

OF SPIRIT

HEIDEGGER AND
THE QUESTION

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I

I shall speak of ghost [*revenant*], of flame, and of ashes.
And of what, for Heidegger, *avoiding* means.

What is avoiding? Heidegger on several occasions uses the common word *vermeiden*: to avoid, to flee, to dodge. What might he have meant when it comes to “spirit” or the “spiritual”? I specify immediately: not spirit or the spiritual but *Geist*, *geistig*, *geistlich*, for this question will be, through and through, that of language. Do these German words allow themselves to be translated? In another sense: are they avoidable?

Sein und Zeit (1927): what does Heidegger say at that time? He announces and he prescribes. He *warns* [*avertit*]: a certain number of terms will have to be avoided (*vermeiden*). Among them, spirit (*Geist*). In 1953, more than twenty-five years later—and this was not just any quarter-century—in the great text devoted to Trakl, Heidegger notes that Trakl always took care to avoid (*vermeiden* again) the word *geistig*. And, visibly, Heidegger approves him in this, he thinks the same. But this time, it is not *Geist* nor even *geistlich* which is to be avoided, but *geistig*.

How are we to delimit the difference, and what has happened? What of this meantime? How are we to explain that in twenty-five years, between these two *warning* signals (“avoid,” “avoid using”), Heidegger made a frequent, regular, marked (if not remarked) use of all this vocabulary, including the adjective *geistig*? And that he often spoke not only

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of the word "spirit" but, sometimes yielding to the emphatic mode, in the name of spirit?

Could it be that he failed to avoid what he knew he ought to avoid? What he in some sense had promised himself to avoid? Could it be that he forgot to avoid? Or else, as one might suspect, are things more tortuous and entangled than this?

Here one could get into writing a chapter destined for a different book. I imagine its title: "How to Avoid Speaking."¹ What does "avoid" mean, in particular in Heidegger?—and it is not necessarily avoidance or denegation. These latter categories are insufficient insofar as the discourse which habitually puts them to work, that of psychoanalysis for example, does not take into account the economy of *vermeiden* in those places where it exposes itself to the question of Being. The least one can say is that we are very far away from this taking into account. And all I should like to attempt here is to approach it. I'm thinking in particular of all those modalities of "avoiding" which come down to saying without saying, writing without writing, using words without using them: in quotation marks, for example, under a non-negative cross-shaped crossing out (*kreuzweise Durchstreichung*), or again in propositions of the type: "If I were yet to write a theology, as I am sometimes tempted to do, the word 'Being' ought not to appear in it,"² etc. Now we know well enough that, at the date at which he said that, Heidegger had already made this word disappear while allowing it to appear under a crossing-out—which had thus perhaps set him going, and a long time since, on the path of that theology he says he would only like to write but which he does not *not* write at this very point, saying it's not that at all, saying that that's the last thing he's doing and that he would have to shut up his thinking-shop if one day he were to be called by the faith.³ In saying this, is he not showing that he can do it? And that he could easily, even, be the only one who could do it?

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The title which imposed itself upon me for this lecture might have surprised or shocked some of you, whether or not they recognized the quotation—this time without parody—of a scandalous book, originally anonymous and consigned to the fire.⁴

This title appears today to be anachronistic in its grammar and its diction, as if it took us back to the age when they still wrote systematic treatises on the model of Latin compositions in the Ciceronian style (*De spiritu*), when what is called French materialism of the eighteenth century or French spiritualism of following centuries established on this model the finest canons of our school rhetoric. The anachronistic form, or even the provocatively “retro” character of this *Of Spirit* seems even more bizarre in the landscape of this conference, for reasons both of style (nothing in it recalls a Heideggerian manner) and, if I can say this, of semantics: spirit, so it seems at least, is not a great word of Heidegger’s. It is not his theme. It would seem that he was able, precisely, to avoid it. And who would dare to suspect in him that metaphysics—materialist or spiritualist—which produced the great days and best moments of a French tradition, the very tradition which has so durably marked our philosophical institutions?

Because this suspicion appears absurd, because it carries in it something intolerable, and perhaps too because it moves towards the most worrying places in Heidegger’s itinerary, discourses, and history, people avoid in their turn speaking *of spirit* in a work which nonetheless lets itself be magnetized, from its first to its last word, by that very thing.

