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The Owl of Minerva and the Colors of the Night

Gary Shapiro

University of Richmond, gshapiro@richmond.edu

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Hegel is known to many readers mainly for a few striking figurative
passages which he himself excluded from the central structures
of his major texts as extrinsic remarks. His mature system justifies
this exclusion by claiming that philosophy operates in the realm of
the pure concept, having surpassed the sensuous narrative images of
art and religion. Nevertheless, the very forcefulness of the passages
themselves indicates that the mature Hegel may never have peacefully
aufgehoben the young man who believed in 1796 that philosophy, in
order to resume its original role as educator of mankind, must become
aesthetic, mythological, and poetic. (I am assuming that Hegel either
wrote "the earliest system-program of German idealism" or endorsed
its principles.) A reading of the famous elegiac passage in the "Preface"
to the Philosophy of Right suggests not only problems of meaning, but
of philosophical rhetoric:

One more word about giving instruction as to what the world ought
to be. Philosophy in any case always comes on the scene too late to
give it. As the thought of the world, it appears only when actuality is
already there cut and dried after its process of formation has been
completed. The teaching of the concept, which is also history's inescapable
lesson, is that it is only when actuality is mature that the ideal first appears
over against the real and that the ideal apprehends this same real world
in its substance and builds it up for itself into the shape of an intellectual
realm. When philosophy paints its gray in gray, then has a shape of
life grown old. By philosophy's gray in gray it cannot be rejuvenated
but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with
the falling of the dusk.1

The first focus of attention here is usually on the mood of philosophical
resignation in which completion of a rational development leaves no
room for action or advice. Theory must necessarily give up any utopian
or activist pretentions it may have harbored once it sees that it can only describe what has been. Despite the fact that Hegelian actuality (Wirklichkeit) is the result of a rational and dialectical process, ascetic renunciation of any relation to action puts Hegel in the strange company of nineteenth century positivists and empiricists; it also establishes a tone fundamentally different from classical European political philosophy of thinkers like Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau, a tone which Marx, provoked by Hegel, was to revive. The statement can also be read on a scale much larger than the political, in which it suggests a resigned acceptance of the completion of Western philosophy and civilization. Hegel is notorious for his view that spirit (Geist), the fundamental reality, has completed itself through the self-knowledge which it attains in his system of philosophy. That he sometimes speaks of his enterprise as a Wissen or Wissenschaft (knowledge, science, or wisdom) suggests how far he has come from the Socratic conception of philosophy as always characterized by a lack of that which it loves.

It would be intriguing to explore these themes. Such exploration would involve a more thorough knowledge of what Hegel understands by end, completion, and fulfillment when he speaks of political life and the higher forms of spirit—art, religion, and philosophy. We might even be led by such an inquiry into Hegel's meaning to see his claims as historically and philosophically plausible and to reconsider our own resistance to believing that we live in a deepening twilight. What I wish to do, however, is to call attention to the manner in which Hegel speaks of Minerva's owl and to juxtapose both the manner and the substance of his thought about the twilight of philosophy and civilization with some of Hölderlin's dichterisch and Heidegger's denkerisch meditations on similar themes. For if Hegel has announced the coming of the night, Hölderlin and Heidegger have sought to make the night their very own territory and to comprehend it from within. If Hegel has rather gingerly allowed himself to lapse into that famous figurative discourse of the owl and the gray in gray, he has immediately weakened his remarks by calling them “external and subjective” in the very next paragraph; Heidegger has had no hesitation—no shame, many professional philosophers would say—in speaking seriously of the most extreme sayings of modern poets about the night of the modern world and in making his own writings into poetic meditations on the night. I hope that the significance of these juxtapositions will become apparent by looking at some internal problems of the Hegelian perspective; and this long way around may yield a deeper sense of the questions which I began by deferring.

There is something strange about Hegel's “owl saying” and a similar and more extended complex of images of the sun, day, and night
which appear in the Philosophy of History. The strangeness has to do both with what the statements mean and with the status of such metaphorical statements in apparently crucial places in the Hegelian system. The strangeness intensifies when we see that these are not two independent themes in this case; they bring us back to one place in which we must puzzle over a single metaphorical network. Our first aporia has to do with whether these sayings are only "external and subjective remarks." It is not difficult to see why Hegel should call them that. In a complete system of philosophy, validity is attained only through what Hegel calls "the labor of the concept," the complex dialectical progression through a variety of increasingly adequate positions; there is no shortcut to wisdom through intuition. When Hegel explicitly discusses questions of style and imagery in art and philosophy, he leaves no doubt that philosophical claims to truth and adequacy must be sheerly conceptual, having left behind, or at least aufgehoben, the representational and imagistic thinking of art and religion. Yet there is some truth in the notion that Hegel's own narrative of the spirit's development is a kind of Bildungsroman; this point has been made suggestively by Josiah Royce, one of the only Anglo-American philosophers to see Hegel sympathetically within the context of Germanic culture, and it has recently been elaborated by M. H. Abrams in his study of romantic poetry and thought. Despite this, Hegel is quite definite in his Lectures on Aesthetics when he claims that there cannot be an epic of the world spirit because the universality of its subject destroys the particularity of situation and action which are indispensable to poetry. "Gray in gray," "dusk," "Minerva's owl"—these are all metaphorical descriptions of the end of culture or spirit and the task of the philosopher. In the same lectures Hegel sees metaphor as the vaguest, least adequate form of poetic language because it points to an indeterminate series of relations or adumbrates without clarifying a new meaning which can never come to presence within metaphorical discourse.

