfeld, *Beyond Despair*, Lecture 3.

7. Abram, *Spell*, 98.

8. Cf. Abram, *Spell*, 127.

9. Abram, *Spell*, 97, 107.

with its abstractions, introduces an unfortunate distance from the sensible? Abram claims that poetic language can help restore our relationship to nature because it allows “our sensory reciprocity with the rest of the sensuous . . . to come to voice.”<sup>10</sup> Abram’s critique of writing is that non-pictorial signs turn attention away from things in nature and instead to the sign itself.<sup>11</sup> Signs (that is, words, especially the Greek alphabet) are not inherently harmful, but they demand our attention so much more insistently than the sensible world that they overpower it.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, pictograms that maintain their roots in the sensible recall attention to the physical things to which they refer—and from which they originate—in the world.<sup>13</sup> Abram is right that there is an important distinction to be made between words or signs, on the one hand, and pictures on the other. But is it true that pictures and works of art refer us to the physical, sensible world while signs entrap us in the human world?

Phenomenologist Robert Sokolowski makes the opposite claim: A picture of a chair invites the viewer to linger on the picture (to consider its perspective, shading, medium), but the word “chair” directs attention immediately to the chair it signifies in the world.<sup>14</sup> Both words and pictures “presence” a thing, and words do so with less interference from the word itself. One might point out that the word refers to an abstract chair while the picture presents a particular one, but that need not be the case. The phrase “my grandmother’s rocking chair” brings that particular chair to mind. A picture of her chair also brings it to mind, but the picture invites me at the same time to appreciate this particular depiction (perhaps as my little brother draws it). In fact, there may be no real thing depicted at all. Sokolowski writes of a painting of a kettle, “I can still refer to ‘the’ kettle depicted in my painting, and when I do so I need not refer to a kettle in some storage cabinet; I mean the one in the painting.”<sup>15</sup> In what way, then, do pictures return us to the real world?

I do not mean that a picture and word equally involve the senses or emotions. A painting of a haystack makes present the colors and angles of a real haystack, and—if the painter is a real painter—something of the *bodily* feeling of vastness I have when standing in a field that has a haystack. Looking at the picture involves and awakens my senses in a way that staring at the word “haystack” on my wall would not. Sokolowski agrees: pictures evoke the bodily response we would have in the presence of the real thing.<sup>16</sup> But just because a picture is itself a thing occupying space that invites our attention, it does not turn us (the viewers) to the real, sensible world but encourages us

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10. Abram, “Between the Body,” 190.

11. Abram, *Spell*, 97.

12. *Ibid.*, 178.

13. *Ibid.*, 97.

14. Robert Sokolowski, *Pictures, Quotations, and Distinctions* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 21.

15. *Ibid.*, 21.

16. *Ibid.*, 15.

to stand looking at the picture. It may awaken us to our senses in general, or produce the feelings we *would* have in the presence of the real object, but it is not obvious that good art helps attune us to the natural world. Why go to a field to see a haystack at sunset myself when Monet has depicted it here so well? A picture can lure us away from nature as well as does a sign—even more so, if it is a better substitute.

Yet Abram argues that a work of art, especially poetry, can restore the human relation to the sensible, healing the rift caused by signs which—with the introduction of vowels—became too self-sufficient, introducing a “reflexivity” between the writer and her own writing.<sup>17</sup> Somehow poetic writing will free humans from this absorption with signs; in this way, it is more like a picture than a sign. I agree with Abram that poetry (and any literary work of art) is more like a picture than a sign, but precisely for that reason it—like a picture—draws attention to itself. Mikel Dufrenne, another philosopher of literature, affirms that drawing attention to itself instead of to the real world is *essential* to any work of art, including poetry.<sup>18</sup> The truth of a work of art (or aesthetic object) is internal to the work and cannot be verified in experience. Dufrenne writes,

Any work which attempts to be true in terms of the external world and not in terms of itself, that is, any work which claims that its meaning is verified in reality because it takes account of reality (either by calling us to know the real or by inciting us to act in a concrete way), is not an aesthetic object.<sup>19</sup>

Dufrenne explicitly contrasts aesthetic objects (such as poetry) with signs, which “disappear behind the signification they present.”<sup>20</sup> A sign refers to a thing in the world and “disappears” behind the thing; it has fulfilled its task of making the thing present. In contrast, the aesthetic object remains with us, demanding attention, drawing us not to the world but to a meaning internal to the work of art. How can poetry help us be “reinscribed” back into the real, sensible world when—like all art—it covets our attention for itself? This was just Abram’s criticism of signs, but I am arguing that it is actually *more* true of pictures, painting, and poetry.

