

Heidegger, Funerary Practices, and the Fourfold

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A Major Research Paper  
in The Department of Philosophy

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
(Philosophy) at Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

September 2022

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**Abstract:**

Heidegger famously argues in *Being and Time* that to live well and honestly, we must face up to our own mortality. Within *Being and Time*, Heidegger is clear that neither exposure to the deaths of others, nor engagement in funerary practices, bring us closer to death in the proper—“authentic”—sense. In this paper, I take up a hint offered by Johannes Niederhauser in his 2019 book, *On Death and Being*, that Heidegger amends his original position on funerary practices in his later work. My project is to affirm that this change indeed took place over the course of Heidegger’s career by highlighting his approving reference to the *Totenbaum* (that is, the coffin) in “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” and his remarks on Sophocles’ *Antigone* in his lecture course *Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”*. In turn, I attempt to account for the change in Heidegger’s position by examining funerary practices in light of the thinking of the “fourfold”. Ultimately, I claim that funerary practices may be considered a form of poetry understood in the broad sense of “poetic dwelling”. In the final sections of the paper, I suggest, beyond Heidegger’s own words but in line with his thinking (at least as I interpret it), that the death of others constitutes a potent and universal access point for reflection on Being *qua* Being, even amidst the profoundly desensitized era of what Heid calls “enframing” (*Gestell*).

### **Acknowledgements:**

Huge thanks to my parents in their unfailing support of my eclectic interests. Thank you to Dr. Matthias Fritsch for his guidance, affirmation, and perfectly pointed feedback; you pulled better work from me than I knew I was capable of! Thank you also to Dr. Emilia Angelova for agreeing to be my second reader; your enthusiasm, and the broad-reaching theoretical connections you draw, are always invigorating. This work would have had many more grammatical and typographical errors if it were not for the patience and generosity of my dear friend and college, Sara Fortin, who spent nearly six hours reading my work aloud to me on a Sunday afternoon. Thank you also to my sweet roommate, Paige Cunningham, for taking care of me amidst my writing frenzy, and to my dear feline companion, PJ, for reminding me to take regular breaks. Thank you also to my wonderful undergraduate mentor, Dr. Radu Neculau, for introducing me to Heidegger for the first time in the fall term of 2019.

This paper is dedicated to the late Dr. Deborah Cook. I am sure you would wince to know I have been working on Heidegger. And yet, it is you who has taught me (or at least begun to teach me) what it means to mourn.

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“Thus, I want to die myself that you, my friends, may love the earth more for my sake; and to the earth I want to return that I might find rest in her who gave birth to me”

– Nietzsche, “On Free Death”, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

### **Introduction:**

This research paper, the primary aim of which is to track Heidegger’s changed stance on funerary practices from his early to late period, is divided into five sections. In the first section, I explicate Heidegger’s position on funerary practices as expressed in *Being and Time*. To provide the necessary context, I begin with a brief exegesis of Heidegger’s related notions of “being-towards-death” and “authenticity”. I proceed to examine, in detail, Heidegger’s phenomenological reflections on human remains and the meaning of funerary practices as residual “concern” for “Dasein-having-been”. I conclude this section by offering a few speculative comments which relate Heidegger’s dismissive position on funerary practices with Nietzsche’s critique of “afterworldliness”.

The second section opens with a discussion of the importance of death to Heidegger’s entire oeuvre with reference to Niederhauser’s 2019 book, *On Death and Being*. While death, otherwise thought in terms of “finitude”, “mortality,” and “withdrawal”, remains a constant theme throughout Heidegger’s writing, there is a marked change between his early and late period regarding his perspective on funerary practices. This change is most evident in his positive reference to the *Totenbaum* (the coffin) in his late essay “Building, Dwelling, Thinking”. I interpret Heidegger’s shift in perspective on funerary practices as a consequence of the methodological “turn” Heidegger undergoes post *Being and Time* – the turn that led him away from a transcendental analysis of Dasein to a meditation on “things” themselves. This move is significant to the question of funerary practices insofar as it opens up the possibility for

Heidegger to acknowledge artifacts and rituals, including funerary artifacts and practices, to be, in themselves, ontologically revelatory.

Section three is intended to demonstrate the reciprocity between Heidegger's notion of the "thing" and poetry to the effect of characterizing funerary practices as poetic. As I argue, Heidegger uses the notion of poetry in a broad and a narrow sense. In its narrow use, "poetry" refers to the written poetry of established poets, such as Hölderlin, Rilke and Trakl. Broadly taken, "poetry" also names a way of living that is particularly gracious and reflective. As I take it, funerary practices, such as the *Totenbaum*, may be considered poetic gestures encompassed within Heidegger's broad notion of poetic dwelling.

The focus of section four is the overlapping contours of Heidegger's treatment of poetry, the "holy", and the affect of mourning. For Heidegger, the holy is a "medium" or mode of disclosure in which world and thing—medium and mediated—present in their interdependence. On my interpretation of Heidegger, the holy is another name for poetic dwelling which is likewise characterised by reflexivity and exposure to withdrawal. Once I establish the synonymy of poetry and the holy, I treat the affective component of this mode. Heidegger most frequently describes the mooded dimension of the holy as a kind of mourning. Although "holy morning" is regularly ascribed to world historical poets within Heidegger's work, I suggest that a more conventional mourning has the potential to manifest as holy.

The final chapter of the paper examines Heidegger's analysis of *Antigone* with an eye to the titular character's decisive action to bury her brother. The section begins with an exposition of Heidegger's reading of the play which revolves around the word "*deinon*", translated by Heidegger as "unhomely". I proceed to put my own interpretation of Heidegger's *Antigone* in conversation with that of Katherine Withy and Dennis Schmidt. As I argue, the much disputed

“divine law” that Antigone’s suffers is the law of mortality as such. Furthermore, her decisive action of burying her brother is, within Heidegger’s broad notion of poetic dwelling, a poetic gesture.

## 1. Funerary Practices in *Being and Time*

Heidegger’s early position on funerary practices is articulated in the first chapter of the second division of *Being and Time*, under the heading “The Possibility of Experiencing the Death of Others and the Possibility of Grasping Dasein as a Whole” (Heidegger 2010, 229). Aside from a few phenomenological reflections on the objective perception of death and the nature of the corpse, Heidegger’s intention is to show how the death of others does not bring us closer to grasping Dasein as a whole. Importantly, Dasein is never whole in an *ontic* sense for Dasein is itself constituted by its incompleteness.<sup>1</sup> However, Heidegger does claim that it is possible for Dasein to be grasped as a whole *ontologically*, namely, as a thrown being-in-the-world stretched between birth and death.<sup>2</sup> According to Heidegger, the structure of Dasein is only truly grasped when Dasein anticipates death in a way that recognises death as non-objectifiable and singularising. The deaths of others, and the practices by which the dead are honoured, are stated to be unhelpful regarding “proper” being-towards-death because they are mere ontic occurrences (Heidegger 2010, 230). Since corpses and funerals are encounterable beings, they cannot help us grasp death in its ontological sense as relating to the very ability for beings to be, nor bring us closer to wholeness or “authenticity”. Given that Heidegger dismisses funerary rites on the ground that they are an ontic—even inauthentic and evasive—it is necessary to begin with an outline of being-towards-death and authenticity.

### 1.1 Being-Towards-Death and Authenticity

According to Heidegger, “being-towards-death” (*Sein-zum-Tode*) is an essential structure of human existence or “*Dasein*” (literally, “there-being”). Just as we are “thrown” (*geworfen*), “in-the-world” (*in-der-Welt*), and “with-others” (*Mitsein*), so we are related, in essence, to the end of our being: death. What makes humans different from other biotic things that are susceptible to death is that we have the capacity to grasp our existential situation by virtue of ecstatic temporality. *Dasein* is not merely locked into itself as an immediate present thing, it ‘exists’ in the Ancient Greek sense of *ekstasis*, that is, of being “outside itself”. *Dasein* is outside itself insofar as it is constituted by three temporal ecstasies: a past which is constantly in the process of being retrieved, a present in which *Dasein* finds itself “with” other beings, and a future onto which *Dasein* perpetually “projects” (Heidegger 2010, 347-349). Indeed, it is this very “ecstatic unity of time” that allows beings to ‘be’ for us. However, just as beings in our world present to us, we are also present to ourselves. Although we stand at a distance from the being that we are (our ‘there’), we necessarily relate to it as “mine” (*jemeinig*) (Heidegger 2010, 41). Since we are equiprimordially temporal and self-relating, we are not impervious to the decay of our beings over time in the way we might imagine plants and non-human animals to be.<sup>3</sup> Rather, we project onto our demise, anticipating our annihilation in advance. In Heidegger’s words we are “dying” (*sterben*) so long as we live” (Heidegger 2010, 238).

Due to our structure as temporal beings, human beings are necessarily being-towards-death, or as Heidegger phrases it elsewhere, “held out into the nothing” (Heidegger 1998, 191). Nonetheless, we typically go through life in a mode that conceals death in its aspect as “ownmost”, “immanent”, and “insuperable” (Heidegger 2010, 252). In other words, we “forget” that death applies to us personally, that it could come upon us at any moment, and that it is the definitive outer limit of life. As opposed to dwelling on finitude, we tend to occupy ourselves



with the various projects we more or less begrudgingly take on, planning for futures that appear to stretch on indefinitely. Yet, despite everyday concealedness, death is never entirely forgotten. According to Heidegger, Being-towards-death persists as the fundamental attunement or “mood” of anxiety (*Angst*) which underlies day-to day taking care of things, and indeed makes such taking-care possible (Heidegger 2010, 178-184; 254).<sup>4</sup> Although anxiety hints to us the truth of our Dasein, we tend avoid dwelling in this mood because of its unpleasantness. Heidegger describes the refusal of anxiety as a kind of flight; Dasein “flees” from its anxiety—which is its proper dying— with the distractions of quotidian “busyness” (Heidegger 2010, 171). So, while the human being is structurally being-towards-death (and must be so for its projects to have meaning), it is usually and for the most part, dying in the mode of avoidance, that is, “inauthentically” (Heidegger 2010, 244).

For Heidegger, the everyday mode of productivity and planning—whether innocently practical or manically evasive— amounts to a kind of “dispersal” of oneself (Heidegger 2010, 125). Whereas in anxiety the particularity of the self is foregrounded against a perplexing world, the everyday mode identifies Dasein with the multitude and their meaningful projects. In the mode of the everyday, Dasein gets caught up (to varying degrees) in the public opinions and roles she finds herself in. While these roles, and the tasks associated with them, provide armour against anxiety, they tend to prevent Dasein from identifying her more idiomatic qualities and most cherished projects. Heidegger refers to the phenomenon of publicness that threatens to trap Dasein in a shallow way of being as “*das Man*”, translated in both the Stambaugh, and Macquarrie-Robinson editions as the “They” (Heidegger 2010, 111; Heidegger 1962, 116). Insofar as Dasein identifies with the “They”, or the average man, she becomes blind to possibilities that are not average, that is, her ownmost potentialities as a particular bound within

temporal-spatial limits. Indeed, the identification with the They is perhaps most significant in the way it modifies Dasein's comportment towards time. The temporality of the They appears as a series of nows extending *ad-infinitum* (Heidegger 2010, 403).<sup>5</sup> The They never dies, so, as much as Dasein lives in terms of the possibilities of the They, the non-existence of possibility is inconceivable. To the extent that Dasein falls prey to the They-self, finite temporality, which amounts to the truth of Dasein, remains concealed.