To accept these considerations, all drawn from Hegelian texts, would reinforce philosophy's traditional claim that metaphors are no arguments; having accepted them we could return with good conscience to the exacting yet relatively familiar ground of conceptual clarification. Let us suppose for a moment, however, that Hegel has made good his claim to have completed the teleological development of spirit to self-knowledge. In that case, philosophical language seems to have only two possibilities before it. One is to continue to circle in the self-contained system through which thought thinks about itself: this is Hegel's fleshing out and humanization of Aristotle's divinity with the concrete history of art, religion, and philosophy. The other is to say those things which
are appropriate to our being at the end of spirit's career. It is the second kind of discourse which Hegel seems to be venturing on in the "owl" passage and in the comparison of the course of history to the course of the day, where spiritual enlightenment comes only with natural night (in the Philosophy of History). If we are in the time of completion (or if Hegel's contemporary readers were), or if we have reached a kind of eternal validity through a temporal progression, then we can become conscious of being at or past the end. For Hegel to return to the figure of night in describing this condition becomes a matter of some importance, although to speak in this way, to fall back into metaphor, runs counter to fundamental directions of his system. The exclusion of metaphor is justified by philosophy's need to achieve fulfillment in its own terms; but if such a completion is actually attained then a return to metaphor may be permissible and even necessary if we are to speak appropriately of our new situation.

Perhaps Hegel's image is so straightforward that it need not engage us in large questions about whether and how metaphor and poetic thought ought to be allowed to enter into philosophical discourse. Although Hegel's images may appear innocent enough, they carry with them a large network of historical and poetic associations. Jacques Derrida has pointed to the connection between philosophical thinking about metaphor and the primary image of the sun in his essay on "White Mythology." It is not just the prevalence of these images—as in the Platonic cave and sun, the light-metaphysics of the scholastics, Descartes' "natural light," the Enlightenment—which is significant, but the way in which they appear when philosophers are attempting to delineate the structure of metaphorical discourse itself. Hegel's text not only exemplifies Derrida's thesis but, appropriately for Hegel, encapsulates his own historical sense of the use of these images.

In the short "Preface" from which our central quotation comes, Hegel has spoken of the relation of Plato's Republic to the actuality of the Greek polis suggesting that, like his own work, it is a nocturnal reflection on the doings of the day. If Hegel had cared to enlarge on the point, he could have mentioned the dramatic setting of the dialogue—a long conversation into the night following an innovative religious festival which signals a change in Athenian mores. As Hegel's translator notes, Hegel's "gray in gray" is probably an echo of Goethe (whom Hegel had already referred to a few pages back):

Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie
Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum.

[Gray, dear friend is all theory
And green is life's golden tree.]
Yet if Hegel is summoning up Mephistopheles, who is engaged here in leading a novice student astray, then one fairly simple reading of the "owl passage" is called into question. This straightforward interpretation to which Hegel seems close in the Philosophy of History would involve a contrast between the parallel courses of the natural day and spiritual development: in this parallelism natural day with its bright sun corresponds to the indefinite and primitive beginnings of spirit, while natural night is a time of spiritual completion, self-knowledge, and enlightenment. The course of the day, a natural cycle, is here a metaphor for the course of history which is governed by human and divine intentions. In this scheme Europe, the home of the Germanic peoples who fulfill the destiny of spirit, is the Abendland; it is the place of the setting sun, the conclusion of the rational progress of world history, and the place where spirit is fully self-conscious. It is in this twilight that the owl of Minerva can take flight. Yet the neat parallelism and inversion of this reading are undercut by Hegel's melancholy tone and his statement that it is philosophy itself which paints a gray in gray. The suggestion is that we may be living in a night-time which is not only a historical conclusion but a time of spiritual uncertainty and confusion. The very uncertainty of Hegel's metaphor—do we live in a time of light or darkness?—refers us back to his hesitations about whether metaphorical speech can be philosophically appropriate; but the problem of metaphor in philosophy leads us back to the question of what kind of age we are living in.

