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### Kant, Hölderlin, And The Experience Of Longing

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# Kant, Hölderlin, and the experience of longing

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RICHARD ELDRIDGE

There is a natural and reasonable temptation to try to find or ground morality within common human life. If moral commandments cannot be lived out there, then what good are they, and why ought we to allow ourselves to be tyrannized by them? So either, it seems, we must show how a culture of justice or freedom or respect is achievable in accordance with one of these high ideals, or we must give them up in favor of more modest balancings of values that are not so categorical. Does not “ought” imply “can”?

Yet it may not be so easy quite to do what seems so natural and reasonable. Is it possible not reasonably to care about freedom or justice or respect, and not also to regard this care as higher or deeper, more woven into our humanity, than a liking for pistachio ice-cream? Our sense of the pull of certain high ideals on us, a pull that involves our humanity, may be not so easily stilled. But then it is not so obvious either how to achieve a culture of justice or freedom or respect, particularly in advanced technological cultures with significant divisions of labors and class antagonisms. What pieces of institutional design or state policy or individual habitual action could possibly lead to universal justice, freedom, or respect?

It is this sense of the human person as caught between an aspiration toward the ideal and also the standing defeat of that aspiration that is expressed or released in the texts of Kant and Hölderlin, as well as in other major Romantic writers, German and English. Within major Romantic and Idealist texts, literary and philosophical, German and English, the struggles of protagonists, real and implied, to come to terms with both the categorical appeal of high ideals and the difficulties of achieving them are traced. The activity imagined for these protagonists itself emerges as a kind of *poiesis*, an effort imaginatively to take up present routes of cultural

activity and to redirect or resignify them in at least partial furtherance of the ideal. Or so, at any rate, it may emerge when Kant and Hölderlin are read through or against one another.

I

It is nowadays little realized and less appreciated first that Kant's philosophical project was essentially *descriptive*, and second that in his descriptions Kant dwells above all on human reason's difficulties and perplexities, as though reason were at odds with itself and as though our lives, in which we exercise our rational capacities, were opaque to us, tangled. But that is, mostly, what Kant says. "Human reason," he famously tells us in launching his project of critique, in the *Critique of Pure Reason's* first sentence, "is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer" (Avii).<sup>1</sup> Thus "human reason precipitates itself into darkness and contradictions" (Aviii).

The project of critique, to be sure, aims at undoing these contradictions and illuminating the darkness. The critique of pure reason is to serve as "a tribunal which will assure to reason its lawful claims, and dismiss all groundless pretensions, not by despotic decrees, but in accordance with its own eternal and unalterable laws" (Axi–xii). That is, the critique of pure reason will sort out the principles that we are entitled to assert – "All events have a cause;" "An unchanging quantum of substance underlies all changes of appearance;" "As beings with practical reason we must treat all beings with practical reason not as means only, but always also as ends" – from speculative claims that are empty, that are *not* ineluctably woven through our lives as conscious and self-conscious beings – claims such as "God is the providential first cause and orderer of nature;" or "My soul is a self-identical, simple, and indestructible substance." In this way, by sorting principles into "lawful claims," on the one hand, and "groundless pretensions," on the other, the critique of pure reason will enable us to escape from both *despotic dogmatism* and *anarchic skepticism* (Aix) into self-assured self-responsibility in our practices, as we live by the principles that have survived critique.

This, at any rate, is the ambition of the Critical Philosophy. We are to become reasonably responsible under and to contentful and secure principles we cannot help but have in our cognitive, moral,

and aesthetic practices, freed alike from attachment to false idols, empty principles, and overmastery by an anarchic, arbitrary otherness. This same image of the *task* of reason or its criticism in aiming at reasonable self-responsibility between empty idolatry and anarchic skepticism also massively informs the English philosophic and poetic traditions, as it figures centrally in the texts of both Hume and Wordsworth.<sup>2</sup>

Is this ambition fulfilled? Are our perplexities and contradictions undone by critique's tribunal in sorting principles? It is not so clear. Certain anxieties or worries about human responsibilities persist in Kant's texts. Instead of being resolved, they are continually rearticulated. Problems supposedly solved in the *Critique of Pure Reason* or the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* recur, particularly in the *Critique of Judgment*. Principles supposedly justified and woven into our practices as self-conscious beings are re-queried. What is my place in the world of nature as a rational, moral being? How can I express in action in nature my nature as a free, rational, noumenal being standing under moral principle? If I can't do that, or can't do so stably and securely, so that every act I undertake is a test of my rational nature, of whether it can sustain itself in the world and whether the world will allow this, then do I really know myself as a free, rational, noumenal being, possessed of a form of continuous, apperceptive self-consciousness rooted in noumenal activity? Is the world of phenomena that appears to my apperceptively unified consciousness really there for me, stably ordered under causal laws no matter what, if the consciousness to which that world appears might fail to sustain itself in coherent action? What awareness of the apperceptive unity of my consciousness enabled me to follow out the threads of transcendental logic? Can that awareness falter? Can apperceptive unity falter? How was or is critique possible at all?<sup>3</sup>

These questions are raised in the *Critique of Judgment* as Kant attempts to put the parts of his system – phenomena and noumena, nature and freedom – back together again, to find, as he puts it, “a ground of the *unity* of the supersensible that lies at the basis of nature, with what the concept of freedom contains in a practical way.”<sup>4</sup> That is, there must be something behind or under natural phenomena and also behind or under my rational free will. There must be a unity between these supersensible somethings that enables and guarantees all at once my continuing, apperceptively unified consciousness and self-consciousness, the presentation to

that consciousness of a stably ordered phenomenal world under a system of laws that is not a hodgepodge, and, most importantly and directly, my ability to act as a rational being, commanded by moral principle, *in that world*: causality by freedom “is to take effect in the world” (*CJ*, 37). How?

