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“The Peeling of Stillness”: Gadamer on Georg Trakl¹

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In a 1993 letter to Hans-Georg Gadamer, the professor of practical theology Richard Riess asked the nonagenarian philosopher whether he would be willing to contribute to a volume that Riess was planning. Riess’s idea was to collect short essays from a variety of authors on a text that had been especially meaningful to them, a text that, as Riess later put it in his introduction to the volume, had “accompanied and—at least for a time—sustained their lives,” even if “in a rather quiet [*stille*] way.”² Riess took as his motto a few lines from Ingeborg Bachmann, hoping that his own collection might help readers find words of truth on which they, like the contributors to the volume, could draw for support. Bachmann’s lines stress the life-and-death stakes of language:

Karl Kraus once said that the merits of every language are rooted in its morality [...]. I

would therefore also like to put words to the test, to demand that they arrive at their truth.

¹ Abbreviations: Hans-Georg Gadamer, “‘Golden blooms the tree of grace’: On Georg Trakl’s *Ein Winterabend*,” ed. and trans. Ian Alexander Moore, *Journal of Continental Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2022): *** (= GBT); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, 10 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1985–1995) (= GW); Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, 102 vols. (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1975–) (= GA). All translations are my own. My thanks to Carlo DaVia, Tobias Keiling, David Krell, David Liakos, and the members of the Pacific Association for the Continental Tradition, at whose 2022 conference I presented an earlier draft of this commentary.

² The first quotation comes from the introduction to the 2004 edition of the volume, *In einem Wort: Bekannte Autoren über Texte, die ihr Leben begleiten*, ed. Richard Riess (Munich: Claudius, 2004), 11–12, the second from that of the 1995 edition, *Drei Zeilen trage ich mit mir: Worte, die ein Leben begleiten*, ed. Richard Riess (Freiburg: Herder, 1995), 9. Riess’s letter to Gadamer can be found in the latter’s papers in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, Mediennummer HS004995155.

One must not think that puzzling over the morality of language is a very esoteric matter; words are what they are, they are fine, but how we position and use them is seldom fine. If this is done poorly, it will kill us.³

It may come as little surprise that Gadamer jumped at the opportunity to write for Riess's earnestly intended volume. It was, after all, an occasion for Gadamer to share his love of poetry with a wide audience. But his choice of poet and text was hardly predictable. Not Goethe, not Hölderlin, not Stefan George, Rilke, or Celan, but the drug-addled, incestuous, guilt-ridden Austrian poet Georg Trakl was the author of the verses that Gadamer always "carried with him" before all else.⁴ And, of the plethora of poems that Gadamer had read and memorized throughout his long life (for a time, he strove to learn one each day by heart), he did not hesitate to select Trakl's "Ein Winterabend" ("A Winter Evening") as the subject of his essay.⁵ What lay behind this decision? What might it reveal about Gadamer's life and philosophy? And what role does Trakl play in Gadamer's poetics?

§1. Trakl—"who still speaks to everyone"

Gadamer does, to be sure, refer occasionally (albeit in passing) to Trakl throughout his later writings. In an essay from 1982, he relates that, "around 1930, all of us were immersed [*lebten*]

³ Ingeborg Bachmann, *Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden: Gespräche und Interviews*, ed. Christine Koschel and Inge von Weidenbaum (Munich: Piper, 1983), 25–26.

⁴ See the title of the first edition of Riess's volume: *Drei Zeilen trage ich mit mir*. See also GW 9: 335 ("Gedicht und Gespräch," 1985/1988), where Gadamer speaks of Trakl as among those "contemporary poets who really accompanied [*begleiteten*] me in my own lifetime."

⁵ On February 9, 2022, Riess wrote to me via email: "Gadamer hat auf Anhieb Trakl angegeben und von sich aus seinen Essay dazu geschrieben" ("Gadamer indicated Trakl straight away and wrote his essay on him of his own accord"). For Gadamer's memorization efforts, see John Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 185.

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in Hölderlin, George, and Trakl” (GW 9: 122, “Das Türmerlied in Goethes ‘Faust’”). Gadamer, who was born just thirteen years after Trakl, even saw the expressionist as a contemporary with respect to the heritage of Hölderlin. It was, Gadamer writes in a text from 1982/1983, “self-evident” that he and Trakl, along with the likes of Rilke and Benn, would “listen to [Hölderlin’s] condensed poetic mode [*Dichtweise*], [...] which does not sing a familiar tune [*Weise*] [...] but attempts—and was able—to put into words its own constrained incapacity [of expression] in ever new visions” (GW 9: 40, “Die Gegenwärtigkeit Hölderlins”).⁶ In 1988, Gadamer saw Trakl “as almost the only one from the generation of expressionist poets who still speaks to everyone”; indeed, Trakl should be reckoned among the “few very great” poets of that era (GW 9: 335, “Gedicht und Gespräch”). For, as Gadamer put it back in 1981, Trakl’s poetry counts as genuine *Dichtung*, that is to say, as “the emergence of the phenomenon of language itself [*das Herauskommen der Spracherscheinung selber*],” which can be heard “only with the inner ear,” rather than being “a mere passageway to meaning” (GW 8: 267, “Stimme und Sprache”). Despite hailing from Austria, it is a poetry that, according to a 1990 text chiefly on Benn and Celan, constitutes “an adequate expression of the German spirit” (GW 9: 367, “Im Schatten des Nihilismus”).