Heidegger's central argument in the second division of *Being and Time*, is that it is possible for Dasein to lean into its anxiety and reveal its existence as being-towards-death. By doing so, Dasein is able to pull itself out of the They-self and remedy its dispersal by grasping the ontological "whole" of its being. As a result of this process, Dasein attains what Heidegger calls "authenticity" (*Eigentlichkeit*) (Heidegger 2010, 227-255). As Johannes Niederhauser helpfully suggests, Heidegger's notion of facing one's own death may be considered a "reformulation of *memento mori* for modern times"(Niederhauser, 2019, xvii). However, it is essential to note that, for Heidegger, it is not sufficient to merely talk about death or meditate on representative images of death. To be properly appreciated, death must be grasped not as some *thing*, but the constantly looming and ultimately inevitable "impossibility of possibility" (Heidegger 2010, 251). In other words, death must be remembered in its ontological sense, as an essential structure of the being of Dasein, and not some ontic thing—a being— that Dasein will one day come across. For Heidegger (at least circa *Being and Time*), representations of death in images or words tend to hinder a proper grasp of death precisely because they attempt to make an object of nothing. As he writes, "this possibility [proper being-towards-death] offers no support for becoming intent on something, for "picturing" for oneself the actuality that is possible" (Heidegger 2010, 251).

Within the literature, there is great controversy over the precise meaning and potential political valences of the notion of authenticity. Against feminist critics, such as Lisa Guenther, who expresses concern that authenticity verges on common, and deeply problematic fantasy of self-authorship (Guenther 2008, 106), I take authenticity to indicate a reflexive knowledge of Dasein structure – a knowledge which makes explicit one’s fragile contingency. As Taylor Carman argues, authenticity is a becoming “responsive to one’s factual particularity as calling for a decision of some kind” (Carman 2000, 23). Authenticity, or “resoluteness”, does not amount to a self-creation from the bottom up, rather, it is a revelation of – a becoming responsive to – the ontological structure of experience that is already in play. This revelation includes the simultaneous revelation that public discourse is what gives form to our “selves”, and that, in our factual particularity, we are irreducible to any discursive category.

Authenticity does not amount to complete self-appropriation in any vulgar sense, but rather a becoming responsive to one’s non-identity which opens a person up to the possibility of thoughtful resistance. As Carman emphasises, “Resoluteness is not a stable, self-sufficient mode of existence, but a perpetual struggle against the reifying and banalizing forces inherent in discursive practice”(Carman 2000, 23). While authenticity is a retrieval of one’s ownmost from the They-self, it does not represent an alternative to, nor an undoing of the They; authenticity is simply a sustained awareness of one’s singularity that enables freedom within public discourse. One’s singularity is discovered in proper being-towards-death, for, inasmuch as Dasein is towards death, she is irreducible to the They, and consequently, compelled to decide what to make of her finite existence. On a practical (ontic) level, authenticity is likely to lead Dasein to be more intentional about her projects of care and less conventional about her life choices. This

not to say, however, that unconventionality is implied by authenticity; what determines authenticity is the existential stance out of which one's decisions arise.

One aspect of Carman's article which is lacking, although not entirely overlooked, is the relation between authenticity and becoming "properly historical". Not only is authenticity a becoming conscious of the tension between one's particularity—one's "ownmost"—and public discourse, but it is also a becoming conscious of the tension between linear time and finite time. This revelation of finite temporality shows Dasein to be limited by death, unlike the discourse of the They which morphs in perpetuity. However, it also shows Dasein to be limited from behind by virtue of thrownness. Carman indicates this when he writes of Dasein as always-already "fallen" (Carman 2000, 17). Dasein does not merely come into existence in a vacuum. She is born—thrown— into a world that has already been shaped by history, and is precisely from this history that Dasein discovers its possibilities. Indeed, the public discourse of the They is precisely this history as it "rises up" in the present. Although Dasein's possibilities seem limitless and her freedom is real, this limitlessness exists within factual and hermeneutical bounds—a boundary Heidegger calls "Destiny" (*Geschick*) (Heidegger 2010, 365).<sup>6</sup> Authenticity as a becoming "properly historical" puts the double limit of death and epochal withdrawal into view such that Dasein can make decisions from an outlook grounded in its own unique situatedness.

## 1.2 The Death of Others

Heidegger broaches the topic of funerary practices within a wider discussion of the death of others. On first glance, it would seem that the death of others could provide an experience of death that would enable an ontological grasp of Dasein as a whole. However, for Heidegger, this

is expressly not the case (Heidegger 2010, 230). The death of others cannot bring Dasein closer to proper being-towards-death for two interrelated reasons: 1) it fails to reveal death as pertaining to one's ownmost self, and 2) death remains something representable. In the death of others, death is present as an ontic thing— an ontic being that cannot bring us closer to death in its ontological essence. Thus, for Heidegger (at least during the writing of *Being and Time*), the objective experience of death remains philosophically bereft; witnessing death and mourning the dead through funerary practices cannot, in themselves, lead us to grasp Dasein in its wholeness, nor aid the thinking of Being *qua* Being.

The occurrence of another's death and the being of the corpse are, within the Heideggerian rubric, 'ontic phenomenon'. They are tangible beings that present themselves amidst a world as opposed to ontological structures that enable the possibility of being as such. In this analysis, the word 'death' is inherently equivocal. It refers both to a particular kind of being that is discoverable and to an ontological condition of Dasein which is always-already in play. Heidegger describes death in its guise as an ontic phenomenon in the following passages:

In the dying of others, that remarkable phenomena of being can be experienced that can be defined as a sudden transition of a being from the kind of being of Dasein to no longer Dasein. The end of the being *qua* Dasein (or of life) is the beginning of the being *qua* something merely present [...]

[...]the being still remaining does not represent a mere corporeal thing. Even the objectively present corpse is viewed theoretically still as a possible object for pathological anatomy whose understanding is oriented towards life [...]

[...] even this way of characterizing what still remains does not exhaust the complete phenomenal findings with regard to Dasein. The "deceased", as distinct from the dead body, has been torn away from "those remaining behind" and is the object of "being taken care of" in funeral rites, burial, and the culture of graves. And that is so because the kind of being of the deceased is "still more" than a thing at hand in the surrounding world to be taken care of. By lingering together with him in mourning and commemorating, those remaining behind are with him in a mode of concern which honors him. (Heidegger 2010, 229-230)

As an objective phenomenon, death is the transition a living organism undergoes to become something inanimate. However, as Heidegger remarks, the resulting inanimate thing appears traced by the life having-been. This is true even as it appears to the scientific gaze whose “pathological examination” treats biotic matter as categorically different from a-biotic matter. Indeed, the very word ‘dead’ itself contains an implicit reference to life; a thing is never apprehended as dead unless it is temporally connected to a life that once was present. While the trace quality of the corpse is evident in a scientific context, it is all the more profound in a social context. It is insofar as a corpse is not merely lifeless, but “unliving”, that it is the focal point of funerary practices. These funerary practices are, for Heidegger, testament to residual concern (*Fürsorge*) for the Dasein who is no longer “there”. This concern, characteristic of being-with-others (*Mitsein*), is a form of care that is distinguished from the kind of care directed at things that are merely at hand (*Besorgen*) (Heidegger 2010, 230; Heidegger 1967, 227).

The discussion of the corpse, which indicates it as not merely an object but a site of withdrawal, would seem to indicate that the corpse may indeed provoke Dasein to reflect on the nature of death, or at least induce an anxiety that would have ontological bearing. However, Heidegger is quite clear that the body of Dasein-having-been, albeit conceptually paradoxical, does not bring us closer to death in a “genuine sense” (Heidegger 2010, 230). As much as we may identify with and want to be near the deceased, we cannot appropriate the death of the other because “death is always essentially mine own. And it indeed signifies a peculiar possibility of being in which it is absolutely a matter of the being of my own Dasein”(ibid). Moreover, the death of others, conceals the insuperability of death since it is the withdrawal of a particular representable being (the deceased). Whereas “in ending, and in the being of whole of Dasein that is thus constituted, there is, according to its essence no representation” (ibid). Death in its

ontological significance is categorically different than the absence of some thing. As the end of possibility, death is no-thing, it is pure nullity.

Phrased differently, the death of others is only experienced in a discursive mode, that is, in the mode of the They-self. Consequently, it is experienced as “ambiguous” (Heidegger 2010, 167). According to Heidegger, when Dasein encounters death in an ontic fashion— in conversation, or even through direct contact— “death” is understood, but in an uncertain fashion that neglects the ontological significance. What is most especially ambiguous is death in its aspect as personal and imminent. When we see or hear of someone die, we are, at least for the most part, merely reminded that people die, not that we are dying (Heidegger 2010, 248). And, even if we are led to think of our own death, we typically brush it off as something that will come eventually, but “not yet” (ibid). It is easy to see how this evasive attitude applies to casual brushes with death, for instance, when one skims an obituary or drives past a car accident. However, as Heidegger indicates, solemn funerary practices also approach death in question in an ambiguous mode. Even in “mourning” and “honoring” the deceased, the deceased is always still “not me” and the immediacy of her death does not translate to the imminence of my own.

In the above description of funerary practices, Heidegger conveys the mooded aspect of mourning in terms of a desire to “linger with” and “honour” the dead (Heidegger 2010, 229-230). Importantly, he does not mention the affect of anxiety, which, as elaborated above, is the mooded counterpart to authentic being-towards-death. As Heidegger indicates in the cited passage, funerary practices consist of “taking care of the body” for the sake of the deceased who continues to “haunt” the corpse as kind of trace or “specter”.<sup>7</sup> For Heidegger, this entails that the body is a locus of absorbed task-oriented concern. However, as is evident in Heidegger’s analysis of anxiety, anxiety is precisely opposed to tasked-based projection. As he writes, “In

anxiety the things at hand in the surrounding world sink away, and so do inner worldly beings in general. The world can offer nothing more, nor can the Dasein-with of others” (Heidegger 2010, 181). Insofar as funerary practices are a posthumous “being-with” in the mode of concerned taking care, Dasein is not, within Heidegger’s schema of affects, properly anxious. Moreover, insofar as she is projecting onto the task of honoring the deceased, she is not projecting onto her end but onto a continuation of linear time into which she hopes to preserve the memory of the deceased. Mourning, as here understood, does not reveal being-towards-death in an authentic way. Rather, mourning is framed as a “privative” emotion that is outward turning, much like fear, which is derived from the fundamental attunement of anxiety but not revelatory of it (Heidegger 2010, 179). Heidegger will in his later work describe ontological “knowing” as a kind of “mourning”, thereby drawing an affinity between mourning and anxiety. However, circa *Being and Time* mourning is treated as an affect directed at a lost being and not at the condition of Dasein’s existence as such.

