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From Infinite Rapprochement to the Open *From Kant to Hölderlin*

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ABSTRACT. For Hölderlin, Kant is the starting point of his thinking. However, religion for Hölderlin is not primarily inscribed in the matrix of practical philosophy, but contains essential impulses from its relation to aesthetics. Hölderlin wants to move from “philosophy to poetry and religion” without taking the path via practical philosophy. In the “Fragment of Philosophical Letters” Hölderlin concludes: “Thus all religion would be poetic in its essence.” While Kant opens up ethically based religion to aesthetic categories only in selected places, Hölderlin places the latter at the centre. This is particularly evident in his reference to God in poetry from 1800 onwards, which borrows essential motifs developed by Kant in the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*. For Kant, beauty has to do with the “feeling of freedom in the play of our cognitive faculties” (KdU § 45), which of course does not mean lack of rules. The creative and free character of the imagination is expressed in the fact that it produces an abundance of ideas for given concepts, which accompany those concepts but escape their regulation (cf. KdU § 49). This open moment, which Kant allows but does not develop further, provides a key to the peculiarity of Hölderlin's writing. His poems always have a concept, an idea, a theological object (the question of God) as their theme. This concept is enriched with new ideas in an unfinishable process of revising the poems. Newer versions of the texts usually do not erase the older ones, but rather fan the linear textual design into a variety that is no longer entirely controllable. This process of multiplication of ideas is particularly intense where God is concerned.

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1. From infinite progress to the aesthetic

When Hölderlin wrote from Jena to his brother Carl on April 13, 1795, he gave an excellent, brief introduction to the significance of the moral law and the postulates of practical reason in Kant's work. Of central importance here is the motif of infinite progress. On "coming nearer to his aim of the greatest possible moral perfection",¹¹ he writes:

But since this aim is impossible in this world, since it cannot be attained within time and we can only approach it in infinite progression, we have need of a belief in an infinite extent of time because the infinite progress in good is an uncontested requirement of our law; but this infinite extent of time is inconceivable without faith in a Lord of nature whose will is the same as the command of the moral law within us, and who must therefore want us to endure infinitely because he wants us to make infinite progress in good and, as the Lord of nature, also has the power to realize that which he wants.¹²

Here Hölderlin is still within the realm of practical philosophy; the matter of aesthetics is not mentioned in the entire letter. About half a year later, in a letter to Schiller dated September 4, 1795, the unification of subject and object appears as the decisive question that every philosophical system must ask itself, alongside the motif of infinite progress¹³:

I am attempting to work out for myself the idea of an infinite progress in philosophy by showing that the unremitting demand that must be made of any system, the union of subject and object in an absolute... *I* or whatever one wants to call it, though possible aesthetically, in an act of intellectual intuition, is theoretically possible only through endless approximation, like the approximation of a square to a circle; and that in order to arrive at a system of thought immortality is just as necessary as it is for a system of action.¹⁴

¹¹ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtlicher Werke und Briefe*, Münchener Ausgabe, ed. by Michael Knaupp, Darmstadt: Hanser 1998 [below MA], Letter 97, 13. April 1795, MA II 576-579, here: 577; cf. MA III, 481-482; Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke*, Stuttgarter Hölderlin-Ausgabe in acht Bänden, ed. by Friedrich Beissner, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1946-1985 [below StA], StA 6.2, 731-735/ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters* ed. and translated with an Introduction by Jeremy Adler and Charlie Louth, London: Penguin Classics, [below EaL], EaL 48-52, here: 49.

¹² Brief 97, 13. April 1795, MA II 576-579, here: 577f/EaL 48-52, here: 50.

¹³ I doubt whether one should speak of the emergence of a "philosophy of unification" in view of this new central question about the unification of subject and object, as Christoph Jamme does in his outstanding study on Hegel and Hölderlin (cf. Jamme (1983), pp. 71-98). Already at this time Hölderlin has, as can be seen in *Being Judgement Possibility*, a strong awareness of the meaning of difference, which cannot be abandoned.

¹⁴ Brief 104, 4. September 1795, MA II, 595f/EaL 61-63, here: 62.

