

Two Essays by Blanchot on Hölderlin

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Blanchot's critical essays are characterized by the delicate and elusive balance they maintain between the study of particular works and the independent reflection upon literature. This ambiguity is typically to be observed, in passages of greater intensity, in the discussion of those writers, such as Hölderlin, Mallarmé or Kafka, to whose work Blanchot's studies have frequently returned. The critical study accompanies and reflects upon the manner in which "literature" appears as a motivation and a theme for the particular writer. The reflection does not, however, remain at the level of the commentary, but tends to fuse its standpoint with that of the works studied, to take over their affirmations for its own account or to develop its own affirmations from the language of the source-text. We will study here this movement in the course of two of Blanchot's essays on Hölderlin.

Hölderlin's work is a privileged reference for Blanchot because, as he states in the opening pages of "Hölderlin et la parole sacrée" (first published in 1946, and collected in *La Part du Feu*), it emerges itself out of a reflection on the nature of poetry:

If one wishes to reflect on what is signified by the fact that the poem, that song exist, and if one claims to interrogate this fact from outside, this interrogation can only lead to Hölderlin, because here this question, experienced for itself and from within poetry, gave rise to the poem. (*PF* 118)¹

The reading in the essays to be examined bears only a limited resemblance to a work of interpretation in the sense in which this is understood in literary criticism: it does not seek to justify its interpretation through argumentation and documentation, nor does it examine alternative possible readings or consider obscurities or refractory passages; it only occasionally gives references, often does not clearly mark the transition from one poem to the next, and discusses no other commentators (except Heidegger).² The genre of the text is not that of the contribution to knowledge, that would say something *about* Hölderlin's poetry, and corroborate this statement through textual evidence: rather, the commentary mobilizes the lexical, figural and narrative means of the poems to focus them on the question posed by Blanchot's own *twxt*, namely: "what is signified by the fact that the poem exists."

This interpretation is not purely external and superimposed, but takes its bearings from the movement of self-interpretation in Hölderlin, by which the latent sense of themes and motifs develops through their repetition in a series of poems. One such motif is the dramatic figure of anticipation appearing in so many of Hölderlin's poems. In both of Hölderlin's first two major works, the epistolary novel *Hyperion*, and the tragic drama, *Empedokles*, the protagonist combines a religious or metaphysical intuition of the whole of nature, with a political vision of a possible reformation of the political and the social order, with this perception as the founding principle. In "Archipelagus," the long poem narrating the rise and fall of ancient Greek civilization, the Greek islands are depicted as languishing without the praise and the honour conferred by the temples, songs and cities of the past; and at the conclusion the imminent return of the "spirit of Nature" and the concomitant reawakening of the human soul is announced, a vision emblematically concentrated, as often, in the anticipation of the festival-day (*Festtag*) that will mark the renewal of the bonds of man and divinity. The stance of these works, made up of metaphysical insight and a mood of expectation (which at the same time implies a withdrawal from the existing order of things) can be seen in the speaker of the poem "An die Deutschen" ("To the Germans"): the poet speaks of wandering (*irren*) through the land, with the sense of being present in "the workshop of the creative spirit," conscious of something happening, and yet unable to say precisely what, divided between the exhilaration provoked by the signs of change, and conflicting feelings of impatience and doubt: the poet looks forward to the moment when doubt will be silenced before the "divine day" (or divine light, *himmlische Tag*). But "An die Deutschen" leaves the poet mournfully abiding by the "cold shore" of his own time, no longer recognizing the contemporaries, and not yet finding the community he foresees, a solitary voice

that finds no echo.³ For Blanchot, such passages reveal a predicament essential to the poetic existence, as one lived necessarily *en attente*, always still to come:

The poet has to exist as anticipation of himself, as the future of his own existence. He is not yet, but he has to be already as he will be later on, in a “not yet” that constitutes the essence of his mourning, of his distress, and also of his great wealth ... *Ich harrete, ich harrete*, this word constantly recurs to express the anguish and the sterility of waiting, as the word *ahnen* indicates its worth and potential ... The solitude of the poet ... is only apparent, for it is anticipation [*pressentiment*]. (PF 125)

