BOOK REVIEW

Ian Alexander Moore's *Dialogue on the Threshold: Heidegger and Trakl*

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Ian Alexander Moore, *Dialogue on the Threshold: Heidegger and Trakl*. Albany: State University Press of New York (SUNY), 2022. 420 pages.

Early one winter morning, after a night of heavy snowfall, I was walking (or skiing, I no longer remember which) along a familiar path in the woods. The morning was foggy, the prevailing colors (or noncolors) of white and gray were interrupted only by the black branches of the trees. Suddenly something caught my eye at the side of the path, where the snow lay in deep drifts. A hole. And at the bottom of the hole, a bloodred stain, the only true color on the entire scene. A hare had dug frantically to escape the fox, but the fox had seized it, throttled it, and carted it off to its den. Only some scattered clumps of fur and that shocking red remained. There were no words for it. It was not the flag of the rising sun, although that crossed my mind, but merely the emblem of shed blood. That intense red was like the words of a poem, like all the words of Georg Trakl's poems. No words can be brought to bear on the words of a poem without doing harm, if only the harm of muffling or dulling those original words.

Even so, a philosopher cannot resist the temptation to write about the intensity of what she or he has seen and heard in a poem. Hardly anything else seems worth writing about. One does not dream of doing

justice: there is no justice in the tribunals of literary criticism, even when a philosopher claims the right to speak as the critic. Even in the absence of justice, however, it seems important to attempt a dialogue on the threshold of poetry. It seemed important to Heidegger, especially on the thresholds we know as "Hölderlin" and "Trakl," and it seems important to Ian Moore. Also to this reviewer.

In a brief review it will be difficult to offer even a mere summary of Moore's fine work, much less to offer any suggestions or criticisms. The criticisms, in any case, would be no more than expressions of gratitude to the author of the work, gratitude for the immense effort that has gone into this work on the threshold.

Moore's book has seven chapters, four detailed appendices, and copious endnotes. The four appendices, all of them genuine contributions to the theme of Heidegger and Trakl, present (1) Heidegger's Trakl marginalia, (2) Heidegger's "occasional" references to Trakl, (3) a key to Heidegger's references to Trakl in his principal essay on the poet, "Die Sprache im Gedicht," and (4), particularly laudable, a selection of Trakl's poems in German and in English translation.

Chapter 1, "'The Poet of Our Generation'," reflects on the apparent oddity of Heidegger's fascination with Trakl – the "incest-ridden expressionist" (1), the "drug-addicted Austrian expressionist" (11). Moore provides excellent background material on the occasions for Heidegger's two principal published encounters with Trakl during the early 1950s, "Language" and "Language in the Poem," in *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (1959). Especially useful is Moore's account of Heidegger's response to the Germanist Max Kommerell. Less convincing is Moore's account of the Carl Dallago episode involving Trakl's relation to Christianity: Moore takes Trakl's replies straightforwardly as evidence of Christian faith, but when the exasperating Dallago peppers the reticent poet with personal questions, or so it seems to me, it is best to take Trakl's replies as efforts to exasperate even further his obnoxious inquisitor. Likewise, when the wonderful poet Else Lasker-Schüler says of Trakl, *Er war wohl Martin Luther*, "Surely he was Martin Luther," one has to wonder about the smile that may have accompanied the word *wohl* (surely). In any

case, it seems to me that questions concerning Trakl's "Christianity" are less compelling than the indisputable fact that with Trakl everything seems different and sounds unheard-of. No traditional saint or apostate seems like him. Even if Heidegger's claim that both Trakl and his poetry can be declared non-Christian is unsustainable – and Derrida has demonstrated quite convincingly that this is so – it seems futile to argue the reverse. In any case, it seems to me now that Heidegger's denial of Trakl's "Christianity" is actually meant to conceal the source of his own chiliastic "placement" of Trakl's poetry. There is good reason to say that Heidegger is descended from a long line of medieval Millenarians and Millennialists. Eschatology is one of his favorite words.

