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Ellipsis: Of Poetry and the Experience of Language after Heidegger, Hölderlin, and Blanchot

written by: William S. Allen (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007. Pp. xiii + 239.)

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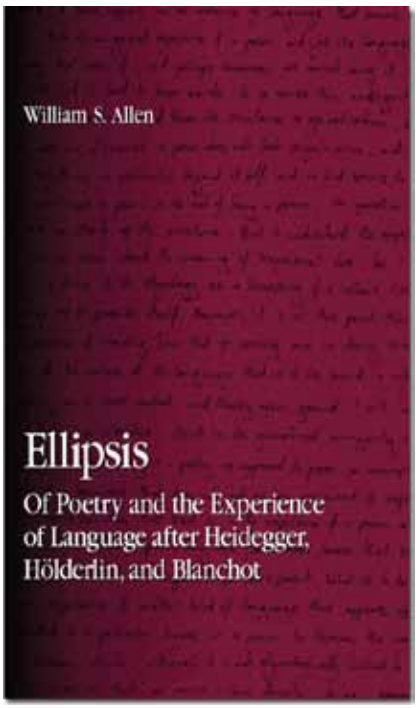

The aim of William S. Allen's book is to trace the development of Heidegger's thinking with respect to language from the early lectures on logic and Aristotle to the later texts in *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, with their apparent emphasis on the *materiality* of language ("It is just as much a property of language to sound and ring and vibrate, to hover and to tremble, as it is for the spoken words of language to carry a meaning").[1] Poets are known to inhabit this "protosemantic" region of language.[2] The question is: what would it be for a philosopher to experience this materiality, much less appropriate it in his or her own writing? The difficulty, as Heidegger himself says, is that philosophy itself, with its "metaphysical-technological" explanations designed to make everything transparent to view, defeats the possibility of such an experience. So what sort of transformation must the philosopher undergo in order to be open to such a possibility? For Allen the answer to this question is to be found in the kind of change that took place in Heidegger's thinking (and writing) as a consequence of his encounter with Friedrich Hölderlin's poetry—or, more exactly, Hölderlin's *paratactic* textuality.[3]

"Parataxis" is a distinctively *modernist* way of putting words together, namely by way of juxtaposition rather than through logical arrangements of syntax and the rule

1 "The Nature of Language," On the Way to Language, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971): 98.

2 See Steve McCaffery, *Prior to Meaning: The Protosemantic and Poetics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001); and Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

3 See Theodor W. Adorno, "Parataxis: On Hölderlin's Late Poetry," *Notes to Literature*, Vol. Two, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992): 109-49. Allen nowhere mentions Adorno, but one can read his book as a rejoinder of sorts to Adorno's critique of Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin, to wit: "Heidegger glorifies the poet supra-aesthetically, as a founder [*Stifter*], without reflecting concretely on the agency of form. It is astonishing that no one has been bothered by the unaesthetic quality of these commentaries, their lack of affinity with their object" (114).

of identity (*s* is *p*).[4] Hence the title of Allen's book: an ellipsis (…) is a paratactic figure of interruption; its temporality is not that of consecutive reasoning but rather that of the caesura, the pause or *entretemps* in which the past recedes and the future never arrives. At the same time, an ellipsis is also a figure of circularity, or that which turns back on itself without, however, arriving anywhere, as in the doomed tautology of the echo.

The figure of ellipsis also explains the conceptual importance of Maurice Blanchot for Allen's project. Blanchot is at once a philosopher and poet of fragmentary writing. In an essay on René Char's poetry—for example, *Le Poème pulvérisé* (1945), *La Parole en archipel* (1962): the pulverized poem, speech as archipelago—Blanchot speaks of

> A new kind of writing not entailing harmony, concordance, or reconciliation, but that accepts disjunction or divergence as the infinite center from out of which, through speech, relation is to be created: an arrangement that does not compose but juxtaposes, that is to say, leaves each of the terms that come into relation *outside* one another, respecting and preserving this *exteriority* and this distance as the principle—always already undercut—of all signification. Juxtaposition and interruption here assume an extraordinary force of justice.[5]

Basically Allen's book asks us to imagine, after Heidegger, a way of thinking (and writing) about language that would be elliptical in this fragmentary sense, that is, a way that is both open and finite, as in Jean-Luc Nancy's conception of thinking without *archē* and *telos*, which is to say without (among other things) concepts, categories, and logical procedures—a thinking that takes us to the limits of intelligibility by engaging existence (including language) as a region of what is absolutely singular and irreducible: resistant, like Heidegger's *Ding*, to subjectivity conceived in terms of rationality and control.[6]

