PROBLEMOS

Problemos
ISSN: 1392-1126
ISSN: 2424-6158
redakcija.problemos@fsf.vu.lt
Vilniaus Universitetas
Lituania

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Negative Moods as the Only Possible Locus of Ontological Experience
Problemos, vol. 98, pp. 83-93, 2020
Vilniaus Universitetas
Disponible en: https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=694574419007
DOI: https://doi.org/10.15388/Problemos.98.7

Articles

Negative Moods as the Only Possible Locus of Ontological Experience

Negatyvi nuotaika kaip vienintelis ontologinio patyrimo lokusas

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Problemos, vol. 98, pp. 83-93, 2020

Vilniaus Universitetas

Recepción: 26 Marzo 2020
Aprobación: 28 Junio 2020

DOI: https://doi.org/10.15388/Problemos.98.7

Abstract: This article is a Heideggerian inquiry into the possibility of *ontological experience*, that is, the possibility of *experiencing the ontological difference*, something wholly distinct from beings. Heidegger, as we know, articulated this as the question of Being. It is a paradoxical question that cannot, at first sight, be answered phenomenologically (in the Husserlian style): if any conscious experience presupposes the constitution of an intentional object in the act of experience, there must be *something* in any experience. In this article, I set out to defend the position that ontological experience is possible and central to the human existence. This view rests on the Heideggerian notion of the affective grounds of all thinking, the attunement of any experience by moods. I will argue that: 1) any thinking is attuned by moods; 2) ontological experience (i.e. experiencing something wholly distinct from beings) occurs in certain negative moods. 3) ontological experience is possible only through *failure*, a malfunction in the fulfilment of meaning; 4) ontological experience is possible in art rather than in science (or in some rigorous philosophy).

Keywords: Phenomenology, *Stimmung*, ontological difference, failure.

Summary: Straipsnyje pasitelkiama heidegeriška prieiga siekiant sužinoti, ar ontologinis patyrimas yra galimas; t. y. ar egzistuoja galimybė patirti ontologinį skirtumą kaip kažką visiškai skirtingo nuo esinių. Heideggeris artikuliavo šią problemą kaip buvimo klausimą. Tai yra paradoksalus klausimas, į kurį iš pirmo žvilgsnio negalima rasti fenomenologinio (huserliško) atsakymo: jei bet koks sąmoningas patyrimas numato intencionalaus objekto sukūrimą patyrimo metu, vadinasi, bet kokiame patyrime turi būti kažkas. Šiame straipsnyje siekiama apginti nuomonę, kad ontologinis patyrimas yra įmanomas ir yra esminė žmogiškosios būties dalis. Ši nuomonė remiasi heidegeriška idėja apie afektyvųjį viso mąstymo pagrindą ir nuotaikos įtaką bet kuriam patyrimui. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad (1) bet koks mąstymas yra derinamas prie nuotaikos, (2) ontologinis patyrimas (t. y. akimirka, kai patiriama kažkas visiškai skirtingo nuo esinių) įvyksta esant tam tikrai nuotaikai, (3) ontologinis patyrimas galimas tik per nesėkmę, prasmės įgyvendinimo sutrikimą ir kad (4) ontologinis patyrimas galimas veikiau mene nei moksle (ar griežtame filosofiniame mąstyme).

Keywords: Fenomenologija, Stimmung, ontologinis skirtumas, nesėkmė.

Introduction

This article is a Heideggerian inquiry into the possibility of *ontological experience*, that is, the possibility of *experiencing the ontological difference*, something wholly distinct from beings. Heidegger, as we know, articulated this as the question of Being (Heidegger 1996: 1-12). It is a paradoxical question that cannot, at first sight, be answered phenomenologically (in the Husserlian style): if any conscious experience presupposes the constitution of an intentional object in the act of experience, there must be *something* in any experience. Furthermore, the concept of *nothingness*, which designates absolute negativity, is furnished with meaning in the act of experience. According to one assessment of Heidegger's thought his question about the meaning of Being fails and ontological difference is nothing but mystical dream that is impossible to experience (Caputo 1986, Sikka 1997), while others argue that the ontological difference is an expression of schizophrenia or depression (Sass 1992, Ratcliffe 2015).