This set of questions is both complicated and enriched by Hegel's radically historical sensibility. What other writers often represent as a timeless opposition between philosophical and poetic discourse is for Hegel a dialectical and historical process. When Socrates refers to "the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry" he represents it as a dynastic feud, like that of the Hatfields and McCoys in which the sons take up a constant struggle; there is no trace of the sense of development through conflict which can be found in Hesiod and Aeschylus. Hegel's saying that "philosophy is its own time comprehended in thought" could be generalized: every historical era has its appropriate form of thought and discourse. It is naively unhistorical to expect to find sophisticated prose in early Persia or a Biblical consciousness in the modern state. In the Philosophy of History Hegel remarks on the confusions of modern historians who take Greek poetry to be history while casting aside the labors of Roman historians and replacing them with their own poetic inventions. The point of the remark is that Greece is a poetic culture and Rome a prosaic one. To take as accurate history the Homeric poems, or even the "histories" of Herodotus and Thucydides, which we are now accustomed to read as structured by
mythic and tragic patterns, is to misread the Greeks. To deny the Romans' prosaic sense of fact is to compound one's error. Hegel is not taking sides on the vexed question of the trustworthiness of primary historical documents. He is referring us to a complex historical scheme in which there is a series of elaborate correspondences between cultural and discursive forms reminiscent of Vico's theory. In the Philosophy of History the succession reads in this way: pre-historic, primitive cultures discourse by means of animistic myth; the oriental world achieves a dualistic, cause and effect understanding which is expressed in chronicle; the Greeks are mature poets who beautify the natural and historical world; the Romans see history as a succession of intelligible human actions; while the Germanic peoples, with the flowering of philosophical consciousness from the scholastics to Hegel, achieve a synthesis of poetry's speculative daring and history's (or prose's) vigorous sense of fact.

The pattern here is an alternation of poetic and prosaic consciousness in which each repetition of the primal pair occurs at a higher level of consciousness. As Hegel points out in his Aesthetics, there are crucial differences between primitive, "natural" poetry and poetry which, following the development of prosaic consciousness, is aware of its own struggle with prose. While it is usual to read Hegel's philosophy of history as organized around a final culmination, the parallels with Vico and the tentative turn toward metaphor at the "end" of history may hint at the possibility of a recorso. Whether such cyclical repetition or even some more radical novelty is possible for Hegel is a matter for dispute. In the Philosophy of History Hegel contrasts the cyclical movement of the sun and the progressive movement toward culmination which is history: "The history of the world travels from east to west, for Europe is absolutely the end of history, Asia the beginning . . . although the earth forms a sphere, history performs no circle round it, but has on the contrary a determinate east, Asia." This seems clear enough. But what does it mean to speak of the absolute end of history? Two plausible interpretations present themselves. History may be at an end in the sense that it has realized certain principles which were immanent in its development and which, now realized, may be expected to govern the future. The achievement of universal freedom, recognition, and consciousness in the modern state would seem to be a foundation for all future social and political activity. Yet Hegel may be speaking not of history in the most general sense of that which happens, or even of that which is noted and interpreted, but of history in the more specific meaning which it acquires in his conceiving of it as "the story of freedom." To suggest that history is the story of freedom may leave some logical space for the narration of other stories. The principles of the modern state, on this reading, need not determine the future
except as the starting point of a new narrative. Hegel's teleology lends itself to either interpretation. History, and more generally the development of spirit \textit{überhaupt}, is the realization and working out of a purpose: the actualization of free and rational self-consciousness. Is this a purpose among several possible ones or is it the purpose, the only one which human beings can pursue? Or might there be some process of more or less continuous change in which human beings depart from their earlier nature and achievements to aim at something new or even to live free of any teleological pattern? It is such questions which we will find Heidegger pursuing in his reading of Trakl's poetry of the night.

If Hegel is the philosopher of our age of evening, his contemporary Hölderlin is its poet. The themes of presence and absence, of a completion which still leaves us melancholy are the explicit themes of his work, while Hegel touches on them only to leave them intriguingly indeterminate. What they thought of each other's work in their mature periods poses a series of the most complex problems in intellectual history. Both began their careers with a revolutionary and prophetic urge to contribute to a new religion of art which would overcome the abstractions of traditional philosophy and religion. Yet Hegel finally came to subordinate art to philosophy while Hölderlin thought himself deeper into the night-time in which the old gods have fled and the new have not yet arrived. The apparent discontinuity can be emplotted as dialogue, however. Hölderlin's sense of absence and expectation of the holy is a critique of Hegel's notion that all that there can be of the spirit has manifested itself. Hegel's devaluation of the metaphorical and symbolic mode in poetry is an indirect commentary on Hölderlin's condensed, paratactic prophecies. While Hegel's philosophy is, in part, an attempt to overcome poetic and narrative modes by the articulation of a single absolute discourse, Hölderlin's poetry contains a critique of the philosophical ideals of absolute presence and of the dialectical development which allegedly leads to it.

