

Random Acts of Poetry? Heidegger's Reading of Trakl

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ABSTRACT

This essay concerns Heidegger's assertion that the biography of the poet is unimportant when interpreting great works of poetry. I approach the question in three ways. First, I consider its merits as a principle of literary interpretation and contrast Heidegger's view with those of other Trakl interpreters. This allows me to clarify his view as a unique variety of non-formalistic interpretation and raise some potential worries about his approach. Second, I consider Heidegger's view in the context of his broader philosophical project. Viewed this way, Heidegger's decision to neglect the poet's biography seems quite reasonable and consistent with his inquiry into the being of language. Finally, I consider Heidegger's suggestion that Trakl is a kind of mad genius. I recast this paradigmatic figure in terms of what I call the 'wretched prophet' and consider some ways in which its appeal sheds light on the crisis of modernity and the aestheticization of politics.

Keywords:
Martin Heidegger;
Georg Trakl;
Jacques Derrida;
TS Eliot;
Language;
Geschlecht;
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1. Introduction

There is a war on the European continent for the first time in decades, and unlike those of the 1990's that seemed to reaffirm America's post-Cold War global dominance, this one comes at a time in which the U.S. led liberal world order is in question.¹ In times like these, why spend our time pondering outdated commentaries on hundred year old Austrian poems?

The feeling that an era has come to an end is present in all these writers [of the post-Nietzschean generation]. This 'sense of ending' is defiantly asserted or coolly taken for granted by the Germans among them, nostalgically cultivated by the Austrians. The feeling of dispossession is dominant...in Trakl's poetry.²

Sadly, our current situation seems not so different. We read now and then of increased mortality rates, drug abuse, and 'deaths of despair,' and it's not hard to sense that "feeling of dispossession," and even a "sense of ending."³

The hope of this essay is that a thoughtful engagement with Martin Heidegger's 1953 discussion of the poetry of Georg Trakl may help to sketch the contours of a certain kind of contemporary despair. My ambitions are not so world-historical as to characterize 21st

century America as a simple repetition of Continental Europe in the early 20th Century. I tend to share Hegel's view that philosophers are especially bad at making predictions, and we must tread cautiously when Heidegger links Trakl's poetry to the prospect of a rejuvenated Occident. So the central question of this essay must be more limited: why did Heidegger insist on ignoring Trakl's biography when interpreting his poetry? Trakl lived an interesting life. He served as a pharmacist in World War I. He suffered from depression, abused drugs, and attempted suicide at least once. He is rumored to have had a sexual relationship with his sister, and he died of a cocaine overdose in a military hospital at the age of 27. One would naturally suppose that these facts bear on his dark and notoriously difficult poetry. But Heidegger ignores all of this. Rather than situating Trakl in his immediate social and historical context, Heidegger casts him as a kind of hermit sage, a madman at the limits of experience who therefore heralds the destiny of a long-buried—and more authentic—Western civilization. Much of Trakl's actual biography supports this interpretation. If Trakl was anything, he was an alienated and disturbed outsider who lived at a time of rapid and radical global transformation. Why didn't Heidegger draw on biographical resources to support his interpretation?

I will address the question in three ways. First, what does the neglect of Trakl's biography mean from the standpoint of literary criticism and interpretation? Second, the question must be considered within the context of Heidegger's thought. Interpretive worries notwithstanding, we will see that Heidegger has good philosophical reasons for neglecting the poet's biography. The essays in which he discusses Trakl's poetry must be situated within the broader context of Heidegger's thoughtful inquiry into the nature of language. Finally there is the extent to which Heidegger's Trakl interpretation succeeds in omitting the poet's biography. Even though he tells us that the poet is insignificant, it cannot be denied—and perhaps it couldn't have been avoided—that Heidegger's commentary would give us some sense of who Heidegger thought Trakl was. Instead of omitting Trakl's biography, Heidegger presents us with an archetype, the mad genius at the limits of experience who imagistic poems reflect "the clear eyed knowledge of a madman."⁴

2. Heidegger's Trakl Interpretation as Literary Criticism

This section begins with a brief biographical sketch of Trakl followed by a general taxonomy of Trakl interpretation. Then Heidegger's 1953 essay is considered in light of a standard criticism.

1 Luce, 2016. Mearsheimer, 2019.

2 Stern, 58-59.

3 Case and Deaton, 2015; Case and Deaton, 2017.

4 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 197. Concerning the essays appearing in GA 12, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, I have tried to follow the available English translations wherever possible. References are to Hofstadter's translation of "Language" in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971) and Peter D. Hertz's translations of the remaining essays in *On the Way to Language* (1971). Changes will be indicated in square brackets, and unless otherwise noted, they are based on the corresponding passages in GA 12.

2.1 A Life Apart

Georg Trakl was born in Salzburg on February 3, 1887.⁵ His father Tobias established a successful hardware business that ensured a solidly upper-middle class lifestyle for his large family. Georg grew up with six siblings, including his younger sister Margarete (Grete) with whom he is rumored to have had an incestuous relationship. He was a bit of a disturbed child, and as he grew older, he took on the demeanor of a brooding artist. In 1906 he premiered a, now lost, one act play called, "Day of the Dead."⁶ Reviews were mixed, but even at this young age, his work showed promise. From 1908 to 1910 he studied pharmacology at the University of Vienna. When the war broke out his medical degree kept him out of direct combat (though it did not exactly shield him from the horrors of war). This work also gave him access to the drugs he would continue to abuse until his death in 1914.

His literary career really began to flourish when he met Ludwig Von Ficker, publisher of the avant-garde literary magazine, *Der Brenner*. Trakl would publish many of his most famous poems in *Der Brenner*. After Trakl's death the magazine took a decidedly Catholic turn, and it has been suggested that this is why so many early critics read Trakl as a Christian poet.⁷ Ficker also facilitated a connection to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who bequeathed a sum of money to poets in Ficker's circle.⁸ In 1913, Trakl published his first book, *Poems*, and the following year, with the

outbreak of World War I, he served in the Austrian military as a pharmacist in the medical core. During this time, he was struggling to publish his second book, *Sebastian Dreaming*, which wouldn't come out until after his death. In the fall of 1914, Trakl sent a letter to Wittgenstein thanking him for his generosity and suggesting a meeting. Wittgenstein agreed, and the two were supposed to meet in early November. Trakl died two days before the meeting was to take place. Wittgenstein had donated the money without knowing anything of how Ficker would disperse it, and after Trakl's death, Ficker sent Wittgenstein some of Trakl's poetry. In his reply, postmarked 28 November 1914, Wittgenstein said: "I do not understand them; but their *tone* delights me. It is the tone of a true genius."⁹

As a child, Georg was unusual. Some of this may have been the youthful affectation of an aspiring poet. Like many of his generation, he admired the work of edgy writers like Baudelaire, Verlaine and Poe, but his problems were real and cannot be entirely chalked up to mere pretense. Anecdotes from his childhood suggest an interest in suicide. These include stories of him jumping in front of an agitated horse and even the path of a moving train. He also walked into a pond: "his hat floating on the surface provided rescuers the only indication where he could be found."¹⁰ Concerning the rumors about him and his sister, it's impossible to know what truth there is to them. It's clear that he had a great affection for her. The theme of

incest is suggested in much of his poetry. An early poem, with the title "Dream of Evil," ends with a suggestive line:

