



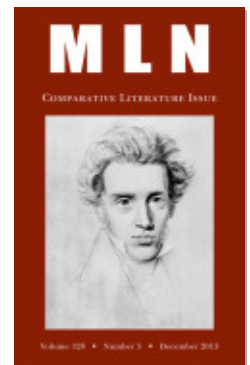
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Modal Revolutions: Friedrich Hölderlin and the Task of Poetry



Gabriel Trop

I

One of the many pathways of modernity travels along an intellectual trajectory that is increasingly skeptical of and hostile toward the concept of necessity, a concept that once played a dominant role in metaphysical and ontological thought from the Middle Ages to the late eighteenth century. By the early twentieth century, the narrator of Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* would have us believe that the human being is endowed with two fundamental modes of access to the world: the sense for reality (*Wirklichkeitssinn*) and the sense for possibility (*Möglichkeitssinn*).¹ There is no mention of a sense for necessity, or what would otherwise be called a *Notwendigkeitssinn*. The erosion of the force of necessity over the mind opens a space of counter-attraction, releasing a gravitational pull toward contingency, or the sense that there is nothing necessary *as such* about the world of the given: all that exists could just as well be otherwise.² Necessity can reappear from time

¹See Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, ed. Adolf Frisé (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1981) 16–18.

²The ineluctability of contingency is, of course, not merely a modern discovery; as Hannah Arendt discusses in *The Life of the Mind*, the intertwining of freedom, possibility, and contingency was acutely perceived already by Duns Scotus, who noted, “at the same moment the will has an act of willing, at the same and for the same moment it can also have an opposite act of willing.” John Duns Scotus, *Contingency and Freedom: Lectura I* 39, ed. A. Vos Jaczn et. al (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994) 116. See Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Willing*, (New York: Harcourt, 1978) 125–146.

to time as a second-order logical category, albeit channeled back into contingency, in which its central (and seemingly paradoxical) formula becomes: the necessity of contingency.³ Necessity *as such*, however, as an integral part of the thickness of experience itself, withdraws into the unthinkable. Musil's text functions as a barometer of this shift. So absurd, irrelevant, archaic and patently metaphysical is the modality of necessity to this particular self-understanding of the modern subject that it cannot even be labeled a conspicuous absence. Necessity has simply vanished from the horizon of thought.

The death knell of necessity as a purely metaphysical category, as the ontological ground of a well-organized, divinely sanctioned cosmos, begins with Kant's reinterpretation of modality in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. However, Kant does not dismiss the importance of necessity as much as transfer all forms of modality from the realm of metaphysical truth to forms of judgment related to the conditions of possibility of experience: ontological modality becomes transcendental modality. The functions of modality become translated into "moments of thinking in general," construed as a movement from "problematic" possible judgments, to "assertoric" real judgments, and finally to a realm of necessity that is inextricably bound up with the transcendental scaffolding of the understanding:

Weil nun hier alles sich gradweise dem Verstande einverleibt, so daß man zuvor etwas problematisch urteilt, darauf auch wohl es assertorisch als wahr annimmt, endlich als unzertrennlich mit dem Verstande verbunden, d.i. als notwendig und apodiktisch behauptet, so kann man diese drei Funktionen der Modalität auch so viel Momente des Denkens überhaupt nennen.⁴

The modality of necessity therefore coincides with the universal validity of Kant's own critical philosophy and represents the *telos* in the schema of movements comprising philosophical thought. As it was for pre-critical metaphysicians such as Leibniz and Wolff, the necessary is still linked to a form of truth, albeit only by reinterpreting modality from the perspective of transcendental philosophy and by considering its relationship to the conditions that make experience possible.

³Most recently, Quentin Meillassoux has attempted to reconcile necessity and contingency by rehabilitating the concept of the absolute as a mathematically-grounded, non-totalizable, thought-independent givenness, e.g., as necessary contingency. See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008).

⁴Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1998) 152–53.

Writing in the wake of Kantian transcendental philosophy, Hegel also reinterprets necessity as a form of metadiscursivity, or the logic whereby logic itself unfolds. In the Hegelian dialectic, necessity appears not as the opposite of contingency, but rather, as a second-order characteristic of the self-organization of spirit that acknowledges, makes a space for, and affirms contingency as an integral part of its own unfolding.⁵ Hegel's philosophy—in each of its various permutations, in the *Phänomenologie* as well as in the *Enzyklopädie*—nevertheless testifies to an abiding dissatisfaction with the formal and empty character of Kant's displacement of necessity to the sphere of the universal *a priori* conceptuality of the understanding. Kant's interpretation of necessity is bloodless, detaching itself from the validity of the lived practices and norms embodied by individuals who act within a socially and historically conditioned world. In contrast, Hegelian necessity describes the process through which one may give an account of one's historical moment and, if this account proves successful, ultimately affirm the intelligibility of one's cultural norms. Hegel nevertheless shares with Kant the attempt to resuscitate necessity within the horizon of discursive and metadiscursive philosophical argumentation by examining the conditions that make possible the specific form and function of philosophical discourse itself. In both cases, for Hegel as for Kant, necessity refers no longer to a pre-critical metaphysical ontology, but to strategies of thinking that make explicit the rationality of the norms, categories, and procedures of one's own conceptual system.⁶

The fact that necessity as a modal category becomes associated either with a pre-critical inaccessible metaphysical absolute or with the metadiscursive, self-legitimizing norms and rules of discourse as such, may in fact explain its diminution as a category of meaningfulness for certain modern conceptions of selfhood. As a mode of perception that orients or flows into practices, the traditional conception of necessity as an *experiential* category appears all but defunct. For Musil, for example, the modern subject seems to look at, or more precisely, disregard necessity as a non-element of its own way of being in the world. Unlike the ancients—for whom necessity by no means functioned as a guarantor of security or a well-ordered cosmos, but on the contrary, was more often associated with a radical lack of control

⁵See John W. Burbidge, *Hegel's Systematic Contingency* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 16–47.