In a straightforward representational sense, anticipation is a projection, in imagination, towards a not yet given state of affairs, considered as capable of arriving independent of the imagining subject. In the interpretation, however – suggested in Hölderlin, spelled out by Blanchot – the projection initiating out of the human desire or will changes its sense: it becomes a response to something which is already there, but which has not yet come to clarity, which does not of itself have the necessary force of existence, and requires the poet’s attention to show itself. The poet’s solitude and anticipation is thus only at a first level a matter of temperament, something proper to the individual: its real sense lies in the elective relation between the poet and this anterior and potential power, designated in Hölderlin as “nature,” “spirit” (*Geist*) or the “sacred.” Poetry becomes a prophetic vocation, conceived not primarily in terms of the linguistic conventions it employs, but rather in terms of the gods who grant or refuse themselves.⁴ In Heidegger’s interpretation, the gods of Hölderlin (or “nature,” as an elemental divinity, or “the sacred”) are recognized as a manner of naming the being of beings: thus nature here for Heidegger, to take only one of many similar formulations, signifies that which “grants to all real entities the open space within which the real as such can first appear.”⁵ In one of the most striking passages of Blanchot’s commentary, the noumenal presence to which the poet dedicates himself is interpreted *via* the metaphor of “the day” (*le jour, der Tag*), in the form that it takes in Hölderlin’s poems:

The sacred is the light (*le jour*): not the light of day as opposed to night, nor the celestial light, nor the infernal fire that Empedocles will seek. It is the light, and yet anterior to the light, and always anterior to itself, a light before the light [*un avant-jour*], a clarity before clarity. We come closest to this in reflecting on the moment of waking, the infinitely distant moment of the break of day, which is also that which is most inner, more interior than all interiority. (PF 127)

One sees here how, without any indication, the commentary makes the transition to an independent reflection: the motif of the beginning of the light reappears in a number of Blanchot's texts, and often has the same implication here, evoking a particular form of anamnesis, in which what is recollected is not an anterior life, but the very beginning, the point of origin from which one has always already departed.⁶ The fascination exercised by Hölderlin's work over writers such as Heidegger and Blanchot – evident, for example, in the shift from the transcendental-philosophical style of the earlier Heidegger to the eschatological motifs in the later work – has much to do with the complexity of the temporal structure of this anamnesis. The recollection of the beginning (which has been forgotten in the present social order; see "Natur und Kunst") becomes the basis of an anticipation, turned towards its repetition in the future, as the dawning of the new epoch: the vocation of the poet is to awaken the people to this epochal transformation, as Dionysus awoke the ancient peoples in bringing the holy wine ("Dichterberuf"). "In the first signs, the poet sees already the completed work, and flies, like the eagle before the storm, announcing in advance the coming gods."⁷ The work of the poet and of the poem, according to this conception, is to make explicit, to bring out of concealment, and thus to allow a new beginning to accomplish itself:

Before the poem, the light is the most obscure of all. As the origin of visibility, the pure beginning of what is to appear, it is the most profound mystery – and also the most terrifying: it is the unjustified, from which justification has to be drawn, the incommunicable and undiscovered which is as such also that which opens and which, through the rigor of poetic language, will in the end reveal itself. ...The poem, through its language, leads that which is unfounded to become foundation: it allows the abyss of the light to become the light which makes things appear and which constructs. (PF 128)⁸

The first light is "the most obscure of all," "the abyss of the light [*l'abîme du jour*]" : this is the light represented at the beginning of the poem "Heimkunft," the chaotic and mixed condition of the *helle Nacht* ("pale night") preceding the morning, when the habitants of the valley are still in darkness, even as the first light begins to give form and contour in the Alps above. The role of the poet then would correspond in this poem to that of the storm-bird, who knows that it is time (*merkt die Zeit*) and calls the day to impose itself (*ruft den Tag*). The passage is constructed out of fragments and allusions of many more poems than can here be investigated:⁹ but the tendency of the figuration and of the reading can already be discerned: the language of poetry effects a movement of passage, a mediation: it allows

the light that is still nascent, unformed, *jung an Gestalt*, to gather density, and become the light of day, in which things assume the stability of an appearance and a sense (see *PF* 127-128).

