Hermeneutics has been first and foremost a theory alert to the finitude of all understanding. Guided by such convictions, hermeneutic theory has paid special attention to the conflicts and complexities of the struggle, ultimately – and I believe that this is important in the final analysis – an ethical struggle, to put oneself in words. This struggle to find words goes beyond the strategic problem of merely communicating information. Rather, it is a struggle that finally concerns the relation of language and being, and so this struggle to find oneself in words is among the most profound struggles in which one can engage. In a very real sense, the question of language always inevitably becomes a question of who one is – and is not.¹

¹ Dennis Schmidt, “Putting Oneself in Words...,” The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, ed. by Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1995); Lyrical and Ethical Subjects. Essays on the Periphery of the Word, Freedom, and History (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005). This strand of Schmidt’s work belongs in a seminal meditation on and with Gadamer – an ongoing conversation through which, among other things, Schmidt becomes who he was to be. This “relation of language and being” is always necessarily a matter of relatedness, of communing and communicating. Hence, logos is primordially dialogos, a movement día, venturing outside, crossing exteriority, through which I gain an access to myself: “when we understand something about the need for words, about how it is that we enter into relation with one another insofar as we put ourselves in words, we understand something important about ourselves.” Here Schmidt’s thinking clearly resonates with Levinas’s understanding of language as an ethical matter, as “medium” of “contact” and intimacy.
1 Conversation

How am I to let my encounter with Dennis Schmidt, here, come to language? How am I to work through his wide-ranging work, and through a friendship of so many years, in the brief time allotted to us, in this space between?

I might attempt to join a few luminous points in his work, perhaps retrieving a fil rouge, or more than one, perhaps gesturing at his comprehensive path, if only in outline. I might as well try to seize some of his insights and prolong them, develop them further, try their elasticity and openness. It might be a conversation. But keeping in mind that conversation, in its play of receptivity and restitution, of listening and giving back, always wanders incalculably, so that it never gives back exactly what it received. It is a matter of a wild reciprocity, in which positions keep shifting and exchange occurs in a constant, if subtle, mutation of perspectives. The back-and-forth of conversation is a morphic, indeed anamorphic field. Formative, transformative, and deformative – the field of imponderable variations, tensions, warps. The fluctuating space of uncontainable form: such is the sense of ana-morphe.

As when Hans Holbein the Younger, in The Ambassadors (1533, London, National Gallery), paints that strange blot between the two standing figures, in the foreground towards the bottom [Fig. 1]. The painting is organized around

![Figure 1](https://example.com/figure1.png)

**Figure 1** Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors*, 1533

London, National Gallery
two standing figures proudly displaying their attributes. The books, musical and scientific instruments, the opulence of clothing and textiles, the finely inlaid floor, all point to men of learning and of power. Their self-confidence is confirmed at the symbolic level by the binding, strict perspectival organization of the space: perspective makes a claim to the world – to knowledge of the world, domination over the world, ownership of the world.

Yet, in the process of “grazing” the surface of the image while moving in space, the viewer might chance upon a position (to the right, very close to the painting) from which the bidimensional oblique blot placed at the feet of the men suddenly appears as something else [Fig. 2]. In fact, as a skull. A ghost in the mechanics of the perspectival grid. All of a sudden, unannounced, a reminder of mortality, toning down any over-enthusiastic confidence in the smoothness of communication and the transparent transit of truth. A reminder that the space of such a transit, the space in between departures and arrivals,
is haunted, disturbingly inhabited, curved, gathered in thick folds, deforming. Irreducible to the limpid, homogeneous, frictionless space organized by the geometry of linear perspective. Visibility is deep, dynamic, harbors invisibility, or different modes of visibility. The secrets it enfolds may at times be seized thanks to a simple movement, a mere change of position. *Das bewegte Leben*, Aby Warburg would have said.

The space of conversation is similarly manifold; understanding is shot through with distortions. Or even misunderstandings. As we can already see, celebration (for approaching an author’s extensive work is, indeed, a celebration, an homage to his or her accomplishments and, above all, legacy) in the mode of conversation is a risky matter. Yet, at the same time, the movement of exploration makes lateral glance possible, the oblique vision allowing (perhaps) for a more perceptive contact with the other (as Lacan variously pointed out with explicit reference to anamorphosis). Even at the risk of a certain indistinction, of a somehow blurred demarcation between the one approaching and the other approached. Here the question already imposes itself: What could philosophy ever become, if it were to open itself to alterity, to the other than *logos*, in the movedness of life? While not addressed directly right away, in what follows the question will keep following us, pursuing us, multiply.

