

# Heidegger, Hölderlin, and National Socialism

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## *Preface*

*This is, as it turns out, the second piece of the conclusion. I simply felt more comfortable in engaging the theme of Heidegger, Hölderlin, and National Socialism by beginning with a critique of a well-known essay on Heidegger and Hölderlin by Karsten Harries.*

*Much has happened since my last installment. Marianne Baeumler, Alfred Baeumler's widow, and I have corresponded by mail. She has been kind enough to make available to me her husband's unpublished "Notizen zu Heidegger" ("Notes on Heidegger"), written in the late 50s and early 60s as a final assessment of Heidegger's thought. I would like to add any relevant remarks from Baeumler's "Notizen" to the final piece of the conclusion which will include a comparison and contrast of Heidegger's and Baeumler's philosophies.*

## *I*

Let me begin by way of a critique. Karsten Harries' essay "The Root of All Evil: Lessons of an Epigram" (1993) provides an excellent entry into the problem of Hölderlin's significance for Heidegger because the main questions of Harries' essay is the following: "Should any poet be taken that seriously?"<sup>1</sup> (Harries 1) His answer is "No," though he leaves the backdoor open when he states, "Were such dreams [the dreams of a poet as prophet] to issue in works that met with widespread acceptance as more than art, then they would indeed threaten our modern culture in its very origin" (Harries 13).

Harries' main criticism of the unique significance Heidegger places on Hölderlin is that it is self-serving: Heidegger simply disregards the warnings in Hölderlin's own poetry, warnings that renounce "the poet's presumed proximity to the holy and prophetic authority" (Harries 18). Rather than heeding these warnings, Heidegger "claimed something like such authority for himself by claiming unique proximity to the poet whom his own interpretations had raised beyond all others. Heidegger's attribution of a unique historical significance to Hölderlin services his own self-assertion" (Harris 18).

To support his claim, Harries turns to Heidegger's talk entitled "Wie wenn am Feiertage..." ("As on a Holiday...") given in 1939 and 1940 and included in the text *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (*Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*,

4<sup>th</sup> ed; 49-77). Hölderlin's poem "Wie wenn am Feiertage..." which is reproduced at the beginning of Heidegger's text, does not include the last portion of the poem. Below I have reproduced the last portion of the poem; the dotted line indicates the demarcation between the end of Heidegger's version in italics and the last portion of the poem he omitted:

*The Father's ray, the pure, will not sear our hearts  
And, deeply convulsed, and sharing his  
suffering*

Who is stronger than we are, yet in the far-flung, down-rushing star of  
*The God, when he draws near, will the hearts stand fast.*

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1. But, oh, my shame! When of
  2. -----
  3. -----
  4. -----
  5. My Shame!
- 

6. And let me say at once -----
7. -----
8. That I approached to see the Heavenly,
9. And they themselves cast me down, deep down
10. Below the living, into the dark cast down
11. The false priest that I am, to sing,
12. For those who have ears to hear, the warning song.
13. There ----- 2

In a footnote, Harries says that this problem was brought to Heidegger's attention as the text was being prepared for the *Gesamtausgabe* edition. By omitting the last portion of the poem, the text that is presented as Hölderlin's poem is already an interpretation; in essence, Heidegger's selected portion of the text. As Harries point out, this would mean that Heidegger's commentary on the poem would be an interpretation of his own interpretation. (Harries n.36,20) Rather than changing it, Heidegger allowed it to stand.

Harries reproduces only a portion of the omitted lines (lines 6 – 13) in his essay and claims that "the disintegrating last stanza of 'Wie wenn am Feiertage...' speaks for

itself,” (Harris 18) a dangerous claim to make, especially about Hölderlin’s poetry. The reason Harries thinks that lines 6 –13 (actually the ninth and last stanza of the poem) are “disintegrating” is that the 6<sup>th</sup> line is incomplete, and the 7<sup>th</sup> line is missing, not to mention the incompleteness of line 13.

In terms of content, Harries claims lines 6-13 show that Hölderlin renounced his prophetic authority and, thus, the last stanza becomes a song of warning against the presumption of such authority. When Heidegger omits the last portion of the poem, he selects only the first seven strophes and half of the eighth strophe which support the position of the poet as prophet, hence, Harries criticism that Heidegger’s version of the poem is self-serving in that he only selects the major part of the poem which supports the position of poet as prophet and omits the so-called renunciation of that role in the last portion of the poem.

