

# Sounding/Silence

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I

In the introductory remarks to his 1934–5 lecture series on Friedrich Hölderlin’s late hymns “Germanien” and “Der Rhein,” the first he gave on Hölderlin’s poetry, Heidegger discusses the “form” of the opening lines from “Germanien”:

The form of the poem provides no particular difficulties. The meter does not follow the model of any conventional genre. A poem without meter and rhyme is nevertheless not really a poem at all, not poetry, prose rather. [...] and yet, [a] common, precise, prosaic “for” [*denn*], sounds, as though spoken for the first time, and this apparent prose of the whole poem is more poetic than the smoothest gambolling lines and jingling rhymes of any Goethesque Lieder or other singsong. (GA 39: 16)

What is at stake when Heidegger says that this word *denn* “sounds, as though spoken for the first time”? Firstly, it has an impact for how we understand Heidegger’s relation to poetry, and to what he scathingly calls “literary history and aesthetics.” The word’s “sounding” is in antagonism with the generic requirements of meter and rhyme; yet meter and rhyme are not therefore irrelevant to what Heidegger is trying to describe, since it is precisely in rejecting meter and rhyme from within verse that this word comes to “sound.” The “apparent prose” through which this word “sounds” is only “apparent”; it is not prose but the “prosaic” as it irrupts within verse; its “sounding” cannot be extracted

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from its prosodic effect within the verse structure of the hymn as a whole. Such moments show Heidegger in a far more ambivalent relationship with poetics and criticism than we might suspect. Secondly, the “sounding” of the word would collapse the distinction between linguistic meaning on the one hand and the sonority of language on the other. The “sounding” of Hölderlin’s poem concerns the meaning of an individual word, *denn*, but is not thereby simply a figure for semantic (or “aletheic,” even) clarity. For this meaning is generated prosodically, as the incursion of “prosaic” dissonance into “jingling” singsong. It is only when we experience this word “as prose” (which, were it embedded in prose, we would not do) that we can hear its “sounding.” Heidegger’s invocation of sounding thus brings us to the very core of his thinking on language. In this paper I wish to approach these two questions alongside one another, and argue that “sounding” is crucial to our understanding both of the truth-value of art and poetry – its capacity to bring a word to “sound, as though spoken for the first time” – and of the phrase “language speaks,” which will become a guideword to his thinking from 1950 onwards.

## II

Heidegger’s thinking on the sounding of language is elaborated at greatest length in the notes to his 1939 lecture series on Herder’s *On the Origins of Languages*. The published version of the lecture series is made up for the most part of lecture notes, and constitutes less an overarching account of language than a thinking through of some of his most abiding concerns. Precisely for this reason it provides an illuminating depiction of Heidegger attempting to confront these concerns at a moment when his thought was in flux. Throughout these notes he returns to Herder’s claim that the sounds of language are heard not in the ear but the “soul,” and which he takes to mean that, instead of sounds being “added to meaning, rather the meaning *sounds*” (GA 85: 111/94). This is precisely what he was getting at in his analysis of the word *denn* in “Germanien”: the meaning is not a pre-existing semantic content transmitted through a physical token, rather it is through its

sounding that it becomes meaningful. Sounding – and, by consequence, linguistic meaning – would in this respect be anterior to any opposition between ideality and materiality.

This consideration develops *Being and Time*'s central claim that “Dasein hears because it understands” (GA 2: 217/SZ1: 163); however, it also offers an advance on this early account of language. In *Being and Time* Heidegger is arguing that all sensory receptivity to language is grounded on the discoveredness of Dasein. When he turns to language's sounding, the phenomenal heft of the word has become part of what first engenders this discoveredness. However, for this to be the case, Heidegger is at pains to distinguish the “sounding” of language that “means” and “lets appear” from the sonority of the word as verbal icon, *Wortlaut* (word-sound) or *Lautgebilde* (the word's “sound-form”). Heidegger argues that in the *Wortlaut*, the sounding itself has been abstracted (or, in Heidegger's more extreme, and, given the political context of 1939, troubling terminology, “degenerated”) into a “present-at-hand” sensuous token whose function is to transmit the meaning of a referential sign (GA 85: 34/38). The sounding of language only becomes mere “sound” when its referential function has been taken to be linguistic meaning in its entirety, with sound itself reduced to a bodily husk. This anticipates his observation, in “The Nature of Language” almost two decades later, that on the referential model it is unlikely “the physical element of language, its vocal and written character, is being adequately experienced,” nor that “it is sufficient to associate sound exclusively with the body understood in physiological terms, and to place it within the metaphysically conceived confines of the sensuous” (GA 12: 193/98).