In these sentences, a program is presented for a philosophy to be developed: “I am attempting to work out for myself [...] by showing [...]”, whereas in the letter to his brother, Hölderlin initially only summarizes Kant’s formative philosophical system. At the center of the short passage from the letter, as mentioned above, there are two important motifs, one of infinite progress or infinite rapprochement and the other of the unification of subject and object. First: The image of infinite progress recalls the central question in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* as to how reason deals with the inevitably occurring figures of an infinite *progressus*, which are in danger of being understood as an inadmissible extension of our knowledge of objects. Kant talks about “transcendental illusion” (“*transzendentalen Scheine*”¹⁵). However, the postulates of practical reason, under the moral law, entail a figure of infinite progress. Hölderlin explicitly refers to immortality.

Second: Hölderlin states that every philosophical system must be concerned with the unification of subject and object in the absolute. He still tries to conceive of this within the realm of Kantian critical philosophy. However, the problem of the separation of subject and object gains more importance, and a first shift away from Kant becomes visible. Talking of a unification of subject and object, Hölderlin does not want to make the entire intermediate space disappear, which in Kant is located between the categories of the subject’s intellect and the data of perception and which is about the constitution of potential objects of experience (*Schematism of the Pure Concepts of Understanding* /*Schematismus der reinen Verstandesbegriffe*). I cannot here delve into how Hölderlin adopts especially the categories of modality to develop a primacy of possibility.

In his letter to Schiller, Hölderlin does not really name the point of unification in the absolute, but merely indicates it with a placeholder, pointing rather towards a function: *absolute ego* – “or whatever one wants to call it”. It becomes clear that it is not his intention to positivize something unconditional that precedes all separations. Rather, Hölderlin is concerned with the movement of overcoming otherwise disparate aspects of reality. He thus takes up the most fundamental dichotomy of modern philosophy (subject/object) and suggests that overcoming the dichotomous character of the concept of reality must be the task of philosophy. The unification has an aesthetic character and is conceived of as *intellectual intuition* (*intellectuale*

¹⁵ Kant, 1998a, p. 352/ Kant, 1998b, p. 385.

Anschauung). While the infinite rapprochement is still present and shapes the passage, the aesthetic emerges as a new element.

2. From intellectual intuition to the aesthetic sense

While infinite progress in Hölderlin's development then fades into the background, the aesthetic becomes even more important. This can be shown in a letter Hölderlin sent to the philosopher Immanuel Niethammer half a year later, in February 1796:

In the philosophical letters I want to find the principle that will explain to my satisfaction the divisions in which we think and exist, but which is also capable of making the conflict disappear, the conflict between the subject and the object, between our selves and the world, and between reason and revelation – theoretically, through intellectual intuition, without our practical reason having to intervene. To do this we need an aesthetic sense, and I shall call my philosophical letters *New Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. And in them I will go on from philosophy to poetry and religion.¹⁶

In echo of Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Hölderlin wants to write *New Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. He mentions as essential content the transition from philosophy to poetry and religion. This transition is connected with the search for a way of dealing with the divisions with which modern philosophy operates. While in his letter to Schiller Hölderlin had only mentioned the separation of subject and object, he now adds the "conflict" between self and world, as well as between reason and revelation. Obviously, he is not only concerned about the modern subject/object constellation, but about a modern development in which thinking – in various respects – to the extent that it is characterized by conflict that cannot be mediated, falls apart.

For Hölderlin, it is clear that there is no way (back) to a tensionless primordial unity that precedes the divisions. At first the divisions in which *our* thinking is caught must be understood: "to find the principle that will explain to my satisfaction the divisions in which we think and exist". The goal is about understanding our current situation.

Moreover, Hölderlin is also concerned with preventing the disintegration of thought into two completely separate areas that can no longer be mediated. When Hölderlin speaks of

¹⁶ Brief 117, 24. Februar 1796, MA II, 614f, here: 615; cf. StA 6.2, 783-787/EaL 66-68, here: 67.

a “principle”, he does not mean a metaphysical principle of unity that could be objectively conceived. In this principle, reason as expressed in Kant’s terminology would fall prey to the *transcendental appearance* (*transzendentaler Schein*) that arises when one considers the conditions of thought in the subject as something positively given.¹⁷ The principle mentioned must therefore be found in a form of thinking, a function, a process; unlike Kant, however, Hölderlin does not (primarily) think of practical reason as the pivotal point of the mediation of the dichotomies and antinomies that constantly break open anew in thinking. He strives to understand and explain them from the point of view of theoretical knowledge, again mentioning the motif of *intellectual intuition*. In my opinion, this motif is initially a sort of cipher for an aspect beyond the dichotomies, which nevertheless is not to be found in practical philosophy, but instead has to do with intuition. This begs the question: What is the point of naming this motif at the point of transition from philosophy to poetry and religion?