In the park, siblings glimpse each
other trembling.¹¹

There could be many explanations for the theme of incest in Trakl's poetry. It's possible that lines like these simply reflect the poet's desire to provoke controversy. They might just be the product of an otherwise disturbed mind. Those who believe that Trakl actually slept with his sister often rely on the testimony of a single critic who claimed to have proof that he refused to disclose.¹²

Drug use was a consistent part of his short life. Translator, James Reidel quotes a 1905 letter to Karl von Kalmar: "to get over the subsequent strain on my nerves, I have unfortunately resorted to chloroform. The effect was awful."¹³ It is also reported that he suffered visual hallucinations. He heard bells, and he occasionally would see a man standing behind him holding a knife. The hallucinations are said to have stopped when he was about twelve but picked up again when he was twenty-four.¹⁴ The horrors of war probably compounded his mental disturbances. The Battle of Grodek was especially brutal, and it is the subject of his final poem. After a gory and humiliating defeat, Trakl was tasked with tending to 90 badly wounded soldiers. He saw men hanging from trees, at least one of whom hanged himself in desperation. Trakl announced his own intentions of

⁵ The main outlines of Trakl's biography are well known. Interested readers may consult the biographical notes in James Reidel's translation, *A Skeleton Plays Violin: The Early, Unpublished, and Last Works of Georg Trakl* (2017).

⁶ Trakl, *A Skeleton Plays Violin*, 4.

⁷ Detsch, 2.

⁸ For an interesting discussion of how Wittgenstein's connection to Trakl might have philosophical significance for the *Tractatus*, see Bremer (2021). Interestingly, Bremer notes that Ficker was considering publishing the *Tractatus* in *Der Brenner*, thinking it deserved to be treated both as a work of philosophy and literary work (528-29).

⁹ Ficker, *Briefwechsel 1914-1918*, 53. I quote the letter here in full: "Lieber Herr v. Ficker! Ich danke Ihnen für die Zusendung der Gedichte Trakls. Ich verstehe sie nicht; aber ihr *Ton* beglückt mich. Es ist der Ton der wahrhaft genialen Menschen. Wie gerne möchte ich Sie sehen und mich über manches aussprechen! Seien Sie herzlichst begrüßt von Ihrem, Ludwig Wittgenstein" (53).

¹⁰ Sharp, 22-23.

¹¹ Trakl, *Poems*, 23.

¹² Detsch (1983) puts it well: "... the critics are divided, as they are with regard to a good many features of Trakl's obscure biography. A definitive statement is especially difficult because of the critics' proximity in time to the suspected deeds and the fact that those who might possess information regarding such deeds would very probably be closely connected to Trakl's family, one of whose members was still alive as late as 1969. Most of the recent critics, however, rely on Theodore Spoerri's statement that he possesses indisputable evidence of an incestuous relationship from a source that he does not think it prudent to identify" (11).

¹³ Quoted in Trakl, *A Skeleton Plays Violin*, xix.

¹⁴ Sharp, 34-37.

suicide, at which point his comrades disarmed him and placed him under psychological supervision in a Krakow military hospital. The care he received seems to have been poor and, if anything, may have made matters worse. It is impossible to determine the extent to which it was intentional, his death from a cocaine overdose on November 3rd, 1914.¹⁵

2.2 Form and Content

Trakl's poetry is notoriously difficult. In his short life, he didn't publish any theoretical treatises or provide readers explicit aid on how to read or interpret his poetry. Images are often used in contradictory ways and unexpected contexts. This led to an important dispute in the early 1950's between formalists and those who emphasized the unmistakably Christian imagery of Trakl's poems.

Wanderer quietly steps within;
Pain has turned the threshold into
stone.
There lie in limpid brightness shown,
Upon the table bread and wine.¹⁶

The formalists view such imagery as incidental, intended to evoke certain feelings in the reader without attributing "any symbolic or world-critical meaning whatsoever to the aggregate of Trakl's images."¹⁷ As Michael Hamburger puts it: "every interpretation of Trakl's works hinges on the difficulty of deciding to what extent his images should be treated as symbols."¹⁸

But he adds, later on, that "any interpretation of his symbols must take Trakl's Christian faith into account." And he faults

Heidegger for evading such biographical questions with his claim that great poets always speak from the same, single, unspoken poem.¹⁹

So the criticism from formalists is that Heidegger projects content onto Trakl's poetry, and the criticism from Christian interpreters is that the content he projects is insufficiently attentive to Trakl's Christian imagery. The nice thing about the formalist approach is that it seems to be in keeping with the ambiguity and impenetrability of Trakl's poetry. Heidegger's reluctance to discuss Trakl's biography might seem to fit with a formalist interpretation. But Heidegger seems to rule this out with his claim that "every great poet creates his poetry out of one single poetic statement only." The purpose of discussing a great poet's work is to locate the original "unspoken statement" from which the various poems "derive their light and sound."²⁰ Heidegger's approach may seem to harmonize with the formalist's when he says, "the poetic work speaks out of an ambiguous ambiguity," but he ultimately attributes the poetry's ambiguity to the ambiguous nature of its object. It is "not lax imprecision, but rather the rigor of him who leaves what is as it is."²¹ Heidegger's search for the original, unspoken poem cannot be reconciled with the formalist approach. Discussing "A Winter Evening" in the "Language" essay, Heidegger says it directly: "the poem's content is comprehensible."²²

2.3 Varieties of Non-Formalistic Interpretation

Concerning non-formalistic interpretations, Heidegger explicitly rejects the

Christian one. We have already acknowledged that Christian imagery is present in Trakl's poetry, but the decisive question is whether those images carry symbolic meaning. The ambiguousness of Trakl's imagery makes it hard to maintain the view that Trakl is painting a picture of a universe resembling any traditional Christian theological worldview. Heidegger emphatically resists the Christian reading of Trakl in the 1953 essay. He cites Trakl's image of "the icy wave" of eternity and asks, "is this Christian thinking? It's not even Christian despair."²³ Erasmio Leiva-Merikakis's *The Blossoming Thorn* (1987) is a good representative of where the Christian interpretation stands today. Leiva-Merikakis interprets Trakl's poetry as a *confessional event*. The Christian imagery is not so much a description of the universe according to Christian doctrine but a way of setting the stage for a genuine act of confession—or even instances of spiritual revelation. He sees Trakl's work in the "tradition of visionary poetry."²⁴ The nice thing about this view is its ability to balance the ambiguity of Trakl's metaphor and the occasional character of each poem with the guiding threads of confession and prophetic vision.

Another important approach emphasizes Trakl's drug abuse and mental instability. Heidegger rejects such approach as symptoms of "an age whose historical, biographical, psychoanalytical, and sociological interest is focused on bare expression."²⁵ Despite Heidegger's objections, the psychological approach has always been popular. Francis Michael Sharp, in his 1891 study, *A Poet's Madness*, notes that this sort of interpretation was

¹⁵ Sharp, 33.

¹⁶ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 192-93. This is the translation as it appears in the English edition of the "Language" essay. James Reidel's recent translation can be found here: Trakl, *Sebastian Dreaming*, 37.

¹⁷ Leiva-Merikakis, 12. We will see (in 2.3) that Leiva-Merikakis defends a version of the Christian interpretation. A good discussion of this debate, from a more Heideggerian perspective, can be found in the introductory chapter of Dretsch (1983).