## 2 Resistance of Images

The question of conversation as a field of transformation and deformation already touches on the issue of translation. This is a theme ubiquitous in Schmidt’s work, particularly the translation or translatability of images into words. Indeed, inscribed within a keen alertness to movement and the ways of life unfolding, the concern with the relation, exchange, and “struggle” between

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logos and eikon consistently traverses Schmidt’s oeuvre from very early on until recent studies.\(^5\)

The bond between word and image crucially touches on the question, or rather the questions, of truth – how truth comes to pass, to manifest itself and take place; how truth is to be perceived, pursued, conveyed; whether we can speak of “the truth of images,” or “the truth of art,” only through the mediation of logos, through the discourse that would bestow meaning upon images, or whether the image could be considered in its equiprimordiality (or even in its utmost archaicality), in and of itself a language and a mode of accessing truth, a mode of thinking; “thinking by images,” Freud writes in *The Ego and the Id* (1922–23), with reference to the effervescence of the unconscious in dreams, for instance.\(^6\)

Schmidt, first of all, identifies in Kant the pivotal moment in which the inquiry comes to the fore, concerning the position of the image vis-à-vis the word, and hence concerning the philosophical significance of art (no longer as the subject matter of the “ghetto” of aesthetics,\(^7\) but as itself an articulation of truth). This is one of Schmidt’s signature moves, which heralds an altogether novel philosophy of history. In this perspective, however, the surfacing of the question of the image, and more specifically of art, in Kant’s thinking would not have been an inauguration, but rather the return of an ancient question decisively addressed in Greek thought. Indeed, according to Schmidt, in antiquity the issue was taken up so decisively and settled with such a sense of urgency, that it remained unheeded thereafter.

The question of art, of its relevance for the inquiry concerning truth, of the implication of art in the very self-showing of truth, was forgotten for centuries to come, firming up the hierarchical domination of the verbal and discursive upon the image and the imaginal. The pursuit of wisdom was thus consolidated in its logico-discursive profile – as if the image were chaotic, unreliable, in need of being secured to the logos so as to gain in structure, order, intelligibility. As if images would not in and of themselves release truth, and sensuous experience would not in and of itself reveal discernment. As if art were reducible to

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6 S. Freud, *Das Ich un das Es* (Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1923).

7 Schmidt, On Germans and Other Greeks, 45–47.
strict rules of codification and accordingly decoded, unproblematically translated into discursive description (as in the tradition of *ekphrasis*). The demotion of art (of its uncertainties, discrepancies, deformities, and irregularities) to an ancillary position leaves truth under the sole control of *logos* – aligned with the corrective orthopaedics of discourse, ultimately leading to the regime of truth as *adaequatio*. And to the concomitant inability to contemplate (to undergo) radical alterity, which would indeterminately fall outside the logic of logical articulation. And, of course, to an overall mode of inquiry longing for absolute conceptuality, and hence pervasively iconoclastic.\(^8\)

Certainly the story is much more complicated, ambiguous, multiple. It may indeed not be one. Schmidt is keenly aware that, in thinking the artistic experience in its naturalness and absolute centrality to human experience, Plato and Aristotle “set themselves apart from the tendencies of the tradition that is their combined legacy, and thereby they define something distinctively ‘Greek.’”\(^9\) Even at the culmination of Greek antiquity one finds remarkable contrapuntal elements to be reckoned with, making that tradition exceedingly rich and discontinuous with respect to any modern rationalism. In addition to Plato’s overflowing imagery and insuppressible myth-making,\(^10\) and Aristotle’s remarks on the pleasure of imitation as “native to human nature,”\(^11\) we may think of Aristotle’s treatment of *techne* (which includes all manner of human creativity, hence what we call arts as well) as one of the modes of *aletheuein* (of truth as discovering, uncovering, disclosing) along with practical knowledge, and, most notably, scientific knowledge, intellect, and wisdom – effectively pointing to the many ways in which truth surfaces.\(^12\) Again, in Aristotle, think of the attribution of discernment (*krinein*) to sensibility (*aisthesis*), entailing that already sensory perception is endowed with determinacy.\(^13\) Or, in transiting

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8 An iconoclastic trait leaving us utterly unprepared, that is, defenseless, vis-à-vis the enormous proliferation of images characterizing the age of technological reproducibility. We are steeped in images, yet cannot read them, comprehend them as a language, understand their syntax. We are invaded by images, yet increasingly inhibited in our capacity for imagination – merely colonized, entertained, transfixed by the spectacle.

9 Even as severe a dialogue as the *Laws* confirms that in many ways Plato situates himself among the poets and imitators, as one of them. The philosophers, however, would distinguish themselves from the other tragedians by imitating not just anything indifferently, but “the most beautiful and best life.” Thus, they would produce “the most beautiful and best tragedy,” which “we say is the truest tragedy” (917b). Also *On Germans and Other Greeks*, 274.

10 *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139b14–17.

11 *De Anima* 426b3–10.
to other places and other times, think of the acknowledgment of the imagination as *imagination vera* – a vehicle of truth inferior to none, as transpires from Medieval Persian-Arabic circles as well as esoteric lineages and symbolic traditions traversing the West from late antiquity to the Renaissance, German Idealism, psychoanalysis, and beyond.

