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GESCHLECHT III: AUTHENTIC FAITH, RELIGION, AND POLITICS IN
DERRIDA'S READING OF HEIDEGGER'S GEIST

Jacques Derrida's prolonged and intimate proximity to the thought of Martin Heidegger has played a significant role in the understanding and debate of Derrida's religious inflections and in the theorizing of the relationship between deconstruction, religion, and politics in general. This proximity becomes particularly clear in the treatment of spirit [*Geist*]: over decades and across texts, Derrida continually returned to analysis of Heidegger's use of this term and concept as a way of working through his predecessor's relationship with faith and religion, with Nazism, with worldliness, language, poetry, and other fundamental avenues of Heidegger's thought. In essence, Derrida saw spirit as a particularly powerful lens through which to interpret Heidegger's conceptual trajectory. This necessitated, for Derrida just as any other reader of Heidegger, an interrogation of spirit's place in Heidegger's political beliefs and the extent to which early conceptual commitments regarding spirit and faith necessitated his turn towards Nazism as well as the nationalistic nostalgia he maintained long after his formal association with the party ended. By taking the recently translated *Geschlecht III: Sex, Race, Nation, Humanity*¹ alongside late works like "Abraham, the Other," the picture of a set of political concerns which are present throughout Derrida's corpus appears as rooted in his persistent interrogation of Heidegger's shifting usage of *Geist*.

In the first two sections of this paper, I trace Derrida's writings on Heidegger's spirit, first in *Being and Time* and then in both the rectoral address at Freiburg and *Introduction to Metaphysics*, all of which Derrida reads in "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone" (1983) and *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* (1989). Given the number of texts at play, as well as my primary concern with the insights brought out by newly translated work, my exegetical work in these sections will necessarily be schematic. In the third section, I read Derrida's assessment of Heidegger's 1953 essay on the German poet Georg Trakl, "Die Sprache im Gedicht," and argue that *GIII* represents a place in Derrida's writing where

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Geschlecht III: Sex, Race, Nation, Humanity*, trans. Katie Chenoweth and Rodrigo Therezo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020). Hereafter referred to as *GIII*.

interrogation of spirit as both a concept and as a figure in Heidegger's thought overlaps with his thinking on religion and faith, and represents a point of transition to thinking of these concepts as overtly intertwined with political concerns.

In *GIII* Derrida challenges Heidegger on his questioning of Trakl's Christianity, and suggests that Heidegger – through his insistence that Trakl's Christian motifs can be reduced down to a primordial Germanic spirituality – himself falls into the trap of programmatic thinking which so much of Heidegger's middle and late writings were devoted to outlining and castigating. Heidegger, in "Die Sprache im Gedicht," attempts to show that Trakl's supposed Christianity is in fact not that at all, but rather some other originary spirit that comes prior to religion and which is rooted in the attachment he has to German language and land. Articulated in response to this, an understanding in *GIII* of the 'Christian in crisis' as authentically faithfully Christian is what, I argue, is the prelude to Derrida's own notions of God and faith found in the later texts and particularly to how Derrida's thinking on 'Judeity' is bound up with politics, especially as it appears in "Abraham, the Other" (2003). It is because of his oeuvre-spanning attentiveness to Heidegger and the way he manipulates spirit towards ghastly political ends that Derrida arrives at this quasi-theological movement.

Given this intertextual and interpersonal relationship, the recently translated *Geschlecht III* occupies an important place among Derrida's texts for those seeking to understand the relationship between these two thinkers, particularly on the topics of religion and politics. Heidegger is often seen as Derrida's closest interlocutor, a relationship which is often at once tendentious and critical, though as others have said, Derrida never simply writes *against* Heidegger, particularly regarding religion. As Derrida writes in "A Silkworm of One's Own," his prayer shawl has been "woven in" to all of his texts on Heidegger.

Reading Faith and Spirit in *Being and Time*

In his readings of Heidegger's earliest sustained engagement with *Geist*, Derrida does not explicitly confront the political resonance the term would later take up for Heidegger. For this reason, attention to Heidegger's early texts plays a small yet important role in understanding the relationship spirit, politics, and faith will take up for Derrida at a later point. To this end, a brief explication of the roots of Heidegger's spiritualized Nazism is valuable. What appears clearly in Derrida's writing on *Being*

*and Time*² is that he sees a form of faith at the heart of the text's project and thus at the outset of Heidegger's systematic thinking on Being. Across a number of texts Derrida begins to articulate the ways in which Heidegger unknowingly intertwined spirit and faith such that they cannot be unraveled, a relationship which grows into the tie between spirit and Nazism. Between "Faith and Knowledge" and *Of Spirit*, Derrida identifies faith at the root of the very possibility of the questions Heidegger puts forward in *BT*, working against the common interpretation of that text as the apotheosis of Heidegger's de-theologizing of his early sources like Augustine, Paul, and Pascal, and despite Heidegger's own insistence on the efficacy of the project of *Destruktion*. This latent faith – despite the circumscription Heidegger attempts to maintain throughout *BT* – leads to the conceptual possibilities for spirit being left open, through which they metastasize over the following years through public texts like "The Self-Assertion of the German University" and *Introduction to Metaphysics*, as well as in the (at the point of Derrida's writing unknown and unavailable) Black Notebooks.

