The Ethos of Poetry
Listening to Poetic and Schizophrenic Expressions of Alienation and Otherness¹

Abstract
In the Letter of Humanism, Heidegger reinterprets the Greek notion of ethos as designating the way in which human beings dwell in the world through a “unifying” language. Through various down strokes in the autobiographical and psychopathological literature on schizophrenia as well as in literary texts and literary criticism, this paper, experimental in its effort, argues that the language productions of schizophrenia and poetry, each in its own way, seem to fall outside this unification of a language in common. Furthermore, it is argued that this “falling outside” is related to radical experiences of “alienation” and “otherness,” which call for an alteration of conventional language. However, whereas poetry appears to open new possibilities of language, schizophrenia runs the risk of being reduced to the silence of incomprehensible “nonsense.” The paper ends with the suggestion that due to certain overlaps between the experiences of poetic and schizophrenic language productions a poetic employment of language may hold a double potential with regard to the understanding and possible treatment of schizophrenia spectrum disorders.

Keywords: Ethics, Language, Responsivity, Poetry, Schizophrenia Spectrum Disorders, Alienation, Otherness.

1. Introduction
It is a well-established knowledge within psychopathology that some kind of “disturbance” happens to the structure and functioning of language in schizophrenic spectrum disorders. As Michel Foucault has argued, the psychiatric discourse has had a historical tendency of reducing this “disturbance” of language to a pathological silence incomprehensible to the voice of reason understood as “a monologue about madness.”² However, it is also more or less of a commonplace that poetry does something to and with language that makes it diverge from more conventional or prosaic

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employments of language. The question is, however, whether this schizophrenic disturbance and this poetic divergence have anything in common or whether they share only what divides them. It is my contention that both the poetic and the schizophrenic production of language, each in its own manner, may be regarded as 1) a “counter-language” to conventional and everyday language productions, and 2) a way of responding to what I in this context of this paper will refer to as “alien experiences.” As we will come to see in the course of the essay, these two traits are not unrelated but rather inextricably linked. To make the terms of this contention as clear as possible, I have divided the paper into five sections. The first section (2) provides an explanation of the title of the paper by having recourse to Heidegger’s reinterpretation of the notion of ethos in the Letter of Humanism where language is emphasized as the way in which human beings dwell in the world. The second section (3) presents a tentative outline of what in the psychopathological literature is often referred to as “anomalous experiences” and “language disturbances” within schizophrenia spectrum disorders. In turn, the third section (4) treats what may be called “alien experiences” and “language alterations” in poetic language productions. To conclude, the fifth and final section attempts to weave together some of the possible intersections that have occurred in the course of the paper and highlight some divergences between poetic and schizophrenic language productions. Finally, the paper ends with the suggestion that a poetic employment of language may serve as a lever to reopening the “dialogue between reason and unreason.”

2. The Ethos of Poetry

I this paper, I do not employ the term ethos as a moral or normative category but rather an existential category designating a manner of being in the world. Largely, this understanding is derived from Heidegger who, in his Letter on Humanism (1946), translates the Greek word ἔθος into the German Aufenthalt or Ort des Wohnens, which we may again translate into a “place of sojourn,” an “abode,” or a “dwelling place.” According to Heidegger, this place called ethos “names the open region in which the human being dwells.” Heidegger’s translation may sound somewhat strange to our contemporary ears, as today the term ethos are often used more or less synonymously with an “ethical” or “moral” attitude, constitution, or habitus. To a considerable extent, this contemporary usage is in agreement with the way in which Aristotle employs the concept. In the second book of the Eudemian Ethics, for instance, Aristotle explains that the term ἔθος is derived from ἕθος, meaning

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3 Michel Foucault, History of Madness, p. 497.
4 Martin Heidegger, Brief über den Humanismus, GA 9, Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1976, p. 354; from now on referred to as BUH and page number in the text. All translations of German texts are my own.
“habit” or “custom,” and that **ethos** therefore denotes “the moral character” or “disposition” that a person has acquired through “repetition” and “habituation.”

However, the Greek ἔθος has assumed different meanings throughout the history of thought and Heidegger’s translation may begin to make more sense if we go back to the 9th till 4th centuries BC. In the Greek context, ἔθος or the plural ἔθεα is often employed to denote the “haunts,” “abodes,” “habitats,” or “accustomed places” of various animals. For instance, Homer uses the term ἔθεα when referring to the “haunts” of mares in the Iliad and to the “sties” of pigs in the Odyssey. Similarly, in The Histories Herodotus uses the same term to denote the “lairs” of lions, whereas Hesiod, in Works and Days employs the term ἔθεσι to describe the “abodes” of the animals called human. In this way, Heidegger’s translation of ἔθος with “dwelling place” or “place of sojourn,” resonates well with what he himself would probably regard as a “more originary” sense of the term than the contemporary notion of ethos as an ethical or moral attitude. Heidegger’s understanding of the term ethos thus signifies the human way of residing or dwelling in the world, which, as he writes, is to be “ex-sistent into the openness of Being (ek-xistent in die Offenheit des Seins)” (BUH, 350). What allows the human being to stand out into the “openness” or the “truth” of Being, however, is language in its essentially “poetic” (dichterisch) mode. According to Heidegger, human language is essentially poetic in the sense that it lets something come into being. In Greek, ποίησις denotes the “creation,” “fabrication,” “making,” or “production” of something in general, just as it more specifically refers to lyrical composition and the art of poetry. Language is thus poetic in its very event, insofar as it produces or lets something appear as something and thus endows it with a being in the world. As Heidegger puts it, language can therefore be said to be “the house of being” in that it lets beings come into their own being and the human beings who think poetically are bestowed the privilege of being the main tenants and “guardians” (Wächter) of this linguistic house (BUH, 314). For this reason, I will focus my analysis of Heidegger’s re-interpretation of the notion of ethos as the human way of dwelling poetically in the world mainly on his engagement with the lyrical works of Friedrich Hölderlin who, according to Heidegger, is the greatest German poet of all times. Hence, in his essay “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry” from 1936, Heidegger writes:

