

Zu den Lampen selbst:
**Phenomenology, Literary Studies and
the Mörike Debate**

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The history of literary scholarship is constituted by conflicts of interpretation, which are themselves historically situated. In terms of the German tradition, few cases are as exemplary as the so-called Mörike Debate: a rather intense exchange, triggered in 1950, between three renowned authorities of varied national affiliations: the Swiss literary critic, Emil Staiger; the preeminent German philosopher, Martin Heidegger; and Leo Spitzer, who, since his emigration during the war, had emerged as one of the founders of Comparative Literature in the United States—all weighing in on Eduard Mörike's ten-line poem, *Auf eine Lampe*, which had first appeared a century before in 1846.

Auf eine Lampe

Noch unverrückt, o schöne Lampe, schmückest du,
An leichten Ketten zierlich aufgehangen hier,
Die Decke des nun fast vergeßnen Lustgemachs.
Auf deiner weißen Marmorschale, deren Rand
Der Efeukranz von goldengrünem Erz umflieht,
Schlingt fröhlich eine Kinderschar den Ringelreihn.
Wie reizend alles! lachend, und ein sanfter Geist
Des Ernstes doch ergossen um die ganze Form —

Ein Kunstgebild der echten Art. Wer achtet sein?
Was aber schön ist, selig scheint es in ihm selbst.

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The poem describes a beautiful lamp, “not yet displaced” (*noch unverrückt*); ornamental figures promote it to “an artistic form of the genuine kind” (*ein Kunstgebild der echten Art*), but “who takes notice of it” (*wer achtet sein*)? The final line provides a response to this question, yet in a manner that is entirely clear. In the Debate, the main point of contention centered on how to read the phrase *es scheint*, with the three participants insisting on a different interpretation: the beautiful “appears to be” blessed in itself (Staiger); or it “shines” blessedly in itself (Heidegger); or it “radiates beauty” in itself (Spitzer). Yet, in focusing on the verb *scheinen*, the exchange further, albeit implicitly, addresses the feasibility of phenomenological approaches to literary criticism, particularly when *phenomenology* is understood as the study of what shines or appears (*φαίνεσθαι*). In this regard, the Mörike Debate anticipated the issues that came to the fore in the *Rezeptionsästhetik* and *Rezeptionsgeschichte* ascribed to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960) and Hans Robert Jauss’s inaugural lecture at the University of Konstanz (1967). Today, nearly seventy years after the instigating event, the Mörike Debate continues to attract serious attention, with Germanists on both sides of the Atlantic declaring their own views on the matter.¹ The question on how to interpret a single line from a mid-nineteenth-century poem thus swelled into a wide-ranging polemic: an ideal opportunity for postwar German Studies to define its methods and legitimize the discipline’s relevance.

The Debate is important not simply because it provides ample material for considering the productiveness and limitations of phenomenology in regard to the reception and analysis of poetic texts, but also because it should serve as the occasion for interrogating decisive presumptions concerning the status and function of language in phenomenological research, including the operative metaphors that might otherwise remain unquestioned in phenomenological studies. By re-opening this notorious dispute, I would like to focus on the latter point, calling attention to two different but related metaphorical tensions: one that obtains between *specificity* and *generality*, the other between *subjective pleasure* and *objectifiable art*. Both turn on the dual aspects of appearing and shining, which, again, lie at the basis of any phenomenology.

¹ For a relatively recent overview with bibliography, see Markus Wild, “‘Schon unser Briefwechsel hat das Gedicht allzu schwer belastet’: Staiger und Heidegger über Mörikes ‘Auf eine Lampe.’” In: *Kontroversen der Literaturtheorie/Literaturtheorie in der Kontroverse* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 207–222; and Gerhard Plumpe, “Eduard Mörikes Gedicht *Auf eine Lampe* im Wettstreit der Hermeneutik,” *Dialog* 1 (2014), 7–18.

I

The circumstances and terms of the debate are well recorded. In October 1950, Emil Staiger gave a guest lecture entitled “Die Kunst der Interpretation,” in which the Germanist offered an overview of his method of stylistics or *Stilkritik*, which many scholars have seen as exhibiting a general phenomenological sensibility. To illustrate his novel approach, Staiger read Mörike’s *Auf eine Lampe*, which Staiger claimed to have selected almost at random. Among those attending the presentation was Martin Heidegger, whose teaching ban at Freiburg had just been lifted. Although the talk explicitly acknowledged its indebtedness to Heidegger’s explication of interpretive processes, including the hermeneutic circle, Heidegger subsequently wrote Staiger a personal letter to express disagreement with his reading of the poem’s concluding line: *Was aber schön ist, selig scheint es in ihm selbst.*²

