

A Forest of Meanings: Chiodi, Heidegger and Tangled Paths

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For me, the most challenging part of being a translator lies in verifying the bibliographic references cited by the author. Differing translations and paginations make it difficult to track down the proper phrase to quote amidst bulky volumes. Successfully verifying such citations is often subjectively more satisfying to me than managing to translate numerous pages. This verification process is much like wandering around in a dark forest, knowing more or less where we are going but having no detailed map, only general directions.

It turns out, however, that sometimes this wandering can lead to significant philosophical discoveries, helping the translator discover an unexpected truth hidden behind a veil of routine. One such occasion springs to mind. While translating Gianni Vattimo's book *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy* into Polish, I came across a well-known quote from Martin Heidegger's essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*. A footnote in the Italian translation states that it comes from a volume by Heidegger entitled *Sentieri interrotti*, which in English would mean "broken routes" or "tangled paths." At first I was surprised. Why had the Italian translator, Pietro Chiodi, a philosopher and outstanding expert on Heidegger, failed to understand such an obvious title? Why did he so oddly translate Heidegger's *Holzwege*, which obviously means "forest paths" (as is reflected in the standard Polish title of the book, *Drogi lasu*? This struck me so much that I shared my thoughts with my students, including one from Germany. He explained that Chiodi was actually right, because German turns out to have the idiomatic expression *auf einem Holzweg zu sein*, meaning "to be on the wrong track." The Polish translation as "forest paths" is therefore a calque that fails to convey the

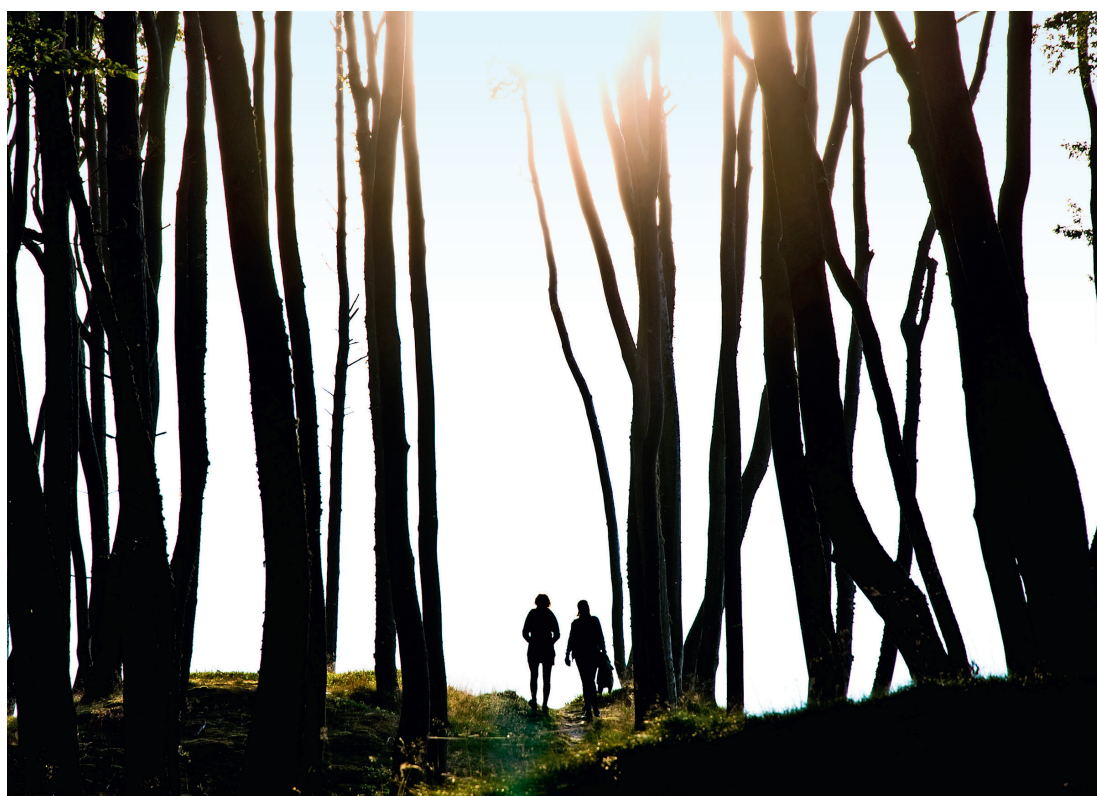
proper meaning of the title of one of the most important collections of Heidegger's essays. The English title of the collection, *Off the Beaten Track*, is a valiant attempt but also seems to miss the mark somewhat.¹