¹⁸ Hamburger, 292.

¹⁹ Hamburger, 310.

²⁰ Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 160-61.

²¹ Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 192.

²² Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 193.

²³ Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 193.

²⁴ Leiva-Merikakis, 19.

²⁵ Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 159.

already suggested by none other than Ficker himself. "In Ficker's view, a possible reason for the prolonged observation [in the military hospital in Krakow] was the interest that one of the doctors had in Trakl as a case of 'genius and madness.'" ²⁶ Along with the mad-genius narrative, there are those who read Trakl as a disturbed and even perverted mind. I'm speaking, of course, of those who emphasize the potentially incestuous relation between Trakl and his sister, Grete. ²⁷

Heidegger remains silent on this last point, but Jacques Derrida isn't buying it. Derrida returns to the 1953 essay on Trakl in his decades long exploration of Heidegger's use of the puzzling German term, 'Geschlecht.' ²⁸ In a series of lectures on this essay, he tells us it can be interpreted "as a great discourse on sexual difference." ²⁹ Derrida's reflections on 'Geschlecht' are quite helpful for understanding Heidegger's work in its philosophical context, and I approach the essay along somewhat similar lines below. That said, an interpretation that places at the heart of Trakl's poetry the imagery of the androgynous childhood relation between brother and sister is likely to result in the same sort of problem of ambiguity that plagues the other content-based interpretations discussed in this section. ³⁰ All of these issues—Trakl's Christianity, his madness, his relation to his sister—are worth exploring thoughtfully in terms of how they shape the poetic imagery. But none of them strike me as decisive as a bases for interpreting the whole of Trakl's poetry.

2.4 Heidegger's Trakl Interpretation

Heidegger's 1953 essay is difficult, but we do get some definitive state-

ments. First, Heidegger tells us that the "site" of Trakl's work is isolation. Heidegger uses the word 'Abgeschiedenheit,' which Hertz translates as 'apartness,' for technical reasons probably having to do with the 'site' [Ort] of Heidegger's 'discussion' [Erörterung]. But is important to see the word's poetic force. In Trakl's "Gesang des Abgeschidenes," 'apartness' or even 'being-apart' would not work. It is unclear whether the poem is the song of one who is living *in solitude* or even of *the departed*, in the sense of the deceased. In either case, the technical, spatial language obscures the poetic intent. Heidegger surely meant to invoke both in his essay. Second we get the formulation, near the end of the essay, of Trakl as the "poet of the yet concealed evening land." ³¹ Here, again, the translation causes some difficulty. 'Der Abendland' is the west. Sometimes it's hyphenated. Sometimes it's separated into two words. And occasionally it is spelled out with the genitive construction, 'land of evening.' But the two senses are always linked. When Heidegger refers to it, it is in the context of two of Trakl's poems: "Abendland" and "Abendländisches Lied." The image of the setting sun is lost with English translations like, 'occident' or 'the west,' and to call it the 'evening land' robs the term of its historical and cultural significance. Given Heidegger's biography, it's important to be cautious about what's being suggested, but the historicity of the concept is essential to what Heidegger is trying to say. He warns us not to confuse the yet unconcealed west with the legacy of Platonism, Christianity, or even Europe. Instead, "apartness is the 'first beginning' of a mounting world year." ³²

So what does all this mean? Heidegger begins his study with a passage from

Trakl's "Springtime of the Soul":

Something strange is the soul on earth." ³³

This is indicative of his thinking on Trakl. Unlike the onto-theological tradition that Heidegger is constantly critiquing, which sets reason and things like souls outside of ordinary lived experience, Trakl places the soul on earth but as something strange. Dwelling in this strangeness isolates Trakl. It places him out away from from the Western tradition that goes back, at least, to Plato. He's able to see the West as it was originally, prior to the fallenness of onto-theology. Dwelling in this solitude he can herald the destiny of the still hidden west. The imagery of the seasons and the earths revolution in a year comes to symbolize the world-historical position of the evening land. Derrida makes an important philosophical point about Heidegger's view when he tells us that Heidegger "proposes no other *content*, only an originary, pre-originary double *on the basis of* which Platonism and Christianity could be produced as decomposed forms." ³⁴ But this is not to be confused with the claim about formalism made above. Heidegger *does, in fact*, project symbolism grounded in his own view onto Trakl's poetry. In response to the decay of Platonism and Christianity, Trakl's poetry—only *apparently* dismal and depressing—poetry is seen by Heidegger to herald a new world-historical year. An age that resembles an "abyss of decay" [*Abgrund des Verfalls*] is a necessary sunset [Untergang] that is the first necessary step toward a dawn of a new beginning, a beginning that is the sunrise [*Übergang*] of a long buried past. ³⁵

26 Sharp 33-34.

27 McLary, 2000.

28 Derrida, 1983; 1987; 1989; 1993; 2020

29 Derrida, *Geschlecht III*, 19.

30 Derrida, *Geschlecht III*, 43-44. Readers interested in exploring this line of interpretation further should check out Detsch (1987) and chapter seven of Farrell Krell (2015).

31 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 197.

32 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 194.

33 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 161-64.

34 Derrida, *Geschlecht III*, 55.

35 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 194.

2.5 On the Objections to Heidegger's Trakl Interpretation

It should be clear by now where critics find fault with Heidegger's view. We've already seen how Hamburger accuses him of projecting symbolic meaning into images that Trakl employs in explicitly contradictory ways.³⁶ Richard Detsch is probably correct in the following description of consensus among literary critics:

Most critics reject Heidegger's contribution as a philosopher's unwarranted encroachment on literary criticism; some few approve but without really coming to grips with the philosophy of *Sein und Zeit* upon which Heidegger's interpretation is predicated.³⁷

Along these same lines, Richard Millington identifies Heidegger as the "most flagrant practitioner" of an approach to Trakl that constructs interpretations based on collections of lines or images chosen for their suitability for supporting a particular argument.³⁸ Millington insists on the importance of biography, adopting what he calls a "diachronic and developmental" approach. He naturally faults interpreters who, like Heidegger (in his view), extract images from their context, "with little or no regard for the relative chronology of the poems in question."³⁸ Derrida is sensitive to this point in his lectures on the essay, but in the end he is sympathetic to Heidegger's need to place himself into the text.³⁹

3. Heidegger's Trakl Essays in Context

This section situates Heidegger's essays on Trakl in relation to Heidegger's

broader project of overturning western metaphysics. I begin by considering the relation between the two essays on Trakl in *On the Way to Language*. This is followed by a brief discussion of the relation between early and later Heidegger after which I describe what I take to be a continuous thread running from "What is Metaphysics?" (1929) to "Language" (1950-51). Finally I attempt to situate the 1953 essay on Trakl in this lineage as well.