⁶This “metadiscursivity” may of course reveal some higher-order metaphysics, and this is the critical point of contention between “metaphysical” and “non-metaphysical” readings of Hegel; see Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 6.

in the face of the larger operations of fate to whose injunctions one had no choice but to submit—the modern subject experiences the fleshless modality of necessity as incompatible with the overwhelming and irrefutable facticity of contingency, instability, and dynamic fluidity. The modality of necessity may suppress its fatalistic and metaphysical implications but never fully manages to divest itself of them; the modalities of reality and possibility, on the other hand, enter into the very fabric, both material and spiritual, of the richness and complexity of experience. Even when necessity is reconceptualized as a metadiscursive principle of organization or as one of the goals of “scientific” discourse, as it is for Hegel, its epistemic value derives not from its immediacy as a lived experience, but as a modality that emerges from reflective acts of cognition.

And yet, is it true that the necessary as a modal category can by definition never enter into the horizon of concrete experience *qua* experience? The question therefore may be raised: is it possible to think necessity (just as one may think possibility and reality) not as that which *governs* experience—that is, not as a set of extrinsic or intrinsic rules, conditions, or principles of organization, discursive or otherwise—but itself as an integral part of the fabric of perception that manifests itself in and through human experience?

At this precise moment of transition in thinking about modality—one in which, for Kant as for Hegel, necessity becomes reinterpreted as a metadiscursive property of conceptual systems rather than a metaphysical property of the given—there appears a sustained attempt to return all forms of modality to the thickness of experience, to regard modal cognition not as confined to logical or ontological categories, nor as judgments that are evaluated according to *a priori* conditions of possibility, but rather, as an immanent and poetic interweaving of thought, sign, and historically concrete time and space. The subject of modernity therefore becomes redefined less as a being that prioritizes one modality over another, but as the sum total of its modal variations, regressions, realignments, as well as both self-inflicted and externally triggered perturbations of its own modal tendencies. Modality in a state of perpetual fluctuation becomes a critical *poetic* faculty of cognition, one that is continually shaping and being shaped with regard to its environment. It is this attempt to think modality in all of its permutations—in the shifting texture of the organization and disorganization of the mind in the act of grappling with the facticity of the material world and with its own ideality—to which we now turn, and whose central advocate is the poet Friedrich Hölderlin.

II

One of the central features of Hölderlin's poetry and the specificity of its language, above all in the works from 1799–1806, consists in the continual and fluctuating modalization of the sensible world. Hölderlin's poetry both presupposes and seeks to produce a thoroughly *modal subject*, one who continually alternates between possibility, reality, and necessity—not as logical categories, but as flows of experience, modulations in poetic language, forms of engagement and involvement. Modalization refers in this context not merely to linguistic operators—*können*, *müssen*, *sollen*, *dürfen*, *wollen*—but to the way in which language articulates a stance toward the facticity of that which it signifies.

For Hölderlin, the poetic modal subject does not follow a trajectory from the possible to the real to the transcendently or dialectically necessary, but rather, moves along an ebb and flow between modalities. The possible, the real, and the necessary, as linguistic attractions and cognitive inclinations, become present and intensified in one and the same act of poetic cognition.

Although Hölderlin rejects the notion of a linear modal teleology, he does not thereby equate poetic cognition with a chaotic and non-differentiated simultaneity of modal experience. At any given moment, the emphasis in poetic texture will shift from the facticity of the real to the intelligibility of the necessary only to fall back into the contingency of the possible; or conversely, out of a mist of possibilities an order will emerge and condense, one wrested from the real by the mind's ability to connect and separate elements of the sensible world and follow the thread of poetic form, and the coherence of the world will suddenly crystallize in a space within which the imagination might wander.

In a certain sense, necessity may be regarded as the most poetic of the modalities and indexes a singularly aesthetic problem: the problem of representation. Within the framework of Kantian philosophy, natural necessity (e.g. as manifest by laws of causality) is not a possible object of experience, and therefore remains just beyond the bounds of that which can be represented. One of Hölderlin's most important philosophical meditations, a short fragment undertaken in 1795 in the wake of Fichte's conception of the self-positing absolute ego, concerns precisely the necessary conjunction and simultaneous incommensurability of that which cannot be represented—pure identity or undifferentiated Being (*Sein*)—with the grammar of representation itself, or the originary sphere of differences that he calls Judgment

(*Urtheil*). This philosophical text was written on an individual sheet of paper, with *Seyn* appearing on one side and *Urtheil* on the other, thereby enacting an undecidable oscillation between each sphere as recto to the other's verso (and vice versa). Hölderlin includes a short excursus on modality in this text, which thus becomes of central importance to the paradoxical relation between non-differentiated Being and the differentiation of Judgment—a relation that actually cannot be expressed *as* a relation, since absolute Being excludes the possibility of relating to something as a distinct or differential entity.