Within his treatment of being-towards-death in *Being and Time*, Heidegger does not explicitly mention Christianity or Platonism, nor does he explicitly name any particular funerary practices as instances of anxious evasion. However, as Hans Ruin notes in *Being with the Dead*, Heidegger’s position on the death of the other echoes the Nietzschean criticism of “afterworldly” metaphysics (Ruin 2018, 196). Traditional metaphysics has tended to figure death not as an end but a passage to another world. This is especially pronounced in Christian and Platonic metaphysics, but is also present in belief systems as early as the ancient Egyptians (Ruin 2018, 197). According to Nietzsche, the belief in an afterlife has led to a nihilistic disavowal of this world—the true world of lively transience—in exchange for a metaphysical “fiction” of



permanence (Nietzsche, 1954, 142-144).<sup>8</sup> The same concern may be detected between the lines of Heidegger's interpretation of funerary practices.

Heidegger described funerary practices as a continued caring for the deceased as "distinguished" from the corpse (Heidegger 2010, 230). The idea that the deceased is distinguished from the corpse could be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, Heidegger may be referring the very real presence of the trace; even after its death, Dasein-having-been exists as one-sided being-with insofar as she is recalled as a being of concern. On the other hand, the notion that the deceased is "distinguished" from the body could be a reflection on the fact that, in funeral practices, the deceased is often conceived as actually present elsewhere. Indeed, in most religions, from the ancient to modern, death is regarded as a passageway for the soul to enter into another life. Funerary practices associated with such religions are, typically and quite explicitly, intended to aid this passage. To name just one example, Ancient Egyptian burial practices dating back to 1500 BC involved placing a book in the grave of the deceased. This book, now referred to by historians as the "book of the dead", contained detailed instructions for navigating the journey to the afterlife (Ruin 2018,186). Even in the contemporary, largely post-religious world, it is common to hear people speak idly of the dead as being in the "next world" or in a "better place". Regardless of whether Heidegger is referring to beliefs in an immortal soul when he refers to the deceased as "distinct from the dead body", it is clear that, within a Heideggerian framework, the representation of death as a passageway is add odds with a genuine understanding of being-towards-death. Insofar as funerary passages project death as a passageway, they allow us to comfort of evading the knowledge of our insuperable end.

## **2. Funerary Practices After the "Turn"**

The foregoing section offered an exposition of Heidegger's thesis on being-towards-death in *Being and Time* with special attention to how it bears on the question of funerary practices. This section will argue, following Johannes Niederhauser, that death, as an ontological structure, and learning to die, as a practical prescription, remain central to Heidegger's thought post *Being and Time*. However, as Niederhauser indicates, Heidegger appears to change his initial position on funerary practices and the death of the other during his later period. In this section, I demonstrate Heidegger's changed stance on funerary practices with reference to his 1954 essay "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" and attempt to explain this change with a brief account of Heidegger's methodological "turn" (*Kehre*).

## 2.1 From Authenticity to "Becoming Mortal"

In his 2019 book, *On Death and Being: An Answer to the Seinsfrage*, Johannes Niederhauser presents a detailed study of Heidegger's treatment of death throughout the latter's entire oeuvre. The thrust of Niederhauser's argument is that death is the most important sustained theme of Heidegger's corpus and may even be conceived as the answer to Heidegger's most central and persistent question, the *Seinsfrage*, or "question of Being" (Niederhauser 2019, 246). Although death is not highlighted in all of Heidegger's work, it is linked to all of his formulations of Being/Beyng and is implicated in his treatment of seemingly disparate topics from temporality and history to technology and poetry. For Niederhauser, dying is not just a structure of Dasein (although it is that too), it is the very meaning of Being. Beings come out of the nothing, withdraw so long as they are, and are always destined to return to nothing. "Death" names the swaying co-implication of possibility and impossibility—being and nothing that grants beings the ability to be (Niederhauser 2019, 246). As Heidegger approvingly cites Hölderlin in his lecture course on the *Ister*, "*Leben ist Tod, und Tod auch ein Leben*" (Heidegger 1996, 118).<sup>9</sup>

For Niederhauser, death is not merely Heidegger's ultimate response to the ontological question. Becoming capable of death as death is also Heidegger's practical prescription for humanity, specifically modern human beings as they exist under the grip of *Gestell*. On Niederhauser's analysis, the epoch of *Gestell*, typically translated as "enframing", is epitomised by the attempt to master death as a "technical problem" (Niederhauser 2019, 156).<sup>10</sup> It is precisely because death is antithetical to *Gestell* in its drive towards perpetual availability that opening ourselves to death can prepare a way out of this epoch of Being. This practical prescription of opening oneself up to death, or even learning to "love death as a friend", is a consistent feature of Heidegger's published work from *Being and Time* to his post war essays on the fourfold (Niederhauser 2019, 126). Circa *Being and Time* (before Heidegger fully thematized *Gestell*) this prescriptive position is deployed in terms of 'proper-being-towards-death' in opposition to the 'They-self'. In his thinking of the fourfold, Heidegger speaks of 'becoming mortal' as a curative for hubristic technologization of the world.

In his chapter devoted to the significance of mortality within Heidegger's thinking of the fourfold, Niederhauser briefly examines his 1954 essay, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" ("*Bauen, Wohnen, Denken*"), highlighting Heidegger's reference to the childbed and the *Totenbaum*. It is here Niederhauser suggests that Heidegger's thinking of the fourfold makes room for public funerary practices to be accorded philosophical significance.

The childbed and the treetrunk coffin are proper *things* in themselves. The death that in a practical sense gathers the community is the bodily death of loved ones. It is here, in my view, that the death of others becomes significant in Heidegger. This experience of the dying of others, which in *Being and Time* does not yield any insight into existential-ontological death, now brings mortals closer to their community (Niederhauser 2019, 192)

In the following section, I attempt to unpack the insightful but unelaborated claim that the death of others becomes significant to Heidegger in his late period. I begin with an examination of the

essay in question, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking”, with special attention to the passage in which he refers to the *Totenbaum* (the coffin). I proceed to give an account of the methodological change in Heidegger’s approach to the question of Being over the course of his career which leads him to prioritise tangible beings— the very kinds of beings that are dismissed as merely “ontic” within *Being and Time*. According to my interpretation, it is this methodological move which allows Heidegger to begin to acknowledge funerary objects and practices as being relevant to the recovery of Being.

## 2.2 Coffins and Other “Things”

As elaborated in the first section of this paper, Heidegger of *Being and Time* (1927) takes a dismissive stance on funerary practices, figuring them as bound to the everyday discursive mode and therefore at odds with an authentically anxious projection on death. However, this position has clearly changed by the time Heidegger writes “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” in the early 1950s. In this well-known essay, Heidegger makes reference to the German funerary tradition of the *Totenbaum* or “tree of death”, with the suggestion that such a being has the power to evoke a genuine remembrance of mortality. Indeed, making space for such “hallowed” things in a home is part of what renders a building a proper “dwelling place”, and not merely a domicile.<sup>11</sup>

“Building, Dwelling, Thinking” (*Bauen, Wohnen, Denken*) is one in a collection of essays of Heidegger’s later period that contains the “thinking of the fourfold”. The fourfold may be understood as Heidegger’s most mature attempt at fundamental ontology. In *Being and Time*, Being *qua* Being was linked to a particular being, Dasein, which is able to disclose beings by virtue of its *ekstatic* structure (Heidegger 2010, 12). However, soon after the publication of this

seminal text, Heidegger abandoned the language of “Dasein” as it yet failed to capture his critique of subjectivity (Heidegger 1998, 207-208).<sup>12</sup> In the thinking of the fourfold, Heidegger conceives Being as the play of four elements: earth, sky, mortals, and gods, wherein humans (mortals) are an essential player, but by no means the central foundation.

The guiding thread of “Being, Dwelling, Thinking” is a meditation on the word “building” (*bauen*). Heidegger claims that building is not merely the precursor to dwelling, as in “one builds in order to dwell”, which is the common understanding. Rather, building is already itself an instance of “dwelling” (Heidegger 1971, 144-146). By this word “dwelling” (*wohnen*), Heidegger refers to being mortal in relation to divinities, the sky, and the earth (Heidegger 1971, 147). For a mortal to be able to build, she must find herself in a world where there is space to build, where building materials are available, and where a tradition of architecture has been established. In this way, building is not a mere action of a human being, it is an event that occurs as an interaction between human beings and the world. With the word ‘dwelling’, Heidegger calls his readers to recall that actions do not simply arise from us, as the metaphysical notion of subject would have it. Human ‘activity’ depends on the gift of Being.

In modern usage, the verb ‘to build’ is typically applied to an active subject (the builder) and a passive object (what is built). However, in “Building, Dwelling, Thinking”, as well as other texts of the period, Heidegger seeks to dispel the subject-object dichotomy codified in grammatical conventions. On the readings of commentators, Charles Scott and John Llewelyn, Heidegger may be understood as attempting to recover the “middle-voice”, a grammatical voice characteristic to Ancient Greek, but, for the most part, lost to modern languages. (Scott 1990, 120; Llewelyn John 1991, 230-232). The active and the passive voice, the two most prevalent voices of speaking and writing, express something done by an actor to an external

object, during the course of which the actor remains outside the object unchanged. In contrast, the middle voice is able to convey a “nonactive, nonpassive occurrence”, one in which the actor is immediately conditioned by the activity (Scott 1990, 120).

The reciprocal structure of the of the middle voice is precisely what is a stake in Heidegger’s claim that building is a form of dwelling. Building is not action *qua* action of a subject, it is an event that emerges from relationality. The original evental quality of building is encapsulated in the notion of ‘dwelling’. The builder builds, but can only do so insofar as the fourfold opens the possibility of building as an interaction between earth, sky, mortals, and gods. In this way, the builder does not merely decide to build; she is rendered a builder by her world. According to Heidegger, the age of modernity—otherwise termed the age of *Gestell*—has forgotten the original meaning of building as dwelling. We continue to build but in the way of world-mastery that forgets to be grateful to that which unconditionally gives. Consequently, we build ceaselessly and yet remain “homeless” (Heidegger 1971, 159).

Within “Being, Dwelling, Thinking”, Heidegger attempts to illustrate what a building conscious of dwelling might look like. He does this by describing a premodern farmhouse in the Black Forest which he takes to be a true place of dwelling.