In order to situate criticism and study in relation to this strange discourse, one can begin by clarifying the implicit (because unformulated) structure of the relation between Blanchot's and Hölderlin's language. In the passage we have been discussing, the mode of Blanchot's text is essentially that of the doubling commentary, ranging freely over Hölderlin's production and drawing together narrative and figural structures to reconstruct a consistent tendency of the thought of the poems. But this is not all that the commentary contains. Throughout the dense and perhaps excessively complex presentation of "Hölderlin et la parole sacrée," poetry is linked to a fundamental impossibility, a "contradiction ... at the heart of poetic existence" (*PF* 121: see also 122, 125, 128). The rhetoric of the essay as a whole is maintained by the constant production of contradictions, each of which is dissolved only to reappear in another form. In its final form, the contradiction lies in the nature of the poetic task itself, in the form in which we have seen it formulated: the "pure interiority" of the sacred, the evanescence of the moment of awakening cannot be reconciled with the permanent, earthly, exterior nature of language:

In truth, this cannot take place, it is the impossible. And the poet is only the existence of this impossibility, just as the poem is only the echoing, the transmission of its own impossibility. (*PF* 128)

In these lines, the essay shows its continuity with the rhetoric and the thought of the collection to which it belongs, *La Part du Feu*, a work in which the language of paradox, contestation, of contradiction and negativity is constantly present, producing a reading experience which is often reminiscent of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In particular, this is to be seen in a series of texts circling around the poetics of Mallarmé:¹⁰ the poetic work aspires to express the absence, the nothingness which, for Mallarmé, is the essential condition of language (*PF* 71). The intricate rehearsal of the relation of poetic language and meaning that is to achieve this result ends in the conclusion that the idea of the work in Mallarmé is "contradictory, unrealizable, and as Mallarmé says, nothing but a ruse. But it is necessary to add that real poetry is an effort to reach the unrealizable, that (according to the poets), this impossibility and this contradiction is the "foundation of poetry, which it attempts vainly to realize" (*PF* 69).

In subsequent works, however, beginning with *L'espace littéraire*, the rhetoric of contradiction cedes to an affirmative conception of the literary work.¹¹ This transformation clearly takes place in concert with an intensified

engagement with Heidegger, which in *L'espace littéraire* tends to overshadow the thematics and language of negation so prevalent during the period of *La part du feu*. But it can also be seen as an appropriation of the metaphysical-religious poetics of Hölderlin, ambiguously affirmed and negated in "Hölderlin et la parole sacrée." The ambiguity is again apparent at the end of the text. Contrary to all that had been said to this point about poetry as an impossible task, it is now allowed that the poem, as expression of the sacred, can attain fulfillment, provided that the final contradiction, the existence of the poet as particular individual, is overcome through the poet's "disappearance."

The temptation of Empedocles was death. But for Hölderlin, for the poet, death is the poem. It is in the poem that he has to accede to the extreme moment of opposition, the moment at which he is compelled to disappear, and, in disappearing, to bring to fulfillment the movement in which he is engaged, which can only be fulfilled through this disappearance. (*PF* 135)

This line of thought, alluding at once to the drama *Empedokles* and the personal fate of Hölderlin, is merely suggested in the dense final paragraphs of "Hölderlin et la parole sacrée," but it comes to the foreground when Blanchot takes up the reading of Hölderlin again in "La Folie par excellence" (1951), a review of a work by Karl Jaspers on the psychology of poetic creation and the connection between madness and literature.¹² For the purposes of this study, our attention will be confined to the second part in which, in the course of a few brief pages, Blanchot returns to the exposition of Hölderlin's poetics.¹³