As Heidegger argues, Staiger falsely understands the verb *scheinen* in the sense of “appearing” or “seeming” to be. For clarification, Heidegger translates Staiger’s reading into unambiguous Latin: *felix in se ipso (esse) videtur*, “it seems to be blissful in itself”—that is, according to Staiger, “what is beautiful, merely appears to be blissful in itself,” with the implication that it might not be blissful in fact; hence, the poet’s melancholic uncertainty. In contrast, Heidegger takes the verb *scheinen* more positively as “to shine, to be resplendent”—*lucet*, not *videtur*. The melancholy mood or *Wehmut* that Staiger discerns in Mörike’s poem is, according to Heidegger, present, but it is immediately addressed by the disjunctive *aber* in the tenth line, where *selig* should be interpreted as an adverb, not as a predicate adjective: Who takes notice of the lamp’s beauty? Presumably no one, or at best only a few; yet it is of no consequence: “that which is beautiful, shines blissfully in the beautiful itself”—in Heidegger’s rendering: *feliciter lucet in eo ipso* (*KdI* 36).

Heidegger’s Latin translations, it should be noted, aim to disambiguate the German, which allows the contestants to identify their position vis-à-vis the text. Where Staiger reads *es scheint* as *videtur*, Heidegger reads *lucet*; and, in the brief exchange that followed, both Staiger and Heidegger do, indeed, uphold their assigned positions, even if, in his final letter to Heidegger, Staiger admitted that both interpretations were equally valid. That is to say, the light that the Latin translations shed on the obscure German line ultimately fades, returning us to the darkness of semantic ambiguity.

² Staiger published a revised version of his lecture along with his correspondence with Heidegger in *Die Kunst der Interpretation: Studien zur deutschen Literaturgeschichte* (Atlantis, 1955), 9–48. Subsequent citations are to this edition, marked *KdI* with page number.

The discussion went public, when, with Heidegger's consent, Staiger published the four letters without further commentary in the Swiss journal *Trivium* in 1951, as an accompaniment to his initial lecture, which appeared in *Neophilologus* earlier that year. Upon reading this material, Leo Spitzer, a key representative of comparative stylistics, decided to enter the debate.³ Of Jewish descent, Spitzer was forced to resign his professorship at the University of Cologne in 1933. After spending a few years in Istanbul, together with the Romanist-Comparatist Erich Auerbach, Spitzer accepted a position at Johns Hopkins University in 1936. Spitzer's contribution to the Staiger-Heidegger correspondence also appeared in 1951, in the following number of *Trivium*, where Spitzer relied on the etymological, Platonic figure that links the beautiful (*das Schöne*) with what shines (*das Scheinende*). Here, the German lexicon would seem to agree with the statement from Plato's *Symposium*, where "the beautiful" (τὸ καλόν) is defined as "that which is most radiant" (ἐκφανέστον [*Symp.* 210e–212a])—a definition, of course, that falls squarely into the realm of the phenomenological.

At any rate, with Mörike's poem on center stage, *Dichten* once again came to stimulate *Denken*—the theme of what had turned out to be Heidegger's last seminar in the Summer of 1942—yet now in a fashion that went well beyond Heidegger's hieratic reflections. Yet, apart from the critical-interpretive issues, the discussion also entailed, at least implicitly, a curiously personal, *ad hominem* dynamic. The rather subservient manner in which Staiger addresses Heidegger as *Hochverehrter* contrasts with Heidegger's more casual address: *Lieber Herr Staiger*. And both modes of address depart even further from Staiger's blatantly dismissive treatment of Spitzer, as well as from Spitzer's short-fused characterization of Heidegger's pontificating manner.⁴ Whereas Staiger formulated his responses to Heidegger in the form of respectful letters, he reduces his reply to Spitzer to three curt bullet-points. One gets the impression that Spitzer's viewpoint does not deserve a proper response, that he is but an émigré scholar, exiled in Baltimore, out of touch with current European discussions. Thus, during the painful rebirth of German Studies after the catastrophe of 1945, one can discern the beginnings of a critique of so-called *Auslandsgermanistik*, which would soon promulgate widely: the notion that Germanists, primarily in the Anglo-American academy, exhibited a fundamentally different intellectual orientation, concerned with issues that diverged significantly from the scholarly pursuits on the continent.

³ Leo Spitzer, "Wiederum Mörikes Gedicht 'Auf eine Lampe,'" *Trivium* 9 (1951), 133–47.

⁴ On this point, see Herbert Lindenberger, "Ideology and Innocence: On the Politics of Critical Language," *PMLA* 105 (1990), 398–408.

What, one may ask, is concealed beneath Staiger's neglect to take Spitzer's intervention seriously?

