Martin Heidegger's Fourfold And The Oikos

ABSTRACT

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In 'Building Dwelling Thinking', the German philosopher Martin Heidegger postulates the fourfold: earth, sky, divinities and mortals. He discusses the simple oneness of the four and argues that building, dwelling and thinking respond to the summons of the fourfold. He asks two questions: 1. What is it to dwell?; 2. How does building belong to dwelling?

The first part of his essay deals with the first question and his answer is a threefold fact: 1. Building is really dwelling; 2. Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth; 3. Building as dwelling unfolds into the building that cultivates growing things and the building that erects buildings. The second part of his analysis uses the example of the bridge and shows that dwelling is the basic character of human beings.

Heidegger's fourfold resembles the triadic oikos: nature, culture and sacred. My paper uses the concept of the oikos, which in Greek means household/habitat, to discuss Heidegger's ontological position and reveal his ecocritical moorings. This is followed by an oikopoetic analysis of Robert Frost's 'Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening' and Edward Thomas's 'Adlestrop' with special reference to 'Building Dwelling Thinking'.

Key words: nature, earth, sky, mortals, culture, sacred, oikos, ecocriticism

Ontological contextualism owes its being to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (Selvamony 7-9). Being is both immanent and transcendent; it cannot be abstracted from its immanent and transcendent context. Hence Heidegger's *Dasein*: being-there or being-

in-the-world. To talk about Being is to talk about the world; the immanent Self is impossible without the transcendent Other.

My paper is an attempt to show the ecocritical elements in Heidegger's thought. Heidegger's essay 'Building Dwelling Thinking' asks two basic questions: 1. What is it to dwell?; 2. How does building belong to dwelling? The first part of his essay deals with the first question and his answer is a threefold fact: 1. Building is really dwelling; 2. Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth; 3. Building as dwelling unfolds into the building that cultivates growing things and the building that erects buildings. The second part of his analysis uses the example of the bridge and shows that dwelling is the basic character of human beings. (*Basic Writings* 347-363)

To explore the relational field comprising building-dwelling-thinking, Heidegger postulates the fourfold: earth, sky, divinities and mortals. He discusses the simple oneness of the four and argues that building, dwelling and thinking respond to the summons of the fourfold. About the fourfold, we must hear Heidegger's poetic voice (Albert Hofstadter's translation):

"Earth is the serving bearer, blossoming and fruiting, spreading out in rock and water, rising up into plant and animal. When we say earth, we are already thinking of the other three along with it, but we give no thought to the simple oneness of the four.

"The sky is the vaulting path of the sun, the course of the changing moon, the wandering glitter of the stars, the year's seasons and their changes, the light and dusk of day, the gloom and glow of night, the clemency and inclemency of the weather, the drifting clouds and blue depth of the ether. When we say sky, we are already thinking of the other three along with it, but we give no thought to the simple oneness of the four.

"The divinities are the beckoning messengers of the godhead. Out of the holy sway of the godhead, the god appears in his presence or withdraws into his concealment. When we speak of the divinities, we are already thinking of the other three along with them, but we give no thought to the simple oneness of the four.

"The mortals are the human beings. They are called mortals because they can die. To die means to be capable of death *as* death. Only man dies, and indeed continually, as

long as he remains on earth, under the sky, before the divinities. When we speak of mortals, we are already thinking of the other three along with them, but we give no thought to the simple oneness of the four."

Heidegger's fourfold resembles the triadic oikos: nature (N), culture (C) and sacred (S). The oikos, which in Greek means household/habitat, is a useful concept in ecocriticism that helps us discuss Heidegger's ontological position and reveal his ecocritical moorings. The fourfold may be translated into the language of the oikos: Earth and sky: N; mortals — C; and divinities — S. But remember that these are overlapping categories. While Heidegger's fourfold is a 'simple oneness of the four', the triadic oikos is a simple oneness of the three — N, C and S.

Human beings build, dwell and think in any order. But building, whether as constructing or cultivating, is a cultural act; dwelling is a natural act and is the basic character of Dasein, being-in-the-world; and thinking is the manifestation of the spirit. Heidegger attaches special significance to the act of dwelling. With the help of etymology, he establishes the fact that building is really dwelling. Dwelling is not just having one's lodgings in a residential building, but a gathering of the fourfold, a staying at home in the oikos. One can be at home, he says, in places such as bridges where we do not have our lodgings. "The truck driver is at home on the highway, but he does not have his lodgings there; the working woman is at home in the spinning mill, but does not have her dwelling place there; the chief engineer is at home in the power station, but he does not dwell there." (348) But to be at home is to really dwell, to enjoy an authentic relationship with one's oikos. But what is the oikos of the truck driver, the spinner and the engineer?

