

Introduction

With the discovery and recent publication of Jacques Derrida's seminar sessions on Martin Heidegger's lecture "Language in the Poem," the Austrian poet Georg Trakl (1887–1914) has been receiving more attention in continental philosophy than ever before.¹ Previously, many scholars in this tradition, to say nothing of philosophy more broadly, shied away from Heidegger's bizarre reading of the melancholic, incest-ridden expressionist, who died at twenty-seven of a cocaine overdose in a psychiatric ward in the early days of World War I. In the words of David Krell, who, like no other, has been facing the abyss of this reading for over four decades,

Heidegger's own discussion of Trakl's poetry remains startling, bewildering, so that it is no exaggeration to say that the extended essay on Trakl ["Language in the Poem"] is of an order of difficulty that is unmatched by any of Heidegger's other essays. Compared to it, "Time and Being" (1962) and the *Beiträge* (1936–38) are child's play.²

There are numerous reasons for this difficulty, not least of which is Trakl's own poetry, with its disconnected, dream-like images of rot and sexual perversion, female monks and shit-stained angels. Through decontextualization and selective etymology, Heidegger radically reinterprets the sense of Trakl's words. For example, *fremd* does not mean "strange," but Old High German *fram*, "on the way." *Geist* does not mean "spirit," but Indo-Germanic *gheis*, "to be outside oneself." Even the ordinary sense of "sense" changes. *Sinn*, in Heidegger's reading, fundamentally means "direction," not "meaning." Heidegger situates the entire body of Trakl's poetic work under the banner of such sense. Trakl's

poetry, he claims, is in the process of cutting itself off from the corrupt and degenerate cast of contemporary humanity and moving toward a new homeland, or rather to the homeland that has always been held in store for it but has long been forgotten. Heidegger has, in short, turned Trakl into a sort of Hölderlin for the twentieth century, without, however, mentioning Hölderlin even once in his two lectures on Trakl.

And yet, for all its idiosyncrasies, Heidegger's work on Trakl has led to a sort of "canonization of the lyric poet": hardly anyone writing on Trakl after 1952 has been able to escape Heidegger's influence, for good or ill.³ What is more, Trakl's fraught poems compelled Heidegger to take up underrepresented themes in his philosophical oeuvre, such as sexual difference, pain, and madness, and even to blur the boundaries between the animal and the human.

But what compelled Heidegger to think about Trakl? Why, after never mentioning the poet in any of his writings, does Heidegger come to deliver two lectures on Trakl in the early 1950s? Why, only at that point in time, does the philosopher discover that this Austrian *enfant terrible* not only ranks among the few great poets, but is "the poet of our generation" and "the poet of the still-hidden land of evening"—the poet, in other words, who keeps the story of the secret Germany alive?⁴ And what bearing does this discovery have on the interpretation of Trakl and on Heidegger's own trajectory?

Drawing on little-known sources such as Heidegger's marginalia in his personal copies of Trakl's poems, the present study endeavors to answer these questions by reconstructing and continuing Heidegger's dialogue with Trakl. I argue that Heidegger was at once attracted to Trakl and apprehensive about immersing himself in Trakl's world. For Trakl was not just a philosopher's poet. He was also a poet of pain and putrefaction, a poet of incest and sexual difference, a Christian poet, a poet of love in death and death in love. In his reading of Trakl, Heidegger laid hold of things he could not quite mold into his matrix. Rather than letting them be, he repurposed them or simply let them go. Yet, at times—and even despite himself—he let Trakl's poetry affect his lifework. Even if Heidegger manipulates Trakl to serve his own ends, there are moments when the poetry gains the upper hand. Impressions to the contrary, their dialogue is not, therefore, unanimous.⁵

Following an initial historical-philological chapter, this book explores six sites in which poetry, not philosophy, prevails. I use these sites as opportunities to reflect not just on the productive and problematic

tensions that pervade Heidegger's reading of Trakl, but more broadly on the thresholds that separate philosophy from poetry, gathering from dispersion, the same from the other, and the native from the foreigner. To take Trakl's work seriously is to accept his invitation to cross these thresholds. This volume, the first of its kind in English, French, or German, accordingly aims to contribute not just to the study of Heidegger and Trakl but also, more modestly, to the "old quarrel [*diaphora*] between philosophy and poetry."⁶

Chapter 1 provides an overview of Heidegger's engagement with Trakl and situates this engagement within the broader context of Heidegger's corpus and sociopolitical milieu. I explain why Heidegger started to write about Trakl in the early 1950s and why he came to see him as a poet who was pivotal, not only for his own thought and for that of his generation, but for the West as such. The chapter offers the first substantial reconstruction of the setting and background for Heidegger's Trakl lectures, namely, the Black Forest spa Bühlerhöhe and its charismatic head Gerhard Stroomann, the influential postwar periodical *Merkur* (*Mercury*), and the circle of authors connected to the avant-garde journal *Der Brenner* (*The Burner*), in which many of Trakl's poems first appeared. Heidegger reacts strongly against these authors' interpretations of Trakl's work, as can be seen in his marginalia to their tributes to the poet. In the final section of the chapter, I show how these marginalia help to reveal the distinctiveness of Heidegger's reading of Trakl, especially as regards the topics of Christianity, sexual difference, and the interplay of biography, autobiography, and hagiography, all of which receive further treatment in later chapters.