We recall that, in his 1950 lecture, Staiger portrayed his selection of Mörike's poem as an altogether innocent choice. Unembarrassed by his own subjective inclinations, he claims that he chose *Auf eine Lampe* simply because he loves Mörike's poems: "Ich liebe sie; sie sprechen mich an" (*KdI* 12). In addition to personifying the poetry—the text taken as a person who inspires a declaration of love—Staiger's conceit is that any one of Mörike's poems could have served as the basis for his demonstration. Yet, especially in light of his rude dismissal of Spitzer, *Auf eine Lampe* may only seem to be a random choice (as if any choice can ever be random). In an earlier essay, *Dichtung und Nation*, published in the *Neue Schweizer Rundschau* in 1933, Staiger did not bother to conceal his ideology behind a mask of randomness. Here, he praised the efforts of the newly established Nazi regime in bringing about a cultural "regeneration,"⁵ adducing passages from *Mein Kampf*, recommending the removal of Arthur Schnitzler from the German curriculum, and lamenting the Jewish tendencies in the work of Hugo von Hofmannsthal. To consolidate his views, Staiger cites the final, disjunctive line of Mörike's *Auf eine Lampe*—*Was aber schön ist, selig scheint es in ihm selbst*—a line that Staiger, here in 1933, reads as a lucent manifestation of the pure German spirit, a torch that shall shine forth and unify the superior German Nation. In other words, Staiger's pre-war reading coincides perfectly with Heidegger's postwar reading, which Staiger now rejects. Deep below Staiger's postwar, melancholic reading of *es scheint* as *videtur* lies a more exuberant, more frightening interpretation—*es scheint* as *lucet*—an interpretation that apparently needed only a Heidegger for reactivation. Was Staiger's subsequent resistance, in 1950, to accept Heidegger's correction perhaps a kind of self-censorship, a desire to suppress incendiary views once endorsed? Were his efforts, after the war, to maintain a rather harmless reading of *das Schöne* as that which only *seems* to be blissful perhaps a willful act, bent on extinguishing a flame that nearly burned Europe to the ground?

As already suggested, the question on the signification of the verb *scheinen* not only pertains to how one understands the lamp in Mörike's poem but also strikes at the very core of how phenomenology understands or should understand itself. For the double sense of the German *scheinen*, both as the passive *videri* ("to be seen, to appear") and the active *lucere* ("to shine, to glow"), is equally discernible in the Greek verb φαίνειν, φαίνεσθαι, which yields the middle-passive participle φαινόμενον, the ostensible

⁵ Emil Staiger, "Dichtung und Nation: Eine Besinnung auf Schiller," *Neue Schweizer Rundschau* 1 (1933), 157–68.

focus of any phenomenology. In the active voice, φαίνειν is ergative, used either intransitively, “to shine, to emit light” or transitively, “to cause something to shine, to disclose”; while in the middle-passive voice, φαινέσθαι means “to come to light, to appear,” even in the sense of “appearing or seeming to be so.” Both meanings, of course, are operative in phenomenology, insofar as the method aims to shed light on or illuminate (φαίνειν, *lucere*) that which is said to come to light (φαινέσθαι, *videri*).

Conventionally, the relationship between the *phainomenon* and the language or *logos* would be regarded as incontrovertible: the poem counts as the phenomenon and the interpretation counts as the elucidation—that is to say, the poem *appears* (φαίνεται, *videtur*), while the interpretation *causes it to shine* (φαίνει, *lucet*). Yet, in the case of phenomenological approaches to reading poetry, the interrelationship of the two poles is constitutive and indissoluble. In this light, the disagreement over the meaning of *scheinen* in Mörike’s poem should rather be viewed as an aspectual, or at best heuristic distinction. On the one hand, there is the *descriptive* language employed to disclose the poem’s meaning, including how one arrives at this understanding: an *apophantic* language (λόγος ἀποφαντικός), which is presumed to be unambiguous, providing untroubled access to the meaningful events under discussion. On the other hand, there is the *creative* language that constitutes the poetic text, a λόγος ποιητικός, which remains somehow obscure, less accessible, open to question. The Mörike Debate therefore stands as a privileged site for investigating the relationship between phenomenology and literature, not only because it can show what phenomenology can say about reading poetry, but also because it can reveal how a poem—Mörike’s lamp—can illuminate how phenomenology itself engages in creative language. As Staiger’s title, *Kunst der Interpretation*, already suggests, one may ask: How does the hermeneutic mode of expression, its own *Kunstsprache*, relate to poetic modes of expression? To what extent does Staiger’s *Interpretationskunst* converge with or diverge from Mörike’s *Dichtkunst*? To what extent does one mutually depend on the other?

II

Staiger’s approach comprises two steps, which are characterized by two cognate verbs: *ergreifen* and *begreifen*. First, the interpreter lets the text “grab” him (*ergreifen lässt*)—an event that instigates a strong and somewhat confused emotional reaction, an *Ergriffenheit* that emerges in the form of an unarticulated presentiment or *Vorgefühl*. This vague feeling is communicated through the poem’s “rhythm,” which constitutes the basic tone of the poem’s “style.” In the case of Mörike’s *Auf eine Lampe*, the style

is eventually perceived to be a kind of “grace” or “charm” (*Anmut*). The second step of Staiger’s method is “zu begreifen, was uns ergreift” (*KdI* 10–11). This move requires a “literaturwissenschaftliche Intervention,” which aims to legitimize the *Vorgefühl*, to give it argumentative weight. Here, text-immanent features provide the basic evidence, the syntactic, metrical, and formal issues, which are then corroborated by a consideration of Mörike’s place in the broader scope of literary history, which identifies the poet as a latecomer, overwhelmed by a sense of melancholy.

