The philosophical fugue: Understanding the structure and goal of Heidegger's Beiträge

Ian Thomason

Heidegger's Beiträge is a dense, strange, difficult, and - pace Otto Pöggeler and Friedrich Wilhelm von Herrmann - also a deeply problematic text. As Pöggeler's famous remark that "a wind from Stilo-Maria has blown through... the Beiträge" suggests, the Beiträge is a text in which Heidegger is at his most Nietzschean (that is, hyperbolic, elliptical, allusive, fragmentary), even as he tries to get back behind Nietzsche, to Nietzsche's Hölderlinian sources, in order to accomplish what looking back in 1951 Heidegger would characterize as the "most difficult task" of having had to extricate himself from Nietzsche's "ruinous" influence. Such factors help explain why Schümann, surely one of the most perceptive readers of the later Heidegger, would complain of the Beiträge that "at times one may think one is reading a piece of Heideggerian plagiarism, so enumbered is it with ellipses and hectoring monosyllables." In order to help us navigate a safe approach toward what is certainly an elliptical but also, for anyone hoping to understand the immanent relation between Heidegger's philosophy and his politics, a particularly important "monolithic assertion" - namely, Heidegger's unexpected invocation of "The Ultimate God" at the climax of the Beiträge - a few words may well be called for about the Beiträge's remarkable history, which Schümann himself refers to a bit elliptically as the text's "overdetermined legacy."

Von Herrmann was the editor of Heidegger's Collected Works [Gesamtausgabe] when the already famous Contributions to Philosophy: [On Enowning] (Beiträge zur Philosophie [Vom Ereignis]) was finally published in 1989 (as volume 65). In this capacity, von Herrmann tells us that the Beiträge's publication was speed-up ahead of schedule in order to coincide with and thus commemorate the centennial of Heidegger's birth. Still, no less than fifty years elapsed between the writing of these "contributions" in 1936-8 and their publication in 1989. These circumstances might not be so remarkable, however, were it not for the fact that the Beiträge had already become famous long before their 1989 publication, when they were greeted quickly - indeed a bit precipitously - by more than a few enthusiastic Heideggerians as "Heidegger's second magnum opus." The enthusiasm distorting this judgment can be explained by the text's remarkable pre-publication fame, which can itself be traced back to the fact that Pöggeler had read the manuscript in the early 1960s and, in his
influential 1963 study, Martin Heidegger's *Path of Thinking* (Der Denkweg Martin Heideggers), he acted as an effective philosophical "PR man" for the *Beitrag*, granting them the status of an obvious secret by frequently quoting tantalizing snippets from them, dropping intriguing hints and promissory notes, and issuing incredible claims about the text's importance for any philosophical exploration of Heidegger's thought as a whole. Some of the more extraordinary of these claims were subsequently widely disseminated and, ironically, have now ossified into a scholarly dogma that threatens to obscure our access to a text that has finally become available first hand. To wit, Pöggler went so far as to call the *Beitrag* Heidegger's "sole "major work proper [das eigentliche Hauptwerk]." A characterization based on the claim that in the *Beitrag* Heidegger outlined the complete system of thought which he spent the rest of his life developing in a piecemeal fashion. It is incredible that this fantasy of having had exclusive access to the Heideggerian Rosetta stone, a hermetic fantasy of the first order to be sure, has been so widely adopted. With the actual publication of the *Beitrag* it has become clear that Pöggler seriously mischaracterized the *Beitrag's* organizational structure, which, as we will see shortly, "is essentially other than a "system" [CP 56/GA65 81]. It is thus not surprising that significantly varying judgments have begun to emerge concerning both the text's merits and its status within Heidegger's increasingly immense oeuvre (the *Collected Works* are now scheduled to include no less than 12 volumes). For instance, the *Beitrag* was recently described (much more modestly, but with a certain psychoanalytic perceptivity) by Safaranski as a kind of "philosophical diary," while Schirrmann himself characterized this "dissconcerting document" as "a monstrous site." Schirrmann implies that this dramatic sounding appellation is not meant to connote "terrifying" (angsthauler) so much as demonstrative, although - if Schirrmann's own series of dense but provocative analyses of the *Beitrag* are any indication - just what this text demonstrates will surely be a matter of contention for a long time to come.\(^{19}\)