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Language is not merely a tool that man possesses alongside many others; rather, language first grants the possibility of standing in the midst of the openness of beings. Only where there is language, is there world [...]. Language is not a disposable (verfügbares) tool, but the originary event (Ereignis) that disposes (verfügt) over the highest possibility of being human (Menschseins). 8

In other words, language is the originary event that opens the being of beings to the being that we call human, and by this opening, the human being is also exposed to its own possibility of being. This is the reason for Heidegger’s claim that only the human being can be said to properly “have a world,” because, to paraphrase Aristotle’s classic determination of the human being as ζῷον λόγιον ἐκλογήν, the human being is the only living being that can be said to “have” language, or rather to exist linguistically or to be linguistic in its very being. In this way, Heidegger distinguishes the human beings who through their language are said to be “world building” (weltbildend), from plants, stones, and other “mineral” or “vegetative” beings that are by definition “worldless” (weltlos) because they are speechless and without language. As for non-human animals, Heidegger admits that the may be said to practice a form of communication, but not that they have an actual language, which is why he describes them as being “poor in world (weltarm).” 9 I will not go further a discussion of these problematic distinctions in Heidegger, since what is important in the present context is not so much the question of whether or not it is only the human being who can be said to have a language, but rather the question of the poetic nature of language as such, which enables the human being to dwell in the world, that is, the human ethos.

With reference to Hölderlin’s poem “Conciliator, you who never believed ...” (1801) and the sentence “Much has man experienced. / Named many of the heavenly ones, /Since we have been a conversation / And able to hear from one another.” 10 Heidegger emphasizes that the ethos of the human being is not only linguistic in its essence (Wesen) but that it is essentially dialogue or conversation (Gespräch). This means that the human being is bestowed not only with the ability to speak and write, but also to listen and to read and that these abilities are inextricably linked with the being of the human being who is essentially a “being-with-others (Miteinandersein).” 11 As Heidegger interprets Hölderlin’s poem, the being of the human being is certainly grounded in language yet it is

10 Martin Heidegger, Erläuterungen zu Hölderlin’s Dichtung, p. 38
only in mutual conversation that the human language fulfills itself as such. Furthermore, Heidegger continues, this conversation has a unifying quality in that it “consists in the fact that in the essential word the one (das Eine) and the same on which we agree (einigen), and on the basis of which we are united and thus properly become ourselves (wir einig und so eigentlich wir selbst sind), is manifest (offenbar). Conversation and its unity (Einheit) carries (trägt) our being-there (Dasein).”

In contrast to Heidegger’s emphasis on the unified and unifying quality of language in its essential mode of conversation, however, the question that I wish to raise in this paper is what happens if the way in which the majority of human beings co-exist in language proves incommensurable and insufficient with regard to the experiences that a single human being may be exposed to during his or her existence? In other words, what happens to the being of a human being whose language begins to deviate from the conversational language that we supposedly have in common and through which we can agree on one and the same? What happens if the language of a human being becomes incomprehensible to its fellow human beings and perhaps even to itself? What happens if the language of a human being becomes so foreign and strange, so disturbing and uncanny, that no one can or will listen to it any longer? What happens if a human being no longer belongs to or is excluded from the unifying language that constitutes the house of being in which the majority of its fellow human beings have their dwelling?

These are not questions that Heidegger engages with in his work, although he does occasionally bring up the possibility that human beings may “fall out of being” and thereby also somehow fall out of the essence of language as the unifying house of being. For instance, in his Introduction to Metaphysics (1935), Heidegger writes that “we have long since fallen out of being without even knowing it.” However, it is still a collective “we” that is said to have fallen out of being, namely, the “they” who have succumb to the “oblivion” or “forgetting” of Being as a result of the history of metaphysics as a “destinal sending of Being” (Geschick des Seins). In this history of forgetting, the human being loses touch with the essence of language as the house of being and begins instead to treat language as an instrument of communication and exchange and other beings, including other human beings, as disposable things in the oblivion of their singular being. Yet, this forgetting of being is still, in certain sense, something that “we” human beings have in common.