In this way, Staiger claims to analyze the poem as it stands there and thus, as it appears, rather than take flight into the refuge of predetermined theoretical positions and impositions, which invariably would treat the poem as a fixed object. That is to say, he strives, in a phenomenological key, to describe the poem as the content of his consciousness, without theoretical distraction, without looking to the side of or behind or beyond the text (*KdI* 9–10). Thus, the poem is specifically—and I would stress the word: *specifically*—something to be seen, a *videndum*. Only in this way, can one arrive at the “secret and beauty” (*Geheimnis und Schönheit*) of a text, its distinctively poetic character: *das eigentlich Dichterische* (*KdI* 10). This singular poetic quality evades conventional philosophical commentaries, which almost invariably replace the specificity of the work with abstract, metaphysical generality. Here especially, the *species*—yet another term for visible appearance—is distinct from the *genus*, which cannot be seen concretely.

Despite his phenomenological openness, Staiger’s loving, if not *erotic* attachment to the poem/lamp is not without presuppositions, however latent. How the critic comes to read what he reads, how the text’s rhythm and style gradually emerge, how the poetic form negotiates the relationship between the details and the whole, should demonstrate how such attentiveness “deepens the pleasure (*Lust*) in the value of the *Sprachkunstwerk*” (*KdI* 11). Pleasure or *Lust* is therefore the goal of his hermeneutic endeavor—a *Lust* that the interpreter can pass on to others, a *Lust* grounded in the interpreter’s ability to shed light on what makes poetry appear as poetry: “den Text in ein noch helleres Licht zu rücken” (*KdI* 25).

The metaphorical force of Staiger’s conclusion is noteworthy: “to move (*rücken*) the text into an even brighter light.” One would be justified in saying that Staiger’s reading is itself a lamp, which casts light on the Lamp that casts or used to cast light. Perhaps it is precisely because Staiger claims that his interpretation elucidates—*interpretatio lucet*—the reason why he allows Mörike’s poeticized lamp merely to *appear* to be blissful: *felix videtur*. Perhaps by limiting the poem to the status of “something to be seen, something that appears”—a *videndum*, a *species*, a *φαινόμενον*—he can endow his own, quasi-phenomenological approach with the

power to shine. How should we reckon with this potentially excessive play of light? Is this excess itself not somehow “irrational” or even “insane”? By moving (*rücken*) the text into a still brighter light, is Staiger perhaps *displacing* the poem, rendering it *verrückt*? Light is indeed illuminating, but it can also be blinding.

A critique of the relationship between phenomenology and literature could proceed by assuming a gesture dear to Edmund Husserl—namely, by going back *zu den Sachen selbst*; in this case: back to Mörike’s poem itself, back to the lamp that is first presented explicitly as *noch unverrückt*. Insofar as the text presents itself as a precise description of an object, the poem can be regarded as a phenomenological study in its own right, with the implied speaker situated in the position of the careful observer who aims to give an account of how this once shining phenomenon appears in his consciousness. Just as the poem’s speaker selected a rather ordinary ceiling lamp as the object of his artistic attention, so Staiger has chosen Mörike’s poem, more or less at random, as the object of his interpretative art. The poem, like the lamp, simply stands there, awaiting elucidation and meaning in the consciousness of the recipient. To attempt a phenomenological investigation of this particular poem, then, would already amount to a kind of phenomenology of phenomenology: a meta-phenomenological account, analogous therefore to a metaphysics that aims to disclose the truth of truth.

The poem’s initial *noch* connects the past to the present, colored by a future, the uncertainty of which threatens to render the past utterly irretrievable. Hence, as Staiger emphasizes, the lamp is *noch unverrückt*—“not yet disturbed,” “not yet displaced”—with the implication that the value of this beautiful work of art is about to vanish, now that we are living in an age devoid of art. Who, today, even notices this *Kunstgebild der echten Art? Wer achtet sein?* Only the poet can catch a glimpse of true beauty, only in this moment, before it disappears entirely. Yet even the poet, whom Staiger portrays as a latecomer, may only surmise the presence of beauty: *Was aber schön ist, selig scheint es in ihm selbst*, “what is beautiful, seems to be blissful in itself.”

