

The Sacred, Or the Bright Sounds of Silence
– A thinking-experiment on nature,
related (and created) to Heidegger and Hölderlin –

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Abstract

This philosophical experiment freely unfolds Martin Heidegger's dialogical approach to poetry – primarily the poems of Hölderlin, Rilke, and Trakl – with reference to the **paradigms of existential history** connected to nature and therefore environment. These paradigms originating from the Greek *physis*, and leading through the Jewish-Christian *natura* have long proved to be in need of an existential historical criticism in which the accomplishment of a revealing concern for initial and original possibilities is becoming increasingly unavoidable.

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The “concept” – or rather the **word** – of the sacred has an important place and role in Heidegger's thinking, distinct in content and significance from all other philosophies. This place and role opens the way and creates the connection to another, equally essential existential historical question, namely: what is the relation of the sacred to ... the transgression of metaphysics? For traditionally the “problem” of the sacred is primarily a “metaphysical problem” after all.

For Heidegger, the case of the sacred is raised and discussed in depth most clearly and definitely in his dialogue with Hölderlin, especially in his explanation and interpretation of the poet's hymn entitled *Wie wenn am Feiertage...*. Heidegger's discussion reveals that the hymn by the word “sacred” refers to, names, and versifies something by which Hölderlin's word “nature” has a hidden relationship with *physis*, the fundamental word of Greek antiquity. Although nature as *the sacred* is not identical to *physis*, it does not differ from it nevertheless to the

extent that the former should be specifically defined as pertaining to something else. Instead, it has and develops a hidden relationship with the latter. Far from unmasking it, the interpretation, by shedding light on its meaning, reveals this concealment and makes it truly considerable and deep, as a challenge, for the purposes of an essential kind of thinking.

Physis, this original basic word with great import, is the expression of the particular relationship of Greek antiquity with existence and the entirety of being. It is not a philosophical term in the sense that we would be able establish today which philosopher coined it and employed it “for the first time” to express existence and being. *Physis* is more ancient, more original than any other pre-Socratic fragment we possess, not to mention the Platonic or Aristotelian systems, which it entirely pervades nonetheless. So, it is only from these that we may understand still, how existence was in fact named and expressed for the Western man by the Greek spirit always perceived as fundamental and original.

The Greeks have an exceptional place on the horizon of Heidegger’s gaze. In the course of the history of existence followed by the Western man, to which Heidegger returns and looks to as well, the Greeks were the first and practically the only to experience existence in its truth as revelation in openness, revelation as unconcealment, and concealment permanently related to it as the return to itself – that is, as an actual and not only “ideal” forth-coming and advent in openness.

The actually untranslatable fundamental term of *physis* primarily means **raising, growth**. This is not a mere summing-up, nor any kind of evolution, but only the self-revelation of the concealed which returns to itself and lends presence to the emerging. Perceived as such, the *physis* means first of all the emerging (*Aufgehen*) in revelation and that what emerges: the lightness of any clearing in which something appears, is outlined, and reveals its own shadows and countenance, *eidōs*. *Physis* is thus the emerging return to itself, withdrawal, and concealing self-revelation. Although the clearing of the revealed can best be identified in the “light”, in the transparency of light, the possibility and permeability of shining, the *physis* equally refers to shadow and darkness, movement, metamorphosis, and calmness, concealment and unconcealment (truth), etc. That is why it initially means sky and earth, plant and animal, the man and his creations, gods, and human history alike.