Chapter 2, "Language of Bread and Wine," continues to take this Hölderlinian and Traklian locution as quintessentially Christian and sacramental, "symbols (or substances) of Christ's body and blood" (47). This seems to me overhasty and ill-advised in the cases of both poets. Moore does concede that in Trakl's poetry "there are also pagan" references to bread and wine, and he calls these "sinister" (46). That seems very strange to me. Consider the "sinister" line, *In reinen Händen trägt der Landmann Brot und Wein / Und friedlich reifen die Früchte in sonniger Kammer*, "In pure hands the peasant carries bread and wine / And the fruits ripen peacefully in the sunny chamber." Nothing sinister there; indeed, nothing "pagan." This last word, an odd malapropism and anachronism, causes Moore some trouble. At one point he does not hesitate to cite "the pagan Pindar" (57), at another point the "pagan" Virgil (91). Now, both Pindar and Virgil were many things in their lifetimes, and there were even more things that they were not. For example, neither Pindar nor Virgil was a *fin-de-siècle* dandy in Paris or a Mayan high priest at Copan during the Classical Age. But far less than either of these was Pindar or Virgil ever a "pagan." More seriously, it can be demonstrated quite convincingly that "bread" and "wine," whether taken together or separately, in both Hölderlin and Trakl have as much to do with country life and with Demeter and Dionysos as they do with the Last Supper. And, to repeat, neither of those two gods nor the country people of Swabia or Austria who bake bread and consume wine is "pagan." I have written about this elsewhere at some length, so I won't go on about it here.[1]

I think again of that red stain in the snow. Trakl's language is like that. Moore quotes Kommerell as saying, so beautifully, "The words have something startled about them, so freshly have they been broken from the quarry of stillness" (quoted at 48–49). The problem is that when you line up words from other traditions and contexts alongside them, such as words from religious traditions and texts, the result is seldom what you want it to be. When Moore lines up some words from the Book of Revelation, even those *bizarreries* fall flat beside Trakl's poems.

Moore does pose the question, "What, moreover, if Heidegger's own discourse, which mimics many of the characteristic gestures of Christianity, were itself inseparable from it?" (65). He is more than right to pose the question. For it is the only way to account for the very odd way in which Heidegger tries to "rescue" Trakl from the "degenerate *Geschlecht*" of humankind, as though Trakl shares with Heidegger his enthusiasm for the overcoming of Platonism and "the other beginning." Heidegger's monstrous claim that Trakl would have to have "jubilated" over the deaths of his fellow soldiers in World War I, since, after all, they were merely members of the paltry human race, good riddance to them, can be explained only by Heidegger's participation in a kind of quasi-Christian Millenarianism – the Second Coming now understood as the *Ereignis* (event) of an utterly new commencement, a seismic shift in the history of beyng promised by the earliest Greek thinkers but now, with Trakl, at hand. Derrida has seen quite clearly the chiliasm of this "promise," and has effectively shown its messianicity without Messianism. And Moore, as his final chapters demonstrate, has understood this quite well.

What remains are unbridgeable differences of interpretation. For example, in the remarkable line that closes Trakl's "Psalm," *Schweigsam über der Schädelstätte öffnen sich Gottes goldene Augen*, "Silently over Golgotha open the golden eyes of God," Moore sees "a glimmer of religious hope." A more skeptical reader of "Psalm" will wonder about those jaundiced eyes, the eyes of a black cat, opening over the disastrous scene of a Son being sacrificed by his Father. Religious traditions are a very mixed bag.

Chapter 3, "For the Love of Detachment," interprets Heidegger's declared "place" for Trakl's single and singular poem as *Abgeschiedenheit*, "apartness," "departedness." Moore relates this word – in Meister Eckhart's vocabulary – to *Gelassenheit*, or "releasement." It is in this chapter that Moore most effectively challenges Heidegger's insistence that Trakl wants to leave the degenerate race of humankind behind in order to instaurate a new *Geschlecht* and an "other" history of beyng. Moore counters that "there is much in Trakl's poetry to suggest deep sorrow and sympathy for the degenerate *Geschlecht*" (95). Not only "much," one may add, but just about everything.