In this article, I set out to defend the position that ontological experience is possible and central to the human existence. I will argue that ontological experience is a specific emotional or affective state where the formation of an intentional object fails. The central concept in my paper is the German word *Stimmung*, a nuanced term that is almost impossible to translate with a single English word (see Gumbrecht 2012). *Stimmung* can mean any of the following:

1. A mood

2. A general emotional atmosphere or climate (this could be private, but also collective). Some authors (Fuchs 2013) differentiate between atmosphere and moods, while others (Gumbrecht 2012, Krebs 2017) tend to conflate them.

3. The mode, style, tune or pathos of a text or speech act

4. Attunement, harmony (of musical instruments). Kant uses the term "balanced Stimmung" to describe the harmony of emotional and rational faculties of human understanding that is a precondition for making judgments of taste (see Gumbrecht 2012: 8).

All these different nuances of this word will combine in my articulation of the ontological experience.

Thinking and moods

This article springs from the basic tenet of existential phenomenology as formulated by Heidegger: any human experience, thinking included, is attuned by moods (Heidegger 1996, §29). Heidegger, as is widely known, does not treat moods as internal states

of mind: a mood is a fundamental way of being-in-the-world for Dasein, any experience is "filtered" by moods (Freeman 2014: 452). The world that opens up in the human experience is always affective, never merely representational – what is experienced always *matters* to us thanks to moods. This standpoint requires that we cast aside all pretensions to a rigorous, objective science – including the pure ego achieved through phenomenological reduction as postulated in certain works by Husserl. A mood is not a regrettable impediment to clear thought, but rather, as I set out to demonstrate, an essential potentiality of ontological thought.

> That a Da-sein factically can, should, and must master its mood with knowledge and will may signify a priority of willing and cognition in certain possibilities of existing. But that must not mislead us into ontologically denying mood as a primordial kind of being of Da-sein in which it is disclosed to itself before all cognition and willing and beyond their scope of disclosure. Moreover, we never master a mood by being free of a mood, but always through a counter mood. (Heidegger 1996: 128)

The idea that an affective element is a necessary component of any experience is not restricted to Heideggerian philosophy in the narrow sense (Hadjiouannou 2019) but is actually quite common these days (Keenan, Ferber 2011). The phrase "affective turn" has found use in both epistemology (Athanasiou, Pothiti, Yannakoupoulos 2012) and social philosophy (Clough, Halley 2007).

The distinction between moods and emotions has been the subject of much inquiry – drawing both from Heidegger and other manners of thought (Ferreira 2002, Freeman 2014, Ratcliffe 2009), including psychology (Beedie, Terry, Lane 2005) and attempts to synthesise phenomenological understanding with the science of emotions (Elpidorou 2013, Ratcliffe 2002). It would be impractical to go into all the nuances (e.g., the distinction between *Stimmung* and *Befindlichkeit* in Heidegger) and disputes here. A few points of difference will need to suffice (see also Krebs 2017: 1422):

> 1. A mood is more stable over time than a particular feeling or affect.
>
> 2. A mood is an affective background that encompasses everything (including the embodiment), giving rise to individual feelings; it is a precondition for the development of feelings, a general emotional atmosphere. Moods are a condition for the possibility of mental states (Freeman 2014: 446). This background is not strictly private for everybody; moods are collectively shared, we can speak of the basic moods of an era (Haar 1992). A mood concerns not only thinking, but life in general.
>
> 3. A mood can be non-intentional, non-thematic and even unconscious. A mood lacks a specific intentional object and a clear cause. This, of course, does not mean that the

> development of moods and emotions occurs in utterly different regimes; a mutual interaction certainly plays a role. According to Fuchs (2013: 10), moods have a tendency for individualisation, whereas feelings tend to become moods as they recede to the background.

