

Words, Like Flowers: Hölderlin's Late Work

Hölderlin's late work, so it has been arranged, is defined by the date of his madness. His rediscovery, from Hellingrath's 'rough composition' to Adorno's 'parataxis,' found as a natural border of its theoretical interest the sudden rupture in the poetry as well as the increasing decay of the poet's capacities.¹ Reading the late Hölderlin was thus from the start connected with the reflections of a 'philosophy of life' (*Lebensphilosophie*) and psychiatric speculation.² Since Dilthey and Jaspers, such reflections and speculations have regarded the 'other side,' the work of the old, insane poet, as the tragic mirror of mental breakdown in which the highest ambition meets with sublime failure.

The schema of sudden alteration from high claims to the fatality of impoverished circumstances, as romantic its charm and classical its symmetry may be, is for numerous reasons unsatisfactory. It submits 'the work,' the work of his last ambition (until 1804) and his work of 'old' age (after 1806, when he was barely 37), to an overexerted 'logic of production,' as Szondi optimistically might have quoted Adorno, which as 'logic of collapse' (*Logik des Zerfalls*) can justify neither of the two sides.³ That it concerns the sides of the same medallion,

of the same author and his reputation, makes the polishing of the one, shiny side into a one-sided enterprise. The dark, reverse side, pulled from the shadows of madness into the light of serious reflection, betrays the features of an unknown author, unknown, that is, precisely in proportion to the interest taken in the known author.

"Hölderlin's fulfillment," the completion of his late work that Kerényi treated with the aid of the incomplete hymn *Mnemosyne*, suddenly illuminates the darkness that follows.⁴ "The other arrow," which Szondi taught us to understand from the lived experience of the poet in the south of France, symbolized "the annihilating power of the divine light" that "drove him, after the trip into the scorching heat of the South, 1802, into benightedness."⁵ From this high flight into the light, both of Icarus and Phaeton, follows a plummet into darkness—mythic punishment that demands a sacrifice paid by the reader. His sympathy, that is, his compassion (*Mitleid*) with the poet's suffering, decides everything and nothing; for what can sympathy mean, facing the borderline experience of the 'other,' if not that its impossibility in the difference of madness makes the height of the poet's fall as well as the radiance of his undertaking all the more perceptible. To the *lauriers de la défaite*, which Foucault lets pass in review, belongs the fact that one takes their mythic content literally and takes sickness as punishment for hubris according to mythic standards. The schizophrenia of the poet is thus taken as an instance of anthropological interest.⁶

Meanwhile, punishment follows apace just as "lies have short legs," namely in the manner of proverbs—"as if one had overlooked the shortness of legs."⁷ Similarly, in the investigation of "Hölderlin's fulfillment" the other side of his last poems has been "overlooked." As uncontested as the striking break may be between the late work (before 1804) and the later work of benightedness (after 1806), between the poet of *Andenken* and *Mnemosyne* and the poet of *Linien des Lebens* (*Lines of Life*) and the seasons, uncontested also the poet's illness and drastically changed circumstances in life, still the

conclusions that have been drawn from Hölderlin's sudden discontinuation of the hymns and withdrawal cannot remain uncontested. The refinement and subtlety of this withdrawal; the hidden reflexivity of the new poetic means; even the 'regression' to already completed texts, as Sattler has shown, a regression, however, with introverted relationships and solutions; hence the very determined negation of already mastered forms—all this suggests other conclusions than simply the limited poetic 'accountability' of the author.⁸

If it is correct, as it irrefutably appears to me in the last chapter of this book concerning two poems from the first, but not yet fully disturbed years of madness, *Das fröhliche Leben* (*The Happy Life*) and *Der Kirchhof* (*The Churchyard*); if it is correct that the question cannot be one of blind refutation, sleepwalking reflexes, or obsessive repetitions—then questions emerge that work retroactively on the reading of what was reflected in the refutation, in the repetition of what has been worked through. Seen in the light of the work of Hölderlin's old age, the shadows of the late work become harsher, and *Andenken* and *Mnemosyne* take on new and different contours. What, as the onset of madness, went wrong with the completion of his life's work—possibly some contingency announcing an even greater consummation—takes on the features of a collapse for which apocalyptic rhetoric is inappropriate. Hölderlin studies have tended to rely on such a rhetoric, namely, to use these symptoms of sickness, the most important of them linguistic symptoms like missing deixis and reduced patterns of interactivity, in order to elevate the intentions of these late works. Contrary to the attempt to make this failure proof of highest intentions, my own tendency here—very provisionally—is to think through anew the achievement of the late and last poems. They are themselves the reworkings of older, in the meantime abandoned schemes and designs. To claim that out of this investigation again comes only a kind of elevation, a surpassing of what was abandoned, would be correct only insofar as undercutting, retraction, and renunciation were not taken as merely regressive

moments. Eugen Gottlob Winkler's reading of the whole "late Hölderlin" indicates the direction: "as if here for the first time a destiny were more truly fulfilled."⁹

What is most true for Hölderlin is a holding on to what is to be "kept" in mourning. Beyond Hegel's interiorizing assimilation (*erinnerndes Anverwandeln*), "being true" in Hölderlin is a condition that "seeks and holds the past in its own being."¹⁰ On this demand of 'true mourning' turns the memory of *Mnemosyne*; in it the 'way of *Andenken*' encounters its limit, but not, on the contrary, the progress of Hölderlin's writing (*Dichten*). Beyond this limit his poetry comes to unexpected fruition, which needs no apologies. An artificial blossoming of course, but in the strictest sense the bloom of an appearance in which "Words, like flowers" bear fruit. This development can only be ascertained in the framework of late allegory, which is responsible for the unrecognized continuity within Hölderlin's late work. 'Late allegory' not only in the specific sense that Hölderlin came to it belatedly or that it makes up his late and last work, but rather in the more general sense that his treatment of allegory in its 'truth' (*Treue*) opens a last late horizon of the allegorical age. Benjamin, who instead of a book about Hölderlin wrote a book about mourning, perceived in baroque allegory the first signs of the end of this age of allegory.¹¹ At the end of late allegory the blooms of poetic tradition bear something other than the customary fruits of reading, 'souvenirs' of lost hope.