1. The Fugal Structure of the *Beitrag*

The *Beitrag* as a whole are organized into seven divisions. Yet, as Heidegger explains in the first of the seven "divisions" (the "Preview" or "Glaenzende Aufsatz") in the *Beitrag*, "Glance Ahead" [Vorleuchten], merely to call the major organizational units of the *Beitrag's" divisions" is already to imply the very opposite of what Heidegger intends when he names them "Fugues," a word which means "unifications" rather than "divisions," but, carrying multiple resonances, also connotes the working of fate in our existence. Through these Fugue, in other words, Heidegger intends to designate the way in which decisive events (the ordinary German meaning of Ereqnis) not only join together to shape our lives but, properly understood, can lead us to transform human history itself.\(^{10}\)

These are, moreover, not the only meanings of Fugue. Crucial to understanding the text, I submit, is Heidegger's subtle suggestion that the *Beitrag's* complex organizational structure, which he elastically maintains to be "essentially other than a "system," can best be understood according to the musical model of the fugue, the "polyphonic composition constructed on one or more short subjects or themes, which are harmonized according to the laws of counterpoint, and produced from time to time with various contrapuntal devices."\(^{11}\) In another context, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has suggestedly examined what I take to be the most important of these "laws of counterpoint" or "contrapuntal devices" at work in Heidegger's *Beitrag*: what Hölderlin calls the "zoaria" and describes as "the pure word, the counter-rhythmic interruption." If the zoaria is the "pure word," then for Heidegger clearly this is das Ereignis, a word which draws attention to its own "wording," that is, to the world-disclosing action of language itself.\(^{12}\) It is crucial to develop a feel for the way in which the fugal "composition" of the *Beitrag* - polyphonically - conveys its own underlying theme: "convening" (Ereqnis), because for Heidegger, it is this underlying, contrapuntally developed theme which harmonizes the text as a whole. Understanding the fugal composition of the *Beitrag* can also help us to understand how Heidegger hopes to accomplish the goal he sets out here: "to prepare for the transition (Übertrag)" to "the other beginning" [CP 56/GA65 6].

After the anticipatory "Preview," Heidegger suggestively titles the *Beitrag's* second through seventh "fugues" (*Fugungen*): "The Echo of Reminiscence (Der Anklang)," "The Interplay or Playing Forth (Das Zapfspiel)," "The Leap (Der Sprung)," "The Grounding (Die Gründung)," "The Ones to Come (Die Zu-Künftigen)," and "The Ultimate God (Der Letzte Gott)." According to von Herrmann's interpretation, the *Beitrag's* second through seventh *Fugungen* illuminate six different but interconnected "essential aspects of Ereignis." This interpretation - and the editorial reduction of the text it underwrites - risk concealing the fugal structure at the core of the *Beitrag*. Only the second through seventh *Fugungen* were written in 1936-37 and intended by Heidegger as a unified fugue. By appending a final "division" on "Being as such" [Das Sein] to the *Beitrag* as if it were the text's conclusion (when in fact it is a summarizing restatement of the text's major themes which Heidegger penned in 1938), von Herrmann's editorial reduction obscures the fugal structure at the core of Heidegger's original text. We can begin to experience this fugal structure if, keeping in mind the text's six "fugues" (or contrapuntally developed subjects), we attend carefully to the idiosyncratic way in which Heidegger uses these short counterpointed subjects to develop the underlying theme.
which joins them together: "This is the essential swaying of Being itself [die Wendung des Seins selbst], which we name ennowing" (CP 3:49). 8

As we will see, ennowing is Heidegger's name for the way "Being as such" happens historically (by being interpretively appropriated, ennowed, by human beings). So, if ennowing—the way Being as such happens—is the Beiträge's underlying theme, how is this theme developed by the six "fugings" (Fugungen) which unify the Beiträge? As Heidegger explains: "Each of the six fugings of the fugue stands for itself, but only in order to make the essential condensed more pressing" (CP 57/6:85.8). In what may at first glance look to be a wild run-on sentence, Heidegger presents the "essential condensation" of the six fugings are meant to convey:

The "fuging" between the first and the other beginning—[out of being's Echo] in the distress of Being's abandonment—[for the "Leap" into Being—][for "Grounding" in truth—] in preparation for "The Ones to Come"—[of] "The Ultimate God." (CP 57/6:85.8)

This entire fugue—which unifies the text—is developed according to what Heidegger calls the "hidden inter-resonating" of the Beiträge's six counted points of fuguing (CP 57/6:85.8). In other words, the text's six different fugings join together to develop a complex but unified philosophical vision—which we will characterize further when we turn to the Beiträge's "goal" below.