Chapter 4, "Pain is Being Itself," offers a reading of Heidegger's pronouncements on *Schmerz* (pain), that most German of all German words, meaning both physical and spiritual pain or even agony. I have paid special attention to this chapter of Moore's book, remembering that in my discussions with Derrida during the 1980s I often insisted that his *Geschlecht* series had to devote itself to that theme. No doubt I did so because of the amount of agony that is palpable in so many of Trakl's poems. Yet Moore shares my doubts about the abstract and anodyne way Heidegger ontologizes pain:

> Heidegger's treatment, at least in the material available to scholars at present, fails to heed and account for the profound significance of irreparable ontic pain – the pain, for example, that rends the body asunder, not the pain that mends all wounds; the pain of personal loss and alienation, not the pain that gathers into community. Heidegger, for his part, dismisses this searing pain of particularity as derivative, as the product of a failure to heed the gentle call of being. (134)

I have always found it useful – and even refreshing – to contrast Freud's accounts of pain in primary narcissism and in love life with Heidegger's pieties. Particularly distressing for both Moore and the reviewer is Heidegger's treatment of the *gewaltiger Schmerz* (tremendous pain, overwhelming agony) of "Grodek," the pain of the "unborn

grandchildren" experienced by the fallen soldiers or by one who witnesses their slaughter – as Trakl did. Moore is right to say that Heidegger's reading is "monstrously tone deaf" (137) and that "Trakl is not looking forward to a new birth for the West here, as Heidegger claims" (140). Yet Moore himself does not shy from writing, "However, as I have been arguing throughout the book, this pain is mediated by the passion of the tortured Christ, whom Trakl follows in faith as he takes up his own cross" (136). I am not sure how much one may presume about another's agony. Trust the red stain in the snow, nothing else.

Chapter 5, "Poetic Colors of the Holy," attempts to glean from Trakl's poems the colors gold and blue in an effort to test Heidegger's claim that these are the colors of *das Heilige*, "the holy." Especially the blue of *ein blaues Wild* (a blue wild animal) is Heidegger's quarry. Moore finds, correctly and by contrast, that Trakl's blues are eminently "bivalent." Yet it is not a question of chromatics; it is a question of Heidegger's discourse on "the holy." Moore seems to fear, as I certainly do, that Heidegger's desire to pontificate on the holy is hardly justified either by his fundamental ontology or by his responses to the poetry of Hölderlin and Trakl. When Schelling labors on the questions of evil and the holy, as he does from 1809 onward, there is an intensity that will not stop with half-way measures or vague abstractions. That intensity is simply not there in Heidegger's efforts. And, whatever one may think of Heidegger's musings, how could one assert that they have nothing to do with the discourses of Christianity and Platonism?

Chapter 6, "*Geschlecht*," thinks through both Heidegger's and Derrida's efforts to confront sexuality and sexual difference in Trakl's poetry. Moore sees quite clearly that Heidegger is least prepared to think these particular issues through and that this lack is remarkable, since Heidegger's postulated overcoming or setting-aside of both Platonism and Christianity requires him here above all to respond. As Derrida demonstrates, it remains impossible for Heidegger to distinguish meaningfully between the two "blows" that in Heidegger's "placement" coin the human race, namely, (1) the "neutral" or perhaps even benign division into female and male *Geschlechter*; and (2) the blow that strikes discord

into the twofold and even into the sibling relationship. The "salvific holiness" of "blue wild game," observes Moore, remains ineffectual (195). Furthermore, Heidegger's anxiety in the face of the abyssal relation of humankind to animality, his deafness to the lunar voice of the sister, and above all his inability to confront the important role of the lovers in Trakl's poetry – precisely at the instant of the o n e *Geschlecht* in that poetry – and in the lives of the humans we know Ian Moore effectively demonstrates.