The question of modality, because it is appended to the section on Judgment, seems to arise only in the context of the manner in which the subject moves through a system of differences. In this section, necessity is associated with “objects of reason” (*Gegenstände der Vernunft*) in a way that explicitly foregrounds the problem of representability. It is therefore as if the modality of necessity forms a permeable zone linking Being and Judgment: an opening through which the wholeness of absolute identity makes itself present within the problematic and troubled world of differences. Absolute Being (*Seyn*) and modal necessity (*Notwendigkeit*) do indeed belong together for Hölderlin inasmuch as both constitute representational problems for conscious experience and poetic language. Drawing on the Kantian theory of modality in the *Kritik der Urteilkraft*,⁷ Hölderlin notes that objects of reason, or objects that would include inaccessible and supposedly metaphysical entities such as the divine itself, never appear “als das, was sie seyn sollen im Bewußtseyn” (MA 2: 50),⁸ and therefore seem to be banished to a realm that may never be made fully manifest to the mind. In contrast to necessity, “[d]er Begriff der Möglichkeit gilt von den Gegenständen des Verstandes, der der Wirklichkeit von den Gegenständen der Wahrnehmung und Anschauung” (MA 2: 50), and hence do not problematize representation as such. Because necessity applies only to objects of reason, it cannot be subsumed under the categories of the understanding, nor can it appear as a direct intuition or perception.

And yet, as will be demonstrated in the following section, the problematic appearance, or more precisely, non-appearance of necessity

⁷See Dieter Henrich, *Der Grund im Bewußtsein* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992) 717.

⁸All citations from Hölderlin, unless otherwise noted, refer to the Münchener Ausgabe of his collected works: Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. Michael Knaupp, vols. 1–3 (Munich: Hanser, 1992). All citations hereafter will be abbreviated as MA and will refer to the volume number and page number within this edition.

to sensory experience and to the intellect (*Verstand*) becomes the *raison d'être* of the poetic act for Hölderlin. It is precisely through the demand placed on cognition via the modality of necessity that the divine or *das Göttliche* manifests itself or refuses to manifest itself to the poetic mind. In other words, because Being is representationally excluded from the system of differences, the modality of necessity, as something that can make itself felt in the organization of experience, functions as a proxy for Being.

This facet of Hölderlin's poetry is particularly difficult to perceive precisely because that which appears most fragmented or most chaotic may be reinterpreted as an attempt to intensify and provoke the mind's capacity to make sense of its environment, to construct out of *apparent* contingencies the *feeling* or *evocation* of coherence. In one of his poetological writings, he refers to the poet as one who "im harmonischen Progreß und Wechsel vor und rückwärts gehe, und [. . .] für den Betrachter, auch gefühlten und fühlbaren Zusammenhang und Identität im Wechsel der Gegensätze gewinne [. . .]" (MA 2: 87). The formal fragmentation of poetic form, according to Hölderlin, therefore performs precisely the opposite cognitive function to that outlined in Adorno's attempt to co-opt parataxis as a figure of disjunction or disunity. Indeed, Hölderlin's use of form does not bear witness to the falsehood of all attempts at synthesis, but rather, is conceived as a perpetual cognitive *askesis*, a challenge and a stimulant for the poetic mind to resignify the trauma of fragmentation—what Hölderlin will call the "betrayal" of the divine—as the very mode of appearance of truth.⁹ In the process of modal shifting, Hölderlin's reinterpretation of the sacred comes to light: the process whereby a possibility, a new (and hence seemingly contingent) reality is converted poetically into a realm of necessary coherence.

The poetic act, however, does not come to an end with the achievement of this resignification. On the contrary, like a scientific experiment whose truth appears so implausible that it finds itself caught in a loop of continual testing, verification, alteration of initial conditions, retesting and reverification, poetic consciousness must undo the order that it previously secured as valid. The poetic act therefore functions as a non-dialectical stimulant of poetic cognition, one that continually demands a *remodalization* of the order that it posits for itself. The act of

⁹Adorno notes, "Hölderlin's method cannot escape antinomies, and in fact, in itself, as an assassination attempt on the harmonious work, springs from the work's antinomian nature." Theodor Adorno, "Parataxis," in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia UP, 1991) 138–9.

remodalization, which returns the appearance of necessary order back to the state of contingency from which it emerged, belongs *essentially* to the poetic act, which finds itself caught in an oscillating tension (rather than a dialectical progression) between modal intensities.

III

It is in the context of Hölderlin's tragic drama *Der Tod des Empedokles*, namely in the transition between his second and third drafts of the drama, that Hölderlin turns his attention to modalization as a poetological doctrine. After *Empedokles*, the tragic mode liberates itself from its confinement within a specific generic form and refers more generally to a pattern of poetic thought.¹⁰ Specifically, for Hölderlin, the main movement in tragic thinking undertakes a modal shift from the possible to the necessary: the attempt to bind and connect the world of the sensible in such a way that the sensible itself is endowed with intelligibility, or such that the possible becomes resignified as necessary without losing its identity *as possibility*.¹¹ This operation constitutes the source of language's sacred power, or that which links language to the sacred: the ability to generate coherence and intelligibility amidst confusion, contingency and danger. The failure to complete this task in *Empedokles*—the drama did, after all, remain a fragment—does not so much undermine the validity of this operation as render it all the more urgent a task for poetic thought. That Hölderlin emphasized the predominance of cognitive acts of binding in tragedy is revealed not merely in his later doctrine of tones, in which the tragic has as its ground the unifying operation of an "intellectuale Anschauung" (MA 2: 104), but also in the theoretical remarks accompanying his translations of Sophocles.

I will return at a later point to Hölderlin's rethinking of tragic necessity. However, before advancing further, it ought to be noted that Hölderlin redefines necessity by shifting its frame of reference from a

¹⁰Hölderlin later aligns the "lyric," "epic," and "tragic" modes with his doctrine of the "alternation of tones" as respectively naïve, heroic, and idealistic. Hölderlin speaks of the tragic poem as one that performs an "intellectual intuition" or makes present "jene Einigkeit mit allem, was lebt" (MA 2: 104). The classic analysis of Hölderlin's doctrine of tones remains Lawrence J. Ryan, *Hölderlins Lehre vom Wechsel der Töne* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1960).