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, at the end of “Transcendental Aesthetics”, Kant emphasizes that intellectual intuition can only be possessed by an “original being”, but not by man as “one that is dependent as regards both its existence and its intuition”.¹⁸ For Kant, intellectual intuition would mean a form of immediate self-knowledge, which would skip the temporally structuring synthesis in which the ego (the “consciousness of itself”¹⁹) evolves and which marks a non-closing moment of displacement, of difference in the self. The ego does not intuit itself “as it would immediately self-actively represent itself, but in accordance with the way in which it is affected from within”.²⁰ The “self-intuition of the mind” (“Selbstanschauung des Gemüts”)²¹ is thus characterized by affecting and being affected – two processes that do not coincide completely (otherwise the inner intuition would be intellectual). This hiatus, which cannot be closed, is time or emerges as time. Kurt Appel expresses this as follows: “There is an unbridgeable gap between the act of positing and the representation of it, which is why representing not only consists of the active moment of affecting, but – equally – signifies being affected. Time is precisely this interval between activity and passivity, this difference that

¹⁷ Cf. Baumgartner, 1988, pp. 101-104.

¹⁸ Kant, 1998a, p. 72/ Kant, 1998b, p. 192.

¹⁹ Kant, 1998a, p. 68/ Kant, 1998b, p. 189.

²⁰ Kant, 1998a, p. 69/ Kant, 1998b, p. 190

²¹ Kant, 1998a, p. 69/ Kant, 1998b, p. 190.

unfurls in every act of self-affecting.”²²

Hölderlin does not fall short of this insight either²³, but – as will be shown later – he will determine this difference to be one of *discretion and continuity*. The recourse to *intellectual intuition* in the letter to Niethammer does not seek to encompass or abolish this difference, but refers, as Johann Kreuzer points out, to the fact that the forms of antagonism, of separation, of difference must be thematized in the aesthetic experience:

“Intellectual intuition” is a necessary prerequisite for the reflection on the structure of self-consciousness as well as for the explanation of the opposites that we discover as self-consciousness or rather that we find within self-consciousness. Intellectual intuition is neither something positive and factual nor is it something that can be theoretically determined. Concerning this, Hölderlin abides by Kant’s criterion. What is regarded as intellectual intuition, is the reality of an aesthetic experience. There is no object of intellectual intuition. (TS XV)²⁴

The way in which aesthetic experience can symbolize and express this difference and this hiatus without retracing them to a preceding motif and thus dissolving them, but also how their tension can be balanced without turning their reconciliation into an infinite progress, will be clarified in the next chapter, paving the way for considerations that “will go on from philosophy to poetry and religion”.²⁵

3. How to conceive of the aesthetic sense

When Hölderlin juxtaposes the terms “theoretical” and “intellectual intuition”, a direction is indicated that ranges from the theoretical evidence of the possibility of objective world experience (theoretical knowledge) to aesthetic experience, in Kant’s words, from the *Critique of Pure Reason* to the *aesthetic judgement*: “To do this we need an aesthetic sense”,²⁶ Hölderlin

²² Appel, 2022, p. 159. Kant writes about “the form of intuition, which, since it does not represent anything except insofar as something is posited in the mind, can be nothing other than the way in which the mind is affected by its own activity, namely this positing of its representation, thus the way it is affected through itself, i.e., it is an inner sense as far as regards its form” (Kant, 1998a, p. 67f / Kant, 1998b, p. 189).

²³ This applies to Hegel in the same way (cf. Appel, 2022).

²⁴ Translation: Sara Walker.

²⁵ EaL 66-68, here: 67

²⁶ Brief 117, 24. Februar 1796, MA II, 614f, here: 615. On the significance of Kantian aesthetics for Hölderlin, cf. the note to Hegel in the letter of 10 July 1794: “My preoccupations are pretty focused at the moment. Kant and

states. This is what Hölderlin – following Schiller – wants to cultivate. The path leads from philosophy to art and religion. Hölderlin never wrote the *New Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* that he announced, but a fragment exists that gives an indication of the path he had in mind. The text has no title and is usually referred to as either *Über Religion* (Stuttgarter Ausgabe) or *Fragment philosophischer Briefe* (Frankfurter Ausgabe).²⁷ In this fragment, Hölderlin points to the inter-referentiality of religion and art.