For our purposes the most interesting locus of this dialogue is Hölderlin's own treatment of the themes of day and night in poems like \textit{Bread and Wine}. These works were all written before any of Hegel's major texts but they share with them that image-complex of a new sun rising which was common in the revolutionary era. \textit{Bread and Wine} itself begins and ends with night and its central strophe speaks of a time of the gods' bright presence. Night's ambiguity between restful completion and a new, strange beginning is itself the beginning of the poem. "All around the city rests" are its first words: men are comfortable and at home. Given the radically historical nature of the whole poem, with its meditation on our loss of the shining manifestation
of the gods, Hölderlin's description of the city-dwellers' drowsy comfort can be read as an account of those who think that they live at the end of history:

Satt gehn heim von Freuden des Tags zu ruhen die Menschen,
Und Gewinn und Verlust wäget ein sinniges Haupt
Wohlzufrieden zu Haus

[Sated with the day's pleasures, men go home to rest,
and a pensive head weighs up gain and loss contentedly
in the house] 8

Yet there are apparently random interruptions in the quiet of the bourgeois night, a “distant music of strings,” a breeze, and the mysterious moon. These lead to the appearance of Night, depicted as a goddess who is said to be not very much concerned about us while wonderful in her favor. Night is not our possession, she is not simply the conclusion of our day, but a power to whom song should be consecrated “because she is sacred to those astray (den Irrenden) and to the dead.” Hegel's natural night is illuminated by man's “inner sun; and when in the evening he contemplates this he esteems it more highly than the original external sun. For now he stands in a conscious relation to his spirit, and therefore a free relation.”9 Hölderlin is suggesting that the weighing and measuring which leads to satisfaction with one's own internal sun misses the numinous sense of otherness to be found in day, if we are strong enough for it, or in night, if we are weaker. Unless we venture outside the house we shall miss the charm and terror of both day and night. Our discourse of the night will not be the autobiographical summing up of a self-contained individual, even one imagined on the gigantic scale of Hegel's Geist. We shall consecrate songs to night but she in return “must grant oblivion, and grant the sacrely drunken, grant us the onrushing word which will be sleepless like lovers, grant us the fuller cup and more reckless life, holy remembrance, too, to remain wakeful by night.”

Hölderlin continues to use the pair of night and day to set up a complex dialectic of presence and absence. In its form the poem seems to point to an absolute presence, for in its very center, equidistant from the images of night and sleep in the first and last strophes, the poet announces a theophany:

Möglichst dulden die Himmlischen dies; dann aber in Wahrheit
Kommen sie selbst, und gewohnt werden die Menschen des Glüks
Und des Tags und zu schaun die Offenbaren, das Antliz

[This the heavenly tolerate as far as they can; but then
they appear in truth, in person, and men grow used to
good fortune, to day, and to the sight of those now manifest.]

Yet although men are in the presence of the gods they do not really
see them. When nun (now) is repeated three times at the end of the
strophe it is not to mark the presence which we associate with the
temporal present but it suggests the gap between our present lack,
which requires names and images, and the full sense of presence that
might have been. Hegel's treatment of the discourse of the "now" in
his Phenomenology of Mind is surprisingly appropriate. Sense-certainty
or immediate sensation is thought to be the richest and fullest form
of knowledge and truth; yet the very act of naming the now demonstrates
that it has passed. The attempt to articulate or grasp the present moment
requires language and language carries with it a set of abstractions
and universals which are just the opposite of the presence originally
intended. Hegel's first and most primitive illustration of this dialectic
is the alternation between "now it is night" and "now it is day."10
For both Hegel and Hölderlin, then, immediate perception is a kind
of hypothetical moment which must be postulated as the origin of
our fall into language; yet while Hölderlin holds out the hope that
some further historical movement may lead to the recapture of the
experience, Hegel offers his own interpretation of the Greek mysteries:

In this connection we may answer those who insist on the truth and
certainty of the reality of objects of sense, by saying that they had better
be sent back to the most elementary school of wisdom, the ancient
Eleusinian mysteries of Ceres and Bacchus; they have not yet learnt
the inner secret of the eating of bread and the drinking of wine.11

Even the animals have learned the nullity of sensible objects, Hegel
points out, because they do not hesitate to devour them. What the
reversal of certainty suggests is that it is "the divine nature of language"
which is at work; the presence which spirit will achieve will be one
in which it speaks to itself, about itself, through its own discourse,
not its presence to another.

Hölderlin's paradoxical invocation of the gods' presence is flanked
by strophes in which the decay of Greek art is prominent. If immediate
perception and language cannot recapture presence, perhaps great art
and culture can.

Aber wo sind sie? wo blühn die Bekannten, die Kronen des Festes?
Thebe welkt und Athen; rauschen die Waffen nicht mehr
In Olympia, nicht die goldnen Wagen des Kampfspiels,
Und bekränzen sich denn nimmer die Schiffe Korinths?
Warum schweigen auch sie, die alten heiligen Theater?
Warum freuet sich denn nicht der geweihte Tanz?