It may seem that this characterization of Kant’s project runs together topics that ought to be kept apart. What do the problems of my own self-consciousness and of knowledge have to do with the problems of the formula and requirements of the moral law, or with the problem of the justification of judgments of taste? Kant, after all, devoted three separate *Critiques* to these problems. Surely his main insight is that we just are as self-conscious beings committed to certain principles of understanding that describe an order among phenomena present to us, and we just do regard ourselves as free insofar as we stand under a moral law. Surely it would be better, and more in the Kantian spirit, simply to explicate and elucidate these separate epistemological and moral principles, avoiding all this nonsense about freedom in the world. As Kant notoriously said in his open letter on Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, in response to Fichte’s effort to develop a metaphysical system upholding freedom in the world, “May God protect us from our friends, and we shall watch out for our enemies ourselves.”<sup>5</sup> Why not back to description, explication, and critique, away from the metaphysics of freedom in nature?

The trouble with this anti-metaphysical line of thought – dominant in Kant’s contemporary Anglo-American reception – is that it is belied by certain passages in Kant’s major texts, where Kant himself connects the topic of apperceptively unified self-consciousness with that of standing under the moral law, as he worries about the place of the rational subject in the natural world. Here are two such passages:

Man, however, who knows all the rest of nature solely through the senses, knows himself also through pure apperception; and this, indeed, in acts and inner determinations which he cannot regard as impressions of the senses. He is thus to himself, on the one hand, phenomenon, and on the other hand, in respect of certain faculties the action of which cannot be ascribed to the receptivity of sensibility, a purely intelligible object. We entitle these faculties understanding and reason. The latter, in particular, we distinguish in a quite peculiar and especial way from all empirically conditioned powers. For it views its objects exclusively in the light of ideas ... Reason does not here follow the order of things as they present themselves in appearance, but frames for itself with perfect spontaneity an order of its own according to ideas, to which it adapts the empirical conditions, and

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according to which it declares actions to be necessary, even although they have never taken place, and perhaps never will take place . . .

Now in view of these considerations, let us take our stand, and regard it as at least possible for reason to have causality with respect to appearances.

(A546–7=B574–5; A548=B576)

In this passage we see a characteristic Kantian transition from claims about self-consciousness to claims about our powers as moral beings. I must regard myself as an intelligible object, as spontaneously and transparently able to formulate and apply certain rules, for example to say “this is a chair.” My seeing of objects is rule-governed in a way that is transparent to my consciousness. I not only have chair-stimuli, as it were, I am also aware of myself as seeing a chair, as subsuming that object under certain sortal rules freely and transparently.<sup>6</sup> And it is this very freedom or spontaneity, evident in the transparently rule-governed empirical judgments of a self-conscious being and constitutive of its apperceptive unity, that at the same time is the source of the moral law. This spontaneity “frames an order of its own according to ideas,” responding to or instancing something higher than the ways of the natural, phenomenal world and legislating for action in that world. Thus, as the *Critique of Practical Reason* continues, “I have this right [to accept the existence in me of noumenal causality, a causality of freedom with the moral law as its determining ground], by virtue of the pure nonempirical origin of the concept of cause.”<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, I can regard myself as a noumenal cause only insofar as I deliberate about how I ought to act. I cannot understand theoretically what in nature or ultimate reality makes me such a being. “We have thought of . . . man as belonging to a pure intelligible world, though in this relation man is unknown to us.”<sup>8</sup> But there is at least this much. I transparently follow rules in making empirical judgments. Certain rules – the concepts of events as caused, of qualities as pertaining to substances – are necessary for there to be any empirical judgments at all. Adherence to these rules brings it about that my consciousness is judgmental and apperceptively unified. These rules are themselves freely created: there is no experience of causality or substance. And whatever freely creates those rules – reason, or spontaneity, or pure understanding stimulated by reason – distinguishes me from all merely natural beings and legislates for my actions in the world, yet in ways that are ultimately mysterious to me. I do not know how or why I am both a free, noumenal agent and an embodied, natural being.

So can I really sustain these beliefs about myself that apparently force themselves on me? What if physiological psychology advances in tracing the motions of my body back to complicated neurochemical causes? What if my culture does not make sense, so that nothing I do seems readily to evince or express freedom and practical rationality? Suppose things seem just to happen. How is freedom to “take effect in the world”? My awareness of myself as a unified self-consciousness, possessed of a moral dignity born of reason’s spontaneity, seems to fade. Maybe it is all just an illusion.

This is, I think, the deep anxiety that is latent in Kant’s extraordinary wanderings back and forth between claims about what we must presuppose (we have apperceptively unified consciousnesses; we are free) and claims about ultimate and impenetrable mysteries (the interaction of phenomena and noumena, nature and freedom; our opacity to ourselves as both natural and freely rational beings). And it is this deep anxiety that comes to the fore in the *Critique of Judgment* and in the historical and anthropological essays. It is the presence of this anxiety in Kant’s texts, his mode of responding to it, though never quite stilling it, and its refiguration in his successors – English and German, philosophical and poetic – that launches and defines Romanticism. This anxiety, together with certain ways of responding to it, is as definitive of human life as anything is, according to these texts. We are beings who are caught between aspirations to realize our dignity and free rationality in a transparent, harmonious culture, aspirations we can’t it seems, give up, and the defeat of these aspirations by nature and culture as they stand, even as we can imagine recasting them. So we are caught in anxiety. Are our aspirations, capacities, and possibilities genuine, or not? How might we make sense of ourselves as having something to live up to?

