



Interpreters of the Divine

nancy's poet, jeremiah the prophet, and saint paul's glossolalist

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I introduction

“**T**his means it is the gods who make us speak” (Nancy, *Adoration* 68). With this sentence, Jean-Luc Nancy concludes a reflection on the excessive dimension of human speech in *Adoration*:

Excessive speech speaks indefinitely, in the exuberance of literary inventions, the profusion of fictions, and the proliferation of discourses, but it also speaks infinitely – and then one no longer hears it, there is nothing more to hear. It resonates only in the voice itself, in a murmur, a rubbing of the voice against itself, hesitating on the threshold of speech. This is the extreme intimacy of the voice, the buried heart of language, a groaning of suffering or of jouissance, a brushing up against sense. (67)

The excess of language, found in literary inventions, fictions, and discourses, thus borders on a deficit or absence of language. Excessive language exceeds what the human ear can hear and makes language withdraw in a particular muteness or murmur on the threshold of speech. The figure of the threshold is marked by a basic ambiguity. On the one hand, it is the passageway and the opening up towards another space, another room, another horizon, another discourse, another person. On the other hand, and this is what Nancy emphasizes in the quotation, the threshold marks the border separating language from its “buried heart,” from the *phōnē*, the mere animal voice “groaning of suffering or of jouissance” that did not

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yet enter the realm of sense but is “brushing up against sense,” coming close to touch it and become significant.

This reflection on the threshold of speech concludes with the sentence I started with: “This means it is the gods who make us speak” (Nancy, *Adoration* 68). Apparently, it is there were the gods, in relation to language, are to be found, at the heart of human speech, “effaced in speech, confused with call and response,” as Nancy adds. The question is: how to bear witness in language to this “buried heart of language”?

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In this essay, I think with Nancy to see what is at stake in the figure of a voice on the threshold of speech and communication. I consider how the figure of the gods that make us speak is brought into play to elucidate the threshold of language and how this figure, as that which makes us speak, somehow offers the crossing of this threshold. To this end, I want to discuss three different figures or scenes in which the gods make us speak. The first one is found in Nancy's work. The ancient Greek experience of the poet's speech, as we can find it in the opening of Homer's *Iliad* and in Socrates' interrogation of the rhapsode *Ion* in Plato's dialogue of the same name, offers a paradigm for the divine inspiration of human speech. There are, however, other figures whom the gods make speak. In particular, the figure of the prophet Jeremiah and the scene of his calling and Saint Paul's reflections on the glossolalist in the First Letter to the Corinthians, offer us two different interpreters that further elucidate the phenomenon of gods making us speak and that problematize certain aspects of the poetic figure and scene. (For a more extensive analysis of the relation between poet, prophet, glossolalist, and interpreter, see Van der Heiden, *The Voice of Misery* 179–90.)

2 nancy's ancient greek poet

In "Answering for Sense," Nancy unfolds the particular hermeneutic structure of the poet's voice that he discerns in the opening sentence of Homer's *Iliad* – "Sing, o goddess, the anger" or "The wrath sing, goddess." As Nancy comments:

Homer does not write himself: He lets the divine voice sing. Him, the *aède*, he sings in as much as he interprets the divine song – this song that he asks her to sing [...]: He does in this way what he expects her to do in order for him to eclipse himself in this song – his own (hers) becoming his own (his), yet always remaining this divine song. He thus lets the voice sing, or else he makes it heard, he recites it. ("Answering for Sense" 84–85)

As the essay progresses, Nancy weaves the different elements that demonstrate the complexity of poetic speech. The poet sings, but goddess sings; the divine voice dictates and calls the poet to commitment, but the divine voice is only heard in and by the poetic response to this demand, that is, in the poet's enactment of this commitment. As Nancy notes: "[The poet] shares the commitment of an outside voice," and "[the poet] commits to it when his turn comes, he renders polyphonic the voice that came to him as a soliloquy" (86). The divine voice is a promise – a *Zusage* in Heidegger's sense of the word – to grant both the voice that sings and the words that need to be sung, but it is a promise which can only be redeemed by and in the poet's actual singing for the goddess. The poetic voice appears, thus, from the very first sentence of the *Iliad*, as two-voiced, double-tongued if you like, because there are always two voices at least: *aede* and *thea*; singer and goddess. Neither of these voices can be said to come first. A voice is never alone, as Nancy notes:

