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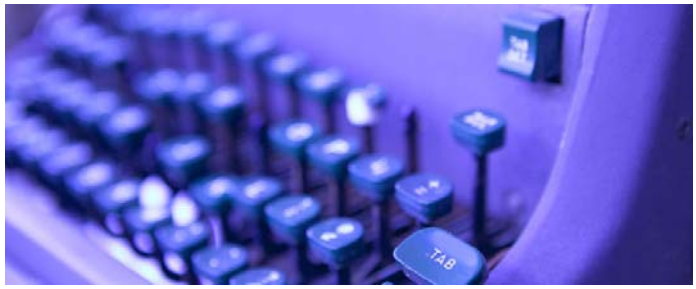

Special issue: Heidegger, writing, and technology

Guest edited by James Holden

Introduction: Heidegger's questions

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Introduction: Heidegger's questions

James Holden

I

It is something of a cliché to say that we live in a technological age. Nevertheless, it is clearly correct to do so. Take, for instance, my position at this moment. I am writing on my laptop whilst listening to a CD on my portable stereo; my study is lit up by the computer's screen and the electric light above. The radiator on the wall behind me is clanking as water is pumped around the central heating system. My mobile phone is on my desk, connected to a worldwide telecommunications network by frequent messages. I am, you might say, cradled by technology. It completely surrounds me, it holds me within its grasp and penetrates me in all sorts of complex ways. But despite this preponderance of technology, do we really understand it? I do not mean do we understand this or that piece of equipment, how to programme the video recorder say, but do we know what technology *is* in itself? What precisely is technology and how do we relate to it? What is our experience of it and what forms of experience does it in turn make available to us? In what ways does it hold sway over us?

These are precisely the kinds of questions that the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) asked in his work and nowhere more obviously than in the seminal essay 'The Question Concerning Technology' (1953).[1] The answers he puts forward in this paper are, like

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those in his others texts, by turns frustratingly dense, brilliant, paradoxical and strangely poetic. They also draw upon a wide range of intellectual materials. Heidegger's developing line of reasoning takes in such diverse things as today's practical understanding of technology, the 'original' Greek experience of Being, the nature of Truth and the workings of the modern power station. He also, and given the nature of this journal I want to flag this up immediately, comes to concern himself with writing, or more specifically '*poēisis*', and technology.

Allow me, if you will, briefly to set out some of the more central points in Heidegger's essay. The philosopher starts by asking about what he terms 'the essence of technology'.[2] In so doing he immediately presents us with a challenge for he dares to declare that 'the essence of technology is by no means anything technological' (MH, 311). From here he turns to examine the apparently straightforward idea that 'technology itself is a contrivance – in Latin, an *instrumentum*' (MH, 312). His method of analysis is to read this everyday definition back against the broader notion of causality which he says underpins it, and in particular the concept as it was first established in Greek thought. He argues that 'what we call cause [*Ursache*] and the Romans call *causa* is called *aition* by the Greeks, that to which something else is indebted' (MH, 314). This notion of indebtedness or 'responsibility', he then explains, is in reality 'an occasioning or an inducing to go forward' (MH, 316). He could say nothing more serious; for, in Heidegger's thinking, 'occasioning' can be thought of as a 'bringing-forth' or in the original Greek '*poiēsis*' (MH, 317) and is linked to 'unconcealment' (MH, 317) and therefore to the twin concepts of Being and truth.

The connections that the philosopher makes here are characteristically dense, complex and allusive. Suffice it to say that in his mind 'technology is … no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing' (MH, 318). Today, though, he suggests that this has all taken on a very specific and altogether new form, which he labels a 'challenging': 'The

revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging [*Herausfordern*], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such' (MH, 320). For Heidegger, this represents a decisive shift in our relationship with both the world around us and, by extension, with Truth itself; now, he argues, 'everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve [*Bestand*]' (MH, 322).