Already, however, just by recognizing the Beiträge's fugal structure, we can avoid Höfliger's influential misconstrual of Heidegger's project as a self-defeatingly systematic break with the urge to philosophical system-building, and thus as at best an ironic or parodic gesture. Such interpretations, which in the abstract might seem to fit the Nietzschean style of the text, 9 nevertheless seriously mischaracterize its tone, which is not only almost humorous (with the exception of occasional bitter sarcasm and the usual punning) but also—in the somber yet hopeful pith of its ambivalent elegy—even reverential. 10 The Beiträge's elegiac tone is that of a mournful celebration, a Hölderlinian-Nietzschean ambivalence borne witness to in Heidegger's claim that: "The most terrible jubilation must be the dying of a god" (CP 163:65:230).11

Despite this important Nietzschean-Hölderlian obsession with the death of God and the possibility of "His" return, the structure organizing the Beiträge is more Bachian than Rachmaninoff. So, instead of making the Beiträge for a series of Nietzschean aphorisms, we need to take seriously Heidegger's implication that his text is joined together according to the musical model of the fugue. Indeed, Joan Stambaugh's recognition of the Beiträge's "preface for an art from the realm of sound" is better understood not as a self-conscious refusal of "ocularcentric" metaphors (as Stambaugh herself rather anachronistically has it), but rather as evidence for the fact that in the Beiträge Heidegger adopts the fugal form (thus bringing the style of his writing into a politically-charged proximity to Paul Celan's fugal poetry).12 Of course, as Michael Hamburger points out, a "fugal composition with words" is literally "an impossibility...because words cannot be counterpointed if they are to remain intelligible."13 Words written stop one another like the successive contrapuntal themes of a fugue will eventually obliterate themselves, leaving only an indiscernible palimpsest. Fugal writing thus tends to experiment with the limits of legibility, as Heidegger's Beiträge itself attests. In so far as it is legible, sustained fugal writing will adopt the form of the fugue conceptually rather than literally; ironically, this makes a successful experiment in fugal writing rather difficult to recognize.

It is strange, nevertheless, that commentators continue to mistake the Beiträge for a series of aphorisms. Aphorisms, in the very economy of their expression, quietly point back to the presence of the author who thought, penned, and polished them. The Beiträge's fragments not only lack the wit and polish of aphorisms, but Heidegger clearly goes to great lengths to erase his own authorial presence from the text—if only to augment the forcefulness of the perspective he advocates by effacing its individuality and thus rendering its broader adoption less dependent on the idiosyncratic circumstances of a personal life-trajectory which is in some unmistakable sense Heidegger's own. Still, when Heidegger goes so far as to put "I" in scare-quotes when writing in the first person, one cannot help recalling that fugue also has a revealing psychological annotation: a "fugue state" designates "a flight from one's own identity, often involving travel to some uncannily desired locality."14 If Hegel in the Phenomenology plays the role of a phenomenological tour-guide, a guide whose presence becomes invisible precisely in so far as he disappears into his own tour, then we should recognize that Heidegger too disappears into the Beiträge, much as the composer disappears into his own composition.15 As an authorial composer-director absorbed into the fugue which he himself directs, Heidegger polyphonically elaborates a single theme through a series of successive treatments, the cumulative effect of which is to get us to attend and come fully to appreciate the significance of the multi-aspectual phenomenon of "ennowing" (Ereignis).