However, what remains crucial here is that reading Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* as a turning point at which art and aesthetic experience re-surface in philosophical reflection and are acknowledged as genuinely involved in the coming to pass of truth – this is the gift of *On Germans and Other Greeks*. And it is a dazzling move that, by the sheer reference to the destiny of images, and more precisely of art, sets off the unfurling of the entire history of Western philosophy – both in its governing narratives and in its irreducibly multiple paths, old and very new. Thus, the Third Critique, in signaling the return of art, would resume an ancient question, recovering its “radical and revolutionary force.”  

With this gesture, Kant would continue his critical assessment of the metaphysical tradition, rigorously tracing the limits of *logos*.

But casting light on such limits means infusing the philosophical discourse, or more broadly the domain of thinking, with the perturbing elements of the experience of art: materiality, sensibility, affectivity, mood, and the whole gamut of emotions and attunements. Elements of unrest and distortion, above all pointing to the ever-singular configuration of circumstances out of which judgments arise – to the ever-singular inflection of judgment. Hence, also, the intimate connection between art and *ethos*. On the one hand, art may be a way to and of truth; on the other, philosophy may open itself up to matters of style, to the force of intuitive immediacy, to the indemonstrable, to exteriority, posture, comportment, performativity. Even to the point of resorting to the power of charms and incantations – as the most spellbindingly seductive of philosophers, Plato’s Socrates, used to do. Thinking moves in the density and motility of life, nowhere else, and this dictates that its *how* is just as relevant as its *what*. The way it moves, its demeanor and outward shell, its discursive form, are just as significant as its theme, thesis, content. They are not the same. But neither are they separate.

As Schmidt shows, then, through the Kantian turn a number of issues long obscured or denied are released again into philosophical reflection. And, as a matter of fact, not only will post-Kantian German philosophy take up the implications of the Third Critique and engage with increasing intensity in a

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far-reaching meditation on art (suffice it to recall here the significance and pervasiveness of tragedy in thinkers from Hegel, Schelling, Hölderlin himself, to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and well beyond), but it will likewise undertake a comprehensive and still ongoing experimentation on language, on writing, on its posture in the world. So much so that, alongside the pre-occupation with the destructiveness of *logos* (especially *logos* as the logic of the concept) vis-à-vis the sensuous in art, the complementary question also emerges, namely, the question concerning what might be of philosophy, what philosophy might become, in light of its availability to art.

Indeed, what if philosophy were a continuation of poetry/drama by other means? What if philosophy would take up the very questions exposed (made visible and conscious) in tragedy in order to find a way of living that might soothe suffering and trauma? What if philosophy would prove to be a “healing balm,” a therapy? What if non-contradiction might be re-considered precisely in light of this sobering and caring task?

It is the resurgence of this question and its corollaries that establishes the connection between the venture of German Idealism and ancient Greece. For Plato could be such a relentless analyst and critic of poetry, music, and the visual and dramatic arts, precisely because he took them “seriously.” Precisely because he was so fully aware of their tremendous affective power – and of our disarmed plasticity under their influence. A mood will come over me, and I will melt in tears, or rejoice, or fiercely march into bloody combat – spellbound by a melody, a rhythm, an image, like a phantasm moving (through) me. And how troubling the fact that such powers can be wielded by human beings upon human beings, so as to captivate and manipulate them. It is not primarily out of epistemological concerns that Plato quarrels with the arts and untiringly scrutinizes them. This is a quintessentially ethical struggle, played out in the *polis*, urged by the sharp awareness of the vulnerability of children and of our evanescence overall. An ethical, political, and pedagogical struggle, then, Schmidt acknowledges, after Gadamer.

Thus, the arts are addressed polemically precisely because they are so intimately experienced, frequented, practiced. Plato confronts poetry from the inside. He operates immanently, moving within the very matter of poetry. It is out of an exquisite mastery over the performative resources of discourse that his discourse unfolds. And it is in writing that Plato marks the limits of writing.

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17 Even after Nietzsche, we should say, who very early on wrote of Plato as a “political agitator,” carrying out “the battle” with “incredible radicalism” (Nietzsche, *Werke*, ed. by O. Crusius and W. Nestle, 19 [Leipzig: Alfred Kröner, 1913], 237–239).
Schmidt observes that after Plato and Aristotle this alertness to language in its enactment, evocative power, and attunement to the matter at stake, will fall into oblivion. Until it will re-surface in the season of German thought inaugurated by Kant.

3 Ubiquitous Phaedrus

Word and image: two modes of disclosing, of indicating. But in between word and image lies writing, the graphic sign, which is also an iconographic sign. Or anyway, the script has an iconographic dimension. At the limit, writing is (a) drawing.