Derrida's critical reading of Heidegger's distinction between faith or the divine and religion appears sharply in §18 of "Faith and Knowledge" regarding Heidegger's assessment of the Romans: "*As for the 'Roman,' does not Heidegger proceed, from Sein und Zeit on, with an ontologico-existential repetition and rehearsal of Christian motifs that at the same time are hollowed out and reduced to their originary possibility?*"³ Ultimately failing at the goal of extricating himself from a religious, and specifically Christian atmosphere, Heidegger's de-theologizing movement – which sets up the stakes of the question of Being itself – is left incomplete, and this residue remains operative throughout his corpus. In arguing this, Derrida offers the distinction between revelation and revealability as a signpost:

(19) *In its most abstract form, then, the aporia within which we are struggling would perhaps be the following: is revealability (Offenbarkeit) more originary than revelation (Offenbarung), and hence independent of all religion? ... Is this not the place in which 'reflecting faith' at least originates, if not this faith itself? Or rather, inversely, would the event of revelation have consisted in revealing revealability itself, and the origin of light, the originary light, the very invisibility of visibility? This is perhaps what the believer or the theologian might say here, in particular the Christian of originary Christendom, of that*

² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row), 1962. Hereafter referred to as *BT*.

³ Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone." In *Acts of Religion*, trans. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 54. Italics in original.

Urchristentum in the Lutheran tradition to which Heidegger acknowledges owing so much.⁴

In other words, Derrida here reads Heidegger's covert reliance on Christian remnants as bypassing the aporetic question of whether revealability necessarily precedes revelation.⁵ To Heidegger, revealability (in, again, a covertly Christian form), as Michael Naas puts it, "ultimately revealed a kind of revealability more originary than all revelation, a sort of 'originary Christendom."⁶

If revealability, the *possibility* of revelation, is for Derrida "the invisibility of visibility," then it becomes easy to see why, later in FK, he begins to question the possibility of Heidegger's separation of thinking from religion (of faith from knowledge, as it were), a point where Heidegger is most adamant about his principle that "Belief [or faith] has no place in thought,"⁷ which grows out of the project of destruction. As Derrida argues, while Heidegger denounces faith in thought, he relies – at the very opening of *BT* – on the faith of a shared "pre-comprehension of the meaning of being" in order to orient his project. As Derrida points out, this supposedly shared, indefinite, hazy preconception of Being "is not an empirical fact,"⁸ but rather a trace of faith. It is a necessarily preexistent foundation upon which Heidegger's ontology is built, similar (as Derrida reads) to the way that God operates in a Christian cosmology.

As Heidegger sets things up at the outset of *BT*, this preconception is in place prior to any questioning of Being –

Inquiry, as a kind of seeking, must be guided beforehand by what is sought. So the meaning of Being must be available to us in some way...We do not *know* what 'Being' means. But even if we ask, 'What is "Being"?' , we keep within an understanding of the 'is', though we are unable to fix conceptually on what the 'is' signifies...But this vague understanding of Being is still a Fact.⁹

Whether or not most readers would agree that this reliance on the "vague average understanding" of Being constitutes faith per se on Heidegger's part, it is that this is one of the central claims of "Faith and Knowledge" – to open up the possibility that

⁴ Ibid., 54.

⁵ Similar issues of precedence in Heidegger will reappear for Derrida later regarding the *Ort* of Being in "Die Sprache im Gedicht."

⁶ Michael Naas, *Miracle and Machine: Jacques Derrida and the Two Sources of Religion, Science, and the Media* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 324.

⁷ Heidegger, "The Anaximander fragment," cited by Derrida, FK, 94.

⁸ Ibid., 96.

⁹ *BT*, 25.

Heidegger leaves faith untouched and that we can see this in writings which serve as the groundwork for his future thought: "... the point of departure of *Sein und Zeit* resides in a situation that cannot be radically alien to what is called *faith*. Not religion, to be sure, not theology, but that which in faith acquiesces before or beyond all questioning, in the already common experience of a language and of a 'we.'"¹⁰ This is to say simply that what for Heidegger is fact is for Derrida rather a question of faith.

This sense of faith as the predication of the entire program of *BT* is what connects it to spirit as it appears in *BT* and beyond. Throughout *BT*, spirit is invoked only in a circumscribed form, bound by quotation marks limiting its free use and binding it to a colloquial meaning. The "spirituality" gestured towards here that resurfaces in *BT* is related to *Dasein*'s unique spatiality, that is to say its *temporal worldliness*. While Heidegger denies that *Dasein*'s spatiality is merely due to a merging of a corporeal body with a "spirit," he goes on to say that it is precisely because of *Dasein*'s "spirituality" that it can be spatial and corporeal in a way that is different than the *vorhanden*: "...because *Dasein* is 'spiritual,' and only because of this, it can be spatial in a way which remains essentially impossible for any extended corporeal Thing."¹¹

