

Perception, Temporality, and Love in Bruce Elder's Aesthetics

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In his lectures of the late 1920s Heidegger offered a radically new reading of Kant's 'doctrine of schematism.' He saw schematism as the "inherent temporal foundation of the possibility of ontological knowledge."¹ What justified such interpretation was Heidegger's assumption that the determinants of schemata, time and the finitude of human experience, open a way toward a radical renewal of the main question of metaphysics. As Heidegger had already established in *Being and Time*, this reading of Kant follows one of the two procedures pertaining to the task of the 'working out the question of Being,' namely the 'destruction of the history of ontology.' The other procedure takes up the analytic of the Being of human existence (*Dasein*) and brings it to its ultimate horizon: primordial ecstatic temporality. In fact, however the insight into the temporal aspect of Kant's thought, despite its epochal significance for the rethinking of Western modernity, is in many respects one-sided. It disregards perhaps the most important aspect of Kant's philosophy. What is more, it shows how the very analytic of *Dasein* belongs essentially to the same tradition whose 'destruction' Heidegger undertook. For, symptomatically enough, Heidegger never spoke about what the very same doctrine of schematism has to tell us about our experience of the beautiful and the possibility of what Kant calls the "highest good." In reality, it was the "highest good" and not merely the Being of phenomena what for Kant constituted the true object of *Metaphysica Generalis*.

If this paper takes the opportunity to analyze some key elements in Bruce Elder's aesthetics, it is above all, because his work presents us with a remarkable attempt to rehabilitate the ontological privilege of what the tradition long before Kant knew as the "highest

¹ Martin Heidegger. *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Trans. R. Taft, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 85.

good.” This ontological privilege Heidegger omitted not only in his reading of Kant. It occupied that essential dimension which Heidegger left unthought throughout his entire philosophical path. Elder’s aesthetics acknowledges the epochal significance of Heidegger’s temporal interpretation of Being. What is more, it takes as its point of departure many ideas developed in Heidegger’s later philosophy of art. However, Elder’s notion of temporal experience derives from a source radically distinct from the *finite* thinking of the historical destiny of Being. It transfigures Heidegger’s ontological difference in order to reintroduce it as a *rigorous separation* which outlines an aesthetics of what we could call – following Grant’s distinction – *temporal experience of the non-historical transcendence of Be-ing*.

The present paper focuses on Bruce Elder’s conception of temporality. By exploring the correlations between his notions of violence, charity, and love, it attempts to explicate the central function of the phenomenological structure of time in his aesthetics. The analysis of this structure is based on the main premise that in Elder’s writings and, notably, in his films there are operative three distinct, yet interconnected modes of temporality: 1) the mode which Elder most often defines as ‘*narrative*’ and which is grounded in objective representation; 2) the ‘generative’ mode which is structured as a ‘retroactive creativity,’ both genetically receiving and creatively producing the present of the temporal flux; 3) and the mode of what we could call *infinite temporality* in which the temporal flux is constituted as ‘wholly transcendent’ and articulated *entirely* through the relation to the ‘Other.’ Proceeding from this threefold premise, this paper attempts to argue that Elder’s *aesthetics of infinite temporality* outlines a mode of experience capable of securing the non-phenomenal and atemporal nature of the Good precisely *within* the realm of phenomena and *within* time. The main implication of this argument is that, in his films and in his reflection on art, Elder sketches out the possibility for us to experience our subjectivity and our world as entirely based on transcendence. For him this possibility entails a necessity, for us to *accept* and *identify* ourselves as inherently foreign to ourselves, that is as

diachronically (re-) constituted by the 'Other.' Elder would express this necessity in another perspective by a reference to a phrase from Ezra Pound's *Cantos*: [T]he only way to create the *paradise terrestre* is to understand and act on the maxim that "a man's paradise is his good nature"² While in our historical time such necessity is imposed by the crisis of modernity, it is art that shows us how moral experience can be rehabilitated in society and how society is "essential to the good life" and "to our development as human beings."³ This is why Elder would recurrently call for our understanding of the social task of art and, in the vein of the Neo-Platonists and Augustine, will ultimately see it as "bound to love."

1. Phenomenon and Perception

While the exposition of the argument in the present paper does not require a particular analysis of Heidegger's idea of finite temporality, in order to demonstrate the distinguishing characteristics of Elder's notions of narrative, generative, and infinite time, it seems useful first to outline, in a methodological perspective, how he draws on and how he breaks with Heidegger's thought.