Ever since the Romans translated the Greek *physis* into Latin as *natura* – which had previously been existence itself and the totality of beings as a “whole” –, it became a basic word denoting the Western

man's relationship with the being as something fundamentally and deeply **differentiated** from him. The dichotomies which have proved impossible to be eliminated ever since, such as nature and man, nature and intellect, nature and art, and so on, all represent this change. For the time being, we have to put aside this "translation" and the course of the history of existence taking shape and being revealed in the Jewish-Christian perception of existence. It is more important now, that although Hölderlin in his German poem uses the Latin-origin word *die Natur*, what he signifies by it is something intricately related to the truth lying in the Greek term *physis*. Let us follow more closely Heidegger's observations. Naturally, the basis of the analysis is still the hymn *Wie wenn am Feiertage....*

Hölderlin, the poet, is the disciple of nature. He derives from it, originates from it, and belongs to it, and it is nature that "raises-grows" him. Indeed, nature grows its beings as a "miraculous all-presentness" (*Allgegenwärtig*). It is present in plants, animals, humans and their creations, stones, the fate of nations, and ... in gods as well. It is present in them, but it is isolated; it does not allow itself to be deciphered by any of them. It only raises and teaches in its "light outlines" apparent in all of these. However, the lightness of its outlines is not any kind of weakness. Since all-presentness means exactly mightiness. The all-presentness of nature does not mean the aggregated, complete or exhaustive reception of all that is real, but a way of holding together the reals in which they still appear as closed and contained even at their turning-out. It holds together the highest and brightest skies and the bottomless, terrifying, and threatening depths.

This all-present, all-mighty, and thus beautiful, or indeed divinely beautiful nature surrounds the poet.

But the all-present **seemed** to be sleeping in "the time of years". Sleeping is in effect a way of being-on-the-way, and as such, self-oblivion, withdrawal, and concealment. Contrary to all appearances, the nature did not sleep, it does not sleep. It keeps vigil, but in mourning. The memory of mourning remains thus the deepest, which names nature first, but also presents it as dark. With its own dark forces. Mourning does not submerge as deep as detachment, as mere forfeit in lagging. But it always lets the self-oblivious back to himself, and thus – it also urges him. The poet mourns thus, but at the same time he suspects everything. Suspicion is the thinking-in-advance in darkness of the truth emerging with light. In suspicion, truth does not seclude itself, nor does it "reveal itself", but it is forth-coming.

Nature is thus in fact calm. Calmness is self-collection, from which all beginning that comes forth and emerges from motion derives. This is why nature is suspectingly-foreshadowingly calm. It is at itself, inasmuch as it is thought-in-advance in its forth-coming. The poets – who belong to nature and at the same time name and utter it – are those who suspect. It is only them who remain alone, enduring, to utter and name the foreshadowingly calm nature. Therefore it is exactly this uttering which decides who poets are in fact. The poets are not the versifiers, but those whose knowledge is suspicion: that is, those who measure the degree of their essence with the scale of the essence of nature.

Hölderlin's "nature" is thus not the *natura* that has become traditional for us in the West. Indeed, his use of the word condenses the viewpoint of having to name the forth-coming, the emerging. The urge is as strong, as powerful as the suspicion ensured in its own fate, as the all-present itself: the self-secluded mourning is the calm suspicion of darkness, darkness is of night, and night is of daylight. But it is dawning now! – the poet exclaims. The word "nature", *Die Natur* is not enough for Hölderlin to express this: he calls what he experiences, with suspicion, "the sacred".

The exclamation is just like the sound and calling of **nature itself**. Hölderlin calls nature "sacred" exactly by constraint of nature and his self pertaining to nature. Moreover, what he calls "dawning" is the coming of daylight. The becoming-light of the all-present in its all-present clearing.

The growth of the shining light is the most silent of all events. When the poet names this, he does not add something to nature externally, but expresses and grows (exclaims!) it. Nature grows the poet, the poet grows nature. Nature and its advent in the poetic word, which names and grows its light by its own constraint: that is the sacred. Not simply emerging, because mourning, darkness, calmness is also being-on-the-way, that is, actually emerging. But is it (still or already) sacred in itself?