3.1 Random Acts of Poetry?

Heidegger's best known discussion of the poetry of Georg Trakl appears in the 1950-51 essay, "Language." In it, Heidegger uses Trakl's "A Winter Evening" as an instance of language purely spoken; he reprints the poem in full, allowing the poem to speak for itself. Given his goal of letting language speak for itself, it makes sense that Heidegger would want to omit the significance of the poet's biography: "The poet remains unimportant here, as is the case with every other instance of great poetical success [*grossgeglückten Fall eines Gedichtes*]."⁴⁰ In the late-fifties, Heidegger collected several of his essays from the fifties and published them as part of a collection called, *On the Way to Language*. In that collection, "Language" was followed by a more complete treatment of Trakl's poetry that had been published in the literary journal *Merkur* in 1953. Originally titled, "Georg Trakl: A Discussion of His Poetry," this essay was renamed, "Language in the Poem: A Discussion of the Poetry of Georg Trakl." The new title seems to link the second treatment of Trakl's poetry with the "Language" essay, and here again, we

find Heidegger downplaying the significance of Trakl's biography, this time with a little bit of wordplay: "the discussion [*Erörterung*] speaks of Georg Trakl only in the sense that it thinks the site [*Ort*] of his poetry." This 'site,' we are told, is a single unspoken poem which is the gathering point of any great poet's work.⁴¹

There are good philosophical reasons for not discussing the poet's biography. In *On the Way to Language*, Heidegger situates "A Discussion of Trakl's Poetry" next to the "Language" essay under the new title "Language in the Poem." The treatment of Trakl's "A Winter Evening" in the "Language" essay is one of the most sensitive and subtle things Heidegger ever wrote. And the treatment of this poem cannot be accused of taking Trakl out of context. Indeed Heidegger cites the poem in its entirety and references a 1913 letter the author wrote to Karl Kraus wherein in he includes an alternate middle stanza.⁴² More importantly, the poem is intended to bring us into contact with the pure being of language. One must suppose that chattering away about the author's life would lead us away from language itself—toward what he calls 'idle talk' (one might say, 'gossip' [*Gerede*]) in *Being and Time*.⁴³ If the discussion of Trakl's poetry struggles as a work of literary criticism, perhaps it succeeds as an extension of task of the "Language" essay. This puts the discussion of Trakl into line with Heidegger's broader project, going back to *Being and Time* and "What is Metaphysics?" From this perspective, to speak of the author's biography is to confuse the being of language purely spoken with everyday instances in the life of the

36 Hamburger, *Reason and Energy*, 292.

37 Detsch, 4. Detsch himself is sympathetic to Heidegger's approach and attempts to approach Trakl's poetry along the lines of a rethinking of unity and difference.

38 Millington, 2020.

39 Derrida, *Geschlecht III*, 60-61. "I won't say that he knows where he's going, for this destination... is not of the order of knowledge, but still, he has an orientation... that pre-oriens, magnetizes, and draws along his approach... He is not just going anywhere in the Trakl text. Incidentally, this is exactly what so-called competent people (philosophers, philologists, poetics critics) criticize him for; they criticize him for saying whatever, arbitrarily, without taking account of the internal organization or the apparent meaning of the text... and imposing on Trakl a situation and a place pre-determined by Heidegger... In any case one cannot overlook... this situation of Heidegger himself and this scene according to which he speaks of himself or, rather, of his proper place, his own step, his own pathway, in short, his signature. And this is not a criticism in my view."

40 Heidegger, *Poetry Language Thought*, 193. Hofstadter translates the bracketed phrase as "...every other masterful poem." This has the problem of overemphasizing the role of the author as master and loses the sense of the term "Fall" as a 'case' or 'instance' of poetic activity. It also leaves out the unusual adjective "grossgeglückten." "Geglückt" means 'successful,' not 'masterful,' and it's likely Heidegger was attentive to the etymological connection to 'Glück,' meaning 'good fortune' or 'happiness.'

41 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 159-60.

42 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 193.

43 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 167-70.

poet. The *event* of poetry—a fortuitous instance of poetical success—has to be something vastly more profound.

3.2 Early and Later Heidegger

Heidegger was consistent in viewing his thought as guided by the question of the meaning of being. If there was a “turn” in his thinking, it seems to have had more to do with his approach than with the goal of his thinking. His style changed, but the question was always the same. He backs away from the technical term ‘Dasein,’ because of a tendency to read of *Being and Time* as a kind of philosophical anthropology. (You can’t blame readers for this; it can be a powerful book when read that way.) But it wasn’t about that. It was about analysis of the being concerned about being that would then prepare the ground for rethinking the question of being itself. It was an attempt to think being in a more original way. He clarifies this point in the “Letter on ‘Humanism’” (1946) and contrasts Hölderlin with “eighteenth century humanists like Winckelmann, Goethe, and Schiller.” Hölderlin, he tells us, “does not belong to ‘humanism’ because he thought the destiny of the essence of the human being in a more original way than ‘humanism’ could.”⁴⁴ To get away from the reputation that he’s doing philosophical anthropology, the later Heidegger adopted a different tone and even shifted away from calling his work ‘philosophy.’ His intention was always to think the question of the meaning of being, never to *philosophize* about it ‘onto-theologically.’ Whatever this new form of thinking is, it’s clear that it is intended to move beyond the kinds of supernatural meta-narrative of being associated with (at least some) approaches to Western metaphysics since Plato.⁴⁵

Some interpreters identify his discussion of Trakl as one of the few instances in which he took his eye off the ball.

According to Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, “on two occasions at least, Heidegger, by his own choice, indulged in philosophy.” This refers to Heidegger’s association with the Nazi party and some of his work on poetry, “Hölderlin and, to a lesser extent, Trakl.” To think the question is not to theorize it but to allow oneself to encounter it. Lacoue-Labarthe speaks of Heidegger’s “‘Hölderlinian’ preaching.”⁴⁶ If Lacoue-Labarthe is right, we should exercise caution and perhaps not make too much of Heidegger’s reading of Trakl. This is just one of the few times that Heidegger slipped of track and allowed himself to posit a kind of theoretical answer to a question we can only thoughtfully approach. Caution is surely warranted, but certain elements of the Trakl essays are continuous with Heidegger’s thinking going back to the twenties. It is to these elements that I now turn.

3.3 From “What is Metaphysics?” to “Language”

In “What is Metaphysics?” (1929) Heidegger phenomenologically undercuts philosophical logic. He approaches the question of being from the standpoint of of the human being, but this standpoint is “freely chosen.” And in “turning toward beings themselves” he approaches the origin of logical negation in a more original way.⁴⁷ Using human experience as the horizon, what’s revealed is something he calls “the nothing,” and it is in the “nihilation of the nothing” that beings like us first encounter the possibility of non-being. To say that we experience this as the existential dread of death only gives us part of the picture. This is actually the being of beings revealing itself, as it does to beings like us who are concerned about being by our own nature. We already have this experience of nihilation available to us before any sort of differentiation or categorization can be formalized. “The nothing is more

originary than the “not” of negation.”⁴⁸ There are no disjunctive syllogisms at this level, only the original experience of the nihilation of the nothing.