This would be a problem if the task were, as Abram thinks, to restore a relationship with the real and sensible world through poetry, which was distorted by appropriating language as a peculiarly human characteristic. Instead, I will argue that the task is to acknowledge more fully our peculiar human responsibility for nature, grounded in our ability to imagine possibilities beyond the real. Poetry is important not because it restores humans to our actual surround-

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17. Abram, *Spell*, 107.

18. Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. Edward S. Casey et al. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 122.

19. *Ibid.*, 116.

20. *Ibid.*, 123.

ings but because it encourages the dreaming of the unreal, allowing us to orient ourselves toward the future and toward possibilities which may never come. Poetic thinking is full of “what if,” and it is this “what if” aspect of humans that enables us to imagine new solutions for current problems. It also enables us to frustrate or deny our immediate desires for comfort, ease of living, or foods we enjoy if we perceive that they endanger the survival of other species or our own future survival. This ability to act for the good of the whole, including other species, is a peculiarly human responsibility, made possible by our ability to see our own existence as contingent.

From Appelfeld and Dufrenne we learn two things about poetry, each of which has a bearing on Abram’s first claim above. First, poetry does not tend toward unity but establishes boundaries between the familiar and unfamiliar. Second, it does not direct us to nature (the real, sensible world) but solicits our attention for itself, for a meaning internal to the work of art that is expressed in the sensuous aspects of the art, not the world. In what way does having our senses awakened to a poem—besides a general reminder that we *have* senses—bring us any closer to being part of a more-than-human world? I do think that poetry can restore a relationship between humans and the world, but only as it draws attention to the *difference* between humans and the non-human and so to a human responsibility to “belong to” and “keep watch” over nature—as I will elaborate below. Abram’s primary emphasis on the similarity (or solidarity) between humans and other beings risks obscuring the peculiar capabilities and responsibilities of humans. I will argue that, although participating sensually in a poem does not direct us to participate or belong to the real, natural world, poetry does awaken us to a sense of *responsibility* that underlies the human place in nature. An important philosopher to address on the role of art in human participation in the world, of course—particularly if it entails a sense of oneself as contingent—is Heidegger. I will argue that Heidegger agrees with Appelfeld that poetry preserves boundaries between familiar and unfamiliar and with Dufrenne that it does so just by drawing attention to itself rather than referring to things in the real, sensible world. Through Heidegger, I will develop an account of language that explains why it is both the problem and the solution to the problem of human alienation (considered precisely as Abram does, as abstraction) from the more than human world. In doing so, I affirm that language belongs—in important ways—exclusively to humans, as the origin of our responsibility to and for the world. It does not follow that language can be used to justify exploitation or domination, as I will address in my concluding section.

### **Heidegger: Poetry and World**

As discussed above, Sokolowski does write that art “presences” the real world.<sup>21</sup> Why then does it not, as Abram suggests, direct its viewers toward the sensible

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21. Sokolowski, 15.



and real? Sokolowski goes on to explain that pictures “make present” what is real only by also making possible its absence—that is, for example, by introducing the possibility that there is no real kettle at all. Sokolowski writes,

Only because we have become the kind of being that uses names, only because we have come to distinguish between a thing and the presence of the thing, can we take something as a picture of that thing: then we achieve the presence of the thing without having the thing itself there.<sup>22</sup>

To the extent that pictures do “make present” the real world, they also draw attention to the possibility of its absence. I argue in this section that all language, even poetic, brings the possibility (even anxiety) of absence—that is, of contingency.