The discussion here takes its point of departure from the poem "Brot und Wein" – during certain stretches merely a paraphrasing translation, directed by the interpretive frame, which again concerns the poem as an interrogation of "the essence of poetry" ("La Folie par excellence" 112). With the reference to "Brot und Wein" the starting point shifts from the relation between the poet as self and nature as a whole (as in the previous essay, in passages following "Wie wenn am Feiertage") to a religious and philosophical-historical conception. According to the thought set forth in Hölderlin's major poems, the historical time of modernity is the time of the absence of the gods, the retreat of the divine presence as it was present to Greece no less than to early Christianity. "Wozu Dichter in dürtiger Zeit?," the poem asks, what need is there for poets in the time of distress? In this time, in which the divinity that poetry once announced and celebrated has abandoned the human world, the poet endures a condition of enforced idleness, has nothing to do but wait, in solitude (*so zu harren, ohne Freunde*).¹⁴ In

the discussion of this passage, we find again the movement that discerns in the representational content of the poem indications of an experience linked to the nature of poetry. In lines anticipating his subsequent descriptions of the poetic condition as *désœuvrement* (an ambiguous French word connoting a state of idleness or disuse, perhaps most idiomatically translated as “inertia”), Blanchot writes: “This is the empty time, the time of error, in which we are entirely without direction, because the certainty of presence, of a genuine ‘here’ is lacking” (“La Folie par excellence” 113). In its reading of what at first appears as a merely subjective phenomenon, the commentary follows Hölderlin’s poem, in which the situation of abandonment is modified by the insight into the historical nature of divine revelation. To paraphrase: it is not at all times that man can endure the presence of the divine: but the night makes strong, error helps.¹⁵ The being-outside of “error” is therefore not merely negative, but it has a “sense,” and signifies the persistence of a relation to “the truth” (i.e., the divine, the certainty of presence), even in its absence:

Error helps [*das Irrsal hilft*]: error is a moment of the truth, it is the expectation which anticipates it [*elle est l’attente qui la pressent*], the depth of sleep which is also vigilance, the forgetting which is the essence of the memory of the divine. Thus error is the silence by which that which is no longer there, the divine, the true, is nonetheless there, is present in the mode of awaiting, of anticipation, escapes the travesty of that which is false (the indefiniteness of error preserves from the false, the inauthentic). (“La Folie par excellence” 113-4)

The work of poetry becomes then the endurance and the accomplishment of “error”: a movement suggested in “Brot und Wein” through the comparison of the poets with the “migration” of the priests of Dionysus in “holy night”: and elsewhere in the blindness of the poet (“Der blinde Sänger”) and in the ability of the mortals to “reach into the abyss” (“Mnemosyne”).

The poet has to consent: he has to become blind. He descends into the night...but his heart remains awake and this awakening of the heart which precedes, which makes possible the apparition of the light, is the courageous anticipation of the first light. The poet is the experience [*l’intimité*] of distress, he lives profoundly the time of absence The night in him becomes the experience [*l’intimité*] of the night. In him night, fatigue, the empty time become anticipation of the first light ... not the prudent light [*der besonnene Tag*], but the day that breaks, the light that is its own beginning, the origin, the point at which the sacred is communicated and founded in the rigor of language. The poet is now the relation to the immediate, to the in-

determinate, the open, that in which possibility takes its origin, but which is impossible, prohibited to men as to gods, the sacred. Certainly, the poet does not have the power to communicate the incommunicable but in him ... the incommunicable becomes that which makes possible communication ... The poet is the one in whom transparency becomes light, and his language retains the unlimited: it gathers and contains the infinitely extensive power of the spirit [*esprit*, *Geist* in Hölderlin] on condition that his language is authentic, the language that mediates because in it, the mediator disappears, puts an end to his particularity, returns to the element from which he comes. ("La Folie par excellence" 114-5)

The contradiction of the sacred as the incommunicable and language, as determinate, the *leitmotif* of the earlier essay, has been subordinated to a mere clarification. Certainly, the poet cannot "communicate the incommunicable" – but poetry can nonetheless be positively thought of as a work of mediation between the divine and the human worlds. Mediation here does not only or necessarily signify the Promethean intercession, translating and betraying the divine to the human, "veiled in song," for the protection of its recipients (see "Wie wenn am Feiertage"). "The sacred" depends on the poet, in order to come to itself: the intervention worked by poetry is again expressed as the movement from transparency (the transparency of the gods who dwell above the light) to the light of day, or as the movement from excess to measure. The accomplishment of this task, however, demands the "sacrifice" of the worldliness of the poet, his existence as a particular individual, a necessity expressed in the drama *Empedokles*, and the continuation of this dramatic motif in the poems ("Dichtermut," "Ganymede," stanza viii of "Der Rhein") which link the poet to a sacrifice of his self, as part of his message.¹⁶