Here the self sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things, ordered the house. It placed the farm on the wind sheltered mountain slope looking south among the meadows close to the spring [...] It did not forget the alter corner behind the community table; it made room in its chambers for the hallowed places of childbed and the tree of death— for that is what they call the coffin there—the *Totenbaum*. In this way it designed it for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time (Heidegger 1971, 157-158)<sup>13</sup>

Although this passage was written some time before Heidegger published “The Thing” (*Das Ding*), one can already see the thinking of the “thing” at work. The things ordered in the farmhouse are referred to as “things” (*Ding*) not “objects” (*Objekte*) (Heidegger 2000, 162). The

roof, the community table, the childbed, and the coffin are not merely objects for the use of the inhabitants of the farmhouse; they do not appear at the ready, perpetually available as in objects of the standing reserve (*Bestand*) that fill the modern domicile. Rather, they are ‘things’—entities which elicit a remembrance of the earth and of finite temporality. As such, they gather the occupants of the house in community in remembrance of the constitutive relationships they maintain to one-another, the various generations past and to come, and the land itself.

The notion of the “thing” represents one of the most profound developments Heidegger undergoes between his early and late period. Throughout his work, Heidegger is determined to elucidate the difference in kind between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seinden*). As stated in the first chapter of *Being and Time*, Heidegger understands the history of metaphysics since Plato as having approached Being mistakenly. Being has been treated as the most universal concept—the being that encompasses all other beings (Heidegger 2010, 1-3). However, Being is not a being at all, but rather a process – the process by which phenomena come to present themselves. Any inquiry that attempts to elucidate Being as a concept with certain properties has yet to grasp Being in a genuinely fundamental sense.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger opts to approach the question of Being by first investigating the being of the “questioner”, namely, Dasein (Heidegger 2010, 6). This task is framed as a Kantian inspired project intended to delineate the a-priori conditions of possibility (Heidegger 2010, 6).<sup>14</sup> In order to differentiate between orders of inquiry, Heidegger adopts, at this time, the quasi-oppositional terms “ontic” and “ontological” (Heidegger 2010, 12). With the word ‘ontic’ Heidegger refers to actual or possible beings – whether they be tangible or conceptual. For Heidegger, the positive sciences operate within the ontic order of inquiry, as do branches of philosophy not oriented to fundamental ontology (Heidegger 2010, 9-10).

‘Ontological’, on the other hand, indicates the order of fundamental ontology, that is, the thinking of Being (Heidegger 2010, 9-10) . When Heidegger uses term “ontological” he refers the questioning of Being *qua* Being and the theoretical posits which emerge from such a questioning. In his explanation of the problem of Being, Heidegger refers to Dasein as the “ontic-ontological” (Heidegger 2010, 12). By this, he means that as a being, Dasein is unique insofar as it has the ability to ask the ontological question of what it means to ‘be’. As Heidegger writes: “Dasein is a being that does not simply occur among other beings. Rather, it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its being the this being is concerned about its very being (Heidegger 2010, 11).

Heidegger’s purported methodology in *Being and Time* is a phenomenological one; in the Husserlian sense he looks “to the things themselves” (Heidegger 2010, 26). However, Heidegger’s intention to look to things is not, at this point, to draw out the meaning of Being from beings directly, but to infer from them the structure of Dasein.<sup>15</sup> This methodological approach changes, however, following the publication of *Being and Time*. At this point in his career, Heidegger undergoes a gradual shift in orientation which is often described as a “turn from Dasein to Being” (Polt 1999, 118). Put in a less cryptic fashion, Heidegger’s project transitioned from seeking the essence of Being by making explicit the being of Dasein, to seeking Being directly in the presenting of beings themselves<sup>16</sup>. As a consequence of this transition, the language of ‘Dasein’ and the ‘ontic-ontological divide’ disappear from Heidegger’s writing almost entirely.

In his analytic of Dasein, Heidegger maintained a strict divide between the ontic and ontological registers in order to delimit his domain of inquiry. Insofar as he was interested in an investigation that would reveal the necessary structures of Dasein, possible ways of being and



acting were not of primary concern. This is precisely why Heidegger dismisses the subject of funerary rites in *Being and Time*. At this period, funerary practices, while indicative of Dasein's essential structure, were not perceived as a form of ontological revelation—that is, as a path to understanding Being. Rather, funerary practices were framed as positive, outward turning activities that exist counter to philosophical reflection. As much as funerary practices might tell the philosopher about the ontological structure of temporality and Dasein-with, the practices themselves were sharply differentiated from the practice of genuine ontological questioning.

Following his turn, the very practice of philosophy changes for Heidegger in a way that rendered it proximate to poetry. Thinking is not longer bound to rigorous self-questioning as in *Being and Time*; indeed, such reflexive questioning appears to fail thought in its deepest aim. For the late Heidegger, thinking becomes a meditation on things as “things”, now, not in terms of what they reveal about Dasein, but what they reveal about “thinging” itself. This “thinging” of the thing, that is, its Being, is eventually named by Heidegger as an interplay between four elements – the “fourfold”. The move towards prioritising “things”, especially works of art and ceremonial artifacts, as, in themselves, revelatory of Being becomes evident in the mid 1930s with “Origin of the Work of Art”. Heidegger's notion of the “thing” reaches full articulation in the early fifties with an essay entitled “The Thing” (*das Ding*).

Beings designated as “things” by Heidegger are beings in the conventional way of being tangibly encounterable and demarcated by temporal-spatial limits. However, the appearance of a “thing” is starkly contrasted from the appearance of an object as standing reserve. Whereas everyday objects of standing reserve conceal their own ontological origins in seamless usefulness, the thing “calls attention to itself as conditioned by the fourfold” (Edwards 2005, 460). Of course, everyday useful objects are necessarily constituted by the fourfold and are, in

this respect, “things”. However, in the presencing of everyday (often mass produced) objects the fourfold, as this very spatio-temporal, finite unfolding of presencing, is muffled. In contrast, the thing which presents as a “thing” *is* in such a way that the fourfold is “gathered” and thus beheld. As Heidegger phrases it, the thing presences as a point which earth, sky, mortals and divinities “fold over to a simple oneness” (Heidegger 1971, 171).

From the perspective of mortals, the thing appears as a kind of inverse of the everyday object. Insofar as a thing “things”, it does not appear to us as something manipulable or measurable by our individual will, rather it appears as mirror that reflects to us our place as mortals in our reciprocal relation to the fourfold. As Edward writes in his essay, “The Thinging of the Thing”, “it is that the thing, gathering and making visible its conditions, and thus simultaneously making clear through that conditionality its proper relation to us, forces us to acknowledge our own conditionality” (Edwards, 2005, 466). In “The Thing”, Heidegger offers the example of a ceremonial jug as a thing which gathers us and, by gathering, elicits remembrance of Being in awe and gratitude (Heidegger 1971, 165-171). In “Being, Dwelling, Thinking”, the farmhouse and its contents serve as things in the “proper sense” as Niederhauser indicates (Niederhauser 2019, 192). They are things that gather mortals reflectively with their world and thereby enable dwelling as dwelling.

On my reading, it is the ontic-ontological distinction that Heidegger maintains *circa Being and Time* that prevents him from seeing the potential of funerary practices, and humans remain themselves, to foster a remembrance of death. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger interprets funerary practices as ontic, that is, as a kind of practice involved with beings and not the meaning of Being as such. However, Heidegger takes a drastic turn in “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” when he suggests that the *Totenbaum* constitutes a “hallowed” place in the home

(Heidegger 1971 158). The *Totenbaum* is a being, yet, despite its status as such, it serves as a reminder of human finitude. Insofar as mortals allow themselves to be gathered by the *Totenbaum*, and the practices the issue from it, they grow nearer to Being *qua* Being— perhaps not in an explicitly intellectual way, but certainly in an affective, poetic one.

In *Being and Time*, being-towards-death is treated as a private, abstract exercise. However, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” and the broader logic of the fourfold indicate that there are particular times, places, and things that can help us to recall our mortality by calling to us as mortals. Among these are the spaces and things associated with dying and the dead. Throughout his work, Heidegger has consistently insisted that recovering our humanness, over and against technological enframing, requires embracing our mortality. In “Being, Dwelling, Thinking”, he shows that to properly dwell as mortals, we must, quite literally, invite death into our homes.

### **3. Poetry and Funerary Practices:**

In the previous section I argued, pursuing a hint from Niederhauser, that Heidegger’s later writing demonstrates a changed perspective on funerary practices coinciding with his turn from Dasein to “things”. In this section, I push this analysis further by arguing that, within the Heideggerian thinking of the fourfold, we can interpret funerary practices as potentially analogous to poetry, even as instances of poetry conceived in a broad sense. This is not to suggest that funerary practices consist exclusively of (or even primarily) of words, nor is it to suggest that funerary practices are always poetic. My argument is simply that is possible for funerary practices cultivate a mood that is phenomenologically akin to the mood of poetry according to Heidegger’s analysis. This mood or ‘medium’ is precisely the mood in which Being

*qua* Being makes itself known both intellectually and affectively. Otherwise termed, this is the mood of authenticity or “proper dwelling”. This chapter will begin with an outline of Heidegger’s analysis of poetry and its tense relation to everyday language. It will proceed to an investigation of poetry more broadly conceived as a “properly mortal” mode of disclosure.

### 3.1 Language and Poetry

Heidegger offers a particularly accessible account of poetry in his essay “Language” (*Die Sprache*), published in 1959. “Language” is structured in a similar fashion to “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” insofar as it investigates a commonplace notion and ultimately inverts that notion to reveal its ontological face. Here, the notion under investigation is language. According to modern sensibilities, language is defined as a tool of expression which we use as active subjects to express inner ideas and feelings. Since words are thought to correspond to things in the mind or in the world, linguistic utterances may be categorised as real or unreal—true or false (Heidegger 1971, 190). For Heidegger, this modern interpretation is “correct” in a practical sense, but forgets the primordial essence of language. Originally, language is what discloses worldly things thereby allowing beings to be.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, people are not the creators of language as is often implicitly thought, nor do we simply “use” it. Language always exists as received, and as such, works through us as much as we work with it. In Heidegger’s phrasing, “Language speaks; Man speaks in that he responds to language” (Heidegger 1971, 207).

In his 2018 book, *Heidegger’s Poetic Projection of Being*, Marius Geertsema explains Heidegger’s cryptic phrase “language speaks” as follows:

It is not us who decide on the meaning of the word and the way in which it shows and unfolds itself. In general, the hearing, reading or interpretation of language, as hermeneutics, precedes any particular deployment of language. Meaning as the totality of significant relations determines the meaning of one’s own essence as well. Language as a

whole therefore transcends the individual speaker or any actual group of speakers, like history transcends the lifespan of the individual. (Geertsema 2018, 121)

Put in the terms of *Being and Time*, language, otherwise known as “discourse” (*Rede*), is an aspect of our “thrownness”. We are thrown into a world that always-already reveals itself in terms of a particular discursive order. As we come to know our world, we “hear” the names of things and are only later able to repeat these names. In this way, language never belongs to us in an absolute sense; it is received as a gift from previous generations following a mysterious lineage untraceable in origin. Moreover, as historical, the particular language(s) that we are thrown into do not allow us complete access to what is and has been. We do not speak the same language as those living on the other side of the earth, nor do we speak the same language as our distant ancestors or our descendants to come. Thus, Being will reveal itself to us differently than it does to other peoples and other generations. As epochal sending, language is necessarily limited; as it presents beings, it simultaneously withdraws possibilities we are not privy to.