First of all, the starting point is important. Hölderlin contrasts mechanistic thinking with thinking of intersubjective-linguistic-historical mediation. For this second type of thinking, he uses the term “sphere”.²⁸ In religion, Hölderlin sees a strong differentiation of these intersubjective-linguistic-historical relations. He defines religious relationships as distinct from “intellectual moral legal relationships on the one hand, and on the other hand, physical mechanical historical relationships”.²⁹ The first set of terms stands for man in his individuality, personality and morality, i.e., in his freedom, the second set of terms for his being included in general relationships, connections, determinations, i.e., for his nature. The first set stands for discrete relations, the second for continuous ones. The two areas never collapse into one – individuality always repels generality and cannot be completely represented in it; conversely, individuality cannot produce its innate constitution, its continuity and its contextual integration by autonomous self-activity. The subject exists as the difference of these moments, which can never be brought into congruence or dissolved into one another. This is the non-closing moment of displacement, of difference in the self as we encountered it in Kant. Here, religion appears as a form of mediation and differentiation. Hölderlin defines it as “intellectual-historical, that is, mythical” by including a term from the first set and a term from the second set.³⁰ Religion is able to connect the two series and balance their moments in tension without resolving them into a comprehensive point of unity or subordinating one of the series to the other. With the word “mythical”, he finds a term that is intended to encompass both sides.

the Greeks are virtually all I read. I am trying to become particularly familiar with the aesthetic part of the critical philosophy.” (Brief 84, 10. Juli 1794, MA II 540f, here: 541/EaL 27-29, here: 29)

²⁷ Cf. EaL, pp. 234–239. Friedrich Hölderlin, *Theoretische Schriften*, ed. by Johann Kreuzer, Hamburg: Meiner 1998 [below TS], pp. XV–XVIII, 10–15, 120 et seq, Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke*. StA 4.1, pp. 275–279, 416 et seq. and StA 4.2, pp. 786–793; Hölderlin, *Sämtlicher Werke und Briefe*. MA III, pp. 387–389; Franz, 2000, pp. 330–344, here: pp. 335–344; Franz, 2020, pp. 224–246; Kreuzer, 2020, pp. 147–161; Böckmann, 1935, pp. 203–210; Gaier, 2008, pp. 75–92, here: pp. 83–85, 91 et seq; Louth (2016), pp. 124–138.

²⁸ EaL, p. 234.

²⁹ EaL, p. 238.

³⁰ EaL, p. 238.

The intellectual-historical, which is the hallmark of religion, expresses itself *mythically*, i.e., in a form of narrative or, more generally, of performance. This is not about an escape from rationality into myth. The mythical characteristic lies in the fact that myth is narrative, which does not convey (religious) knowledge of the world, but only comes to life in the act of narration or performance. It can give expression to that hiatus that constitutes the human being: Narrative is able to aesthetically unite those two logically divorced aspects, that of singularity and that of continuity, and the therein contained separation of morality/freedom and nature. Thus, an image “expresses the character of the individual life that each can and does live infinitely in his or her own way”,³¹ i.e. it is a mediation of the infinite differentiation of the sphere in which human beings live. All this is embedded in Hölderlin's effort to show that life means “more than machinery [Maschinengang]”.³²

By means of the mythical in its narrative structure (demanding some sort of performance), a connection of religion with art (poetry) is alluded to but has to be developed further. In order to give the two areas of art and religion a more precise definition, Hölderlin refers back to each in relationship to the other: art can be more precisely differentiated by referring to religion's ability to balance the two aspects of the singular and the continuous. Depending on the form of the relationship between the two poles, art defines itself as “epic myth”, “dramatic myth”³³ or as the “lyrical-mythical”.³⁴ In these modes of artistic expression, the emphasis is on one of the two sides (on personal relationships, i.e. on the first set, or on historical ones, i.e. on the second set). Specific tensions are thereby established in each case. However, Hölderlin points out “that both the personal and the historical parts are always only subordinate sections, in relation to the true main section, to the *God of the myth*”³⁵. Hölderlin takes up the term “mythical”³⁶ again, which had previously denoted the connection between “intellectual-historical”, and thus refers once again to the unifying power of religion. When he determines God as the “main section” in the context of the differentiation of art, this does not mean that art is ultimately dissolved into religion, but rather that art in all its manifestations is about the absolute. Art does not disintegrate into a collection of individual works of art and

³¹ TS, p. 15.

³² EaL, p. 234.

³³ EaL, p. 239.

³⁴ TS, p. 15.

³⁵ EaL, p. 238 et seq.