Thus nature is older than the "times". Naturally, though, it is not older than time itself, but it is the "oldest" time. It is thus by no means that what is considered "supertemporal" in metaphysics or "eternal" in Christianity. Everything that is real and effective, even prior to gods, is nature. This is why Hölderlin says that nature is "above the gods of West and East". Sanctity is thus not an attribute of the gods above or one God. Sacred is not sacred because it is Divine, but the Divine is Divine because it is sacred in its own way. Nature as the sacred "does" something else

than gods: all present beings will be in it as in a clearing. The sacred is the poetic essence of nature.

The sacred is what emerges in light with the silent tinkling of arms: a suspicion which ends in its own silence, and with its silence, in the word, touching the word which shines in the poet's existence. This is how it becomes a hymn, a song – that in his own silence, its own listening, the poet watches over the silent convulsion of the sacred. The true, authentic poetic word may only burst shinningly out from silence, lit by the beam of the sacred: “Jetzt aber tagt!”

When is this “now”? This is Hölderlin's time, and not any other. But this time is a time defined precisely by Hölderlin's word. This time cannot be measured by dates, nor can it by centuries. Because this is the actual time, determined in the moment: history. History is there only where and when the essence of truth is decided in mortality in the momentariness of the beginnings. Hölderlin's term “sacred” grounds or may ground another kind of history. It is for the first time that the sacred appears as something which is beyond gods and – of course – humans. Again, it was with Hölderlin first that the poetic word became a term which can ground, or indeed grounds the beginnings. The western language of the Germans retains this word, but does not yet listen to it.

Consequently, Hölderlin uses the word “die Natur” – which is not ample enough for him, therefore he calls it “the sacred” (“das Heilige”) – to denote something which is secretly related to *physis*, the fundamental word of Greek existence, and at the same time it is different still. What is this relationship, to what extent is it concealed and different?

Physis and the sacred are fundamental words of the **beginnings**. Naturally, beginnings are beginnings because they are not born from each other. Otherwise they would only be continuations. Therefore the relationship of the beginnings can only be concealed. But beginning is only there where the essence of existence was originally experienced and uttered-named as meaning in existence and openness as non-concealment. This is what the Greek word *physis* does in a time the first traces of which are echoed by the Homeric poems, pre-Socratic philosophers, and mainly by the fragments of Parmenides, Anaximander, and Heraclitus. It is now and in this that the truth of existence and the essence of the thinker is determined. It is now and in this that the fate, the thinker's fate – that he utters existence, *his* existence over and over again – is determined. This is how existence grows (*physein*) in the thinker, and this is how he grows it himself as well historically. *Physis* and the sacred is thus existence “itself”, but in a way in which in other beginnings it has grown

present and uttered-named in the truth of the essence of thinkers and poets. The thinker utters the existence, the poet names the sacred.

However, the beginning is ... **just** a beginning. It would be a mistake to think of it as a kind of “whole” and ultimate fulfilment. Existence was uttered and named in it. Although the truth of existence is uttered and finds lodging in the word, but this should still be listened to, thought into, and thus it must still be inhabited. In its essence, this listening and thinking is not development or decline, but the explicit, considerate state of the truth of existence in itself. The “way”, the course on which thinking – being essential – does not develop or decline, but is still in motion, is the circle. The beginnings are thus on this circle in their relation to each other. This is the level on which existence and the “level” are one and the same (meaning). So when philosophy adjusts to its own essence, it does not develop at all. It must stand still and think the same thing over and over. That what was and is uttered at the beginning, and as a beginning. Again and again, in all living present. For the sake of an always possible and determined future.

All motion, every movement on the circle is essentially the beginning and the end as well. The beginning on the circle is thus a beginning only inasmuch as it starts something which is **not** exactly itself. It can only be a beginning if that what it begins will step off the circle. Development, that is the distancing from this place is a “mistake” which pertains to thinking, just like the shadow that everything casts for itself.