While the scare quotes serve to distance Heidegger from spirit in this text, he still relies on it in this diminutive form, a form which, according to Derrida, begins a process of "re-Germanization"¹² of Heidegger's concept of Being, and it is this description of *Dasein*'s spatiality which will eventually tie spirit to the German people and the German *Heimat*:

As early as *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger takes up the values and the word 'spirit,' simply in *quotation marks*. He thus assumes it without assuming it, he avoids it in no longer avoiding it. To be sure, this un-avoidance now supposes and will henceforth maintain the earlier delimitation. It does not contradict, but confirms and renews the necessity of avoiding (*vermeiden*), and will always do so. And yet, along with the word, even enclosed in quotation marks, something of spirit...allows itself to be withdrawn from the Cartesian-Hegelian metaphysics of subjectivity. Something which the word "spirit" still names between quotation marks thus allows itself to be salvaged. Spirit returns. The word "spirit" starts to become acceptable again.¹³

¹⁰ FK, 96.

¹¹ BT, 368.

¹² Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 23.

¹³ loc. cit.

Spiritualizing Nazism

The sense in which the spiritual remainder of *BT* is tied to spatiality will ferment over the six years that span between *BT* and Heidegger's inaugural address as rector at Freiburg, in which he first takes up the term freed from delimitation. "The Self-Assertion of the German University" is where Heidegger develops the idea of German higher education as the cradle of the spiritual education of the *völk*. That is to say it is in this text where Heidegger identifies the university as the place in which to illuminate to the German student their unique ontological standing as among the people most attuned to the questioning of Being. This is to be facilitated under Heidegger's leadership by a reanimation of the different arms and aims of the university:

If we will the essence of science understood as the *questioning unguarded holding of one's ground in the midst of the uncertainty of the totality of what-is*, this will to essence will create for our people its world, a world of the innermost and most extreme danger, i.e., its truly spiritual world...¹⁴

This ultimately amounts to Heidegger's first open step in operationalizing spirit towards the ends of politically-oriented nationalistic nostalgia, although it is couched in the language of a resistance to modernity and mechanistic thinking. To create a "spiritual world" for Germany is, for Heidegger, to reject the progression of Western thought through a fundamentally new orientation of the meaning of scientific inquiry as working towards an ultimately spiritual project. As Heidegger puts it "'spirit' is neither empty cleverness, nor the noncommittal play of wit, nor the endless drift of rational distinctions, and especially not world reason; spirit is primordially attuned, knowing resoluteness toward the essence of Being."¹⁵ What Heidegger describes here in negative terms would, if inverted, represent a pithy version of the critiques of modernity found in texts like "Age of the World Picture" or, as we will come to see, *Introduction to Metaphysics*. It is crucial to note that this deployment of spirit is also, to follow the logic of Derrida's reading of *BT*, to embed faith in the Nazi project via spirit, since spirit and faith have been tied together from the outset of Heidegger's project.

Derrida spends a great deal of time reading the rectoral address in *Of Spirit* and sees an "essential and internal

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," in *Philosophical and Political Writings*, edited by Manfred Stassen (New York: Continuum, 2003), 6.

¹⁵ Loc. cit. This is the first direct definition of spirit we get from Heidegger's writings.

continuity"¹⁶ between the circumspect and hamstrung spirit of *BT* and the 'inflamed' spirit in 1933's address. This inflammation will eventually, in texts like *Introduction to Metaphysics* and the Black Notebooks, be openly put to work towards the political and metaphysical ends of National Socialism. It is quite clear from *Of Spirit* that Derrida sees deep threads running between Heidegger's earliest work – with particular attention to *BT* – and his political positions as the second world war approached. To put the progression as Derrida sees it thus far in simple terms, a form of faith is the unspoken justification for any questioning after Being that Heidegger proposes; and if spirit as defined in the rectoral address is, in essence, the ability to question after Being, then it appears to be impossible for Heidegger to think questioning without faith. The question then becomes – if one wishes to follow Heidegger's hermeneutic to any extent – how to think about faith and Being without following Heidegger's path towards such vile political ends.

At this point Derrida's appraisal of Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics* becomes crucial, for if, as Derrida says, "the *Address* relaunches and confirms the essential elements of *Sein und Zeit*, so the *Einführung* [*Intr. to Meta.*] repeats the invocation of spirit launched in the *Address*."¹⁷ The *Introduction* develops the precise mechanics of the link between Being and spirit which the address leaves unsaid, and as Derrida puts it, "it even relaunches it, explains it, extends it, justifies it, specifies it, surrounds it with unprecedented precautions."¹⁸ Derrida's reading will be supported by what is eventually found in the Black Notebooks, and particularly in *Ponderings* II and III, though he never had access to them.¹⁹

As Derrida succinctly puts it, the relevant thrust of the *Introduction* is that "One could say that he spiritualizes National Socialism"²⁰ by characterizing spirit in terms of the "blood and earth" of the German people, by virtue of which they might create a spiritual world which resists the "great pincer" of Russia and America's "mathematical-technological thinking of the modern age."²¹²² What is called the "battle community" of

¹⁶ *Of Spirit*, 35.

¹⁷ Ibid., 41.

¹⁸ Ibid., 41.