Heidegger appropriated the "Words, like flowers" quotation for his own purposes and through his interpretation made it famous. He took the flowers of rhetorical poetics, its metaphors and figures that have given the name to the arrangement of anthologies, as clairvoyantly perceived revelations, epiphanies of poetry, lively living metaphors of the poetic word. No "collection of dried plants," Heidegger objected to Benn's reproachful "herbarium," but rather an "awakening of the widest gaze."¹² What Heidegger makes out of Hölderlin's "Words, like flowers"—and the discussion from Ricoeur to Derrida follows Heidegger in this interpretation, namely a manifesto of poetic revelation through the word—is not so

easy to demonstrate when read at the precise place and line of the poem *Brot und Wein* (*Bread and Wine*): *Nun, nun müssen dafür Worte, wie Blumen, entstehn*—"Now for it words like flowers have to originate."¹³ The tone of resignation in this line cannot be overlooked. In the *dafür*, which refers back to *nun aber nennt er sein Liebstes*—"but now he names his most beloved" of the previous line, only an *ersatz* is announced, a substitution through which the word as metaphor enters and enables the naming of the most beloved. The name, which derives from the naming of the most loved and remains as such, is as fresh as it once was as a name, that is, like dried flowers, catachresis.¹⁴ What remains namely, nominally endowed by poets, are 'dead metaphors,' not living ones, as much as one would be tempted to take them as living. That they are most literally what they are—in their literality translucent—shows a different characteristic than that of lively animation. Yet here I anticipate myself.

For what from Heidegger's perspective makes such a lively impression in Ricoeur's '*métaphore vive*' (although it doesn't need it according to Derrida's reading of Heidegger) is only the most successful common denominator for the aporia of the reading of Hölderlin, which makes its appearance in the rupture that separates his late work from the last poems before his retreat. The spare poetry of his old age becomes impassable steppes when considered within the superior claim of a Heideggerian 'Being,' even though this 'Being,' as the gestalt of withdrawal, maintains itself in these poems more in concealment than in revelation: "it retires into its krypt."¹⁵ Whatever one here would like to credit or debit Heidegger and his influence on the reading of late Hölderlin, above all *Andenken* and *Mnemosyne*, it is clear, and in detail only to be made clearer, how much the evaluation of the mad, schizophrenic Hölderlin owes to the hypostatizing of his previous high ambitions. In other words, Hölderlin's poetry after 1806 fully refutes every eschatological implication of the previous poems. More precisely: the allegory that is negated in these poems, the destroyed eschatology within them, is found archivized—the "proceedings of a birdsong"

(*Akten eines Vogelsangs*) that now sounds different and whose unheard-of insight now reads otherwise.¹⁶

Unlike Keats's *Nightingale*, "immortal bird," this song endures not in the disappointment of its 'fancy.'¹⁷ Hölderlin's late allegory does not succumb to melancholy, the diagnosis for which he gives in *Mnemosyne*. Rather, it "veers," as Benjamin observed in the overextended transcendence of baroque allegory: not into the afterlife, but rather in the *Happy Life* here.¹⁸ The foil of enlightened mourning, which stands out in Haller's *Unfinished Ode on Eternity* and in Kant's commentary on the "true abyss for the human reason," is the indispensable background for that which Hölderlin's allegory undertakes in the end and, in ironic addition to Kant's joke (*Witz*), performs against Hegel's system. The 'overextension of transcendence,' Benjamin's punch line for the baroque 'play of mourning' (*Trauerspiel*), reaches the limit in kryptic subjectivity: subjectivity withdrawn to kryptic inscription.¹⁹ But the old Hölderlin reaches beyond subjectivity and its kryptic overextension. In the empty afterimage of overextended transcendence, objects of temptation and promise gather anew and beyond all exertion: in "leaves of mourning" (*Laub voll Trauer*), "berries, like coral"—the fruit of Cézanne.

What veers in late allegory and leaps into the nothing of emptied features overleaps the allegorical expectation. The empty representation of abandoned frameworks still has the force of withdrawal symptoms. Late Hölderlin, however, is not impressed with them. This is not the concern of his poems. The dimension of reticence, reserve, secrecy (*Verschweigung* in Rilke), of the structural implicature of the emptied forms, this dimension becomes the new space for the old images of relinquished schemes. Instead of backwards melancholy, from which Hölderlin's *Andenken* took leave, his last poems, the poems after all of his last 35 years, anticipate images like those Cézanne brought before the spectator's eye—a very provisional analogy, certainly, whose persuasive power I do not want to lessen by attempting to demonstrate it across the abysses of specialized disciplines.²⁰ Cézanne's apples are no longer the golden ones of the Hesperides, but the renunci-

ation they forebode is equivalent to a Herculean deed.²¹ Extracted from their mythic sources, plucked from the tree of another knowledge, they suggest a this-worldliness that lights up in the translucent materiality of signs, in the abstraction precisely not of forms but of schemes.