The “Language” essay of 1950 is the continuation of this sort of reflection. Here he tells us that in attempting to understand the being of language we are trying “to get where we are already.”⁴⁹ It is only in letting language speak that we are able to encounter it for itself. We do this through the hearing of a poem, Georg Trakl’s “A Winter Evening.” Heidegger picks the poem, somewhat cleverly, because it contains several of his key notions. The sounding of evening bell should remind reader of the “call” of conscience from *Being and Time*.⁵⁰ And the idea that it tolls longer on account of the gentle falling of the snow should remind readers of the contrast between authentic temporality and the ordinary notion of time as a measurable sequence of instances. Language speaks in the naming of things which calls them together. For example, when Trakl says “the window is arrayed with falling snow,” the window and the snow appear in the attentive listener’s imagination. Heidegger doesn’t think of this the way that most of us intuitively do, as ideas (somehow, let’s say metaphorically) *in* the mind. Even mind/body dualists would admit that there is no place for these ideas to go. They are not spatial; nor is the mind. But the question isn’t how an unextended image can be *in* an unextended mind. The question is: how can there be *two* of them? The image of *the snow* and the image of *the window* belong to the same idea and are separated in movement of the falling snow. The poem broadens the field when it speaks of wanderers on dark paths who are drawn to the house where the window is still being hit with snow. The house has a table inside, with food on it. The “tree of graces” (which is God

44 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 244.

45 Of paramount importance here is the twisting free of Platonism that Heidegger discusses in Chapter 24, Volume One of the Nietzsche lectures.

46 Lacoue-Labarthe, 12.

47 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 83.

48 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 86.

49 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 188.

50 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 272-80.

knows where but still somehow in the world of the house) draws up 'cool dew' from beneath the earth. None of this is taking place in space, yet everything exists in a kind of as *if* spatial relation belonging to the same poetic world. I have been using the metaphorical language of 'ideas' in 'the mind' only because it's a useful way of expressing these things. But the metaphors themselves need to be replaced in order to capture the way in which language and thinking succeed in producing this world.

These various things are yoked together in a place that is no place at all, and they are, somehow, in this non-place differentiated as individual elements of the larger scene. The Christian imagery of Trakl's poem is unmistakable when a wanderer approaches the warmly lit house with bread and wine on the table. The wanderer cannot enter because pain has hardened the entry way into stone. Heidegger uses this pain-hardened threshold as an image of what he calls "the difference."⁵¹ Language speaks in the painful opening up of the difference, where the difference stands for the medium that allows for the imagery of the poem to combine multiple elements within the world that the poem creates. He hyphenates the German word for difference, 'Unter-schied.' This is intended to separate the preposition 'unter' which he traces to the Latin 'inter.' This etymological move connects the 'unter' of the difference with the 'intimacy' of the connection between elements in the poem. The second part of the word is connected to the verb 'scheiden,' which means to 'separate' or 'divorce.' So, Heidegger uses the threshold beyond which it is too painful for the wanderer to pass to illustrate the fundamental separation at the heart of the being of language. Language calls things together but also peels them apart. The different elements of the poem intermingle in a kind of movement—now together, now apart, now in focus, now out of focus. The poet calls all these

things together while simultaneously parting them in a pure instance of spoken language.

If the painful parting of the difference is what separates things within a world, then we are not too far off from the way in which the primordial nihilation of the nothing makes possible the "not" of negation in "What is Metaphysics?" If the nothing is ontologically prior to the not of negation, perhaps the pain of the difference is ontologically prior to the "all," "some," or "none" of categorical logic. We will see this developed a bit more in the next section.

3.4 "Language in the Poem" and 'Geschlecht'

In situating the 1953 essay alongside "Language" and giving it the new title, "Language in the Poem," Heidegger is drawing our attention to the fact that this essay carries on with certain themes from the other essay. We can see how "Language in the Poem" relates his discussion of the difference with the help of Derrida's reflections on the German word, 'Geschlecht.'⁵² There is not space of a detailed study of this here, but some indications concerning the etymology of the word and a brief discussion of the most relevant paragraphs of the essay should be enough to illustrate the connection.

'Geschlecht' is the German word for 'sex.' Like the English word, it can indicate both the biological categories and the activity: 'geschlechtlich' means 'sexual,' and 'Geschlechtsverkehr' (lit. sexual traffic) refers to sexual intercourse. 'Geschlecht' also picks out other category terms, like: 'generation,' 'gender,' 'family,' 'lineage.' One probably wouldn't go wrong thinking of 'Geschlecht' when they think of those terms that are etymologically connected to 'genus.' The Latin, 'genus,' refers to a variety of category terms: 'kind,' 'race,' 'descent,' 'family,' 'nation,' and 'gender.' Etymologically, it survives in words that begin with gen-, like 'general,' 'genre,' and 'genesis' (as well as 'origin'). Derrida's decades long concern with Heidegger's

use of the term 'Geschlecht' is related to his attempt to make sense of Heidegger's Nazism.⁵³ If Heidegger rejected biologism for its technological and scientific approach to the question of being, one might assume he'd be immune from the ideology of National Socialism. We think of the Holocaust as essentially linked to the eugenics movement and the pseudo-science of biological racism, which of course it was. But there are other ways to think the unity of the nation. If Heidegger wasn't a thinker of 'die Rasse' or 'der Stamm,' words more commonly associated with racism and the eugenics movement, perhaps he was still a thinker of the spiritual unity of the German 'Volk.' And if Heidegger's thinking surrounding these issues is more complex, which it certainly is, perhaps he makes use of the complex and ambiguous term, 'Geschlecht.'

In the 1953 essay, Heidegger invites us to think of 'Geschlecht' in the fullness of this ambiguity. [ein geschlecht passage]. In the subsequent paragraph, he connects 'Geschlecht' to the verb 'schlagen,' meaning 'to hit' or 'to strike.' An ordinary way of forming the past participle of a verb in German is to take the third person form and add the prefix *ge-*, but 'schlagen' is an irregular verb. The past-participle of 'schlagen' is 'geschlagen'; its third person singular form is 'schlägt.' However, if one were to take the third person present form, "schlägt," and use it to form the past participle, it would become "geschlägt." This made-up word would sound very close to the pronunciation of the word, 'Geschlecht.' So, for Heidegger, the category term, 'Geschlecht' picks out *that which has been hit*. This is just like the the "Language" essay, where the difference between intimate elements called together in Trakl's poem are painfully rendered apart in a naming that gathers. Here, membership in a categorization is secured when something is *slugged*. It is also the connection between 'schlag' and 'geschlagen' that enables Hertz to translate—not unreasonably—Heidegger's

51 Heidegger places a dash between the *Unter of der Unterschied*, which Hofstadter tries to replicate with difference. It works in German because 'Unter' is a preposition and because 'schied' is related to the verb 'scheiden,' meaning 'to separate.' English doesn't have the same effect, so I will just mark it out using context and the definite article 'the' to help indicate when I'm using the technical term.

52 Derrida, 1983; 1987; 1989; 1993; 2020.

53 For a detailed discussion Derrida's interpretation of Heidegger's nationalism apropos of 'Geschlecht,' see Krell (2007; 2015; 2020) and Therezo (2018)

description of Trakl's unspoken poetic statement as the "call that the right race may come to be [*Rufen nach dem Ereignis des rechten Schlages*]."⁵⁴ Here, of course, it is important to tread cautiously. A more literal translation would be the "call of the event of the just hit." Perhaps he is suggesting something unexpectedly humanistic when he draws our attention to the emphasis that Trakl places, in the last line of Trakl's "Song of the Evening Land," on "one kind [*Ein Geschlecht*]."