The question is therefore how we may understand situations in which the language of a single human being undergoes such a radical alteration that it is no longer, or perhaps never was, capable of

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12 Martin Heidegger, Erläuterungen zu Hölderlin’s Dichtung, p. 39.
participating in the unifying conversation, which, according to Heidegger’s reading of Hölderlin, is so essential to being human. According to Roman Jakobson, Hölderlin’s own poetry underwent precisely such a radical alteration in the years succeeding his presumed schizophrenic breakdown around the year of 1805 and especially during “the last decades of his ‘serious psychosis.’”14 This alteration, Jakobson argues, becomes manifest precisely in the shift from a conversational or dialogue-based style of writing in his earlier poetry to a more monological and impersonal style in his later poems where all personal pronouns such as “I,” “you,” and “we” appear to disappear and be replaced by impersonal seasons and views. As such, Jakobson writes, “Scardanelli’s poems are distinguished from any verbal intercourse by their systematic surrender of basic forms of conversation. In contrast to the patient’s usual verbal behavior, these poems have no deictic language signs or any references to the actual speech situation.”15 To my knowledge, however, Heidegger never comments on or engages with the late poetry of Hölderlin or Scardanelli.

What I wish to examine in the succeeding sections is the alienating experience of no longer belonging to or residing in the “house of being” understood as a shared language and thus of no longer feeling at home in a world of fellow others. This experience of being somehow situated “elsewhere” or “outside” of the “common” is a form of experience that many individuals diagnosed within the schizophrenic spectrum appear to undergo. Yet, the suggestion that I wish to develop here is that the experiences of being somehow exiled from the world of others and of being a foreigner in one’s own mother tongue are ones that poetry may to some extent be said to share with schizophrenia. More specifically, I wish to develop the double hypothesis that schizophrenic and poetic language productions alike constitute “counter-languages,” which may be regarded as ways of responding to “alien experiences” by way of an alteration of customary or “ordinary” language. Let me try to unfold this hypothesis by clarifying the terms involved.

In a preliminary manner, what I wish to designate by the term “alien experiences” is, on the one hand, experiences of some more or less elusive sense of “otherness,” “strangeness,” “foreignness,”

14 Roman Jakobson and Grete Lübke-Grothues, “The Language of Schizophrenia: Speech and Poetry” in Poetics Today, Vol. 2, No. 1a, 1980, p. 139. “Posthumous” diagnosis are always problematic and there has been much discussion regarding Hölderlin’s breakdown and the “proper” diagnosis of his mental state following 1805. Yet, on the basis of his writing and various accounts from doctors, friends and acquaintances who saw Hölderlin in this period many agree that Hölderlin at least shows prominent signs of a disorder that falls within the schizophrenic spectrum. On this topic, see for instance Jean Laplanche, Hölderlin and the Question of the Father, trans. Luke Carson, Victoria: ELS Editions, 2007.
15 Roman Jakobson and Grete Lübke-Grothues, “The Language of Schizophrenia,” p. 142. “Scardanelli” was one of the names that Hölderlin gave to himself after he disavowed his family given name and in the course of the alterations of his poetic language. Although only fragments have been preserved of Hölderlin’s poems of the final years it is presumed that he began signing them “Scardanelli” from around 1841 about two years before his death. As Jakobson notices, many of the letters from his family name Hölderlin recurs in Scardanelli albeit in a different order, that is, “rdnelli” instead of “lderlin.”
or “unfamiliarity.” In this way, alien experiences appear to diverge or exceed anything that may be experienced as recognizable or familiar and thus exposes the familiarity of the human abode to a certain uncanny openness of its ethos. On the other hand, the term refers to an experience of alienation or estrangement, understood as a sense of “dissociation,” “distancing,” “exclusion,” or “isolation” with regard to a sensus communis. As such, the alien experiences entail the exposure to an “outside” or an “elsewhere” than the shared world and language of a community. My argument is that what both of these aspects of the alien experiences call for is a certain alteration or othering of language, which, in contrast to conventional or everyday uses of language, is somehow capable of “responding” to or “counter-acting” this exposure to radical otherness.

Following the lead of Deleuze, we might say that the poetic and the schizophrenic language productions, each in their own way, constitute such alterations in that they are both events that take place at “the edge of language” and in communication with its “outside.”16 This is not to say, however, that the schizophrenic and poetic productions of language are essentially the same, or that a schizophrenic language is always poetic and a poetic language always schizophrenic. The point is rather that both of these manners of producing language constitute a form of delirium, meaning that they both, in one way or another, deviate from the customary furrows of language (de-liro) towards something other, something foreign, and something unprecedented. Sometimes these deliria succeed in poetizing language by inventing a “foreign” or “minor” language within the “accustomed” or “major” language, which breaches it open from the inside and thus allows for new perspectives and possibilities of unknown visions and auditions to occur. At other times, however, the deliria “no longer open out onto anything” and end up, as Deleuze writes, in “impasses closed off by illness.”17

To pursue this double hypothesis and qualify these tentative claims in more detail, I will try to sketch out the perhaps shared experience of the alien and its “disturbing” effects in and on language by having a closer look at various linguistic alterations as these become manifest in poetic and schizophrenic language productions respectively. Of course, this is an enormous task that requires a much more extensive analysis than this limited paper is able to provide. Nonetheless, the objective of the paper is explorative and it aims at providing a general outline of the direction in which the above questions are pursued in the attempt to establish, not so much a unifying, but rather an altering and differentiated conversation between poetic and schizophrenic productions of language. I will begin

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17 Gilles Deleuze, Essays Critical and Clinical, p. lv-lvi.
with a brief outline of the alterations of schizophrenic language in order then to proceed to the poetical.