A voice in itself is not a voice: It's a silence that does not even have the space of an address, it's a muting enclosed in its buzzing, in its roaring or in its murmur (the repetition of a mute *mmm* – *mutum*). A voice is always two voices at least, always polyphoned somehow. (86)

This results in the following description of the *hermeneutic* activity of the poet, in which hermeneutics and interpretation is directly understood as a form of bearing witness:

He bears witness to *thea*'s existence and he takes upon himself his desire: the desire he has for *thea* and the desire that *thea* is herself.

Witness to *thea*'s existence, he declares his own self as being her *aede*, that is, also her hermeneut. The hermeneut is not first the one who deciphers and who decodes significations, even if he has to, at times, do just that [...] The hermeneut is not first the one who signifies *what is* said: He is the one who carries the desire to say further. The hermeneut supplements the subject with his desire: He presents *thea* and makes her

be heard in the very voice – her own voice – by which he convokes her [...] he also bears witness to her nature, and to how the latter is entirely made of this sharing of voices of whom *he*, he who writes (or she), is a part, a moment, an accent, and a sense beside so many others. (Nancy, “Answering for Sense” 90–91)

Let me unfold a number of elements that this longer quote offers and connect them to some themes we find elsewhere in Nancy’s work.

(1) Nancy offers here a particular sense of hermeneutics or interpretation modelled on the poet’s activity. With this suggestion, he remains faithful to his account to develop a primordial sense of hermeneutics as suggested in, for instance, “Sharing Voices” and “The Forgetting of Philosophy” (see also Van der Heiden, “Reading Bartleby, Reading Ion” and *Ontology After Ontotheology* 74–92). This account takes its point of departure in a hint that we can find in Heidegger’s *On the Way to Language* where in the latter he distinguishes hermeneutics in the sense of the art of interpretation from a more primordial sense of “the hermeneutical,” which still resounds in the Greek verb *hermēneuein* and the noun *hermēneus*, or interpreter, as it is used in Plato’s *Ion*. Adopting Plato’s playful relation of hermeneutics and the god Hermes, Heidegger suggests that “the hermeneutical” concerns “the bearing of message and tidings” (29). The interpreter carries, bears, and brings the message to convey it to the listeners. Note that in the French, the verb *porter* translates the German *bringen*: “‘Hermès porte l’annonce du destin,’” as Nancy quotes Heidegger’s “[Hermès] bringt die Botschaft des Geschickes” (Nancy, *Le partage des voix* 82; Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* 115). Similarly, the German *zur Sprache bringen* is translated as *porter à parole* (Nancy, *Le partage des voix* 30). I will return to the importance of *porter* below.

The reader of Heidegger has to wait until Nancy’s “Sharing Voices” to find a genuine account of this Heideggerian hint. In this text, Nancy offers a genuinely hermeneutical alternative to the more classical senses of

hermeneutics developed by authors such as Gadamer and Ricoeur, for whom hermeneutics remains the art of interpretation, that is, an art that presupposes a particular signification that attracts the interpretation and that generates hermeneutic desire. Nancy fully acknowledges that hermeneutics understood as the unfolding or the deciphering of a particular signification has its own epistemological significance, but it cannot reach into the sense of hermeneutics that is attained in the ancient Greek understanding of poetic speech.