Enowining is Heidegger's name for the rapprochement between human beings and Being by which intelligibility takes place. That is, Ereignis-upgrades the process whereby human beings actively participate in the becoming-intelligible of their worldly environments, the disclosure of their worlds.16 A philosophical application of the art of fugue affords Heidegger the ideal means to meditate on, explore, and develop the riches of his subject (Ereignis), for it allows the Beiträge to remain structurally organized even as
it breaks with the hierarchical demands of systematicity in favor of the alternative formal model of "fuguing," a form which nicely accommodates multiple, overlapping explorations of a rich underlying theme. Indeed, because Heidegger is repeatedly elaborating the same subject from different perspectives, developing its inner possibilities through a series of successive, varied, and cumulative treatments, such "fuguing" seems perfectly chosen to explore and reveal the fullest possible implications of the polysemic, deeply resonant phenomenon of Ereignis. Otherwise insightful scholars have, nevertheless, thus far entirely failed to recognize that the Beiträge is composed according to the musical model of the fugue (an easy mistake to make if, under the influence of Pöggeler's reading, one too quickly "explains" Heidegger's text by reference to its "Nietzscheanism"), even as they inadvertently document its fugale-like structure. To wit, Alexander Schwa writes:

The outward construction of the work leads to many, often formalistic repetitions, producing a line of thought that does not really go anywhere. ... The more pages Heidegger stacks up, the more the voluminous text becomes the document of an inner, silent magnificence, yet nonetheless manifestly founded on the possibility of "vom Zug" - only clearly present the Ereignis as "vom Zug" - of the truth of Being. ... In his general analysis, the Beiträge are unable to offer that ministry worked out, "womöglich" philosophy of Being that Heidegger intended."

Had Schwa recognized such "formalistic repetitions" as Heidegger's polysemic "fuguing" on the "theme" of Ereignis, he might have been able to see the big picture otherwise than as a "failed" structure, a heap. Schwa's is indeed the kind of impression one will likely get if one misses the text's fugal structure and, misled by the Pöggelerian dogma of "Heidegger's second magnum opus," one reads the Beiträge expecting the systematic organization familiar from Being and Time, an organizational structure which (pace Pöggeler and Schwa) it was never Heidegger's intention to provide.

II. The Goal of the Beiträge
So, if the Beiträge's structure is fugal, what is its goal? And how does its fugal structure serve this goal? Heidegger's self-effacing style works to conceal this, but in the Beiträge's "fuguing" (Fugungen), Heidegger first retraces the successive stages whereby he himself initially recognized the integrally related phenomena of enowming and "Being as such," and then lays out the subsequent steps according to which he plans to elaborate the philosophical significance of thinking them in concert (as the enowming of Being as such)." Thus these Fugungen are not merely (as von Heermaan has it) interconnected "essential aspects of Ereignis, but rather articulate the series of successive steps which take us from the recognition to the elaboration of the significance of the latter Heidegger's primary, interconnected philosophical insights into enowming and Being as such. The Beiträge's fugal structure thus develops a complex but entwined set of claims, what we could think of as a fugal argument. Recall the "essential onefold" of the Beiträge's six fugal subjects:

[T]he "interplay" between the first and the other beginning out of Be-ing's "Ehre" is the distance of Being's abandmentation for the "Zug" into Be-ing for "Grundung" as its truth as preparation for "The One to Come" of "The Ultimate Goal" [CP 186/GA 35].