I will return to the question of the body below. Before that, I wish to dwell on the other detail of the “sounding” of this word *denn* in the opening lines of “Germanien”: that it “sounds *as though spoken for the first time*.” The motif “for the first time” recurs throughout “The Origin of the Work of Art” (written between the “Germanien” lectures and the lecture series on Herder), as a trope for the artwork's *aletheic* capacity, whereby it “sets up a world.” This happens first at the level of the

art medium – “The rock comes to bear and to rest and so *first* becomes rock; the metal comes to glimmer and shimmer, the colours to shine, the sounds to ring, the word to say” (GA 5: 32/24) – but subsequently inflects the surrounding world: the temple at Paestum, for instance, “*first* makes the storm visible in its violence,” “*first* brings forth the light of day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of night,” so that “Tree, grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket *first* enter their distinctive shapes and thus come to appearance as what they are” (GA 5: 28/21). In other words, the artwork transforms the ways in which we encounter beings in an open region, and this is experienced as our seeing them “for the first time,” just as the poem brings us to encounter the word *denn* differently than we had done so before. And indeed, this is precisely how, in the Herder lectures, sounding is conceived: “‘sounding’ is at first a *self-showing as a being, an appearing, that lets appear*” (GA 85: 111/96). The sounding of language both announces its own entry into appearance (as self-showing), and permits other beings to show themselves.

In this, Heidegger is not simply following the argumentation of “Origin,” however. As a “letting-appear,” we encounter the basis of something like linguistic reference. Heidegger, that is, is anticipating that programmatic claim of his later writing on language that the essence of language is “saying as showing” (GA 12: 242/123). Indeed, he goes on to characterise λόγος itself as a “gathering sounding” (*sammelndes Lauten*) (GA 85: 35/29), the articulation of beings in openness that language effects coincides with its own appearance in this open.

This description of λόγος as a “gathering sounding” will strike us at first as rather unexpected, given that in both *Being and Time* and *On the Way to Language* authentic λόγος is depicted as silent. Yet the gerundive *Lauten* implies a process of movement into sound from out of an anterior silence. Here we see its sounding coincide with Heidegger’s explanation, in “Origin,” for how the artwork can engender this “first” quality. For Heidegger tells us that sounding is the “happening of the strife of earth *and* world” (GA 85: 54/45, emphases in original), and in this it is “not essentially related to the tone and sound, but *to the openness and clearing* of being and, that is, to the silence and the rending of

the silence in the strife of world and earth” (GA 85: 125/107). If we are to understand both how language comes to sound, and what kind of meaning this sounding might furnish, we should look in greater detail at its “strife”-character. It is to this question that I now turn.

### III

In the “Origin of the Work of Art,” “earth,” whilst most readily encountered as a brute thingliness, is defined ostensibly by its movement of “coming-forth concealing” (GA 5: 32/24). Heidegger depicts a struggle in which the earth, “bearing and rising up, strives to preserve its closedness” (GA 5: 51/38), but is captured and traced within the world from which it would withdraw. The strife would be “silent” insofar as it withdraws from worldly experience; it would emerge into “sounding” as it is captured and traced momentarily within the world. Heidegger situates the “earth” in the artwork’s “work-material” or medium, but to do so poses a particular problem when it comes to poetry. Whereas this work-material is easy enough to identify elsewhere – the “bearing and resting” of stone, the “shining” of colour, and the “ringing” of sound – it is not certain what poetry’s work-*material* would be. Heidegger calls the “earth” of language “the naming power of the word” (GA 5: 32/24), but where this “power” resides, and what is “earthy” about it, are not entirely clear. One influential and powerful reading speaks of the “opacity of verbal matter”: “The sounds of spoken language, its rhythm, its accents, its timbre, its resonance, its pace, as well as its written characters,” which “through their material weight ... escape signification and withdraw from the clarity of sense and from the transparency of the world.”<sup>1</sup> But there is a danger in this gloss: to “escape signification” will not in and of itself entail a withdrawal from sense and world, especially given Heidegger’s attempt to dispute the model of language as signification with an arbitrary sonorous token. Moreover, it cannot be grasped simply in its “sounds,” insofar as the earth withdraws from all phenomenality – sound, after all, remains audible. Whatever sonority the earth might have will be far more complex to situate.

