Phenomenogony: Alcman and Heidegger on Θέτις and θέσις

"one often doesn't know whose tale he retells"[1]

Heidegger ends his 1949 lecture "The Danger" by glossing the term *Ge-stell,* 'positionality;' saying that *stellen* corresponds to the Greek θέσις, "assuming that we think θέσις in a Greek manner."[2] A fresh basis for thinking θέσις in a Greek manner came to light in 1957 with Edgar Lobel's publication of volume 24 of *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri.* That volume contains a fragment of ancient comment on lemmata from a poem of Alcman's evidencing "a semi-philosophical cosmogony unlike any other hitherto known from Greece."[3] Alcman composed songs for girls' choruses at Sparta in the late seventh or early sixth century BCE. So far as I can find out Heidegger, like Aristotle, never mentioned him. What remains of his "idiosyncratic cosmogony" is preserved only in this text;[4] which Ferrari translates so:

> "From the *p*[   ] *tekmōr* came into being [   ] thence [   ] *poros* from [   ] for when matter began to be formed (ἤρξατο ἡ ὕλη κατασκευασθῆναι) a *poros* came into being (ἐγένετο) as a first principle (ἀρχή). Alcman therefore says that the matter of the universe (τὴν ὕλην πάντων) was chaotic and unformed (τεταραγμένην καὶ ἀπόητον), and that then someone came into being (γενέσθαι τινά) who gave form to the universe (κατασκευάζοντα πάντα), next *poros* came into being, and *tekmōr* followed closely upon the appearance of *poros.* And *poros* is in the nature of (οἷον) *arkhē, tekmōr* in that of *telos.* Once Thetis came into being such *arkhē* and *telos* of the universe came into being, and the nature of the universe is analogous to the material of bronze, that of Thetis to that of the craftsman (τοῦ τεχνίτου), and that of *poros* and *tekmōr* to *arkhē* and *telos.*"[5]

West notes the commentator "identifies Poros as the ἀρχή which he assumed that any cosmological theory must disclose to analysis; he probably reasoned that τέκμωρ must be the τέλος, as the word itself implied, and there was nothing else but Poros that could be the ἀρχή." *Tekmōr* implies *telos* because "The basic meaning of the word [epic form of τέκμαρ] is 'boundary-mark'; hence it developed the two senses of 'boundary, end' and 'mark, sign'. Here it

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[1] *er oft nicht weiß, wem er seine Sage nachsagt.* Martin Heidegger, "Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking" in *Discourse on Thinking* (tr. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund 1966) 72.

[2] Martin Heidegger, "The Danger," in *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures:* Insight Into That Which Is *and* Basic Principles of Thinking (tr. Andrew J. Mitchell 2012) 59.

[3] M. L. West, "Three Presocratic Cosmologies," 13 *The Classical Quarterly* 154 (1963).

[4] Vol. 24 *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* No. 2390 fr. 2. More widely accessible in *Poetae Melici Graeci* (ed. D. L. Page 1962) p. 24. Glenn W. Most reproduces Claude Calame's 1983 edition in "Alcman's 'Cosmogonic' Fragment (Fr. 5 Page, 81 Calame)," 37 *The Classical Quarterly* 1 (1987).

[5] Gloria Ferrari, *Alcman and the Cosmos of Sparta* (2008) 32; brackets indicate lacunae in the papyrus; I have supplied the Greek in parentheses from Page's edition.

is apparently associated with Poros as a principle of differentiation." The commentator's Aristotle-derived interpretations of *poros* and *tekmōr* are, says West, "of course to be disregarded."[6]

As for Thetis the demiurge or creator, in his first go at the fragment in 1963 West writes, "The Nereid Thetis is the last goddess we should have expected to find fulfilling this role."[7] "We may say that Alcman could certainly have interpreted the name Thetis as 'she who sets'; and that the association might have been suggested by the actual existence of a *θέτις (gen. *θέτιος) for θέσις."[8] By the time of his *magnum opus* of 2007 West treats Alcman's "etymologizing reinterpretation" as not so outré after all, as in fact consistent with Indo-European tradition:

> "A more basic [more basic than the root *taš,* 'fashion'] Indo-European verb for divine creation is $*d^heh_1$, which means to set in place, lay down, or establish. [Examples from Hittite, the *Gāthas*, and Old Persian omitted.] The Vedic creator god Dhātṛ has his name from the same verb. In early Greek it appears as τίθημι, for example in Hes. *Op.* 173d Ζεὺς δ' αὖτ' ἄ]λλο γένος θῆκ[εν μερόπων ἀνθρώπων, 'and Zeus created another race of men'; Alcman *PMGF* 20 ὥρας δ' ἔθηκε τρεῖς, '(Zeus?) made three seasons'. In Alcman's idiosyncratic cosmogony (*PMGF* 5 fr. 2 ii-iii) Thetis, whose name can be analysed as $*d^heh_1$- with an agent suffix but who is otherwise a sea-nymph, appears to have played a demiurgic role, as if a female counterpart of Dhātṛ."[9]