The conventional view of language as a tool of expression is particularly misleading according to Heidegger because language is precisely that which enables expression. It is in language that beings are gathered so the event of appropriation (Being) can occur. However, the general trend of modernity is to forget the connection between language and Being, concealing it with the unequivocal treatment of words as tools. Nonetheless, despite the grip of instrumental thinking, it remains possible (at least in some instances) to speak in a way that remembers language as a receptive gathering. Heidegger calls such a speaking “speaking purely”. For Heidegger, no matter the form, pure speaking is poetry (Heidegger 1971, 192, 205)<sup>18</sup>. Thus, Heidegger outlines two contrasting modes in which language occurs: 1) the everyday forgetful mode which uses language to order and give orders; 2) the “rare” poetic manner which

remembers the essence of language in its relation to withdrawal. Such language speaks through the mortal who resists any pretense of mastery.<sup>19</sup>

As is evident in the phrase “language speaks”, Heidegger takes language to be an activity of the middle voice. Poetry speaks from an understanding (if not necessarily an intellectual grasp) of words as received. Within his work of the nineteen forties and fifties, Heidegger conveys the relationship between poet and poetry, which defies the subject-object dichotomy, using metaphors of “calling” and “naming”. Poetry is the “called call” and the “named naming”. In “Language”, Heidegger, employing these very metaphors, gives the following account of the contrast between poetry and everyday language:

Mortal speech is a calling that names, a bidding which, out of the simple onefold of the difference, bids thing and world to come. What is purely bidden in mortal speech is what is spoken in the poem. Poetry proper is never merely a higher mode of everyday language. It is rather the reverse: everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used up poem from which there hardly resounds a call any longer (Heidegger 1971, 205)

Typically, when beings are indicated in words, whether as silent disclosure or spoken aloud, the world and its interconnectivity is forgotten. The world is backgrounded when we reveal in everyday language a useful object or an item of property. However, in poetry, which is also “mortal speech”, it is the objectivity of the object and the subjective will which are forgotten. The thing that is named in poetry, and thereby brought to presencing, is a thing that does not conceal the world but allows world to shine through it. Thus, world and thing presence together. For Heidegger, this calling together of world and thing is really a calling of the “difference” (Heidegger 1971, 200). “Difference” here refers to the difference between Being and beings. By “folding” over world and thing, the poet calls Being as Being.

It must be noted here that, although Heidegger describes the two-fold of world and thing in the cited passage, he understands world as an interconnected multiplicity. Heidegger is

explicit on this point in “Language”: “The unitary fourfold of sky, earth, mortals, and divinities which are stayed in the thinking of things we call—the world” (Heidegger 1971, 197). “World”, used at this point in Heidegger’s writing, names the interplay of the four elements that participate in Being. These elements include earth and sky which open up dwelling in space, along with mortals and immortals whose interplay is the stretching of finite temporality. In the “thing”, which is evoked by poetry, the fourfold is folded into a unity so the play between time and space — presence and mystery— can be beheld.

Heidegger describes poetry as the “reverse” of everyday speech because instead of imposing a preformed understanding, it listens for the “thing” itself. This is also why Heidegger refers to poetry as “mortal speech”. Poetry does not come from the perspective of one who seeks the status of a god, but rather comes from a modest mind and heart—the heart of a mortal who recognises herself as connected to the divine, but only at a distance. Whereas everyday language presumes mastery, poetry humbly listens to “things” as they are delivered over and resound the name that is heard. It is precisely this listening, this giving over to the world as “thing”, that gives poetry its freshness and originality. Every day speech is a used-up poem insofar as it refers to something that was once heard, but is no longer listened to. Everyday speech “hardly” resounds because its pretense of mastery has rendered it deaf to the call of “things”.

### **3.2 Poetry as Proper Dwelling**

Poetry in its literal sense, as in the poetry of Hölderlin, Trakl, and Rilke, takes precedence in Heidegger’s later writing. However, it is clear that Heidegger also maintains a broader notion of poetry that includes other forms of visual art, architecture, and agricultural cultivation. Indeed, he also considers philosophy to be akin to poetry in its aim to reveal Being (Heidegger 200, 161).

In many places in his later work, Heidegger treats poetry even more generally as a particularly heedful way of disclosing the world. This point comes across most clearly in “Question Concerning Technology” and “...Poetically Man Dwells...”.

In “Question Concerning Technology”, Heidegger traces the word poetry (*Poesie*) to the Greek word *poesis* which he translates as “bringing forth” (Heidegger 1993, 317). For him, “bringing forth” is synonymous with disclosing, or in other words with the coming together of the four causes so beings can present themselves (Heidegger 1993, 317). According to Heidegger, *poesis* is an activity which can be attributed to both humans and nature (*physis*). *Physis* is itself a *poesis*, insofar as it brings forth beings which present themselves, grow and die of their own accord (Heidegger 1993, 317). Humans engage in *poesis* when they manufacture things or “bring them to a stand” in language. In this way, technological enframing is itself a form of *poesis*: “technology is something poietic” (Heidegger 1993, 318). Although technology, as a way of revealing, is a kind of “poetry”, it is, for Heidegger, a poetry of a derivative kind which betrays the nature of *poesis*. As he writes, “the revealing that holds sway through modern technology does not bring forth in the sense of *poesis*. The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging” (Heidegger 1993, 320). To summarise, technology is not a type of object, as is commonly thought, but a mode of disclosure. Specifically, it is a mode of disclosure that forgets its nature as disclosure and the fact that disclosure implies simultaneous withdrawal. Technology is a mode of disclosure that mistakes the mortal position for a godlike one, and thereby assumes that all there is *is* objectively available.

To illustrate his point, Heidegger gives the example of two different ways the Rhine river has been disclosed to mortals: 1) the sincerely poetic fashion of Hölderlin’s hymns, and 2) the ugly unpoetic *poesis* of technological enframing. As he writes, “The hydroelectric plant is not



built into the Rhine river as the old wooden bridge that joined bank with bank for hundreds of years [...] what the river is now, namely, a water power supplier derived from the essence of the power station” (Heidegger 1993, 321). In Hölderlin’s hymns, the Rhine is a thing which presents the coming together of the fourfold. As such, it was a marker of time, place, and community. The uniqueness of the Rhine disappears as it becomes a source of quantifiable energy. Instead of being a point that gives shape to human dwelling, the dammed river is rendered a testament to man’s supposed mastery of the earth.

In sum, Heidegger’s notion of poetry should not be understood in the sense of literature—as words that have been produced in a given sequence to evoke certain images. Poetry is a mode of disclosure which is heedful as opposed to imposing. To poeticize merely means to patiently listen to the call of things as they present themselves and respond to that presentation. Receiving responses to the world may be in words, as in written or spoken poetry, but it also may be in the form of building, crafting, making music, dancing, or tending to others. Put simply, poetry is a mode of being mortal that interrupts the mode of enframing and returns the human being to its original responsivity. Heidegger’s broad conception of poetry as form of disclosure, articulated in “Question Concerning Technology”, is brought home in the later essay “...Poetically Man Dwells...”.

Inspired by a line from Hölderlin’s “In Beautiful Blue”, Heidegger claims in “...Poetically Man Dwells...” that poetry is the essence of human life (Heidegger 1971, 223). Poetry is not an addition to dwelling as is commonly thought, nor a flight of fancy, but the very condition of its possibility. It is poetry, conceived in the sense of a responsive naming, that is disclosure, which allows humans to build, cultivate, and otherwise make their homes in the world. In the epoch of *Gestell*, we have forgotten, amidst subject-object discourse, that all our

activities are conditioned by the fourfold. In this forgetting, our dwelling has become unpoetic. However, as Heidegger claims, “dwelling can only be unpoetic because it is poetic in essence” (Heidegger 1971, 225).<sup>20</sup> By remembering the “measure on earth”, that is, our mortality and the categorical unreachability of the absolute, we can transform our dwelling to a poetry that is truly poetic.

It has been my claim that we can understand Heidegger’s reference to the *Totenbaum* in “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” in terms of the notion of a “thing”. However, the notion of the *Totenbaum* as a “thing” cannot be understood without reference to poetry as a particular medium of disclosure. Mortals must meet the *Totenbaum* in a poetic fashion for it to be apprehended as a “thing” and not merely an object. Insofar as the *Totenbaum* presences as “hallowed” (Heidegger 1971, 158), the peasant family that surrounds, lives with, and uses it, do not (at least for the most part) regard it in terms of the monetary value it represents or the square footage it occupies. Rather, the *Totenbaum* is approached with reverence and thus given an opportunity to “stand” and “speak” of the cycles of birth and death. Put differently, the *Totenbaum* cannot “thing” in a vacuum; it presences and gathers community in the mode of poetry—that is, in a sensitively mooded medium. The relation between the thing and the poetic medium is reciprocal. The *Totenbaum* things because of the peasants’ poetic mode of dwelling, and in turn the *Totenbaum* calls out and speaks to them of dwelling as mortals, thereby filling the home with poetry.

#### **4.1 Poetry, Mourning and the Holy**

Poetry, for Heidegger, is not merely a collection of words but a mode of disclosure that reveals and responds to beings as “things”. This chapter will elaborate the relationship between “poetic dwelling” and the “holy” with the aid of Andrew Mitchell’s 2015 book, *The Fourfold*,

and James Edwards' "The Thinging of the Thing". According to my own interpretation, 'holy' and 'poetic' ultimately indicate the same mode or "mood". I conclude this chapter by arguing, with reference to Heidegger's notion of "holy mourning", that commonplace mourning can be taken up in a way that lights up the holy. What is more, inasmuch as funerary practices are taken up in the mode of the holy, they have the potential to break through, if only for a short period, the godless mode of *Gestell*.

#### 4.2 The Poetic Mode as the Holy

Heidegger introduces the theme of the holy in his 1934–35 lecture course on *Hölderlin's Hymns: "Germania" and "The Rhine"* (Mitchell, 2015, 191-192). For Heidegger, the holy (*das Heilige*) is the "medium" or "mood" in which divinities present themselves to mortals. Of the four elements of the fourfold, the divinities are arguably the most difficult to interpret. Although the divinities are said to "shine forth" in the thing, it is clear that the divinities do not present as any kind of entity themselves. They, like earth, sky and mortals, should be understood as a condition for Being as such (Edwards, 2000, 461). However, what precisely the divinities represent insofar as they are a conditional element of Being is somewhat elusive.