¹¹Stanley Corngold sees one of the central problems of the tragedy in the attempt to "detach Empedokles from accidentals." See Stanley Corngold, "Disowning Contingencies in Hölderlin's 'Empedocles,'" in *The Solid Letter: Readings of Friedrich Hölderlin*, ed. Aris Fioretos (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999) 223.

metaphysical ontology to a hermeneutics of intelligibility. Necessity for Hölderlin does not refer to objective characteristics of the given world, its laws and its determinate configurations, but rather, designates the retrospective and provisional construction of coherence by a subject faced with a chain of seemingly contingent events. Hölderlin's most concise formulation of necessity may perhaps be found in the closing lines of the first version of "Patmos," namely in the injunction that "Der veste Buchstab, und bestehendes gut / Gedeutet" (MA 1: 453).

The poetic act implicitly presupposes a world whose self-evidence has been rendered problematic, one in need of coherence and connectivity, and moreover, one in which the extant order has already been destabilized by radical, unpredictable change. In the essay "Das untergehende Vaterland," revolutionary time is thus predicated upon a modal intensification of possibility. The possible makes itself felt whenever the real loses its hold over the mind, thereby provoking the sensation of dissolution: "Aber das *Mögliche*, welches in die *Wirklichkeit* tritt, indem die *Wirklichkeit sich auflöst*, diß wirkt, und es bewirkt sowohl die Empfindung der Auflösung als die Erinnerung des Aufgelösten" (MA 2: 73). The poetic act fuses the immediate *facticity* of dissolution as well as the *memory* of the lost sense of reality—an act of binding between past and present—thereby bringing the disruptive force of possibility and the emergence of a new temporal order into one and the same cognitive space. Hölderlin calls this poetic stimulation of connectivity an "idealistic act of remembrance" (*idealische Erinnerung*), or the "Erklärung und Vereinigung der Lücke und des Contrasts, der zwischen dem Neuen und dem Vergangenen stattfindet" (MA 2: 73–74). Only in the intensification of moments of traumatic dissolution and the poetic healing of these wounds can the intelligibility of novelty appear: radical perturbation can only be reconciled with divine order in the cognition of a poetic state in which "bestehend wirkliches, reales nichts scheint, und das sich Auflösende im Zustande zwischen Seyn und Nicht-Seyn im Nothwendigen begriffen ist" (MA 2: 73). For Hölderlin, the modality of necessity as a conduit for the sacred emerges from semiotic, historico-philosophical, and cognitive processes of *filling out gaps* and *connecting particulars* at intensified points of transition. The poetic act documents and elicits the process whereby possibility (an alternative, unstable, and differential contingency) is resignified as a necessity (a coherence of events extending over time), thereby holding both seemingly mutually exclusive modal domains in a singular tension.

It is important to stress that the necessity generated by the tragic act applies only to the necessity of a disruption occasioned by the influx of

possibility into the real. This notion of necessity must be carefully distinguished from a metaphysical conception of necessity—for example, the one articulated by Leibniz—that tends to *legitimize* that which exists and sees in the extant order the harmony of the world in spite of its apparent deficiencies. Such a “negative” concept of necessity demands the perpetual maintenance of the given, regardless of its problematic state. This form of necessity—or the necessary *maintenance* of facticity rather than the necessary *disruption* of facticity—appears particularly pernicious to Hölderlin. The attempt to hold the world in a constant state of irresolution rather than draw upon and even provoke a crisis in order to effect a higher-order form of intelligibility is a standpoint precisely adopted by Empedokles’ nemesis in the third version of *Der Tod des Empedokles*, an opponent who seeks “die Probleme der Zeit auf andere, auf negativere Art zu lösen. Zum Helden geboren, ist er nicht sowohl geneigt, die Extreme zu vereinigen, als sie zu bändigen, und ihre Wechselwirkung an ein Bleibendes und Vestes zu knüpfen [. . .] Seine Tugend ist der Verstand, seine Göttin die Nothwendigkeit” (MA 1: 877). Empedokles’ enemy—whose heroic necessity, linked with *Verstand* rather than *Vernunft*, must be carefully distinguished from tragic necessity—seeks to bend the will of the people to the extant form of power as it happens to manifest itself. Empedokles, however, seeks the intelligibility of total revolution, or radical change in all spheres of life—subjective, political, and cultural—and therefore foregrounds a correspondingly “positive” conception of necessity, namely one that sees disruption and perturbation as part of an emergent order. The conception of necessity espoused by Empedokles’ opponent is fatalistic and normatively secure, whereas Empedokles’ own conception of necessity is revolutionary and normatively disruptive.¹²

IV

Hölderlin’s understanding of the tragic situation as a condensation of modal intensities at a moment of dynamic instability originates with the poetic and poetological fragments associated with *Der Tod des Empedokles*, but it continues to play a role in his translations of Sophocles’

¹²The scholarship on Hölderlin’s relationship to the French Revolution in particular is voluminous and has a long tradition, a tradition initiated above all by Pierre Berthaux, *Hölderlin und die Französische Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969). However, my claim is not that Hölderlin’s understanding of the tragic is derived from the French Revolution, but rather, that Hölderlin attempts to render intelligible the grammar of revolution as such, instances of rupture that perturb and initiate processes of conceptual and cultural reconfiguration.

Oedipus and *Antigone* in 1803. We will now move to an examination of these later remarks, for in them, Hölderlin lays bare the mechanism through which tragedy effects a modal transition from possibility to necessity while simultaneously maintaining the irreducible openness of possibility as such.