And yet, until 1993, Gadamer does not appear to have taken Trakl’s poetry up in any serious way in his writings. Only once in the *Gesammelte Werke* does Gadamer even name a poem by Trakl, and that is in the context of a description of one of the chapters of a volume that Gadamer was reviewing. Gadamer adds that Trakl’s sonnet “Verfall” (“Collapse”), which the

⁶ Trakl, who died in 1914, could not, however, have benefited greatly (if he did at all) from Norbert von Hellingrath’s famous edition of Hölderlin’s late hymns, which, although circulated in draft form in 1914, did not become widely available until its publication in 1916. Contrast GW 9: 39, as well as GW 9: 459 (“Sinn und Sinnverhüllung bei Paul Celan,” 1975). On Trakl’s edition, see Uta Degner, “‘Infirmes’ Autorschaft: Trakls *Helian* als poetologischer Selbstentwurf,” in *Autorschaft und Poetik in Texten und Kontexten Georg Trakls*, ed. Uta Degner, Hans Weichselbaum, and Norbert Christian Wolf (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 2016), 100, as well as “Georg Trakl’s Poem ‘Hölderlin,’” trans. Ian Alexander Moore with commentaries by I. A. Moore and Hans Weichselbaum, *Journal of Continental Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (2020): 304–317.

author of the chapter cites in full, is indebted not only to Heine, as the author suggests, but also to George (GW 8: 59–61, “Zu Poetik und Hermeneutik,” 1968/1971). Gadamer no doubt had great respect for Trakl, as the quotations I have cited attest. But, if “A Winter Evening” was so important to him, it is curious that he never mentioned it previously. Perhaps the reason for his decision to write about Trakl so late in life lies less in his relation to the poet than in the influence of a different philosopher’s controversial interpretation of the poem.

§2. The Philosopher from Meßkirch—and an “all too elegant spa”

I am referring, of course, to Martin Heidegger, whose 1950 reading of “A Winter Evening” in the lecture “Die Sprache” (“Language”) marked a turning point not only in Heidegger’s understanding of language and appreciation of Trakl as the true heir of Hölderlin,⁷ but also in the general reception of—and receptiveness to—Heidegger’s thought. Although critics such as George Steiner viewed Heidegger’s reading as “a marvel of sympathy,” others, such as Gadamer’s student Otto Pöggeler, could “hardly see that what Heidegger is working for has anything at all to do with Trakl’s poem”; in any event, it was, in Pöggeler’s estimation, the moment when “the thread connecting contemporary philosophical endeavors with Heidegger was torn.”⁸ As Gadamer explains in a 1996 interview with Jean Grondin:

Heidegger says at one point [in his lecture on “A Winter Evening”], “language speaks” [“*die Sprache spricht*”]. I must admit that, for a long time, I opposed the forced paradox of Heidegger’s formulation. I didn’t like it very much, and I experienced how some of the

⁷ This becomes more evident in Heidegger’s second lecture on Trakl, “Die Sprache im Gedicht” (in GA 12: 31–78).

⁸ George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 143–44. Otto Pöggeler, “Neue Wege mit Heidegger?,” *Philosophische Rundschau* 29, nos. 1–2 (1982): 45, 55.

most loyal of Heidegger’s disciples were furious about his having said that.⁹

Gadamer provides further insight in his own commentary on “A Winter Evening,” this time relating that he was present when Heidegger first uttered his notorious tautology in public:

This beautiful poem by Georg Trakl has become famous, particularly as a result of a lecture that Heidegger gave on it decades ago at Bühler Höhe. [...] If a thinker of Heidegger’s stature adduces poems in order to make his thoughts communicable through them, he is concerned, in the first instance, certainly not with the voice of the poet, but with what accords with the visions of his own thought. This leads to the so-called acts of violence that often stand in the way of the individual explanation. Here I still remember Heidegger’s lecture very clearly decades later. (GBT: ***)

Before drawing some comparisons between Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s respective interpretations of “A Winter Evening,” I would like to reconstruct the setting for Heidegger’s lecture. Since Gadamer recalls it at least twice elsewhere (see below), we might reasonably suspect it played a larger role for him than the typical venues for philosophy papers.

The occasion for Heidegger’s lecture was a memorial celebration in honor of Gadamer’s close friend Max Kommerell—a literary scholar and former member of the George Circle who

⁹ “Dialogischer Rückblick auf das Gesammelte Werk und dessen Wirkungsgeschichte,” in *Gadamer Lesebuch*, ed. Jean Grondin (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 286. Gadamer goes on to interpret the phrase as indicative of the impossibility of having final say. He also comments positively on it in GW 2: 298 (“Logik oder Rhetorik,” 1976), where it is a matter of the existence of language prior to individual speakers, as well as in GW 3: 374 (“Ethos und Ethik,” 1985), where it is a matter of heeding, not any and all linguistic associations, but that which language itself speaks together with (*mitspricht*) the speaking of an individual. For an example of an attack on the phrase (although not by one of Heidegger’s loyal disciples), see Hermann Schweppenhäuser, “Studien zur Heidegger’schen Sprachtheorie” (1957–1958), in *Sprache, Literatur und Kunst: Gesammelte Schriften I*, ed. Thomas Friedrich, Sven Kramer, and Gerhard Schweppenhäuser (Berlin: Metzler, 2019), 122, who calls it an “idolization of language” (“Vergötzung [...] der Sprache”); see also Heidegger’s reaction thereto in GA 102: 70.