In his chapter of *The Fourfold* devoted to the divinities, Andrew Mitchell explains the divinities in terms of an indication of withdrawal that comes in the form of a "wink" or a "hint" (Mitchell 2015, 171-175). As opposed to revealing themselves as any being, divinities present themselves purely as an index to withholding. As Mitchell writes, the hint is "the word of withholding itself" (Mitchell 2015, 175). Understood this way, Heidegger's God is a name for what can not be known—for what remains a mystery. When the divine presents to mortals, it speaks not to deliver any instructions, but merely to provide a reminder of finitude (both

existential and epistemic). In their “word of withholding”, the divine mirrors to mortals their mortality as such.

In “The Thinging of the Thing”, Edwards gives a somewhat more substantial reading of Heidegger’s divinities. For Edwards, the divinities refer to the necessary eschatological component to human life and the Being of things. As he writes, “Need and eschatological hope are (according to Heidegger) conditions of human life as such. To recognize one’s fundamental neediness; to acknowledge that one is not the healthy and complete being one can imagine – if only inchoately – oneself to be [...is to] look to the future for the gift of one’s completion brought on the wings of a presence from another world” (Edwards 200, 463). For Edwards the divinities hint to mortals of a situation better than the one they find themselves in—one that would bring with it wholeness, health, and healing. The divinities represent the unnameable good that we hope and prepare for but cannot bring about by our own will. Of course, given that ecstatic nature of temporality, the divinities do not merely solicit from the future. Rather, the “present and past are the story in which the traces of the god – traces both of absence and of coming presence – must be discerned”(ibid). Importantly, however, insofar as the divinities present as genuinely divine, past and future do not appear in the guise of vulgar repetition or planning. While the divinities hints of heaven to come, the coming presence that is anticipated can only met with radical openness.

As the medium in which the divinities hint, the holy is a mode suffused with withdrawal, specifically, the withdrawal necessitated by the structure of finite temporality. This gathered element of withdrawal puts the holy at odds with *Gestell* as the mode of perpetual availability. As Mitchell writes, “the holy marks a liberation from the presuppositions of utility, which include availability for the assessment of an object’s worth as a means to an end. Withdrawing

from utility, the altruism of the holy renders what lies within it singular” (Mitchell, 2015, 191). In other words, what is revealed in the medium of the holy are not objects at hand to be ordered but precisely things as “things”. In the holy, things reveal themselves as “singular” as opposed to interchangeable as in standing reserve. However, this revelation of singularity is by no means a revelation of individual self-containment—quite the opposite. To recognise the singularity of a thing is to recognise it as the unique and fragile outcome of the play of the fourfold. The holy exhibits the very way that beings in their singularity require an entire network of meaning—a world—to be meaningful. In Mitchell’s terms, the holy articulates the “mutual need between medium and mediated” (Mitchell 2015, 196).

Another way to describe the holy is the medium which harbours an understanding of the simple “onfold of the difference”, that is, the co-implication of world and thing. As elaborated in Heidegger’s essay “Language”, this is precisely the mode out of which the poet speaks: “Poetry is a calling that names, a bidding which, out of the simple onfold of the difference, bids thing and world to come” (Heidegger 1971, 205). The poet reveals through the medium of the holy and at the same time seeks to give it a name. Heidegger confirms the link between poetry and the holy when he writes in “As When On Holiday” that “the poet’s song gives voice to the holy” and “their [the poet’s] song makes the land holy” (Mitchell 2015, 195, 200). Put simply, the holy is another name for poetic dwelling as a mode of disclosure which reveals things, not as isolated objects but as a marriage of earth, sky, mortals and divinities. For Heidegger, poetry is the true essence of religion stripped of metaphysical pretense. Poetry is holy insofar as it harbors an understanding of the world as a sublimely interconnected mystery and our place in this sublime mystery as mortals who await divine sendings.

### 4.3 Poetry and Mourning

In Heidegger's first mention of the holy, he indicates it as a "mood" (*Stimmung*), specifically the "fundamental mood" (*Grundstimmung*) (Mitchell 2015, 195, 191). "Mood" is here an imperfect term to describe a disclosive mode or medium as it is bound, in common usage, to the notion of the metaphysical subject. However, describing the holy as a "mood" does help to highlight the way in which the holy involves *pathos*. As Mitchell indicates, Heidegger associates the holy with various emotions including both joy and horror (Mitchell 2015, 194-195). I also hold that Heidegger's indication of the holy as a "fundamental mood" aligns it with his early notion of anxiety. However, in his late work, the emotion of the holy, or in other words, the *pathos* of poetry is most frequently associated with mourning.

For Heidegger, modern poets (most especially Hölderlin), dwell in a mode of holy mourning. In the epoch of ever-expanding technology, poets are those especially susceptible to feeling the absence of the divine and, by mourning such absence, "safeguard" the flight of the gods. As Mitchell describes:

That this fundamental mood of mourning would be holy means that this mourning brings no personal advantage to whoever it claims, but instead is a "self-opening affliction" [*Bedrängnis*], which places itself before the flown gods, guarding their flight and enduring what comes [*die Kommenden*] [...] In the holy, we suffer the affliction of not-having (Mitchell 2015, 191).

In a world that has forgotten the divine, that is, mystery, gratitude, and withdrawal, the poet is one who is able to remark, and indeed lament, this loss. The poet is sensitive to the way the call of "things" has dimmed, how places have been concealed by abstract space, and time has been crushed to a continuous present. Yet, in this lamenting the absence of concealment, the divine is found again by the poet-mortal. For, it is in the mournful "not-having", that the holy wells up.

The treatment of mourning as—at least in some instances—“holy” marks a significant change from Heidegger’s brief reference to mourning in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 2010, 230). In this early work, Heidegger frames mourning as an outward turning, “circumspect”, emotion entangled with things in the world. Here, however, the word ‘mourning’ is indexed not to the loss of a particular person, but to loss itself. Holy mourning is directed at the mournful nature of Being which, insofar as it is enabled by finite temporality, implies our exposure to death.

Although painful, holy mourning like anxiety is revelatory; it brings us nearer to Being in its inextricable relation to absence. In his reflections on Hölderlin’s hymn to the Ister, Heidegger emphasises the revelatory power of poetic pain—a pain that he describes as a being consumed by the fire of the holy (Heidegger 1996, 153).

Pain [...] is that knowing proper to being distinct, in which the belonging to one another of the human beings and gods first attains the separation of distance and thereby the possibility of proximity, and thus the fortune of appearing. Pain belongs to being able to show; it belongs to the poet as the knowledge of his own essence. This essence resides in each case as being the between in which the demigod stands and that he has to sustain the between of heavenly and human beings. (Heidegger 1996, 153).

In his treatment of holy mourning, Heidegger verges on a kind of elitism that frames certain people (specifically world-historical philosophers and poets) as uniquely privy to the call of the divine. This comes across especially in his treatment of poets as “demigods”. It is for this reason I emphasise Heidegger’s broad notion of poetry as poetic dwelling. Inasmuch as we are all capable of receiving the call from certain things, struggle with words to capture our deepest insights, and suffer from the pain of existence as such, we suffer from the fire of the holy. We are all open to flashes of insight from time to time and, inasmuch as we hear and speak from this insight, we act as demigods sustaining the “between”. Indeed, to be a demi-god is merely to be properly mortal—at winking distance from the divine. The poet is not some type of person, as Heidegger sometimes leads us to believe with his incessant attention to Hölderlin and the Greek

tragedians. Being a poet is a structural possibility for every Dasein, as is authenticity as it is presented in *Being and Time*.<sup>21</sup> Insofar, as we let go of mastery and invite the beings to affect us, we dwell as mortals in the mood of the holy. In doing so we participate, along with the world-historical poets, in preparing the way for an epoch beyond *Gestell*.

In nearly all of his post-war texts, Heidegger expresses fear that in the epoch of technology, we have nearly lost the ability to see things beyond the veil of enframing. This fear often surfaces in quasi-religious terms as “the flight of the gods” and “the loss of the holy”. Although Heidegger, does not claim to be able to show the way out, several points are clear. 1) the way out of *Gestell* requires a rediscovery of the holy.<sup>22</sup> By rediscovering the holy, we invite the gods to ‘wink’ at us and remind us of our place as mortals within the fourfold. 2) We cannot *will* the holy to arrive, for it is precisely will that presides in the age of *Gestell*. We must wait instead for a call that delivers us over into the medium—a call that may issue from consideration of our ownmost deaths, from things themselves, or from the songs of poets. 3) As the reverse of the *Gestell*, the holy involves the *pathos* of suffering. Suffering is here not thought of in a negative sense (necessarily), but in the etymological sense of being subjected to or affected by something.<sup>23</sup> As a passive “altruistic” mode, the holy is always attended by a kind of mourning: mourning for what we cannot have, mourning for what we must at some point lose, and mourning because we cannot be gods. The holy, as a mode that reflexively understands, that is measures, the limits of finite “being there”, recognises and lives human life as mourning.<sup>24</sup>

As Heidegger, cited by Mitchell, writes, “It remains undecided whether we experience the holy still as the trace of the godhood of the divine or if we still even encounter a trace of the holy. It remains unclear what the trace of the trace could be. It remains in question how such a trace would care to show itself to us” (Mitchell 2015,198). Here I want to suggest, as an answer to this



question, against Heidegger's actual words but in line with his thought, that the death of others may prove an opportunity for "salvation". Although modern Western funerary practices are often inflected by sterility and calculation, I hold that usually and for the most part, there is at least some glimmer of the fourfold present at the modern funeral. And, in most cases, funerary practices offer even the busiest of us a sincerely poetic pause that hints at the holy. In a world where we rarely consider poetry outside of the classroom, or feel the presence of the divine at regular religious gatherings—where few people celebrate coming of age, and God no-longer "oversees" marriages in any serious sense—funerals may be one of the few places modern mortals experience the holy.