Staiger suggests that things were presumably much different in an earlier epoch. In the age of Goethe, the poet could still speak, “decisively and unambiguously” (*entschieden und unzweideutig* [KdI 28]), confident in the knowledge that he was in the presence of true beauty. To illustrate, Staiger cites a parallel passage from the Classical *Walpurgisnacht* of the Second Part of *Faust*: “Die Schöne bleibt sich selber selig.” As Staiger argues, Goethe’s reflexive pronoun, *sich*, is replaced by Mörike’s more cautious personal pronoun, *ihm*. For Staiger, the phrase *in ihm selbst* distances the beautiful from the observer, who therefore remains unsure whether the beauty does or does not exist. In distinction from Goethe’s poetic language, Mörike’s is *unentschieden und zweideutig*.

Heidegger takes the concluding line far more positively, essentially, as a confirmation of Hegel's aesthetic theory, that the lamp, precisely as a beautiful work of art, combines "sensuous appearing" (*das sinnliche Scheinen*) with "the shining of the idea as the essence of the artwork (*das Scheinen der Idee als Wesen des Kunstwerks*)" (*KdI* 36). Hegel even stresses the etymological relation between what is beautiful and what shines: "Das *Schöne* bestimmt sich dadurch als das sinnlich Scheinen der Idee."⁶ Accordingly, for Heidegger—and, interestingly, for Spitzer as well—the lamp does not merely seem to be blissful, but rather shines blissfully in itself. As Heidegger further elaborates, the pronoun *ihm* simply denotes that the artwork has no self-consciousness for itself, as opposed to the phrase *in sich*, which would ascribe self-consciousness to the lamp. The citational gestures of both interpreters should be underscored: just as Staiger turns to Goethe, and later Hölderlin, to support his claims, so does Heidegger call in Hegel to bear testimony on the case.

Despite the differences in their interpretive conclusions, however, both readings tend to reduce Mörike's poem to the most generic statements on the essence of art and universal criteria of beauty—that is, they do not hesitate to make the text accord with general conceptions, without considering the poem's historical contingency, even when they claim to adhere to the poem's specificity. This aesthetic-formal generalization includes an insistence on the artwork's presumed autonomy or independence—its *Selbstständigkeit*, its *Unabhängigkeit*.⁷ For Staiger and Heidegger, the lamp's luminescent beauty depends only on itself. Tellingly, all three interpreters, Spitzer included, take the poem's concluding phrase *in ihm selbst* to refer to *das Schöne*. They are untroubled by the tautological argument (the beautiful appears/shines in the Beautiful itself) and thus refuse to consider other possible antecedents of the personal pronoun. Yet, as Albrecht Holschuh and others have stressed, although the *ihm* could certainly refer to *das Schöne* of line 10, it is just as reasonable, if not preferable to take the antecedent as the subject of the interrogative in line 9: *Wer achtet sein? ... Das Schöne scheint in ihm selbst*. "Who takes notice? ... The Beautiful shines in him himself."⁸ Rather than bracket their own presuppositions concerning the general essence of art and

⁶ The quotation is found in G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, in *Werke*, vol. 13, Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, ed. (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), 151.

⁷ On this theme, see Angel Angelov, "'Auf eine Lampe' von Eduard Mörike: Autonomität und Heterogenität der 'klassischen' Form," *Arcadia* 46 (2011), 73–98.

⁸ "Bei Mörike ist das Schöne an sich nichts, sondern selig scheint es im Menschen, der des Kunstwerks achtet." Albrecht Holschuh, "Wem leuchtet Mörikes Lampe," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 110 (1991), 588.

beauty, Staiger and Heidegger, and Spitzer as well, allow the light of their ingenuity to obscure other poetic possibilities.

The generalizing gesture is curious, insofar as the lamp is, so to speak, explicitly “dependent” or *abhängig*: “*aufgehangen an leichten Ketten*.” Certainly, this enchainment is but a tenuous link—the chains are “light.” The connection to the past is on the verge of disappearance. By extension, it is linked to a poet who himself is cognizant of his own boundedness toward death. For an unlit lamp makes palpable the threat of darkness, the possibility of disappearance or eventual forgetfulness. Thus, Mörike’s lamp is found in “a now almost forgotten *Lustgemach*”—“almost forgotten” (*fast vergessen*), which means *not yet forgotten*, just as the lamp is *not yet displaced*, even though it already fails to produce any physical light. In this regard, the poem’s speaker, whose own indirect presence depends on the lamp he addresses, almost stands in the dark, without being completely in the dark, almost forgotten, without being entirely forgotten.