The explication of the non-historical temporal experience, according to Elder, requires a specific kind of phenomenological approach. It takes its bearings from a return to *perception*, to the concrete *noetic* intentionality of the body. To this extent, Elder follows Heidegger in his adoption of Husserl's formulation, 'Zu den Sachen selbst!'⁴ Furthermore, Elder distinguishes between attentive and inattentive perception: "When perception is attentive, it responds not merely to the actual objects of experiences, but also to that which sustains their being."⁵

² 'Driftworks, Pulseworks, Lightworks: The Letter to Dr. Henderson,' in *Dante and the Orthodox: The Aesthetics of Transgression*, ed. James Miller, Wilfred Laurier University Press, Waterloo: 2005. p. 455

³ 'Art, the Good, and Life in Society,' unpublished manuscripts, p. 88.

⁴ "To the things themselves!" Cf. Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962, p. 50.

⁵ 'The Violence and Charity of Perception,' unpublished manuscripts, p. 28.

Attentive perception therefore involves an ontological moment, one which is concerned with the possibility of the objects. By ‘actual object of experience’ Elder does not designate the immediate and pure present moment. The latter can never be isolated from the constant *noetic* projection flowing towards and running beyond it. By ‘actual object’ rather he means a certain aspect of the possibility of the thing perceived. The *noetic* act and the actuality of the perceived object are inseparable. Yet this is not because they are synthetically attached to each other, but because they constitute each other. Elder describes this relation as an act of reading:

“[T]he act of reading is creative. That is, [...] every perception is interpretation that actualizes one aspect of the *energeia* of the λόγος, that same *energeia* that grants the potential for Be-ing. All perception is an act of reading [...] that interprets the configurations that the λόγος inscribes in beings [...]”⁶

According to this description, the moment of appearance of the object always already involves a particular meaning. This meaning however is not attached to something pre-existing. The object of perception does not exist prior to the act. What Elder tells us is that this act *actually* creates the perceived object *ex nihilo*. But how then, does he understand the status of the λόγος? Is it not obvious by the very fact of interpretation that the λόγος is prior to the perceptual act of creation? A comparison with Heidegger’s account of the relation between φαινόμεον and λόγος would help us clarify this apparent ambiguity.

Heidegger defines ‘phenomenon’ formally by referring to its Greek etymology: φαινόμεον is ‘that which shows itself in itself.’ He distinguishes it from ‘semblance’ and ‘appearance’ by pointing out that the former “signifies that which looks like something”⁷ and the latter “means a reference-relationship which *is* a being itself.”⁸ Λόγος, for its part, is also formally defined. Heidegger resorts to Aristotle’s explanation of λόγος as αποφαίνεσθαι in

⁶ ‘The Violence and Charity of Perception,’ unpublished manuscripts, p. 28-29.

⁷ Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962, p. 53.

⁸ *Being and Time*. p. 54.

order to sum up its numerous meanings in a single expression: 'letting-something-be-seen.'⁹ What he infers from these two formal definitions is that φαινόμεον and λόγος belong primordially together without any prior moment of synthesis. Thus the integral concept of phenomenology, according to Heidegger, means: "to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself."¹⁰ This description however has an inherent ontological significance. Heidegger introduces this crucial connection by an emphatic announcement:

Only as *phenomenology*, is *ontology possible*. In the phenomenological conception of 'phenomenon' what one has in mind as that which shows itself is the Being of beings, its meaning, its modifications and derivatives. [...] Least of all can the Being of beings ever be anything such that 'behind it' stands something else that 'which does not appear.'¹¹

As we can see from this very brief summary, in his explanation of the phenomenological method Heidegger points at two key moments: 1) λόγος as the Being of beings (phenomena) cannot be distinguished from them in the manner in which one phenomenon is distinguished from another; 2) λόγος can be grasped only in a hermeneutic-circular way as the possibility of beings to be in the way they are.

We can already notice some similarities and some differences. Like Heidegger's 'φαινόμεον,' Elder's 'perception' has already, in a more or less explicit way (attentively or not), a certain meaning (every perception is already and interpretation). However, with respect to the status of λόγος, Elder's aesthetics explanation differs significantly from Heidegger's hermeneutic account. While emphasizing the actual coincidence of interpretation and creation, Elder insists on their essential difference with respect to their orientation. This coincidence and this difference together determine the inherently aporetic structure of perception. That which is

⁹ *Being and Time*, p. 56

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Being and Time*, p. 58.

interpreted in perception – the λόγος as potentiality – is absolutely transcendent to the interpretation itself; λόγος is never present in our reading, neither as intentionally grasped possibility, nor as immediately experienced actuality. It is rather “inscribed in beings” as a “configuration” or a text whose author is primordially absent and which is to be read by us without any vision or representation. Because of this irreducible separation, interpretation in fact creates what it interprets. By contrast, according to Heidegger, the Being (*Sein*) of beings (*das Seiende*) as ‘letting-be’ (*Gelassenheit*)¹² discloses itself precisely in understanding and interpretation. There is no interval which separates thinking from Being. According to Elder, however, this irreconcilable interval is precisely what guarantees Being’s transcendence. “The gap between what is and what might be,” he writes, “is the real source of our intimation of deprivation; it is that gap which draws our attention towards the Good.”¹³ This gap, to be sure, is what gives aesthetics a certain methodological privilege with respect to ontology.