Theirs is a technological oikos, in which the human cultural bonding with the land and the sacred is frail. In 'Letter On Humanism', Heidegger writes: "The greatest care must be fostered upon the ethical bond at a time when technological man, delivered over to mass society, can be kept reliably on call only by gathering and ordering all his plans and activities in a way that corresponds to technology." (255)

In another essay titled 'The Question Concerning Technology', he writes: "But this much remains correct: Modern technology too is a means to an end. This is why the instrumental conception of technology conditions every attempt to bring man into the right relation to technology. Everything depends on our manipulating technology in the proper manner as a means. We will, as we say, 'get' technology 'intelligently in hand.' We will master it. The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control." (313) Heidegger tells us that technology is never neutral; it is the challenging of nature to supply energy to be stored as standing-reserve.

Dwelling in the oikos means to let things be in their essence. "To dwell, to be set at peace," writes Heidegger, "means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its essence. *The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing*. It pervades dwelling in its whole range. That range reveals itself to us as soon as we recall that human being consists in dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth." (351)

Heidegger shows how the bridge gathers in its own way the fourfold. It gathers the earth as landscape around the stream. It is ready for the sky's clement and inclement weather. It grants mortals their 'lingering and hastening' ways from side to side. "The bridge *gathers*, as a passage that crosses, before the divinities — whether we explicitly think of, and visibly *give thanks for*, their presence, as in the figure of the saint of the bridge, or whether that divine presence is obstructed or even pushed wholly aside." (355)

For those in a hurry, the bridge may be just a passage across the stream. But how was it for William Wordsworth? In his lines 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge' (September 3, 1802), he sings: "Earth has not anything to show more fair: / Dull would he be of soul who could pass by / A sight so touching in its majesty." (*Complete Poetical Works* 178) Writes Heidegger: "Staying with things, however, is not merely something attached to this fourfold preservation as a fifth something. On the contrary: staying with things is the only way in which the fourfold stay within the fourfold is accomplished at any time in simple unity." (353)

Poetry is building-dwelling-thinking, in each of which the fourfold is gathered. Let us do an oikopoetic analysis on two poems that explicitly lend themselves to the idea of dwelling. First, let's look at Robert Frost's 'Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening' (80):

> Whose woods these are I think I know,
> His house is in the village though;
> He will not see me stopping here
> To watch his woods fill up with snow.
>
> My little horse must think it queer
> To stop without a farmhouse near
> Between the woods and frozen lake
> The darkest evening of the year.
>
> He gives his harness bells a shake
> To ask if there is some mistake.
> The only other sound's the sweep
> Of easy wind and downy flake.
>
> The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
> But I have promises to keep,
> And miles to go before I sleep,
> And miles to go before I sleep.

The personaic action is watching the lovely woods, an unusual dwelling on a snowy evening. The persona's little horse's bells ask 'if there is some mistake' in stopping 'without a farmhouse near'. The owner of the woods is unaware of the persona's dwelling for a moment on the loveliness of the dark woods. The snow falls from the 'skies' on the woods that rise up from the 'earth'. This sight pleases the 'mortal' persona

that he dwells awhile on the 'divine' beauty of nature before he hears the 'sacred' call of duty. Thus, the poem is a gathering of the fourfold.

But the harness bell is a product of human culture. It sounds a warning, as it were, lest the persona forgets the promises that must be kept in the town. The only other sound of the sweep of 'easy wind and downy flake' fails to challenge the sound of the bell. The persona cannot afford to dwell for long admiring the snowy evening. The persona has to be restless once again having promises to keep and 'miles to go before I sleep'.

None can own nature, but can only dwell in nature. Yet the persona says that the woods are owned by someone who dwells not therein but in a village. Is the persona guilty of watching the woods without the owner's permission? What right has the owner to own the woods if he wishes not to dwell there?