3.5 Conclusion

In this section, I have attempted to show that Heidegger's Trakl essays are continuous with his earlier reflections on the meaning of being. When Heidegger applies his unique phenomenological approach to these questions, his thinking is radical in the sense that he thinks concepts down to the root. At the root of being, he uncovers the nothing. The ground [*Grund*] of being is an abyss [*Abgrund*]. Likewise, when he inquires into the being of language he uncovers something decidedly non-linguistic. Our proper comportment toward language is silence. Mortals genuinely speak only insofar as we respond to language.⁵⁵

Alongside these investigations, we find Heidegger re-imagining fundamental logical concepts—like, negation, differentiation, and categorization—in terms more of their more fundamental phenomenological elements. Nothingness, differentiation, and 'Geschlecht' are decidedly beyond the scope of ordinarily philosophical logic, but for Heidegger, they are the ground from which such conceptual understanding emerges. The ground of logic, therefore, is nothing logical. If the typical empiricist approach is to apply logical concepts to experience in order to clarify and make it intelligible what's given, Heidegger's phenomono-

logical approach deflates this underlying methodological distinction at work. Both experience and logic are grounded phenomenologically. For Kant, concepts without intuitions are empty; for Heidegger, concepts without intuitions are fabricated abstractions grounded in more fundamental elements of experience.

One might follow this line of thought to the experientialist psychology of authors like Goerge Lakoff and Mark Johnson. They seem to echo this Heideggerian attitude toward logic in the Afterword to *Metaphors We Live By* (1980):

We continually find it important to realize that the way we have been brought up to perceive our world is not the only way and that it is possible to see beyond the 'truths' of our culture. But metaphors are not merely things to be seen beyond. In fact, one can see beyond them only by using other metaphors.⁵⁶

As with Heidegger, it seems to follow from such a view that abstract and rarified concepts cannot have the last and final word in assessing other kinds of claims. No matter how abstract they might seem, theoretical concepts are just as much subject to evaluation as the metaphors of everyday discourse. If this sort of view is right, then the being of even the most abstract concepts is historical. The gathering that takes place in language (if you like, metaphor) precedes the formal and technical vocabulary that we would use to analyze it. This raises an important problem: if theoretical concepts are historically and experientially grounded, then they are likely to get things wrong in times of rapid or radical transition. Old concepts lag behind evolving social reality.

4. Decadence and the Dreadful Promise of Esoteric Wisdom

In this section I argue that Heidegger's failure fully omit Trakl's biography stems from something deeply compelling about the archetype of what I will call *the wretched prophet*. I begin by sketching this archetype and distinguishing Heidegger's Trakl from other versions. Then I attempt to articulate the difficult relation between democracy and esotericism by looking at Gorham Munson's critique of T.S. Eliot. Then I attempt to tie this all together by contrasting Trakl with a very different kind of war poet, Wilfred Owen.

4.1 The Wretched Prophet

The hermeneutical circle is much easier to understand than it is to escape.⁵⁷ I like to explain it using the little paradox from Plato's *Meno*.⁵⁸ You can't discover truths that you don't already know because you wouldn't recognize them if you found them. Heidegger's treatment of the problem in "A Dialogue on Language" is illuminating, and he tags it to his use of the word 'discussion' in the 1953 essay on Trakl.⁵⁹ Here he connects the word 'hermeneutics' to the Greek god Hermes, who has the power to bring divine gifts.

In the case of poetry, such gifts come in the form of inspiration. As any reader of the *Apology* has already learned, poets don't really know anything.⁶⁰ They are but vehicles through which inspiration speaks. Heidegger directs readers to the following passage from Plato's *Ion*:

...these lovely poems are not of man or human workmanship, but are divine and from thee gods, and...the poets are nothing but the interpreters of the gods, each one possessed by the divinity to whom he is in bondage.⁶¹

The meaning of the poem, therefore,

54 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 195.

55 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 207.

56 Lakoff and Johnson, 239.

57 A detailed discussion of the relevant parts of *Being and Time*—esp. 31, 32, 33, 41, and 42—would take us beyond the scope of this paper.

58 Plato, *Collected Works*, 80d-e.

59 Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 115.

60 Plato, *Apology*, 22b-c

61 Plato, *Ion*, 534e

is not to be found in something like the mind of the poet, but rather at the site of authentic poetic inspiration. It is with these things in the background that we must understand Heidegger's claim that the artist and the work originate together: "the artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other."⁶²

One might stop here and ask why we should engage in literary criticism at all. If the poem speaks for itself, what but perversion could come from discussing it? Heidegger's answer is that the reading of poetry can occasion an encounter with the being of language. In the "Language" essay, I think we get something quite like this. His commentary is delicate. It leads us along the proverbial country path until we reach the clearing in which the poem can be heard for itself. We saw in the previous section, we get some fascinating insights concerning the nature of language. Critics of Heidegger may question the truth of these insights, but they are certainly worthy of serious consideration. So, we can defend the "Language" essay by saying that it's not really about Trakl or his poetry at all. It's about language. This is confirmed by the title and by the fact that the draft he wrote in October of 1950 doesn't even mention Trakl's name in the main body of the text.⁶³ All this would seem to situate Heidegger alongside those Trakl interpreters that Leiva-Merikakis calls the "arch-formalists," those who deny that there is any meaning or ideology or symbolism beyond the imagery of Trakl's poetry.⁶⁴ The only thing that matters is Trakl's use of language and imagery to evoke certain feelings in the reader. But we know that Heidegger doesn't stop there.

Heidegger's Trakl is the isolated madman who foretells the renewal of the yet to be revealed west. This Trakl is the 20th

century version of what we might call the *wretched prophet*. In Plato's *Ion*, Socrates is having some fun at the expense of the poets and pointing out that they don't really understand what they say. The connection between ignorance and divine inspiration was much more important among theists who believed that revealed religion provided deep insight into the natural (or supernatural) world. Maimonides, for example, followed in the tradition of Muslim philosophers like Alfarabi who seemed to base their understanding of prophecy on Plato's philosopher king—at least as they understood it according to the documents available to them. Maimonides insists on two crucial points. First God makes a prophet of whomever He wants; second, prophecy is only ever attained by those who are fit for it.⁶⁵ These two demands are obviously in tension. It seems intuitive that God could make anyone a prophet, regardless of preparation. Why would the prophet need to have the character of a philosopher king? Indeed, Spinoza cites "rustic fellows" and "insignificant women like Hagar" as proof that "those who look in the books of the prophets for wisdom and knowledge of natural and spiritual things are completely on the wrong track."⁶⁶ If these folks can gain prophecy, it must not be a good source of wisdom.

But this is only half the story. Socrates himself furnishes the other half in the same discussion from the *Ion*:

these lovely poems are not of man or human workmanship, but are divine and from the gods, and...the poets are nothing but interpreters of the gods, each one possessed of the deity to whom he is in bondage. And to prove this, the deity on purpose sang the loveliest of all lyrics through the most miserable poet.⁶⁷

Here we see that the lowliness and ignorance of the individual endowed with divine wisdom can also serve as a kind of *proof* that the message comes not from the poet but from the gods. This view has a legacy as well. Not only do we find it in the Bible, as Spinoza reminds us, but the notion of the wretched prophet is also something of a trope. To cite just one example, there is the letter written by 12th Century German mystic, Hildegard of Bingen. Attempting to prove her prophetic bona fides to the head of the Cistercian order, Bernard of Clairvaux, she writes:

I who am miserable and more than miserable in my womanly existence have seen great wonders since I was a child. And my tongue could not express them, if God's Spirit did not teach me to believe.⁶⁸

Here, again, we see the absence of wisdom being employed as evidence that spiritual insight is coming, not from the prophet herself but from actual divine inspiration. Her lowly social station, lack of education, and presumed—though certainly not actual—lack of intelligence makes her the perfect example of what I'm calling the wretched prophet.