¹⁹ Commentary on the Black Notebooks – to mirror their place in Heidegger's trajectory of thought – will occur marginally – as parallel and yet no less conceptually central – in footnotes.

²⁰ Ibid., 39.

²¹ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 40.

²² In *Ponderings* II we find further confirmation of this in a medium where Heidegger was a deal more experimental than anywhere else, constellating ideas prior to their systematization in published writing:

How everything has become accessible to 'meditation' and reflection today! Nothing can any longer resist analysis or withdraw from it.

German teachers and students in the *Address* must be ready to take up willful arms against that time when “the spiritual strength of the West falls and the joints of the world no longer hold,”²³ such that Germany’s “splendor and greatness” might persist.²⁴ As Derrida reads it, Heidegger’s dogged attempts to get back behind the Greeks – to employ spirit in dissolving the rhetoric of subjectivity and truth upon which the history of metaphysics relies, and towards which he levels *Destruktion* – “is not just a risk run,” but one realized. The risk that is run by tying this metaphysical goal to the German people – and to emphasize

Yet—still more fatally—we believe we would come in this way to the ground and soil, whereas we merely suck the blood out of the last impulses and forces of active and constructive questioning. Should everything be swallowed up in analysis? Or do we come and finally bring ourselves—each one with his own mission—into the thrilling and unfamiliar moment of populist-spiritual action? (*Pond.* II §231, 74-75.)

At this point the initiation of the ‘beginning’ is still something Heidegger sees as a volitional possibility—should, by force of a ‘populist’-national and personal will, the German people choose to undertake it, they might hasten the downgoing [*Untergang*] of the history of the West. That is, they might fulfill the spiritual destiny of the German people. What lies after this *Untergang* remains unknown to Heidegger, but what stands in the way is clear—“*The harm of the human sciences, the sciences of the spirit* [meaning those sciences which seek to calculate, represent that which is properly spiritual]—how they inundate, destroy, and disempower everything spiritual.” (loc. cit.)

²³ RA, 11.

²⁴ Again, resonances in *Ponderings* III. While in the *Address*, geopolitics is certainly an atmospheric backdrop, in the *Introduction* it becomes a priming focus. In *Pond.* III we can see the development of this turn towards painting the specter of the non-Germanic West as paradigmatic of representational modernity:

The communal-civil happening is to be unfolded in its actuality in order to attack all the harder and sharper and fuller the floundering (rootlessly and without rank) of the new spirit—i.e., in order to guide the awakening actuality of German Dasein to its greatness for the first time, a greatness concealed to this Dasein and waiting for it, a greatness around which the most fearful storm is raging. (*Pond.* III §§5, 80.)

So here obviously is the preference, again, for the German people as those whose ‘unique greatness’ prepares them to weather the storm of calculative modernity through the willful enactment of the spiritual project. It is in this period (around the time of the *Address*) that the rhetoric of the will first begins to fade, and by the time that the *Introduction* is published it will be, to an extent, displaced by the concept of questioning as attunement to unconcealment—the ‘logic of silence’ that begins to emerge in *Pond.* IV (contemporaneous with the *Introduction*). For example, in *Pond.* III, Heidegger intimates that the work of the rectorship, that is the work of education towards the question of Being, is to be acting “against my [Heidegger’s] innermost voice.” (*Pond.* III §§8, 81. See also §65, 94.)

Yet at this point he has not totally given up on the grand nationalist project as one of volition, for “the great experience and fortune that the Führer has awakened a new actuality, giving our thinking the correct course and impetus. Otherwise, despite all the thoroughness, it would have remained lost in itself and would only with difficulty have found its way to effectiveness. Literary existence is at an end.” (*Pond.* III §10, 81.) It is Nazism, symbolized by the “spiritually political leadership” (*Pond.* III §30, 85.) of Hitler which ends the possibilities of ‘literary existence,’ which I take to mean the possibility of non-political thought—“*Metaphysics as metapolitics*.” (*Pond.* III §32, 85.) As we see initially in the *Address*, and then in *IM*, it is the leader who inspires spirit in the *Volk*, and the pastoral possibility remains alive in spite of its now-beginning decline from pride of place in Heidegger’s thought.

the conceptual chain, thus back to the spatiality of Dasein – results in “terrifying contaminations.”²⁵

If its [the *Rectoral Address*] program seems diabolical, it is because, *without there being anything fortuitous in this*, it capitalizes on the worst, that is on both evils at once: the sanctioning of Nazism, and the gesture that is still metaphysical.

And if “the *Address* relaunches and confirms the essential elements of *Sein und Zeit*, so the *Einführung* [*Intr. to Meta.*] repeats the invocation of spirit launched in the *Address*.²⁶ That is to say simply that if the *Address* picks up on faith where it is left open in *BT* and modulates it into spirit, then *IM* takes spirit over from the *Address* and furthers its embeddedness in Heidegger’s project.