Is it not remarkable that this theme, spirit, occupying—as I hope to show in a minute that it does—a major and obvious place in this line of thought, should have been disinherited [*forclus d’héritage*]? No one wants anything to do with it any more, in the entire family of Heideggerians, be they the orthodox or the heretical, the neo-Heideggerians or the para-Heideggerians, the disciples or the experts. No one

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ever speaks of spirit in Heidegger. Not only this: even the anti-Heideggerian specialists take no interest in this the-matics of spirit, not even to denounce it. Why? What is going on? What is being avoided by this? Why this filtering out in the heritage, and this discrimination? Why even when the legacy is being rejected does *Geist* not occupy the place it deserves alongside the major themes and major terms: being, *Dasein*, time, the world, history, ontological difference, *Ereignis*, etc.?

It was perhaps necessary to run the risk of a classical academicism so as to mark, while yet leaving it open—for it is not my intention to deal with it—the French dimension, the Franco-German chronicle in which we are *situating* Heidegger during this conference which was also an *Erörterung* keeping the questions “open,” in view of this place. *De l'esprit* is a thoroughly French title, much too French to give the sense of the *geistige* or *geistliche* of *Geist*. But that is the point: it will perhaps be heard better in German. Perhaps, at any rate, we will be more properly sensitive to its Germanness if we let its resonance be heard coming from a foreign language, so as to put it to the test of translation, or rather if we put to the test its resistance to translation. And if we submit our own language to the same test.

This necessity remains on one side. I will not rely for the essential justification of my topic on an introduction or preface. Here, nonetheless, are *three* preliminary arguments.

There is first the necessity of this essential *explanation*, the quarrel between languages, German *and* Rome, German *and* Latin, and even German *and* Greek, the *Übersetzung* as *Auseinandersetzung* between *pneuma*, *spiritus*, and *Geist*. At a certain point, this last no longer allows of translation into the first two. “Tell me what you think about translation and I will tell you who you are,” recalls Heidegger on the subject of Sophocles' *Antigone*.⁵ In this title *De l'esprit*, the Franco-Latin *de* also announces that, in the classical form of the enquiry, and even of the dissertation, I wish to begin

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to treat of *spirit*—the word and the concept, the terms *Geist*, *geistig*, *geistlich*—in Heidegger. I shall begin to follow modestly the itineraries, the functions, the formations and regulated transformations, the presuppositions and the destinations. This preliminary work has not yet been systematically undertaken—to my knowledge, perhaps not even envisaged. Such a silence is not without significance. It does not derive only from the fact that, although the lexicon of spirit is more copious in Heidegger than is thought, he never made it the title or the principal theme of an extended meditation, a book, a seminar, or even a lecture. And yet—I will attempt to show this—what thereby remains unquestioned in the invocation of *Geist* by Heidegger is, more than a *coup de force*, force *itself* in its most out-of-the-ordinary manifestation. This motif of spirit or of the spiritual acquires an extraordinary authority in its *German language*. To the precise extent that it does not appear at the forefront of the scene, it seems to withdraw itself from any destruction or deconstruction, as if it did not belong to a history of ontology—and the problem will be just that.

On the other hand, and this is a second argument, this motif is regularly inscribed in contexts that are highly charged politically, in the moments when thought lets itself be preoccupied more than ever by what is called history, language, the nation, *Geschlecht*, the Greek or German languages. From this lexicon, which we are not justified in calling spiritualist or even spiritual—can I risk saying *spirituelle*?—Heidegger draws abundantly in the years 1933–35, above all in the *Rectorship Address* and the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, and also in a different way in *Nietzsche*. But during the following twenty years, and except for one inflection which I will try to analyze, this same lexicon gives direction for example to the seminars and writings on Schelling, Hölderlin, and especially Trakl. In them it even takes on a thematic value which is not without a certain novelty.

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Here finally is my third preliminary argument: if the thinking of *Geist* and of the difference between *geistig* and *geistlich* is neither thematic nor athematic and if its modality thus requires another category, then it is not only inscribed in contexts with a high political content, as I have just said rapidly and rather conventionally. It perhaps decides as to the very meaning of the political as such. In any case it would situate the place of such a decision, if it were possible. Whence its privilege, still scarcely visible, for what are called the questions of the political or of politics which are stimulating so many debates around Heidegger today—doubtless in renewed form in France, thanks notably to Lacoue-Labarthe—at the point at which they tie up with the great questions of Being and truth, of history, of the *Ereignis*, of the thought and unthought or, for I always prefer to say this in the plural, the thoughts and the unthoughts of Heidegger.