This fugal argument can be unpacked as follows. If we recognize "Being's abandoning" (experiencing the "distress" of the fact that Be-ing has dissolved into nothing but pure beingness by the underlying Nietzschean metaphysics of our atomic age), we can glimpse, in this seeming "nothing," an "echo" of the first beginning of Western philosophy, in which "Being as such" - the phenomenological "presencing" (Anwesen) which simultaneously elicits and defies conceptual circumscription - was "inceptively" enowmed, interpretively appropriated and so rendered intelligible in terms of phain and altheia (by Heraclitus and Parmenides). There are three crucial claims here: First, that what initially appears to us (from within the fundamental conceptual parameters set by Nietzsche's metaphysics) as "nothing" is really "Being as such" [CP 188/GA 35], an "inexhaustible" phenomenological "fullness" [CP 266/GA 35 382] which "beckons for" [CP 260/GA 35 372] and "overflows" [CP 176/GA 35 249] all of our conceptualizations. Second, that the activity by which human beings appropriate aspects of this inexhaustible phenomenological presencing is Ereignis, "enowming," the "cleaning" or world disclosing whereby Dasein - the taking place of Being - implicitly appropriates the phenomenological "presencing" which informs an, excesses it, thus making an ontological home within the historical "storm of Being" as such [CP 211/GA 35 300]. Third, that the "first beginning" doubly informs (or "plays forth") into the "other beginning" beyond Western metaphysics (which Heidegger seeks to inaugurate), because the deconstructive retrieval of the Greek understanding of phain and altheia helps us to recognize the temporal dynamism of phenomenological presencing and the rerecognizable occurrence of Ereignis, respectively. So, Heidegger's fugal argument concludes, to embrace these two crucial, interrelated aspects of phenomenological intelligibility - that is, to understand and experience intelligibility as the enowming of Being as such - is to "lead into" and thereby "ground" our "truth" (that is, the occurrence) of this other understanding of Being, making us members of a future human community ("those to-come") who, sharing this other understanding of Being, prepare for a new historical sense of what matters (which Heidegger here calls "the ultimate god"). This is its place in the Beiträge that Heidegger elaborates for the first time what will become the central phenomenological insights of his later work (Ereignis and Being as such), and where he first attempts to spell out what he takes to be their implications. Although these implications especially remain
sketchy and elliptical, it is nevertheless quite clear that for Heidegger the potential significance of this dual phenomenal-ontological insight is not narrowly "philosophical." Rather, the intended consequences of understanding inelligibility as the enowing of Being as such are best described as "ontopoietological" (as Jacques Derrida suggests) because for Heidegger they include nothing short of the "possible transformation of Western history [mögliche Wandelung der abendländischen Geschichte]" [CP 575/GA65 81]. Indeed, with his philosophical characterization of the meaning and possibility of such a radical historical transformation as an "other beginning" for Western history, Heidegger seems to transgress into the domain of religion (if not theology); for he goes so far as to equate this other beginning's occurrence with the return of a "God" most famously (if only esoterically) in the Der Spiegel interview. As Heidegger explains in the Beiträge: "The ultimate God is not the end, but rather the other beginning in the inexpressible possibility of its history." [CP 289/GA65 412].

In what was originally the climactic Figung of the Beiträge — the abrupt but deeply resonant figing Heidegger calls "The Ultimate God?" [Was-Liegt-Gott] — Heidegger first and perhaps most fully articulates and defends philosophically the historical possibility of what may initially be described as a secularized conceptualization of historical "salvation." Hence, thanks to the Beiträge's section on "The Ultimate God," we are now in a much better position to understand Heidegger's controversial Der Spiegel pronouncement that: "Only one thing is God known to us yet." As for the publication of the Beiträge, we can now recognize that this haunting posthumous pronouncement to Der Spiegel (literally haunting, because deliberately posthumous), was not a spontaneous parapsych by which Heidegger unconsciously betrayed his Christian despair, and thus a "sad profession of impotence" (as Richard Wolin has it), but rather an apparently deliberate allusion to the "wholly other" [der ganz: Andere] "ultimate God" Heidegger knew himself to have privately set forth in the Beiträge, and thus a reference Heidegger also had to have known would only make sense after the Beiträge's publication — that is, as it turned out, more than three decades later. If this is right, then before we will be able to unravel these long-standing mysteries of Heideggerian thought and scholarship, we will first need to understand the philosophical work Heidegger is attempting to do in "the ultimate God," this especially esoteric Figung which, prior to all, "leaves us in the same state of inexpressible unification." If we had time to carefully unpack the fascinating combination of Heideggerian, Nietzschean, and Babalonian influences which come together in Heidegger's mysterious call for "the ultimate God," we would see that the vision of philosophical salvation Heidegger alludes to in the 1966 Der Spiegel interview is the same positive philosophical project he had been elaborating since 1936-38, when he broke with the "movement" of the National Socialist pseudo-revolution as the most extreme symptom of enframing's totalizing metaphysics, the technocratic Nietzschean ontology of eternally recurring will-to-power. This Nietzschean mode of revealing "preconceived" all entities as mere "Bezahm, forces endlessly coming together and breaking apart with no purpose other than their own unlimited, self-aggrandizing increase, and so it "extends itself to a presumed 'eternity' which is no eternity but only the endless excentra of what is most desolately trammeled." [CP 237/GA65 409].