In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Van Gogh’s painting discloses the human world and how Heidegger thinks Earth appears (just as what does not appear) in relation to it. Heidegger agrees with Dufrenne that a work of art does not refer to real things in the world but instead *makes present a whole world*. The shoes depicted in Van Gogh’s painting have meaningful reference in a world of tools and work. The shoes are useful to the peasant woman because they are a “reliable” part of her world. Through the painting, by contrast, we become aware of these familiar relations as a world and may also become aware that we, too, have such a world of familiar landscapes and useful things that structure our daily activities. We do not come to this awareness by being attentive to any particular part of our familiar, reliable world. By looking for the shoes if they are missing, or having to repair them, they could become “conspicuous” in the woman’s world—just like the hammer in *Being and Time*. But the fact of not being able to find a hammer or pair of shoes does not usually—or perhaps ever—result in a new, authentic awareness that we live in a world full of things that exist as part of a meaningful web of relations. That awareness, Heidegger thinks, involves an awareness not just that any object may break or be lost but that the whole world *as world* depends on the human being who lives and works, for whom the things have meaning. Because Van Gogh’s painting gathers the world as world in this way, it enables us to see and attend to these relations. As depicting a single thing (such as a kettle) affirms the possibility of its absence making present a whole world (as Van Gogh has managed to do, albeit by painting just one part of it), Heidegger thinks that Van Gogh has captured the contingency of that world—and of “world” itself.

Heidegger makes the strong claim in *Being and Time* that there is no world without humans to gather it.<sup>23</sup> It is tempting to take the later Heidegger’s “Kehre” as simply a reversal of this subjective beginning, as Abram seems to have

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22. *Ibid.*, 24.

23. Heidegger writes in “The Thing” (in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter [New York: HarperCollins, 1971]): “When and in what way do things appear as things? They do not appear by means of human making. But neither do they appear without the vigilance of mortals” (181). He concludes, “Men alone, as mortals, by



done. Because Abram wants to attend primarily to the style of philosophers<sup>24</sup>—or, in Abram’s words, “to accomplish a creative reading”<sup>25</sup>—I have tried to address Abram’s ideas directly rather than question their origin in Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, far from softening his emphasis in *Being and Time* on the relation between human beings and world, Heidegger states explicitly in the later work that animals do not have a world.<sup>26</sup> It is only with *Being and Time* as a background and these later, explicit articulations of world that we can understand what Heidegger means by “gathering” and “world” in texts like “The Origin of the Work of Art.” Animals do have concerns and familiar, meaningful objects, and they can refer to these objects or mourn their absence. Yet in “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” Heidegger writes, “Men alone, as mortals, by dwelling attain to the world as world.”<sup>27</sup> What would *world* be, in this sense? Abram emphasizes the similarity between humans and animals because he wants to avoid abstraction and objectification of one’s environment. But humans gather and dwell in a world, in this Heideggerian sense, precisely because they can abstract themselves from it. That is, humans can see both its continued existence and their place in it as contingent, disclosed as nothingness in the face of their mortality.<sup>28</sup> The capacity to see the world as a web of relation is *just the same* ability to see oneself apart from it, of perhaps severing those relations (as certainly happens in death). I am arguing here that this realization is also a condition for understanding the world as one’s responsibility—that is, as something that must be *maintained*. The artist who can gather the world of a peasant woman into a work of art can also see it as *someone’s* world. “I,” the viewer or artist, am not in the paint-

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dwellling attain to the world as world. Only what conjoins itself out of world becomes a thing” (182).

24. Abram, “Between the Body,” 190.

25. “Merleau-Ponty and the Voices of the Earth,” in *Minding Nature: The Philosophers of Ecology*, ed. David McCauley (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), 83. Quoted in Ted Toadvine, “Limits of the Flesh: The Role of Reflection in David Abram’s Ecophenomenology,” *Environmental Ethics* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 155-70.

26. See *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale, 1959), 45. Heidegger does write in *Introduction to Metaphysics* that animals have an “impoverished” world. The difference is not a softening of the claim but rather a different sense of “world.” Animals certainly have purposes, projects, concerns, needs, and familiar things—but because they do not suffer anxiety over their death or even curiosity regarding their origin, they do not become aware of their world “as world.” If we are wrong, and they do so, then perhaps they can help us in gathering it. But we cannot build an ethics on the possibility that they can—both because so many things we also want to protect clearly cannot (trees, canyons) and because it distracts attention from the fact that “gathering world” is not a privilege we should fight over but something we need to be actively *doing*.