Indeed, what we learn from Heidegger, particularly if, like Allen, we read Blanchot alongside of Heidegger as a kind of stand-in and interpreter, is that our relation to language is not one of mastery but one of incompetence in which our efforts to make sense of things—to take hold of them discursively—are always brought up short. As

4 See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988): 66: "Conjoined by *and*, phrases and events follow each other, but their succession does not obey a categorical order (*because*; *if-then*; *in order to*; *although*…). Joined to the preceding one by *and*, a phrase arises out of nothingness to link up with it. Paratax thus connotes the abyss of Not-Being which opens between phrases, it stresses the surprise that something begins when what is said is said." In contrast to Lyotard Heidegger regarded parataxis as the distinctive form of early Greek thinking. See *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968): 182-93.

5 "The Fragment Word," *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971): 308.

6 See Nancy, "A Finite Thinking," trans. Edward Bullard, Jonathan Derbyshire, and Simon Sparks, A Finite Thinking, ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003): 3-30. See Heidegger's critique of conceptual or propositional thinking with respect to things in "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971): esp. 24-25.

Allen argues in his first chapter, this failure was precisely Hölderlin's experience in his later poems—a failure that Blanchot articulates (in a way that Heidegger did not) in his early essay on Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin, in which, interestingly, Blanchot contrasts Heidegger's "confidence in the words of his language, the value he gives to their more or less secret interconnectedness," with Hölderlin's experience of the resistance of language and the impossibility of writing.[7] Poetry is just this experience of impossibility; that is, it is not a *work* of language but an event in which language ceases to function as a form of mediation. The paradox is that the ontological significance of poetry consists precisely in this worklessness (*désœuvrement*), where words and things impinge upon us precisely by refusing to hang together in any intelligible form.

Blanchot himself came to this insight not by way of Heidegger but from his reading of Alexandre Kojève's famous lectures from the 1930s on Hegel's *Phenomenology* in which the dialectic of negation and signification (or speech for short) is figured as a kind of murder that annihilates the singularity of things by subsuming them into concepts.[8] In his essay, "Littérature et le droit à la mort" ("Literature and the Right to Death," 1948), Blanchot writes: "In a text dating from before *The Phenomenology*, Hegel, here the friend and kindred spirit of Hölderlin, writes: 'Adam's first act, which made him master of the animals, was to give them names, that is, he annihilated them in their existence (as existing creatures).' Hegel means that from that moment on, the cat ceased to be a uniquely real cat and became an idea as well" (*The Work of Fire*, 323). Mediation is death. For Blanchot, however, poetry is the reversal or interruption of this dialectic of negation and signification:

> In speech what dies is what gives life to speech: speech is the life of that death, it is 'the life that endures death and maintains itself in it' [Hegel]. What wonderful power. But something was there and is no longer there. Something has disappeared. How can I recover it, how can I turn around and look into what exists *before*, if all my power consists in making it into what exists *after*? The language of literature is a search for this moment which precedes literature. Literature usually calls it existence; it wants the cat as it exists, the pebble *taking the side of things*, not man but the pebble, and in this pebble what man rejects by saying it.... (*The Work of Fire*, 327).

How to take the side of things? "My hope," Blanchot writes, "lies in the materiality of language, in the fact that words are things, too, are a kind of nature.... Just now the reality of words was an obstacle. Now it is my only chance. A name ceases to be the ephemeral passing of nonexistence and becomes a concrete ball, a solid mass of existence; language, abandoning the sense, the meaning which is all it wanted to be, tries to become senseless. Everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of ink, the book" (*The Work of Fire*, 327).

7 "The 'Sacred' Speech of Hölderlin," *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995): 114.

8 *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969): esp. 200-201.

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It is not immediately clear what Heidegger would have made of this. The word *Gelassenheit* comes to mind. Allen thinks that Heidegger "is nothing but 'modernist' in his understanding of art" (*Ellipses*, 223 n9), but it seems more plausible to think of him as one of the "last romantics" for whom poetry remains an event of world-making—not, to be sure, on the model of the manufacture of objects, but rather that of a primordial (decidedly non-Hegelian) *naming* that calls things into being without turning them into concepts. Allen is certainly right when he remarks that when Heidegger first takes up the subject of poetry in "The Origin of the Work of Art," his conception of poetry "has nothing to do with the region of literature associated with poems" (*Ellipsis*, 80). And this remains the case in the later writings as well, in which poetry is never mere *praxis* but is subsumed by "the higher rule of the word" that lets things be things (*On the Way to Language*, 151).[9] For Heidegger, the materiality of the poem consists not in thinglike words but in words whose sounds are echoes of "an inexpressible Saying" (*On the Way to Language*, 150). The difficulty is that these are not sounds we can actually hear, just as poetry is not meant for reading ("The sound rings out in the resounding assembly call which, open to the Open, makes World appear in all things. The sounding of the voice is then no longer of the order of physical organs. It is released now from the perspective of the physiological-physical explanation in terms of purely phonetic data" [*On the Way to Language*, 101].) Imagine Heidegger listening to sound poetry!—Hugo Ball's *lautgedichte* or Henri Chopin's *poésie sonore*.[10]

