I will be focusing my remarks primarily on the first essay in Heidegger's *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, "Die Sprache" ("Language"),¹ and thus on an essay devoted not to Hölderlin's poetry, but rather to a poem by Trakl. I will want to suggest, however, that Heidegger's reading of Trakl's *A Winter Evening* constructs a kind of allegory concerning poetic language. It follows from such a hypothesis (and this would be the case even if the last words of Trakl's poem were not "bread and wine") that Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin plays a major role in the essay.

"Language" is an exemplary essay for Heidegger's approach to the question of language (and specifically poetic language). It offers a general statement about poetry within the framework of the dialogue between thought and poetry that Heidegger pursues throughout *On the Way to Language*. But it is also distinctive for the fact that it points overtly to what I take to be Heidegger's key difficulty in his descriptions of the relation between human speech and what he calls the speaking of language: namely, that human speech introduces into this speaking what I will call "noise." My aim in this paper will be to bring this difficulty forth by offering a brief reading of "Language." I will then try to pursue the questions raised by this essay by turning to another passage in *On the Way to Language* (this one addressed to verses by Hölderlin) and finally to lines by Hölderlin that offer a singular challenge to Heidegger's claims for poetic language by pointing to a source of "noise" that Heidegger does not seem to hear.

Heidegger begins his essay by proposing to invert the traditional approach to language. He proposes to think it not in relation to humankind, as has been done throughout the tradition, but in itself, and to think humankind, in
turn, from its basis. This means abandoning the traditional armature of concepts about language which Heidegger summarizes in three basic notions: that language would be a means of expression of thought and feelings; that language would be a form of human activity by which humankind makes itself, or makes a world for itself; that it would be a representation of what is (whether real or imagined).

But the inversion Heidegger proposes actually requires more than the abandonment of these concepts; it requires, to a certain extent, the abandonment of the concept itself, if we understand by this the representation of the essence of a thing, in this case language. For as soon as we arrogate the right to represent to ourselves the essence of language, we posit a relation between it and human knowing, and refer language back to humankind; we posit language as an object for a subject capable of representing that object in its essence. Some combination of the three traditional notions of language is inescapable if we proceed within the structure of representation. So Heidegger finally invites us not only to avoid the traditional understanding of language as a means of representation; he invites us to avoid positing language itself as the object of representation. We are to think language from out of itself—proceeding from language and not approaching language from our position as theoretical subjects.

To approach language in itself, he suggests, we must ask how language is as language or comes about as language. Heidegger's response to this question comes immediately in his essay. Language is language, he says, and he explicates this apparently tautological phrase by asserting that language speaks. So to follow language in thought, die Sprache nachdenken, to think after language (in the sense of the phrase, "after the fashion of") is to engage with the speaking of language. Thought must allow language to speak; and this means that the language of thought must answer to language. Only when thought reveals itself as answering to the essence of language will the inversion Heidegger is seeking be achieved.

But on what grounds can Heidegger affirm that his own answer to the question of how language is as language answers to the essence of language and is not merely another concept for language? How can he know that he is answering to language when he insists that language speaks? Heidegger himself raises the problem just as quickly as he gave his answer. He writes: "Is this, seriously, an answer? Presumably [Vermutlich: I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere that the essential mode of thoughtful saying as it replies to language is one of "presumption," so this word is not falling here by accident] . . . Presumably it already is—that is, when it becomes clear what speaking is" (PLT, 190). So Heidegger's proposition, that language speaks, will reveal itself as having answered to the essence of language once we know what it means to speak. The thesis itself will become meaningful, it