4.2 Heidegger's Trakl as Wretched Prophet

Important qualifications must be made before we can apply the wretched prophet label to Heidegger's Trakl. First, whatever prophecy may be involved, Heidegger does not see it in terms of traditional theism. Heidegger's prophet would be someone who has a kind of special access to the being of beings that is compatible with the reversal of Platonism and the critique of all modes of traditional metaphysics, including theism. Second, Trakl's writing is woefully difficult to interpret. Whatever his 'prophecy' may

⁶² Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, 1.

⁶³ Heidegger, GA 80.2, 987. The paragraph quoted from the version published in *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (1959) above seems to have been first added in February of 1951 and appears in the same location, same wording in GA 80.2, 1011.

⁶⁴ Leiva-Merikakis, 12.

⁶⁵ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 126-29. For a good discussion of the role of Islamic philosophy in influencing his position, see Frank's introduction to this volume, esp. 20-29.

⁶⁶ Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 27.

⁶⁷ Plato, *Ion*, 534e.

⁶⁸ Hildegard of Bingen, *Letter to Bernard of Clairvaux*, 3.

be, it can be no more helpful in revealing divine truths than the poetry itself is susceptible to interpretation. The first of these concerns is answered partly by the second. Heidegger's wretched prophet is not the mouthpiece of the deity. There is no transcendent infinite speaking through him. Rather, his prophecy comes from an intimate nearness to the being of beings. This will involve a deep sensitivity to finitude and what Heidegger calls, being towards death. From *The Autumn of One Alone*:

A pure blue emerges from a rotting
husk;

The birds on the wing resound of
ancient lore.⁶⁹

It is in the intimate mingling of the spiritual and the earthly that Heidegger sees Trakl moving beyond Platonism.⁷⁰ Heidegger notes that Trakl tends to prefer the word 'geistlich' to 'geistig,' and posits that this has to do with a rejection of "the gulf between the super-sensuous no-eton and the sensuous aistheton."⁷¹ For Heidegger's Trakl, the difference between the spiritual and the material is located on the same horizon as the question of the meaning of being, wherein difference originates in the unfolding of time through the nihiliation of the nothing and the painful separation at the heart to the being of language. Readers may or may not find such thoughts about the being of language compelling. What's clear, however, is that any alleged prophet of such a view would appear, to most of us, morbid and esoteric. Heidegger's Trakl is the clear-eyed madman whose hard-won insight is the result of painful lived experience. If we lack the ability to understand Trakl's poetry, this is—from the perspective of the believer—entirely to be expected. Compassion for the wretched prophet served to divide the

true believers from those who think them mad.⁷²

4.3 Democracy, Aristocracy, and Esotericism

Esotericism in poetry is nothing unique to Trakl. Another example might help illustrate what's dreadful in the prospect of esoteric wisdom. T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" has spawned endless commentary, even as the author made it logically impossible for any commentator to make a definitive statement on the poet's meaning. He achieved this by contradicting himself directly in his own commentary. The imagery and references of the poem are difficult enough on their own, and Eliot didn't exactly help readers with his footnotes indicating sources like Jessie Westin's *From Ritual to Romance* and Sir James Frazier's *The Golden Bough*. All this suggested a profound connection between Eliot's poem and Arthurian legend. But in a critical essay from 1956, the author cancels all of this out and expresses regret for even including the notes in the first place:

...my notes stimulated the wrong kind of interest among the seekers of sources. It was just, no doubt, that I should pay tribute to the work of Miss Jessie Weston; but I regret having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail.⁷³

When I read this, I can't help but detect a certain enjoyment on the part of the author. He seems to me to get a certain kick out of breaking the critic's heart. All that work you did, pouring through volumes of Frazier, pondering ancient myth, the legend of King Arthur, 'twas all for naught!

We shouldn't weep for the critics, though, since they are the ones who get

the last laugh. It is only with the author's denial that the game of interpretation becomes truly interesting. By saying both 'yes' and 'no,' Eliot has removed his authority from the language game and opened up genuinely limitless possibilities for interpretation. The poem both is and is not about the Grail. It becomes a kind of non-place that we can approach and move about, approaching and withdrawing according to some rules and suggestions about what it is. It becomes "A Game of Chess" but on an infinite checker board with the opponent's king constantly drawing back pretending to carry the Holy Grail.

It's good to be a little suspicious, and maybe even impatient, with this approach to interpretation. It's a fun game wherein one might learn a lot, but when it extends out beyond the world of literature it poses risks. An early critic of Eliot's *The Waste Land* faults the poet for his esotericism in what I think is an especially insightful way. Gorham Munson argues that Eliot's esotericism "derives neither from the abstruseness of subject nor the abstruseness of technic." And despite certain "formal achievements," he tells us, the poem is guilty of "deliberate mystification."⁷⁴

...it is amazing how simple is the state of mind which these broken forms convey. The poet is hurt, wistful, melancholy, frail: modern civilization is a waste land, a sterile desert in which he wanders forlornly... Mr. Eliot is very fatigued. There can be no question that he suffers, at moments his cry is as sharp as that of a man mangled by the speeding wheels of a subway express... We respect that cry. But about the nature of this state of mind there is nothing occult. It is in fact a very

69 Trakl, *Sebastian Dreaming*, 40.

70 Derrida is especially sensitive to this in his discussion of fire in Chapter nine of *Of Spirit* (1989).

71 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 178-89. Hertz translates 'geistig' as 'of the spirit' and 'geistliche' as 'spiritual.'

72 Interestingly, this accords to some extent with a theory of the origin of language that couldn't be more different from Heidegger's. A strain of research in evolutionary biology suggests that language evolved as a kind of cultural signaling system, marking out those who are good cooperators and committed members of a community from those who are not. Richard Joyce gives a nice summary of this research in attempt to anchor moral realists to the same unholy genealogy and provide support for his version of the error theory (Joyce, 2006, 88-92).

73 Eliot, *The Frontiers of Criticism*, 534.

74 Munson, *The Esotericism of T.S. Eliot*, 207.

familiar mood.⁷⁵

To some, this will sound like a the griping of an aging reader who just doesn't get it, but Munson is a careful reader. His criticism is deeper than simply accusing Eliot of obscurity for obscurity's sake. That would be an easy charge to make against a difficult poem that one doesn't enjoy, but when the mood conveyed by the poem is one of dispossession or dissatisfaction with the state of the world, an alternative explanation presents itself. Why wouldn't Eliot want to be understood? Because all current efforts to understand the poem are anchored in the very same world the poet means to reject.

Munson sees in Eliot a longing for a different kind of aristocracy. He's right to see this. To the extent that "The Waste Land" expresses a longing for the noble monarchical world of Arthurian legend, it is also expressing a deep dissatisfaction with democracy. If Eliot's poem were understood by everyone, then his complaint against the modern world would be self-refuting. By leaving the masses puzzled and speaking exclusively to the elect, Eliot's poem is able to prove itself and justify its complaint that the everyday world is out of joint. In the absence of the ideal of aristocracy—that Munson describes as "the union of the ideas of intelligence and control"—true poetry must speak the secret language of the disempowered few, the few who by rights ought to rule. Sympathetic readers intuitively get this and lash out at those who reject the poem because their own ability is proof of their status among the elect.