In the word of the essential thinkers and poets the essence of existence has touched language, reason, and the question of meaning. In their words – the fundamental words – the surfacing and shining of existence in the openness pertaining to itself receives a growing-rearing sound. Such are the fundamental words, the beginnings, the **shining sounds of existence**. It is only important that the truth of existence should reach the language, and that thinking should penetrate this language. Its old or “new” words. The continuation of the beginnings is a hasty and not adequately essential thinking. In fact, this is how fundamental words become beginnings. They start something which may also have an (other) ending. From one end to the other: this is the course of the history of existence, the historical way of the truth and oblivion of existence.

The historical overview of time and existence shows exactly that the truth of existence has been forgotten in time. The beginnings on the circle are at the “beginning” of existential forgetting in such a way that they do not belong to it still. The fate of existence in existential forgetting

is not merely a kind of negligence of human thinking – nor the rudimentariness of a thinker’s abilities – but the course of the history of existence itself. The forgetting of the truth of existence to the advantage of the streaming-in of a non-essentially thought existence. In existential forgetting, existence is distanced from the beginnings. It does not drag away the beginnings from themselves. The beginning does not move, it is only being forgotten. Naturally, distancing in forgetting is live remembering. Therefore memory means at the same time the traces of the beginnings and the yearning of its lights in oblivion.

The *physis* and the sacred are thus beginnings. But the sacred is not the re-translation of the Latin *natura* to *physis* by the devious ways of history. *Physis*, *natura*, and the sacred are not merely cases or questions of translation, but words and names pertaining to existence in times and for time. Words and names given to it by essential thinkers and poets who paid attention to, and were constrained by the pertaining sounds of the opening light, withdrawal, and fading-out. The sacred and the *physis* are thus different, because they are different beginnings in “different times” and ... for different people.

Nature as the sacred only emerges for poets, essential poets. Their essence and fate is to name the sacred. Therefore essential poets will search for the traces of the sacred in times of need as well, they listen to the returning voices of the beginning, and watch its vaguely flickering lights in the distance. Hölderlin is the poet of the poet, the poet of the essence of poetry. This is not some kind of *ars poetica*, that the poet believes, states, and undertakes. The fate of the poet of poetry is to create and consolidate the essence of poetry in the poem. Hölderlin employs this particularly poetic way of meditation to arrive to that outstanding place where the creation of the essence of poetry is determined in the experience of existence as sacred, as a poet’s fate, consolidated as beginning. The fate of the poet is the fate of poetry: the essence of poetry is the naming, uttering, enriching, and growing of existence as the sacred. Just as concealment is “within” the light of the unconcealedness of the *physis*, the darkness of the night and the light of the day are equally “within” the sacred. This is an unwavering, immovable beginning emerging and sounding silently with light from the darkness.

Similarly to the sacred, the truth of existence also becomes forgotten. However, the sacred remains untouched while it withdraws itself, and distances in existential forgetting and loss of essence. While it distances itself, it does not display its unconcealedness in its entirety. It seems therefore that something has been detached from it and has taken

its own path on the historical course of existence in the existential forgetting of being. However, it has remained untouched on the “circle” of the opening initial truth of the fundamental words of existence.

Following Hölderlin, Rilke stands on a lower step in the course of the history of existence. It is not existence, only being that is shown to him in its entirety. Therefore Rilke’s word *natura* means something which is not detached from history, is not an “object” of natural sciences, and does not oppose art, but it is the basis of history, the arts, and also of nature taken in a narrow sense. The “die Natur” denotes the existence in the entirety of its being, of the beings. Rilke is the poet of the integrity and wholeness of the beings. Not of the sacred, but of that, which may still lead to it.

The poets start out then to search for the traces of the sacred, because they experience the absence of the integrity of existential meaning. Since that what is sacred, can only appear as shining in the broadest sphere of entirety. Rilke is thus the poet of the absence of entirety, the traces and distancing lights, echoes of the sacred. This is why Heidegger calls him the “poet of the times of need”. Times of need, the neediness of time, the loss of the foundations, existential forgetting. We distance ourselves from the sacred. The sun sets, then the night falls. The sacred, distancing – remains only memory and trace.