Narrative Time and Generative Time

It seems already obvious that the methodological dissimilarity between Elder’s understanding of perception and Heidegger’s concept of phenomenon reflects two distinct conceptions of temporality. What Elder conceives as a singular occurrence of perception does not acquire a *noematic* temporal dimension. In attentive perception the very noetic-noematic correlation is transcended. The temporality of perception is therefore ‘pre-propositional’ and does not involve representations of the past and the future. It faces, in a merely noetic way, the hiatus which divides the actuality of perception and the potentiality of λόγος. At this stage, we can still find correspondence to some of Heidegger’s ideas. In his middle and later writings Heidegger

¹² *Gelassenheit* is a concept which appears at a stage in Heidegger’s work much later than *Being and Time*. Yet the remarks above give evidence to the continuity in his thought with respect to the structure of ‘letting-be.’ See for example Martin Heidegger. *Gelassenheit*. Günther Neske, Pfullingen, 1959.

¹³ ‘The Violence and Charity of Perception,’ unpublished manuscripts, p. 42.

renounces the noematic forms pertaining to the ontological priority of the future. Particularly important among these are 'Being-towards-death' and 'anticipation.' He also radicalizes what in *Being and Time* was called 'falling.' Thus, Heidegger finds himself much closer to the understanding of the abovementioned hiatus. "The earth," he writes in the 'Origin of the Work of Art,' "is openly illuminated as itself only where it is apprehended and perceived as essentially undisclosable..."¹⁴ What this would mean with respect to temporality seems clear. For Heidegger as for Elder, the earth is that extreme of receptivity and non-intentionality which lies essentially outside the temporal flow and maintains an irreducible transcendence. Yet, on Elder's view, Heidegger's understanding of the earth was not radical enough to maintain the absolute difference between the worldly finite beings and the transcendent infinity of the Good. With an implicit reference to Heidegger Elder writes:

History has brought earth and Heaven into fateful relation: despite their intimate ontological coupling, there can be no reconciliation between beings of the κόσμος and the Mystery of Being since what is between them – the Between or (what is the same [...]) the earth is not anything that can be formally disclosed within consciousness and in our time, the only type of thinking that we can engage in is an "en-forming" one.¹⁵

This passage makes it conclusively clear that, according to Elder, the potentiality of λόγος can in no way appear in time. It remains atemporal and resists any phenomenal form. What is more, following in this argument George Grant's interpretation of Nietzsche, Elder insists that Heidegger's ontology of *Geschichte* as *Geschick* (history as destiny) is unsustainable in itself. It is only through series of transformation of consciousness in its turning to the 'wholly transcendent' that one could assume Nietzsche's *amor fati*. To clarify and reinforce this argument it is worth quoting a passage from Grant's *Time as History*:

¹⁴ 'The Origin of the Work of Art,' in Martin Heidegger. *Off the Beaten Track*. Trans. J. Young & K. Haynes, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002, p. 25.

¹⁵ 'Approaching Heaven,' unpublished manuscripts, p. 66.

I must state my simple incomprehension. How is it possible to assert the love of fate as the height and, at the same time, the finality of becoming? I do not understand how anybody could love fate, unless within the details of our fates there could appear, however rarely, intimations that they are illumined; intimations, that is, of perfection (call it if you will God) in which our desires for good find their rest and their fulfillment.¹⁶

But how, according to Elder, do such “intimations” occur? What is their relation to temporality?

First, he tells us that the *λόγος* which never presents itself in disclosure and finite time inscribes itself in experience. It leaves its mark in the form of disruption, discontinuity, and repetition. This is why Elder will tell us that perception is essentially *violent*. It disarranges our natural inclination to re-present the possibility of Being as actuality, to correlate the noematic and the noetic. Such correlation is the ground in consciousness for what Elder will call ‘narrative temporality.’

Furthermore, perception is violent because it reduces that which is infinite and transcendent, to that which is finite and immanent. Along with this, because of this very transformation, perception is also *charitable*. It opens itself to the gift of the Good, of the always new becoming.