Kant’s way of responding to these questions is exemplary. When he came in the *Critique of Judgment* and in the historical and anthropological essays explicitly to confront the problem of *how*, in what manner, self-conscious self-identity, morality, and freedom could be expressed in a stable, receptive world, what Kant mostly did was to produce imaginative narratives of the past and future of human culture. The function of these narratives is to uncover the existence of a human capacity, practical reason, as that capacity has been dimly, partially, exercised in practice, thence to suggest that the full, self-conscious exercise of that capacity may inaugurate a perfected culture, a kingdom of ends, in which all human beings

reciprocally respect, attend to, and practically love all human beings, without coercion.

Roughly, Kant's imaginative narrative of humanity's progressive development and realization of its capacities goes like this.<sup>9</sup> Originally human beings are creatures of sensation and animal instinct. They then begin to use their reason to make comparisons among things, perhaps preferring some foods to others, and further acquiring new, artificial desires through imagining satisfactions, rather than merely pursuing them instinctively. Having these artificial desires and no longer being dominated by instinct, human beings "become aware of what it means to choose,"<sup>10</sup> become conscious of their negative freedom. Arising out of this consciousness of freedom comes an awareness of one's life in time and of a need to work and to plan. Human beings become aware of, and come to fear, their own death, and they take rational pains to avoid it. But this is not the end of the story. Through the use of reason, "the human being becomes aware, however obscurely, that he is the end of nature."<sup>11</sup> This awareness of oneself as an end, and of all rational beings as ends, is then imagined to drive two further developments. Initially we are to establish a rational state, "a universal civic society which administers law among men."<sup>12</sup> This civil society is not, however, the final end of our development. It is rather the necessary framework and precondition for our further development of a kingdom of ends, a rational community in which our ends "are brought systematically into harmony by reason as reciprocal end and means, like the interdependent organs of a living thing."<sup>13</sup> Achieving this harmonious culture of rational freedom, a moral culture beyond politics and the enforcement of rights within competition, is the work of Enlightenment, "man's release from his self-incurred tutelage."<sup>14</sup> Kant regards his own philosophical writing as advancing this work, helping to free us from tutelage or service to our animal nature so as to achieve collective rational freedom. His articulation of the principle of morality is to help to move us first to found a liberal state and then further, through culture, to bring our ends into rational harmony with one another.

This advance toward freedom first through politics and then through culture is not, however, the work of philosophy alone. Art has a crucial role to play in this development. "Fine art . . .," Kant writes, "has the effect of advancing the culture of the mental powers in the interests of social communication" (*CJ*, 166). The



work of art, in blending sublime, natural *originality*, the “primary property” of genius, “the innate mental aptitude *through which* nature gives the rule to art” (*CJ*, 168) with sense, intelligibility, and the crafting of material serves as an exemplar of embodied freedom in the world and a spur to its further development. In taking up “something of a compulsory character ... or, as it is called, a *mechanism*,” that is, the demand to craft material intelligibly, original artists embody the soul, which otherwise “would be bodiless and evanescent” (*CJ*, 164) (“gar keinen Körper haben und gänzlich verdunsten würde”).<sup>15</sup> “The poet essays the task of interpreting to sense the rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, hell, eternity, creation, & c. Or, again, as to things of which examples occur in experience, e.g. death, envy, and all vices, as also love, fame, and the like, transgressing the limits of experience he attempts with the aid of an imagination which emulates the display of reason in its attainment of a maximum, to body them forth to sense with a completeness of which nature affords no parallel” (*CJ*, 176–177) (“in einer Vollständigkeit sinnlich zu machen, für die sich in der Natur kein Beispiel findet”).<sup>16</sup> The poet’s work thus shows us that the embodiment of rational ideas, including the idea of freedom, is possible. The poet’s work thus both locates us as beings for whom the project of constructing a culture that fully embodies rational freedom is possible and advances that very project. It embodies, expresses, and advances our aspirations as rational beings, and in doing so it “binds up language, which otherwise would be mere letters, with spirit” (*CJ* 179, modified) (“mit der Sprache, als bloßem Buchstaben, Geist verbindet”).<sup>17</sup> The poet’s work, one might say, makes our sayings and doings intelligible as ours. Rather than standing as mere material happenstances, they become legible to us in the poet’s high achievement as vehicles of our possibilities for freedom, rooted in our rational humanity or Spirit. We can, as it were, see our humanity in them.

This is in many ways a wonderful story. But how much reassurance about our capacities and possibilities does it provide? Do we now know ourselves as possessors of rational freedom, able to manifest that freedom in a harmonious moral culture? As thus rehearsed, this story smacks of what Dostoyevsky stigmatized as Schillerizing – blathering about the achievement of moral culture through artistic activity. (In fairness to Schiller, the essays on the sublime and on naive and sentimental poetry are a lot tougher than the *Letters*, show more awareness than the *Letters* of the tendency of

art in modernity to deepen antagonisms rather than to smooth things over;<sup>18</sup> and even in the *Letters* there is a crucial incoherence that undoes Schiller's imagination of progress, as he wavers between saying that artistic activity is merely instrumental to the emergence of a moral culture and saying that it is rather an end in itself, as though he can't quite really envision a definite path to the end of history.) What is wrong with Schillerizing?

In the first place, it scarcely requires much perceptiveness to notice that Kant's narrative of our realization of our capacities has not in fact come true. Bitterness, antagonism, envy, competitiveness, violence, and domination are conspicuously more the stuff of our lives than reciprocity and harmonious rational freedom. Nor did Kant fail to notice this. The imaginative narrative of our progress in realizing our capacities that he produces is merely conjectural in its treatment of the past. With regard to the present it is merely an ideal that should govern the writing of more specific histories and inform our present political efforts. "Conjectures cannot make too high a claim on one's assent. They cannot announce themselves as serious business, but at best only as a permissible exercise of the imagination guided by reason."<sup>19</sup> Conjectural narrative is not intended by Kant to be evidently true as things stand, nor to provide any *justification* of our ascription to ourselves of rational capacities and self-legislated moral principles. Officially, those ascriptions are secured by the arguments of the first two *Critiques*, and the remarks about freedom in history and art are mere playings out of possibilities established elsewhere.