Memory is of course not something which was once worn away, leaving some of itself behind. Memory is the absence of being-present, together with the distance from and to which it points. The darkness of the world progresses. In the loss of essence of existential forgetting the sacred only becomes a trace which will lead – if at all – to God alone. But in fact the traces which lead to this trace will gradually fade. So in Trakl’s poems the sacred is only a light covered up in the darkness of the night which only collects together by gaining its brightness in veiling alone. This is the blue in Trakl’s poems: the blueness of darkness.

The beginnings are thus at the starting point of existential forgetting in such a way that they do not belong to it. But the beginnings are words, the occurrences of the fundamental words, the essential arrival of existence in the language. This is when they will brightly resound. Their sound is a continuous, silent, careful-watchful challenge and task. But this condensed, hurried streaming from the bright sounds of silence only sees, listens and thinks as much as it can grasp and occasionally seize. This is the beginning which begins, the *Fang* of the *Anfang*. The beginning which brightly sounds, that is the fundamental word. Since its light is its sound and its sound is its light, that what is grasped of its voice

as pure sound, or of its light as pure light, leaves untouched and immobile the cohesive brightness of the fundamental word's sound. This is how some of Parmenides' ideas remain "present" through the millennia, unthought, forgotten, but always brightly resounding. Likewise, the beginning which begins and takes the course of existential forgetting and loss of essence in the history of existence is the sacred as "the moving". It is completely superfluous to find out its auxiliary addresses, because it is impossible to see and hear the sacred as the always possible essence of the truth of existence in the poet's fate.

This also makes impossible the essential dialogue of thinkers and poets as well. It is exactly the word of the essential thinker and essential poet which may decide the fate of the truth of existence in being.

However, it is quite here that the question of philosophy's ability to conduct such a dialogue – inasmuch as it is willing at times to do so – is raised. What is philosophy and where does existence stand on the course of its (western) history? Philosophy however, in its "second" beginning originating from Plato, means in fact metaphysics, even if not named as such. Metaphysics thinks of the being in its entirety – world, god, man – in its consideration of existence. Assuming, as Heidegger says, that it is not only being that derives from existence but, more originally, existence lies in its own truth and the truth of existence lives as the existence of truth, the question rises: what is metaphysics in its foundations? But if we understand it, then this question leads beyond metaphysics, because it signals that the truth of existence in metaphysics remains not only an unfounded and unknown, but as such also an unassumed "foundation". Therefore this question leads beyond the way of thinking underlying metaphysics, called logic. It also leads beyond that kind of treatment the horizons of which was opened for the sciences by metaphysics itself, and which was fulfilled in the prevalence of technology and a constructive, performance-centric calculation.

But indeed, what kind of thinking is that which is neither philosophy (metaphysics) nor science, since it has exceeded both? Well, this kind of thinking searches for assistance and guidance in existence there, where it does not appear as a kind of object or a territory to be conquered, which, from a logical perspective, always proves unthinkable and incalculable. Essential thinking concentrates on the truth of existence and helps the existence of truth in that it may find a shelter in historical mankind. The result or consequence of this kind of thinking is not such that can be taught, circulated, made public, and used. But it is such, that

in the contact with its fatal determination a different, yet in the essence of its origin also identical uniform determination is born.

Essential thinking subordinated to existence, listening to the sounds of existence coming to light, searches the word to name existence. The word from which and in which the truth of existence may touch the language. The word of the essential thinker therefore always derives from a long speechlessness, and the careful clarification of that what opens up and enlightens in this silence. However, the name of the poet derives from the same source. The poetic work and essential thinking are identical in their careful-watchful silence. But they are also extremely different: the thinker utters-relates the existence, the poet names the sacred. The poet's word by which he denotes the sacred is an essential reference point and guidance.