The comparison of the two texts indicates some of the possible directions open to critical discourse confronted with Hölderlin's poetic thought, and beyond this perhaps, with modern poetry more widely, to the extent that, in its reflection on the possibility and reality of poetry, it comes in one way or another, like Hölderlin, to posit poetry as "a metaphysical activity" (in the phrase of Nietzsche). How does the critical discourse position itself in relation to a poetics which determines itself by its relation to a point of transcendence or a point of anteriority – the celestial spheres of *Heimkunft* or the zone of indeterminacy designated as "Nature" in "Natur und Kunst" – to which poetry alone can give meaning and reality? In both of Blanchot's texts, the primary gesture is the commentary which gives at least the implicit assent of the immanent exegesis: in the first text the exegesis is qualified by being coupled with a critical discourse which reveals it as an impos-

sible project, albeit one that in its failure can reveal a fundamental ontological division.¹⁷ In the second text, this discourse falls away: the affirmative repetition of Hölderlin's poetics is, however, accompanied by a much greater emphasis on the negation of the poetic self. Poetry is not a matter of a vision or an immediate revelation: it is authentic to the extent that it finds itself in and abandons itself to the night, the endlessness of error, prior to the beginning announced by the poem. This extends the exegesis of Hölderlin, and opens up a field of reflection which will have its consequences within Blanchot's work, and would need to be further examined in that context: one can doubt, however, that it provides the function of a critical distance. Modern poetry provides criticism with an alternative: either it can remain within the discursive field of research, one in which the question of origin and transcendence is *a priori* bracketed, inadmissible except as a documented historical representation: or it remains in continuity with the metaphysical premises of the poetry, interpreting these without reducing them to the status of representations, in which case the commentary remains "poetic," from the standpoint of the discipline. If the language of Blanchot's essays on Hölderlin continues to have such a recurrent subterranean presence in his own later reflections, it is no doubt in part because it was in these texts that he encountered this alternative and decided for the latter possibility.

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NOTES

- ¹ The translations of all passages cited are my own. Page references are to the original French.
- ² "Hölderlin et la parole sacrée," in its initial publication in *Critique* (in 1946), appeared on the occasion of the French translation of one of Heidegger's texts on Hölderlin, the commentary on the poem "Wie wenn am Feiertage" from the *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*.
- ³ This solitude becomes central in the closely related poem, "Rousseau": the French thinker appears as an allegorical figure: he is the one who reads in the signs of his own time changes that are to come, prophesizing "the coming gods."
- ⁴ On the "prophetic" conception of the poet in Hölderlin and in Romanticism more generally, see the recent work of Ian Balfour, *Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002). An influential article in the specific context of Hölderlin is Otto, "Die Berufung des Dichters", available in *Über Hölderlin* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1970).