Elder will often remind us that the founding structure of narrative, of what Plato called *diegesis* is determinant of the discourse of science and history. By transforming transcendence into presence, and thus reconstructing temporal experience as objective time, narrative temporality disguises the true significance of aesthetic experience. Thus, the role of art, whose most radical nature the language of cinema embodies, is first to interrupt and fragmentize the mode of narrative time. Its primary task is to exercise violence on the time of representation. Its second task, however, is to open experience to the charity of perception. Since the noematic order of the Good is unforeseeable for us, through art we experience the sacrifice of the fullness and infinity of the Good for the determinate particular existence. Thus aesthetic experience reveals to us the constitutive moments of a temporal mode which is radically different from the time of narrative. Elder calls this mode ‘generative temporality.’

¹⁶ George Grant. *Time as History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995.

In accordance with the above remarks, we could specify three constitutive moments of generative temporality: 1) it dissociates the intentional structure of narrative time, that is it articulates the violent aspect of perception; 2) it functions as 'retroactive creativity' and articulates the origin of dissociation as transcendent to what articulates it in the present; 3) it reconfigures the present so that it be open to the transcendent dimension of the future and to the charitable aspect of perception.

Generative temporality is that mode of experience in which we become able to think the origin of temporalization itself. It makes us attentive to the fact that all presence – including the presence of our retrospective and prospective projections – is already a modification. Such modification articulates within presence the transcendence which resists any presentation. Elder describes its structure as a Möbius strip "in which the future generates the past even as the past generates the future."¹⁷ Because of the fact that this generating future is prior to any temporal phase and temporal phases are always only creative interpretations, generative time has the capacity to interrupt any form of temporalization.

Elder's epic cinematographic cycle *The Book of All the Dead* can, in many respects, be seen as an enactment of the modes in the transformation of temporal experience. As he himself points out, each of the nine films in the cycle, in analogy to Dante's "*Divina Commedia*," describes a different stage in the transformation of consciousness. Among the films composing the cycle it is perhaps *Illuminated Texts* which shows us best the structural moments of generative time. The film sets out by a scene which has a pretty much narrative structure and retains throughout, different forms of reference to the objective historical time. The narrative temporality however is disrupted, included in patterns repeated, and disseminated. This disruption culminates towards the end of the film when thematic centrality acquires the most radical rupture and estrangement in human historical consciousness: the Holocaust. Images of

¹⁷ 'The Violence and Charity of Perception,' unpublished manuscripts, p. 40.

concentration camp sites fragmented and rearranged by geometrically formed ornaments are combined with voiceover citations from Reznikoff's poem *Holocaust* which is based on camp testimonies and records of the Eichmann trial. Yet, this re-intensification of the most violent challenge to the ontology of historical destiny is not left on its own. The whole cycle, as Elder has indicated, is inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy* and he sees *Illuminated Texts* as analogous to precisely to the passage from Hell to Purgatory. Thus the moment of deepest historical rupture refers, somewhat retroactively, beyond the thematic and aesthetic frame of the film. The last scene is the climax of this reference. It shows a self-reflected image of the camera and the cameraman where in the objective of the camera we see the interior perspective of a gas chamber. The scene is accompanied by a sound-manipulated voice repeating the phrase "Is it far?" from Reznikoff's poem. This is the last phrase in the film. It is worth quoting whole passage:

Jews of the camp they had come to were told:
"Undress the bodies
And carry them to the wagon"
But these Jews were too weak to carry the bodies on their shoulders
And had to drag them,
Take them by the feet and drag them along;
and the Germans beat those who dragged
to go faster.
One Jew left the body he was dragging to rest for a moment
and the man he thought dead
sat up,
sighed and said in a weak voice,
"Is it far?"

Infinite Temporality and Love

After having outlined the key structural moments in Elder's conception of generative temporality, we could move forward and ask perhaps the same question with which *Illuminated Texts* concludes yet, of course, in a theoretical fashion: How can the dimension of the Good be maintained as absolutely transcendent to finite time and yet take place and acquire a justification within it? For Elder this question concerns the exigency of our historical time, our modern culture and society to accept the intrinsic priority of a non-historical transcendent order. The possibility for such acceptance he sees in the inherent connectedness between aesthetic and moral experience. The more particular question with respect to this connectedness, according to him, is twofold: What does living in society contribute to the good life and what is the role of art in the relation between the Good and our present time?