3. Alien Experiences of Schizophrenia and Their Alterations of Language

It has long been a psychopathological insight that individuals with the schizophrenia spectrum disorders often have so-called “anomalous experiences,” which are difficult, if not impossible, to express in conventional modes of communication. A major source of distress for individuals affected by schizophrenia disorders is therefore the difficulty in articulating or expressing their anomalous experiences, which can lead to a profound sense of desertion, detachment and dissociation, not only from others but also from themselves. On the subjective side, the loss of relation and difficulty of communication can generate a sense of despair, fixation in the illness and hopelessness; on the objective side, the difficulty for patients to express and communicate their anomalous experiences poses a formidable challenge to our understanding of schizophrenia spectrum disorders.

If one views it historically, the anomalous experiences relating to schizophrenia seem to be ambiguous. On the one hand, they concern the experiences of otherness and estrangement to which the individual diagnosed with a schizophrenia disorder her- or himself is exposed. On the other hand, the very term “anomalous” experiences also reflect the view that the surrounding world holds on the schizophrenic individual as being somewhat “alien,” “foreign,” or “strange.” We need only recall that the people we today call “psychiatrists,” “psychologist,” or “psychotherapists” used to be commonly referred to as “alienists.”

Since the earliest days of schizophrenia as dementia praecox, the schizophrenic language has been described as “insensible” and “incomprehensible” and the very presence of the individual diagnosed with schizophrenia has been described not only as “strange” or “foreign” but sometimes even as “eerie” or “uncanny.” The Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler, who coined the term schizophrenia in the beginning of the 20th century, provides the following depiction of how the

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patients within the schizophrenia spectrum were perceived in the psychiatric institutions of his day:

“To the idiots at his institution the doctor has a relationship resembling that of a father to his children; most of the schizophrenics, however, remain as foreign (*fremd*) to him as the birds which he feeds.”

According to Bleuler, one way in which the foreignness or strangeness of the patients diagnosed with schizophrenia manifests itself is in the odd alterations of their language, which he describes as follows:

> [I]t becomes punctuated (*skandiert*), spoken in rhythms, written in rhymes. For many years, one of our patients barely opened his lips while speaking whereby he was completely indifferent to the fact that no one could understand what he said. The voice becomes altered (*verändert*). Over a period of ten years, I never heard a certain catatonic woman speak except in high falsetto or in squeaking tones (*in Fistelstimme oder in herausgepressten Tönen*).

Over against these descriptions of how the strangeness of schizophrenia may be experienced by the surroundings, another psychiatrist, Karl Jaspers, refers instead to the otherness and alienation that the schizophrenic patients themselves report to experience as a process of “derealization.” According to Jaspers, many individuals with a schizophrenia disorder experience an extensive sense of “uncanniness” or “unhomeliness” (*Unheimlichkeit*) where everything around begins to appear strange and they no longer, if ever, feel at home in the world. One patient puts this estrangement into concise and quite poetic words:

> It is as if I see everything through a veil; as if I heard everything through a wall.—The voices of people seem to come from far away. The things do not look as before, they are somehow altered (*verändert*), they seem strange (*fremdartig*), they seem flat as a relief. My own voice sounds strange. Everything appears astoundingly new, as if I had not seen it for a long time.—It is as if a fur had covered my skin—Sometimes I touch myself to convince myself that I corporally exist.

Reneé, the author of *The Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl* (or in original French *Journal d’une schizophrène*), which was later published by Presses Universitaires de France with an interpretation by her psychoanalyst Marguerite Sechheyae, even recounts how her experiences during a psychotic

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episode appeared so strange and foreign to her, that she felt compelled to invent entirely novel words in order to be able to articulate them. Renée describes her spontaneous invention of her own meaningless but not senseless language in this way:

In no way did I seek to create them; the words came of themselves and by themselves meant nothing. Only the sound, the rhythm of the pronunciation had sense. Through them I lamented, pouring out the grueling grief and the interminable sadness in my heart. I could not use ordinary words, for my pain and sorrow had no real basis.\textsuperscript{25}

From these few down-strokes in the vast literature on schizophrenia spectrum disorders we can surmise how “alien experiences” or “experiences of the alien” may be manifested in the various “anomalies” or “disturbances” of the schizophrenic language production, which are difficult to account for exhaustively. Nonetheless, in a recent study “On the Phenomenology of Linguistic Experience in Schizophrenia,” the psychologists Elizabeth Pienkos and Louis Sass have attempted to identify some of the most prevalent linguistic anomalies that seem to occur within the schizophrenia spectrum and end up with four overall classifications.