This may just be all the better for aesthetics. The rigid recalcitrance of the true believer only makes the chess game of interpretation more exciting. But the same dynamic looms over ideology. Munson's criticism shows that the closer we bring this sort thinking to a discussion of large-scale social organization, the more frightful the implications become.

Lacoue-Labarthe quotes Joseph Goebbels, "politics, too, is perhaps an art, if not the highest and most all-embracing there is."⁷⁶ What makes the madman [*Wahnsinnige*] special is decidedly aesthetic. His senses [*Sinne*] are otherwise. This give his understanding of the world a different sense or meaning [*Sinn*]. As theoretical language inevitably struggles to keep up with our rapidly changing world, we must tread carefully when looking to the poets in hopes that they might herald the dawning of a new world.

4.4 "Grodek"

Trakl was not a wretched prophet. His poems did not herald a new world but lamented the loss of a dying one. His poetry manifests a deeper kind of powerlessness. Here it's helpful to contrast his poetry with the great English war poet, Wilfred Owen. Owen's writing is muscular and, in its own way, ideological:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,

Knock-kneed, coughing like hags,
wee cursed through the sludge

He speaks of the horrors of war with sneering anger. A contempt directed at the shallow patriotism,

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old lie: *Dulce et decorum est*

*Pro patria mori.*⁷⁷

Like Trakl, Owen died in World War I. He didn't know when he wrote this how the war would turn out. But I don't think this should stop us from inferring something from the difference in tone. Trakl's "Grodek" is also brutal, but it lack's Owen's confident defiance:

...the night envelops

Dying warriors, the wild lament

Of their shattered jaws.

There's no anger in the poet's voice, only an "angry God" who dwells in the "red clouds." The poet does not stand up against anyone in defiance because there's no one to stand up against. Neither Owen nor Trakl see meaning in the war, so defiance wouldn't be directed against the enemy. Owen's anger is righteous. It is directed at the proverbial men in suits who send boys off to die for worthless cause. He is standing up against an injustice that he sees a perpetrated, at least in part, by own country. But this opportunity for righteous self-assertion isn't available to Trakl who can only bear witness to the dissolution of the of Austria-Hungarian empire. The signs were already there, and Trakl's only recourse is loving lamentation:

And the black pipes of autumn play softly in the reeds.

O prouder sorrow! You brass altars

Today a colossal pain feeds the hot flame of the spirit,

The unborn descendants.⁷⁸

This is the poetry of despair. There is no powerful authority for Trakl to rebel against, only disorder and decay at the foundations of his lifeworld. He himself is among the impotent and humiliated.

If this desperation and impotence are combined with the elements of the wretched prophet discussed above, an interesting dynamic starts to emerge. The powerless subject is drawn to the prophet as a symbol of an alternate reality. They see the prophet as a leader who promises a world in which those who are fit to rule get to rule. If the prophet horrifies those more content with the current order, this only confirms the follower's suspicion that the current order is corrupt. The more shock and confusion the prophet can elicit, the more the prophet becomes a sign of profound change to come. And for the desperate and powerless, profound change may

⁷⁵ Munson, *The Esotericism of T.S. Eliot*, 205-6.

⁷⁶ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, 61.

⁷⁷ Owen, *Poems*, 15. "The old lie: it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country."

⁷⁸ Trakl, *A Skeleton Plays Violin*, 247.

promise hope. Profound change is better than the certainty of steady decline. The more the prophet is hated by (supposedly) upright professional types, the more the prophet's followers believe that the promise of change is real. Let the consultant class tremble in fear of the vulgar populist. If they laugh at him, even better. The more the comfortable and morally upright show contempt for the wretched prophet, the more they demonstrate the prophet's ability to upend the broken system.

5. Conclusion

As it pertains to Heidegger's location within the broader literature on Trakl, his is a non-formalist view that differs from the Christian interpretation in the same way that Heidegger's philosophy differs from the traditional metaphysics. As it pertains to his thoughtful inquiry into the meaning of language, however, his omission of biography is justified by deeper, longstanding, commitments. Viewed this way, the decision to ignore the rumors and controversy over Trakl's biography makes perfect sense. This may explain why he chose to rename the 1953 essay "Language in the Poem" and situate it next to the "Language" essay when he published *On the Way to Language* (1959). Concerning his construal of Trakl in terms of the archetype of the madman, I defended a connection to what I call the wretched prophet. The wretched prophet only seems unattractive to those who have not traced the path of the prophet's madness. To those who have, their ugliness is proof of their righteousness. That "everyone else" is repulsed by the wretched prophet only confirms that this prophet is *ours*. While a bit beyond the

scope of this paper, it's worth noting that the empirical literature on belief in conspiracy theories seems to confirm some of the points made above about recalcitrance and powerlessness.⁷⁹ And if theoretical concepts are struggling to keep up with an ever changing reality, this would help explain the much-lamented futility of appeals to logic, facts, and data in persuading those committed to such modes of deep-questioning. After all, it must be admitted that the conspiracist is getting some things right.⁸⁰ The everyday view of the world is inadequate. One rejects this on pain of committing oneself to the untenable thesis that everything is just fine. Things are not just fine. But, as always, we must tread carefully in looking to those who promise to herald the dawning of a new world.

79 Van Prooijen (2019) surveys the literature on this, suggesting that those who feel empowered are less likely to believe in conspiracy theories, and he suggests that opportunities for empowerment may reduce their appeal. This also accords with an interesting case study, investigated by Kevin Roose of the New York Times. In a long-form podcast series called *Rabbit Hole*, he traces the YouTube history of a young man named, Caleb Cain who claims to have been radicalized by videos on the platform. Especially interesting is the seventh episode of the podcast, featuring audio from conversations among conspiracists that suggest that a big part of the appeal is the camaraderie they feel with other believers who seem to get them better than their friends and family. To be drawn to a worldview seems connected to belonging to a *Geschlecht* with whom you can laugh about the outsiders who see you as mad.

80 Stanley (2015, 2018) maintains that the subjects of propaganda in liberal democracies are susceptible thereto because they are in grip of false ideology. What this account seems to miss is that—as frightening as it may sound—the aestheticization of politics actually finds its footing at an epistemically respectable level. When the old theoretical concepts have broken down, the ideology they supported begs to be replaced. It can only be replaced by a new theoretical ideology if that new ideology can be theoretically justified. But this is ruled out by the same changes that discredited the old one. In times of rapid and radical transformation theoretical concepts are still struggling to catch up to the new reality. Under such conditions it becomes reasonable to steer clear of theory altogether. Thus theoretical concepts give way to poetical ones. Poetical concepts can't be theoretically justified either, but this is no defect, since poetical concepts simply don't admit of theoretical justification. Such concepts may be good (by their own lights) so long as they ring true. This opens the way for all kinds of frightful consequences, but from a strictly epistemic perspective, it seems at least as legitimate as a new theoretical ideology that fails on its own terms. This is why the best modern propaganda campaigns devote most of their energy to discrediting mainstream viewpoints, rather than bolstering the case for their own side. For examples of this, see Pomerantsev (2014, 2019).

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