VOCATION AND VOICE*

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The title of my paper attempts, with its etymological figure, to think in another language a German term that appears in certain decisive passages of Hölderlin and Heidegger. This term is the substantive Stimmung. If it is true that we can think only by way of language, if, as Wittgenstein put it, every philosophical interrogation can be presented as an interrogation of the meaning of words, then translation is one of the eminent means by which man thinks his words.

Now, as a great philologist once remarked, the German word Stimmung is precisely one of those words that we tend to define as untranslatable. "This does not mean," this same philologist adds, "that phrases such as 'in guter Stimmung sein' could not easily be rendered by 'to be in a good mood' or by the French 'être en bonne humeur'; 'die Stimmung in diesem Zimmer' by 'the atmosphere in this room'; 'Stimmung hervorrufen' by 'to create an atmosphere'; 'die Seele zu Traurigkeit stimmen' by 'to dispose the soul to sadness', etc. But what is missing in the main European languages is a term that would express the unity of the feelings experienced by man face to face with his environment (a landscape, nature, one's fellow man), and would comprehend and weld together the objective (factual) and the subjective (psychological) into one harmonious unity....

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The Frenchman can neither say ‘l’humeur d’un paysage’ [the (subjective) mood of a countryside] nor ‘mon atmosphère’ [my atmosphere] ... whereas the German has at his disposal both ‘the Stimmung of a landscape’ and ‘my Stimmung’. And there is also in the German word a constant relationship with ‘gestimmt sein’, ‘to be tuned’, which, with its inference of a relative solidarity or agreement with something more comprehensive ... differentiates it from ‘state of mind’.

The word Stimmung, given its obvious proximity with Stimme, voice, belongs originally to the acoustico-musical sphere. It is related semantically to Latin words such as concentus and temperamentum, or to the Greek word harmonia, and means originally attunement, accord, harmony. From this musical sense there developed, without ever becoming detached from this original sense, the modern meaning “state of mind.” It is a question, in fact, of a word whose meaning has been displaced in the course of time from the musico-acoustical sphere—to which its proximity to the voice attached it—to the psychological sphere.

It will be useful to reflect for a moment on this displacement, this change of place. The history of human culture is often nothing other than the history of such displacements or dislocations, and it is precisely because we pay no attention to them that the interpretation of the categories and concepts of the past often gives rise to so many misunderstandings.

A simple example will clarify what I mean. We know that in Greek love is called érōs. And yet, for us, love is a feeling, that is, something which is not easy to define, but which nevertheless belongs without a doubt to the psychological sphere, the inner experience of a psychic and bodily individual. We know however that for the Greeks of the archaic era, Érōs was a god, that is, something which belonged not to human psychology but to theology. The transformation implicit in the movement from érōs to love does not pertain so much to the phenomenology of love, singularly constant, as to its migration from one sphere to another. In this migration, the
pantheon of the Greeks, or later the "trinitarity" of the Christian God, shifted into us: this dislocation of theology is what we call psychology. And it is to this dislocation that we should be attentive when we translate éros by love, if we want to avoid misleading errors. Because of this, the Provençal amor—as well as the love of the stilnovisti—which is just on the dividing line between theology and psychology, has given rise to such frequent misunderstandings: indeed, there it is not clear whether we have before us a religio-soteriological ceremonial, or an adventure in the modern sense.

You will understand, then, how important it is to determine the place in which we should locate (in our case) the term Stimmung. In section 29 of Being and Time, Heidegger presents the Stimmung—which the English translators render as "mood"—as "the fundamental existential mode" through which Dasein is opened to itself. Insofar as it brings Dasein originarily into its Da—being-there into its there—it brings about, in fact, the "primary discovery of the world (die primäre Entdeckung der Welt)" (130). What is in question in it is therefore above all not the ontic plane—what we can know and feel within the world, particular "innerworldly" beings—but the ontological plane, the very opening of the world. (In Wittgenstein's terms we could say: not how the world is, but that it is, or even: not what one says as a proposition within language, but that language is.) Therefore, writes Heidegger, "it comes neither from 'without' nor from 'within,' but rises from being-in-the-world itself" (129).