The first classification concerns a dissociation between experience and language according to which the language at one’s disposal appears inadequate, insufficient, or downright distortive with regard to expressing the experiences undergone. This dissociation may result both in a discordance between whatever is intended to be expressed and the expression itself as well as in a detachment of words from their meaning whereby by they stand out as more or less meaningless sounds and letters. In this respect, we may refer again to Renée who in her journal writes how she “said ‘chair,’ ‘jug,’ ‘table,’—‘it is a chair’—But the word echoed hollowly, deprived of all meaning; it had abandoned the object, was separated from it, so much so that on the one hand it was a ‘living, mocking thing,’ on the other, a name, emptied of sense, like an envelope emptied of content.”\textsuperscript{26}

The second classification of the study concerns a diminished interpersonal orientation of language, meaning that language no longer functions primarily as an instrument of communication. This diminishment of interpersonal orientation of language is indicated by the anomalous function or even eclipse of the \textit{deictic} elements of language that help to contextualize one’s speech or writing. This disappearance of deictic language signs in the schizophrenic language production brings us back to

\textsuperscript{26} Marguerite Sechahaye, \textit{Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl}, p. 56.
Jakobson and his reading of Hölderlin’s late poems, which emphasizes the shift away from the conversational language employed and portrayed in “Conciliator, you who never believed…” from 1801. As Jakobson concludes his essay on the late poetry of Hölderlin, “[l]anguage—with its immense store of words and its exciting rules for the arrangement of words—is essential for him not in the form of dialogue, but only in the form of a poem, while the speaking with one another and the coming together is rejected by him as a mere ante-room of language.”

The third classification of Pienkos’ and Sass’ study concerns abrupt shifts of attention and context relevance according to which language appears to be somewhat unhinged from its context and situation. This unhinging allows for a “loosening up of associations” as well as for a peculiar or unusual word use and even, as in the case of Renée, for the invention of new words. This loosening opens up a whole range of semantic possibilities that seems to distract or divert the schizophrenic speech, thought and writing away from any teleological schema, which make it difficult for an interlocutor to follow along. As the authors of the study articulate it, “[n]o longer constrained by the goals and rules of communication, words and language may become unhinged, pointing toward a multitude of possible meanings.”

Besides Renée, we could here also mention the famous case of Daniel Paul Schreber, who in his Memoirs of My Nervous Illness (Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken) recounts how certain “foundational,” “basic,” or “ground-language” (Grundsprache) begins to form itself in his mind, or rather in his nerves, by which God communicates with him. As Schreber writes, this “ground-language,” which resembles some sort of antiquated German, is “extraordinarily difficult to explain to other people even vaguely. That it exists is overwhelmingly proved to me day after day; yet it belongs even for me to the realm of the unfathomable because the objective it pursues must be recognized by all who know human nature as something in itself unattainable.”

The fourth and final classification recounted by the study, is the occurrence of what the authors call “unusual attitudes toward language.” These attitudes refer not to “unusual” experiences that are to be conveyed in language but rather to “unusual” experiences of language as such. This may be manifested by the way in which the material and aesthetic aspects of language, e.g. its appearance, gaps, intonations, sounds, rhythms, or texture may be foregrounded whereas the semantic “content” and communicative aspects of language recede into the background. As one patient, cited by the study

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only in part, describes it, “[o]ne word stood out of the sentence. That word became as something material, nearly a thing for me, or an image in front of me.”

It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop these “anomalies” of schizophrenic language productions in more detail. Yet, reflecting on the four classifications of the study, we may in a very generic way say that the schizophrenic language productions appear to somehow “disturb” both the communicative, narrative, as well as the grammatical and syntactical structures of “ordinary” language by diverting it from its more customary and conventional employments. This “diversion” to some extent explains why schizophrenic language has often been described as “confused,” “cryptic,” “disordered,” “incomprehensible,” “neologistic,” and “ungrammatical.” The question is, however, if similar “diversions” and “disturbances” of ordinary or customary language do not also occur in poetic language productions. In contrast to prosaic language, poetry appears to be more preoccupied precisely with the aesthetic, phontetical, rhythmical, musicological, and material aspects of language than with its the communicational, narrational, teleological, and semantical aspects, which is perhaps why it has a reputation of being “obscure,” “inaccessible,” or “incomprehensible.” This question brings us to have a closer look at how “alien experiences” might come about in and have an effect on poetic language productions.

4. The Alien Experience of Poetry and Its Alterations of Language

On the occasion of receiving the Georg Büchner award in 1960, the Rumanian born poet Paul Celan gave his famous “Meridian speech.” In the speech, Celan initially describes the art of literature and poetry as “a stepping out of the human (ein Hinaustreten aus dem Menschlichen), a going beyond oneself (ein Sichhinausbegeben) into an uncanny realm that is turned toward the human (einen dem Menschlichen zugewandten und unheimlichen Bereich).” Further ahead in the speech, Celan provides an additional definition of the poem as “the place where tropes and metaphors want to be led ad absurdum” (MER, 199). In other words, the movement and direction of literature and poetry

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proceed not only to the uncanny limit of the human but also to places where “reasonable” language somehow oversteps its boundaries and becomes excessive.

According to Celan, however, this excessive step of poetry into the uncannily absurd is also an act of liberation or freedom effectuated by the so-called “counter-word” (Gegenwort). This poetic counter-word inscribes a sort of catastrophic turning point into the regular rhythm of language—a “turning of breath (Atemwende),” as Celan also calls it, which may upset the cadence of respiration to the point of syncope (MER, 200). Celan inherits this poetic inscription of a revolutionary counter-word or turning of breath from Heidegger’s favored poet Hölderlin, who in his poetological remarks on the Sophoclean tragedies of Oedipus and Antigone designates the linguistic effects of what he calls the caesura.