³⁶ EaL, p. 238.

styles, but is, in all its finite particularities, a representation of the Absolute.

Conversely, the “higher connection”³⁷ or the lively differentiation that Hölderlin associates with religion (“sphere”) must not remain “in thoughts alone”³⁸ but must find an expression that only art can grant. Hölderlin uses the expressions “subject-matter” and “presentation” for this.³⁹ Religion cannot be reduced to its content, its *subject-matter*; it always requires its performance, its *presentation*. This is never merely the external expression of existing content, but all along its cultural-artistic mediation, without which it would not exist: “everyone honours his own god and all honour a common one in poetic representations”.⁴⁰ Religion has no expression of its own, but is a repetition and free adoption of gestures and motifs, of elements from poetry, narrative, painting, sculpture, dance, music and architecture. This reference of religion to art, i.e. this repetitive adoption of its elements, is summed up for Hölderlin in the beautiful sentence: “Thus, all religion would in its essence be poetic”.⁴¹

Let us summarise: Art refers to that infinite differentiation that is connected with religion. It gives narrative form to the hiatus or displacement which is man’s existence and is therein also an expression of the absolute: its “true main section” is the “*God of the myth*”.⁴² Conversely, the concept of God cannot be detached from cultural-artistic mediations, for all honour God “in poetic representations”.⁴³ It is thus not replaced by or traced back to art, but it is *essentially* connected to it. For Hölderlin, religion has an aesthetic character.⁴⁴

4. Poetry as expression of aesthetic ideas

As pointed out before, religion and art entail both subject matter and presentation. Neither art nor religion can ever refer to fixed content whose performance (presentation) is a merely arbitrary moment. Art and religion as a means of dealing with the ego’s displacement need this moment of constant renewal (as this gap can never be closed). From 1800 onwards, this moment reaches deeper and deeper into Hölderlin’s poetry.

³⁷ EaL, p. 237.

³⁸ EaL, p. 237.

³⁹ EaL, p. 238.

⁴⁰ EaL, p. 239.

⁴¹ EaL, p. 239.

⁴² EaL, p. 239.

⁴³ EaL, p. 239.

⁴⁴ This section is closely based on the essay: Deibl, 2018.

In order to show this, I have to return to Kant once more. The openness in Kant's conception, which Daniel Kuran⁴⁵ highlighted and which Hölderlin sought to develop further, has its highest expression in *aesthetic ideas*. These refer to the richness of imagination, which can never be summed up by a determined concept and which accompanies every process of logical judgement. It is precisely this anarchic opening of new possibilities that can help us understand a development in Hölderlin's poetry after 1800.

In his poems after 1800, especially in the so-called *Homburger Folioheft*, a vast revision process begins: It is a revision process of adding further text variants to existing texts, not correcting earlier ones but repeating them in free variation. This corresponds to a reading process, in which the texts open up in an ongoing transition through the variants. As Gunter Martens points out, where "there [...] are no explicit eradications carried out by the poet, we have to hypothesize the alternative (or even multiple) validity of those texts written next to or on top of each other"⁴⁶. It is not about corrections, but about "extensions of the imaginative space" according to the "formal principle of simultaneity resisting by and large its reproduction in the linearity of print"⁴⁷. Thus, we have to seek meaning in the oscillation between the variants, i.e., at the point of transition. However, the possibly emerging forms of meaning cannot be fixed, but must be suspended once again. The text not only offers possible beginnings everywhere it "gives itself to our understanding"⁴⁸, but also represents a "labyrinth of possibilities with several exits"⁴⁹. Each reading has contingent beginnings and endings which it may not record as definite.

Often these intense revisions and new and alternative passages can be found in those sections where God is mentioned. This fragility of the text indicates both the rupture and the multiplication of linguistic expressions related to the notion of God itself. According to Hölderlin, the concept of God is closely connected to the openness of language (and the artistic process in general). The transcendent character of God is translated into openness. Neither the dichotomy of immanence and transcendence nor the concept of infinite progress helps us to conceive of God, but rather the open.

⁴⁵ Cf. the article by Daniel Kuran "From Ethics to Aesthetics. On an Aesthetic Sense in Kant's Philosophy of Religion" in this volume.

⁴⁶ Martens, 2017, p.147.

⁴⁷ Martens, 2017, pp. 148 et seq.

⁴⁸ "Angefangen werden kann an jeder Stelle, die sich dem Verständnis gibt." (Reuß, 2017, p. 87)

⁴⁹ Sattler, 1975, p. 120.

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