"To be in a Stimmung," Heidegger adds, "is not initially related to something psychical, it is itself not an inner condition which then in some mysterious way reaches out and seeps its color into things and persons" (129). The place of the Stimmung, we could say, is neither within interiority nor in the world, but at their limit. Thus being-there, insofar as it is essentially its own opening, is always already in a Stimmung, is always already emotively oriented; and this being oriented is prior to all conscious knowledge and equally to all sense perception, to all Wissen and to all Wahrnehmen. Before it is opened in any knowledge and in any sense perception, the world
is thus opened to man in a Stimmung. “And only because the ‘senses’ belong ontologically to a being,” Heidegger writes, “whose mode of being is an affectively situated being-in-the-world, can they be ‘touched’ and ‘have a sense’ for something so that what touches them shows itself in an affect” (129). We can say, then, that the Stimmung, rather than being itself in a place, is the very opening of the world, the very place of being.

The Stimmung, however, as it brings Dasein into the opening of its Da, at the same time discloses to Dasein its being thrown into the Da, its having been always already delivered over to it. The originary opening of the world which takes place in the Stimmung is therefore always already the unveiling—says Heidegger—of a Geworfenheit, of a being-thrown, to whose structure belongs an essential negativity. In section 40 of Being and Time, in an analysis of anxiety as a fundamental Stimmung, Heidegger lays out the characteristics of this negativity. Here too what is revealed by anxiety is above all not a particular, determinable object in the world. “The about-what of anxiety,” writes Heidegger, “is completely indeterminate. . . . Thus neither does anxiety ‘see’ a definite ‘there’ or ‘over here’ from which what is threatening approaches. The fact that what is threatening is nowhere characterizes the about-what of anxiety. . . . it is already ‘there’—and yet nowhere. It is so near that it is oppressive and stifles one’s breath—and yet it is nowhere. In the about-what of anxiety, the ‘it is nothing and nowhere (nirgends)’ becomes manifest” (174–5).

At the very point, then, where Dasein comes into the opening that is most proper to it, and, in anxiety, places itself before what is new, as world, this opening reveals itself to be traversed already by a negativity and a malaise. If—as Heidegger writes—the Da is now before Dasein as “an inexorable enigma” (128), this is because the Stimmung, revealing man as always already thrown and given over to his opening, unveils to him, at the same time, that he himself has not brought himself into his Da. “As a being,” writes Heidegger, “Dasein is thrown, he himself has not brought himself into his Da. . . . Existing, he never comes up behind his being-thrown. . . . since he himself has not laid its foundation, it rests in its own weight, which the Stimmung unveils to him as a burden.” Precisely because Dasein
is opened to the world in such a way that he is never master of his opening, this opening to the world has the character of uncanniness (of not feeling at home: zu Haus).

Here we should refer to a poetic text which Heidegger has constantly in mind while he is writing Being and Time, Rilke's Duino Elegies. Already in the first lines of the first elegy, after the formidable appearance of the angel, Rilke writes that "the animals are aware that we do not feel securely at home in our interpreted world (daß wir nicht sehr verlässig zu Haus sind in der gedeuteten Welt)." And in the eighth elegy, evoking the idea of "the Open"—das Offene—in which the animal gazes with all its eyes, Rilke writes that "we never . . . have pure space before us, such as that which flowers endlessly open into: always world, and never nowhere without no (Nirgends ohne Nicht)."* 

Let us try now to recapitulate the characteristics of this Stimmung, this originary opening to the world which constitutes Dasein, and, if we can, to locate its place. The Stimmung is the place of the originary opening of the world, but it is a place which is not itself in a place; it coincides, rather, with the proper place of the being of man, with his Da. Man—Dasein—is his own singular opening. And yet, this Stimmung, this originary accord and this consonance between Dasein and world is at the same time a dissonance and a discord, a not-being-at-home and a being thrown. Man is thus always already preceded by his own opening to the world.

Why, we may now ask, does the opening of the Stimmung have the character of a scission and a dissonance? What is taking place in it? What can it be a question of according or tuning, if the only possible "tune" has the form of a dissonance?