[But where are they? Where do the well-known
thrive, the festival's crowns? Thebes wilts,
and Athens; do then the weapons no longer
sound at Olympia, nor the golden chariots of
the games, and are the ships of Corinth no
longer, then, wreathed with flowers? Why
are they silent too, the ancient and sacred
theaters? Why does the hallowed dance not
rejoice?]

The decay of Greek art shows the impossibility of recapturing presence.
In a time of absence we can at best track down the signs and traces
(Zeichen and Spuren) of the gods who have flown. Such concern for
traces may eventually lead to the strength for presence, at which point
the gods may manifest themselves again. Hölderlin's complex of day
and night, presence and absence, plays on the cyclical aspect of the
solar day. Hegel's discussion of Greek art (Kunstreligion) in the Phenome-
nology sees it not as a falling away from presence but as a dialectic
which, like the courses of the sun and human history, moves from
an illusory external presence to a genuine spiritual one. The progress
begins with the attempt to represent the gods in a visible and external
form. Such art is necessarily abstract for it obviously fails to capture
the living presence of the gods while leaving obscure the role of human
beings in the artistic process. The path of the progress consists in
a gradual abandonment of the notion of divine manifestation, until
comedy completes the "depopulation of heaven" and leaves the poet,
his audience, and the actors at one in a serene sense of their own
power; this anticipates the final presence in which Hegel's readers achieve
an identity with absolute spirit.12

The contrast which I have been sketching has this form: Hegel sees
a completion of full presence being attained through an increasingly
self-conscious human discourse, while Hölderlin represents language,
art, and poetry as a series of losses and attempts at recovery. Yet Hegel's
completion has the ambiguity of the twilight in which Minerva's owl
takes to wing, while Hölderlin's night anticipates a return of the light.
In this opposition between poetry and philosophy can be found variant
conceptions of the nature of poetry itself. Hölderlin's lines in the seventh
strophe are famous.

. . . und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?
Aber sie sind, sagst du, wie des Weingotts heilige priester,
Welche von Land zu Land zogen in heiliger Nacht.

[... and what is the use of poets at a time of dearth? But they are, you say, like those holy priests of the wine-god who travelled from country to country in holy night.]

As Paul de Man suggests, the question is ambiguous in that it may be asking either for the purpose of poets in this time of dearth or for the purpose of poets within temporal existence in general, pervaded as it is by transience and lack. The answer, tentative though it is because attributed in the poem to Hölderlin's friend Heinze, seems to suggest that whether it is the night of time or our time of night or both, there is a kind of meaning in what poets do which is somehow successive in form. Hegel's conception of poetry's development had not yet been articulated, but was already in the air in the form of the evolutionary accounts of poetry adumbrated by Schelling and Schlegel. For Hegel, the inner history of poetry is a progression from metaphysical and symbolic suggestion of a distant divinity to the mode of romance and the genre of drama in which poetic discourse approaches spirit's self-knowledge. For Hegel the spirit of poetry passes from land to land—from Oriental symbolism, to Greek drama, to "romantic" poets like Shakespeare and Goethe—in order to arrive at the "inner sun" which illuminates the end of history; for Hölderlin the journey of the poets is a kind of passionate preservation and endurance which has no internally necessary goal. The wine-god, Dionysus, is sung at night because his traces keep alive our intimations of a greater presence. Hegel, invoking Dionysus in the Phenomenology, says that truth is "the Bacchanalian revel where none is sober," an absolute union of motion and rest which is strictly identical with spirit's celebration of itself. Here the drunkenness of truth is a presence of the god in us which leaves no room for wandering through the night.

I am suggesting that some of the most significant work of both Hölderlin and Hegel should be read not simply as "poetry" or "philosophy" but as a discussion or dialectic between poetry and philosophy. By focusing this Auseinandersetzung around the metaphor of the evening, and the legitimacy of metaphorical discourse itself, I have attempted to suggest the radically historical character of the discussion. These themes, latent but powerful in Hegel and Hölderlin, become the explicit concerns of Martin Heidegger's essay "Language in the Poem: Situating Georg Trakl's Poem." Heidegger's essay is the intersection of the two temporalities of poetry and thinking. Heidegger sees Trakl as "historical in the highest sense because he sings of the destiny (Geschick) which propels mankind into its still withheld nature, and saves it" (p. 80).
As a prophetic poet, Trakl must be situated in the night-time of which he sings. But thinking too is determined by this same night and so any dialogue or discussion between thinking and poetry itself acquires a different meaning in the evening (p. 51). Heidegger repeatedly quotes Trakl’s line, “Abend wechselt Sinn und Bild” [Evening changes sense and image], to suggest not only the point of Trakl’s poetry and thinking’s response to time, but to justify his own strategy in reading the poems. Part of what Heidegger is doing by calling his own enterprise thinking rather than philosophy is attempting to dispense with the concept of an eternal sophia which the traditional term carries with it. Thinking does not aim at an absolute possession of or identity with its object which would bring history to its close. Therefore it cannot succeed in transforming temporality marked by the rising and setting of the sun, into an inextinguishable internal sun. Like Vico’s primal poets, the founders of the gentile races, Heidegger is impressed by the otherness of the sky and the gods who alternately conceal themselves in and reveal themselves through it. The consequent reading of Trakl’s poetry aims at juxtaposing this sense of simultaneous disclosure and hiddenness with the history of philosophy which aims at making everything manifest. In another essay Heidegger says that “this manifestness of Being within metaphysics may even be at the same time the extreme oblivion of Being.”