27. Heidegger, “The Thing,” 182.

28. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: SUNY, 1996), 255, 283-85.

ing. The shoes in the painting are not *mine*. I realize that her world is a world because she is the center of it—not because she masters it, but because she lives in it and cares for it. The peasant woman’s world is held together by—or simply is—her work. The peasant woman might herself see this, but insofar as she does so, she abstracts. That is, she sees her world as *belonging* to her rather than herself as a part of it, related to it as any other part to a whole.

This human, Heideggerian world, then—as distinct from an animal’s world—has as the condition for its possibility the peasant’s (or the artist’s) own ability to see this world as *hers* and so as dependent on her activities. That is, knowing that it is hers is no different from the ability to abstract herself from it. As Heidegger is fond of repeating in various forms (especially in his discussion of “enframing” [*Ge-stell*] in “The Question Concerning Technology”), the possibility of losing the world, because it depends on work and activity, is also the possibility of keeping it. An authentic relationship with nature is possible only as we understand that it is in an important way contingent. Namely, we understand our relationship to world only as we confront our own mortality, understanding for the first time the sense in which this meaningful nexus of relations is ours.<sup>29</sup>

This point is made more negatively by Max Scheler in *Man’s Place in Nature*. In this late work, Scheler argues that reason and abstraction allow humans—unlike animals—to frustrate their own drives.<sup>30</sup> Reason allows them to see the whole *as whole* and place themselves in it, which in turn makes it possible for them to sacrifice their own desires for the good of others.<sup>31</sup> His important insight is that humans must demand something of ourselves which we would never demand of animals. We would never expect animals to voluntarily curb their populations, construct smaller dwellings, challenge their food sources, or consume fewer (or different) resources for the good of other species, especially if no negative effects were immediately apparent. But we environmentalists do not hesitate to demand these sacrifices of ourselves, and to look askance—perhaps even with bewilderment—at those who refuse to participate. Then at the same time we encourage these same others to understand that they are not outside nature but part of it. How can humans both see themselves as part of nature *and* the bearers of this strange responsibility to act in ways that do not come naturally—i.e., to use resources more efficiently, think of the good of other species, and produce fewer of the things they want? Do humans have a peculiar role and responsibility, not reflected or modeled by the rest of nature—or not?

If humans do have a peculiar responsibility for the rest of nature, what does it look like? Both Heidegger and Scheler emphasize the importance of

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29. See especially Heidegger’s description of *Angst* in *Being and Time*, 176, 177.

30. Max Scheler, *Man’s Place in Nature*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (New York: The Noonday Press, 1961), 40–46.

31. *Ibid.*, 44

*modality* for the human relationship to world. Through reason—even abstraction—a human being can recognize her own relationships as actual but not necessary and so as something which she is responsible to maintain. What does this have to do with poetry? Poetry and other works of art have in common not merely that they express—as Abram emphasizes—but that they are creative. The human ability to dwell in different modalities (the possible and even *impossible* or fantastic) means that humans can create disorienting spaces for difficult truths (like Appelfeld), write poems with internal harmony whose truth does not depend on comparison with reality (cf. Dufrenne), and even imagine a world without oneself in it, weighing the effects of one's own actions and whether or not they are sustainable. These tasks and possibilities delimit ways in which it does not make sense to say simply that “language speaks” without reminding, as Heidegger also does, that—in peculiar and important ways—*humans* speak. Our speaking, or our peculiar manner of it, brings with it a kind or degree of responsibility that does not belong to the rest of the more-than-human world.