Elder's point of departure for the answering of this question is the assumption that "living in a community fosters the development of certain modes of consciousness that are requisite to our full development as human beings."¹⁸ In the context of the discussion developed above this assumption would mean that it does not suffice for us to be able to point, from the position of our finite temporal mode of existence, retroactively to the infinite realm of the Good which is never present for us. We have to be able to find the inherently good nature of our time and our world and the possibility for that lies in living in society. Thus, against the liberal tradition characteristic of the modern worldview, Elder will insist that living in community is not a question merely of a social contract established to serve purposes of individuals who are already complete their nature. My individual and finite existence essentially presupposes and requires the relation to other human beings. Without this relation it is incomplete and this relation is what grounds the possibility good life. And if we return to Kant's schematism we will see that it was precisely this relation what constituted its primary function:

¹⁸ Art, the Good, and Life in Society, unpublished manuscripts, p. 88.

I call the idea of such an intelligence, in which the morally most perfect will, combined with the highest blessedness, is the cause of all happiness in the world, insofar as it stands in exact relation with morality (as the worthiness to be happy), **the idea of the highest good**. Thus only in the ideal of the highest **original** good can pure reason find the ground of the practically necessary connection of both elements of the highest delivered good, namely of an intelligible, i.e. **moral** world.¹⁹

Elder however will move further to claim that moral obligation to others itself requires and presupposes a phenomenology of the experience of encounter with an Other and that that phenomenology, for its part, develops out of, and elaborates, an explication of its relation to aesthetic experience.²⁰

The encounter with the Other is for Elder an event which does not properly speaking occur in our time, because our time, the time of the subject, is constructed as representation. My subjectivity is defined with respect to the object and therefore it presupposes a noematic dimension projected onto the future and the past. Such projection however proceeds from my self-presentation. What is not yet and what is already past is thus interpreted on the basis of the present. It is re-presented. Self-presentation then determines the ordinary time in which we as subjects live. What happens when we encounter an Other therefore cannot be phenomenologically grasped from the position of the temporality constructed in this way. Such temporality, to be sure, is precisely what Elder, as we already showed, understands as narrative or history. This is why the event of the other is not part of my world and my history. What is more, this events disrupts my world. It separates me from me, because my world is based on representation . I am capable to comprehend the Otherness of the Other only because I am able to “acknowledge that the Other has thoughts and feelings distinct from my own, that I can never

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. P. Guyer & A. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 680.

²⁰ Art, the Good, and Life in Society, unpublished manuscripts, p. 92.

possess, to admit that there is consciousness that does not emanate from the 'I.'²¹ This capacity, according to Elder, by the very fact that it enables the recognition of the absolute difference, is already responsibility. It is essentially a moral experience. But if, by nature, I possess such capacity, then my nature is primordially turned to the Other. It is primordially good. Through moral experience therefore finite temporality is disclosed as essentially turned to the infinite. It transcends itself.

But, at this point, we must ask: Is this experience of responsibility to the Other not what we discovered as Elder's conception of generative temporality? Is generative time not precisely the mode of experience which retroactively articulates that what can never be present in it? Does the encountering with the Other not generate a moment of violence when we face it from within habitat of narrative time? And is it not a charitable gesture of goodness when we recognize responsibly the Other as an original and generating part of our temporality? Elder's answer to each of these questions would be affirmative. What he would also tell us and what one would realize after seeing the last five films from *The Book of All the Dead* is that moral experience by itself remains an intimate incomplete event incapable of justifying a good order within the worldly living in society. In order for such justification to take place, we need a mode of experience which *secures* without assimilating it the experience of the Other. Such experience must be both closer and more remote than moral experience: closer to the primal sensible flux of the body and farther than the particular instance of encountering of the Other. Clearly, for Elder this could be nothing but the mode aesthetic experience, because only in aesthetic experience can one be aware of "a time composed exclusively of a first moment, a

²¹ Art, the Good, and Life in Society, unpublished manuscripts, p. 94

moment of primal self-sensing”²² and only in aesthetic experience “there is no possibility of establishing a relationship of reciprocity.”²³

What could we say then about the dimension which, by assumption, is required for the correlation of art and alterity? What is the dimension which would not sublimate (to use the translation of one of the most powerful terms in philosophy) their irreducible difference and at the same would articulate a moment of necessity? “[I]n both,” will answer Elder, “the moral and aesthetic realms, the acknowledgement of necessity engenders feelings of love [...]. In both realms, this love points towards the delight in obedience to what is Higher.”²⁴

²² Art, the Good, and Life in Society, unpublished manuscripts, p. 101.

²³ Art, the Good, and Life in Society, unpublished manuscripts, p. 98.

²⁴ Art, the Good, and Life in Society, unpublished manuscripts, p. 97-98.

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