had died of cancer six years prior and who had once visited Heidegger at his cabin with Gadamer.¹⁰ Gadamer, too, spoke at the event, which took place at the luxurious Black Forest health resort Bühlerhöhe (or Bühler Höhe, as it is sometimes written). The health resort was a fashionable place for the intellectual, political, and economic elite not only to relax, but also to give and hear lectures on a wide range of topics in the aftermath of the Second World War. As Georg Britting, who gave a reading of Trakl's poems after Heidegger delivered his second lecture on the poet there in 1952, recalls: "It was *very* highbrow, tempered by Black Forest trout and fried chicken. [... I]t was swarming with counts and princesses, a bit snobbish."¹¹ Despite the crowd (with whom the provincial philosopher was, however flattered, also uncomfortable¹²), the intensity of Heidegger's philosophy was on full display. In Gadamer's words,

Heidegger needed all his strength to endure the plight of language [*Sprachnot*] and not to let himself be distracted from his question about being by any of the offerings of traditional ontotheological metaphysics and its conceptuality. The dogged energy of his thinking broke through whenever he gave a lecture: [... for example in] the interpretation of a poem by Trakl and again that of a late Hölderlin text—often in the all too elegant spa [*allzu vornehmen Kurhaus*] Bühlerhöhe, where even Ortega y Gasset once followed him, attracted by this gold prospector of language and thought [*Goldsucher der Sprache und*

¹⁰ See Kommerell's beautiful description of his 1941 visit in Max Kommerell, *Briefe und Aufzeichnungen 1919–1944*, ed. Inge Jens (Olten: Walter, 1967), 377–83. For Heidegger's relation to Kommerell, who famously declared in a letter to Gadamer that Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin was a "productive train wreck" (ibid., 403), see GA 80.2: 1147–72, as well as Joachim W. Storck, "Zwiesprache von Dichten und Denken"—Hölderlin bei Martin Heidegger und Max Kommerell," in *Klassiker in finsternen Zeiten—1933–1945*, vol. 1 (Marbach: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 1983), 345–64.

¹¹ Georg Britting, *Briefe an Georg Jung 1943 bis 1963*, Georg-Britting-Stiftung, http://www.britting.de/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Band20_d.pdf (page 211).

¹² Martin Heidegger and Kurt Bauch, *Briefwechsel 1932–1975*, ed. Almuth Heidegger (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 2010), 145.

des Gedankens]. (GW 3: 286, “Martin Heidegger—85 Jahre,” 1974)¹³

Or, as one reporter for the *Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung* put it in an article on the Kommerell celebration at Bühlerhöhe:

Martin Heidegger’s lecture presented a sort of metaphysics of language—in Heidegger’s language. He does not want to talk about language: it is a matter of “thoughtfully seizing hold of the speaking of language” [“*das Sprechen der Sprache denkend zu erfassen*”]. It was a masterful way of thinking through [this issue] with many abysses and backgrounds, but again and again it was effectively and vividly taken out of the realm of thought and redeemed by exemplary recourse to a poem given to every audience member as a handout. Thus, in the midst of the dialectic of Heideggerian formulas, a philosophy came to [. . .] life.¹⁴

Nevertheless, there was, as noted above, resistance to Heidegger’s lecture, as well as to the elitist, esoteric atmosphere at Bühlerhöhe, which can be seen as an extension of the earlier conservative revolutionary atmosphere of the George Circle. Only, Trakl now takes on the role, formerly played by Hölderlin, of “poet as leader” (*Dichter als Führer*, to recall the title of Kommerell’s notorious masterpiece of 1928).¹⁵ In an article for the *Deutsche Zeitung und*

¹³ The interpretation of Hölderlin to which Gadamer is referring can be found under the title “... dichterisch wohnt der Mensch ...” in GA 7: 189–208. For Ortega y Gasset’s debate with Heidegger at the latter event, see Egon Vietta, “Die Vorträge Martin Heideggers 1949–1951,” *Universitas: Zeitschrift für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Literatur* 6 (1951): 1360.

¹⁴ R. G. Haebler, “Metaphysik der Sprache: Max-Kommerell-Tagung auf Bühlerhöhe,” *Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung* 235 (October 10, 1950): 2.

¹⁵ Max Kommerell, *Der Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1928). See Walter Benjamin’s critique: “Wider ein Meisterwerk,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Hella Tiedemann-Bartels, vol. 3

Wirtschaftszeitung published a few days after the event, the literary scholar Adolf Frisé recognizes Gadamer’s contribution but then writes of Heidegger’s:

Heidegger, who had also been close to Kommerell, held a *privatissimum* [i.e., a course offered for a select audience, used ironically by Frisé] on “Language,” with reference to Kommerell’s treatise “Die Sprache und das Unausprechliche” [“Language and the Inexpressible”] (1937). [. . .] [O]ne instinctively thought of esotericism, of the airtight encapsulation of the circle [around Stefan George] from which Kommerell emerged. The shielding against the disquiet of everyday life, against contradiction from the “other side,” mostly weakened his arguments rather than strengthening them. The aseptic and poison-free air up there, along with the deceptive security in social conventions that have become problematic, are now more than ever a questionable stimulus. Heidegger’s diction underlined this danger: the danger of monologuing, of a thinking which spins about in its own head and seems, in its search for new ciphers, to lead to a frightening encryption of thoughts. Like hardly any other people [*Volk*], we [Germans] tend to absolutize an intellectual/spiritual [*geistige*] figure without criticism and restraint; Stefan George was an example of this. Today, it looks like Heidegger is the next in line.¹⁶

(Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 252–59. For Trakl as the successor to Hölderlin in Heidegger’s work and for more on Bühlerhöhe as an important setting for Heidegger in the early Federal Republic of Germany, see Ian Alexander Moore, *Dialogue on the Threshold: Heidegger and Trakl* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2022), especially chapter 1; and Tobias Keiling and Ian Alexander Moore, *Heidegger (und Trakl) auf der Bühlerhöhe* (Marbach: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, forthcoming).