### Owning and Preserving the Unowned

Some environmental philosophers are wary of speaking of human responsibility because it seems a throwback to talk of “dominion” and “domination.” The difficulty is that many words which we *need* to describe our own place in nature have become contaminated with negative associations. One of these words is “ownership.” Is there a way of speaking of “ownership”—that is, the world as one's “own”—without turning the world into an object or possession? The Heideggerian insight that humans gather world is made concrete by Erazim Kohák in *The Embers and the Stars*, where he writes that the task for humans is to let things “belong”—a task which we often neglect. The possibility of “belonging” is neither possession nor a merely sentimental attitude. Kohák's example is the difference between a mass-produced toy panda bear and a toy a child loves and names—in other words, which is attended to and cared for.<sup>32</sup> Kohák also alludes to a proverb that an extra coat hanging in my closet does not properly “belong” to me but to the homeless person who needs it. We are rightfully wary of any philosophy that turns nature into a human possession, but we should not let the language frighten us away from this notion of “belonging,” through which we are able to see that “domination” of the natural world is not the only danger. What if our alienation from the natural world is instead a result of not letting our *human* world belong to us in the rich sense described by Kohák?

Attending to “world” is not just an inward turn to the inner life of consciousness, which would be a neglect of what goes on outside our human homes and cities. Rather, Heidegger describes “earth” as that which appears

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32. Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 128.

at the edges of world. Each one of the fourfold “means” all four, such that a failure to attend to and “gather” world would mean there is nowhere for earth to appear. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger contrasts “world” and “earth,” describing each as being disclosed or “unconcealed” just in their contrast to one another. It is in relation to the temple as a space built by mortals in worship of the gods that earth is disclosed as that remaining unenclosed by world. In contrast to world—the world of human construction, work, and familiarity—earth remains unfamiliar and wild. A kind of “relation” is established between world and earth through the boundary, but precisely in their difference and unrelatability. That is, we come to understand that humans have a task of “keeping watch”<sup>33</sup>—which is not a call to re-awaken our senses but to understand the dangers and possibilities that belong exclusively to humans as the beings who gather world.

These boundaries and contrasts address Abram’s second claim, above: that poetry can heal the rift between humans and the more-than-human world that emerged historically and empirically through technological developments. Though Abram is correct in a certain sense—as I will elaborate—that language is to blame for our alienation from nature, he looks to an anthropological account of the development of language through history, as if the problem did not *essentially* relate to language as such. Heidegger writes, in contrast, that *all* language conceals; the best poetry can do is acknowledge that there is this concealment or “let the veil appear as what veils.”<sup>34</sup> The problem is not with a certain kind of language (an alphabet with or without vowels) but a conflict inherent in language itself—that is, to human participation in the world.<sup>35</sup> Even

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33. Cf. “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

34. *Ibid.*, 25.

35. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, another philosopher Abram turns to for support, makes this point most strikingly. In *Signs*, he writes: “Man does not paint painting, but he speaks about speech, and the spirit of language wants to depend on nothing but itself” (trans. Richard C. McCleary [Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1964], 80). That the “spirit of language” wants to be independent implies that Merleau-Ponty would not accept Abram’s historical-anthropological account of writing, as if a mistaken sense of human independence from nature arose with the development of a certain kind of alphabet but was not at work already in language itself. Furthermore, for Merleau-Ponty there is a conflict between consciousness and sensible appearance that occurs in every perception (i.e., positing) of an object, as he insists throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception*, but also *The Visible and The Invisible*, as is emphasized by Douglas Low. This conflict is the possibility of abstract thought, despite his agreement with Abram that thought is not first abstract but begins in and never escapes experience. Merleau-Ponty writes: “But *precisely because* my body can shut itself off from the world, it is also what opens me out upon the world and places me in a situation there” (191). For more on the conflict between consciousness and appearance that occurs in every perception, see also Douglas Low, “The Continuity Between Merleau-Ponty’s Early and Late Philosophy of Language,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 17 (1992).

though Heidegger describes the humans who gather world as themselves gathered in and by the fourfold, he preserves a task for mortals that is not done reversibly or reciprocally by earth or sky; instead, it is by assuming our distinctive (mortal) place in the fourfold that we let ourselves be gathered. Nature becomes silent to us because we do not understand our own language, our own activity of “worlding” and participation in the world by gathering it and keeping watch over it. Abram understands that language is both the solution and the problem; he does not see that it is the nature of language always to be both a solution and a problem.