West admired Alcman's cosmogony because "it is the formal and not the material aspect of the original chaos that is put in focus and treated as needing modification: not 'out of the waters came earth', but 'out of the ἄπορον καὶ ἀτέκμαρτον came πόρος καὶ τέκμωρ'. This is truly abstract thinking."[10] In West's reconstructive paraphrase the poem began something like this:

> "In the beginning there was a waste of waters, conceived as trackless and featureless (ἄπορον, ἀτέκμαρτον). In it Thetis was or came to be, and upon her appearance, or perhaps as a result of something she did, the boring uniformity of the primeval ocean was disturbed by the emergence of Track and Feature (Πόρος, Τέκμωρ). There was darkness then at first, but it was followed by day, and the moon and the stars."[11]

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[6] "Three Presocratic Cosmologies" 155.

[7] *Id.* 154.

[8] *Id.* 156.

[9] M. L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (2007) 354.

[10] M. L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (1971) 207. Formal and material – do we all aristotelize now?

[11] *Id.* 206-207. Neither 'waters' nor 'ocean' is in the Greek. West gives his reasons for believing Alcman's to be a water-cosmogony in "Alcman and Pythagoras," 17 *The Classical Quarterly* 1 at 3-5 (1967).

The ancient commentator's interpretation, again, is in West's words that "Poros is the ἀρχή (κινήσεως) . . . and Tekmor . . . is the τέλος or τὸ οὗ ἔνεκα."[12] Rather than disregarding this interpretation we may understand it as the common ground of Alcman's cosmogony and Heidegger's phenomenogony, his tale of how phenomena came to show up **as** phenomena.

Heidegger frames the issue in the Bremen lectures by contending that "Technology essences as positionality" and then asking "But what reigns in positionality? From where and how does the essence of positionality take place?"[13] By Heidegger's account,

> "Only when Φύσις reigns is θέσις possible and necessary. For only when there is something present that is brought about by a bringing-here-forth can human positioning [*ein menschliches Stellen*], θέσις, then arrange [*hingestellt*] upon such a presence (i.e., the stone) and out of this presence (stone) now something else that presences (a stone staircase and its steps), here among what is already present (the native rocks and soil). What now presences (the stone staircase) presences in the manner of something that, through human positioning (θέσις), i.e., production [*Herstellen*] becomes steady. *What stands there through* θέσις *essences otherwise than* [*west anders an als*] *what is brought forth here by* φύσις. . . . Φύσις first brings what presences as such to human production and representation by simultaneously giving unconcealment to humans and placing it at their disposal."[14]

In the terms of Alcman's commentator, 'stone' is metonymy for ἡ ὕλη πάντων; θέσις is ὁ τεχνίτης – 'the disposer,' 'the arranger;' the arranging (*hingestellen*) is *poros* as stone-cutting, taking stone as for-cutting; and *tekmōr* the finished staircase, the proximal what-for.

In Heidegger's story Φύσις, the letting presence of what presences in unconcealment, is "the being of beings," *Sein des Seienden*. Yet Φύσις "has nothing of those traits that the essence of beyng [*das Wesen des Seyns*] shows in its destiny, which it appropriates [*ereignet*] as positionality."[15] Heidegger's marginal note to this sentence is "*zweideutig*!" The antecedent of 'it' in the last clause must be *das Wesen des Seyns*: 'the essence of beyng appropriates its destiny as positionality.' For as Heidegger has just said Φύσις and human θέσις essence disparately; the root distinction between the two "concerns what presences as such in the way that it presences;" as we might put it the being of beings does not form world. "Humans as the mortals are the first to dwell in the world as world."[16] The first to dwell among phenomena **as**

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[12] "Alcman and Pythagoras" 4.

[13] "Positionality" in *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures* 43.

[14] "The Danger" 60-61; Heidegger's italics and lower-case phi.

[15] *Id.* 61. *hat noch nichts von den Zügen, die das Wesen des Seyns in jenem Geschick zeigt, das es als das Ge-Stell ereignet.*

[16] "The Thing" in *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures* 20.

phenomena; among things showing up as meaningful presence. Φύσις does not make sense, Dasein does.[17]

West wonders "what event could one describe by saying 'Poros and Tekmor are operating'?"; and thinks the answer is "'the world is being fashioned out of a rude mass that is ἄπορον καὶ ἀτέκμαρτον'."[18] 'Fashioned' in the sense of 'geared with': Thetis equips ἡ ὕλη πάντων with *poroi* and *tekmōr.*   The commentator uses the aorist passive infinitive κατασκευασθῆναι[19]: "when matter was starting to be outfitted." In a trackless, featureless waste the needful ἀρχή κινήσεως is a course, a way to that other needful thing a destination (goal, berth, solution), τὸ οὗ ἕνεκα of the channel, path, track, etc. Most generally *poroi* and (indeclinable) *tekmōr* are roads and nodes, ways and works, means and ends.[20]

Such is the θέσις-character of Φύσις: "within Φύσις itself a certain θέσις-character is concealed."[21] And θέσις, Heidegger says, "means positioning, placing, setting [θέσις *heißt: stellen*]." If we think θέσις 'in a Greek manner' – at least in the manner of the Alcman fragment – it means κατασκευάζειν with *poroi* and *tekmōr*: 'to equip (configure, set up) with means and ends.'