According to Heidegger the site (Ort) or unspoken central source of Trakl’s poetry is the apartness (Abgeschiedenheit) of a wandering in the world’s night. To depart from what has been accomplished during the day, to wander in the night, is to make or begin to make a new beginning. Like Hegel, Heidegger sees the evening as a time which marks the completion of philosophy, although he gives a different reading of its history. For Heidegger this history revolves around the search for the absolutely present, and so leads from the Platonic Ideas through the Cartesian cogito to Hegel’s manifest spirit and finally to Nietzsche’s Will-to-Power. The completion of this history, however, is not the completion of history as such which is, apparently, always structured by absence and concealment as well as presence. The time of philosophy’s completion, then, is not just an external evening but a real one in which we can observe the tragic consequences of a hybris which has attempted to illuminate all of Being by its own resources. Poetry and thinking that are no longer subject to the illusory aim of possessing or coinciding with the present will accept the absences of the evening. Their task is to make the evening their own in the sense of sympathetically being with it or in it rather than consuming it. Heidegger speaks of this making own as Ereignis, which Albert Hofstadter helpfully translates as “enownment.” The extended “situ-
tion” of Trakl’s poetry is a discussion between philosophy and poetry on the enowment of the evening. Just as Trakl is not simply writing about the night, but speaking from it, Heidegger is not merely explicating Trakl’s image (as if he had a ready technique for reading all poems), but speaks of Trakl’s poetry from his own situation in the evening of thinking.

Heidegger’s discussion of Trakl’s metaphors—the blue game (das blaue Wild), the pond of the evening, the ghostly, pain, and death—not only aims at clarifying the meaning of the poet’s work but seeks to exhibit that metaphorical discourse in the appropriate language of the night. Here there is an interesting coincidence between a Heideggerian and a psychoanalytic reading of Trakl. In a recent monograph on the poet, Maire Jaanus Kurrik has suggested that Trakl’s work exhibits a progressive escape from the ordinary constraints of sense because it is an increasingly direct expression of primary process.16 Heidegger says that “language speaks” in another essay on a Trakl poem. The idea is that language, liberated from our willful attempts to impose sense and purpose on it, will reveal deep and unexpected connections of things if we will only listen to it. Paratactic poetry like Trakl’s seems to show in its very form that it is liberated from the constraints of grammar imposed by the will. For Heidegger this move is more historical than pathological. It can be made only when the willful aim at presence has exhausted itself and the desire to dominate language has vanished.

The night which emerges in Trakl’s poetry is shot through with bright hallucinatory colors, and populated by a blue game or deer, the departed, and the ghostly. The colors of Trakl’s night are interesting if only for the fact that they are colors. Night might ordinarily be expected to be dark and obscure; in fact a typical Trakl poem is a dazzling succession of colors in the night. The contrast suggests a distinction between this night and the ones of which Hegel and Hölderlin speak. Hegel’s “gray in gray” recalls not only Mephistopheles in Faust but Goethe’s theory of color which he adopted for his own Philosophy of Nature. For Goethe and Hegel the primary optical phenomena are the polarities of light and darkness, not the colors into which Newton had shown white light could be decomposed. Light and dark have a false, immediate synthesis in gray and a true reconciliation in color, which requires a medium. For Hegel the evening must be colorless because there is not enough light left to create color. External night and internal sun stand at the end of history’s colorful pageant and represent its dissolution into the primary pair. The connection of color with life (as in Goethe’s “und grün des Lebens goldner Baum”) reinforces the melancholy of the Hegelian night.