Significant to the caesura is how it denotes a “pure” word, which effects a counter-rhythmic rupture within the process or procedure of a tragedy thus breaking up the regularity of its metrical pattern in such a manner that “beginning and end no longer rhyme.” The caesura is “pure” in the sense that it no longer refers to anything other than itself; rather, it is a word devoid of a meaningful content or referent, and, as such, it is a word that appears as a word and nothing but a word precisely in the disappearance of meaning. Following Lacan, we might say, that the caesura is a pure word in that it no longer functions as a signifier in the production of a meaningful signified but instead makes itself manifest in the pure meaninglessness of bare letters that make out “the material support that concrete discourse borrows from language.” What is important to remember, however, is that the structuration of these meaningless letters or “pure signifiers,” as Lacan also calls them, is constitutive of the very production of meaning, that is, of signification—the pure letters designate the nonsensical origin of sense.

Accordingly, we might say that Hölderlin’s caesura as a “pure” word marks a rift in the fabric of signifying or meaning-producing language, which interrupts its customary habitus and makes manifest the very texture of language. In contrast to the meaningful words that refer to something “out there” in the world and that say something, the poetical caesura does not say or communicate anything. Rather, the caesura is an empty transport or a pure metaphor, which, as Hölderlin writes, “enters the course of fate as the custodian of the natural power which, in a tragic manner, removes

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(entrückt) the human being from its life-sphere, the center of its inner life into another world and tears (reisst) into the eccentric sphere of the dead.”

With Hölderlin and Celan, we may therefore say that the ethos of poetry is ecstatic in that it conducts a departure from a solid foothold or a stepping out from familiar territory through a “deterриториализ” and eccentric movement without coordinating center. Yet a stepping out into what? Out into nowhere but the “elsewhere” or the “outside.” Thus, this liberated ex-sistence is a stepping beyond the boundaries of the familiar that does step into some other delimitable place. Instead, it is a step-not-beyond (pas au-delà), as Blanchot would say, into the open and undelimitable space of the other, which is more the withdrawal of place than the location of one. Therefore, poetry also conducts a kind of utopian topology, not so much a topology of the “good place” (εὖ-τόπος) but rather of the “no place” (οὐ-τόπος), which draws up a cartography of impossible paths along which we might, as Celan says, come across “the place, where the alien (das Fremde) was, the place where the person was able to set himself free as an—strangely astonished (befremdetes)—I” (MER, 195).

As Celan emphasizes, poetry seeks out this strange “place of nowhere” away from the beaten tracks of the familiar for the sake of an encounter, namely the encounter with the always singularly other. The poem can thus be regarded as a response to the interpellation of otherness, which does not tell us anything specific but which, as Celan says, is “a question which points into the open and empty and free—we are far out (wir sind weit draußen)” (MER, 199). As such, the utopia of poetry is to liberate a space for an unforeseeable encounter that can only take place in this undelimitable non-place, which is precisely the placeless place of the other—a heterotopia.

The question is what this ecstatic attempt to respond to the interpellation of otherness by making space for heterotopian places in poetry does to the structure of language. A brief answer to this question is that poetry radically disturbs language because, according to Foucault, heterotopias “secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that.” As Foucault continues, while utopias allow for fabulous discourses since they are still imbedded within the “very grain of language” as fabula and fari, that is, in the narrative and communicative dimensions of language, heterotopias, on the other hand, “desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source.” But what if poetry is neither utopian nor heterotopian but...

35 Friedrich Hölderlin, Sämtliche Werke, Briefe und Dokumente, Vol. 10, p. 156
38 Michel Foucault, The Order of Things, p. xix.
rather the utopia of heterotopias, the fable of the unspeakable, the language of what disturbs language?

In order to provide a tentative response to these questions let us return in brief to Hölderlin’s caesura.

In its interruption of customary language, the caesural turning of breath makes language appear as such, that is, in its nakedness stripped of all its representations and significations. Poetry as an experience of language as such is therefore also a traversal of a certain limit of language within language. To put it differently, poetry is the disruption and suspension of the function of language as an instrument of communication or exchange of information. In the words of Lacoue-Labarthe, “[p]oetry is the spasm or syncope of language.”\(^{39}\) Poetry makes language inoperative, poetry does not produce a product, because the work of poetry, as Blanchot suggest, is “an unending lack of work.”\(^{40}\)

A poem has neither a message to deliver nor a story to tell; rather, it effects an interruption of narrative communication, which aims at saying nothing. This is why Foucault can say that the heterotopias of Borges’ literature approaches the experience of aphasia and why Celan can say that the poem shows “a strong tendency to falling silent (eine starke Neigung zum Verstummen)” (MER, 197). However, in interrupting the operation of language by making it manifest as “pure” words or signifiers devoid of any inherent signification, the poetic counter-word also liberates language from its denotational, signifying, and representational schemas towards the possibility of another kind of gesture and another kind of encounter. Namely, an encounter with what escapes both denotation, classification, and interpretation, an encounter with the other as other or with the otherness of the other, with what remains other even in its encounter, which, according to Celan, is precisely what poetry longs for. Celan writes:

The poem wants to reach the Other, it needs this Other, it needs an encounter (ein Gegenüber). It searches out and addresses it. Each thing, each human being is for the poem that keeps to the Other a form of this Other.

