

Week 9: 'Language in the Poem' (1953)

Georg Trakl

- Trakl described his poetic style as 'my pictorial manner which forges together four separate image-parts in four lines of a stanza into a single impression' (letter, July 1910)
- 'I felt, smelt, touched the most terrible possibilities within me, and heard the demons howl in my blood, the thousand devils with their spikes which madden the flesh. What a fearful nightmare! Gone! Today this vision of reality has dissolved into nothing again, these things are far away from me, their voices farther still, and I listen enraptured once more to the melodies that live in me, and my elated eye again dreams up its images which are lovelier than all reality! My entire, beautiful world filled with infinite harmony' (letter, 1908)
- 'Too little love, too little mercy and justice, and always too little love; all too much hardness, arrogance, and all manner of criminality – that's me. I'm certain I only avoid evil out of weakness and cowardice and so further shame my wickedness. I long for the day when the soul shall cease to wish or be able to live in this wretched body polluted with melancholy, when it shall quit this laughable form made of muck and rotteness, which is all too faithful a reflection of a godless, cursed century' (letter, 1913)
- Michael Hamburger (one of Trakl's translators): 'what Trakl lamented was not the fact or the condition of death, but the difficulty of living in an age of cultural decline and spiritual corruption'.

Rhythm

- Heidegger reads Trakl's rhythm as one wave (die Woge, la vague) flowing towards its source
- Rhythm is an intrinsic motion and animation of language – like the ripple of a wave that swells and sinks (it moves and also stays in place)
- In his commentary on Stefan George's poem 'The Word', Heidegger says rhythm bestows a kind of calm, repose and tranquillity: 'Rhythm is what enjoins the getting under way of dance and song, thus letting these rest in themselves. Rhythm lends repose'
- David Nowell Smith argues that Heidegger's account of rhythm does have something to do with versification as literary critics understand it (it's not just a metaphor); for Smith, we experience the animation guiding language through theories of metre, but rather than treating this as mere form (as literary critics tend to do), we should 'hear the versification free these contours and shapes to render manifest their constitutive role in a poem's alethic movement. This is a rebuttal of a particularly rigid approach to metre, and the mode of reading that sustains it, but not of the prosodic rhythms of poetry' (Nowell Smith, *Sounding / Silence: Martin Heidegger at the Limits of Poetics*, 2013)

- In other words, the aletheic capacity of poetry is a function of the materiality of poetic form: the prosody of poetic verse makes possible a disclosure of beings that remains closed off to prosaic thinking
- This has profound implications for reading Heidegger – critics (following Adorno) have assumed that Heidegger rejects poesis (poetics) for *Dichtung* (poetry as invention and a way of revealing the conditions on which all artworks and all forms of communication are possible) – Nowell Smith says Heidegger does not reject poetics or form and that what poetry brings into the open of unconcealedness is inseparable from how it shapes the limits of that open region

Derrida on Trakl

- Derrida wrote four pieces on Heidegger called 'Geschlecht', a word that translates as race, lineage, stock, generation, sex and so allows for an exploration of ontological difference
- Geschlecht I, II and IV have been published; Geschlecht III (which has not been published) is a close reading of Heidegger's 'Language in the Poem' (David Krell has written several essays on the essay as he corresponded with Derrida about Geschlecht III and owns the typescript)
- Derrida also devotes a chapter to Heidegger's reading of Trakl in *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* (1989)