The holy mourning Heidegger refers to in his works on Hölderlin is a mourning that is directed towards the epoch as a whole; the poet of "desolate times" mourns the absence of the gods.<sup>25</sup> However, on my view, common mourning may prove an opportunity for reflection on the nature of Being as such. There are few opportunities in the modern world for comfortable middle-class westerners to come across genuine unavailability. A few key exceptions include heartbreak, sickness, and death. However, even these remaining forms of suffering are becoming more and more "solvable". Cognitive science is developing ways to re-wire the synapses of the brain so a person can fall out of love, and dating apps present us with hundreds of potential partners to replace any lost lover. Pharmaceutical companies develop cures for diseases before maladies have been given names, and a tablet of Advil prevents the requirement of suffering the discomfort of a headache. Death, yet remains untouched (although not for want of trying on the part of doctors, longevity scientists, and biotech entrepreneurs).<sup>26</sup> It is unfortunate that Heidegger did not revisit the death of others explicitly in his later work, for it is an example of withdrawal that is experienced profoundly and universally. As such, it points to an opportunity, in an

otherwise technologized “godless” world, for communities to sense traces of, even “dwell”, in the Holy as it emanates from the bodies of the deceased and the hallowed places the dead reside. For, it is no accident that Heidegger uses the word “hallowed” (*Geheiligten*) to describe the place of the *Totenbaum* in the peasant farmhouse. Places suffused with death are spaces which harbour the potential for the holy.<sup>27</sup>

It is not my claim that funerary practices are always poetic, that is, taken up as holy. Funerary practices are equi-vocal like any word or gesture; they may be taken up in a generously poetic or callously unpoetic fashion. Bodies, as beings, have, like all beings, an equivocal significance. The corpse may be disclosed as an object to be disposed of or preserved for sanitary, political, or “afterworldly” reasons. But it also can be disclosed a “thing” – a thing which gathers remembrance of the mysterious nature of Being. It may be said, using a famous Heideggerian locution, that grief for a lost loved one signals simultaneously the greatest danger and hope. The remains of the dead are charged with meaning, whether they are revealed as things or objects. On the one hand, the death of the other can inspire the most violent desire for revenge against finite temporality that leads us to seek metaphysical or technological “solutions” to death. On the other hand, grief can disperse into holy mourning, that is, a bittersweet gratitude for death as necessary to life.

## **5 The Poem of Antigone**

In order to illustrate the connection between poetry, mourning and the holy within Heidegger’s thinking of the fourfold, I turn to Heidegger’s famous interpretation of *Antigone*. This interpretation is forwarded in two places within Heidegger’s work: his 1935 *Introduction to Metaphysics* and his 1942 lecture course *Hölderlin’s hymn “The Ister”*. I focus on the latter text

as it is a more extensive treatment of the play and is presented in a language more proximate to the language of the fourfold. Somewhat against the thrust of Heidegger's own argument, I hone in on Heidegger's treatment of the titular character. On the basis of Heidegger's remarks, I argue that *Antigone* is a depiction of poetic dwelling. As such, *Antigone's* act of burying her brother must be understood as a poetic gesture within Heidegger's broad definition of poetry. As a poet, *Antigone's* personal law—the infamous divine law—is the law of the poetic dwelling, namely, the law of being as a mortal.

I open this section with an outline of Heidegger's reading of the play which he understands as meditation on the “unhomely” essence the human being. In doing so, I attempt to synthesize the various formulations of “being-towards-death” and “becoming properly mortal” discussed in foregoing sections. I proceed to put forward my own interpretation of Heidegger's *Antigone* as a poet within a poem in conversation with notable commentators Katherine Withy and Dennis Schmidt.

### **5.1 The Human Being as *Deinon***

Somewhat surprisingly, Heidegger presents his most in-depth treatment of Sophocles in a lecture course purported to be about Hölderlin's river poems. The juxtaposition of Sophocles' and Hölderlin's poetry is taken up for several interrelated reasons—most significantly to demonstrate the hermeneutical difficulty of translation while highlighting the shared purposes of the two poets. However, I must somewhat sideline the context of Heidegger's treatment of *Antigone* in order to elaborate what he says about the play itself. According to Heidegger, the essence of the play is a rendering, in poetic terms, of the “counterturning” truth of human

existence. This existence is referred to by Sophocles as “*deinon*” which Heidegger translates, following Hölderlin, as “unhomely” (*unheimlich*).

The counterplay of this tragedy is not played out in opposition between the “state” on one hand and “religion” on the other, but between what constitutes the innermost counterturning of the *deinon* itself, insofar as the *deinon* is thought as the unhomely. The counterplay is played out between being unhomely in the sense of being driven about amid beings without any way out, and being unhomely as becoming homely from out of a belonging to Being (Heidegger 1996, 118).<sup>28</sup>

For Heidegger, the human being is in essence unhomely (*deinon*). Unlike other beings in the world, mortals are such that “they stand in the midst of beings in a way as to comport themselves towards beings as such” (Heidegger 1996, 76). This is because mortals are rifted (although importantly not detached) from nature. Heidegger describes this rifting as a being held into the “open” (Heidegger 1996, 91). This “open” elsewhere termed the “nothing”, the “clearing”, or the “sky”, is what allows us to demarcate the borders of things –a demarcation that occurs always in “*logos*” or language. However, rifted from nature, the human is itself incomplete, that is, not at home. This unhomeliness amounts to the *pathos* of anxiety— anxiety at being exposed, responsible, limited, condemned to loss and death. To combat this feeling of homelessness, mortals face outward dangers, conquering and collecting as many beings as possible in hopes of finding a sense of safety and completion. In Sophocles’ words, man is “*Pantaporos aporos*”: “Everywhere venturing fourth experienceless without any way out” (Heidegger 1996, 59). While this wandering amidst beings is spurred by the hope of alleviating anxiety, it presents a danger of its own. In the incessant quest to overcome unhomeliness the human confuses beings and non-beings, i.e., the difference between beings and Being (Heidegger 1996, 89). Put in more practical terms, in the effort to make the world “homely”, we have the propensity to sap the meaning and beauty out of all things, desertifying the world and thereby rendering it all the more inhospitable.

And, still in the end, human beings inevitably come to *aporos* – nothing, that is, they come to death.

Although the language of Sophocles brings in a new set of metaphors, the two sides of the “counterturning” Heidegger here describes map quite cleanly onto the “counterturning” or “catastrophe” he describes elsewhere in his work. “Being driven about amid beings without any way out” is another, albeit somewhat more “foreign”, way to describe the forgetting of Being. In his description of the technological mastery of humans as *deinon*, Sophocles indicates a phenomenon akin to the “everyday mode” as Heidegger conceives it. That is, a mode which, amidst hunting and building, dwelling is forgotten. Moreover, Heidegger will insist that Sophocles indicates a “way out”, namely, through a turning backwards towards the uncanny origin—Being. In this text, Heidegger articulates this possibility as “making one’s home in the unhomely” (Heidegger 1996, 103).

Heidegger’s explanation for the symmetry between his own thought and the ancient words of Sophocles is that poetry and genuine (non metaphysical) philosophy ultimately have the same aim. Heidegger explicitly states this point in *Introduction to Metaphysics* in his transition from the treatment of ancient Greek philosophy to the ancient Greek tragedy.

The thinking of Parmenides and Heraclitus is still poetic and here this means philosophical not scientific. But because in this poeticizing thinking thinking has precedent, thinking about human beings also acquires its direction and measure. In order to clarify this poetic thinking sufficiently in terms of its proper counterpart we will now interrogate a thinking poetry of the Greeks. (Heidegger 200, 161)

Here Heidegger indicates that philosophy and poetry are counterparts. The first is a poeticizing thinking and the latter is thinking poetry. In other words, while they approach the subject differently, both aim to name the same. They aim to name the swaying nature of Being itself.<sup>29</sup>

## 5.2 Antigone Poeticizing

In his reflections on *Antigone*, Heidegger reads the essential counterturning as most palpably disclosed in the first choral ode (Heidegger 2000, 161-181; Heidegger 1996, 51-97). However, the counterturning of the *deinon* is also the schema for his interpretation of the tragic plot. The main conflict between Antigone and Creon is essentially a result of the counterturning possibilities of Dasein as it is indexed to a particular being—the being of a corpse. Creon interprets the corpse in an outward turning, everyday fashion as a mere being. Specifically, it is a being of negative value due to the trace relation of the traitor who once animated it. As such, in leaving it exposed to the carrion, he uses the body as a political tool to promote national values and patriotism. Inversely, Antigone views the corpse of Polynices, not as an object, but a thing in the proper sense (at least in Heidegger’s reading). Instead of it being disclosed to her as a political tool, the body discloses itself as a fragile singularity that lights up the fragility of human life. Where Creon sees in the body a traitor to be punished, Antigone beholds the sublime mystery of the fourfold.

While Heidegger does not outright condemn the position of Creon, it is evident he champions the figure of Antigone, naming her in one instance as “authentically unhomely” (*eigentlich Unheimlich*) (Heidegger 1984, 146).<sup>30</sup> As Katherine Withy suggests, Heidegger praises Antigone as an example of “ontological reticence” (Withy 2014, 3). Unlike Creon, Antigone is attuned to the corpse, not in terms of what it can do for her, but in terms of her obligations to it. It cries out to her “bury me”(Withy 2014, 5). Antigone is able to hear the cry of the body precisely due to the “divine law” she abides. Withy interprets this divine law is the hidden law of intelligibility (Withy 2014, 5). Antigone has a holistic understanding of Being

such that she understands beings as dependent on a network of relationships. Thus, she takes up the action of burial because it is required to uphold the intelligibility of her world.

Withy's account of ontological reticence is somewhat lacking insofar as it neglects to reference the earth, divinities or the fourfold more generally. Nonetheless she is correct to suggest Antigone recognises herself as obliged to the corpse, regardless of the commonly understood "value" her brother represents, because he was (and continues to be) a constitutive part of her own being and the being of the community. I would add here, however, that the gesture of burial is not merely an obligation rooted in intelligibility, but rooted in obligation to the fourfold – most especially an obligation to the earth. In recognising the body as a "thing" in the proper sense, she recognises the body's indebtedness to the earth, and through the movement of mirroring her own indebtedness. Considered in this way, the burial of her brother may be understood as a sacrifice back to the earth as recompose for its gift of life.<sup>31</sup>

If Heidegger maintained the original position on funerary practices at the time of his interpretation of Sophocles, it would be odd for him to name Antigone as authentic. After all, her decisive action is to carry out a burial ritual. He could conceivably argue that Antigone's act was bound to afterworldly beliefs; she may have buried her brother because she was concerned about his, and her own passage to the underworld. Indeed, there are plenty of lines in the play that would support such a reading. However, Heidegger is quite clear in his interpretation that Antigone is not motivated by personal benefit. What determines Antigone is precisely the divine law, a law that Heidegger describes as "that which first bestows the ground and necessity upon the distinction of the dead the priority of blood (Heidegger 1996, 117). Put simply, this is the original law of dwelling itself. Antigone grasps (at least intuitively) the condition of Being as dependent on the fourfold and the place of mortals as a part of the interplay. As opposed to

turning away, she dwells in her anxiety and grief, making her “home in the unhomely”. She abides the conditions of being mortal on earth, that is, of death and error, and makes suffering them her personal law.<sup>32</sup> Antigone’s sister Ismene describes Antigone as having a “fiery heart though turned towards the cold” (Heidegger 1996, 98). This coldness that Antigone is turned to is not merely the cold body of Polynices, it is death itself; Antigone has opened her heart to death as a friend. To use Hölderlin’s phrase, Antigone recognises “*Leben ist Tod, und Tod auch ein Leben*” (Heidegger 1996, 118).<sup>33</sup>

In Dennis Schmidt’s reflections on Heidegger’s Antigone in *On Germans & other Greeks* and “The Monstrous, Catastrophe, and Ethical Life”, he names Antigone’s divine law as the “law of the idiom” (Schmidt, 2015, 66-67; Schmidt, 2015, 260). By this description he indicates Antigone as a poetic figure—one who understands language as implicating withdrawal, just as the literal translation of an idiom falls short of its meaning. Antigone possesses the poetic knowledge that words do not accord with objective reality, but rather bring forth by leaving a remainder. Although phrased slightly differently, Schmidt’s interpretation of the divine law is entirely compatible with my own, for, the knowledge of the poet is precisely the knowledge of mortality as such. After all, poetry is precisely “mortal speech”(Heidegger 1971, 205). Insofar as she suffers the law of being mortal within the fourfold, she must be understood as a figure of poetic dwelling or “holy mourning”. By extension, the burial she performs, is, in its essence, a poetic gesture. By burying her brother, Antigone participates in an eruption of the holy – a gathering of gods, sky and earth in and through the body of the deceased. What Antigone does in the play bearing her name is to sacrifice herself, not for any quantifiable value, but for poetic dwelling itself. Her sacrifice is a poet’s sacrifice, a sacrifice to “make the land holy”.