The poet-interpreter is not someone who deciphers and explicates significations. Rather, poets are enthusiasts who speak not by their own knowledge (*epistēmē*) or skills (*technai*), but because the gods make them speak. The poets receive – but never possess – the ability “to compose that to which the Muse has stirred him” (534c), as Socrates suggests in the *Ion*. Their task is first and foremost to hand down and hand out the *theia moira*, the divine dispensation – *le partage divin* as Nancy translates, thus coining his usage of *partage* – that moves them. To emphasize the distance between *epistēmē* or *technē* and the activity of the poets, Socrates emphasizes that as long as a human has its mind “in him,” he “is powerless to indite a verse or chant an oracle” (534b). The poets are interpreters of the divine voice only when they are possessed by a divine force – *theia dunamis* – and when they are out of their minds; in Greek: *nous*, which is the same term used in Saint Paul’s 1 Cor. 14.

When the poets sing, they do not know what they sing, they have no understanding of what they sing. In this sense, when the poet is called a *hermēneus*, an interpreter of the gods, this cannot refer to someone who seeks to explicate or decipher the words of the gods. To be an interpreter means to voice the words of the gods, to lend one’s own voice so that the gods may speak with it. With the fortunate distinction between divine force and signification, the *Ion* suggests that poets do not communicate significations that can be understood, but rather a divine force or power by which they themselves are possessed. Moreover, it is this

being-possessed (or being-inspired: *entheos*) that is handed down to the audience. Those who listen to the songs of poets and rhapsodes are captivated as well. They share in the inspiration that makes the poet's voice speak. As Socrates notes in the *Ion*: "the god himself is the one who speaks, and he gives voice through them to us" (534d). The voice of the poet is thus also in the *Ion* a double voice – the poet sings, but the gods sing. Because there is no divine voice outside of the human voice of the poet, as Nancy emphasizes in his reading of this dialogue, the divine voice is only as this voice doubled in the poet's voice. For purists, it will therefore always remain unclear who speaks, either the poet or the god, because they always speak together, at the same time, with this one tongue and one mouth that combines poetic and divine voice.

To hand down, to transmit, and to carry further thus form for Nancy the basic sense of hermeneutics in the ancient Greek paradigm of the poet. As he insists in "Sharing Voices," even the rhapsode, although he appears to be second in rank, does not diminish in any sense the *theia dunamis*, the divine power that he passes on: "the divine force is transmitted intact – but exactly as it *is to be transmitted*, and it is with the second ring that it manifests entirely this property" (237–38). Hence, the rhapsode demonstrates even more purely or univocally that the hermeneut is a passageway that is the very condition of possibility of communicating the divine power. The hermeneut enables the transmission and circulation of the divine force, allows it to move from one towards the other.

In turn, this determination of hermeneutics affects Nancy's account of sense. The following quote from *The Sense of the World* mirrors the two forms of hermeneutics – explication vs. transmission – in two senses of sense: "Sense is consequently not the 'signified' or the 'message': it is *that something like transmission of a 'message' should be possible*. It is the relation as such and nothing else" (118). We find a similar difference in "Sharing Voices": "[meaning] is abandoned to [*abandonner à*] the sharing [*partage*], to the hermeneutic

law of the difference between voices, and that it is not a *gift*, anterior and exterior to our voices and our orations" (244). The signified and the message are the forms of sense that are sought for when explicating or deciphering. A more primordial sense of sense, however, concerns transmissibility itself, the movement towards the other, the movement of making communal. When a voice, in Nancy's vocabulary of *Adoration*, brushes up against sense, it finds itself on the brink or the threshold of this transmissibility, about to reach the other. In the Socratic paradigm of the iron rings, the magnetic force itself, *theia moira*, *theia dunamis*, accounts for this transmissibility.

(2) For Nancy, desire is bifurcated by the same difference that traverses hermeneutics and sense. If hermeneutic desire is understood as the desire to decipher or explicate a pre-given signification, hermeneutics basically repeats an onto-theological structure, which Nancy therefore calls *onto-theo-eroto-logy* (*The Sense of the World* 51). This term refers to the *presupposition* of meaning – or of a transcendental signified – that generates the desire for meaning as the desire for something that *can be* appropriated, although it is always postponed and deferred.