- ⁵ *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1951), 57 ("Die Natur...[verschenkt] allem Wirklichen die Lichtung, in deren Offenes hinein alles zu erscheinen vermag, was ein Wirkliches ist"). Heidegger's thought is present in the language of Blanchot's text, more than it is in the form of explicit discussion: thus, the sacred is glossed by Blanchot as a movement of emergence, prior to determinate entities (*venue antérieure à tout "quelque chose vient,"* PF 125); or as the "radiant power whose coming-forth is the law, the principle of appearing of that which appears, the origin of all power of communication" (*Puissance rayonnante dont le jaillissement est la loi, principe d'apparition de ce qui apparaît, origine de tout pouvoir de communiquer,* PF 125). These passages freely translate the language in which Heidegger writes of being, especially when the sense of being is elaborated via the Greek word *physis*. *Physis* is often rendered by Heidegger as *Aufgehen* (arise, emerge), which is doubtless also the sense of *jaillissement* here. On the connection between being and appearing in Heidegger, see *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, (Sixth edition. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1998), 75-88).
- ⁶ See, e.g., *AMV* 51-2, 76-81, 143-5 and also *La folie du jour*. In discursive mode, see the essay on Joubert in *Le livre à venir*, especially the conclusion, 90-1.
- ⁷ *Kennt er im ersten Zeichen Vollendetes schon/ Und fliegt, der kühne Geist, wie Adler den/Gewittern, weissagend seinen/ Kommenden Göttern voraus* ("Rousseau"). In the philosophical poem, "Natur und Kunst oder Jupiter und Saturn," the poetic knowledge of what is on the point of beginning comes from the memory of the immemorial. On this intrication of past and future, see, in addition to Heidegger's commentaries, Emil Staiger's essay "Über 'Natur und Kunst'" in *Über Hölderlin*, 33-44.
- ⁸ "Avant le poème, le jour est ce qu'il y a de plus obscur. En tant qu'origine de la transparence, commencement pur de ce qui va jaillir, il est le mystère le plus profond – et aussi le plus effrayant: il est l'injustifié, à partir de quoi il faut prendre justification, l'incommunicable et l'indécouvert qui, en tant que tel, est aussi ce qui ouvre et, par la fermeté de la parole poétique, va devenir à la fin ce qui se découvre. ... Le poème, par la parole, fait que ce qui est infondé devient fondement, que l'abîme du jour devient le jour qui fait surgir et qui construit. "
- ⁹ The revealing of the incommunicable, for example, alludes to the conclusion of "Germania"; the transition from the abyss of the light to the light as constructing the day in which we dwell refers to the itinerary of the river in "Der Rhein," stanzas iii to vi.
- ¹⁰ "Le Mythe de Mallarmé," "Le mystère dans les lettres," "Le paradoxe d'Aytré," "La littérature et le droit à la mort." Many other texts of this period construct similar arguments. In "The language of fiction," Hegel's concept of symbolic art, its constitutive *Unangemessenheit*, its inadequacy to what it intends to signify, is affirmed as the general paradigm for art (PF 86).
- ¹¹ A sign of this change is that one finds in *L'espace littéraire* very little of the language of deception, trickery, and lure, discussed in Nordholt's study, and which is indeed characteristic of *La part du feu*, where it relates to the need for literature to give the appearance of doing something of which it is constitutionally incapable. (See the chapter entitled "La tromperie comme vérité propre de l'oeuvre" in Anne-

Lise Schulte Nordholt, *Maurice Blanchot: L'écriture comme expérience du dehors* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1995), 214-8.

- ¹² *Critique*, 45, 1951, 99-118. The essay is available in English in *BR*, 110-28. References, however, will be to the original journal publication, and the translations, again, are my own.
- ¹³ Passages from this discussion were extracted to provide the conclusion of the final essay in *L'espace littéraire*.
- ¹⁴ Error here, as in Hölderlin's word *Irrsal*, or in the French *errer*, signifies the wandering movement of a migration. The motif appears in a related sense in a number of poems: see "Der Main," "Rousseau," "Dem Allbekanntem," "Der Ister." It reappears in a somewhat different context, with the disciples in "Patmos," who are separated and driven off on their separate paths, after the death of Jesus.
- ¹⁵ *Denn nicht immer vermag ein schwaches Gefäß sie zu fassen, / Nur zu Zeiten erträgt göttliche Fülle der Mensch. Traum von ihnen ist drauf das Leben. Aber das Irrsal / Hilft, wie Schlummer, und stark machet die Not und die Nacht* ("Brot und Wein," stanza vii).
- ¹⁶ "the poet has to be ruined, in order that in him and through him the excess of the divine become measure, the measure common to all, and this destruction, this effacement at the heart of poetic language is what makes language speak [*ce qui fait que la parole parle*], what makes it into the sign *par excellence*" ("La Folie par excellence" 116).
- ¹⁷ This strategy has become known in English language criticism through early essays of Paul de Man, such as "The impasse of formalist criticism" and "Heidegger's exegeses of Hölderlin," both appended to the second edition of *Blindness and Insight*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).