The natural, cultural and spiritual dimensions of life may be coded N, C and S respectively. Any literary text is bound to express at least one of these dimensions. It is also possible that any one of these dimensions may be absent. We have seven possible combinations: 1. N-text, 2. C-text, 3. S-text, 4. NC-text, 5. NS-text, 6. CS-text and 7. NCS-text. Epics invariably deal with all three dimensions. Short stories are usually C-texts; and hymns, S-texts. Now, it is possible to go further and introduce subtypes. If we reserve N, C and S only for principal dimensions, then n, c and s may be used to indicate subsidiary dimensions. For example, an NCS-text may be of the following subtypes: nCS, NcS, NCs, ncS, nCs, Ncs and ncs. (Nirmaldasan 20)

'Stopping By Woods…' is an NCs-poem, with nature and culture dominating with a slight hint of the sacred (a sense of duty). The persona's being is a momentary being-N; it becomes a being-C after the sound of the harness bell. Our lives answer to the summons of technology. We go by the clock and rarely by the seasons. The persona has built up his cultural oikos with 'promises to keep' and he dwells there in his thinking after a moment of forgetfulness at the sight of the lovely woods. Even the horse, whose native being was a being-N, has become an inveterate being-C. Of course, we cannot be sure what the

horse thinks; its shaking the bells, perhaps, has been misinterpreted by the persona. The redemptive feature is that a being-C still retains traces of a being-N.

Let's calculate the Green Density Measure (GDM) of this poem. If GNP is the number of green nouns and green pronouns; TNP, the total number of nouns and pronouns; and HNP, the number of human nouns and human pronouns, then

GDM = [GNP / (TNP – HNP)] * 100. (Nirmaldasan 22)

Stanza	GNP	HNP	CNP	TNP	GDM	Attitude
1.	5 woods, these, here, woods, snow	6 I, I, his, he, me, his	2 house, village	13	71.42	positive
2.	4 horse, woods, lake, evening	1 my	2 farmhouse, year	7	66.66	neutral
3.	3 sound, wind, flake	2 he, his	1 bells	6	75	neutral
4.	3 woods, sleep, sleep	3 I, I, I	3 promises, miles, miles	9	50	positive

The average GDM is 65.77 (neutral). The persona's building relationship with N looks positive but tends to be neutral; his thinking and dwelling is a being-C.

Now to Edward Thomas's 'Adlestrop' (25):

      Yes. I remember Adlestrop —

      The name, because one afternoon

      Of heat the express-train drew up there

      Unwontedly. It was late June.

      The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.

      No one left and no one came

      On the bare platform. What I saw

      Was Adlestrop — only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass

And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,

No whit less still and lonely fair

Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang

Close by, and round him, mistier,

Farther and farther, all the birds

Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

This NCs-poem is a persona's recollection of a nominal oikos. The persona was located in the express-train when it unwontedly drew up only for a minute at Adlestrop in late June. Adlestrop was no passenger's destination and none from Adlestrop was there on the platform to board the train.

Just the name of Adlestrop was what the persona saw. Then what prompted his recollection of Adlestrop now? The persona's restless oikos, ordered by the express train and the hissing steam, perhaps made him ponder about the almost natural oikos of Adlestrop, where flowers bloom in beauty and a blackbird's song inspires the songs of 'all the birds of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire'. Though the persona's lodgings are in some town, his dwelling is in Adlestrop.

The average GDM for 'Adlestrop' is 41.25 (positive).

Stanza	GNP	HNP	CNP	TNP	GDM	Attitude
1.	2 afternoon, heat	1 I	6 Adlestrop, name, express-train, there, it, June	9	25	neutral
2.	--	6 someone, his, throat, one, one, I	4 steam, platform, Adlestrop, name	10	0	neutral
3.	7 willows, willow-herb, grass, meadowsweet, haycocks, cloudlets, sky	--	--	7	100	positive
4.	2 blackbird, birds	--	3 minute, Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire	5	40	positive

Though the persona is far away from Adlestrop, he values that minute at the locale where the flowers bloomed and the blackbird sang. Even as the express-train is standing-reserve, mortals too end up as standing-reserve of the technological oikos. The persona's utterance reveals a being-C that thinks towards a being-N.

Adlestrop is a gathering of the fourfold: the 'mortal' persona, the flowers of the 'earth', the cloudlets of the 'sky' and that 'divinity' that attempts to retain the integrative oikos of Adlestrop. The persona's dwelling in Adlestrop is a result of thinking, not a consequence of building. Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire are familiar places, but Adlestrop is not. Yet the solo blackbird's song could inspire a chorus farther and farther from the locale. The same is true of the oikos of Adlestrop.

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