It is even more curious that the citations from Hegel’s *Aesthetics* which Heidegger and then Staiger solicit all derive from Hegel’s discussion of Classical Art, even though Staiger views Mörike as a late Romantic. For Hegel, Romantic art departs from the classical ideal and attends instead to the ephemeral: “das Flüchtigste treu und wahr festzuhalten.”⁹ According to Hegel, art still aims to conquer time and with it mortality, yet Romantic art turns its back on Classical conceptions of timeless beauty in favor of what is transient and contingent, like an ordinary lamp that decorates an almost forgotten *Lustgemach*. Agreeing with Kant, Hegel associates the essence of art with the observer’s disinterestedness, with the observer’s capacity to remove objects from their practical function. And accordingly, Mörike’s poem strives to liberate the lamp from all instrumental concerns. This process of artistic apotheosis is already discernible by the fact that the lamp merely decorates the ceiling: it no longer lights up the room, it has already lost the very function that makes a lamp a lamp. The lamp, therefore, is almost a work of art—almost, but not yet. For as the poem proceeds, it becomes evident that this beautiful object is as bound to the passing of time as the poet himself. The lamp is almost liberated from its historical context, the *Lustgemach* of yesteryear; the chains that bind the object to its past are not very strong. Nonetheless, the lamp is *noch unverrückt*, not yet displaced into the general state of art. Its specific appearance prevents its entrance into the genus of art.

Mörike’s description is crucial:

⁹ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik II*, *Werke*, vol. 14, 227.

Auf deiner weißen Marmorschale, deren Rand
 Der Efeukranz von goldengrünem Erz umflieht,
 Schlingt fröhlich eine Kinderschar den Ringelreihn.

As Spitzer emphasizes, the ivy wreath formed with golden-green bronze recalls that bronze develops a green patina or verdigris (*Grünspan*) only with age. The golden-green color is a sign of corrosion, the passing of time. This mark of transience contrasts with the ivy depicted, insofar as ivy is an evergreen. Whereas the green of bronze describes change over time, the green of ivy describes permanence through time. This stunning combination of permanence and transience causes the speaker to exclaim: *Wie reizend alles!* It is striking to find such an over-generalized, rather empty statement, especially after the precise description of the lamp's marble bowl. The phrase does little more than reflect a spontaneous, general effect felt by the observer: an outburst of emotion that has nothing specific to say. This imprecision, this over-generalization, is immediately corrected by the specificity of the subsequent lines: *lachend, und ein sanfter Geist des Ernstes doch ergossen um die ganze Form*. Yet, here, the poem seems to have progressed from a rather passive description to a more active, more hermeneutic ascription of meaning, one that offers an account of the *entire form*.

This turn to subjective reflection may aim to connect the lamp's physical appearance with the emotional outburst. But perhaps there remains a *displaced* relationship between the two poles: between the subjectively general and the objectively specific? The long dash at the end of the eighth line seems to address this issue: —*Ein Kunstgebild der echten Art*. Neither Staiger nor Heidegger nor Spitzer remark on the peculiarity of this statement. Indeed, most interpreters read the line as though Mörike wrote *ein echtes Kunstgebild*. But the poem does not say *ein echtes Kunstgebild*. Instead, we have *ein Kunstgebild der echten Art*. Usually, an object is identified as “authentic” (*echt*) if and only if it represents a recognized “kind” or “type” (*Art*);¹⁰ hence, the connection between the notion of *genuine* and the idea of a *genus*. By evoking the idea of a “genuine genus” (*eine echte Art*), the poem seems to question the very validity of the *genus* itself. As already mentioned, the *genus* is not only the *general* type, but also that which can never be seen; it is an abstraction, distinct from the *specific*, which defines what is concretely visible. Unlike the *species*, the *genus* is not seen at all. But how should one understand this invisibility? On the one hand, the *genus* may be a non-phenomenon, that which does not appear at all; while on the other hand, it may

¹⁰ Cf. Benjamin Bennett, “The Politics of the Mörike-Debate and its Object,” *The Germanic Review* 68 (1993), 60–68.

be a fantasy, that which appears only within the consciousness of the speaker, in the observer's imagination or φαντασία, yet another term derived from the verb φαίνεῖν.

The term *Kunstgebild* appears to mediate the tension between the specific and the general, the species that is seen and the genus that is not. The lamp belongs to the general realm of *Kunst* only insofar as it has been “formed” (*gebildet*) by a subjective will, and only insofar as someone pays attention to the object as such: *Wer achtet sein?* Until the point when the work is “noticed” or “respected” (*geachtet*), it remains almost forgotten, not yet displaced in the general, immortal realm of art. Still, the condition for entering this general realm lies in the observer who takes notice of the object's specificity. Beauty's blissfulness or blessedness—its *Seligkeit*, itself often a euphemism for death—depends on its power to be seen (*videri*). Staiger, Heidegger and Spitzer strive to divorce the artwork's value from this key subjective criterion: a shared insistence on the independence of beauty that would seem to contradict their readings, which are all based on the hermeneutic principal—that the poem's phenomenal meaning comes to light at the specific, historically situated moment of reading.