Without simply saying that what Heidegger means by “earth” is convertible with the physical planet and nature, as Abram does,<sup>36</sup> we can use Heidegger’s distinctions to critique the present preoccupation with “moral standing” in environmental philosophy. Though I cannot develop this critique here, the practical result of the aesthetic-Heideggerian environmental philosophy I am describing would be a shift of concern from moral standing and the human’s part in a larger whole (i.e., deep ecology) to cultivating a distinctively human relation to our own artifacts and activities, thereby preserving that which remains outside our human activity as mysterious and unowned. Any dialogue that begins where humans and the rest of nature are already in competition for resources begins too late; it cannot help turning nature into a standing-reserve, no matter how many rights are protected. But if we attend to and “keep watch” over our own activities, we will know whether the loss of a forest for timber is a sorrowful necessity or whether it is being cut down to lower the price of toothpicks. A debate over the use of a field that considers only the “moral standing” of that field and its inhabitants cannot be meaningful or persuasive because we do not understand how we are already involved with it. Developing a deeper aesthetic sense of the beauty of the field might be helpful in some cases, but it might also just be a distraction from the question of our own consumption, work, and what we can reasonably expect ourselves—or others—to “let be.”

I have made a transition here from poetry to thinking—even “calculative thinking.” With the later Heidegger, I believe the most interesting thing about poetry is that it is always on the verge of becoming metaphysics without actually doing so. It is this danger which is the source of its saving power. Our sense of our own human responsibility is always on the verge of becoming domination, and this is a danger we must continue to struggle against. Nevertheless, the fact that we fall into domination is not merely an accident of history—it is rather a distortion of our essential task and responsibility. Heidegger describes this struggle nowhere more clearly than in “The Question Concerning Technology,” where *Gestell* is bound inextricably with *Gelassenheit*.

Abram’s conclusion, too, is that writing—despite being the source of our alienation from nature—can also be the solution. Why should this be? Abram

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36. Abram, *Spell*, 206ff.

can offer little justification for its saving power except that we are here now and should make the best of it. Heidegger, on the other hand, can offer an explanation and description of this human struggle at the boundary between poetry and metaphysics, which exists wherever there is authentic language of any kind. He echoes Kierkegaard's insight that what is different in the end must have been different in the beginning.<sup>37</sup> If writing is the path toward human re-inscription in the rest of nature, it has always been so; if it is a danger, it has always been so. The danger is not empirical but essential to what language is: a naming and claiming of the world as familiar and *ours*. Though Abram's insights may be valuable in critiquing the notion of a Cartesian subject in empty space, I am more concerned with another danger, one which perhaps could only have arisen as philosophers began to emphasize "flesh," silence, solidarity, and reciprocity. This emerging danger is, namely, mistaking ourselves for simply a part of the world rather than those who can abstract ourselves from it and so are responsible for and to it in a different—as I have said, *peculiar*—way. In Heidegger's terms, in facing our own mortality, we are the ones who can understand ourselves and our actions as contingent, opening ourselves to new possibilities and the cessation of current destructive activities. These new possibilities, and the possibility of abstraction, come with a price: it is unfortunately possible for us to dwell only in our own abstractions and shape the world to match them. As suggested above, even poetic language is on the verge of becoming metaphysics (here simply abstraction) and risks leaving physics behind forever. It is the nature of language—human language, with its tendency toward abstraction—to be both a solution and a problem. Language is a doubling, a making, and itself a *thing*—though not merely a thing. Nevertheless, it is our *poiesis*—our authentic *making*—which allows us both to dwell in the world and keep watch over it. It would be unfortunate if a naïve optimism in the possibilities of poetic language were to distract poets and philosophers from the complex dangers that language *always* brings to experience. I worry that Abram, by separating the danger of prose and metaphysics from the saving power of poetry and expression, misunderstands both. I have instead outlined some ways in which language, as it speaks, calls us to understand our peculiar, human responsibility for the world and our precarious place in it.

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37. "Otherwise the story must have been different from the beginning and been different as it went along, not merely becoming different at the end." Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession*, trans. Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper and Row, 1948), 35.