Let us reflect for a moment on the fundamental character—the character of an arché—that Being and Time assigns to the Stimmung and to anxiety as a fundamental Stimmung. One state of mind, one passion, one Stimmung has in Antiquity a similar privilege and a similar principal character: thaumázein, astonishment or wonder, which according to a very old and constant tradition is the arché of philosophy. First of all, we can remark in passing a fundamental
difference: for the Greeks, the originary opening belonged to the optical sphere—thaumázēin is theásthai, to look—whereas for Heidegger and, in general for us moderns, it is located in the acoustic sphere (Stimmung from Stimme, voice). This is the debt modernity owes to Judaism, for which revelation is always an acoustic phenomenon. Recall that in the Bible we read: “The eternal speaks to you from the fire. You heard a voice of words, but form or figure you have not seen, only the voice.”

In what sense should we understand the acoustic character of the Stimmung and its relation to astonishment and to the other pāthē of Greek philosophy? Heidegger himself relates his treatment of the Stimmung to the theory of the pāthē of classical Greece, pointing out that the first systematic treatment of the emotions was not carried out in the domain of psychology, but in Aristotle’s Rhetoric. Now, in Aristotle’s Rhetoric, the treatment of the passions is carried out quite naturally within a theory of persuasive discourse, and thus in a narrow relation to language. But the intuition of this proximity between the passions of the soul and language, between pāthos and lógos, also characterizes the most extensive reflection which post-Aristotelian thought dedicated to the problem, that of the Stoics.

We owe to Chrysippus the radical formulation, disconcerting for us at first sight, according to which the passions, insofar as they have an essential relation to the lógos, can occur only in man. Man is subject to passions because he is a speaking animal; and he is a passionate animal because he is an animal rationale. Indeed, the passions are in no way a natural phenomenon, according to the Stoics, but a form of krísis, of judgment and therefore of discourse.

Given these premises, let us now examine the definition which the Stoics give to passion: it is pleonázousa ormē é hypérētínousa ta katá ton logón métra. The standard translation would be: “excessive impulse which transgresses the measure of language.” Ormē comes from ónymi, which has the same etymology as the Latin orior and origo and signifies “I spring forth, I am born, I originate.” The definition therefore presents a springing forth, an origin which surpasses the measure of language. Elsewhere the Stoics say of this ormē that it is apeithēs logo, “not persuadable by language” and they affirm that all pathos is biastikón, violent. What is in question in this springing
forth and in this violence? We recall that, for the Stoics, páthos is not a natural irrational element, but is linked with lógos, so that what exerts violence here can be nothing other than language itself, the excessive origin can only be that of language itself.

Among the Stoic fragments which have been preserved, we do not find anywhere so explicit a statement as this, and yet it is the only one which does not contradict the premises of their theory of the passions, of the “rational animal” as the only “passionate animal.” In any case, just as the Stimmung, which, in the very moment that it brings Dasein into his opening reveals to him his not-being-at-home in it, so does the Stoics’ theory of the passions point towards a disconnection, an excess arising in the relation between man and that which most properly belongs to him, that is, between man and lógos, language.

At this point we can formulate the following hypothesis: the theory of the passions, of the Stimmungen, is the place where Western man has thought his own fundamental relation to language. Through it, Western man—who defines himself as animal rationale, as the living being who has language—seeks to grasp the árthros, the very articulation between the living and language, between zóon and lógos, between nature and culture. But this connection is, at the same time, a disconnection; this articulation is, to the same extent, a disarticulation; and the passions, the Stimmungen, are what arise out of this disconnection; they are what reveal this interval.