There is, however, another form of desire, not one that desires to appropriate but rather to hand down, to pass on, and to relate "one toward the other." It is desire in this second sense, thought on the basis of a primordial hermeneutics that we encounter in the quote from "Answering for Sense." Here, Nancy determines the basic mood of the poet's responsiveness as desire; the poet "carries the desire to say further" – the poet is the *porte-voix* of the goddess "porte plus loin le désir de dire" (see also Nancy, "Sharing Voices" 45n29, 71n51). The motive of carrying, *porter*, is inscribed in the subsequent determination of poetic speech as *bearing witness*; the poet is the witness, *témoin*, of the existence of the goddess and of her nature, *le partage des voix*, the sharing of voices. The desire to *carry* the goddess in her existence and her nature, which is itself a carrying further or a carrying on of the desire to speak, marks this other form of *porter*, which

in English we render as “to bear,” namely to *bearing* witness, *porter témoignage*. The existence and the nature of the goddess, so this primordial scene of poetic speech suggests, is not without this motive of the *porte-voix qui porte plus loin, qui porte témoignage et qui porte en lui-même*. The poet is, thus, not the witness who merely sees or experiences, but the witness who brings the goddess’s existence and nature to a certain completion by carrying it (cf. also Agamben 148–50).

This relation of the poet and the goddess, which concerns a carrying that carries outward and carries further, does raise the question of where exactly the voice brushes up against sense and where it is only running up against the threshold of a speech that transmits and carries further. How is the hermeneutic desire evoked and to which deficit does it respond if it is not the absence of a hidden signification? Two other figures, that of the prophet and the glossolalist, offer two different scenes of gods making humans speak which both concern the realm preceding the actual transmission, that is, a realm in which transmissibility is not yet given but genuinely longed for.

3 the prophet’s calling

Although the Homeric poet is dictated and somehow called by the goddess, the *Iliad*’s song opens with the poet speaking and calling on the goddess to sing. The first word, here, is the poet’s. The biblical scene of a comparable figure, the prophet Jeremiah, offers another beginning. The first chapter of Jeremiah depicts the stages preceding any opening sentence of a poetic song or a prophetic declaration. Among the group of divine hermeneuts, Jeremiah stands out, perhaps, exactly because the story of his calling itself is narrated. If you like, the particular structure of “dictation” is unfolded: the story of becoming the one who carries the divine voice is told.

(1) Jeremiah is called to be a prophet. What is the temporal structure of such a call? It is not simply confined to the moment or the event of the actual address. The call’s temporal

structure is more complicated. In fact, so the story goes, the calling precedes the prophet’s very existence. He is called from before he was born and even from before he was formed in the womb of his mother (Jer. 1.5). Although the call cannot reach the prophet himself in these prior stages of and to his existence, it is clear that this call somehow forms the horizon of this existence – it is like the murmur in which his existence is embedded, although he does not (yet) hear or understand it. Here, the call genuinely remains on the threshold, not reaching the one who is called, not yet addressing the prophet. This immemorial dimension of the calling, which is not heard and does not yet actually address, is supplemented – perhaps even completed – at the moment when the address reaches its addressee. The moment discloses another temporal dimension of the call: it is an event taking place here and now – here and now I am called, as Jeremiah experiences. Yet, the content of this announcement is not only this here and now; rather, the call makes itself known as a call older and more ancient than existence, as a calling which apparently was there, always already, immemorial, on the threshold of an actual address, but still holding itself in reserve, brushing up against sense, awaiting the moment to cross the threshold and transform into a call that actually reaches the prophet’s ear and understanding. The call has the capacity to call to another existence, but at the same time this is the existence to which the prophet has always already been called, from before his existence, with a murmuring call awaiting the event of its transformation into sense.