The question concerning the intentionality of moods has been ground for some dispute; some authors argue that moods, as a background, are non-intentional (Ratcliffe 2009), while others consider them necessarily intentional (Elpidorou 2013). In my opinion, it cannot really be said that moods are always and utterly non-intentional. First of all, we do list, categorise and describe various moods — let's not forget about Heidegger's famous characterisations of anxiety (Heidegger 1998: 88-96) and boredom (Heidegger 1995: 132-168). In these characterisations, the mood is certainly presented as an intentional object. Admittedly, the description/differentiation of a mood is not quite the same as "living" it; for instance, Heidegger argues that anxiety leaves us speechless and becomes available for description only after it has dissipated (Heidegger 1998: 89). However, this remark nevertheless points to the fact that anxiety has been recognised/acknowledged as well as remembered in the vague manner proper to it. We do speak of moods and spirits even in terms of folk psychology and it is usually, albeit not always, possible to identify them. For example, a person may notice that they are always tired and gloomy for no particular reason, that the things that used to bring them joy no longer do, and diagnose themselves with a mood that psychiatry terms depression. Of course it could be argued that a mood, once recognised, is always already transformed into an emotion, but in that case, it would be altogether impossible to talk about moods in a phenomenological sense – they should either remain a mystical X beyond consciousness, or something that can only be studied by external observation from a 3rd person perspective.

Husserl offers a better solution to the problem. As I learned from an article by Nam-In Lee (1998), Husserl's unpublished manuscript M III 3 II 1 includes a phenomenology of the mood. A mood, according to that work, is a fuzzy background that serves to interconnect the various feelings constantly piercing the consciousness. To put it in Husserl's terms, then: moods are the *horizon* of emotion and have the indeterminate intentionality characteristic of a horizon (Lee 1998: 115). Rudolf Bernet, drawing on a number of works by Husserl, calls this "an intentionality without objects" (Bernet 1994: 244). As a horizon, a mood not only organises the overall palette of conscious emotions, but also "colours" the experience of any object – it even colours the world as the universal horizon of all experience. Lee rightfully points out that Husserl's approach leads to the conclusion that, at least insofar as the natural attitude is concerned, non-objectifying acts have a general advantage over objectifying ones (Lee 1998: 116).

Life events and things no doubt have a power to shape the mood. At the end of this section I will argue for the position developed by

H. U. Gumbrecht (2012): that things and texts, too, may possess a *Stimmung* of their own. Things and texts open up as they are being experienced, of course, but this does not mean that any work can be experienced in an infinite number of ways, in any way whatsoever. With works of art, in particular, what matters most is the rhetorical pathos (*Stimmung*, style, manner of writing), rather than the specific meaning or general idea that opens up in the text (this is the aura that Benjamin speaks of). It is the primacy of pathos (Gross 2005), in fact, that explains why Heidegger arrived at dialogue with poetry as he sought to answer the question of Being.

Negative moods and failure

I claim that ontological experience occurs only in certain negative moods. Talk of negative moods involves risk of misinterpretation and requires some clarification. *First of all*, we should refrain from the simplistic reduction of moods into negative and positive in accordance with psychologistic or folk-psychological bases of classification, such as pleasure/pain or happy/unhappy. If we are to classify moods at all, it should be done with more nuance (see Fuchs 2013). At the same time, it must be kept in mind that the classification and cataloguing of moods occurs through an act of theoretical interpretation, where indistinct moods are specified in the course of analysis and likened to emotions. *Secondly*, a discussion of negative moods should cast aside the value judgments widespread in common experience (pleasure–good; pain–bad). At least in terms of the ontological question, negative moods are not bad or undesirable at all; quite the opposite (see Withy 2012).

Yet it is precisely those moods that folk psychology considers unpleasant and wearisome – such as anxiety, the uncanny, abjection, horror, a sense of finitude (being-toward-death), nausea etc. – that Heidegger and those who follow in his footsteps highlight as examples of ontological experience. It would be wrong to assert that such a register is a necessary foil to any philosophy: there are certainly philosophers for whom the fundamental mood is joy[1] or a certain enthusiasm (Spinoza, Deleuze). So how come existential phenomenology has such a negative attunement? To answer this question in the spirit of Heidegger, a jolly philosophy is based on metaphysical illusion; such thinking is centred on some ontic fetish for all-one. However, Being is not one or something, but rather nothing that lies hidden beyond what is (Heidegger 1998: 233; 1977: 85), and hence authentic ontological thinking necessarily has a negative affectation. I broadly agree with this line of reasoning but would prefer to avoid a certain dogmatism of nothingness, as if it were granted that we are negatively affected by a certain peculiar "object", a nothingness that nots; extra-empirical assumptions have no place in phenomenological thought.