¹⁶ A. F., “Bühler Höhen-Luft,” *Deutsche Zeitung und Wirtschaftszeitung* 5, no. 82 (October 14, 1950): 15; also in

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Whereas Gadamer’s lecture at the 1950 Bühlerhöhe event examined Kommerell’s then-unpublished study on the novelist Karl Immermann (whom Gadamer can be said to have presented as “a sort of ‘counter-poet’ to the world of the George Circle”),¹⁷ Heidegger made only one remark about Kommerell in his lecture, a remark that Heidegger left out when he delivered the lecture again the following year (1951). Since the latter served as the basis for its publication in *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (1959), the only connection to Kommerell that one could glean from the volume was in the acknowledgments section, where Heidegger mentions that the chapter was first written for the memorial celebration (GA 12: 259). Fortunately, the Bühlerhöhe version of Heidegger’s lecture was recently published, enabling us to discern Kommerell’s importance for the development of Heidegger’s (and, as we will see, Gadamer’s) position on language. This importance lies in the connection between what Heidegger calls *das Geläut der Stille*, “the peal” or, more literally, “gathered sounding of stillness,” and what Kommerell calls *das Unaussprechliche*, “the inexpressible.”

§3. Kommerell’s “Inexpressible” and Heidegger’s “Peal of Stillness”

Adolf Frisé, *Spiegelungen: Berichte, Kommentare, Texte 1933–1998* (Bern: P. Lang, 2000), 126–27.

¹⁷ Quotation by Rüdiger Görner, “... die ganze Verhäßlichung des Lebens durch den ‘Zeitgeist’: Zu Gadamer’s Immermann-Interpretationen,” in *Gadamer’s philosophische Hermeneutik und die Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. Carsten Dutt (Heidelberg: Winter, 2012), 209–221. Kommerell’s study would later appear as “Immermann und das neunzehnte Jahrhundert,” in Max Kommerell, *Essays, Notizen, poetische Fragmente*, ed. Inge Jens, 187–222 (Olten: Walter, 1969). Based on Haebler, “Metaphysik der Sprache,” 2, as well as Gadamer’s notes for his lecture (written on the back page of the invitation from Gerhard Stroomann to Gadamer dated September 12, 1950 in Gadamer’s papers in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, Mediennummer HS005541999), some of Gadamer’s presentation overlaps with his “Zu Immermanns Epigonen-Roman” (1947/1964) (GW 9: 193–206). See also Gadamer’s “Gedenkrede auf Max Kommerell,” delivered shortly after Kommerell’s death and published as an appendix to Gadamer’s edition of posthumous writings by Kommerell, titled *Dichterische Welterfahrung: Essays* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1952), 205–229, as well as Gadamer’s 1949 text “Karl Immermanns ‘Chiliasische Sonette’” (GW 9: 180–92).

Gadamer recalls this connection in a 1991 lecture (published in 1993, the same year he composed his commentary on “A Winter Evening”):

It was at Bühler Höhe when Heidegger, in memory of my deceased friend Max Kommerell, used a beautiful and gripping metaphor for language as the pealing of stillness [*das Läuten der Stille*]. Then a clever audience member said: “That was a new theory of reason.” Indeed, reason is already being thought of as the secret pre-structuring of thoughts from the perspective of verbalization in language [*Verwortung in Sprache*]. (GW 10: 273, “Europa und die Oikoumene”)

Gadamer does not, however, recall that Heidegger introduced the metaphor to distinguish his position on language from the concept of the inexpressible in Kommerell. The inexpressible refers to a gestural core of language that cannot be articulated in the spoken or written word, although it is tacitly present in the spaces between words, especially those of poetry. Kommerell writes in “Language and the Inexpressible” (1937):

Just as, among animals, the human is the one who speaks [*der Sprechende*], so, among humans, is the poet the one who speaks. The measure of expression [*Das Maß des Aussprechens*] seems to be limited for humans, infinite for poets. And yet the unsayable [*das Unsagbare*] grows with the ability to say things; the most beautiful poets win us over through what wants to remain mute in them and yet is there between the words.¹⁸

¹⁸ Max Kommerell, “Die Sprache und das Unaussprechliche: Eine Betrachtung über Heinrich von Kleist,” in *Geist und Buchstabe der Dichtung* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2009), 243.

In the first, Bühlerhöhe version of the lecture “Language,” Heidegger offers a subtle critique of Kommerell (and of the longstanding tradition of the ineffable, *to arrheton*, more broadly), a critique that, upon first hearing, one might be forgiven for taking for praise:

so long as we represent language solely in view of the expressed, we always find language’s limit only at the unexpressed. Those who think more deeply next recognize the enigma of language in the inexpressible [*im Unaussprechlichen*]. But language speaks as the speaking of the unspoken. The latter is the abyss on which all that is inexpressible already rests, on which everything unspeakable [*jedes Unsägliche*] sustains itself.