Derrida registers that this shift between the rectoral address and *IM* accompanies a shift in thinking for Heidegger about the possibility of questioning itself: “...if nothing precedes the question in its freedom, not even the introduction to questioning, then the spirit of spiritual conduction... can be interpreted, through and through, as the possibility of questioning.”²⁷ This is to say simply that by the *Introduction*, Heidegger shifts from thinking the questioning of Being as a given possibility to thinking about the *very possibility* of the *Seinsfrage*. Thus, since spirit is what predicates questioning in the first place, once questioning itself takes center stage, so must spirit. And insofar as this is the case, the political resonance with which Heidegger has invested spirit – the resonance of a metaphysical Nazism – must also take center stage. This trajectory and Derrida’s reading of it relate explicitly to religion and faith, a relationship which appears in Heidegger’s criticisms of Christianity in both the *Introduction* and “Die Sprache im Gedicht,” an essay from 1952 on the poet Georg Trakl.

Geschlecht III and Beyond: Spirit, Religion, and Politics After Heidegger

That Heidegger antagonizes a particular version of Christian faith in working out his notions of German spirit and proper questioning is no secret. At the outset of the *Introduction*, Heidegger uses the idea of a Christian secure in their faith as the foil to his thesis of uncertain questioning:

²⁵ OS, 40.

²⁶ Ibid., 41.

²⁷ Derrida, ibid., 43.

One who holds on to such faith as a basis can, perhaps, emulate and participate in the asking of our question in a certain way, but... if such faith does not continually expose itself to the possibility of unfaith, it is not faith but a convenience. It becomes an agreement with oneself to adhere in the future to a doctrine as something that has somehow been handed down. This is neither having faith nor questioning, but indifference...²⁸

In other words, the Christian way of asking after Being, in presupposing an answer rooted in and provided by God, in fact sidesteps the issue entirely. If the *Grund-* and *Vorfrage* are inherently unstable and uncertain, then the presumption of a divine answer prevents authentic asking in the first place. As Heidegger says, "Anyone for whom the Bible is divine revelation and truth already has the answer to the question...before it is even asked."²⁹ In Heidegger's sense they are not even truly asking. Heidegger's framing of questioning is an always open uncertainty, yet one which forecloses any possibility of a 'questioning faith,' and becomes critical to thinking faith for Derrida.

While both Derrida and Heidegger share the conviction that authentic thinking on Being is always already laced with uncertainty, they diverge when Heidegger asserts that the Christian is constitutionally incapable of such uncertainty within the framework of Christianity. Because of this, Heidegger vocally maintains that God and faith have no place in proper thinking, going so far as to say that "A 'Christian philosophy' is a round square and a misunderstanding."³⁰

But why does Heidegger arrive at such a dogmatic stance on Christianity? One which ignores the plurality of ways in which faith might operate not only for Christians (his specific target here) but for all who have faith of some sort in a divine presence (an implicit target)? Why does a degradation of religion, thought to be distinct from and mutually exclusive with the primordial German spirituality, predicate authentic questioning after Being? These are questions which bother Derrida, who in *Of Spirit* was perplexed by how Heidegger could have landed at this conclusion. If, as Heidegger himself makes the case in the *Introduction*, the question is originary, as that which comes prior to all other thinking, then it ought to come, as Derrida says, "before all politics, all psychagogy, all pedagogy."³¹ This is to say that, insofar as spirit has come to be tied inextricably to Nazism for Heidegger, it cannot predicate questioning, nor can the

²⁸ Heidegger, *ibid.*, 8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

commitment to deriding faith. Precisely the opposite should be true – spirit should foreclose the possibility of such a factional alignment, of such a dogmatic adherence to a political structure. In other words, in making use of spirit as a justification for Nazi doctrine, Heidegger makes the very mistake for which he castigates the Christian – he allows a presupposed truth be that which opens up the possibility of his questioning. For Derrida, “all this conducts the *Einführung* back to the *Rectorship Address*,” and begins to put forward “a kind of *geopolitical* diagnosis, of which all the resources and all the references return to spirit...”³² and under which “the German people...this ‘metaphysical people’ par excellence, is at once the most spiritual, and the most exposed to danger.”³³ This reference to a collective, to a ‘we,’ again gestures back to that originary faith found by Derrida in *BT*, for “Geopolitics is none other than a *Weltpolitik* of spirit.”³⁴

What was perplexing to the Derrida who wrote *Of Spirit* is no less so to the Derrida of *Geschlecht III*.³⁵ While by 1953, when Heidegger wrote “Die Sprache im Gedicht,” he was of course no longer formally and publicly associated with political Nazism, many of the nationalistic sentiments which led to the ‘spiritualizing’ of Nazism in the first place remained intact. In fact he only intensifies his antagonism towards Christianity through his assessment of Trakl. And yet, for all the digressions and distancing we have noted thus far, Derrida nevertheless remains, throughout *Geschlecht III*, committed to at least some significant aspects of Heidegger’s thought. As Rodrigo Therezo has argued, *Geschlecht III* can be read as a place where Derrida’s reading of Heidegger runs quite close to Heidegger himself and where the process of reading itself, both of Heidegger reading Trakl and Derrida reading Heidegger, is quite fraught.³⁶ Derrida’s sustained writing on Heidegger and spirit represent an enduring and energetic drive to understand spirit’s place in the questioning of Being, though those are of course not his own terms, and to the importance of that questioning to the relationship between religion and politics. However, one of the most important places where Derrida takes up a stance of

³² Ibid., 44.