(2) When the call reaches Jeremiah, his very first response – because there is a *first* response in this story – is not to hand down towards others and to carry the desire to say and to call further, which is the prophet’s task. Rather, he responds: “I cannot speak” (Jer. 1.6). It is important to emphasize that this response is not the expression of a will, that is, of a reluctance or a resistance to speak. It rather speaks of an incapacity. The reason the prophet provides to substantiate his response is that he is too young. He is too young

compared to the ancient call that finally reaches him. Over against this immemorial call to speak, the prophet's capacity to speak for that which calls before and beyond himself is a mere nullity; he is in the state of the infant, the non-speaking-one. Hence, at the very moment when the ancient, divine calling, transforms from an immemorial mute murmur surrounding the prophet's existence into a call that finally makes itself heard, it is this incapacity that manifests itself first and to which the prophet bears witness first; it turns out that he carries this incapacity in himself. When called, he first experiences an *obstruction* with respect to the genuine prophetic task "to carry the desire to say further."

What is the significance of this obstruction? The story, as it unfolds, confronts us with a point of indecision that forces us to interpret, to decipher the meaning of this obstruction. Let me offer two possible interpretations, which together mirror and displace the difference that traverses, according to Nancy, the sense of hermeneutics.

(a) The first reading finds the significance of this incapacity to speak in its service, its subservience to a particular divine economy. After all, as one might suggest, the prophet's incapacity to speak is not a drawback at all, but rather the basic condition of possibility for the divine speaking machine to function properly. God, as the story tells us, subsequently touches the prophet's mouth and puts the divine words in it. The human incapacity to speak and the human's utter insignificance before this God and his call turns out to be the best of fortunes. Because Jeremiah has nothing to say himself, of himself and for himself, his own voice does not add anything to the words that Yahweh puts in his mouth. His mouth, breath, and tongue become – purified from all wanting-to-say, *vouloir-dire*, from all self-contributed meaning – the *pure* vehicle for divine messages and tidings. It is the sovereign God who is fully in control of the prophet's tongue, so that nobody needs to doubt the divine origin of the words that leave the prophet's mouth.

Such a reading, one might suggest, repeats an onto-theo-eroto-logical gesture: the desire

of the prophet to become nothing is introduced here so that the longed-for purified word of God can manifest itself without reserve and without contamination. It is as if the story of this original calling and the prophet's original response are introduced as a fictional origin to ward off or to neutralize the basic experience of the *hearing* of the word of God that Derrida so strikingly describes in *The Gift of Death*:

I hear tell what he says, through the voice of another, another other, a messenger, an angel, a prophet, a messiah or postman [*facteur*], a bearer of tidings, an evangelist, an intermediary who speaks between God and myself. (91)

From the perspective of the hearer of prophetic words, there are always messengers, go-betweens who impose themselves in between the hearer and the divine voice. As both Nancy and Derrida suggest in their own way, there is no first, pure or purified divine voice that is simply given and to which the interpreter should simply give way without obstruction. It is with respect to this particular contamination of the divine voice by the go-betweens, which is itself the very condition of possibility of carrying the divine voice further, that the story of the calling offers a supplement – that is, a second supplement in the form of a story of the origin to neutralize the contamination of the supplements that are necessary to hand down the divine words. A supplement to overcome the doubt in the hearers generated by the fact that they only hear the divine voice mediated by others and never immediately.

(b) A second reading focuses on the phenomenological sense of the "I cannot speak" for the prophet himself. It is, in the first place, the acknowledgment and affirmation of a particular lack. This lack does not simply concern the prophet's linguistic capacity as such. Although he thinks he is too young, he can speak – after all, he does speak. It is, however, with respect to the call addressing him that a specific deficit is disclosed and recognized. One might, perhaps, suggest that the divine call can only arise from the immemorial mute murmur that

always already surrounded the prophet's existence to an actual call that reaches the addressee *when* the prophet is ready for and capable of recognizing and proclaiming his own incapacity. One might, perhaps, say, to use the distinction Nancy refers to in "Answering for Sense," that the call as mere *phōnē* has to be transformed in an *audē*, in an address, in a voice that can be heard by a human (86). The "I cannot speak" bears witness not to the prophet's incapacity to speak himself or to speak for himself, but rather to his incapacity to speak for the other that calls on him. Confronted with the call to speak for God, the prophet experiences his own capacity to speak as a limited capacity: he can merely speak for himself and not for any other. Exactly in this sense, the "I cannot speak" bears witness to the call and to the having heard the call.