Unofficially, Kant's argumentative itinerary suggests, these later narratives *are* epistemically crucial. In taking up the topic of *how* freedom is to appear in the world, they literalize and develop an anxiety about our capacities that was already latent in earlier swerves between claims about our awareness of a noumenal spontaneity and its deliverances in us and claims about what we must presuppose in so far as we already accept the idea that we have overriding, categorical obligations.

But this reading scarcely makes things better. If we have no secure prior warrant for ascribing certain capacities and possibilities to ourselves, but instead need the imaginative historical narratives in order to make such ascriptions plausible, then why narrate the history that way, with that ideal, in the face of the obvious facts of misery and domination? Just who do we think we are?

Kant himself, to repeat, was aware of the obvious facts of history. Recall that the imaginative historical narrative of our progress is a story of the progressive development of our rational nature out of our animal nature – a kind of second birth – through the setting up of competitive, artificial desires. The birth pangs here are considerable. Kant's general name for the energy or power that drives this development and shapes all of culture is *antagonism*:

The means employed by Nature to bring about the development of all the capacities of men is their antagonism in society, so far as this is, in the end, the cause of a lawful order among men. By "antagonism" I mean the unsocial sociability of men, i.e. their propensity to enter into society, together with a mutual opposition which constantly threatens to break up the society ... This opposition it is which awakens all [man's] powers, brings him to conquer his inclination to laziness, and, propelled by vainglory, lust for power, and avarice, to achieve a rank among his fellows whom he cannot tolerate but from whom he cannot withdraw.<sup>20</sup>

Thus art, while embodying our soul and rational freedom, will also embody conflict, vainglory, lust for power, and avarice. The ideal narrative of our possible achievement is a narrative also of the struggle of our nature against itself. The picture of human nature as it expresses itself in history is neither naturalistic, despairing, and Hobbesian–Nietzschean, nor optimistic, blandly utopian, and apolitical, as certain strains in Rousseau and Marx are. It is rather what Allen Wood calls a "deeply moralistic conception of the human condition, which makes it axiomatic that human beings are capable of living with one another on decent terms only when their natural desires and dispositions are under quite strict constraint (if not forcible external constraint, then rational self-constraint)."<sup>21</sup> Every exercise of power or virtue, every act of originality or courage or kindness or justice or love that we might look to as advancing our culture, will be at the same time marked by vainglory and antagonism. The virtues, the powers that might advance culture, are not clearly harmoniously compossible among us. History is the record of their exercise under and often contributing to relations of domination. Yet it makes sense to hope for their compossibility, to struggle against our own vainglory in the hope of achieving a harmonious kingdom of ends, even if we can't see how. "Nature," Kant tells us, "reveals something, but very little"<sup>22</sup> of the path toward a kingdom of ends. And yet we are also drawn toward it. Or so, at least, Kant's story would have it.

II

Here then are two beliefs that seem inescapable. We do not live in a moral culture or kingdom of ends, but instead in a world of antagonism, vainglory, and domination, without any clear sense of how to inaugurate a moral culture. Yet we also believe – something in us, something that among other things expresses itself in art, seems to make us believe – in the dim possibility of a kingdom of ends, believe that things will ultimately make sense, that the virtues are compossible, that all things might express their natures harmoniously, that life is not all and only power against power, nature against nature.

Narratives, or at least rich ones, explore how it is that we live with both beliefs, in the space, one might say, of tragedy, not self-sufficient in our power to inaugurate a moral culture, but not dispossessed of the aspiration to do so either. As Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal Naquet put it,

The tragic sense of responsibility arises when human action becomes the subject of a reflection, a debate, but has not yet acquired a status autonomous enough to be self-sufficient. The proper domain of tragedy is situated in a frontier zone where human actions come to be articulated with divine power, and it is in that zone that they reveal their true sense, a sense not known to the agents themselves, who, in taking on their responsibility, insert themselves into an order between men and gods which surpasses the understanding of man.<sup>23</sup>

The working out of this tragic sense of responsibility, as we are caught between the demands of rational freedom and the difficulties of antagonistic historical life, is tracked or traced in narrative, which investigates *how* these demands and difficulties might be reconciled. Narrative will be, one might say, the necessary scrutiny of our powers and possibilities of rational freedom and moral culture as they bump up against the facts of antagonism in history, those powers and possibilities never quite disappearing, but never quite receiving full realization either.

What is it like to live in such a way, to inhabit such a narrative or to hold together narratively one's sense of possibilities of rational freedom in a moral culture with one's sense of the immediate and standing ways of the world? It is this sense of human life that is powerfully expressed in Hölderlin's elegies and in particular in "Dichterberuf," "The Poet's Vocation."<sup>24</sup> Many of Hölderlin's lyrics center around the persistence of longing, as the poet simultaneously