Hölderlin notes that the dynamic instability of the tragic situation in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone* is produced not merely by the unintelligibility of an age to itself, but above all by the social trauma of states of transition, shifting norms and values, and contested models of political legitimacy. Hölderlin describes such periods as "vaterländische Umkehr, wo die ganze Gestalt der Dinge sich ändert" (MA 2: 375). Hölderlin's own *Empedokles* had similarly adopted this conception of tragedy inasmuch as its central dramatic problem arose from a transition in forms of power, namely from the priestly class and the centralized power of the *archon* to a more expansive natural religion and a republican mode of governance. At such moments of transition, the real has become unintelligible, the old gods and norms have lost their legitimacy, and signs have become unchained from their specific sacred referents: everything seems to float in chaotic indeterminacy. Because the link between the sensible and the divine has been reduced to zero, there can be no possible semiotic operation capable of communicating the transcendence of the sacred. It is at this precise moment that the originary power of nature appears as this indeterminacy at a moment of transition, a situation described by Hölderlin as follows: "insofern aber das Zeichen an sich selbst als unbedeutend = 0 gesetzt wird, kann auch das Ursprüngliche, der verborgene Grund jeder Natur sich darstellen" (MA 2: 114).

The breakdown of the mediating function of language and the suspension of truth at the precise moment of overturning gives rise to the conditions that make possible the birth of tragedy, which in effect refers to a higher-order representation of the ground of nature. However, the conditions of transcendental weightlessness that trigger the need for the tragic act must not be confused with the enunciation of this act. The tragic speech act in fact seeks an adequate poetic response to the terror of disorientation, a situation in which, "wie eines Kezengerichtes, als Sprache für eine Welt, wo unter Pest und Sinnesverwirrung und allgemein entzündetem Wahrsagergeist, in müßiger Zeit, der Gott und der Mensch, damit der Weltlauf keine Lücke hat, und das Gedächtniß der Himmlischen nicht ausgehet, in der allvergessenden Form der Untreue sich mittheilt, denn göttliche Untreue ist am besten zu behalten" (MA 2: 315–16). The *a priori* of the tragic situation consists

first and foremost in an *impediment to perception*, a situation in which the senses are continually deranged and competing forms of power render individual and communal orientation impossible. The tragic act therefore not only represents the *apparent* rupture of the divine and the human in a deranged sensuality, but also seeks to repair this false apparition, correcting the misperception of what appears to human beings as the absence of divine immanence in the world. For Hölderlin, the link between the divine and the human is never fully severed. Rather, these two domains communicate in a code that requires its inversion in order to become legible: the divine presences itself in the “all-forgetting form of betrayal” (*in der allvergessenden Form der Untreue*). But what is this betrayal, and who is betraying whom?

In fact, there is a double betrayal at work in the tragic situation. On the one hand, the tragic hero must “betray” the sacred, that is, negate the “old” and no longer legitimate sources of political and religious authority. From this betrayal, the tragic hero derives his or her revolutionary potential. The tragic hero therefore finds himself or herself in the paradoxical situation of being radically *inside* his or her culture, indeed, deeply embodying its innermost inclinations and latent possibilities, and yet, *outside* the culture inasmuch as he or she appears as a pariah to an extant system of norms (and hence as a “traitor” to these norms). On the other hand, the god betrays the human being when the divine *as sign* is no longer manifest, having hidden itself in the chaos, violence, and suffering that intensify at the moment of transition. This betrayal also makes possible a revolutionary shift, since the norms that govern any particular social configuration have, by virtue of this act, been suspended.

Revolutionary time—or a form of temporality in which all comprehension is annulled—is therefore portrayed as a betrayal that inheres in time itself:

In dieser [Zeit] vergißt sich der Mensch, weil er ganz im Moment ist; der Gott weil er nichts als Zeit ist; und beides ist untreu, die Zeit, weil sie in solchem Momente sich kategorisch wendet, und Anfang und Ende sich in ihr schlechterdings nicht reimen läßt; der Mensch, weil er in diesem Momente der kategorischen Umkehr folgen muß, hiermit im Folgenden schlechterdings nicht dem Anfänglichen gleichen kann. (MA 2: 316)

Time itself is corrupted when its transparent teleological progression—“beginning and end” as poetically harmonized or “rhymed”—becomes opaque to the participants within the drama as well as to the world-historical observers attempting to make sense of the unfolding of the situation. The corruption of time reveals the essence of the tragic

situation as betrayal: as a refusal of the divine to manifest itself in the world of appearances *as* order and as the refusal of the human being to accept the legitimacy of the pre-existing order.

Furthermore, the tragic experience of time and space—that is, a betrayal of traditional conceptions of time and space as stable, well-ordered cognitive capacities—positions Hölderlin’s theory of tragedy as an alternative formulation to the Kantian transcendental aesthetic. Time itself becomes a condition of possibility of *incomprehensibility* rather than a Kantian form of intuition that makes perception possible. Tragedy as a poetic speech act, by taking its point of departure from incomprehensibility, in turn produces a metaphysics of poetic form designed both to reflect and transform the problematic conditions of time and space in the act of its enunciation. Hölderlin frames the ruptures and reparations in temporality and cognition as problems for poetic figuration, whose dissonances and consonances are philosophically thematized by referring to operations of “harmonization” (rhyme) in time, or, as we shall discuss momentarily, a break in time that becomes part of poetic temporality, namely, the caesura.