In response to Harries’ criticism of Heidegger, it is important to notice that Harries only reproduces lines 6 – 13 and fails to reproduce the other part that Heidegger left out: that is, lines 1 – 5 (the second part of the eighth strophe). If Harries had reproduced the whole portion of what Heidegger left out, it would be evident to the reader that the poem is an *incomplete draft*; the eighth and ninth stanzas are incomplete. All of the seven completed stanzas are nine-line stanzas, except one which has eight lines. Thus, Heidegger’s version ends with the first four lines of the eighth stanza.

The principle of Heidegger’s editing is fairly clear here: he cuts the poem off at the last completed line (the fourth line) of stanza eight. Why? Because the rest of stanza 8 and 9 is an incomplete draft. Harries does not tell his readers that the poem is a draft and that stanzas eight and nine are incomplete. Contrary to Harries, “the disintegrating last stanza” does not speak for itself: stanzas eight and nine are simply incomplete and are not necessarily “disintegrating” in the sense that the fragmentation reflects the poet’s state of being.

Thus one can accuse Harries of the same manipulation of which he accuses Heidegger: on the one hand, Heidegger omits the last portion of the poem leading his readers to believe they have the entire poem. On the other hand, Harries does not tell his readers that the poem is a draft and that stanzas eight and nine are simply incomplete and, thus, leads his readers to believe that the last two stanzas are coherent and complete. Finally, this leads readers to believe that the *only reason* Heidegger omitted the end of the poem was to eliminate that part of the poem which did not conform to his interpretation.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that Heidegger deliberately left out the last portion of the poem because it did not support his own interpretation. It would

certainly place Heidegger's whole essay in grave doubt; however, it would not necessarily place all of Heidegger's other commentaries on Hölderlin's poetry in doubt: his commentaries on such poems as "Germania," "The Rhine," "Andenken," "The Ister," and "Griechenland" would still have to be assessed on their own terms. Furthermore, the omitted portion of the poem would place Heidegger's commentary in grave doubt only if the omitted portion conclusively renounced the position the poet takes in the first seven and a half strophes.

From my own reading of the omitted incomplete strophes, I agree that a warning song is introduced in the sense that Hölderlin portrays himself as a false priest. What role this renunciation plays, however, is unclear. In addition, the degree of renunciation is unclear: is it meant to subvert the preceding strophes completely or only conditionally? We do not know with any degree of certainty because the poem is incomplete. In the end, the poem does not speak for itself.

While we are on the subject of ellipses or things left out, let us examine Harries' claim that the austere style (Harries calls it the rough style) practiced by Hölderlin and other modern poets "recalls Nietzsche's description of the style of decadence" (Harries 5). This association leads Harries to the following question: "does the sublimity of the rough style of so many modern poets herald a new beginning or is it merely the expression of a decadence unable to hold on to the whole of life" (Harries 5)? Harries' point is that the call of authenticity that Heidegger associates with the rough style "may be understood as a phenomenon of decadence" (Harries 5).

In order to support this claim, Harries presents the following citation from Nietzsche's *The Case Of Wagner*:

What is the style of every *literary decadence*? That life no longer lives

in the whole. The word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and obscures the meaning of the page, the page gains life at the expense of the whole .... The whole no longer lives at all: it is composite, calculated, artificial, and artifact (Harries 5).

Harries explains what this quotation means in the following lines: "characteristic of the style of decadence is the almost hallucinatory power of individual word gestures – Hölderlin's late hymns would seem to offer ready examples" (Harries 5). The question is whether the austere or rough style, the style of Pindar, Hölderlin, and many modern poets, can be adequately described as decadent in Nietzsche's sense of the word.

If we turn back to Harries' citation of Nietzsche from *The Case of Wagner*, we see that Harries has left out material from the citation: an ellipsis occurs in the latter part of the quotation. The following is the material that Harries has omitted:

The page gains life at the expense of the whole – the whole is

no longer a whole. But this is the simile of every type of *decadence*: every time, the anarchy of atoms, disintegration of the will, “freedom of the individual,” to use moral terms – expanded into a political theory, --“*equal* rights for all.” Life, *equal* vitality, the vibration and exuberance of life pushed back into the smallest of forms; the rest, *poor* in life. Everywhere paralysis, arduousness, torpidity *or* hostility and chaos: both more and more obvious the higher one ascends in forms of organization. The whole no longer lives at all....<sup>3</sup>

What is obvious from the part that Harries has omitted is that the austere or rough style, when it is understood correctly, does not conform to what Nietzsche describes as the decadent style.