seeks to envision a transfigured, moral culture of freedom and reciprocity emerging out of the ashes of the old and confronts the non-emergence in fact of such a culture. His sense of himself as a bearer of rational humanity, one who has a soul to be materially embodied in culture, is tied to his ability to envision narratively a transfigured culture, so that when that envisioning falters in the face of the ways of the world, so does the poet's sense of his own identity and power. Yet the faltering is never quite complete, never quite a collapse into complacency either, never quite a rejection of aspiration and a sense of possible power in favor of the naturalist, Humean thought that all we can do is act on the basis of desires and projects that we happen naturally to have, so that we would do well to break with high aspirations and become honest eaters, drinkers, and compromisers with the world. Hölderlin never rests in such a thought. Instead the lyrics close only in ambiguous, highly charged ways, with a sense still of possible powers not yet housed in, or attached to, any definite course of culture. "And let me say at once / That I approached to see the Heavenly, / And they themselves cast me down, deep down / Below the living, into the dark cast down / The false priest that I am, to sing / For those who have ears to hear, the warning song. / There"<sup>25</sup> "As on a holiday . . ." ends. The poet's sense of power, identity, and cultural possibility is further bound up with a sense of obscure divinity in or around us, waiting to be realized, but never quite present here, so that the poet's investigation of genuine but blocked possibilities of poetic power and moral culture in history is at the same time an investigation of the possibility of a religious human life, a possibility never definitely heralded, but always longed for. Hölderlin is thus pre-eminently the poet of what Schiller called "*elegy* in the narrower sense," wherein nature and the ideal are an object of sadness," as nature "is treated as lost" and the ideal "as unattained."<sup>26</sup> The persistence of the elegiac tone in Hölderlin's texts produces a peculiarly intense strangeness in them, a kind of inexplicable unparaphrasability. His work is, as Eric Santner puts it, "a site where the contradictions, stresses, longings, and disenchantments that scar our own modern selves are passionately rehearsed."<sup>27</sup>

Hölderlin's peculiarly intense elegiac tone or manner or substance has been submitted to a number of explanations in literary history. Santner suggests that Hölderlin's thought might be explained in Oedipal terms as stemming from the lack of a "successfully internalized . . . father as idealized totemic figure."<sup>28</sup> For Santner,

building on Lacan, it may be that only “identification with the figure in whose names these [Oedipal] taboos were instituted in the first place”<sup>29</sup> can enable one to work through grief and mourning at the loss of the mother, so as to achieve an integrated self and reasonable desire. Since Hölderlin lacked such a father-figure – his father died when Hölderlin was two; his stepfather when he was seven – he is condemned to an eternal “search for viable paternal totems”<sup>30</sup> throughout his life and work.

Or, following Weber and Benjamin, it may be modernity’s fault. In dividing life up into separate spheres of knowing through science, acting morally and politically, attending aesthetically to art, working for a wage, and consuming, the self is torn apart by the incoherence of the routines of life offered in modernity. J. M. Bernstein, drawing on Weber and Habermas, suggests that the modern art object expresses mourning for a lost integrated society and longing for its recovery. This mourning and longing result, he claims, from “a double isolation”: first, “the diremption of the question of moral value from questions of truth and falsity – the fact/value distinction – that resulted from the growth of modern science and its methodological self-understanding; and secondly, the separation of artistic worth from moral worth – the inscribing of art within the autonomous domain of the ‘aesthetic’.”<sup>31</sup> Hölderlin’s work is here cast as a symptom of modernity’s political pathology, in contrast with the comparative healthy integrity of premodern societies then ruptured by science and technology.

Or it may be that Hölderlin’s elegiac longing stems from a simultaneous covert awareness of and repression of the agonies of political life that is typical of the bourgeoisie.<sup>32</sup> What the bourgeoisie, which generally does *not* suffer much under a market economy, prefers to see as individual longing or alienation that is open to aesthetic suasion is really a retrogressive attempt to displace and deny a material anger rooted in class oppression of agricultural and industrial laborers. On this reading too, Hölderlinian longing would disappear were class consciousness and politics to develop explicitly, and this longing is itself a bourgeois indulgence that inhibits that development.

Or it may be that Hölderlin’s longing itself contains or intimates its own cure, as Heidegger suggests. “The poet,” Heidegger writes in considering Hölderlin, “names the gods and names all things in that which they are. This naming does not consist in something already known being supplied with a name; it is rather when the poet speaks

the essential word, the existent is by this naming nominated as what it is . . . The essence of poetry is the establishing of being by means of the word."<sup>33</sup> For Heidegger, the experience of longing that is expressed in Hölderlin's poetry is open to cure through a more attentive, patient, poetry that hearkens to Being in such a way that it can point to the refiguration of culture and its existents. And indeed Heidegger sees this hearkening and pointing as already underway in Hölderlin's work. Resoluteness in this hearkening and pointing is all that is needful.

Or it may be that Hölderlin's longing expresses the inextricable entanglement of human consciousness with language, something in its essence conventional and hence barred from satisfactory engagement with the natural, as de Man suggests in his radically anti-Heideggerian reading:

Poetic language seems to originate in the desire to grow closer and closer to the ontological status of the object, and its growth and development are determined by this inclination. We saw that this movement is essentially paradoxical and condemned in advance to failure . . . The word is always a free presence to the mind, the means by which the permanence of natural entities can be put into question and thus negated, time and again, in the endlessly widening spiral of the dialectic.<sup>34</sup>

For de Man, the entanglement of human consciousness and desire in the conventionality of language that is always exterior to Being casts human subjects as *êtres pour soi* always vainly seeking to be also *êtres en soi*, and Hölderlinian Romantic longing is the exemplary expression of this unavoidable desire.

Each of these explanations has considerable interest and plausibility. Yet Hölderlinian longing in fact encompasses and synthesizes each of these cruder reductions of it. Would it help to cure us of such longing if we all somehow had happy relationships with our fathers or father-figures? Were pre-modern societies in fact free of alienation and fragmentation, or are these phenomena, as Marx suggests, already primordially present with the rudest forms of division of labor and simply exacerbated in modern society? Could we return to or inaugurate an integrated society beyond the antagonisms that seem fearfully part of the stuffs of our identities? Would we even want to? Would a class politics help to do this? Or will class politics itself be an activity in part of individuals responding competitively to shared conditions? Would we be better off politically to conceive of our aspirations as divergently determined by various class experiences, rather than as shaped in part by our nature's struggle with itself?