Nevertheless, Max Kommerell said his most beautiful thing where he thought on his path into the farthest [*auf seinem Wege in das Weitesten dachte*]. This is, in my judgement, the treatise whose title reads: “Language and the Inexpressible: A Consideration of Heinrich von Kleist.” May what has been said in his memory remain the echo of the last conversation that moved us on a common path over a Black Forest summit. (GA 80: 999–1000)

Heidegger implies here that, for all his advances, Kommerell failed to reach the essence of language. It is true that there is a dimension of inexpressibility in language, particularly in poetic language. But there is an even deeper, more paradoxical dimension that, according to Heidegger, Kommerell missed. Language, for Heidegger, does not simply shelter the unspoken. It *speaks* the unspoken. “Language speaks as the peal of stillness,” which is fundamentally not a human activity even if it may well need humans in order to be heard (GA 12: 27–28; cf. GA 80.2: 1002,

1023). In a different lecture on Trakl, delivered at Bühlerhöhe two years after “Language” under the title “Die Sprache im Gedicht” (“Language in the Poem”), Heidegger elucidates these ideas of the speaking of the unspoken and of the peeling of stillness by likening the relationship between the poet’s particular poems (*Dichtungen*) and the unspoken poem (*Gedicht*) that unifies them to the waves of a body of water. The body of water is not the same as the waves but is nevertheless present in them. Likewise, the unspoken poem differs from any of Trakl’s individual poems even as it is spoken and speaks itself in each and all of them (GA 12: 33–34).

Poetry, as we learn in the earlier lecture “Language,” is an exemplary site in which to hear the tolling of stillness, which might also be understood as a death knell. For it is what facilitates recognition of our mortality and of our finite status as but one ply in the fourfold of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals. But in this recognition lies the possibility of dwelling. Poetry, in the deepest and most proper sense, enables us “to arrive at the speaking of language in such a way that this speaking properly comes to pass [*sich ... ereignet*] as what grants sojourn to the essence of mortals” (GA 12: 11; cf. GA 80.2: 983, 1007). In the lecture “Language,” Heidegger chooses the poem “A Winter Evening” as the best way to demonstrate this (GA 12: 14; cf. 17 and GA 80.2: 1009–1010). Even if, as he stresses elsewhere, other poems may have worked for his purposes,¹⁹ it is noteworthy that “A Winter Evening” contains the basic components of the phrase *Geläut der Stille* (verse 2: *läutet*; verse 9: *still*), whether or not Heidegger took the phrase from Trakl.²⁰ Here, at any rate, is the final version of the poem, whose trochaic tetrameter I have carried over into the English translation, without, however, retaining Trakl’s enclosed rhyme

¹⁹ In a protocol of a discussion held after the delivery of the second version of the lecture in Stuttgart, Heidegger asserts freedom of choice and claims that the poem served only to shed light on prior knowledge. “Bericht von der Diskussion mit Prof. Martin Heidegger zu seinem Vortrag ‘Die Sprache’ in Stuttgart am 15.2.1951,” page 6, in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, Mediennummer HS00670171X. In the first version of the lecture delivered at Bühlerhöhe (GA 80.2: 986), Heidegger admits that his “choice of the poem” is a “leap.”

²⁰ For an earlier use of the phrase, see Heidegger’s 1939 seminar on Herder and language (GA 85: 90).

scheme:

Wenn der Schnee ans Fenster fällt,
Lang die Abendglocke läutet,
Vielen ist der Tisch bereitet
Und das Haus ist wohlbestellt.

Mancher auf der Wanderschaft
Kommt ans Tor auf dunklen Pfaden.
Golden blüht der Baum der Gnaden
Aus der Erde kühlem Saft.

Wanderer tritt still herein;
Schmerz versteinerte die Schwelle.
Da erglänzt in reiner Helle
Auf dem Tische Brot und Wein.

*

When the snow falls on the window,
And the evening bell tolls long,
There's a table prepped for many
And the house arranged just so.

Several in their pilgrimage
Come on dark paths to the gate.
Golden blooms the tree of grace
Rising from the earth's cool sap.

Wanderer steps in, so still;²¹
Pain has petrified the threshold.
There in purest brightness gleam
On the table bread and wine.

Heidegger, like Gadamer, also cites the final six lines of an earlier version of the poem dedicated to Karl Kraus and titled “Im Winter” (“In Winter”); unlike Gadamer, however, Heidegger does not offer an interpretation of the variants:

Seine Wunde voller Gnaden
Pflegt der Liebe sanfte Kraft.

O! des Menschen bloße Pein.
Der mit Engeln stumm gerungen,
Langt von heiligem Schmerz gezwungen
Still nach Gottes Brot und Wein.

²¹ Note that *tritt* can also be heard as an imperative (although there is neither comma after *Wanderer* nor exclamation point at the end of the line), hence: “Wanderer[,] step in, so still.”

*

His wound so full of grace is
Tended by love's gentle might.

Oh! sheer agony of man.
He who strove with angels mutely,
Reaches, vanquished by holy pain,
So still, for God's bread and wine.

In lieu of a close reading of Heidegger's interpretation of Trakl in his lecture on language, which I have recently undertaken elsewhere,²² here I will highlight only four aspects of his interpretation and connect them with Gadamer's commentary.

§4. Gadamer in Dialogue with Heidegger

(1) *The role of the poet Georg Trakl*. I already quoted a passage from Gadamer's commentary about Heidegger's primary interest, when reading poetry, in "what accords with the visions of his own thought" (GBT: ***), not in the poets themselves or in getting them right. In Heidegger's Bühlerhöhe lecture on Trakl, it is chiefly a matter of communicating his own ideas on language by way of Trakl's "A Winter Evening." Indeed, Heidegger himself asserts early on in his

²² Moore, *Dialogue on the Threshold*, chapter 2. In this chapter I also develop, against Heidegger (and thus against Gadamer; see below), a Christological reading of "A Winter Evening" that nevertheless resists subsumption under "ontotheology."