All desire, if one may believe Socrates in the *Symposium*, follows from the recognition and the experience of a deficit as deficit. Desire is marked by a distance and this not only the distance of a signification: "*Desire [...] is the empty signifier of the distant signified*, or of the distance of meaning" (Nancy, "The Forgetting of Philosophy" 32). The desire to speak the other (voice) and to speak for the other is born, as desire, from the experience of this deficit, of the incapacity to speak for the other, to reach or touch the other. The call that addresses and that reaches the addressee is therefore to be understood in both its activity and passivity. Actively, it calls the prophet to speak for the other; passively, it only reaches the prophet in whom the desire to speak for the other is (being) born. This active-passive dimension of the call fits perfectly with Nancy's determination of sense: "To think sense as the in-appropriative encounter of desire and gift, as the excellence of the coming of the one toward to other, this is the task" (*The Sense of the World* 52) Actively, the call is a gift to the prophet; passively, the call can only be received in and by an awakened desire in the prophet. Only together, they form the event of the sense of the call.

The awareness that makes the prophet say "I cannot speak" is thus placed in a particular

horizon that opens up the prophet's perspective to the promise of a particular displacement of his capacity to speak. This promise announces itself in this incapacity: "Perhaps I can also not speak only myself and only for myself." This possibility is first given as a desire that understands what it lacks. To the expression of this desire in the words of the prophet "I cannot speak," the divinity now indeed responds with a promise that it will grant the words. Touching the prophet's mouth, displacing and cutting in two the tongue, forking the tongue that could only speak for itself, and putting the words in the mouth of the prophet.

The God of Jeremiah, like the poet's Muse, promises, in the Heideggerian sense of *Zusage*, to grant the words that are necessary to speak for the other. Yet, in turn – and here we see the poetic-prophetic "to and fro"-movement – the words are only *actually there* and the promise is only actually redeemed when the poet-prophet speaks them out, carrying the desire to say further. Here, indeed, the prophet bears witness to the existence of the god and their call, by carrying and carrying out the promise that this call harbors from immemorial times onwards.

4 the glossolalist's interpreter

The scene of the prophet's calling concerns the provenance of the hermeneut's speech and desire. This scene needs to be complemented with one that does not concern how hermeneuts themselves are addressed, called, and dictated, but rather how the hermeneut addresses – or to use the imagery of Plato's *Ion* and Nancy's "Sharing Voices": how the hermeneut affects the adjacent iron ring.

To describe how the poet is addressed and affected by the divine voice, Nancy writes: "he shares the commitment [*il partage l'engagement*] of an outside voice" ("Answering for Sense" 86). It is, however, perhaps not self-evident that such a sharing in the divine allows for a further sharing and communication. There seems to be a difference traversing the sense of the outside voice. In fact,

the commitment of an outside voice can also constitute a particular sense of inwardness, of a closed dialogue limited to two spirits alone that refuse to communalize their mutual communication to any outsider. This particular circumstance marks the figure of the glossolalist that we find in Saint Paul's 1 Cor. 14. Through the reference to glossolalia, the speaking in tongues, in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (114–16) and Derrida's analysis of this phenomenon as a form of sharing what cannot be shared in *The Gift of Death* (73–77), as well as the comparison between the poet's and the glossolalist's speech in Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* (113–15), this phenomenon goes to the heart of the import and reach of Nancy's notion of *partage*. I want to rethink this discussion here in terms of the relation between the Greek poet and the Pauline glossolalist.