III

Mörike's *Dichtkunst* may have sparked a decades-long debate precisely because it seems to mirror the *Interpretationskunst* outlined by the main protagonists of the dispute. That is to say, Mörike's *Auf eine Lampe* appears to rehearse the selfsame gesture—namely, pulling the specific toward the general, aiming to move (*rücken*) an ordinary ceiling lamp into the still brighter light of timeless art. At the head of the poem, of course, the lamp is *noch unverrückt*, even though it is already judged to be “beautiful.” This tentative ascription of beauty (*o schöne Lampe*), like Staiger's *Vorgefühl*, is what the poem aims to legitimize in the subsequent lines. The problem is that the lamp is altogether marked by time and temporal mutability, qualities that presumably counter the enduring essence of art. Art, as opposed to mere decoration, presumably survives the artist: *ars longa, vita brevis*. This proverbial wisdom becomes a *memento mori*, when one concedes that the immortality of art coincides with the mortality of the artist. The lightness of the chains that hold the lamp to a specific past—to the *Decke des nun fast vergessnen Lustgemachs*—encourages the poet's ambitions, the ambition to discover (*entdecken*) the lasting artistic value of the object. The observer focuses on the white marble of the bowl, whose weight already pulls the lamp from its dependency. Likewise, the attention paid to the band of children, dancing in a ring, together with

the evergreen ivy, affirms the object's everlasting nature. Still, as already indicated, the *Grünspan* of the bronze filigree maintains the lamp's boundedness to time.

That said, the golden-green could encourage a leap into timelessness. For the combination of gold and green may allude to the "golden bough" (*aureus ramus*), which Aeneas had to obtain to gain entrance into the Underworld in the Sixth Book of the *Aeneid*. Yet, this well-known symbol not only concisely combines art and nature but also recalls that whatever persists must first pass away. It could therefore serve as a reminder that the Hades itself can be a metaphor for poetry: negotiating the power of life and the permanence of death; a site of eternal, undying existence, yet populated by the souls of the departed; a realm that feeds on experiential reality, while remaining distinct from lived experience; an immortal kingdom for which the entrance fee is death. Aeneas successfully enters Hades, but anyone can enter Hades at any time. The trick is to escape, still alive. *Hic opus, hic labor est*.

The tension between what is time-bound and what is timeless is almost resolved by the general exclamation: *Wie reizend alles!* The statement marks a passage to the generality of art, a generality that appears as *ein sanfter Geist des Ernstes*, as the gentle seriousness of a fatal contract, one that spells the mortality of the artist. In Antiquity, the image of children dancing in a ring was indeed a common motif depicted on funerary urns. It further alludes to the passing away of the lamp's original historical context, no longer the decoration of a *Lustgemach*, but rather a *Kunstgebild*, an object no longer made (*gemacht*) for transitory pleasure, but rather something formed (*gebildet*) for the eternity of art. Is the poem's sublimation, its endeavor to move (*rücken*) the lamp from the time-bound realm of erotic *Lust* to the timeless sphere of incorporeal *Kunst*, not mirrored in Staiger's own attempt to translate his pleasurable encounter with the poem into a lasting, aesthetic object?¹¹

The fatal contract, signed by the *Geist des Ernstes*, reveals a serious consequence: By insisting on the immortality of art, one defines art as devoid of death and therefore devoid of life.¹² Hence, the poem concludes that art's beauty is not immortal. Rather, it lives in the present for those alive in the present, even if only for a brief, *epiphanic*, luminescent moment, one that shines in the *phantasia* of the one who is attentive to it. By affirming that beauty is not everlasting, by showing that art remains dependent on the one who appreciates it, the poem saves the life of the object and with it the life of the poet. For immortality can only be purchased by death. The *Schönheit* of the final

¹¹ Cf. Rolf Selbmann, "Das 'fast vergeßne Lustgemach': Mörikes Gedicht 'Auf eine Lampe', die Erotik der Poesie und die Seligkeit der Interpretation", *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 5 (1995), 593–99.

¹² Cf. Kenneth Calhoun, "The Urn and the Lamp: Disinterest and the Aesthetic Object in Mörike and Keats," *Studies in Romanticism* 26 (1987), 3–25.

line thus resumes the *Schönheit* of the initial line, a beauty that is very much conditioned by the lamp being *noch unverrückt*. The poem's circular form allows the lamp to remain in the *Lustgemach*, even after it has been transformed into a *Kunstgebild*. The feminine character of *die Lampe* is shifted into neutral and neutralizing light, into becoming *das Kunstgebild*, only to be brought back to its initial erotic charge.

Spitzer reminds us that Mörike's description of the lamp's design is derived from the first *Idyll* of Theocritus, which Mörike had translated and published a few years before composing *Auf eine Lampe*. Yet, Spitzer fails to consider the full import of this intertext. The *Idyll* features the poet-singer Thyrsis, who is approached by a peasant goatherd, who in turn tries to persuade the singer to perform a song he has composed about the death of Daphnis, the mythic inventor of pastoral poetry. Should Thyrsis agree to sing this lamentation, the goatherd would give him an elaborately designed bowl made of ivy-wood, painted white and adorned with an ivy wreath. After describing the specific features of the bowl, the goatherd compels the poet:

πόταγ', ὠγαθέ· τὰν γὰρ ἀοιδάν
οὐ τί πα εἰς Αἴδαν γε τὸν ἐκλελάθοντα φυλαξεῖς.