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interpretation that authorship is “unimportant” when one is dealing with “greatly successful poems.” “The great success,” Heidegger continues, “even consists partly in its being able to disown the person and name of the poet” (GA 12: 15; cf. GA 80.2: 986, 1011). Little wonder, then, that Heidegger never mentions Trakl’s name again in his lecture.

Gadamer, for his part, follows suit: after declaring his “modest wish to open up one of Trakl’s most beautiful poems even more precisely to a first understanding” (GBT: ***), Gadamer no longer speaks Trakl’s name (although, given the brevity of his commentary, this omission is, admittedly, less suspect). As we will see, Gadamer also follows Heidegger in mentioning, but then promptly abstracting from, the specifically Christian associations of Trakl’s poetry, finding in it rather a universalist claim to consolation.

(2) *The status of literary criticism* (Literaturwissenschaft). Heidegger is well known for his disdain for “scientific” approaches to language and to the poetic word in particular. In his lecture on “A Winter Evening,” he dismisses grammatical-logical, linguistic, and language-philosophical conceptions of language as naively based on longstanding presuppositions of language as representationalist, expressivist, or human-specific. Other disciplines such as biology, philosophical anthropology, sociology, psychopathology, and theology fail to escape from these presuppositions. In his second lecture on the poet, Heidegger does not deign to argue with the historiographers, biographers, and psychoanalysts interested in Trakl’s poetry; he simply notes, without being concerned by it, that they would find his thoughtful attempt to situate Trakl’s poetry to be on the wrong track. From their perspective, his reading, which locates the entirety of Trakl’s work in a movement of departure from the corrupt Occident (*Abendland*) toward a Land of Evening (*Abend-Land*) long held in store for the elect, is an act of violence perpetrated by nothing short of a “language criminal”—*ein Sprachverbrecher*—as Walter

Muschg, perhaps Heidegger’s fiercest literary critic, once wrote.²³

In Gadamer’s view, there are, to be sure, moments when Heidegger clutters up Trakl’s “A Winter Evening” with his own preoccupations. They are, for all that, and despite Heidegger’s own affirmations of hermeneutic violence earlier in his corpus, only *sogeanante*—only “putative or so-called”—“acts of violence,” in Gadamer’s words (GBT: ***). Or rather, if they are “acts of violence” or “inaccuracies,” as Gadamer later writes without qualification, it does not behoove critics to point this out unless they, like Heidegger, are “in a position to enrich, for their part, the enactment of poetic reading [...] instead of inhibiting or even stifling it” (GBT: ***). Whereas the later Heidegger often draws a distinction between the disclosive, mystery-sheltering truth he aims at (*a-lētheia*, *Wahr-heit*) and the neglect of truth (*Verwahrlosung*) on the part of mere scientific or factual correctness (*Richtigkeit*),²⁴ Gadamer warns such critics that their pedantic quibbles may not even be “able to gain something more correct [*Richtigeres*] from the matter” (GBT: ***).²⁵ Gadamer is not only defending his philosophical master here (who, recall, made it possible in 1950 for Trakl’s poem to “accompany and sustain” Gadamer for the remainder of his life²⁶); Gadamer is also preparing to identify and exposit a poetic instance of language that does not admit of translation into apophantic discourse and hence resists *literaturwissenschaftliche* analysis. Further, and even more remarkably, Gadamer is attempting to understand what makes this poetic instance possible. He finds this condition in Heidegger’s syntagm “peeling of

²³ Walter Muschg, *Pamphlet und Bekenntnis: Aufsätze und Reden*, ed. Peter André Bloch in collaboration with Elli Muschg-Zollikofer (Olten: Walter, 1968), 346. Muschg critiques Heidegger’s Trakl interpretation specifically in *Die Zerstörung der deutschen Literatur* (Bern: Francke, 1956), 214–30.

²⁴ See especially Martin Heidegger, “The Argument against Need (for the Being-in-itself of Entities),” trans. Tobias Keiling and Ian Alexander Moore, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 30, no. 3 (2022): 528 (not in GA), as well as GA 12: 13; cf. GA 80.2: 985, 1008–1009.

²⁵ Cf. GW 3: 191 (*Heideggers Wege*): “[Heidegger’s] interpretations of difficult Hölderlin poems or sayings [*Worte*] were identifications. To count up again the acts of violence by which such identifications come about is a miserable endeavor.” See also *Hermeneutik, Ästhetik, Praktische Philosophie: Hans-Georg Gadamer im Gespräch*, ed. Carsten Dutt, 2nd edition (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1995), 40.

²⁶ Cf. Riess, ed., *In einem Wort*, 11–12, and GW 9: 335.

stillness,” with which Heidegger was able to articulate “the primal attunement [*Urstimmung*] of Trakl’s poem” (GBT: ***). It is here that we should locate Heidegger’s enrichment of our ability to read “A Winter Evening.” Before doing so, however, we must learn to heed Gadamer’s and Heidegger’s warnings about another temptation.

(3) *The Christian interpretation of Trakl.* In his lecture on “A Winter Evening,” Heidegger imagines a typical reading of the poem, according to which Trakl deploys his skills so as to convey in a beautiful and memorable way his initial despondency and his subsequent hope in salvation afforded by his Christian worldview. “The third stanza,” writes Heidegger, “invites the wanderer to leave the dark outside and to enter the brightness within. The houses of the many and the tables of their quotidian meals have become a house of God and an altar table” (GA 12: 16; cf. GA 80.2: 1012). In the earlier version of his lecture delivered at Bühlerhöhe, Heidegger adds: “The Christian world unequivocally factors into the poem. The poet belonged to the Protestant enclave of his Salzburg homeland” (GA 80.2: 988). According to Heidegger, this reading, too, relies on the idea of language as expression and is reductively biographical. It fails to appreciate how language speaks itself in “A Winter Evening.”