The tragic hero’s central function is to perfectly embody time at the very moment at which it turns, or to *become* pure revolution. If, however, he or she becomes pure time at a moment of revolution (*Umkehr*), the hero in fact becomes pure corruption of time. It is in this mode of corruption—as one who is “excluded” from the extant norms of governance—that the hero appears to his or her environment. And yet, in spite of this apparent corruption of time, the tragic act is only made possible by the assumption that the divine presences itself *as* absence, and nevertheless remains latent; in the tragic situation, a second-order realm of the sacred comes to light through the dual first-order betrayal of the tragic hero and the god. The hero betrays the “particular” sacred (in Empedokles’ case: the old gods, the priestly class, the concentration of power in the sovereignty of the *archon*), but in so doing, unleashes a process whereby *new gods*—new norms, new forms of governance, new relations to nature, history, and others—are made to appear.

The tragic hero therefore has a dual function, which one may observe in the case of Empedokles. First, the tragic hero must make this new configuration of the real appear not as merely contingent, but *necessary*: not merely as that which is publicly intelligible and capable of a discursively-anchored and cognitively secure legitimacy (as it would be for Hegel), but that which is capable of being *experienced* as such immediately and sensuously in an act of aesthetic cognition. Second,

the rupture of the normative order of things, the evacuation of the divine and the betrayal of time—e.g. the trauma of the hero's destiny, the monstrous sacrifice—must also appear as necessary. The semiotics of the tragic hero signals the necessity of a void within the turning of time. The function of Hölderlin's tragic hero is therefore to carve out a space in which an alternative normative organization of reality is not only thinkable, but is *experienced* as a necessary rupture that binds together subjects, words, and deeds in a new form of intelligibility.

V

As Hölderlin's philosophy of tragedy evolves, he believes that in order to resignify corrupted time as sacred time, or to produce from contingent possibilities the appearance of an intelligible necessity, the mind requires space in order to generate connections and stimulate procedures of binding. This space takes the rhetorical and philosophical form of the caesura.¹³ Hölderlin's caesura must neither be regarded as a principle of disruption or interruption for its own sake, nor strictly speaking as a rhetorical technique, but rather, as a nexus of text and consciousness that opens possibilities of thought, a space in which modal transitions—above all a permeability between the modalities of possibility, reality, and necessity—are concretized in poetic cognition.

As part of the operation of idealistic memory, the repairing of corrupted time necessitates a resignification of what Hölderlin refers to as the movement of "transport": "Der tragische *Transport* ist nemlich leer, und der ungebundenste" (MA 2: 310). The transport designates a crossing over, a movement from one state to another. On the one hand, the transport is undertaken by the tragic hero when he or she

¹³Here I agree with Françoise Dastur's claim, "La césure permet ainsi l'apparition du temps lui-même, elle permet un regard sur l'entière du temps [. . .]". *Hölderlin, le retournement natal* (La Versanne: Encre Marine, 1997) 70. Dastur has introduced an important revision to the prevalent misunderstanding of the caesura as pure rupture. Lacoue-Labarthe, for example, understands the idea of the caesura as a "break" with speculative necessity rather than its enabling condition: "the lesson, with respect to tragedy, is as clear as can be: the more the tragic is identified with the speculative desire for the infinite and the divine, the more tragedy presents it as a casting into separation, differentiation, finitude." Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, trans. Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989) 232. However, Lacoue-Labarthe is correct inasmuch as the caesura performs this function of "overseeing" time itself by opening a space in which opposing and self-differentiating modal forms come into contact with one another and then emerge transfigured from this co-mingling.

moves from the world of the living to the realm of the dead, when “die Naturmacht, die tragisch, den Menschen seiner Lebenssphäre, dem Mittelpunkte seines innern Lebens in eine andere Welt entrückt und in die exzentrische Sphäre der Todten reißt” (MA 2: 311). This is the moment when the being of the hero reaches its zero point, effectively becoming a nullity. On the other hand, this very same transport is undertaken by the culture at large, at a moment of transition in which all norms are cancelled, thereby opening a space for another way of organizing the sensible realm. The moment of radical change is “empty” and “the most unbounded” inasmuch as the historical moment has no apparent communion with an extant normative order, neither with the gods nor with any contemporaneous structure of political power. Thus, what must be made intelligible in the tragic act is the original unintelligibility of tragic transport: the point of death as the moment when both the tragic hero and the entire culture must rethink themselves and fill the void of pure possibility, which they do by transforming the evacuation of the divine from the world into an infusion of divine presence into this apparent emptiness. This operation is made possible by the caesura:

Dadurch wird in der rhythmischen Aufeinanderfolge der Vorstellungen, worinn der *Transport* sich darstellt, das, was man im Sylbenmaaße Cäsur heißt, das reine Wort, die gegenrhythmische Unterbrechung nothwendig, um nemlich dem reißenden Wechsel der Vorstellungen, auf seinem Summum, so zu begegnen, daß alsdann nicht mehr der Wechsel der Vorstellung, sondern die Vorstellung selber erscheint. (MA 2.310)

The caesura does not merely produce a rupture or a break; on the contrary, its physiological and poetic function is closer to the act of taking a breath, a making room for the emergence of order amidst the rush of phenomena. What appears in the space of the caesura is not the *alternation* of ways of thinking, but *thought itself qua idea* (*Vorstellung*), indeed language itself, the *logos* both as word and as intelligibility of the given (“das reine Wort”).¹⁴ It would perhaps be better to conceptualize the caesura as a pause rather than as an absolute

¹⁴This is how Hölderlin interprets Antigone’s naming of Zeus as “the father of time,” a god whose central operation consists in reversing the flow from life to death toward its opposite, from death to life: “Vater der Zeit oder: Vater der Erde, weil sein Karakter ist, der ewigen Tendenz entgegen, das Streben aus dieser Welt in die andre zu kehren zu einem Streben aus einer andern Welt in diese” (MA 2: 372). Thus the apparent “eccentric” movement of the sensible into some sacred void is in fact revealed as a movement from the sacred back into the world of the sensible.

break: an opening that binds incommensurable moments, conflicting modalities and cultural forms, allowing the spirit to grasp the logic of phenomena as they unfold over time.