In light of this difficulty, I would like to focus on the “strife” itself. If “sounding” has a “strife-character,” this would mean that the very movement of language into sounding strives against (or rends, *reisst*) the silencing movement that bounds it. But insofar as it is in “strife,” it does enter sounding. Perhaps we might think of earth as something like an open E-string played on the violin: at once pitch, timbre, and the oscillations of the string reverberating on the soundboard, but at the same time the scraping of horsehair on catgut. As anyone acquainted with this sound (especially when it is generated by a five-year-old) will know, the moment that is most violent on the ear is also the moment closest to silence, as the bow almost scratches to a halt on the string (and so the vibrations cease). This would also explain why the word *denn* in “Germanien” “sounds” through its prosodic dissonance, as this is where we most powerfully experience the excess and breakdown of our sonorous experience – and experience this excess, this breakdown, as sonority. It is in its excess over simple audibility, then, in an excess experienced at the limits of audibility, that Heidegger can describe *Wortlaut* as the “*preserving keeping – earth of the world*” (GA 85: 109/93). In the “sounding” of language, earth enters the phenomenal world in such a way as to become audible, but dissonantly and aporetically, and so inhabits the *Wortlaut* even as the *Wortlaut* would blot it out.

#### IV

It is in this regard that we can understand another of the key phrases of Heidegger’s late writings on language, one which obtains its first formulations in the Herder lectures: the “peal ↑ of stillness [*Geläut ↑ der Stille*]” (GA 85: 90/78). In the 1939 lectures, there is an arrow pointing upwards after “peal,” indicating non-verbally the movement of this peal into sounding, embodying the “coming-forth” of the earth into phenomenal experience. Whilst the arrow was subsequently dropped, its directional thrust strikes me as illuminating for understanding what is meant by his saying that “language speaks as the peal of stillness.” With this phrase, his concern is double: first, he wishes to characterize the way a “silent” language anterior to reference can be experienced;

second, he wishes to grasp the movement by which this originary language enters verbal articulation. In both instances, the way we conceive of verbal sound is crucial, as this becomes the mode by which this “peal” is experienced. In “The Way to Language,” which marks the culmination of his thinking of the period, and perhaps the most succinct statement on language he makes, he sums it up thusly:

The phonetic-acoustic-physiological explanation of sounding does not experience their origin in the peal of stillness, even less so how sounding is thereby brought to voice and determined [*die hierdurch erbrachte Bestimmung des Lautens*]. (GA 12: 241/121–22, tm)

There are two striking things about this passage; firstly, we can note how, through his insertion of a hyphen into *Bestimmung*, he wishes to suggest that the determination of verbal language takes place as a bringing-to-voice. This means that the fixing of the word’s semantic meaning is inextricably bound up with the human body. Indeed, Heidegger links the “phonetic” explanation of verbal sound as a sensuous token with the “physiological” explanation of sound production through the vocal cords. Secondly, this “bringing to voice” is concerned with the movement into language of two stillnesses, which would both come to sound in this “peal”: the silence of a “linguistic essence” beyond all human activity, and therefore beyond the limits of the audible, and a silence that stems from the opacity of the human body itself.