The philosopher uses a number of examples to illustrate what he means by all this, most notably the image of a 'hydroelectric plant … [on] the Rhine' (MH, 321). He could just have easily drawn his examples from literature. When I read his descriptions of energy generation and distribution I cannot help thinking of that moment in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) when Leopold discusses the great systems that allow water to emerge from his kitchen tap: 'From Roundwood reservoir in county Wicklow of a cubic capacity of 2.400 million gallons, percolating through a subterranean aqueduct of filtre mains of a single and double pipeage … through a system of relieving tanks, by a gradient of 250 feet to the city boundary'.[3] This surely typifies the kind of challenging-forth which, in the terms of Heidegger's essay, turns the very Earth itself into a 'standing-reserve'. The philosopher's point is that such systems of technological exploitation, distribution and exchange are now ubiquitous.

Writing this, I am becoming conscious again of my own position, which I believe can equally be explained using Heidegger's thinking. The electricity to power my study light and notebook computer has been created from nature, whether by burning coal or gas extracted from the earth, stored, and then supplied to my house by a complex network of cables, sub-stations and wires. Not dissimilarly, the water that is noisily moving around my central heating system has been drawn from a 'natural' supply elsewhere and is now being heated, which is to say that

it is being asked to store the energy from the boiler and then transmit that through the radiators into the air in the study. More, this entire technological architecture has to wait until I make demands of it.

Please do not think that this reference to my own role in the process is entirely gratuitous. If we continue to read Heidegger's essay, 'The Question Concerning Technology', we are told just what Man's crucial and utterly unique position in this new technological situation really is. He declares: 'Only to the extent that man for his part is already challenged to exploit the energies of nature can this revealing that orders happen' (MH, 323). Whilst thinking through the implications of this the philosopher pays particular attention to orders of precedence, stating that 'precisely because man is challenged more originally than are the energies of nature, i.e., into the process of ordering, he is never transformed into mere standing-reserve. Since man drives technology forward, he takes part in ordering as a way of revealing' (MH, 323-24). In order to clarify what he means by this Heidegger pauses to offer a new and significant definition: 'We now name the challenging claim that gathers man with a view to ordering the self-revealing as standing-reserve: *Ge-stell* [enframing]' (MH, 324). This is, I would suggest, the key passage of the essay and is one to which the contributors to this journal will frequently return.

Heidegger subsequently goes on to argue that when it is understood in this way, as enframing, the essence of technology must be recognised as a 'danger' (MH, 331). Most notably, he contends that whilst under its power 'man … is continually approaching the brink of the possibility of pursuing and promulgating nothing but what is revealed in ordering … Through this the other possibility is blocked – that man might rather be admitted sooner and ever more primally to the essence of what is unconcealed and to its unconcealment' (MH, 331). This is an important point that he restates on the next page: 'enframing … banishes man into

the kind of revealing that is an ordering. Where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing' (MH, 332).

Just as enframing, the essence of technology, represents a real danger then so too, in Heidegger's mind, it offers a way of negating that danger, or at least of countering it to some degree. In the final pages of 'The Question Concerning Technology' he appropriates the language of the German poet Hölderlin in order to argue that 'in technology's essence roots and thrives the saving power' (MH, 334; see also MH, 333). In order to develop this conceit the philosopher takes a number of tight linguistic and philosophical twists and turns. He finally arrives at the notion that the term 'essence' itself should be understood to mean 'granting' (MH, 336). Having made this connection he declares that 'needed and used, man is given to belong to the propriative event of truth. The granting that sends one way or another into revealing is as such the saving power' (MH, 337). This is a complex idea that he reiterates slightly more clearly moments later: 'man … may be the one who is needed and used for the safekeeping of the essence of truth. Thus the rising of the saving power appears' (MH, 338).

Heidegger's concludes his essay, 'The Question Concerning Technology', by underlining the importance of continually holding all this in our thoughts: 'Everything, then, depends upon this: that we ponder this rising [of the saving power] and that, recollecting, we watch over it' (MH, 337). Somewhat surprisingly, he suggests that literature could play a decisive role in this enterprise. Heidegger briefly explains that 'at the outset of the destining of the West, in Greece, the arts soared to the supreme height of the revealing granted them … And art was called simply *technē*' (MH, 339). Thinking about the significance of this, the philosopher finally enquires, in his typically cryptic style, whether 'the fine arts are called to poetic revealing? Could it be that revealing lays claim to the arts most primally, so that they for their part may expressly foster the growth of the saving power[?]' (MH, 340).