I claim that ontological experience is possible only through **failure**. If we abandon the theoretical assumption of Being/nothingness that singles out certain appropriate moods to "disclose" itself, then we

should ask what it is about some negative moods that makes them, as I want to argue, the seat of ontological experience. What all these moods have structurally in common is the profound, central *glitch* in experience, a massive failure of experience.[2] If we are to translate this back into the language of Husserlian phenomenology, these moods serve to occasion an encounter with the horizon that prevents experience from fulfilling, an intentional object from forming or a continuous practical activity from proceeding.

Let's take a quick look at some of Heidegger's best-known examples of this process. What sets anxiety apart from fear, according to Heidegger, is its *lack of an object*: it is impossible to ascertain what it is that causes the anxiety.

> In case of anxiety we say that "one feels uncanny". What is "it" that makes "one" feel uncanny? We cannot say what it is before which one feels uncanny. It just feels like that as a whole. All things and we ourselves sink into indifference. (Heidegger 1998: 88)

The same goes for profound boredom – it is no particular situation that is boring; rather, boredom covers me in such a way that the field of potentialities that Dasein typically inhabits is closed off. In the face of profound boredom, mattering – the universal way in which Dasein relates to what is – hence also fails (see Ratcliffe 2009, Pippin 2005: 64).

> This means that through this boredom Dasein find itself set in place precisely before beings as a whole, to the extent that in this boredom the beings that surround us offer us no further possibility of acting and no further possibility of our doing anything. There is a telling refusal on the part of being as a whole with respect to these possibilities. (Heidegger 1995: 139).

Consciousness is generally oriented/motivated towards the fulfilment of experience; among other things, a mood is fulfilled in various emotions. According to the standard interpretation, if I am in an anxious mood, this gives rise to an ever-growing number of fears and phobias. As I realise and analyse this multiplicity, I will at some point most likely try to describe my overall mood – in other words, I objectify my emotional horizon. Recognising that I suffer from a strange mood, I might even see a doctor and let myself be pharmaceutically "re-attuned". Likewise, the mood of profound boredom would mean that any perceived object seems boring, nothing excites me. In general, a mood merely "colours" an individual perception as the emotional horizon.

Heidegger sees anxiety and boredom in a different way. Let's take a look at the characteristic features of these moods:

> 1. The moods in question are profound and all-encompassing, taking hold of the person. While acutely present and focal in experience, they lack an object.[3] People are anxious or bored in a vague, general sense (*es gibt Angst*).

> 2. Such moods tend to disorient one's subjectivity, giving rise to a lethargy where the smooth continuation of the meaning creation process and the pre-conceptual/habitual meaning of life both fail (Mulhall 2011: 128). In other words, in the face of such moods the gears of intentionality come to a halt – these moods resist interpretation into an emotional state that could be taken by the experiencing person to have a specific reason.
>
> 3. In phenomenological terms, then, these moods let us encounter the universal horizon of experience (the world, Being, nothingness...). This is a limit-experience, a wanting, failing lack of an object (empty intentionality), but not quite yet the black hole of unconsciousness. In ontological terms, too, thinking of ontological difference can only occur at the border between beings and Being, according to Heidegger (1977: 99).
>
> 4. These moods are negative in terms of the how of experience, as well as ontological, given that they reveal the nonbeing, the "non" of all that is. From an ontological perspective, such moods are indeed fundamental (Grundstimmungen), although it would be more appropriate to call them abysmal (Ab-grund).

By my reckoning, these negative moods are in fact the only way to talk about ontological experience[4] – any other attempt to single out Being as something completely different from what is inevitably succumbs to representationalism (Being is nothingness, but this nothingness is nevertheless an intentional object, etc.). Even the most empathetic readers of Heidegger (Käufer 2005, Marion 1998) come to the conclusion that nothingness can never be given as a phenomenon – this observation has, naturally, also been a source of criticism of Heidegger (Waghorn 2014: 102-124). The greatest landmark of this failure of representation is Heidegger's thought as a whole – even though the question of Being continues to take new forms here (about *Sinn vom Sein, Sein selbst, Seyn, Ereignis, Es gibt*), Being always remains hidden, it only nots (as *Entzug, Verweigerung, Geheimnis* etc.).