Heidegger himself explains: "In the wood there are paths, mostly overgrown, that come to an abrupt stop where the wood is untrampled. They are called *Holzwege*. Each goes its separate way, though within the same forest. It often appears as if one is identical to another. But it only appears so. Woodcutters and forest keepers know these paths. They know what it means to be on a *Holzweg*."²

For Heidegger, the forest serves as a multi-level metaphor. On the one hand, he talks about the basic problem of being, which is described in terms of moving inside a forest. On the other, it draws attention to the feeling of being lost and constantly trying to find our way, following tangled forest paths. The forest metaphor also contains a description of truth as transparency, revealed during our journey as we suddenly find ourselves standing in the light, in a clearing, when what is hidden reveals itself for a moment in the openness or in the Open. A forest is nature, to which man returns, wanting to live within the world itself, not in its image.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege*, Vittorio Klostermann GmbH, Frankfurt am Main, 1950. Italian translation: *Sentieri interrotti*, trans. by P. Chiodi, Firenze, 1968. Polish translation: *Drogi lasu*, trans. by J. Gierasimiuk, R. Marszałek, J. Mizera, J. Sidorek, K. Woliński, Warszawa 1997. English translation: *Off the Beaten Track* ed. and trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, 2002 (note that Young & Haynes do offer some argumentation in favor of their title).

² *Off the Beaten Track*, 2002, p 0 (note how here, at the very first opportunity within the book itself, Young & Haynes adroitly sidestep the question of how to translate *Holzwege*).



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Pondering the various translations of the title of *Holzwege* led me to consider another way of thinking about how tangled the forest paths of human fate can be. For example, let's the author of the tome himself – Martin Heidegger, who lost his way in the most poignant and terrible way in the history of philosophy. He was a member of the Nazi Party to which he regularly paid membership fees until its end, clearly declaring his support for national socialism and Hitler. After the war, he tried to clear his name. He escaped to the Black Forest where he wrote essays, including the ones that ended up in *Holzwege*. It may seem naïve to think that he regretted his political choices because he never properly apologized for them. When in 2014, in accordance with his last will and testament, *The Black Notebooks* were published as the last volume of his *Collected Works*, the philosophical world was outraged and surprised by the form rather than the content of the notes written between the 1920s and 1930s, which included the most horrific anti-Semitic sentiments. Without going into further detail, it's enough to say that Heidegger's decision at the end of his life to publish his most obsessive, racist and xenophobic thoughts was shocking.

This story overlaps with that of Heidegger's Italian translator, Pietro Chiodi (1915–1970), an outstanding philosopher, albeit one completely unknown in Poland. Chiodi, who began his academic career in 1934, was involved in the anti-fascist resistance movement from the beginning. During the war he took part in

partisan struggles, and in 1944 was captured by one of the Italian SS units and taken to the concentration camp in Bolzano. As a Jew, he had no chance of surviving, but with help he managed to escape strapped underneath a train traveling from Innsbruck to Verona. After the war, he continued his academic career at the University of Turin until his death. As a student of one of the greatest Italian philosophers of existence, Nicola Abbagnano, he studied Sartre, Kant, and Heidegger. He was also the author of the novel *Banditi* (“Bandits”), in which he recalled his experiences as a guerrilla fighter. In the introduction to its new edition, he wrote: “This edition is intended primarily for young people, not to revive the old hatred in their souls, but so that they may look at it with awareness and realize without illusions that, in the future that awaits them, they cannot for any reason allow certain values – such as freedom in political relations, justice in economic relations, and tolerance in all relations – to once again be brutally and insidiously threatened by anyone.”³

And although it is obvious that as humans we tend to see shades of grey rather than black and white, the tangled forest paths that led me to this story are surprisingly obvious. I often wonder how Chiodi would have reacted to *The Black Notebooks*. Would he have been able to forgive Heidegger for losing his way, choosing the wrong track? Should it and can it be forgiven at all?

³ Pietro Chiodi, *Banditi*, Torino 1975, p. v.



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