The distinguishing feature of glossolalist and prophet concerns exactly the difference in their capacity to address, to communalize or to build up a community or communality. Let me note in passing that this sense "upbuilding," sometimes translated in English as "edifying," but that is in fact a somewhat unfortunate translation, is one of Kierkegaard's most cherished terms. The verb "to build up" translates the Greek *oikodomeō*, the building up of a house, a realm to dwell in and to inhabit together. It stems from Saint Paul's letters, is used in particular in 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 8.1; 1 Cor. 10.23) and plays a crucial role in 1 Cor. 14, where it is used at least four times, to distinguish between the fertile speech that builds up the community, that is, that allows the divine voice and address to communalize, from the speaking in tongues that, under particular circumstances, does not allow for such a communalization. As soon as we read this, bearing in mind Nancy's critical assessment of the conception that approaches community as a work in *The Inoperative Community*, we know that we have to be attentive to how the "upbuilding" character functions as a demarcation criterion in Saint Paul's considerations.

The distinction between glossolalist and poet does not mean that the glossolalist is not

engaged in or committed to the divine voice. Quite the contrary. The remarkable character of glossolalia consists for Saint Paul exactly in the fact that it constitutes a kind of immediate interaction between the human spirit (*pneuma*) and the divine. This in itself is a positive phenomenon, as Saint Paul notes: "Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves" (1 Cor. 14.4). Yet, he distinguishes and hierarchizes between this speech that does not address others from the speech of the prophet. It is therefore that he advises that one keeps one's speaking in tongues to oneself – after all if nobody knows what you say, when you address the others in utterly foreign tongue, you speak into the air, as he suggests. The only exception to this rule is when someone is present who can interpret this incomprehensible speech – the verb used here is *diermēneuō*. In addition to the spirit's private communication with the divine, an interpreter is needed, someone who can draw this divine dialogue outside of itself and who can indeed "carry the desire to say further." "Therefore," as Paul adds, "one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret" (1 Cor. 14.13). Again, there is a call here, a demand and a prayer for the power to interpret. Sharing in the divine voice itself is, for Paul, a way of speaking with a foreigner's voice: this voice cannot be understood by the people who hear the glossolalist, but also not by the glossolalist him or herself. This makes this passage even more interesting: Paul distinguishes between *pneuma* and *nous*. *Pneuma* is the spirit that prays to and communicates with the divine when speaking in tongues, but the *nous*, the mind, is not part of this communication; it is excluded from it.

Thus, it truly mirrors and displaces the situation in Plato's *Ion* where the poets, when speaking or singing, are out of their minds. Yet, in Saint Paul's case, the divine spirit does not inspire the others; it remains foreign to them; they do not share in it; the divine dispensation does not hand out to them, neither to their *nous* nor to their *pneuma*. Differently put, the divine spirit in 1 Cor. 14 does not affect like a magnetic force that can be carried further. It

interpreters of the divine

is in this situation that Saint Paul says: “Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret” (1 Cor. 14.13). Apparently, the phenomenon of sharing in the divine voice does not simply have the power to interpret and address. It needs a hermeneutic supplement that draws it out of itself and carries it outward so that it can, indeed, communalize. Hence, while the *Ion* ultimately plays with the difference between force and meaning – the divine magnetic force that can be communicated without the mind being operative – arguing that communicability is attached to such a divine, magnetic power itself, 1 Cor. 14 suggests that the interaction with the divine spirit, without an operative mind, without the capacity to render intelligible, remains mute and simply foreign to the others – a mute murmur, a mute gibberish that in itself lacks communicability.

Hence, there is a force at work here, but one that only utters a mystery, a secret, thus separating the glossolalist from the bystanders. Let me emphasize that this experience of the foreign character of the language thus uttered – this experience is in itself divided between the inward experience of the glossolalist and the outward experience of those who hear without spirit – is not simply a *negative* one. Rather, this experience produces the call and the prayer for interpretation, for the hermeneut. Interpreters are thus called to *intervene* in a duality that separates the language that communalizes from the divine language, and places themselves in and on this threshold to make the two languages communicate and communalize. Since Paul argues that the interpretation aims at the upbuilding of the community, as opposed to its confusion, it would seem to go against the basic tenet of his remark to argue that the interpreter is brought in only to *reduce* the divine communication to that of the universally understood language, or to that of a fixed language of the community and the significations that can already be expressed in it. If upbuilding would be understood in this way, the work of the community would once more be that of a unification that allows for no plurality. Saint Paul seems to be pointing

out that another form of *building up* of the community and of communality is at stake; the upbuilding means that the divine spirit and the divine voice with which no communication seemed possible, become significant and is communicated. The interpreter mediates between *pneuma* and *nous*, enabling communication. Therefore, it seems more likely that the interpreter is indeed concerned with creating new ways of hearing and understanding that transform the community: the community and its language are changed, opened up to another significance.