So the reductive psychological and political readings of Hölderlinian longing seem too optimistic, seem not to see how much this longing runs through what we are. Heideggerian resoluteness seems no more likely to cure this condition than do psychoanalytic therapy or class politics. But de Man's reading of our ontological exteriority to reality as conscious *êtres pour soi* entangled with language seems to cast us as victims of something, to counsel quietude, and to deny the political and psychoanalytic dimensions of our condition that we might address. If the political cannot cure us, then neither ought we to flee from or deny it. What then is the character of our longing, and how ought we to come to terms with it?

Here we may dwell on just how Hölderlin expresses it. It is clear that Hölderlinian longing, for all that it also has psychoanalytic, political, and ontological dimensions, directly expresses a moral aspiration and anxiety: a sense of the possibility of a moral culture, and of finding one's own identity and power in prophesying and contributing to its inauguration, coupled with a sense of being blocked by culture as it stands from any immediate route toward this cultural transfiguration. Hölderlin has this to say about his aspirations in a letter of 1793 to his half-brother Karl Gok:

My affections are now less directed toward particular individuals. The object of my love is the entire human race, though not, of course, as we so often find it, namely in a condition of corruption, servility, and inertia . . . I love the race of coming centuries. For this is my deepest hope, the faith that keeps me strong and vital: our grandchildren will have it better than we, freedom must finally come, and virtue will better flourish in the warmth of freedom's sacred light than in the ice-cold zone of despotism . . . This is the sacred purpose of my wishes and my activity: that I might stir the seeds of change that will ripen in a future age.<sup>35</sup>

And here is what he has to say two years later, in a letter to Schiller, about his frustration in his hopes. "I am frozen and numb in the winter that is all around me. The heavens are as iron, and I am as stone."<sup>36</sup> These remarks are expressions of Kantian–Schillerian aspirations to realize one's rational dignity and freedom in a transfigured moral culture, to secure one's identity in contributing as a poet to the transfiguration of culture, and of awareness of the deadness and inertia of culture as it stands in embodying antagonisms. This aspiration and this awareness are all at once ontological, political, psychological, moral, and quasi-religious.

We can trace how these dimensions of aspiration and frustration are woven together in "The Poet's Vocation," "Dichterberuf," as a



Romantic elegy. What picture of our halting progress and of the poet's role in it does it develop?

The poem opens with the sense that once, in prehistory, nature and the divine interacted, preparing a place for a humanity not yet on the scene. "Shores of Ganges heard the paean for the god / Of joy when Bacchus came, conquering all, / Young, from the Indus" (1–3). There is, in nature's reception of the god, as it were a second, higher nature within nature. It is the task of the god to rouse humanity from its merely instinctive, natural existence, into an awareness of something higher, an awareness that is dimly embedded in its nascent self-consciousness. Bacchus came "with holy wine / Rousing the people from their slumber" (3–4). This arousal or first awakening to self-consciousness takes place, the reference to Bacchus suggests, through ritual, not just because we have intentionality somehow wired into our minds one by one.

This first arousal through ritual to self-consciousness is not, however, complete. An "angel of our time" is needed to arouse us further,<sup>37</sup> to "Give the laws, / Give life to us" (6–7), to enable us now fully to realize our higher nature in a moral culture of free, reciprocal recognition and attention under moral law. The appearance that is needed of the angel of our time is to take place neither through ritual nor through the ordinary routines of farming, hunting, and house-keeping, in which we reason, and are aware of ourselves as reasoning, but only instrumentally. "Not the thing that is man's care and skill / Inside a house or underneath the sky" (9–10) shall now further awaken us, albeit that these cultural routines are more than animal activities: "a man fends and feeds more nobly / Than animals do" (11–12). Nor will it help simply to love and care for others, unless we first learn what it is to love and care for a human being, and for human beings with opposed interests, rather than for a pet.

It is instead poets who are suited for the highest, "Der Höchste, der ist, dem wir geeignet sind" (14). Dedicated to care and service of the highest, poets are ever anew through their singing to enable friendly hearts to take it in, "Daß näher, immerneu besungen / Ihn die befreundete Brust vernehme" (15–16), thus enabling the higher birth throughout the people of a transfigured culture that is responsive to the highest.

So far, in stanzas 1 to 4, this is the optimistic side of the more or less standard Kantian–Schillerian story of the development of a fully human culture out of nature through a first birth of the human in ritual and a second birth through the poet's work in expressing the highest. There now occurs, however, a complicated extended

apostrophe, occupying all of stanzas 5 to 7, as the poet addresses successively “you heavenly gods / And all you streams and shores / hilltops and woods” (17–18) and “You deeds rampaging out in the wide world / You days of destiny, fast and furious” (25–26). The substance of this apostrophe, the independent clause asking a question of all the things addressed, does not begin until the first line of the eighth stanza. The effect of this extended, multiple, jumbled apostrophe, with all its images of violence – “by the hair one of you / Seized us” (19–20); “dumbfounding / the mind” (“stumm / Der Sinn uns wards”) (22–23); “as if struck by lightning” (24); “rampaging out in the wide world” (25) – is to interrupt and block the imagination of the smooth completion of the poet’s task. Something, it seems, is violently in the world, and perhaps in us, that the poets, for all their dedication and appointed work, cannot take up, engage with, and make use of as material to be transfigured into the life of a moral culture. If the gods come in this way – multiply, violently, rage-drunk, loosing deeds that cannot be held or gathered (“ruhelosen Thaten”) – then what now is to be done? Should the poets then conceal, repress, or deny this violent waywardness of the ways of the gods in the world? “Should we *not* speak of you?” “Euch sollten wir verschweigen?” (29). There seems in the face of the ways of the world no way to go on with the task of the poet. Art threatens to collapse into something idly aesthetic. The harmonies that poets are capable of seem condemned to idleness and impotence, seem destined only “to ring as if in idle caprice” (“Muthig und müßig” – brazenly and idly) / Some child had dared to touch for fun (“im Scherz”) / The master’s consecrated and pure strings” (31–33).