According to Hölderlin, the speeches of Tiresias in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone* mark the point of the caesura: an interruption that allows observers—both the text-internal observers of the chorus as well as the text-external observers of the audience—to resignify the chaotic and potentially nihilistic negation of one conception of the sacred as the opening up of a space for a new form of sacrality. The logic of this transition in fact reveals a higher-order necessity through the cognitive process exemplified by Tiresias, who “in den Gang des Schicksals, als Aufseher über die Naturmacht [tritt]”—at a moment during which this very *Naturmacht* demands the transport of the hero, or the movement “in die exzentrische Sphäre der Todten” (MA 2.310–11). The Sophoclean tragic hero, caught up in a moment of suffering, incapable of perceiving the higher-order organization of nature and history to which he or she belongs, is counterbalanced by Tiresias, one who stands under the modality of necessity as a “custodian over the power of nature.” The caesura therefore allows the viewer, and presumably the chorus or *demos*, to experience all modalities at once—the potentiality of total revolution (*gänzliche Umkehr*), the reality of concrete tragic suffering as it unfolds in its present state, and the “insight” into the necessity of the self-perturbing order of natural and historical appearances as its own specific temporal law.

Although Hölderlin comes to the notion of the caesura in the course of working through the translations of Sophocles in 1803, it is perhaps this rhetorical and cognitive figure that he was seeking in *Empedokles* and whose precise formal and poetic manifestation never quite managed to materialize in the various versions. Specifically, in the third and final draft of *Empedokles*, after Hölderlin has reconceptualized tragedy as a form of modal resignification, he introduces a caesura-like element into his own tragedy in the form of Empedokles' former mentor, the Egyptian seer Manes.¹⁵ As an Egyptian, Manes exists in a liminal space that affords him maximum mobility and permeability: he is capable of

¹⁵Andrzej Warminski also portrays Manes as a “caesura.” However, because he understands *Vorstellung* as the representation of the drama's own representation (whereas I understand it as the cognitive and historical space in which time itself becomes purified and contingency may be resignified as necessary), he sees the caesura as a disruptive act of self-reflective textual violence rather than as an opening for thought. See Andrzej Warminski, *Readings in Interpretation: Hölderlin, Hegel, Heidegger* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987) 17–22.

moving between mutually exclusive sacred paradigms and modalities, situated between monotheism and polytheism, possibility and necessity, identity and difference past, present, and future. Manes moves between the certainty of knowledge—he says of the sacrifice, “Ich wußt es auch / Schon längst voraus, ich hab es dir geweissagt” (MA 1: 896)—and the uncertainty of possibility, prodding Empedokles to confirm and articulate his identity: “O sage, wer du bist! und wer bin ich?” (MA 1: 898) As both foreign to the culture and intimate with the culture, as one who understands and yet interrupts and delays the tragic sacrifice—Empedokles says, “Nun denn! was hältst du es noch auf?” (MA 1: 896) and “wenn dir es nicht / Beschieden ist zum Eigentum, was nimmst / Und störst du mirs!” (MA 1: 900)—Manes takes up a role analogous to the caesura.

Manes’ disruption of Empedokles’ sacrifice, as a caesura-like figuration, does not merely open a space of pure contingency, but one equally saturated with necessity, or more precisely, a space in which these two modalities may collide and be thought and felt simultaneously. Like Tiresias in Sophoclean tragedy, Manes perceives that which conditions the necessity of tragic annihilation and discerns the meaning of Empedokles’ sacrifice, namely the process whereby the death of the particular is linked to the appearance of the necessary:

Die Menschen und die Götter söhnt er aus.
 Und nahe wieder leben sie, wie vormals,
 und daß, wenn er erschienen ist, der Sohn
 Nicht größer, denn die Eltern sei, und nicht
 Der heilige Lebensgeist gefesselt bleibe
 Vergessen über ihm, dem Einzigen,
 So lenkt er aus, der Abgott seiner Zeit,
 Zerbricht, er selbst, damit durch reine Hand
 Dem Reinen das Nothwendige geschehe,
 Sein eigen Glük [. . .] (MA 1: 897)

The order of necessity shines only when the contingent particular disappears, or more precisely, when the particular only appears as particular rather than as an embodiment of the *nomos*; the institution of the law must survive the contingency of the individual being in order to be durable. Indeed, Empedokles’ sacrifice in this instance, his plunge into the fire of Aetna, does not simply atone for a prior infraction against divine law (due to either *hubris* or *hamartia*, both of which played a larger role in the first two versions of the tragedy). Rather, it is precisely Empedokles’ embodiment of an alternative natural or social order—his identification with divine law—that necessitates his death, for this law, by definition, must transcend the mortality of the particular individual.

In the tragic action, catharsis occurs not in the spectators, nor in the tragic hero, but rather, *through* the tragic hero, for it is time and nature itself that must be purified: the hero “giebt, was er besaß, dem Element, / Das ihn verherrlichte, geläutert wieder” (MA 1: 897). The operation enacted by Empedokles’ projected—but ultimately unfulfilled—sacrifice nevertheless foregrounds a central performative contradiction at the heart of Hölderlin’s theory of tragedy: if the tragedy is ultimately designed to wean the people from the need for a charismatic figure, from an overattachment to an individual being or to the flesh of particularity, then the tragedy as a work of art annihilates its own reason for existence, since it can only function precisely by valorizing the particularity of the hero.¹⁶ The central danger of tragic action, indeed its inescapable double bind—that which must be avoided and that which the very form of the tragedy necessarily instantiates—comes to light in Empedokles’ *over-memorialization*. Hence, as “idol” of his time—as a distorted and yet mimetic reflection of the god, an *Abgott*—Empedokles must become iconoclastic with respect to his own particular iconicity. It is this semiotic operation rather than the logic of sacrifice that demands Empedokles’ destruction. The inversion of the Christian formula whereby word becomes flesh designates the presence of the divine in a human being whose flesh must destroy itself to become word: *das reine Wort*. The death of Empedokles recasts traumatic self-destruction as a coherent and intelligible event. Manes’ dramatic function is therefore to interrupt the action and open a space for thinking the interpenetration and flow between disruptive possibility and restorative necessity, thereby mediating Empedokles’ sacrifice to the community by making it appear *as necessary*.¹⁷