In between the spoken word and the imaginal presentation of visible phenomena, then, are writing and drawing, mediating the space leading from a certain phenomenal density (the image) to the rarefaction of words, which, as Sappho sang, are made of air. Writing and drawing, *graphein* and *zoografhein*: the ancient (and modern) Greek word for drawing (or even painting) images draws this activity even closer to writing. At the limit, drawing is (a) writing. It is life-writing, the writing of life. In both writing and drawing it is a matter of scratching, carving, tracing lines. A matter of sketching, delineating. Drawing lines, then, includes diverse phenomena ranging from writing to painting.

Just as importantly, however, writing is itself inherently differentiated, in its modes of figuration and in its very logic: in particular, the difference between writing a sound, a voice (the “semantic voice,” Aristotle would say), and writing an image, imaging a phenomenon. That is, roughly, the difference between alphabetic notation (with syllabic and consonantal variations), on the one hand, and ideogrammatic (or pictographic, logographic) notation, on the other. Imitation of a sound, imitation of an image. The latter does not primarily express fixed phonetic values but a more or less evident visual reference. It maintains an original bond with the phenomenal sensuousness it designates, however distilled and extracted. In ideogrammatic scripts the word is written with one single character, as in Egyptian hieroglyphs or Chinese Han characters. Conversely, in alphabetic scripts the word is already distanced from what is says: the word written as a string of characters, one character for each elementary sound, presents an acoustic articulation prior to presenting the thing. Thus written, the word is anchored to the order of the aural, already aloof from the phenomenon and its sketch. The image is already resolved into

18 “I begin with words of air, but pleasant to hear” (fr. 1a Edmonds).
sound. This is a highly mediated symbolization, involving a movement away from the self-presentation of phenomena – a detachment from the intimacy with things, undoing bonds and favoring abstraction, emancipation from the sensuous. Here lies a markedly analytical potential. Alphabetic notation itself amounts to an analysis of the sonorous continuum into more or less minute, more or less indivisible, segments.

It should come as no surprise that, musing in the vicinity of these questions, spurred on by them, in his philosophical trajectory Schmidt should time and again return to Plato's *Phaedrus*. In the *Phaedrus* Schmidt mostly highlights the ultimate Platonic pronouncement against writing, its exteriority, its iconographic, or even ichnographic dimension, preserving language from falling into the order of the figurative. Schmidt magnifies the Platonic attempt at asserting the privilege of the word over the image by maintaining at once a sharp demarcation between them, yet also the transitivity of image into word, and not vice versa. The domination of the word, purely spoken, free from sensuous entanglements, incorporeal, would thus be granted.

Yet I should like to make two suggestions in this regard, at least in passing – trusting that they will be attuned to Schmidt's discussions of Plato, which are extensive and never one-sided. Again, this needs to be underlined, for even in this respect Schmidt's posture is quite singular. Writing in the lineage of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and especially in the wake of Derrida's celebrated analysis of the *Phaedrus* (basically reading Plato as a proto-Husserlian thinker of absolute and absolved interiority), he proposes a quite different arrangement of what is called the history of Western philosophy. Rather than following the outline of a unitary history of metaphysics unfolding from Plato's institution to Nietzsche's destitution (Heidegger), or, more hyperbolically, from Heraclitus to Husserl (Derrida), Schmidt renders the ancient Greek beginning, notably the two immense figures establishing its beginning (Plato, Aristotle), in all their nearly unbearable ambivalence. That is, a fecund ambivalence. Schmidt manages to sustain the tension of a reading that never simplifies, and shows the

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20 Plato's *Philebus* (17a ff.) addresses the analysis of the continuum of the human voice into a range of distinct acoustic units. The human voice is at once one and infinite (unlimited, unbound) in its individual chromatic characteristics, variations of pitch and volume, as well as in the sounds it can articulate (vowels, consonants). Analyzing the unbound phenomenon of voice, i.e., bringing number (limit) to bear on it, allows for the detection of basic sounds and their organization into an alphabet. Again, bringing measure to bear on voice gives rise to harmonic systems: different pitches are organized in scales according to the intervals between them, a finite number of notes belonging in one articulation.
ancient thinkers as they approached the most basic questions (concerning life, nature, human life, its conditions and ethos) at once foreclosing and injecting as yet unexhausted vitality into them. It is in this spirit that, before returning to the broader issue of philosophy and art, I am offering the following remarks as an aside.

A first suggestion: Socrates’ orality is only apparent, one of his many masks. It is an orality already written, informed by writing, and itself writing. Gadamer asks: Why does thinking press forward into the word?23 But with respect to what the Phaedrus shows we might as well ask: Why does speaking always already press forward into writing, as if in this way coming into its own? The Phaedrus shows that the Nietzschean locution, “Socrates, he who does not write,” should be written in quotation marks.24 That the structure of writing already sustains and structures orality, most notably the Socratic movement of thinking. Hence, provocatively: Socrates writes, for not only what has heretofore been discussed as his “saying” is indeed written (the writing of Plato), but moreover his writing is prior even to that of Plato, indeed dictates the latter, makes it necessary – in other words, precribes it.