It will be clear from this brief summary of 'The Question Concerning Technology' that Martin Heidegger is a key figure when it comes to thinking about the nature of writing and technology and the present and possible future relationships between them. It is with this in mind that we are presenting this special issue of *Writing Technologies* focusing on his work.

II

Towards the beginning of *Introduction to Metaphysics* (presented as a series of lectures in 1935; first published in 1953), Heidegger declares that 'philosophical questions are in principle never settled as if some day one could set them aside'.[4] This is true also for Heidegger's own questions. The essays in this special issue of *Writing Technologies* seek to take up once again, situate, respond to and otherwise intervene in the German philosopher's analysis and to pose altogether new questions concerning technology. They are interested in philosophical and historical contexts, literature and the cinema, the body, the countryside and, of course, technological artefacts themselves.

In the first essay, Neil Turnbull re-evaluates Heidegger's whole philosophical project in relation to technology. In his eyes, Heidegger 'is first and foremost a modern conservative *philosopher of technology*'. In order to fully articulate this view he reads the German philosopher's *oeuvre* alongside and against that of his compatriot and contemporary Ernst Jünger (1895-1998). In both these thinkers' texts he identifies a form of what he labels '*techno-conservatism*'.

Placed at the beginning of this special issue, Turnbull's penetrating analysis offers a way of understanding and re-engaging with both the content of Heidegger's work on technology and the different intellectual contexts in which it can be located. The three essays that follow turn in their own ways to the problems of *literature*. In a sense, they never forget Heidegger's powerful assertion at the end of 'The Question

Concerning Technology' that 'because the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it' (MH, 340). As I have already suggested above, the philosopher's enigmatic answer is that 'such a realm is art' (MH, 340).[5]

Roger Ebbatson's essay is concerned with different cultural representations of a key moment in agricultural history – namely, the appearance of the steam-powered threshing-machine. Whilst he deals with what he himself terms a '"constellation" of texts both literary and philosophical', he focuses largely on Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and Richard Jefferies' slightly earlier essay 'Notes on Landscape Painting' (1884). In these texts he finds two subtly different responses to the revolutionary machines' presence in the fields. Ebbatson's approach is to associate these responses with the different meanings that Heidegger ascribes to the essence of technology. As he puts it: 'In addressing the vexed question of agricultural technology in agrarian England, it is clear, both Thomas Hardy and Richard Jefferies framed and posed crucial issues which would be explicated philosophically in Heidegger's essay'.

The final two essays in this special issue focus on Heidegger's philosophy and science fiction. In the first, Adam Roberts considers the image of 'the Hand' in the philosopher's texts and the ways in which it has been reinterpreted by his critics, most notably Jacques Derrida. This investigation leads him to ask the seemingly straightforward question that forms the title of his essay: 'Is SF handwritten?'. As he explains it during the course of his argument, 'this question unpacks into the larger issues of the place of technology, and "technics" more broadly, in science fiction itself'. Thus it is that he points to a series of 'hands' in the genre's 'texts' (written and cinematic), exploring both their significance and signifying power. Such images, he adds, might tell us something

about the form of the fiction itself and its creation as, in his words, the 'monstrosity of these specific SFnal [science fictional] hands is the monstrosity of SF itself'.

In the concluding essay I turn to a specific science fiction text, M. John Harrison's novel, *Light* (2002). My approach is to focus on some of the many images of light and enlightenment found in this work and from which it draws its title. I consider the ways that these refract the concerns of the genre as a whole and also the extent to which they can be read alongside the various discussions of light and unconcealment in Heidegger's work, and in particular those in *The Essence of Truth* (presented as a series of lectures in 1931-1932; first published in 1988).

Taken together, these four essays represent a new and imaginative response to Heidegger's thinking, and also the related concepts of *writing* and *technology* more broadly. It is to be hoped that in addition to providing some answers they clear a space for further critical investigation.

Notes

[1] In fact, I have deliberately phrased my own questions above in a Heideggerean manner.
[2] Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', trans. William Lovitt and David Farrell Krell in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell, Revised and expanded edition (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 311. Hereafter referred to in the text as MH.
[3] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; repr. 1998), pp. 623-624.
[4] Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 44.
[5] In his essay 'Landscape and machine: Hardy, Jefferies and the question of technology', Ebbatson cites this passage of Heidegger's essay himself.