Gadamer offers a similar critique in his commentary, but instead of distinguishing two ways of reading “A Winter Evening,” he distinguishes between the two main versions of the poem. The first version (“In Winter”), he contends, is not yet *vollendet*, “complete,” by which he seems to mean that it is too particular or, in the language of the early Heidegger, too ontic, despite its recognition of “the general lot of humankind, of distress and of torment and of the need for help on the part of the creature that seeks healing” (GBT: ***). For, the consolation that it extends is exclusive: the bread and wine of the “bright room” (GBT: ***) in which they are visible come from, indeed *are*, the Christian God and, as such, may be received only by those

who accept them as a sacrament. (Considering his focus on the first version at this point in his commentary, we might ask whether Gadamer is entitled to speak of brightness or a room here; he does so, presumably, so as to implicitly contrast the diffuse light of the room in the later version, as well as perhaps the light of God [1 John 1:5] indicated in the first, with the concrete luminosity of the “tree of grace.”) In what may be a subtle critique of Heidegger, Gadamer goes on to admit that “[i]t would surely be preposterous to deny that this sacramental side of bread and wine and its readiness for every wanderer who comes to it are not in view at all” (GBT: ***). Nevertheless, the early version of the poem lacks *dichterische Wirklichkeit*, “poetic reality.” In Gadamer’s reading, such reality is achieved only in the “the later completion [Vollendung] of the poem,” particularly, as we will see, in verses 7–8: “Golden blooms the tree of grace / Rising from the earth’s cool sap.”

(4) *Poetry worthy of the name*. For Heidegger, Trakl’s poem is a genuine poem because it is a pure *Gesprochenes*, i.e., a site for the gathering (*Ge-*) of what has been spoken (*-sprochenes*) by language and continues to speak to us thanks to language, if only we would listen. “A pure *Gesprochenes*,” he explains, “is that in which the completion [Vollendung] of speaking that belongs to the *Gesprochenes* is for its part something inceptive [*anfangende*],” i.e., something that seizes hold (*-fängt*) of us and leads us to (*an-*) our proper dwelling place as a fold of the four (GA 12: 14; cf. GA 80.2: 1009). Trakl’s poem itself does this, but so, it seems, would his “tree of grace” if we were to encounter it:

The tree is rooted solidly in the earth. Thus, it thrives to the point of blooming, which opens itself to the blessing of the sky. [. . .] The poem names the tree of grace. Its solid blooming shelters the fruit that falls unearned: the salvific holiness [*das rettend Heilige*]

that is propitious [*hold*] to mortals. In the golden blooming tree, earth and sky, divinities and mortals prevail. (GA 12: 21; cf. GA 80.2: 994, 1016)

The tree is, in short, precisely what Heidegger had called a “thing” in Spring 1950 at Bühlerhöhe when he repeated his “Bremen Lectures” at the health resort. Trakl’s tree is not a symbol but an instance of the “thinging of the thing” (GA 79: 16 et passim).

I will not dwell on Gadamer’s interpretation of the tree of grace, as it forms the subject of David Krell’s essay published in this issue of the *Journal of Continental Philosophy*. But I should note a few things before I turn back to the pealing of stillness. To begin, Gadamer connects the completed status of the later version of the poem to the “more immediate” and “entirely sensuous way” in which verses 7–8 “speak” (GBT: ***). The consolation offered by these verses is not that of the mediator between God and human beings, i.e., Jesus Christ or his Cross as the true “tree of life.” The tree of grace is accordingly neither a Christmas tree, gleaming from candles placed on its branches as was common in the past, nor—or at least not fundamentally—an allusion to the trilobate crucifix with a golden figure of Jesus on the altar of the Salzburg Evangelische Christuskirche, which Trakl attended in his youth.²⁷ Indeed, as Gadamer reads the verses, it is not even tree at all that Trakl is describing, but rather a kerosene lamp that is “*like a tree, like a cathedral*” (GBT: ***; emphases added). Whatever the personal reasons for this association in Gadamer’s mind, and irrespective of its philological plausibility (“sap” would have to be understood as “petroleum”), what Gadamer seems to want to emphasize is the simultaneous concreteness and generality of something that was once so familiar in the early twentieth century and is used in many regions still today: the smell—many would say

²⁷ The latter is how the leadership of the church today interprets it. See <https://christuskirche.at/ueber-uns/die-christuskirche/>.

stench—of burning paraffin that gives light and hence comfort in the darkness. “It is the golden consolation of light,” he writes, “that beckons the approaching wanderer in the dark night [...]. That is the sensual reality of the poem. Nobody is talking there. There, the poem declares the paths of all people” (GBT: ***).

But Gadamer does not leave it at that. His concern is not to trace allusions, let alone to translate into propositions (*Trakl’s tree is actually a lamp, and light in the darkness is a comfort to all...*). Nor, I take it, is he limiting himself to the claim that Trakl’s verses are to be heeded not only in their signification, but in their untranslatable materiality, in their “self-standing” as words, hence as “pure poetry.”²⁸ The universal scope of the poem—that to which it (and *not* the poet Georg Trakl) is calling its readers—has to do with the stillness that sounds in it.