Despite his avoidance of writing, then, Socrates may not be “a man of orality.” On the contrary, his practice seems already pregnant with a logic that will culminate in the practice of alphabetic writing and in the discourses structured by it. One could speak, then, of Socratic writing, in the sense of a philosophical destination, of the destiny of a practice inaugurally incarnated in the figure of Socrates. Socrates does write, and his writing takes the form of a dissimulation of writing, of a certain privilege accorded to the voice, to the apparent immediacy of its invisible presence.25 Such a writing of the voice will always already have pre(in)scribed both the alphabetic-scriptural threshold (the transcription of vocal temporality) and, subsequently, a certain progressive divergence from appearing and appearances (due to the phonetico-sonorous dimension of alphabetical writing, to the relative freedom it claims with respect to the visible). More pointedly still, Socrates’ comportment would be informed by writing: as is clearly shown in the Phaedrus, he practices analysis in the way in

23 Schmidt, “Putting Oneself in Words ...,” cit.
25 According to Socrates, what is safeguarded in interiority is itself already always written. Interiority is a place of writing. Concerning the “living and ensouled discourse (logon ... zonta kai empsychon) of the one who knows,” Socrates says that it is “written, together with knowledge (met’epistemes graphetai), in the soul” (276a). In the Republic one finds a similar moment, when both polis and psyche (world and interiority, visible and invisible) are posited in terms of writing (albeit with different font size) and their accessibility in terms of reading and written letters, grammata (368d).
which an expert reader practices it, a way that is orally impracticable as well as unthinkable. Socrates writes, because he reads.

Socrates writes – so much so that Plato (and the others after him) will eventually succumb to the imperative of writing. Plato will have had to write, as if Socrates would write through him, as if Plato were but a prosthesis, an extension of the teacher. Or maybe Plato will write as if reaching out towards the teacher (the beloved) now missing, as if bringing to further realization the saying, the very being of Socrates.

And a second suggestion: In the *Phaedrus*, voice is as plural and exterior as writing is. No less sensible, no less material and unsecured than writing. There is no *logos*, but voices, in the plural, in the *dia*. Voices shifting positions, coming from different directions and sources. No *logos*, if not in and as these voices, disparate and singular, variously shared and intertwined – these many voices that *we are*. Voices bound to each other, echoing, responding, in an ongoing conversation that is an ongoing alteration of the other, that keeps encountering the irreducibility of the other as other.

Rigorously speaking, Socrates is never truly the one who speaks, but it is always someone, something else, from an elsewhere which is not simply external to Socrates but rather constitutes him. His speaking, compelled by the daimonic prescription, is readily attributed to archaic poets, to the numinous energies of the natural environment, to Phaedrus himself. The Socratic word is, then, inspired word, word that flows like the breath of an other. From an other. A saying that develops from the experience of being carried away (like Oreithuia by Boreas), of *ek-stasis*, of loss of control – no longer, or not simply, a speaking in which one says anything (if anything was ever said), but in which one is being said. Always already exceeding the subject, relinquishing the prerogatives and authority of the subject. A posture incompatible with a practice of *logos* like that of the sophists – willful, self-assertive, and unaffected.

The *Phaedrus* brings this onto the stage, shows this *ethos* and its polemical and political stakes. These inceptive remarks concerning the Platonic dialogue become possible only if the narrative and performative dimensions of the text are taken seriously. If we pay close attention to what the text shows and does, and not only to what the text says, themetically posits, argues or demonstrates.

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26 Also *Apology* 26d–e.

Again, on Word and Image. And *Ethos*

Whether ideogrammatic or alphabetical, we noted, writing involves an iconographic quality – the quality of the trait in the curves and curls of alphabetical script no less than the overt visuality of pictograms. But writing involves as well the aural evocation: voice, rhythm, music.

Thus, between word and image is a moved, moving space of overlapping and interpenetration. A space of aural-visual dynamics, voices and phenomena.

Between word and image, the varied and unstable modes of *graphein*, at once writing and drawing. But also: *graphein* carries along the voice, sound, together with the graphic, painterly, visual traits. Writing-drawing speaks, possesses a sonority, more or less explicit, more or less latent. In so many ways is the word, both written and spoken, implicated in sensuousness. Language is never disengaged from the sensuous, never self-sufficient. Always falling short of pure ideality. This is why, Schmidt observes, “language is always poorest at speaking and articulating itself,” and “what this poverty of language means is found in the way that the word conceals within itself the enigma of the image. Insofar as it *can be written* – one might even argue that it *needs to be written* – the word exposes its own concealed iconographic nature.”