If Nietzsche's metaphysics epitomizes history of its meaning, Heidegger's "other beginning" seeks to reverie and history through a post-metaphysical turn. To understand adequately the later Heidegger's central philosophical project, it would be crucial to take the furthest possible measure of the complex and sometimes competing influences which come to a head in Heidegger's philosophical soteriology of "the ultimate God." Since we cannot do this here, let us at least single out what is perhaps the most important of these influences, namely, that provided by Hölderlin's poetic vision of "the future," die Zukunft, that which remains "to-come." Playing on this comonatation with the utmost seriousness, Heidegger writes: Of the soon-to-come, Hölderlin has come the furthest, and hence is the most fecund poet [als produktivsten Dichter, in other words, the poet who remains the most to-come]. Hölderlin is the most fecund [als Zukunftig, that is, the one who remains to-come], because he came the farthest, and in this distance he reversed and transformed what is greatest. [CP 230/1A55 401].

Hölderlin was for Heidegger "the one who poetized the furthest ahead" into the future of our age [CP 143/1A55 204], and Hölderlin's vision was of a future "turning."

Beginning in his student years (1788-90) with Hegel and Schelling at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Tübingen (the recent eruption of the French Revolution made their shared faith in the possible "spiritual" progress of politics seem much less utopian, if no less dangerous, than it does now?), Hölderlin dedicated himself through his poetry to a "versal renewal" of the German nation, "those people whom God has forsaken" (as he put it in Hyperion), a people who "live in the world like strangers in their own house." [CP 185/1A55 401] Hölderlin's moving lamentations exercised a profound and important influence on the ambitions Nietzsche and Heidegger harbored for the political role of philosophy in helping "Germania" discover and appropriate its own national "identity." Indeed for Hölderlin, the spiritual-political homelessness of the "God-forsaken" German people will only be ended when a new historical "Göttertag" is inaugurated and the "flight of the Gods" thereby reversed. This "reversal" is the Hölderlinian Keine., and the
Exegetical vision underwriting it may be the most revealing of the major influences which come together in Heidegger's politically momentous invocation of "the ultimate God" at the climax of the Beiträge. In his 1938-39 Beiträge, his 1937-38 lecture course on the Basic Questions of Philosophy, and his 1943 lecture on Hörderlin's 'Hymn to the Ister," Heidegger philosophically appropriates Hölderlin's salvific vision in order to convey his own conviction that the current historical "night" of cybernetic technology can actually help awaken a phenomenological alterity. A receptive corporeal-motorial modality ("dwelling") which is itself capable of facilitating a history "healing" return of "the Holy Idea Heiligkeit" (as he puts it in 1955), or a spiritual Heimkehr, a "turn-home" or "homoecoming through alterity" (as he will say in 1943, evoking Odysseus). The Beiträge's fugal structure serves this goal, I would now suggest, because at bottom the text is an attempt to re-atone humanity, to foster a new, more thankful "fundamental attainment" (Grundstimmung) out of which will emerge our journey home, back to ourselves and thus toward a post-metaphysical historical age. Heidegger's names for this attainment will be "sacralization" (Heiligung) and "re-alignment to things" (Gelenkenheit zu den Dingen); what such dwelling should be attuned to dwehl within - is the Sachlichkeit of being as such.

Yet, however philosophically appropriated, this vision of a "turning" of the wheel of history is, in a word, the dream of a revolution. Understanding the fugal structure of the Beiträge helps us to recognize that the ultimate goal of this text is to foster philosophically just such a revolution in our ways of understanding ourselves and the meaning and intelligibility of our world, indeed, to resist history by transcending the technological eternal return of the same, "the endless eternities of what is most desolate today." I would add, finally, that despite the undeniable radicality of this project and the striking language Heideggerสรรพสิ่ง describe and motivate this philosophical-ontological revolution in the Beiträge, this is nevertheless precisely the same revolution for which he already laid the philosophical groundwork in Being and Time by re-conceptualizing the self as Dasein, that is, as a temporally-structured making-intelligible of the place in which we happen to find ourselves. By developing his focusing on the theme of Ereignis, the master-word of his thinking, Heidegger's Beiträge seeks to help us understand just how rich, meaningful - indeed, philosophically revolutionary - this seemingly simple world-discourse may yet want to be. The University of New Mexico