(62–63)

Come on, good man! You will not preserve any song
anywhere, once you enter Hades at any rate, where things are entirely
forgotten.

In Mörike's own translation: "Fang' an denn! Sicher ja wirst du / Nicht dem Aïs dein Lied, dem allvergessenden sparen." The lines insist that poetic song is performed by the living for the living. The singer's voice will no longer be heard, once he enters the Underworld. Therefore, sing now, while you are still present on earth, and in return you shall receive this beautiful bowl. Vocal performance and a silent work of art thus become the terms of exchange. Hades is where everything is entirely forgotten, where everything that is now almost forgotten disappears forevermore. In Theocritus, the aorist participle ἐκλελάθοντα derives from the verb λανθάνω, "to be forgotten, to escape the notice of." In *Auf eine Lampe*, Mörike evokes both senses by employing the verbs *vergessen* and *achten*.

Both poetry and philosophy entail a concern with forgetfulness. The nominal form of λανθάνω is λήθη, which denotes both the state of having forgotten and the river that flows through the realm of the dead. Throughout the tradition, λήθη works together with memory. Departed souls drink from the waters of Lethē in order to erase

all memory of their former lives, before being reincarnated. According to Hesiod, poetry, inspired by the Muses, the daughters of Memory (Μνημοσύνη), allow mortals to forget (λανθάνειν) their misery. And of course, λήθη is what is negated in Plato's privileged term for "truth": ἀλήθεια. The alpha-privative that defines "truth" or "reality" as that which is not forgotten, not hidden—Heidegger's *Unverborgenheit*—is further discernible in Theocritus' spelling of Hades, adopted from Homer: Ἅιδης, taken as an alpha-privative noun (*a-ides*), which thus denotes a negation of what is seen, a negation of what is visible, a negation of what appears, the *non-eidetic* itself. Ἅιδης is the realm where everything seems to be forgotten, where no one shines forth with life, where everything and everyone seems to escape the notice of all. *Wer achtet darauf?*

One could say that Hades (Ἅιδης) is the very realm of displacement or *Verrückt-worden-sein*. Yet Mörike's lamp, at least initially, is *noch unverrückt*, hanging from a ceiling by *leichten Ketten*, suspended in a *Lustgemach*, perhaps like someone who is not yet insane, not yet unchained from reality, holding on to lucidity precariously by the light bondage of reason.

As Staiger admits, the *Kunst* of interpretation aims to communicate the *Lust* of reading a poem. That this pleasure is temporal or provisional is already evidenced by Staiger's multiple considerations of Mörike's poem, an engagement that not only spans from 1933 to 1951, but also points toward an open-ended future. This future is implicit in the poem's opening adverb: the *noch* as the sign of *Das Noch-Nicht*. Thus, Staiger's conclusion from 1951 concludes nothing.

Ich habe mein Gefühl geprüft und den Nachweis erbracht, daß es stimmt.
Nun mag ein anderer kommen, eine andere Auslegung versuchen und
seinerseits den Nachweis erbringen, daß sein Gefühl ihn nicht getäuscht hat.
Wenn beide Darstellungen wahr sind, so werden sie sich nicht widersprechen
[...]. Sie deuten mir beide nur an, daß jedes echte, *lebendige* Kunstwerk in
seinen festen Grenzen *unendlich* ist. (*KdI* 32–33; my emphasis)

Later, in 1964, Staiger himself emerges as this other interpreter, now reading *Auf eine Lampe* as addressing what he calls the problem of *Kunstvergessenheit*. Just as Mörike looked back melancholically on the past splendor of the Goethezeit, so Staiger now looks back at Mörike's epoch. Now, in 1964, Staiger claims that only through repeated attentiveness to the great literary tradition can the present day be redeemed from the "technologization and scientification" (*Technisierung und Verwissenschaftlichung*)

that is inimical to art.¹³ Without judging the legitimacy of Staiger's third and final assessment, one could still take the lesson to heart. Perhaps only as long as phenomenology respects the specificity of the literature it studies, perhaps only as long as it recognizes that the light it sheds on a poem coincides with the light that the text emits, can it be of continuing value—a *Kunst*, indeed, yet one that can never rest content with its conclusions, one that resists the oblivion of everlasting fixity, keeping the text alive and dynamic and infinite by always compelling us to go back *zu den Lampen selbst*.

¹³ "Die Kunst in der Fremde der Gegenwart," in Staiger, *Geist und Zeitgeist: Drei Betrachtungen zur kulturellen Lage der Gegenwart* (Zürich: Atlantis, 1964).