By the time the reader reaches chapter 7, "Spirit in Tatters," and the brief "Postscript," it is clear that Moore's book has undergone a significant development. If he has chosen for his cover image Trakl's caricature of himself as a frowning cowled monk, it is clear by the end of the book that the monk in question is a Robert Browning monk, if not "Fra Lippo Lippi" then a troubled brother from "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," whose final two lines are:

> Plena gratia
> Ave, Virgo! Gr-r-r – you swine!

If Heidegger can characterize his own path of thinking as the attempt to bring Nietzsche's task to a full unfolding, and if he can interpret the Anaximander fragment in terms of a history of being that is essentially *tragic*, he can also invoke the holy and the all-gathering *logos* of being, which, as Moore observes (201), makes of that history a *comedy*, if not a *divine* comedy. Moore writes:

> Heidegger attempts to isolate his interpretation against the metaphysics of Platonism and Christianity, but his annotation compels us to ask whether there is not something metaphysical about his aspirations for a purified homeland and a purified *Geschlecht*. How much gathering can there be before the incalculable freedom of being is rendered null? The quelling of its rage and the softening of its pain may sound appealing, but is this not ultimately a fantasy on a par with the grandest of the metaphysical tradition? Do not such fantasies blind us

> to indominable malice and thereby only fuel its flames? (209)

Moore is wise to close by citing Reiner Schürmann, whose *Broken Hegemonies* reflects on the *distressed* site of Heidegger's texts from the late 1930s to the end. "The distress of the site and the pathos of thinking indicate one and the same epochal monstrosity," writes Schürmann (quoted at 214).

There are aspects of Heidegger's confrontation with Trakl and of the Trakl-world itself that one wishes Moore had shed greater light on. What is one to make of Trakl's obsession with Elis, Sebastian, Helian – all the haunting brothers who are the early dead? What is one to make of the fearful alliance that Georg and his younger sister Gretl form against their chilly mother? What is one to make of the Catholic governess who gives the children their second language (Alsatian French) and some version of her intensely ascetic religiosity? What is one to make of the flow of identities between brother and sister, inasmuch as the shibboleth of "incest" tells us nothing about that flow? Does not Heidegger's fervor to become a brother to "the stranger" of Trakl's poetry, and thus a brother to the sister he never had, reflect some sort of phantasm stemming from what Freud calls the period of latency in human emotional development, and would that not make the history of being, at least in certain of its aspects, something like a dream of puberty? And is not Luce Irigaray – the one important interpreter of Heidegger's Trakl essays whom Moore does not cite – correct when she wonders whether the "gentleness of the onefold twofold" that Heidegger envisages for the mortals can really come from those dead boys? or whether there can be but one source of *Sanftmut*, the only source of tenderness there ever was? Would a "Christian" reading of Trakl's poems help us with any of those questions? or virtually any others? Are we not left to stand astonished in the face of the bloodred stain in the blindingly white snow of Trakl's poems?[2]

NOTES

1 See Krell, "From Candlelight to Kerosene Lamp: Heidegger and Gadamer on Trakl's 'A Winter Eve'," in *The Journal of Continental Philosophy* (3:1/2, 2022), 87–104. Section 3 of the paper, "In the Lamplight: Bread and Wine," shows how varied both Hölderlin's and Trakl's uses of these words are, whether taken together or separately, so that it seems impossible to me to reduce them to a familiar sacramental figure. Certainly in Hölderlins's case, the prevailing references are demonstrably to Demeter and Dionysos. Trakl's usages pose a more difficult question. Yet there is a good chance that Gadamer is right: bread and wine may be found on the tables of a country inn, lit by a kerosene lamp, rather than on the altar in Heidegger's candle-lit church.

2 The book is admirably researched and written, and also beautifully produced. I spotted only one typo, and one possible omission: on p. 64, line 4: "spiriual." On pp. 20–21, "This articulation [of the fourfold] allows for a difference that does abolish intimacy." Question: Is the word "not" missing between "does" and "abolish"? I am uncertain what would hang on this, but I pose the question. One regret is that the illustrations are often difficult to make out.