In the final section of his reading of *Antigone*, Heidegger names Antigone as the “purest poem” (Heidegger 1971, 119). By this he does not mean that the tragedy *Antigone* is a paradigmatic example of pure speech, although it is clear that he takes Sophocles to be a poet of the highest caliber. Rather, Heidegger takes Antigone the character to be a poem, namely, “the poem of becoming homely in the unhomely” (Heidegger 1971, 121). The figure of Antigone represents the potentiality of the human being to find beauty and gratitude even amidst loss and death. Although Antigone is not a poet in the traditional sense, she is a poet of poetic dwelling; her poetic product is her life and every gesture incorporated in it. Antigone, albeit a fiction, is a figure of life lived as a poem. By gifting us the poem that Antigone, Sophocles offers a reminder of what is most essential: coming home to our place in the world as mortals.

As Heidegger emphatically reminds us, Sophocles lived in a drastically different world than our own, one that will remain foreign regardless of our ability to read Ancient Greek. Nonetheless, there are currents of sameness between the situation depicted in *Antigone* and our own. While we live in an epoch in which beings present differently, Being itself is the same in its counterturning structure. Human beings remain cable of turning away from their origin in uncanniness (now more than ever) and of thoughtfully recalling it. Sophocles lived in a world rich in holy fire—or so the claim goes. Yet, insofar as the holy needed Antigone as its protector, we might assume that the crisis of the holy had already begun. What is more, *Antigone* shows us that mourning has not changed in essence since antiquity. While modern practices are necessarily different than Ancient ones, they retain the same counterturning possibilities. On the one hand, they can pull us away from nearness to Being, on the other, they can serve as a reminder of the gift and mystery of life. In the modern age of *Gestell*, we’ll do well to remember Antigone. Not

because we can repeat her actions in any vulgar sense, but because her insistence on dwelling in mourning hints at a way out of the predicament of our own epoch.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have sought to trace the change in Heidegger's thinking on funerary practices from the period of *Being and Time* to the period of the fourfold. In *Being and Time*, funerary practices were framed as a aspect of everyday life turned away from essential questioning. However, in the essay "Being, Dwelling, Thinking", and in the broader logic of the fourfold, funerary practices are shown to be, themselves, a possible path to Being insofar as they are taken up in a poetic mode. What is more, I hope to have shown how Heidegger's meditations on mourning as a source of healing, has bearing on our contemporary lives lived in technological modernity. Instead of shuffling on the next task, Heidegger encourages us to pause and dwell in our grief, not matter its cause—whether it be the loss of a loved one, or just a generalised feeling of lostness in the world. For it is in grief that we moderns come nearest to the truth Being, and it is in grief that we may discover renewal.

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## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> Dasein is only ontically whole at the moment of death at which moment it ceases to be Dasein (Heidegger 2010, 22, 7).

<sup>2</sup> Grasping Dasein as a whole ontologically is the very project of *Being and Time*, at least in its final form. As I note later, *Being and Time* was an unfinished project.

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger unfortunately draws a strong distinction between human and non-human animals. I cannot undertake to deconstruct this problematic dichotomy here. However, those interested in this issue might look to Derrida's "The Animal I therefore Am", and/or Carrie Packwood. "Embracing Humanimality".

<sup>4</sup> For Heidegger, it is anxiety, as the affect of thrown exposure, which grounds the possibility of outward turning emotions such as fear or desire. Likewise, being-towards-death is the condition of possibility of everyday taking care. It is only insofar that we are dying that projects are meaningful.

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger connects public time to Hegel's notion of Spirit: "Hegel's concept of time presents the most radical way in which the vulgar understanding of time has been given form conceptually" (Heidegger 2010, 407).

<sup>6</sup> Although Heidegger focuses on death as insuperable end of possibility within *Being and Time*, it is clear in his discussion of "historicity" that Heidegger relates proper being-towards-death to a broader sense of epochal withdrawal. The affinity between death and epochal withdrawal becomes more pronounced in his later work

<sup>7</sup> Here I borrow the Derridean terms employed by Hans Ruin to describe Heidegger's analysis of human remains (Ruin 2018, 195). The term 'specter' is first employed in this way by Derrida in *Specters of Marx*.

<sup>8</sup> Hegel and Nietzsche present an extremely vivid opposition in their treatments of death and afterlife, especially in their references to ancient Egyptian culture. Hegel applauds the Egyptians for presenting a "glimmer of spirit" insofar as they honour their dead with immortal signs (Ruin 2018, 193). Conversely, Nietzsche uses "Egyptianism" as an example of the kind of "afterworldly" metaphysics which is "hostile to life", claiming that Plato went wrong insofar as he was "schooled by the Egyptians" (Nietzsche 1997, 51,120). This opposition is especially interesting to note alongside Heidegger's criticism of Hegel's philosophy of time.

<sup>9</sup> "Life is death and death is also life". This is an excerpt from Hölderlin's "In Beautiful Blue", a poem that is frequently referenced in Heidegger's late essays.

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger introduces the term *Gestell* in his 1954 *Question Concerning Technology*, based on his 1949 lecture "The Framework" ("*Das Gestell*") (Safranski 1999, 391).

<sup>11</sup> The tradition of the *Totenbaum* would have involved washing and displaying the body of a deceased loved one in the home (Kenzler 2019, 133). To say that the home makes room for the *Totenbaum* is to say that the peasant home was designed with funeral practices in mind.

<sup>12</sup> As Heidegger claims in "Letter on Humanism", Dasein was never meant to be conceived in terms of a subject. Nevertheless, it was often interpreted as such because the third division of *Being and Time*, "Time and Being", in which the priority of Dasein and Being was to be reversed, was held back (Heidegger 1998, 207)

<sup>13</sup> Significantly in this passage, it is not Dasein or the human being which is in the subject position. Rather, it is the fourfold itself. It is the gathered oneness of mortals, divinities, earth, and sky that place the farm on the wind-sheltered slope.

<sup>14</sup> Specifically, Heidegger views his project as unfolding ecstatic temporality as a condition of possibility, a problematic which Kant himself fell short of grasping. Heidegger relates his own work to the Kantian schematism (Heidegger 2010, 23).

<sup>15</sup> As Heidegger explicitly states, the analysis of Dasein is merely the first step in getting a hold of “a sufficiently grounded set of ontological problems” (Heidegger 2010, 12).

<sup>16</sup> Put differently, following Heidegger’s “turn”, the act of philosophy itself is translated from the active to the middle voice. The way to Being is no longer conceived as an active questioning but a thoughtful opening of oneself to the call of things.

<sup>17</sup> This point recalls Heidegger’s discussion of “discourse” in *Being and Time*. As Geertsema points out, language is treated as “expression of discourse” circa *Being and Time*. In his later work, Heidegger treats what he formerly calls “discourse” as already language (Geertsema 2018, 119).

<sup>18</sup> The opposite of the poem is not prose. Pure prose is never “prosaic”, it is as poetic and hence as “rare” as more structurally regimented forms of poetry”.

<sup>19</sup> Note that everyday language and poetry is contrasted along the same lines as objects of the standing reserve and “things” which gather the fourfold.

<sup>20</sup> Geertsema links Heidegger’s claim about the essentially poetic nature of human dwelling to his project in *Being and Time*, “Like he had already shown in *Being and Time*, the being of our existence is known and at the same time unknown (...) The same holds true for the poetic nature of a people” (Geertsema 2018, 252). In another place, Geertsema insightfully suggests that Heidegger’s notion of coming home to the truth of human existence bears resemblance of the biblical parable of the prodigal’s son (Geertsema 2018, 263-264).

<sup>21</sup> While I take “authenticity” and “poetic dwelling” to be roughly continuous, it is important to note that authenticity is unfortunately framed in active terms. Poetic dwelling is more successfully deployed as a process of the middle voice.

<sup>22</sup> This why Heidegger makes the claim “only a god can save us” in his 1966 interview with Rudolf Augstein.

<sup>23</sup> As Mitchell notes, the holy sometimes presents as joy (Mitchell 2015, 202).

<sup>24</sup> In her 2015 essay, “Mourning as the Origin of Humanity”, Francoise Dastur argues that mourning should be considered the “fundamental mode of being human” (Dastur 2015, 1). This statement would align mourning, anxiety, poetic dwelling, and the holy.

<sup>25</sup> Heidegger wrote an essay on Rilke called “What are Poets For” which examines the question first posed by Hölderlin, “what are poets for in a desolate time?” (Heidegger 1971, 91).

<sup>26</sup> For a more extensive treatment of modern attempts to “solve” death as a “technical problem”, see Niederhauser’s *On Death and Being*.

<sup>27</sup> Note here the relation between the words *geheiligten* (hallowed) and *das Heilige* (the holy).

<sup>28</sup> By describing the tragedy as not being about the conflict between “state” and “religion”, Heidegger contrasts his own reading of *Antigone* to that of Hegel.

<sup>29</sup> The similarities and dissimilarities between poetry and philosophy are a key issue in Heidegger’s late work. I unfortunately cannot treat the subject in depth here.

<sup>30</sup> As Schmidt emphasises in *On Germans and Other Greeks*, Heidegger conceive his own work as being “beyond” the ethics of good and evil, much like Nietzsche’s. Nonetheless, Heidegger does posit an “original ethic” in his “Letter on Humanism” (Schmidt 2005, 249). On my reading, this original ethic is the ethic of poetic dwelling. Inasmuch as Antigone is a figure of poetic dwelling, she is an ethical figure.

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<sup>31</sup> In the fifth chapter of *Taking Turns with the Earth*, Matthias Fritsch suggests the earth may be viewed as having a claim to the dead (Fritsch 2018 193-205). Heidegger appears to approach this point in his interpretation of *Antigone*. It may be said that Antigone, in her ontological reticence to the fourfold, buries her brother Polynices so that the earth may reclaim his body.

<sup>32</sup> As Niederhauser remarks, Heidegger explicitly names death as a "law" in several works (Niederhauser 2019, 180)