And if the voice—according to an ancient tradition which defines human language as phoné énarthros, as articulate voice—is the place in which this articulation between the living and language occurs, then what is in question in the Stimmung, what comes into play in the passions, is, we could say, the in-vocation of language, in the double sense of putting into a voice and of recall, of a historical vocation which language addresses to man. Man has a Stimmung, he is passionate and anxious, because he maintains himself, without having a voice, in the place of language. He stands in the opening of being and of language without a voice, without a nature: he is thrown and abandoned in this opening, and from this abandon he must make his world, from language his own voice.
If we return, at this point, to the text of Heidegger with which we began, then a new light is shed on the theme of the Stimmung, as well as on the appearance, in later sections of *Being and Time*, of a voice of conscience. The etymological connection between *Stimmung* and *Stimme*, vocation and voice, acquires here its proper sense. In the same originary opening of *Dasein* there now appears the silent call of a Voice of conscience, which imposes a more originary understanding of the same opening that had been determined in the analyses of the *Stimmung*. Later, in “What is Metaphysics,” and especially in the “Afterword” added to the fourth edition, the recuperation of the theme of the voice is henceforth complete. There the *Stimmung* of anxiety is comprehensible only in reference to a lautlose Stimme, a voice without sound, which “is attuned (stimmt) in the terror of the abyss.” Anxiety is thus nothing other than die von jener Stimme gestimmte Stimmung, the “vocation attuned by this voice.” And the voice without sound is the voice of Being, which calls man to the experience “of the wonder of wonders: that the being is.”

Let us pass now to the second text on the *Stimmung* which we had proposed to interrogate. It is a prose piece written by Hölderlin which bears the title *Über die Verfahrungsweise des poetischen Geistes*, which we can translate as: “On the Process of the Poetic Spirit”; more precisely, it is a brief appendix to this text which itself bears the heading: *Wink für die Darstellung und Sprache*, “Indication for Exposition and Language.”

As the title suggests, in this text Hölderlin is reflecting on poetics itself, and he presents us with, so to speak, a phenomenology of the poetizing spirit. This has nothing to do, however, with what one traditionally refers to as the poetics of an author.

In the poetic art, the poet takes his poetry as a theme and determines its form and its contents. Poetics is situated in the dimension of a program and presupposes, for that reason, that the place of the poem is already opened and that the poetizing “I” is already constituted, for only by starting with this can something like a program or an intention be born.
The dimension into which Hölderlin’s text leads us is more originary than that of a poetics, for what is in question in it is the very coming into being of the poetic word, *its taking-place*. And it is in this dimension, which is not simply a dimension of language, that we encounter again, in a decisive function, the concept of the *Stimmung*. Here Hölderlin distinguishes both from the matter and from the form of the work a dimension which he defines as “formal-material” or “spiritual-sensible” and which he calls the *Grund des Gedichts*, the reason or ground of the poem—which we could translate, taking up again the old Provençal poetic vocabulary, as *razo de trobar*. (We might recall that the German language is the one which has preserved most faithfully, in the very terms by which it designates poetic activity, the medieval poetic vocabulary: *dichten* and *Gedicht* derive from the medieval Latin *dictare*, *dictamen*, which indicate the very center of poetic composition.)

Hölderlin says of this dimension that it must constitute the passage (*Übergang*) between the sensible material, that which is expressed and represented, and the spirit (*Geist*) and its ideal elaboration. It is only this intermediate element, writes Hölderlin, that “gives to poetic composition its rigor, its solidity and its truth, and protects it from the risk that the free ideal elaboration might become an empty manner and expression, sheer vanity.”

It is in order to define this dimension—which does not belong properly to lived experience and is not simply language, but which constitutes the center out of which alone the poetic work can be produced—that Hölderlin introduces the concept of the *Stimmung*. Man, he says, must leave behind mere life, “original childhood,” *ursprüngliche Kindheit*, and raise himself to a pure echo (*reinem Widerklang*) of this life and of this childhood, which he defines precisely as a pure, immaterial *Stimmung*, *stofflose reine Stimmung*, or else as a transcendental sensation (*transzendentale Empfindung*).

It is in this central moment that the space is opened in which the poetic word takes place. “Precisely in this instant,” writes Hölderlin, “in which the original living sensation, purified to the point of becoming a pure *Stimmung* opened to the infinite, is found as infinite in the infinite, as a spiritual whole in a vital whole, it is in this instant that one can say that language is intuited.” And just as life has been
spiritualized into pure Stimmung and pure sensation, so now has the Stimmung become a real and living word, in which, Hölderlin writes, "spirit and life are equal on both sides" and in which, as "a successful work and creation," it "finds originary life in its highest form and knows what it has found."