The first of these two silences is probed in the 1950 lecture “Language,” a reading of Trakl’s “Ein Winterabend.” Here he argues that silence, *Stille* (also translated as “stillness”), is by no means the “soundless” (*Lautlos*), that is, the absence of sound, but lies anterior to any sound-soundless opposition (GA 12: 26/PLT 204). This echoes his similar claim, in “Origin,” that the artwork’s “rest” (*Ruhe*) is not the lack of motion but rather the highest form of movedness (*Bewegtheit*) which furnishes motion as such. Indeed, the German *Stille* incorporates both silence and stillness, allowing Heidegger to depict the “sounding” of language as a form of movement into appearance. The “Saying” which

effects such motion would be silent/still both by virtue of lying anterior to verbal language and by virtue of its excess over verbal language. When we hear a “peal” of stillness, what we are hearing in part is this excess from within the framework that is being exceeded.

The “peal of stillness” is not only the point where silence and sounding, stillness and movement, intersect. It is also the point of contact between language’s “linguistic essence” and human speech: the “peal of stillness is nothing human” (GA 12: 27/PLT 205), and yet it peals within human speech. This means that the “peal of stillness,” when it sounds, is necessarily distorted: coming to sound, Heidegger says, “be it speech or writing, the silence is broken” (GA 12: 28/PLT 206). Arising from out of this silence, the sounding of language loses the silence that is its source; drawn into presence, it has been torn from the withdrawing movement proper to it. And yet, as Chris Fynsk has noted, insofar as language “needs” human speech, the breaking of its silence in fact becomes a condition for this silence. Not only, then, does its silence speak through, and as, “noise”; such “noise” becomes an integral feature to the silence of “linguistic essence” itself.<sup>2</sup>

**v**

Here, the “silence” that peals in human speech is aligned with an originary λόγος. In the 1957–8 lectures on “The Nature of Language,” however, Heidegger identifies a second silence out of which language “sounds.” Here, Heidegger takes issue with the notion that language is merely reference, and points to “the property of language to sound and ring and vibrate, to hover and to tremble” as evidence that verbal sound is more than simply the arbitrary husk of the signifier. As in the 1939 Herder lectures, he appeals to the “earth” as the provenance of such sounding, ringing, and vibrating: “body and mouth are part of the earth’s flow and growth in which we mortals flourish” (GA 12: 194/98). By this juncture in Heidegger’s thought, “earth” is no longer being conceived as in “strife” with “world,” but rather one of the “fourfold” that makes up the world. It is in opposition with “sky” or “heaven” (*Himmel*), whilst on a second axis, divinities are opposed to mortals.



This has a subtle shift of emphasis: whilst still characterised by its coming-forth concealing movement, earth is now thematized much more in terms of what is “sheltered” by it and “emerges” from out of it. To see how precisely “earth’s flow and growth” becomes at once bodily and linguistic, Heidegger calls upon some passages from Hölderlin, notably the description of language as “the mouth’s flower.” This phrase, Heidegger continues, lets us “hear”

the sound of language rising up earthwise. From whence? From a saying in which happens the letting-appear of world. The sound rings out in the resounding assembly call which, open to the open, lets world appear in things. . . . The sounding, the earthly of language is held with the harmony [*Stimmen*] that, playing together in chorus the regions of the world’s structure, attunes them towards one another [*einstimmt*]. (GA 12: 196/101, tm)

This “sounding” arises both out of the “earth” of the flowering mouth and throat, and out of the “saying” which first brings world to appear. In this respect, the “sounding of language” is something like the point of intersection of both movements – of saying into speech and of the earth of the body into a language that rings, vibrates, hovers, and trembles. Yet Heidegger is in fact making a far stronger claim: that these two constitute not only one and the same *peal*, but *one and the same movement*. The earth of the body engenders the “open” space in which we encounter ourselves and the world around us; at the same time, “saying” offers a “harmony” that attunes beings towards one another, thus setting them into relation and holding them within the world. We encounter an articulation at once bodily and linguistic, whose “sounding” arises out of the “earth” of this body, and even, as “sounding,” preserves this earth in momentary presence. All sounding becomes *Be-stimmung*: a bringing to voice which fixes language in presence.