Although Hölderlin uses parataxis, inversions, and enjambment, he does not use these elements to the point that individual words become sovereign and leap out of the sentence the way Nietzsche means it. Words in Hölderlin's poetry do not become “an anarchy of atoms” in the way Nietzsche describes the decadent style. Harrier mentions Adorno's claim that Hölderlin's rough style is a “paratactic revolt against synthesis,” (Harries 7) and I would agree, but not to the point where words can no longer be gathered together. After all, Hölderlin's poetry can be read (gathered) like the lines Harries quotes from the beginning of *Patmos*: “Nah ist / Und schwer zu fassen der Gott” (“Near is / And difficult to grasp, the God”) (Harries 7). The inversion does make us stumble and makes the word “Gott” conspicuous, but the words still hang together.

The austere style, according to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, uses words ““like blocks of building stone that are laid together unworked, blocks that are not square and smooth, but preserve their natural roughness and irregularity””<sup>4</sup> This is not, however, an “anarchy of atoms.” The blocks may be rough and become conspicuous, but are still *laid together*. They still belong to a syntactical structure and do not leap out of that structure.

Actually, Harries' attempt to cast the austere or rough style as something decadent in Nietzsche's sense is a red herring. Later in his essay, Harries begins to talk about the rough style in positive terms: “Is the shift from a smooth to a rough style that von

Hellingrath found so characteristic of Hölderlin not itself called for by the evolution of the aesthetic approach . . . ?”(Harries 12). Contrary to Heidegger, Harries is trying to keep Hölderlin within the evolution of aesthetics. Once Harries places Hölderlin within that context, he no longer mentions Hölderlin’s rough style as “monstrous” (Harries 6-7); indeed, the evolution of the aesthetic approach now in fact *calls for* the transition from the smooth to the rough style! Harries supplies David’s painting *Oath of Horatii* as an example of such a transition and concludes by stating that “In painting and architecture, too, this shift from the smooth and beautiful to the rough and sublime style finds inspiration in the art of the ancients” (Harries 13).

I find it odd how something as “monstrous” as Hölderlin’s austere or rough style could be placed alongside something as sedate as the “unmediated opposition” evident in David’s *Oath of Horatii*. What has happened is that Hölderlin’s “monstrousness” has been translated into the aesthetic approach, one that Harries favors over the unique significance Heidegger attributes to Hölderlin which goes beyond aesthetics. Rather than thinking through the radical singularity of Hölderlin’s “monstrousness,” Harries opts for sedating that “monstrousness” into something less threatening by placing Hölderlin’s rough style alongside David’s Neoclassicism. “Rough style” now functions as a critical concept of aesthetics which refers indifferently either to David’s “unmediated opposition” or to Hölderlin’s parataxis and, thus, tends to obviate Hölderlin’s unique historical significance.

What are the consequences of placing Hölderlin’s poetry in the context of Harries’ aesthetic approach? The first consequence is that Hölderlin remains within the context of metaphysics. Harries acknowledges that “Heidegger does seem to me right when he seeks the origin of the aesthetic approach in the metaphysical world view” (Harries 13). Harries also agrees with Heidegger that the metaphysics of the ruling world paradigm based on the objectification of reason “lacks the power to give meaning to life” (Harries 9). In other words, the ruling paradigm of modern metaphysics “and, more specially, the Cartesian project of mastery, tend toward nihilism” (Harries 9). Although this metaphysics leaves no room for art, beauty, and poetic thinking, it nevertheless does not make them “altogether superfluous” (Harries 9).

Rather than breaking out of metaphysics, Harries sees art as a response to and compensation for the poverty of modern metaphysics. Thus, art compensates for the “loss of reality” in modern metaphysics. But since art and poetry cannot break out of metaphysics altogether, they arise as a compensation to modern metaphysics on the basis of *another metaphysics*: the loss of reality inherent in modern metaphysics “gives birth to dreams of a fuller life where the split between sense and spirit is healed” (Harries 13).

Harries is ambiguous here. Like Heidegger, he sees art and poetry as having an ontological function: "all genuine poetry places us beyond the understanding of being that rules metaphysical thinking and reminds us of its insufficiency" (Harries 15). Unlike Heidegger, Harries does not see this "beyond" as non-metaphysical. He does not see Hölderlin's poetry as embodying a poetic thinking that goes beyond metaphysics in Heidegger's sense; rather, he sees art and poetry going beyond the poverty of modern metaphysics on the basis of a richer, fuller metaphysics which remains dialectically connected somehow to modern metaphysics. Harries does not clarify this relationship.