How essential it is for Hölderlin to determine this dimension, in which alone the pure poetic word can occur, is attested by the fact that, in order to define it, he feels the need to oppose it to categories proper to the thought of his two friends from Tübingen, Hegel and Schelling. He writes in fact that, since it cannot be a mere vital tension, it can be neither consciousness and reflection (because in this way its life would be lost—and here he is aiming at Hegel), nor an "intellectual intuition with its mythical, plastic 'subject-object'" (because in this way its consciousness would be lost—and here he is aiming at Schelling), but a pure Stimmung, a pure transcendental sensation. For this, it is important that this Stimmung remain pure and protected from all foreign intrusion, and, as Hölderlin writes, that the poet "in this moment assumes nothing as given, proceeds from nothing positive, that nature and art (...) speak not until there exists a language for him, that is, until what is now unknown and unnamed in his world becomes known and namable for him, precisely because it has been compared to his Stimmung and found to be concordant (übereinstimmend). For if there existed (...) for him, already in a determinate form, some language of nature and of art, then precisely to this extent he would not be within the sphere of his action, he would step outside of his creation, and the language of nature or of art (...) would come first, insofar as it is not his language."

Also in this exceptional document of the Western poetic tradition, as in the text of Heidegger we just examined, the Stimmung is the condition through which man is able, without being always already anticipated by a language not his own, to proffer his own voice, to find his own words. Already at the beginning of the modern lyrical tradition—in the poetry of Provençal, the stilnovisti and the
Minnesänger—this condition was located in a Stimmung. Whether it was called Amor, amore, or Minne, in each case it designated the experience of dwelling in the origin of the word, the locating of the λόγος in the archē.

What is in question in the Stimmung is the possibility, for speaking man, of experiencing and experimenting with the very birth of the word, and therefore of grasping the very taking-place of this language, which, constantly anticipating him, throws and destines man outside of himself into a history and a tradition. For only if man could grasp the very origin of the signifying function which always anticipates him, would the possibility of a free language be opened for him, a language that is truly and integrally his language. Only in such speech could the philosophical project of a thought without presuppositions and the poetic project of an absolutely proper language find sense and reality.

Indeed, it may be that freedom can only mean freedom from nature and from language. If language liberated us from nature only to throw us into a historical destiny where the historical Destinator incessantly anticipates us and slips away, there would be no freedom possible for man. Freedom is possible for speaking man only if he is able to come to terms with (venire in chiaro) language, and, taking hold of its origin, to find a speech that is truly and entirely his own, a speech that is human. A speech that would be his voice, as the song is the voice of the birds, chirping the voice of the cricket and braying the voice of the donkey.

But can the Stimmung, by becoming a Stimme, give to language a place and, in this way, make it proper to man, the animal without a voice? Can the passionate historical vocation that man receives from language be transformed into a voice? Can history become the nature of man? Or is it not rather limited to bringing man face to face with his absence of voice, with his aphonia, thus placing him purely and immediately before his language?

_Translated by Jeff Fort_

2 [TN. Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. J. Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 126. Henceforth, quotations from this translation will be followed by the page number in parentheses. I have occasionally modified the English translation in accordance with Agamben’s Italian. One important example: Agamben frequently uses terms (whether in citations or in his paraphrases) which denote “opening” (aprirsi, apertura), and I have translated them literally, as here. But it should be noted that these terms correspond to the German terms (based on the verb erschliessen) which are rendered differently in the English translation, as “to disclose” and “disclosure.”]


4 [TN. Normally Stimmung is not translated as “vocation,” which is reserved for another closely related term, Bestimmung (meaning also “determination”). According to his refiguring of Stimmung as “in-vocation,” Agamben’s translation is justified by the connection he makes—following Heidegger—between having a Stimmung and being “thrown” into a given historical situation, a being thrown which “determines” a trajectory that can be likened to a vocation in that it seems to open the possibility of a proper “destination”—and the promise of a proper voice.]