VI

I would like to finish by treating briefly two final points. Firstly, this account of language's sounding movement entails a striking transformation in the category of voice. And indeed, placing the shared origin of body and language in the voice, Heidegger seems to be committing the most egregious "phonocentrism." This charge, however, would be precipitate. Heidegger's conception of "sounding" aims to think the bodily in language far beyond any simplistic privileging of speech over writing, as evidenced by the marginal notes he adds to the 1960 editions of "Origin of the Work of Art" and "The Way of Language": "Language and Body (Sound and Script)," and "Sounding and Bodying – Body and Script" (GA 5: 62/47; GA 12: 249), and in his apparent indifference in the "Ein Winterabend" lecture, cited above, as to whether human language is in "speech or writing."

Yet Heidegger's thinking at this juncture also offers a significant advance over (I'm tempted to say, it "supplements") deconstructive philosophy. At the crux of Derrida's critique of phonocentrism is the claim that Husserl attempts to secure the absolute presence of voice to the speaking subject through the motif of "hearing-oneself-speak," but cannot because voice itself is ultimately inflected with irreducible difference.<sup>5</sup> When Heidegger portrays language's sounding as the "earthwise" "rising up" of voice in throat, then voice withdraws from the very articulation it renders possible. The body becomes the site for language only as it becomes opaque to it – becomes, indeed, opaque to itself. The intersection of language and body happens, in other words, at the breakdown of bodily self-presence, which is at the same time the breakdown of a transparent λόγος. What is at issue in this silence is precisely how the human body itself, far from securing self-presence, becomes the site of an opacity that shapes our experience of presence as such and endows the limits of presence with an aporetic phenomenal weight. Heidegger depicts language's originary articulation as a "soundless calling gathering" (*lautlos rufende Versammeln*) (GA 12: 204/108); its binding power, and its capacity, in "calling," to engage

with absence, are such that they exceed our experience of the phenomenality of language.

Secondly, and finally, I would like to return to the question of poetry with which I started. Heidegger's account of the sounding of language comes through a gloss of two moments in Hölderlin: "words, like flowers," and "the mouth's flower." This moment is perhaps most famous for the denunciation of metaphor that follows his employment of these phrases, which is one further instance of his disputing a "literary" interpretation of poetry in favour of attending to its significance for the thinking of being. At the same time, and inversely, we can regret the fact that, if Heidegger situates the voice's "rising up" in these lines, he does not attend to their vocal qualities, even though he suggests that, in order to grasp language anterior to the scission of sound and sense, we should attend to "melody and rhythm in language," and to "the kinship between song and speech." Indeed, if the very notion of "sounding" is meant to antecede the sound-sense split, then for Heidegger to focus entirely on the "content" of the phrases (metaphors or similes or no) is somewhat problematic.

In this regard, the first instance I cited, from the lecture series on "Germanien," appears more successful, as the word's "sounding" concerns the meaning of an individual word and yet surfaces out of a prosodic dissonance. But here we find another problem, which is less one of Heidegger's reading practice and more one of how we might reconcile this notion of "sounding" with poetic technique more generally. The prosodic dissonance that effects the poem's "sounding" is itself engendered by a patterning of *Wortlaut*. In this case, it would seem that *Wortlaut*, a derivative form of sounding, is nevertheless that which makes such sounding possible. Or, to see it another way, we could say that Heidegger's concern is with how an anterior truth of language – its gathering of beings into an open region in which they can be articulated verbally – can surface in the words we use, and how we can use words so that they exceed the framework we have at our disposal in order to grasp a linguistic essence that exceeds our linguistic usage and withdraws from it, and yet conditions it. To this end, poetry

would employ language as a medium whose possibilities – tropological, gestural, prosodic, and so forth – would afford us an encounter with this excess. This would be why it is in poetry, Heidegger says, that we hear the “broken silence” that “shapes the mortal speech that sounds in verses and sentences” (GA 12: 28/PLT 206), because poetry attends to the limits of the modes and media of its own sounding, and thereby probes the moments at which this “broken silence” shapes the poem’s speech. To think in greater detail the relation between Heidegger and poetics as a discipline, I would suggest that the question of how poetry’s engagement with its verbal medium might render audible a prior sounding offers a productive starting point.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Michel Haar, *The Song of the Earth*, trans. Reginald Lily (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 111.
- 2 Christopher Fynsk, ‘Noise at the Threshold’, in *Language and Relation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 27–30.
- 3 Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 12.