Looking at a fundamental mood from the outside, the much-debated question of whether it manifests nothingness (anxiety in Heidegger), Being (*il y a* in Levinas) or the entirety of what is (boredom in Heidegger) loses relevance. These and many other keywords (e.g. the uncanny, see Withy 2015) that serve to describe negative moods refer to the same objectless, "not-ing" encounter with the horizon. Of course, all attempts at describing the ontological mood are inevitably doomed to incompleteness and inadequacy; no exhaustive theoretical description can be provided for them in the language of acts of experience that are fulfilled with meanings. This is precisely why late Heidegger and those he influenced emphasise the primacy of silence before speech, the importance of listening to

silence or pure wordless voice (Heidegger 1959, cf. Agamben 1991).[5] Steven W. Laycock even comes forward with the intriguing claim, combining Husserlian phenomenology with Buddhism, that "the primoridal "interest" of consciousness, is invested not in the presence, but in the utter of "absolute" absence ... it is originally absence (emptiness), not presence, which is of value to consciousness." (Laycock 1997: 71)

Based on the foregoing it could be argued that the task of ontological thinking cannot be theoretical but only lies in attunement, the maintaining or bringing about a negative mood – although here, too, care should be taken to avoid postulating any clear causal links. For example, it seems that the mysterious writings of late Heidegger only serve to attune some readers, inviting scorn or analytical critique from others. This is where *taking-as* (*Vernehmen*) comes into play: according to the interpretation laid out here, it refers to the presence of a negative fundamental mood. A tautologising phenomenology in the style of Heidegger (see Courtine 1993) means that this kind of thinking is always already attuned to failure, to "no". This opens up a number of important questions that this paper cannot begin to address, such as: Is everybody by nature open to the experience of negativity, and if that never occurs, is theirs then an inauthentic state of being? Or does having a relationship with negativity require a special taking-as, inspiration, and is therefore characteristic only of poets and thinkers? Also important is the question of the moods typical of an era – does the calculating mindset of the era of modern technology that extends around us as an overarching immanence render ontological experience impossible, or is it quite the opposite – that our planetary homelessness instils in us a negative attunement, etc.

Ontological experience in art

Ontological experience is possible in art rather than science or rigorous philosophy. This claim is trivial in view of Heidegger's path of thinking, but I will nevertheless try to clarify it briefly. Theoretical discourse is intensely oriented towards its objects, producing a dense network of meaning in the receiver; however, earlier we saw that the occurrence of ontological experience requires the attainment of a negative mood where the fulfilment/association of acts of meaning is disrupted. Such a rhetorical pathos (*Stimmung*) behind the explicit message is characteristic of some kind of literary texts[6], in particular (and maybe even more so of those art forms that are relatively independent of language, such as music). This is where the musical connotations of *Stimmung* become relevant: a thinker attuned by negativity is like a vibrating string (thinking *qua* answering, ringing to the tone of silence). Deliberately going against Heidegger, for whom a minimal distinction between thinking and poetry always persists, I want to argue that an amalgam of philosophy and literature (see Luks 2010) is borne out of ontological thinking – namely, out of these very same negative moods discussed in the course of this article. An

ontologically attuned text uses meaningful words in ways that bring about an intense disruption in the progression of meanings. I believe that the meaning of literature as well as the meaning of ontological thinking lies not only in the meaning of the token (*logos*) but rather in the milieu (*pathos, Stimmung*) surrounding it. Ontologically attuned literature does not aim to accumulate or connect new meanings, to invent new worlds; quite the opposite, it is meant to cause a failure in the system of meanings. As Maurice Blanchot put it: art is the silence of the world (see Luks 2017).

More specifically, it can be argued that an ontologically attuned text is *sublime*. By this I mean that the sublime is not necessarily a feeling, but it could also be a mood that bears an important functional similarity to anxiety (Coyne 2013: 23-24). The experience of the sublime is characterised by all the features of failure typical of the negative fundamental moods discussed earlier: a shock that serves to disorient subjectivity, an indeterminate lack of an object, an empty intentionality without fulfilment of meaning (Welten 2011), a nothingness lurking on the horizon of unrepresentability (see also Gasché 2001), a glimpse of the ontological difference (Escoubas 1993). Although Heidegger eschewed the concept of the sublime, which he relegates to metaphysical aesthetics (Coyne 2013), I feel confident to draw parallels and argue that not only did the thinking of late Heidegger consists in the interpretation of sublime poetry, some research gives reason to assert that the writings of late Heidegger themselves can be called sublime poetry (see Anderson 1996)[7]. As we traverse the path to language (*Unterwegs zur Sprache*), these writings sustain at the level of rhetorical pathos a negative attunement (see Gross 2005).