Chapter 2 offers a close reading of Trakl's poem "A Winter Evening" and Heidegger's interpretation of it in the three versions of his lecture "Language" (1950, 1951, 1959). I argue that, although Trakl marks a point of departure for a second distinct turn in Heidegger's thinking—this time toward the self-speaking of language, where Heidegger also develops a unique theory of difference—Heidegger effaces or questionably repurposes crucial elements in Trakl's song, such as its search for a uniquely Christian redemption. For Trakl, poetic language is mainly a matter of expiation, which has important implications, ignored by Heidegger, for how to understand the meaning of things like bread and wine, and hence the meaning of being.

Chapter 3 turns to Heidegger's second text on Trakl, "Language in the Poem," from 1952. Heidegger claims that all of Trakl's poetry

is gathered around the concept of *Abgeschiedenheit*, “detachment” or “departedness,” which Heidegger interprets both as a departure from the degraded present of the Occident (*Abendland*) and as a departure toward a proper dwelling place, toward the land of evening (*Abend-Land*). This is a promised land, but the promise is made, not to all those who would believe, but to the few who have ears to hear the elemental power of the German language. Heidegger harnesses the etymologies of nearly every key German word for his earth-bound interpretation; however, he does not explore the history of the very word that supposedly centers Trakl’s entire corpus. Taking inspiration from Derrida’s way of reading other important terms in “Language in the Poem,” I show how the ancestry of *Abgeschiedenheit* both undermines Heidegger’s appeal to an exclusive land and language and opens up the possibility of an inclusive, anarchic love that is more in accord with the spirit of Trakl’s poetry. This chapter also includes a close reading of the entirety of Trakl’s “Springtime of the Soul,” from which Heidegger takes the famous line, “The soul is something strange on earth,” although he questionably passes over the poem’s staging of incest and the pain it causes the narrator.

Chapter 4 examines what Heidegger does have to say about pain in his two texts on Trakl and in a selection of notes recently published in a limited German edition under the title *On Pain*. While it is remarkable that Heidegger places pain on the same level as other key terms in his effort to understand being, he shrinks back from its most radical, rending implications, as articulated in Trakl’s late poem “Grodek.”

Chapter 5 brings Trakl into dialogue with the ancient Greek lyricist Pindar, the only poet, besides Trakl, whom Heidegger names in his two lectures on his Austrian contemporary. I show how, for Heidegger, both the gold of Pindar’s victory odes and the blue (together with gold) of Trakl’s expressionist poems articulate essential aspects of the holiness of being: gleaming presence in the case of gold, and sheltering concealment in the case of blue. I raise some questions as to whether Heidegger’s work on poetic color could accommodate poetic accounts of sacrilege, which leads to a discussion of the extent to which madness can be considered holy in Trakl’s work. I ultimately argue that the word “madness,” which Trakl seems purposefully to misspell in a recently discovered poem titled “Hölderlin,” resists the sense of gentle gathering that Heidegger locates in Trakl’s poetry and in Hölderlin and his madness. Trakl is, rather, a precursor to Paul Celan.

Chapter 6 explores the polysemous word *Geschlecht* (“gender,” “tribe,” “generation,” “species”) in Heidegger’s reading of Trakl. Heidegger is interested initially in how Trakl appears to distinguish between a corrupt humanity, in which difference entails dissension, and a unified humanity to come, in which difference would resolve its dissonance, without thereby dissolving *as* difference. However, Trakl’s poetry prompts Heidegger to address other differences, including those of sex, of species, and, less directly, of race. In this chapter, I explore several possibilities that Heidegger opens but either leaves undeveloped or soon forecloses: that ontological difference is bound up with sexual difference, that Heidegger is not necessarily committed to the male/female binary, and that he loosens the barriers between the human and the animal that he had erected earlier in his career.

Chapter 7 considers the larger arc of “Language in the Poem.” Juxtaposing Heidegger with Friedrich Schelling, I show how Heidegger’s analyses of spirit and evil militate against the sort of salvation he proposes. Trakl, too, is in search of spiritual redemption, but his is a redemption inextricably mediated by atonement and the necessity of enduring the decay and deprivation of existence, the trauma of being in the world. As Trakl’s friend and patron Ludwig von Ficker once wrote, “Trakl looked straight through the hell of his life (never beyond it!) into the actuality of the distant heaven.”⁷ Or, to apply Celan’s language: Trakl’s poetic work “does, certainly, make a claim to infinity, it attempts to reach through time—through it, and not out beyond it.”⁸

The volume concludes with four appendixes. The first reproduces some of Heidegger’s marginalia in two of his personal copies of Trakl’s poetry. The second provides chronologically organized evidence for Heidegger’s engagement with Trakl, beyond the two texts he wrote on the poet. The third documents which poems Heidegger references in “Language in the Poem.” In the fourth appendix, I offer new translations of eighteen poems by Trakl that have been important for my interpretation of his work.