§5. Gadamer on the Peeling of Stillness

Gadamer concludes his commentary with a striking, albeit ambiguous claim. In contrast to the first version of Trakl’s poem, wherein the voice of the poet is still audible and his particular preoccupations are foregrounded, the final version calls from the space of the self-speaking of language as the peeling of stillness. Here is Gadamer’s conclusion, the final phrase of which I will leave in German for the moment:

The simple turns of phrase about the space of the holy and about the entry into the security of the church, which speak from the original version, remain far behind what the completed poem says. It is not the words of a poet, but the peeling of stillness that calls to

²⁸ On this see especially Gadamer’s 1977 essay “Philosophie und Poesie,” in GW 8: 232–39. Compare also Gadamer’s interpretation of the shining of the golden lamp in Eduard Mörike’s “Auf eine Lampe,” GW 2: 359–60 (“Text und Interpretation”).

everyone and *zu sich ruft*. (GBT: ***)

Die einfache Wendung von dem Raum des Heiligen und dem Eintritt in die Geborgenheit der Kirche, die aus der ursprünglichen Fassung spricht, bleibt nun doch weit hinter dem zurück, was das vollendete Gedicht ausspricht. Nicht Worte eines Dichters sind es, sondern das Läuten der Stille, das einen jeden ruft und zu sich ruft.

On a first hearing, it sounds as though the pealing of stillness were calling everyone and calling them “to themselves,” i.e., to their situatedness as participants in a dialogue with the articulated work and with the silent source from which it springs. It was perhaps to draw attention to the uniqueness and self-referentiality of each reader at each moment that Gadamer added *mich*, “me,” to the final sentence of the published version of his text (provided, that is, that he was involved in the final stages of production). Hence: “It is not the words of a poet, but the pealing of stillness that calls *me* and everyone and calls [us] to ourselves.” Recalling *Jemeinigkeit*, the call of conscience, and the voice of the friend in Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*, we might label this a “Dasein-centric” or “existentialist” reading of Gadamer’s conclusion, even if it is also dialogical. The pealing of stillness confronts me with myself as that being whose *own* being is an issue for it.

I do not want to deny the plausibility of this reading, but another one is possible, one that, I believe, better accords with the larger context and with the pealing of stillness as the later Heidegger understands it. On this reading, *zu sich* would not be rendered as “to themselves” or “to ourselves,” but as “to itself”: “It is not the words of a poet, but the pealing of stillness that calls [me and] everyone and calls [us] *to itself*.” There are several reasons to favor this reading.

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First, grammatically, it is curious that Gadamer, if he was indeed responsible for the addition of *mich*, did not disambiguate the phrase by modifying *zu sich ruft* to *uns zu uns selbst ruft*: *das Läuten der Stille, das mich und einen jeden ruft und uns zu uns selbst ruft*, “the pealing of stillness that calls me and everyone and calls us to ourselves.” Second, lexically, the phrase *zu sich rufen* can also mean “to summon before oneself,” i.e., before the summoner. The Grimm dictionary (s.v. *rufen*) gives a couple examples from the Bible: “und er rief zu sich alle schuldener seines herrn” (“So he called every one of his lord’s debtors unto him,” Luke 16:5); “der ruffe zu sich die eltesten von der gemeine” (“let him call for the elders of the church,” James 5:14). Third, *quellengeschichtlich*, or in terms of Gadamer’s sources, when Heidegger uses the phrase *zu sich* in his lecture “Language,” it is precisely for the pealing that gathers the world and things unto *itself* by calling them: “Das bei sich versammelte Rufen, das im Rufen zu sich sammelt, ist das Läuten als das Geläut” (GA 12: 27; cf. GA 80.2: 1001–1002, 1023). Finally, hermeneutically, Gadamer does not speak in his commentary of what we, as readers living in a different context, bring to the understanding of the poem. It is not we who complete “A Winter Evening” in our reading of it. “A Winter Evening” is already *vollendet*.

If this is right, then our task would be less to come before ourselves through engagement with the poem than to “disappear” before both “the pure standing-there of the poem,” as Heidegger writes (GA 4: 8), *and* the stillness from which it first rang out and continues, as a proper poem or pure *Gesprochenes*, to ring out. What is remarkable about “A Winter Evening,” then, is not simply that it is, and prompts attentiveness to, non-instrumental, non-conceptual poetic language (which, for its part, cannot be heard by expressive, pragmatic, or representationalist conceptions of language) but that it calls us to the very source of this and of all language: the pealing of stillness.

These two interpretations of the call of the peeling of stillness—the existentialist and the ontological or, better, “logological”—are not altogether incompatible, however, even if the latter should take priority. In calling me to itself, the peeling of stillness also, at least in one respect, calls me to myself, namely, as ultimately dependent on it for all linguistic meaning and (if we are to follow Heidegger) for any possibility of dwelling thoughtfully on the earth. If Gadamer was thinking something along these lines in his brief commentary on Trakl’s “A Winter Evening,” it makes sense that the poem always “accompanied and sustained” him, even if it took him over forty years to write about it.²⁹

²⁹ Meanwhile, Gadamer would compose his magnum opus, which one might connect to the present analysis by saying that, just as being is not exhausted by its understandability (i.e., by the medium of language as it is conceived in *Wahrheit und Methode*), so stillness is not exhausted by its peal. Admittedly, in order to draw this analogy, the relative clause in Gadamer’s famous line would have to be read as restrictive: “*Das Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*” (GW 1: 478). In the intervening years, Gadamer would also prepare his booklet on Celan, where, as in his commentary on Trakl’s tree of grace, stillness plays a prominent role. See especially Gadamer’s reading of the stilling of the mulberry tree and the crystallization of the true word in Celan’s “Du darfst,” GW 9: 386–88.