Between words and images is the place of a certain ambiguity, an ambiguity verging on indistinction. Or on synesthesia. Seeing-hearing. A hearing that makes me see. A seeing that makes me hear. As in Paul Klee’s *Tod und Feuer* [Fig. 3], in which it is difficult to say whether death is conjured up by the skull-like shape at the center of the painting, by the whiteness filling that shape, or by the letters composing the word for “death,” *Tod*, variously repeated in upper- and lowercase, floating across the space in different sizes and orientations, structuring the surface to the point of turning the perception of figures into an experience of reading, and vice versa. The perceptual experience remains under-determined in kind, unstable, trembling between the auditive, the figurative, and the semantic. And the hieroglyph-like signs, despite their sharpness and peremptoriness, never simply emerge from their embeddedness in color, from the thick, fiery background.

When words and images, even in their abiding irreducibility, are so tightly intertwined out of the strands of each other, when they emerge as so undecidably equiprimordial, is it still possible to imagine an uneventful, uncontroversial, linear transposition of image into word? Is it possible to make images speak without a remainder, and its distorting effects? Can images, as in

ekphrasis, be resolved into words, brought to verbal language and exhausted therein? In the transition from image to word, and back, is it possible to avoid deformation – as though it were a matter of a seamless transit, and not a matter of crossing an unspeakable difference?

Is it possible to avoid deformation? Is it possible to assert, as was asserted throughout a long stretch of the history of Western philosophy, that the image can, without either reduction or distortion, be translated into word and, thus, brought under the stabilizing control of the concept? Is it possible, then, to claim that such an assimilation may take place without any remnant or residue?
But, in the wake of considerations such as the above, Schmidt switches the question, turns it around: “This prejudice, which so clearly defines philosophy today, needs to be overcome.” At the limit, the question could become: how can deformation be highlighted? How can the impasses of translation be magnified, and, along with them, the vanity of the philosophical obsession with smoothness – conceptual and otherwise? How can the perception of such difficulties be acknowledged, sustained, so that philosophy may open itself up, relinquish the self-assuredness that can come only at the cost of an infinite distance from life, its roughness, its idiosyncrasies?

This is where the engagement with Paul Klee becomes utterly significant. And, indeed, the turns to the Swiss artist’s work and thinking are nearly as ubiquitous as the turns to the paradigmatic Platonic dialogues. Schmidt addresses Klee’s meditation on the inevitability, indeed the mandate, of deformation:

Allow me to use a simile, the simile of the tree. The artist has studied this manifold world and has, so we may suppose, somehow found his way in it, quietly. He is so well oriented that he can bring order to the flight of appearances and experiences. This orientation in the things of nature and of life, this multifarious ramified and branching order, I would liken to the root system of the tree. From here the juices flow to the artist, passing through him and through his eye. Thus he stands in the position of the trunk. Battered and moved by the power of the flow, he introduces what he is seeing into the work. Just as the crown of the tree visibly expands in every direction in time and space, so does the work.

The statement is elaborated in the lecture given at the Kunstverein in Jena, January 26, 1924. By reference to the tree, Klee undertakes to seize a “glimpse into the painter’s workshop,” into the mystery of creation. Beyond the conscious project involved in every artistic undertaking, the investigation delves into “those parts of the creative process ... which during the formation of a work unfold mostly in the subconscious” (81). The image of the tree points to the dark ground of luminous emergence, of dreams, of teeming vitality, and draws thinking down into it.

29 Between Word and Image, cit., 19.
30 See also Byung-Chul Han, Saving Beauty (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).
Vegetal imagery induces the association of the unconscious with the life of plants and their basic metabolism. The tree, its work, the currents traversing it, become figures of the processes of formation, transformation, deformation. Of anamorphosis, involving the simultaneous presence of multiple perspectives, hidden, to be discovered – folded into each other, to be unfolded.

The tree sinks its roots deep into the dark earth, and lifts its branches high up into the sky. Its middle part, the trunk, is precisely where the simile situates the paradigmatic human being that the artist is. Between earth and sky, the artist is a mediator in a vast interplay of forces and influences. An ethics emerges here, after the posture of the tree, its trunk standing strong and inscrutable, an alchemical vessel. An ethics of artistic bringing forth, of releasing heretofore invisible visibility, in turn requiring and resting on a certain existential posture – ethics as the art of life: “Battered and moved by the power of the flow” coursing through him (or her), “standing at the place allotted to him, the trunk, he does nothing other than gather and send forward that which comes from the depths. He neither serves nor rules, he only mediates. He truly holds a modest position. And the beauty of the crown is not his own. It has only gone through him” (82).

The passage through the trunk involves a necessary deformation. As a passageway, the artist assists the metabolism of nature in its necessarily distorting work of self-regeneration and self-renewal: “I have already spoken of the relationship of root to crown, of work to nature, and have elucidated the difference by reference to the two different domains of earth and air, and the correspondingly different functions of depth and height. In the work of art, likened to the crown of the tree, at stake is the deforming necessity due to the entrance into the specific dimensions of the imaginal [des Bildnerischen]. For therein stretches out the rebirth of nature” (86).