At this point, we would expect some outline of what this richer, fuller metaphysics is on the basis of Hölderlin's works, but no such metaphysics is developed. Rather than constructing the aesthetic, or better, the poetic, on the basis of an examination of Hölderlin's poems and essays, Harries constructs his own view of poetry as an aesthetic object (based on Paul Valéry and Archibald MacLeish) apart from Hölderlin and then simply assumes that the poet will fit the construct.

Harries presents a poetic based on a non-instrumental view of language; the language of poetry is language that does not refer beyond itself and thus creates its own presence in which it can exist: "Just because poetic language does not have an instrumental function, is not a means to an end, it can grant us a sense of being at one with ourselves that we are denied so long as care and anticipation binds us to the future. Self-renewing, self-repeating, the poem lets the present triumph over the past" (Harries 12). The assumption here is that the only way we can be "at one with ourselves" is when we are no longer bound by care and anticipation to the future, only when we deny our participation in the finitude of temporality.

This poetic would have us assert "the self-renewing presence of the poetic realm" (Harries 12) as a unity in opposition to the loss of reality and nihilism inherent in the metaphysics of objectifying reason. The result, however, is simply the assertion of one metaphysic (the metaphysics of spirit) in opposition to another (the metaphysics of rationality). The permanent presence of the poetic is asserted in opposition to the permanent presence of the logical and mathematical. Harries himself recognizes that the assertion of the poetic in the face of the metaphysics of the ruling world paradigm *cannot succeed* (Harries 14).

The assumption Harries makes in all of this is that Hölderlin's own poetic conforms to this construct of poetry that he has presented. Nowhere in his essay does Harries attempt to justify this assumption. No attempt is made to present Hölderlin's own poetic.

Harries' final point, to illustrate that Heidegger's claim about Hölderlin's unique historical significance is unacceptable, consists in showing that Heidegger's claim is incompatible with Western freedom of thought, "a freedom that refuses to be bound by what happens to be our place in space and time and by its perspectives" (Harries 17). In other words, because Heidegger's claim about Hölderlin is tied "to the magic of one particular tradition, one particular language, one particular poet," he is practicing a "deliberate provincialism" which is incompatible with the cosmopolitanism of Western freedom (Harries 17). Thus, in order to avoid the criticism that his choice of the local is arbitrary, Heidegger invests Hölderlin "with the authority of a prophet" (Harries 17). It is this reading of Hölderlin as a prophet that Harries finds self-serving on Heidegger's part.

In response, I find it interesting that whenever Harries discusses the impoverishment of objectifying reason which has "debased human beings into mere appendages of a lifeless mechanism," he is sympathetic to the ability of art to provide "a world full of meaning" (Harries 9). But when he focuses on the ability of art to provide such a fullness of meaning, he sees this movement as one that consists in a necessary removal from reality: "Emphasis on the presence of the aesthetic object has to lead to interpretations of the poetic realm as an autonomous sphere, removed from everyday reality and its concerns, indeed removed from reality altogether" (Harries 12). This attempt, however, to create an autonomous aesthetic realm cannot succeed, according to Harries.

The second consequence is that we are left with a seemingly powerful but nihilistic metaphysics of rationality on the one hand and an impotent metaphysics of spirit full of meaning on the other. Although Harries assigns an ontological function to art in that "All genuine poetry places us beyond the understanding of being that rules metaphysical thinking" (Harries 15), he, nevertheless, wavers as to what precisely this function is. I assume he means that genuine poetry places us beyond the metaphysics of objectifying reason, but not out of metaphysics altogether since the whole tenor of his essay argues against Heidegger's placing Hölderlin outside or beyond metaphysics. But what is this "other" metaphysics into which poetry displaces us? For the lack of a better term, I have called it the metaphysics of spirit.

What is of interest are "the powerless dreams of a world full of meaning" that arise from the poverty of modern metaphysics (Harries 9). They are powerless because objectifying reason "excludes art" (Harries 9), because even though "objectifying reason demands the aesthetic as a necessary complement" (Harries 9), these dreams have no place *to be* in the ruling world paradigm, because even in the long run when they become art, they cannot maintain the self-sufficiency of their permanent presence. Whatever this other metaphysics is to which art and poetry belong, it ultimately fails, not simply because it is impossible for a poem not to refer beyond



itself. Even if poetry could maintain its self-sufficient presence, it still would have no place to be within modern metaphysics.