³³ Ibid., 45.

³⁴ Ibid., 46.

³⁵ While *GIII* has only recently become available to the public, and even more recently in English, it was originally composed as lecture notes for Derrida’s 1984-85 seminar in Paris. A detailed account of the movement of this text from inception through publication can be found in David Farrell Krell’s *Phantoms of the Other: Four Generations of Derrida’s Geschlecht*. See specifically chapter five. Important to note for the purposes of this paper is that the material that appears as *GIII* was conceived several years prior to the appearance of *Of Spirit*. What this shows is that the religious and political concerns that appear in force in *GIII* are working in the background of and conditioning the trajectory of *Of Spirit*.

³⁶ Rodrigo Therezo, “Doublings.” in *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* vol. 24, 2019.

distance from Heidegger is on the notion of the ‘place’ [*Ort*] of Being, an appraisal which very much predicates the passages explicitly taking on Christianity and faith.

Much of Derrida’s take on the Trakl piece is an attempt to work out Heidegger’s method of reading, one which attempts a separation from traditional methodology of poetic interpretation. Characteristically dismissive of what he takes to be Western traditions of philosophical and critical thought, Heidegger attempts to circumvent such conventions in reading Trakl. The preliminary dismissal of method does double duty: on one hand it allows for a radical and counterintuitive assessment of Trakl’s poetry. On the other hand, it vouchsafes Heidegger’s own method and conclusions, as he has already disregarded the critical tools which might be turned against him. It is this atmosphere in which Derrida is taking up a reading of Heidegger on Trakl, a reading which focuses on Heidegger’s distrust of ‘method’ coming from the pitfalls he sees in its conceptual presuppositions.

Having acknowledged the difficulty of criticizing Heidegger from within this atmosphere, Derrida nevertheless pushes us to think that there is perhaps a residue of conceptual presupposition which remains operative for Heidegger himself in “*Die Sprache im Gedicht.*” Derrida reads Heidegger as implicitly relying on the concept of a ‘place’ [*Ort*] at the end of the ‘path’ [*Bewegung*] of questioning, and of the path itself as existent. This extends into the poetic origins of Trakl’s work through Heidegger’s insistence on an originary poetic thread which gives Trakl’s poems their voice. As Heidegger says, “The fact that each of Trakl’s poems, all unrelated, even if not uniformly, points to the same place [*Ort*] in the poem, attests to the singular unity of his poems’ groundedness in the root [*Grundton*] of his poetry.”³⁷ This *Grundton*, which resonates through all of Trakl’s poetry, is the identifiable trace by which Heidegger claims to be able to locate the originary place from which all poetic thought can grow. Not coincidentally, by tracing this through the ‘spirit of the German language,’ Heidegger is able to insist that only German spirituality can uncover the ground of the questioning of Being.

While, as Derrida points out, “Heidegger proposes from the outset to rethink place,”³⁸ and to root out Christian presuppositions about Trakl and his work, there is nevertheless a sense in which *place itself* remains a presupposition:

We might say that ‘before’ Being and Nothingness there is Place, that which gives rise and makes it so that there is

³⁷ [Dass jede der Traklschen Dichtungen, gleich unverwandt, wenn auch nicht gleichförmig, in den einen Ort des Gedichtes zeigt, bezeugt den einzigartigen Einklang seiner Dichtungen aus dem einen Grundton seines Gedichtes.] Heidegger, GA 12, 35. Translation my own.

³⁸ Derrida, GIII, 8.

(*es gibt*) Being and Nothingness gathered together. If place is regularly, typically defined by gathering (*Versammlung*), our entire approach to the Heideggerian gesture will have to question this privilege of gathering and all that it entails.³⁹

While Heidegger is careful to maintain that the destination at the end of the path of questioning is not predetermined, "The question thus questions after that which already takes place and shows itself, for example in the poem. The poem is there."⁴⁰ In this sense, there is, as Derrida puts it, "ultimately an absolute univocity of language" that points back towards the "homeland" of Trakl's poetry.⁴¹ As we have already seen in earlier texts, Heidegger has been less than ambivalent about univocity, equating it to the techno-scientific attitude of modernity he polemicizes against in the *Introduction*. As such, he must differentiate the Germanic, spiritual univocity of Trakl's poetics from the vulgar singularity of modernity.⁴² The difficulty of doing so is, as David Farrell Krell notes, to Derrida "more than a 'tension' in Heidegger's situation."⁴³ While Heidegger accepts that Trakl uses language and concepts drawn from the Christian worldview, he must explain this usage as being subsumable under the language of *Geist* if he is to maintain that Trakl speaks from a 'univocally' spiritual position. Heidegger's point is to say that even the polysemy that such Christian motifs indicate can in fact be reduced down to the Germano-spiritual *Ort* from which Trakl's poetry springs. "But Heidegger will attempt to reduce this polysemy by demonstrating that Trakl is not Christian, or, more rigorously, that the place from which he speaks or to which his poems tend to return as to their source, his Gedicht, is not the Christian place."⁴⁴

When Heidegger adjudicates Trakl's 'Christianness,' he does so in part based on the fact that on his deathbed Trakl does not invoke the trinity, does not utter the names of God or Jesus. To him, this is an out and out indication that the poet's Christian language is not to be taken at face value. Trakl's, Heidegger says, "Is not even Christian despair."⁴⁵ Derrida's response to this is worth excerpting at length, as it reveals several pertinent points:

³⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 11.