At this dangerous and exposed site, the place of the operations of mediation and transmission, in the experience of being traversed by a flow to be conveyed further, the artist (the human being) becomes aware of him- or herself as a vessel of mixing and transformation. The artwork is the outcome of a process moving through and past the body of the artist. The artwork is literally made out of the artist’s body, not by it. Accordingly, the configuration of the being of the artist, in its structure and becoming, appears to be essential to the ways of generativity, to the ways of bringing forth the work of art, and, simultaneously, to the ways of living. “I am my style,” Klee writes in his diary in 1902. In a kind of indistinction of life and art, we see him from very early...
on consistently directing his attention to his own growth and preparedness. Klee will indefatigably attend to the training of perception, to the refinement and alertness thereof, and to the concomitant ever-deepening explorations, displaying an uncanny rigor in his descents even to regions usually ascribed to madness and the primitive. Such would be the discipline of the tree, if we may say so: utterly sensitive in its extremities (in the searching roots, in the trembling branches and tender buds), open to the stream of currents inside, outside, and throughout, but also robust, able to withstand and abide, even in its ultimate vulnerability.

The task of forming, thus, turns out to be at one with that of self-formation. The creativity involved in art crucially demands a training in the “art of life,” for, indeed, art is nurtured by artful living. The artist him- or herself is a work in progress. To quote one of Klee’s striking early formulations: “In the spring of 1901 I drew up the following program: First of all the art of life; then, as ideal profession, poetry and philosophy; as real profession, the plastic arts; and finally, for lack of an income, drawing illustrations.”33

Issues of growth and realization, finitude of the will, and the assignments involved in the mere fact of being alive, are at the center of the following entry, from June 1902. Life demands cultivation. Experience itself is nothing granted but a task requiring assiduous, mindful exercise:

Actually, the main thing now is not to paint precociously but to be or, at least, to become an individual. The art of mastering life is the prerequisite for all further forms of expression, whether they are paintings, sculptures, tragedies, or musical compositions. Not only to master life in practice, but to shape it meaningfully within me and to achieve as mature an attitude before it as possible. Obviously this isn’t accomplished with a few general precepts but grows like nature. Besides, I wouldn’t know how to find any such precepts. A Weltanschauung will come of itself; the will alone doesn’t determine which direction will yield the clearest path: this is partly settled in the maternal womb and is ordained by fate. … Advancing along a spiritual path: with every step, more solitary. … Fearfully sober things, these: the canvas, the painting surface, the base. Not much more exciting: the tracing of lines, the treatment of forms. Over it all, light, the creation of space through light. Any content is prohibited for the time visible. … I even dream about it. I dream of myself. I dream that I become my model. Projected self. Upon awakening, I realize the truth of it. I lie in a complicated position, but flat, attached to the linen surface. I am my style.”

33 Diaries, 48.
being. The purely pictorial style. How far away the true experience of these things still is! For the time being, the notion of the art of living is more fascinating.34

It is not sufficient to be biologically alive in order to live, let alone to experience, as an individuated being. Yet, the necessary supplement (the “art of life”) need not amount to a formative operation imposed at will on the physiological, natural layer of life, as if nature were primordially amorphous. On the contrary, becoming “an individual” entails acknowledging and trusting the guidance of nature, essentially (if not solely) entrusting one’s development to it – trusting, that is, that in its womb shapes and paths will make themselves available.

To such an extent would the phenomenon of art involve the comprehensive question of ethics, and of life as itself an artwork. In this sense, too, “Klee is a painter of life itself.”35

5 Another Tragic Age

We have attempted, however most concisely, a crossing of Dennis Schmidt’s work through the lens of his innovative philosophy of history, hinging on the role and place of art in philosophical investigation. We have touched on Schmidt’s highly balanced approach to the past of Western philosophy, particularly Plato – acknowledged in his lucid discernment of the ontological as well as ethical import of the relation image-word, and hence art-philosophy, the beautiful-the good;36 but also, conversely, unrelenting in his suspicion of art, consistently scrutinizing it because of its ability indifferently to illuminate and to obscure. However, in closing, I would like to emphasize further, if most succinctly, the ethical momentum of Schmidt’s thought. Which is arguably among the most distinctive elements of his legacy, from one end to the other: philosophy as a way of life, longing to bridge the chasm between the often cryptic studies of the academic profession and praxis, the movement of life shaping the world. For the last 150 years, well into the last decades of the Nineteenth century, so many philosophical discourses have found their deepest motivation in the attempt at overcoming the dichotomy between praxis and theoria.

34 Diaries, 119–120.
36 Plato, Philebus 64e, as noted in Schmidt, “On the Idiom of Truth and the Movement of Life,” cit. But the nexus of beauty and goodness is also crucial in the Timaeus, as Schmidt points out in “Thank Goodness for the Atmosphere: Reflections on the Starry Sky and Moral Law,” Research in Phenomenology 50.3 (2020).
But the overcoming of such a dichotomy, if it was ever accomplished, basically remained a theoretical matter. And philosophy within the walls of the academia.