Although Heidegger does not discuss the general significance of color
within Trakl's poetry he does make some important comments on blue
or the blue, which is a frequent enough image to be obsessive in Trakl.
(The distance between a Heideggerian and a psychoanalytic reading
will become evident here if we keep in mind that the latter tends
to attribute Trakl's blue to its associations with his incestuous relations
with his sister.) Speaking of the blue game that wanders through Trakl's
night, Heidegger asks for the source of the blue game's blueness. The
problem is how something could receive a color from the dark of
the night. Here Heidegger suggests a closer reading, pointing out that
while the night is dark (dunkel) it is not necessarily characterized by
gloom or obscurity (Finsternis). Darkness has its own kind of clarity,
and "Clarity (Helle) sheltered in the dark is blueness." Things are not
ordinarily invisible in the night but their appearance is altered, or
as Trakl says, "Evening changes sense and image." The scope of the
alteration can be measured by Heidegger's association of clarity with
"the sound that calls out of the shelter of stillness" by appealing to
the etymology of Helle. Trakl's blueness is at once the call to which
we can listen in the night, if we are ready to listen to language's own
speech, and the color of that night itself. Other poems which Heidegger
cites speak of "holy blueness." Yet Heidegger says that, "The blue
is no image (Bild) of the holy. Blueness itself is the holy, on account
of its gathering depth which manifests itself only in its covering itself
up" (p. 44). The point here has both to do with the night and its
language. Blue could be (and is in some poets) a present, sensory image
of something else (like the holy) which is absent or at least not sensuously
concrete. Metaphorical language, on such an understanding, aims at
making present that which is absent, like the words invoked by Hölderlin
in Bread and Wine which "must now arise like flowers." Hegel criticizes
metaphor just because it can only point towards the idea of presence
in an indefinite way while never actually achieving it.17 Heidegger's
point is that at least in some poems—in Trakl's poetry of the night,
in any case—such discourse is not simply an instance of a dialectic
of presence and absence but may itself embody that dialectic. Blue
is not the present substitute for an absent holiness; it is holiness just
because it has no absence without presence and no presence without
absence. The night on the one hand and its colors and flaming spirit
on the other do not stand for something other than themselves but
by their very play disclose what is.

In Heidegger's "thinking" discussion with Trakl's poetry, it is no
longer possible to make a clear distinction between the questions of
what the night means and how or to what extent philosophy (or thinking)
can itself be a form of metaphorical discourse. The site is the night,
the night is a time of both presence and absence, and this is the nature
of the language which is its valid speech. The contrast with some other ways of understanding metaphor is instructive. Many moderns have tended to make metaphor the essential force of poetry, contrasting its richness and plurality of meaning with the schematic abstractions of merely discursive prose. Hegel's early devaluation of metaphor finds it inferior to the fuller dialectic of the epic, the lyric, and the drama which in turn is aufgehoben in the definitive syntheses by which philosophy makes the spirit present to itself. Both the modern inflation of metaphor and Hegel's critique are based on a metaphysics of presence. They also sort themselves out historically. Hegel's judgment is contributory to his own absolute idealism which appears as the all-inclusive culmination of art and philosophy; the modern turn to metaphor comes as part of a search to replace the grandiose failures of traditional philosophy and religion with a fullness of image and meaning.

Heidegger's own view of poetic language parallels his notion of truth as aletheia or disclosedness. There is no truth or manifestation without its background of concealment and therefore there is no unqualified or absolute manifestation. In his essay on "Plato's Doctrine of Truth" Heidegger shows how the Platonic idea of presence is tied to the allegory of the cave and the sun which charts an itinerary from the land of shadows to the shining presence which makes all other presence possible. (Whether focusing on the indirect and mythical nature of the discussions of presence within the Platonic dialogues would qualify this "doctrine" is a question which Heidegger does not consider.) In commenting on one of Hölderlin's poems, Heidegger uses the sky as an emblem of the dialectic of absence and presence in poetry. He apparently accepts Hölderlin's idea that God, as unknown, serves as a measure for the poet. The concept of an unknown and perhaps unknowable measure seems highly paradoxical. Yet Heidegger suggests that

Heidegger makes the connection between this general schema for understanding poetry and his historical concerns by noting that the sense of this precarious measure is liable to be obscured in a time given to an excess of precise calculation.

Since Heidegger's own later work is often charged with being excessively loose, poetic, or metaphorical, it may be appropriate to see that
one crucial dimension of these works is a meditation on the nature of poetry and its place in philosophy (or thinking). If the thinker is in the night he will make the night his own, and this will mean that he will allow its highly charged language to speak for itself. This may take the form of an explication of this language in poets like Hölderlin and Trakl, or it may consist in retelling the story of philosophy by suggesting that it in fact begins with more internal light than we suppose and ends in a twilight which is as much spiritual as external. Heidegger's meditations on the pre-Socratics are designed to make some of the metaphorical richness of their thought real options once more, while his conception of the obscurity of the metaphysics of presence which culminates in Hegel and Nietzsche aims at exhibiting the lack of clarity in so many philosophical assumptions about clarity. Just as the poet of the night must think about the nature of poetry itself, so the night's thinker will place philosophy's career within a framework of presence and absence which is traditionally poetic. Perhaps this is why Heidegger describes thinking and poetry as neighbors who are both close to and distant from one another, like dwellers on adjacent mountain peaks.