⁴¹ Ibid., 74.

⁴² See loc. cit., as well as Heidegger, ibid., 71.

⁴³ David Farrell Krell, *Phantoms of the Other: Four Generations of Derrida's Geschlecht* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015) 188.

⁴⁴ Derrida, ibid., 83.

⁴⁵ [Es ist nicht einmal christliche Verzweiflung.] Heidegger, ibid., 72. Translation my own.

... Heidegger asks why such a resolute, decided Christian does not pronounce the names of Christ or God with his last breath. He seems to suppose with this that a Christian or a man of faith in general can and must be 'resolute' or 'decided,' can and must be what he is unequivocally, and nothing else. No more polysemy, no more indecision all of a sudden: either you're a Christian or you're not, and if you are, you don't forget to name God and Christ. Nevertheless – and Heidegger knows this, should have taken it into account, knows it better than anyone...a Christian and a man of faith in general is not necessarily a man of certainty... *A faith without anxiety, without indecision...would not be a faith.*⁴⁶

From his reading of the *Introduction* in *Of Spirit* to his reading of "Die Sprache im Gedicht" here, Derrida is sounding the same concern – if by his own logic Heidegger ought to know better than to orient his thinking around such an unnuanced dogmatic stance, why does he do so? "Despite his discretion and his caution, such an assertion" that Trakl simply cannot be authentically Christian "remains rather violent and, I will say once more, rather dogmatic."⁴⁷ Why is it Trakl's Christianity that so irks Heidegger? Derrida shares Heidegger's fear that a metaphysics of presence leads to programmatic thought; however, he does not agree that religious faith necessitates such a metaphysics, or that spirit and faith are incompatible. Derrida argues that Heidegger is ultimately unable to consolidate this tension:

...to say, then, 'neither the concepts of metaphysical theology nor those of ecclesiastical theology are sufficient,' one must presuppose that these concepts have a univocal sense or a masterable, gatherable plurivocity, that these concepts of theology, metaphysics, and dogmatics also have a place that is one and from which one can say 'this is not Trakl's place, Trakl's *Gedicht*,' or 'this is not a place commensurate with the place of Trakl's *Gedicht*.' But what would happen if we were not in agreement on this point, if we rejected this presupposition, if we said: there is not only one place for this thing called Metaphysics or Theology, or, what's more, if we want to access the Place of texts, the place from which so-called metaphysical or Christian texts proceed, we must stop believing in a certain univocity

⁴⁶ Derrida, ibid., 87. (Brackets in original, emphasis mine.)

⁴⁷ Ibid., 83.

and read them how we read Trakl, by giving them the same credit.⁴⁸

If one were inclined to articulate Derrida's position in Heideggerian terms, an uncertain faith might be quite spiritual – might allow access to the path of questioning. In a sense, Derrida sees Heidegger's understanding as a lack of imagination regarding the possibilities of a faith within religious bounds and as a worry that he will fall back into the trap of Western metaphysics he is so desperately working to escape. As Derrida puts it, "the obstinacy in shielding Trakl and shielding himself from a 'place' of Christian thought pushes Heidegger to simplify excessively."⁴⁹ This oversimplification, far from merely representing some oversight of Heidegger's in the interpretation of a fairly obscure German poet, rather indicates a far deeply set of issues Derrida takes with Heidegger's relationship to language and nationality, insofar as he has come to see Germany and the German language – as again we have already seen in more openly political texts – as the fertile soil out of which a new vision of modernity can spring and the material-political aims of the Nazi party as a means of propagating that vision:

[Trakl's poetry] speaks German not only from a German place but from a place that, in turn, situates the place of the West, the Christian West as well as the West of Platonic and post-Platonic metaphysics – and thus of what Heidegger calls metaphysical theology – it must be the case that the German place here holds an absolute privilege both with respect to the Platonico-Christian West it allows us to think to the extent that it, too, belongs to it, and with respect to this same West to the extent that it does not yet belong to it or already no longer belongs to it, which also allows it to think this West and say it.⁵⁰

If Heidegger in other writings can recognize the unspeakability, the unknowability, the radical ineffability of Being, then he ought to recognize the spiritual potentiality of uncertain faith. Derrida goes on to suggest that, insofar as Heidegger has come to think spirit as the possibility of questioning, spirit necessitates uncertainty – it is in fact the truest mark of spiritual faith that it is uncertain of its object: "...when a Christian despairs, I imagine that he despairs first and foremost [of the fact]...that he can no longer recognize the form of Christian despair in his despair. The Christian despairs of

⁴⁸ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 89.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 76.