Now well into the Third millennium, a tragic age whose culture and general mood lack any serious sense of the tragic, we might hold statements of this tenor noteworthy:

In tragedy we find the memento of the very real capacity of human life to call catastrophe down upon itself suddenly, whether by accident, design, or simple blindness. We learn from it that, knowingly or not, we can bring disaster into the world, even monstrous evil. We learn too that there is no defense, no good, which might ward off this fate. To philosophize is to index one’s thought to some hope of healing, no matter how many caveats one places upon its possible realization.37

As if attempting to draw upon ancient and intact resources for other modes of being (of being human, alive in this world), Schmidt has indefatigably philosophized in the proximity of the tragic repertoire of Greek antiquity and German modernity alike, informed by Dionysus, the anamorphic god – horned child, bearded elder, foreigner, persecuted. This is probably the ultimate cipher of Schmidt’s thinking. And I tend to associate his focus on the theme of the tragic with other reflections that he, even more recently, dedicated to the sky, its hyperbole, its intractable openness, the contact with its lights and its depths.38

In the contemplation of the sky, not unlike the contemplative posture of the spectator in the theater, not unlike Odysseus witnessing the Sirens’ potentially annihilating spell, the exposure to the boundless becomes a condition for the healing acquisition of measure:

What we need to understand anew is that today we confront a profound limit that has been exposed by the remarkable sweep of what we now know. We know more than ever, we see more stars than anyone in history has ever imagined, but what has really come into view is a limit of a new order, one that is far deeper and more basic than we have yet tried to understand. It is a limit that defines the reach of the human. We meet

37  Schmidt, On Germans and Other Greeks, 284.
our finitude in many ways: in death, in animal life, even in languages. These are radical experiences that change how we understand ourselves and how we understand what it means to be in the world. Finding such limits of the human, struggling to engage the non-human in all its various forms – gods, monsters, and even the inhuman that we are able to be – is, to my mind, the point at which we begin to bind ourselves to something larger than ourselves and something that might orient us to the good.39

In *ek-stasis* existence becomes most fully itself, that is, out-standing. It stands out in the unknown, as yet not exhausted by mounting human knowing. Aesthetic experience thrusts beyond art, even beyond itself. And, in this stretching out, the human encounters its limits, the unresolved riddle and undisclosed secret that it itself is, despite the accumulation of scientific knowledge defining our age. Such an experience may not be altogether discontinuous with respect to the ancient philosophical exercises of expansion beyond oneself, into the cosmos, practiced especially in neo-Platonic and Stoic circles.40

And here, perhaps, may also lie an invitation to think art and philosophy, myth and critical thinking, even tragedy and Plato, together again. For Dionysus does not seem too removed from the myth of the swarms of the dead, at the end of the *Republic*,41 in which the *psychai* keep circling from life to death and back to life, each time traversing unspeakable discontinuities and undergoing tremendous metamorphoses. All circling motions, so recurrent in Plato,42 indicate this hovering between up above and down below, inside and outside, excess and return to measure, *ek-stasis* and worldly affairs – experiences that transform and transfigure. Involving, each time, a return: a way back to a place of contraction, density, and opacity (the cave) after ravishing movements of expansion. Think of the circulation from the cave upwards and back down, as well as the circularity of the so-called divided line (it begins and ends outside knowledge), let alone the circulatory dynamism of the souls (with or without carriage) between life and death in the *Republic* and *Phaedrus* alike; most evidently, the ascent from beautiful bodies to the beautiful all by itself, and return, in the *Symposium*. These are aesthetic and ecstatic experiences, after which

39 Ibid., 26.
41 On the resemblance between the myths of Dionysus and of Er, the warrior at the center of the narration ending Plato’s *Republic*, On Germans and Other Greeks, cit., 298.
one comes back to the same, the ordinary. Except that nothing stayed the same and there's nothing ordinary to ordinariness. Here are depicted modes of undergoing that nourish, regenerate, and re-energize life.43

In the originality of Dennis Schmidt's relentless confrontation with the past lies the recognition of an ancient yearning, an attempt at integrity. A legacy of struggle:

Philosophy has always been for me a way of life, one that sits only with difficulty in the institution of the university, and so I struggle with distinguishing the profession of philosophy from the practice of a philosophical life: that struggle, which is also the effort to reconcile the terribly esoteric work that we often do with the need to see it as real and valuable to the world, is one that has deepened over time for me.44

Perhaps philosophical inquiry may no longer aim to reduce, comprehend under the concept, resolve tensions and contradictions, but instead encourage the availability to sustain them as such, to frequent radical difference, while at the same time attempting to trace, perchance to heal, the destructiveness that humans bring upon themselves. And each other.

43 As Schmidt notes in “The Philosopher and the City: Heidegger Reading Plato’s Republic” (2021), Heidegger identifies the transitions out of cave-like dwellings into the open, and back again, as that which defines the human being in its very being (GA 36/37, 187).