The attention that the poem attempt to devote to everything it encounters is its finer sense of detail, of outline, of structure, of color, but also for the “twitches” (Zuckungen) and “indications” (Andeutungen). (MER, 198)

As such, we could say, that poetry wants to say nothing in advance because it wants to be an attentive response to the approach or the appeal of the other, which is neither a thing nor a concept,


nor anything that can be apprehended and grasped by understanding or communicated in a comprehensible language. Instead, poetry is the language of the other in the double genitive, it is the language about the other as other and it is the other becoming manifest in language only through the interruption of language. However, in this language of the other poetry comes to itself as such, because the poem becomes poem only outside of itself in the place of the other. This is why Celan writes that, in its quest for this place of the other, this heterotopia, the poem also comes to find its own origin. Thus, the poem comes to speak its own singular language but it does so only in a tongue that is called for by the other. The mother tongue of poetry is a strange and foreign tongue. The language of poetry is not a dialectical movement by which the same recognizes itself in the other and thus appropriates it as its own. Rather, poetry is the experience of an interminable paradox: the poem only becomes itself as an other that remains other, it is originally outside itself and, as such, it only returns to itself in perpetually departing from itself towards the unknown place of the other. This place of the other is inscribed in the poem as an interior exterior or as an “intimate gaping,” which is the very condition of the poem as an ecstatic opening. As such, Celan says that the poetic act is also a kind of “homecoming (Heimkehr)” in that the otherness that it seeks is also that which gives voice to what is most its own, namely, a language disowned from the beginning (MER, 201).

Returning to Heidegger, we might say that poetic language is the house of being, but this house is by no means mastered by whomever speak it and is inhabited by strangers and haunted by the ghosts of the uncanny. As Heidegger writes in “…Poetically Man Dwells…”, again with reference to Hölderlin, “[t]he poet calls, in the sights of the sky, that which in its very self-disclosure lets that which conceals itself appear, and indeed as self-concealing. In the familiar appearances, the poet calls the alien as that to which the invisible imparts itself in order to remain what it is: unknown.”

With this very brief and no doubt insufficient outline of the poetizing of alien experiences, let me close by resuming some similarities and dissimilarities between the poetic and schizophrenic language productions considered with regard to the question of otherness and estrangement.

5. Departures from the House of Being

According to the German psychiatrist Wolfgang Blankenburg, schizophrenia can be characterized as a “loss of natural self-evidence,” that is, “a loss of an a priori disclosure of a common life-world or,

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41 Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, p. 54.
in other words, a loss of that which for most of us goes without saying and does not become an object of explicit questioning, doubt, explanation or reasoning.”44 This loss of the self-evident may induce a sense of existential or “ontological insecurity,”45 which again in turn is bound up with a “hyperreflexive” tendency to perceive and question subject matters that for others are taken for granted and often remain entirely unnoticed, such as how we measure time with clocks or how we greet one another by the shaking of hands.46 Furthermore, this loss of self-evidence goes for the experience of language as well by which the usually unquestioned connection between the sound-image of a word and its meaning is disrupted. Yet, instead of designating this tendency as a loss of natural self-evidence, could we perhaps regard it more as a questioning of the supposed naturalness of this self-evidence of language? Or, even perhaps as a discovery that the presumed link between language and being, words and things, signer and signified is neither natural nor necessary, but rather historically and socially constructed and “arbitrary” as Saussure suggested. If so, this is perhaps a point at which the hyperreflexive tendency of schizophrenia approaches not only a philosophical questioning but also a poetic opening of language, which involves a loosening up not only of grammar and syntax but also of the link between “words” and “things,” and thus of the conventional uses of language that are taken for granted in our everyday conversations.

Schizophrenic and poetic language productions alike seem to involve a degree of dissociation between experience and language, which estranges language from its function as a more or less neutral or transparent vehicle for communication or the exchange of information. Instead, language becomes manifest as language, which also opens the possibility for language becoming a material rather than a medium. With this emphasis on the materiality of language, the semantic “content” of language recedes into the background and gives way to its sonority, rhythmicality, caesurality, and even to its synesthetic properties of color and taste. Language becomes corporal and this body of language way affects the bodies of those who speak it, listens to it, reads it, or writes it in a very real way. As the French artist, poet, and playwright Antonin Artaud, who was presumably also suffering from a schizophrenia spectrum disorder, writes in his “Manifesto in a clear language” from 1926:

There is for me an evidence in the realm of pure flesh which has nothing to do with the evidence of reason […]. In the realm of the affective imponderable, the image provided by my nerves takes the form

of the highest intellectuality [...]. And so it is that I watch the formation of a concept which carries within it the actual fulguration of things, a concept which arrives upon me with the sound of creation.47

We might say, then, that both the schizophrenic and poetic language productions have somehow departed from the linguistic “house of being” in which the majority of human beings make their living and thus turned their back on the “unifying conversation” that, according to Heidegger, carries our existence. Yet, despite there being certain overlaps between the language productions of schizophrenia and those of poetry, and despite the fact that writers such as Hölderlin, Antonin Artaud, Renée, Unica Zürn, and many others at times seem to live and write in a “zone of indistinction” between the two, the way in which these productions depart from “ordinary” or “customary” language may be very different indeed. There have been various attempts at describing the difference between poetic and schizophrenic language, three of which I will here mention in brief.