From a phenomenological point of view, it is precisely such upholding of a mood wherein lies the mystery of ontological thinking, an empty intentionality that collides with the object-less horizon of experience (Welten 2011). By this I do not mean to say that it is ridiculous to speak of ontological experience, that it is surely nothing but a psychical effect. On the contrary, I maintain that it is precisely this sublime "not", where coherent meaning and practical relations fail, that truly reveals to us what it means to be human (cf. Hurst 1996, Sliogeris 2005). I have no evidence of ontological difference other than the negatively attuned experience in certain moods. For me that is enough to continue engaging with the negative.

Conclusion

In this article I asked the question about the possibility of *ontological experience*, that is, the possibility of *experiencing the ontological difference*, something wholly distinct from beings. I defended the position that ontological experience is possible and central to the human existence. According to my interpretation ontological experience happens in some negative moods, in a specific emotional or affective state where the formation of an intentional object fails. This interpretation started from Heideggerian premise,

that any human experience is attuned by moods. I discussed shortly the question concerning the intentionality of moods and claimed, that moods as the *horizon* of emotion have the indeterminate intentionality characteristic of a horizon, an intentionality without objects.

I claimed that ontological experience is possible only through failure. What all ontologically important moods (Boredom, Anxiety, Uncanny etc) have structurally in common is the profound, central *glitch* in experience, a massive failure of experience. These moods are negative in terms of the *how* of experience, as well as ontological, given that they reveal the nonbeing, the "non" of all that is. If that is correct, then the task of ontological thinking cannot be theoretical but only lies in attunement, the maintaining or bringing about a negative mood. The occurrence of ontological experience requires the attainment of a negative mood where the fulfilment/association of acts of meaning is disrupted. Such a rhetorical pathos (*Stimmung*) behind the explicit message is characteristic of some kind of literary texts – according to that was my last claim of this article that ontological experience is possible in art rather than science or rigorous philosophy. At the very end of this article I argued shortly that an ontologically attuned text is sublime.

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Notes

1 Heidegger also notes (1996, §68) that joy and hope are important existential moods, but he never offers an in-depth analysis of them.

2 Some researchers have already noted that failure is a central characteristic of Dasein (see Critchley 2011, Marder 2007, Pippin 2005). Here I just want to emphasise that this failure is the locus of ontological experience.

3 It could be argued that fundamental moods are somewhere in-between a mood and a feeling, a freezing point where a mood turns into a feeling: they're focal but object-less. They might be described as existential feelings, as Ratcliffe (2008) does.

4 Katherine Withy (2012) argues along similar lines by analysing the methodological role of anxiety in Heidegger's "Being and Time". She sees in anxiety an essentially ontological attunement, as it brings to a halt all ordinary points of reference between entities within the world. However, Withy does not claim that the failure inherent to negative moods is the sole ontological experience – Heidegger himself certainly did not during his "Being and Time" period, as he was seeking out ways to constructively answer the question about the meaning of Being.

5 The claim that silence has an advantage over speech was already sketched out in "Being and Time"; e.g. the call (*Ruf*) of *Dasein* that calls for the nothingness of the world speaks in the uncanny mode of silence (Heidegger 1996: 254-255).

6 The question of what kinds of literary texts have the potential to trigger an ontological experience is a broad and much-debated issue that cannot possibly be explored adequately within the constraints of this paper. The ambivalence of the word *Stimmung* helps us avoid both of the following far-fetched extremes: (1) there is a well-defined objective canon of texts that have an ontological potential, or (2) given that the artistic experience depends on the receiver, any work, even the most banal dime novel, could attune the reader ontologically.

7 Anderson goes into some detail about the ways that Heidegger's post-*Kehre* thought is poetic. For Anderson, this poesy is sublime primarily because of its preoccupation with the themes of death and

mortality. For Reinhard Mehring (1992), a sublime *Stimmung* is evident in the waiting for the absent gods in Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin. Several scholars (Van Peperstraten 2011, Gosetti-Ferencei 2004) have found that Heiddegger integrated the sublime into the beautiful already in the "Origin of the Work of Art."