This θέσις-character of Φύσις is a *Bewandtnisganzheit*, a totality of relevancies, a dense mycelium of *poroi* and *tekmōr,* all ultimately bound up into "a what-for which *no longer* has relevance [*ein Wozu . . . bei dem es **keine** Bewandtnis mehr hat*];"[22] Φύσις as "primary what-for;" its own for-the-sake-of-which.

In his 1944 lectures on Heraclitus Heidegger glosses ἐπιστήμη φυσική by saying

> "The name [ἐπιστήμη] means an understanding that pertains to beings as a whole.   φύσις, understood properly, does not only include that which, in

[17] "*Meaning* [*Sinn*] *is the 'upon-which'* [*Woraufhin*] *of a projection* [*Entwurf*] *in terms of which something becomes intelligible* [*verständlich*] *as something . . . only Dasein can be meaningful* [*sinnvoll*] *or meaningless* [*sinnlos*]. . . . all entities whose kind of Being is of a character other than Dasein's must be conceived as unmeaning [unsinniges], essentially devoid of any meaning at all." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson 1962) 193; Heidegger's italics.
[18] "Alcman and Pythagoras" 2.
[19] Concordance of accidence in progress here:
https://logeion.uchicago.edu/morpho/%CE%BA%CE%B1%CF%84%CE%B1%CF%83%CE%BA%CE%B5%CF%85%CE%B1%CF%83%CE%B8%E1%BF%86%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%B9 .
[20] "even a vegetable lives its not-too-bright life in terms of an end-for-which [*Wozu*]." Martin Heidegger, *Logic: The Question of Truth* (tr. Thomas Sheehan 2010) 129. Via metabolic pathways.
[21] *ein gewisser* θέσις-*Charakter verbirgt.* "The Danger" 59.
[22] *Being and Time* (tr. Joan Stambaugh 1996) 78.

distinction to history, we call 'nature': for history also belongs to φύσις, as do the humans and the gods. φύσις means beings as a whole."[23]

Φύσις means the being of beings as a whole. Within Φύσις, i.e. the totality of relevancies wrought by Thetis, Thetis returns as the θέσις of human positioning.   "With the existence of human beings there occurs an irruption into the totality of beings, so that now the being in itself first becomes manifest, i.e., as being, in varying degrees, according to various levels of clarity, in various degrees of certainty."[24] By virtue of Thetis-2 a clump of Φύσις now grasps *poros* and *tekmōr* **as** *poros* and *tekmōr*, with all the recombinant possibilities which that grip can articulate.[25] As Sheehan has recently put it, "without us there is no in-break into the solid fullness of things, no open region for synthesizing and distinguishing, and therefore no possibility of meaning."[26]

Yet the figure of *Einbruch* misleads insofar as suggesting that *Ereignis*, the on-going event of human sense-making, somehow 'pre-exists itself' and intrudes into beings *ab extra*, like a mushroom through pavement. Instead, as Foucault says of the object of knowledge, sense-making "exists under the positive conditions of a complex group of relations."[27] "Only when Φύσις reigns is θέσις [as human positioning] possible and necessary." And Φύσις is the *Bewandtnisganzheit* of *poroi* and *tekmōr*; the complex whole of relations of relevance giving rise to positive conditions of change. In his phenomenogony Heidegger describes the change at issue as the emergence of the capacity to see and operate in the dimension, so to speak, of *poros*-and-*tekmōr* 'pure and simple'; which dimension Thetis had, as Alcman tells it, brought to pass in the first instance.

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[23] Martin Heidegger, *Heraclitus:* The Inception of Occidental Thinking *and* Logic: Heraclitus's Doctrine of the *Logos* (tr. Julia Goesser Assaiante and S. Montgomery Ewegen 2018) 162. For 'as do the humans and the gods' *cf.*
ἓν ἀνδρῶν, ἓν θεῶν γένος: ἐκ μιᾶς δὲ πνέομεν
ματρὸς ἀμφότεροι: Pindar, *Nemean* 6.1-2.

[24] *Mit der Existenz des Menschen geschieht ein Einbruch in das Ganze des Seienden dergestalt, daß jetzt erst das Seiende in je verschiedener Weite, nach verschiedenen Stufen der Klarheit, in verschiedenen Graden der Sicherheit, an ihm selbst, d.h. als Seiendes offenbar wird.* Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (5th ed. enlarged, tr. Richard Taft 1997) 160.

[25] "without man that-which-regions can not be a coming forth of all natures, as it is." *diese* [*die Gegnet*] *ohne das Menschenwesen nicht wesen kann, wie sie west.* "Conversation on a Country Path" 83.

[26] Thomas Sheehan, "Heidegger: πάθος as the Thing Itself" (2019);
https://www.beyng.com/docs/TomSheehanPathos.html .

[27] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (tr. A. M. Sheridan-Smith 1972) 45.