Nevertheless, we know little of the dialogue of poets and thinkers: the dialogue which springs from original thinking, the personal poetic and thinking essence of the truth of existence, and is completely different than the "relationship" of philosophy and poetry. Such a dialogue, which draws back into an identical but concealed origin, is the contact of Heidegger and Hölderlin uttering existence and naming the sacred, in the absence of which the determination of the transgression of metaphysics in this time of historical mankind cannot be hoped for.

However, it seems that – returning to its origins – this dialogue is the dialogue of the *physis* and the sacred, of the Greek spirit and Hölderlin's spirituality, mediated by essential thinking as an inquiring-open withdrawal to existence, the meaning of existence in Heidegger's relationship to both of them. But Heidegger is not an *organon* of this dialogue. What is more, the question of the transgression of metaphysics is decided here, and it is also revealed that **Heidegger himself is in fact a beginning** which essentially differs from all later applied "hermeneutics". That what Heidegger utters in the word *Lichtung* about "existence" and "forced" by existence, is similarly in a concealed relationship with both the Greek *physis* or that what Hölderlin's word "sacred" denotes. This is how the "sacred", just like the *physis*, stands in the "ways" of the transgression of metaphysics as an immovable beginning and at the same time a warning standing in its initial fate – that is, as an essential source and fountain.

The *Lichtung* is the openness, in which and by which something may emerge and be revealed brightly and clearly. It is something like a clearing, which opens up in a thick forest – cleared, freed and eased of its inner thickness –, and which we open in existence by our creating

existence. This is where the light may then pour in, and the infinite play of light and shadow may be formed. It is in this that the sound resounds, echoes and disappears, becomes stronger, then fades out. *Lichtung* is the open. Open to everything that comes to the present with light and silence, shadow and sound, and from there, gathered or frayed, it always departs.

The *Lichtung* is thus not “the Sacred”, nor the Greek *physis*, but it is in a concealed relationship with that to which even the *physis* of the Greek spirit keeps its relationship concealed. The transgression of Western metaphysics leads back to depths where a similarly concealed relationship, a speechless dialogue is born with the existential urges of Eastern spirituality. For Heidegger’s *Lichtung* does not simply denote existence by making its mutual relationship with the *physis* and the sacred present in essential thinking. Instead, it denotes it by placing it in a concealed relationship with the approach of far-Eastern spirituality which thinks of existence and its appearance in the vibrating and drifting compresence, consolidation and continuous vibrancy of the bright sound and sounding light as something which also appears originally as light and sound in silence, grown together purely and easily.

Therefore we must also defend, guard and take care of these thoughts. So that they should not come to us on the breezes of prattling or fashion. And at the same time we should also attempt to penetrate their grave, yet perhaps in silence brightly opening currents.

The sacred by the *Lichtung* – in a concealed way – is drawn to the way of transgressing metaphysics. “Metaphysics” is only able and willing to think of its subjects as “transcendence”. On the one hand, it thinks of them as being beyond physics, the *physis* or nature, and on the other hand, it thinks of the *meta*, the beyond as nature itself, as something radically differing from the man. But by the *Lichtung*, on the ways of transgressing metaphysics – also in concealment – the sacred sends us back to the equally original Greek *physis* ... and even beyond, to the East. And it of course helps one realize that the man is not simply a “part” – even if exclusive or special “part” – of nature, which thus always “surrounds” him as an undetachable burden, but it essentially **pertains** to it!

“Nature” as *physis* and sacred is not only some kind of “environment”, or some organic or inorganic “basis” of this environment over which the essentially different human life and human existence is transacted as “history”, and in connection to which the question of its harmonious or disharmonious relationship is raised over again (albeit too late usually), but exactly and essentially that to which the man with his

existence and in his existence originally and existential-historically **pertains**. And it is only in pertaining to it that the man may pertain to himself as well. Creatingly, that is, **poetically**. That is, being brought to life by it, **pertaining** to it and uprearingly growing it with and in its own existence, in the performed, evaded, or denied, yet essentially creating questions of its finite meanings.

Translated by Emese G. Czintos