This violent, incoherent culture in which art is reduced to the aesthetic is further a culture dominated by thankless consumptiveness: “Too long all things divine have been put to use / Heavenly powers trifled away, mercies / Squandered for sport, thankless, a / Generation of schemers” (45–47). In the service of thankless, competitive consumptiveness, we name and number what is higher, thinking to make use of it by quantifying it, but therein missing its meaning. “The telescope scans and quantifies / And names with names the heaven’s stars” (51–52). We make “the good ... / Play for a fee like a beast captive” (38, 40).

In a culture under the sway of entertainment, consumption, and instrumental reason, what place is there then for the poet? The poet’s identity and sense of himself falter. The narrative shifts fully

out of the envisioning of the poet's work and into the interrogation of present despair at an apparently impossible vocation. "Was it for this" ("darum hast du") (34), this present condition of impotent dejection, that the poet "heard the prophets of the East / And Greek song and lately . . . / Voices of thunder" (34–36)? "Was it for this?" – the very question that launches Wordsworth's *Prelude* on its course when in Book I, line 273, Wordsworth turns from an overwhelming sense of failure and self-betrayal in his inability to find a high theme that will lend his poetry a serious life in culture, therein establishing his own poetic identity, to the activity of recollecting his halting growth in nature and culture.

And here too, as partly in Wordsworth, there is a partial recovery of a more modest sense of poetic power, rooted in gratitude and remembrance and in the abandonment of the wish to transfigure the entire culture in accordance with one's vision. After one has been left "unsouled" ("entseelt") (44) by the failure of the highest ambition to transfigure the whole of culture now by bringing forth the word, it is possible to close one's eyes, or have them covered with night, giving up one's highest hieratic ambitions. "And yet with holy night the father will veil / Our eyes, that still we may not perish" (53–54). An expansive, puffed up power can never force heaven. "Doch es zwinget / Nimmer die weite Gewalt den Himmel" (55–56). "Nor is it good to be too knowing" (57). Yet the submission of our wills and vision to the mysteries of nature, holy night, and the father, now letting culture to some extent go as our wills are chastened by our lack of clarity and vision, is not a lapse or reduction back into mere animality either. There is a work of thankfulness still to be undertaken, a preserving and containing (behält) (58) of what is higher in a more muted form. This work is not easily undertaken alone. "Yet to keep and contain it alone is a hard burden" (58–59). When alone, the poet's envisionings may become too grandiose and lead to madness. So "others the poet / Gladly joins who help understanding" (59–60), thus ratifying and reinforcing one another's now muted powers and identities as those who respond more dimly and receptively, in gratitude not excessive pride, to what is higher. Yet even such pleas or prayers for joint work and understanding are, as pleas or prayers, reminders of present antagonisms. "Man stands . . . lonely / Before God" (61–62). Hölderlin's highly charged, difficult, and ambiguous syntax further reminds us of his difference from us, making the poem an object that is resistant to any moralizing appropriation to some form of cultural work. His work is informed

not by secure possession of divine power and knowledge of how to spread it through culture, but by God's fault or absence or lack ("Gottes Fehl" [64]).

Not then as prophets and installers of an accomplished moral culture, not in secure possession of an apocalyptic knowledge of last things, but protected by simplicity ("es schüzet die Einfalt ihn") (62), with neither weapons nor subterfuges (62), we may stand or persist, possessed of human identities, powers, and possibilities that are dimly responsive to what is higher, but veiled, and are not themselves divine. Thus we may stand, so long as God's being, but not being present, helps us in our human works, "so lange, bis Gottes Fehl hilft" (64). There<sup>38</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 2nd edn., trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1933), Avii, p. 7. All subsequent references to this work will be to this edition and will be given in the text by page numbers of 1781 first German edition [A] and 1787 second edition [B], given in the margins of Kemp Smith's English translation.
- 2 For a discussion of this image of the task of reason in English letters, and of the refiguration of reason away from deduction in the service of this task by Coleridge and Wordsworth, see my *On Moral Personhood: Philosophy, Literature, Criticism, and Self-Understanding* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 128–131; 106–116.
- 3 Frederick Beiser, in *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), usefully takes this last question and the general problem of a "meta-criticism of reason" (p. 6) as his organizing theme in surveying Kant's various receptions from 1781 to 1793.
- 4 Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), p. 14. Subsequent references to the *Critique of Judgment* will be to this edition and will be given in the text by page number following "CJ."
- 5 Kant, "Open Letter on Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, August 6, 1799," *Public Declarations*, 12, 6, 370–371; reprinted in Kant, *Philosophical Correspondence, 1759–99*, ed. and trans. Arnulf Zweig (University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 254.
- 6 Robert Pippin, in *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 16–24, usefully and lucidly discusses the connection between apperceptive self-consciousness and taking oneself to follow certain rules in making empirical judgments.