5 conclusion

When Gadamer in *Truth and Method* speaks of the hermeneutic experience, which basically is the experience that the other has something meaningful to say that I have not, in any way, anticipated, his analysis remains too much within the boundaries of an operative *nous* or mind. The genuine hermeneutic challenge is to be found at the limit of this *nous*, where another significance addresses us. This, one could summarize, is one of the basic insights that guide Nancy’s rethinking of a primordial sense of hermeneutics based on the Greek poet’s enthusiasm. Yet, the experience of the foreign – or *l’épreuve de l’étranger* – that imposes itself also complicates the sense of transmissibility and the passage that the poet-interpreter exemplifies. These complications are encountered especially in those variations of the figure of the poet in which the hermeneut does not speak or does not yet speak. The story of the prophet’s calling as well as Saint Paul’s assessment of the glossolalist show a particular complication of the *porter*, the carrying to which the interpreter is called.

The scene of the prophet’s calling shows in which sense the call precedes the prophet becoming a *porte-voix qui porte plus loin* the god’s call and demand. Before the prophet speaks, he bears witness to the call on the threshold of speech: on the one hand, preceding any address, truly brushing up against sense as the movement of “one toward the other” as a call that precedes each and every aspect of the

prophet's existence; and on the other hand, in its kairological structure, addressing, reaching the other. This form of bearing witness, however, does not carry the call further, but is first and foremost articulated in a testimony that bears witness to the prophet's incapacity to carry further. The call, thus reflected in the prophet's incapacity to speak for the other, let's the desire to speak for the gods, to be their *porte-voix*, be born in the prophet by which the "I cannot speak" becomes the capacity that "I can also not speak for myself alone."

On the other side, the interpreter carrying the desire to say further, the phenomenon of the glossolalist confronts us with another threshold. The glossolalist is, par excellence, the one who bears witness in their speech to the god's address, but the glossolalist does not bear witness to this address and call as a call to be carried further. Rather, the glossolalist is so taken up with the divine call and the dialogue between their spirit and the divine spirit, that no transmission ensues. Only a bystander, one who is not possessed or attracted by the divine spirit in the same way but one who is rather, in a certain sense, repelled by the attraction of the glossolalist (cf. Kierkegaard 33), has the capacity to carry the experience of the pure witness, the glossolalist, further and let others share in it by not letting them share in it. Here, the interpreter is truly found on the threshold, belonging neither simply to the realm of the glossolalist nor simply to that of the community, but exactly in this way allows for the two realms to brush up against each other, allowing them to touch and communicate.

echo by jean-luc nancy

To me, Gert-Jan van der Heiden's remarkable exposition calls above all for an extension: "the experience of the foreign" (*l'épreuve de l'étranger*) must be fully appreciated on the basis of the fact that the "foreigner" (*l'étranger*) does not speak our language, nor do we speak theirs, and that as a result there is an innate impossibility of "getting along"

van der heiden

(*s'entendre*). We can "understand" one another (*se comprendre*), but we never hear (*entend*) the other's language as our own. Certainly, it is possible to "hear" several languages according to each time different regiments and registers of "ownness," yet for all that the threshold separating languages is not removed. In this respect, it makes no difference whether the divine language is another language or other than language: in both cases, otherness (and therefore "ownness") is other than the language itself.

But this other-than-language-in-language is constitutive of language (*la langue*) (and of the fact that there are only languages in the plural). Language (*le langage*) always indicates an outside of which it can say nothing. But it equally indicates the non-existence of any outside about which anything is to be said or kept silent.

Such is the divine: non-existent outside and yet substantive (*consistant*) or resistant ...



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