Yet Heidegger's late work is not only a meditation on the fate of poetry in what Hölderlin called dürftiger Zeit. It is also, like Trakl's work as read by Heidegger, an attempt to restore the prophetic functions of language. In his essay on Trakl's A Winter Evening (Ein Winterabend) Heidegger says that the poem calls together the earth, heavens, mortals and gods (the Geviert or four-fold). He does not mean that it represents or symbolizes these four but that it actually brings about a place or focus of their interplay. When Heidegger writes Die Sprache spricht (language speaks) repeatedly, at least one of the repetitions must be read not as Heidegger's words about language but as the voice of language itself. Both poet and thinker pass from being producers of texts to accessories in the revelation of a mystery. In Vico's terms both are practicing divination. Awed by the otherness of the sky (now the evening sky) they seek to perform a theurgic ritual in which their individual roles will dissolve in the greater fact which their texts usher in. To read one of Heidegger's later texts sympathetically is to follow the rituals and be initiated into part of the gathering of the four-fold oneself.

To recall the divination of Vico's primitive men is strange when we are dealing with the late products of the evening of a culture. One standard critical response to what Heidegger is attempting would be to recall Vico's critique of the crudity and vagueness of primitive divination and metaphor as well as his sense of their potential riches. In fact this is roughly Hegel's critique of symbolic and metaphorical poetry which may very well have been written with Hölderlin in mind.
Such a simple identification of Heidegger with Vico's primitives will not work, however. That there are parallels, perhaps suggesting a *recorso*, is evident from the concern with the sky and the revealing/concealing metaphorical language appropriate to it and the gods. Yet Heideggerian divination occurs through texts which are not only self-conscious in their textuality but which embody a complex reflection on the history of philosophy and its relations with poetry. He has not simply reverted to the beginnings of our tradition but has attempted a new beginning which takes account of the fact that what we think of as our history has already run its course. In the one text which Heidegger has published in the format conventionally assigned to poetry he says, “To think is to confine yourself to a single thought that one day stands still like a star in the world’s sky.” To accuse Heidegger of a vague and indefinite longing for an unknown god is to neglect his own very clear sense that the territory in which he is attempting to clear some ground is full of unmapped impasses, tangles, and other dangers. For a single thought to be visible like a star implies that its observers are otherwise wrapped in the night. This star, like Trakl’s flaming spirit and shining colors, points a way for those who are not content with summing up the achievements of the day and are not afraid to go wandering in the night. Heidegger’s thought in the world’s sky is not the sun of the Platonic and Hegelian analogies; it shines through the dark of the world’s night which can no longer be banished by the philosophical sun. For Heidegger this complex of star and thought is no longer merely a figure of a conceptual truth. Not only does evening alter sense and image but it alters their relationship.

The strange and inverse parallelism in the Hegelian and Heideggerian ways of dealing with the relations between philosophy and poetry can be marked by thinking of the only poem Hegel is known to have written, *Eleusis*. Addressed to Hölderlin and composed in 1796 (like the “earliest system-program of German idealism”), it begins with the poet’s sense of the sublimity of the stars. As Geoffrey Hartman has shown, it doubles the eighteenth century sense of the sublime—the movement from being overwhelmed by natural size or power to a conviction of one’s own spiritual strength—by continuing a similar movement *within* the spiritual world. Here Hegel, now elevated beyond the stars, feels the weight of Greek culture, but overcomes his temporary sense of belatedness by his will to interpret; in Hartman’s words it marks the turn “from the sublime to the hermeneutic.” Hegel could not remain either with the stars or the Greeks. While he apparently adhered to a program calling for the fusion of philosophy with myth and poetry, his own poetry foreshadowed the move from poetic to reflective thought which culminates in his pronouncement of the 1820’s
that "art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our ideas instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place." Hegel's move from poetry to philosophy occurs through a turn from the eternal stars to the logic of human history. Heidegger's repudiation of the eternal is at least as intense as Hegel's but he suggests the possibility that the historical and the human ought not to be automatically identified. Heidegger attempts to show that there is a history of being (Geschick) as well as a human history (Geschichte). To dwell on the star in the night of this history propels us into neither the eighteenth century sublime nor the Hegelian hermeneutic because the night and the star retain some of their facticity and opacity. For Hartman it is the strength of the Hegelian approach that it asserts the humanization of art. I have tried to show that even for Hegel the results of such absolute humanization are ambivalent and tend, in dialectical fashion, to undermine themselves when he speaks of what it is to have attained such an end or hazards language that might be appropriate to it. The strength of hermeneutics, as Hegel knew, leads to art's dissolution within philosophy and to philosophy's self-announced end. Heidegger, having moved away from the almost perversely scholastic assault on the meaning of being that was to have been initiated by Being and Time, reverses the Hegelian sequence. If the alternatives suggested by his work—listening for the speaking of language, the poetizing of philosophy, and dwelling on the revealing/concealing blueness of the night sky—are still indeterminate, they fill a gap which would otherwise be occupied only by the "pensive head" of Hölderlin's poem which "contentedly reckons gain and loss at home."
7. The Philosophy of History, p. 103 (I have slightly modernized Sibree's translation).
12. I have analyzed this development in “Hegel's Dialectic of Artistic Meaning,” Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Fall 1976.
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