In his third seminar on The Psychoses, Lacan more or less explicitly draws a line between literature and what he calls the “psychotic discourse” when he emphasizes that although President Schreber may be said to be writer in the sense that he produces “sheets of paper covered in writing” he is certainly “no poet.”48 Lacan’s argument, in 1955-56 at least, as to why Schreber’s several hundred pages long book on his “nervous illness” cannot be said to be “proper” literature is that he is not able to produce meaningful metaphors wherefore he is swept away by the purely metonymical movement of a language that “speaks all by itself” (PSY, 250).49 This language of psychosis is driven by arbitrary phonetic and content-related relations of similarity and contiguity, which perpetuates a deferral of meaning until “the level is reached at which signifier and signified stabilize in a delusional metaphor.”50 In other words, Schreber is not a poet because he is not able to invent metaphors that convey some kind of meaning to others than himself and as such he “does not introduce us to a new dimension of experience” (PSY, 78). According to Lacan, Schreber’s psychotic discourse therefore resemble “the writing of dreams” more than it does the language of literature (PSY, 281).

In their book on the language of psychosis, the original Danish title of which is Det er et bånd der taler literally meaning “It Is a Tape That Speaks,” the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Bent


Rosenbaum and the linguist and literary critic Harly Sonne admits that there are certain “superficial” similarities between the language of schizophrenia and that of poetry in that they both perpetrate some sort of “disturbance” on conventional language. However, the authors suggest that the poetic language production distinguishes itself from the psychotic in that it is capable of having its narrative sequence come to an end by “closing itself around a restoration of the body as a whole,” whereas the schizophrenic language continues in the state of a “morcellated body” that tends toward the infinitely undelimitable and permeable.51

In his Essays Clinical and Critical, Deleuze propounds a similar argument to both of the previous ones. For him, the schizophrenic and poetic language productions may be said to be similar to the extent that they both conduct a “decomposition of the maternal language.”52 However, whereas the poetic language production succeeds in creating a “new syntax” in the course of its decompositions, the schizophrenic language production, when it becomes pathological, fails to create such a syntax and thus end up operating “in a void, and never links up with a vital process capable of producing a vision.”53

Drawing to a close, it may well be that neither the poet nor the person diagnosed with schizophrenia inhabits the house of conventional language in which most of their fellows reside. Yet, whereas the poet might be able to construct an “alternative” house of Being in her or his language—a house where the other may or may not come to pay a visit—the person with schizophrenia might end up without a roof over her or his head—exposed under the open sky. Or, perhaps even in an upside down manner like Büchner’s Lenz, “with the sky below, as an abyss” (MER, 195). In this regard, it may be informative to note how Lacan in his third seminar, and in a semi-Heideggerian vocabulary, draws a distinction between the neurotic subject who “inhabits” language like a house, even if (s)he is not the master of this house, and the psychotic subject who is said to be “inhabited, possessed” by language like a haunted house (PSY, 250). This being said, however, the person diagnosed with schizophrenia may also be a poet, and the poet may be affected by schizophrenia spectrum disorders.

Despite the above mentioned differences, it is nonetheless the intention of this paper to suggest that the poetic and schizophrenic language productions may still be said to share a certain experience

51 Bent Rosenbaum and Harly Sonne “Det er et bånd der taler”. Analyser af sprog og krop i psykosen. Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1993, 91. On this distinction between a language that is capable of interrupting itself and a language that is not, see again my forthcoming paper “On a Language that Does Not Cease Speaking.”

52 Gilles Deleuze, Essays Critical and Clinical, p. 5.

53 Gilles Deleuze, Essays Critical and Clinical, p. 11.
of and exposure to the “alien,” the “strange” and the “unhomely,” which for calls for an alteration of language. This alteration interrupts all “common sense” and forces language out of its customary, domestic, and familiar furrows, making it somewhat delirious. Should this suggestion have some merit, we might then ask whether and how a poetic employment of language might offer individuals within the schizophrenic spectrum exposed to such experiences of abyssal otherness, a possibility of not becoming paralyzed, silenced, or entrapped by this exposure, but rather of becoming capable of counteracting it and responding to it otherwise. In this way, poetic language may hold the potential to play a double role with regard to schizophrenia spectrum disorders. First, as an experimental practice, the engagement with poetic language may open up new spaces of experience and expression in which people with schizophrenia spectrum disorders may be able to explore, transfigure, and respond to their “alien” or “anomalous” experiences. Second, as an expressive practice, the poetic works created by people within the schizophrenia spectrum might tell “us,” the people who join in the unifying conversation of language, something about these “alien” or “anomalous” experiences to which we would otherwise not have access.

It is our responsibility not to reduce what we do not understand to the silence of “nonsense.” Rather, we should learn to listen to the “madness” of a speech, a writing, or a work as something that, in the words of Foucault, “opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without an answer, opening an unhealable wound that the world is forced to address.”54 Furthermore, it is a matter for future research, both critical and clinical, to further investigate whether and how the poetic language may contain a liberating potential to transform the overwhelming experiences of alienation into openings instead of closings. In this way, we may help to foster, not necessarily a unifying conversation, but a conversation that is open for the encounter with the other—even if this conversation may, in the words of Celan, often turn out to be only a “despairing conversation” (MER, 198).

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54 Michel Foucault, History of Madness, p. 537.
Bibliography