Allen's argument, however, is that, for all of Heidegger's emphasis on listening to what is soundless, there is in his later writings "a stronger if more discreet presence of the textual, material underside of language" (*Ellipsis*, 179). (Curious that Allen should place textuality *discreetly* on the *underside* of language.) Much of Allen's argument turns upon a certain way of reading the following from "Das Wesen der Sprache": "The essential nature of language makes itself known to us as what is spoken, the language of its nature. But we cannot quite hear this primal knowledge [*Ur-Kunde*], let alone 'read' it. It runs: The being of language: the language of being" (*On the Way to Language*, 76). Allen takes *Ur-Kunde*, not as "primal knowledge," but as "'original' documentary evidence, *archē*-tidings. (*Urkunde*: a 'writ,' 'scrip,' or 'certificate,' from *Kunde*, 'tidings')" (*Ellipsis*, 179). Allen does not take up Heidegger's *Was heisst Denken?*, which repeatedly and almost obsessively dissociates language from anything actually spoken or written: "For whatever is put into language in any real sense is essentially richer than what is captured in audible and visible phonetic conformations, and as such falls silent again when it is put into writing" (*What is Called Thinking?*, 206). Just so, the materiality of *Ur-Kunde* is not so much physical or corporeal as *abyssal*. If, as Allen says, the textuality of *Ur-Kunde* "is confirmed by Heidegger's dismissal of our possibility of 'reading' it," this is because *Ur-Kunde* is at the same time an event of *désœuvrement* or worklessness—writing that "has the compelling and frustrating presence of being both near and far, unavoidable and ungraspable: it is *essentially* fragmentary" (*Ellipsis*, 181-82).

In the spirit of *désœuvrement*, Allen's final chapter bears the title, "Fragmenting:

9 See Marc Froment-Meurice, *That is to Say: Heidegger's Poetics*, trans. Jan Plug (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998): esp. 80-101.

10 See McCaffery, "Voice in Extremis," *Prior to Meaning*, pp. 161-86; and Gerald L. Bruns, "The Transcendence of Words: A Short Defense of (Sound) Poetry, *The Material of Poetry: Sketches for a Philosophical Poetics* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005): 39-75.

L'iter-rature of Relation," where *l'iter-rature* is a paratactical pun that turns "literature" into a word for the kind of elliptical thinking (about language, but perhaps also about much else, including how philosophy should be written) that Allen believes should be taken up "after Heidegger," namely thinking that is both fragmentary and at the same time endlessly turning back on itself without forming any self-relation or totality. Allen refers us to Blanchot's fragmentary writing (*L'Attente l'oubli*, *Le Pas au-déla*) and Jacques Derrida's elliptical essay on poetry, "Che cos'é la poesia," as examples of what he has in mind, but his principal accomplishment in this chapter is performative. For better or worse he takes it upon himself to put *l'iter-rature* into play by way of self-reflexive writing:

> I cannot speak without being misheard; I cannot write without being mis-read, even by myself. Already I have lost my intention and your attention. I cannot speak and yet, that is all there is to say. Never can I say what I mean, although I mean everything that I say. I cannot speak, and that is why I do. I can neither speak nor write, and yet that is what is going on. There is speaking and writing here but my relation to them is no relation at all. What is happening here is impossible, and yet it persists. It is the limit of all that I can do, the end, the edge, the period. It is finitude, and yet it is itself infinite, an endless repetition of ending, an infinite finitude, a repeating period: an ellipsis. What is this ellipsis? A pause, which appears between other pauses, although it doesn't appear for there is nothing there to appear. Language is nothing but this endlessly repeated encounter with its own limits, an ellipsis in which and as which it persists (*Ellipsis*, 208).

One recalls Habermas's effort to save us from this sort of thing by affirming—against Heidegger, Derrida, and the "leveling [of] genre distinctions between philosophy and literature"—the propositional style of philosophical argument.[11] In defiance of the protocols of communicative reason, Allen's concluding paragraph gives us this parting shot: "Writing is the chattering of edible words" (*Ellipsis*, 216).

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11 See *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990): esp. 185-210.