The question that Harries leaves in the background is the question of power. Following Harries, it seems to me that though art asserts a metaphysics counter to the metaphysics of objectifying reason, it does so by using the same means: that is, by asserting itself as a form of permanent presence in competition with the permanent presence of modern metaphysics. A permanent presence of plenty and perfection asserts itself and rivals the permanent presence of poverty. But why couldn't a metaphysics of art rival and even displace the metaphysics of objectifying reason? That possibility does not seem to be a live option for Harries. I ask the question because I wonder if it is not the question of the power of art that animates Harries' essay on Heidegger rather than the question of Hölderlin's unique historical significance.

When Harries says that Hölderlin is not unique in Heidegger's sense, he implies that metaphysics of art could accomplish the same kind of transformation with respect to modern metaphysics. If any genuine poetry has the power to place us beyond the ruling paradigm, then metaphysics of art should certainly include this possibility. It becomes a moot point, however, when Harries states that art ultimately cannot succeed and, thus, cannot "replace the ruling paradigm with another" (Harries 8).

In the end, Harries opts for the freedom and universality of metaphysical thought when he takes Heidegger's "deliberate provincialism" to task. Heidegger's choice of Hölderlin is deliberately provincial in the sense that thinking can be saved only by submitting itself "to the magic of one particular tradition, one particular language, one particular poet" (Harries 17). The claim is that Heidegger's adherence to the local, that is, to the sense in which Hölderlin is "rooted in a particular time and place" and to "a particular history and language," is antithetical to the freedom of thought that refuses to be bound by such particulars.

This assumes that Hölderlin's poetic thinking remains bound by his particular time and place and his particular language. The same claim could be made, however, about Harries' use of Paul Valéry and Archibald MacLeish as poets who also remain bound by their times and places as well as their languages and, thus, provide an additional reason why poems cannot maintain their self-sufficient presence. But again, the real issue is not whether poetry can assert a permanent presence which could rival the hegemonic universality of objectifying reason and provide an alternative hegemony to modern metaphysics. I would argue that poetic thinking can provide an alternative to this clash of one permanent presence with another precisely because poetry does not offer a God's eye-view apart from times and places, languages, and perspectives.

I would argue that Hölderlin is *neither* bound by his time and place *nor* is his poetic thinking to be taken apart from his time and place in the sense that it rises above it in the attempt to establish a form of permanent presence. Hölderlin is not bound by his time and place precisely because the whole point of his poetic thinking is to move out from what is native of his own tradition and language in order to experience and learn what is foreign to it. What is native to the poet cannot be learned without first learning what is foreign. Furthermore, what is native must be as well learned as what is foreign.<sup>5</sup>

This holds true linguistically as well. Hölderlin's transliterations of Pindar's odes directly into the German language bring the foreignness of the Greek into the German language and transform it. It was a well-known claim before 1933 that Hölderlin had in effect created a new language that was neither Greek nor German. Paul Fechter in his massive work entitled *Dichtung der Deutschen (Poetry of the Germans, 1932)* states that Hölderlin had reached an extreme polarity in his poetry where "the Greek had become German and the German Greek."<sup>6</sup> Hölderlin's poetry is not a local poetry preoccupied with the local. Nor does Heidegger choose Hölderlin's poetry out of some misplaced provincialism.

Heidegger's choice of Hölderlin has much more to do with a poet who was able to step-off or demarcate that realm of nihilism which still haunts us today, not by asserting another form of permanent presence, but by establishing in his poetry the movement of a thinking that moves *with* finite temporality *through* the nihilism in order to find an alternative to metaphysical thinking. It is the attempt to establish a place in time through a poetic retrieval back and forth from past to future, from what is native to what is foreign and back again; to institute a poetic retrieval in consonance with the finite movement of temporality without resorting to the assertion of permanent presence apart from that movement.

The word "movement" here is deliberate. In 1933, Heidegger saw "the movement," that is, the movement of National Socialism and the upheaval that Germany was undergoing as one that contained possibilities for heading in Hölderlin's direction.

*To be continued.*

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Harries, Karsten. "The Root of All Evil: Lessons of an Epigram," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol 1 (1) (March) 1993; hereafter referred to as Harries with corresponding page numbers.
- <sup>2</sup> Hölderlin, Friedrich. *Poems and Fragments*. Trans. Michael Hamburger. (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1980) 377.

[3](#) Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967) 170.

[4](#) Hölderlin, Friedrich. *Hymns and Fragments*. Trans. Richard Sieburth (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1984) 31.

[5](#) Santner, Eric. *Friedrich Hölderlin: Narrative Vigilance and the Poetic Imagination*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 1986) 58.

[6](#) Fechter, Paul. *Dichtung der Deutschen*. (Berlin: Deutsche Buch-Gemeinschaft, 1932) 411.