- 7 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1956), pp. 57–58.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 9 In rehearsing Kant's narrative of history, I draw not only on Kant's essays "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View" (1784), trans. Lewis White Beck, and "Conjectural Beginning of Human History" (1786), trans. Emil L. Fackenheim, both in Kant, *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1963), but also on Allen Wood's elegant and insightful reading of Kant's anthropological and historical works in his "Unsociable Sociability: The Anthropological Basis of Kantian Ethics," *Philosophical Topics* 19: 1 (Spring 1991), 325–351.
- 10 Wood, "Unsociable Sociability," p. 330.
- 11 Wood, "Unsociable Sociability," p. 330; citing Kant, "Conjectural Beginning," p. 59.
- 12 Kant, "Idea for a Universal History," Fifth Thesis, p. 16.
- 13 Wood, "Unsociable Sociability," p. 343.
- 14 Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" (1784); in Beck, ed. *On History*, p. 3.
- 15 Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 238.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 251.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 253.
- 18 "This leads me to a very remarkable psychological antagonism among men in a century that is civilizing itself: an antagonism that because it is radical and based on inner mental dispositions is the cause of a worse division among men than any fortuitous clash of interests could ever provoke; one that deprives the artist and poet of all hope of pleasing and affecting universally, as is their task; which makes it impossible for the philosopher, even when he has done his utmost, to convince universally: yet the very concept of philosophy demands this; which, finally, will never permit a man in practical life to see his course of action universally approved – in a word, an antithesis that is to blame that no work of the spirit and no action of the heart can decisively satisfy one class without for that very reason bringing upon itself the damning judgment of the other. This antithesis is without doubt as old as the beginnings of civilisation and is scarcely to be overcome before its end other than in a few rare individuals who, it is to be hoped, always existed and always will; but among its effects is also this one, that it defeats every effort to overcome it because neither side can be induced to admit that there is any shortcoming on its part and any reality on the other; despite this, it still remains profitable to pursue so important a division back to its ultimate source and thereby to reduce the actual point of the conflict at least to a simpler formulation." Friedrich Schiller, "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry," trans. Julius A. Elias, in *The Origins of Modern Critical Thought*, ed. David Simpson (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 171.
- 19 Kant, "Conjectural Beginning," p. 53.

*Kant, Hölderlin, and the experience of longing*

- 20 Kant, "Idea for a Universal History," p. 15.
- 21 Wood, "Unsociable Sociability," p. 346. Though his general theme of Kant's emphasis on our need to struggle with ourselves is surely right, Wood may put the point slightly too strongly. Just as Kant pictures the growth of culture as involving antagonisms that are slowly overcome as we move toward rational harmony, it is possible to picture the development toward rational harmony within the person's set of desires as a matter not simply of constraint or coercion, though not a matter of pre-established harmony either, but rather as occurring through the tension-laden but harmony-tending *education* or *Bildung* of desire by reason. See the discussion of the relations of reason and desire in Kant's moral psychology in my *On Moral Personhood*, pp. 41–47.
- 22 Kant, "Idea for a Universal History," p. 22.
- 23 Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne*, vol. 1, cited in Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Williams' translation. Like Williams, I reject Vernant and Naquet's progressivism and think that we do *not* outgrow this sense of responsibility. All human life, ancient and modern, is situated in this frontier zone. I would regard the "debate" about how to "articulate" our actions "with divine power," a debate in which no one can ever be a self-sufficient master, as a debate in which we are caught up, here and now. See my "How Can Tragedy Matter for Us?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 52: 3 (Summer 1994), 287–298.
- 24 Friedrich Hölderlin, "Dichterberuf," "The Poet's Vocation," in Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, ed. Eric L. Santner, trans. Christopher Middleton, (New York: Continuum, 1990), pp. 152–157. All references to this poem, presented in both German and English on facing pages in the Santner edition, will be given in the text by line number.
- 25 Hölderlin, "Wie wenn am Feiertage . . .," "As on a holiday . . .," trans. Michael Hamburger, in *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, pp. 195–196.
- 26 Schiller, "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry," p. 163.
- 27 Eric L. Santner, "Introduction," in Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, p. xxiv.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. xxxiv.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 2. Santner suggests a similar reading, Hölderlin, pp. xxiii–xxiv, xxxv.
- 32 I have in mind here the kind of New Historicist criticism of English Romanticism that has recently been produced by Marjorie Levinson and John Barrell.
- 33 Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry," trans. Douglas

- Scott, in Heidegger, *Existence and Being: "The Four Essays"*, ed. Werner Brock (South Bend, IN: Henry Regnery Company, 1949), pp. 281–282.
- 34 Paul de Man, "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image," *Revue internationale de philosophie* 51 (1960); reprinted in English, trans. de Man, in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1970), pp. 69, 70.
- 35 Hölderlin, "Letter, 1793, to Karl Gok," cited in Santner, "Chronology," in Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, pp. xi–xii. Compare a letter of 1797: "I believe in a coming revolution in the way we think, feel, and imagine, which will make the world as we have known it till now grow red with shame" (p. xv).
- 36 Hölderlin, "Letter, 1795, to Schiller," *ibid.*, p. xiii.
- 37 Compare Wordsworth's similar usage of the image of arousal from sleep in outlining his own ambitions and sense of vocation in the "Prospectus" to *The Recluse*. "– and, by words / Which speak of nothing more than what we are, / Would I arouse the sensual from their sleep / Of Death, and win the vacant and the vain / To noble raptures;" from *The Recluse*, in Wordsworth, *Selected Poems and Prefaces* ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), p. 46, lines 811–815.
- 38 Much of the thinking for this paper emerged out of teaching together with my colleague Hans-Jakob Werlen, to whom I am grateful for stimulation, encouragement, and conversation. An earlier draft was presented to the members of a 1993 NEH Summer Institute on Ethics and Aesthetics, directed by Charles Altieri and Anthony J. Cascardi; the discussion there led to significant improvements.