Christianity, or else he doesn't really despair. ...so he despairs as a Christian when he despairs of Christianity."⁵¹

Derrida's suspicion of and discomfort with the seemingly politically-motivated dogmatism that we see guiding Heidegger's understanding of spirit leads us into the common interpretations of Derrida's religious thinking as being about a sort of theological indiscretion, an undecidability about the existence of God and thus the veracity of religion as such. However, to leave it at that is a grave oversimplification, particularly since, as we have seen, the question of religious faith carries such deep ties to the problems of nationalism and political injustice. Readers of Derrida's religious inflections often fail to consider the political resonance of such inflections, in part because they focus attention on his writings on Christianity.⁵² While Derrida's writing on Heidegger *vis* religion and Nazism take Christianity as exemplary, it is not exceptional. Derrida's writing on Judaism represents the place where the political and the religious intersect most clearly. Perhaps this should not be surprising, given his self-nomination as the 'last of the Jews'⁵³ as well as the specter of Nazism which hangs over more than one of his most intimate interlocutors.

On one hand, to attempt to simply jettison religion, as Heidegger does, appears just as misguided from a Derridean standpoint as does the attempt to disambiguate religion, spirit, and politics. On the other hand, Derrida is obviously not simply trying to rehabilitate a version of either Judaism or Christianity that would be recognizable to either's orthodoxy, as is clear from his dialogue on the despair of the Christian. In a sense, Derridean deconstruction at once requires disaffiliation with claims to divine authority while at the same time requiring a radical openness to the possibility of the irruption of the divine. In this sense deconstruction must always be open to the possibility of its own failure – to the adventing of a God whose transcendental authority would render deconstructive displacement of the 'transcendental signified' an error. To Derrida, even as "everything [he] interprets... under the Greek name *khôra*, the place, the ahuman and atheological location" seems entirely foreign to "the God of the Jews," "this manner of interpreting the place can still keep a deep affinity with a certain nomination of God from the Jews."⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid., 93.

⁵² Perhaps the most well-known example being John D. Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*.

⁵³ Jacques Derrida, "Circonference," in Jacques Derrida, by Geoffrey Bennington (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 178, translated as "Circumfession," in Jacques Derrida, by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 190.

⁵⁴ Derrida, Jacques. "Abraham, the Other" in *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida*. Bettina Bergo et. al., editors. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007.) 29. Originally published in 2003, English edition 2007.

The oscillation of the role of religion found across Derrida's texts signals the way in which it functions both as both a resource for and as a threat to deconstruction. Religion, exemplified in certain later writing as Derrida's 'Being-Jew,' "would then be something more, something other than the simple lever – strategic or methodological – of a general deconstruction; it would be its very experience, its chance, its threat, its destiny, its seism."⁵⁵ In other words, while religion operates in certain ways and at certain times as that which threatens deconstruction through its character as the 'undeconstructible,' it is also that very same character that allows for deconstruction in the first place.

This 'Judeity' is "perversely exemplary" of the status of religion generally for Derrida, "hyper-exemplary, more than exemplary, other than exemplary," in that it both reveals and threatens "all the philosophical and political consequences"⁵⁶ we have worked out thus far. In fact, the "oscillation and undecidability" between the forms of religion highlighted throughout this paper exemplify the very structure which has undergirded all of the considerations of "law, justice, and right... and state or onto-theological sovereignty"⁵⁷ seen heretofore. At the same time as Derrida's reading in *GIII* takes religion in the orthodox, onto-theological sense incoherent, it also renders a Heideggerian atheism incoherent. This is an attitude that will carry into Derrida's late writing and one which conditions the way in which religion and the possibility of political justice interact: "on the one hand, it is (from a historical, ethical, political perspective, etc.) the condition that one emancipate oneself from every dogma of revelation and election; on the other hand, this emancipation can be interpreted as the very content of the revelation or of the election, their very idea."⁵⁸

§

Seen in the light of this later writing, Derrida's interrogation of Heidegger's *Geist* appears to have much higher stakes than the simple tracing of a conceptual trajectory. The story that is told through Derrida's accounting of spirit and its culpability in Heidegger's descent into nationalistic dogmatism serves as a cautionary tale, and it informs Derrida's own thought and concern with the certainty of both religious and political orthodoxies. By taking such a long-ranging view of Derrida's engagement with Heidegger's writing on these concepts, we can see how the residue of faith in early foundational writings

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Loc. cit.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 33.

⁵⁸ Loc. cit.

became the basis for what is most reprehensible in Heidegger's thought and the way in which Derrida takes up this insight as a lens through which to interrogate his own relationship with religion.

Further work along the lines of this paper might take into account Derrida's more overtly political writing, for instance "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'" or *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, in which religiosity undergirds thinking on the possibilities of justice and state authority. Taking a broader view of the Derridean corpus enables readers to see that the so-called religious and/or political 'turns' in Derrida's thought are in fact not turns at all, but rather the gradual development of ideas and problematics which can in fact be traced back through his early writing and to his earliest engagement with sources like Heidegger. By combining genealogical work like that undertaken here with analysis of the critiques of political economy that show up in certain other texts, a path might open up towards constructing a positive political theory from Derrida's work with resonance for contemporary issues.