The final words of Hölderlin’s manuscript focus on Manes’ revelation to the people, the *demos*, of the “final will” of Empedokles’ sacrifice.

¹⁶Corngold draws attention to this paradox when he says, “Finally, when all accidentals have been denied, would not the empirical being of the hero, the finite, historical, bodily entity, also be instantly drawn up in this vortex of *Verläugnungen* [denials]?” Corngold, “Disowning Contingencies in Hölderlin’s ‘Empedocles,’” 218.

¹⁷Corngold notes that at the conclusion of the play, “History becomes a world-time without sacred renewal, a godless time” (Ibid. 236). Corngold is correct, but only in the sense that this state of confusion dominates at the end of the first act, not at the end of the tragedy as such; it forms part of the trajectory of tragedy, but not its telos. Hölderlin’s notes suggest that the tragic action would ultimately resignify this godless world of mere appearances, specifically using the Egyptian seer Manes as a mediator. The abandonment of the project does not repudiate its animating idea; on the contrary, Hölderlin’s later poetry reveals that he never loses sight of the necessity of tragic resignification, but continually seeks a poetic form that would respond adequately to the challenge that it poses.

This revelation takes place during the festival of the Saturnalia: “Des Tags darauf am Saturnusfeste, will er ihnen verkünden, was der letzte Wille des Empedokles war.”¹⁸ On the one hand, the proximity of the pagan festival of the Saturnalia to Christmas—taking place in late December—places Manes’ revelation in the context of a redemptive event. On the other hand, the choice of this festival nevertheless foregrounds the mythical structure of patricide and restoration, trauma and healing: the celebration of a deity, Saturn, who is himself an embodiment of revolutionary time, one whose own order was overthrown and ultimately surpassed by a new sacred pantheon. The Saturnalia, as a carnivalesque festival of liberation in which the law itself was suspended and power relations were inverted, formalizes and codifies this suspension and inversion of law as a higher-order law.¹⁹ The redemptive content of Empedokles manifests itself precisely in the necessity—and hence potential retroactive legality—of the abrogation of order.

However, the appearance of Manes as caesura in *Empedokles* does not speak the *truth* of the tragedy as such, but puts his own utterance of this truth in a polyphonic relationship to all other utterances and perspectives—as represented by the tragic hero himself, by the allies and enemies of the tragic hero, and the *demos* of the chorus. The tragedy manifests itself therefore not as a reduction to the purity of the word spoken in the space of the caesura, but as a site of conflict whose specific semiosis is under permanent investigation. *Der Tod des Empedokles* as dramatic play in fact reveals not the necessity of a superior being, nor an onto-theological sacrality, nor a noumenal world *behind* the world of appearances, but rather, the logic of appearances itself, a logic whose very nature is to shift modalities, at times appearing as the potentiality of novelty, at times as the facticity of the real, and at times as the intelligibility of the necessary. And indeed, here we have reached the central function of the caesura: not to eliminate modal clashes, but to open up a space whereby one mode may *pass* into another, where modalities clash and harmonize, separate and combine, differentiate and unite. The caesura semiologically and rhetorically effects a cognitively-grounded modal intertwining, the co-presence of

¹⁸Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. D. E. Sattler, vol. 12.1 (Frankfurt am Main: Roter Stern, 1985) 525.

¹⁹Karl Philipp Moritz notes that during the Saturnalia, “Die Sklaven waren jetzt frei [. . .] Die Herren warteten den Dienern bei der Mahlzeit auf [. . .] der Senat versammelte sich an diesen Tagen nicht; die Gerichte feierten; alle Prozesse ruhten [. . .]” Karl Philipp Moritz, *Anthousa oder Roms Alterthümer* (Berlin: Friedrich Mauerner, 1791) 229.

differentiated modal forms of attunement through which the “pure” word appears, since the word in its purity *is* this very modal impurity.

The clash of semiotic operations and cognitive modalities as the very texture of the sacred is condensed into a formula in the third draft of *Empedokles*. When Empedokles speaks to his disciple Pausanias, asking if Pausanias would give his “blood” and his “soul” for Empedokles—thereby appearing more as Satanic tempter rather than as sacrificial redeemer—he issues a word of warning, saying, “Ich bin nicht, der ich bin” (MA 1: 892). Empedokles’ words may be read on at least three different levels. First, and most evidently, this paradoxical formulation distills human transience to a formula: doomed to pass into nothingness, we are not beings that *are*, and so too must Empedokles’ own form of being embrace oblivion.²⁰ On a higher self-reflective level, Empedokles’ statement also lays bare the rhetorical and poetological logic that makes possible his own tragic textuality: Empedokles must simultaneously persist in memory as an agent of universal normative reorientation and be forgotten as a concrete particular. His own tragic paradox enacts his simultaneous memorialization and oblivion: in “not being” the being whose essence it is “to be.” On a third level, this statement opens a window onto the very order and disorder of tragic sacrality. This conception of the sacred consciously inverts the absolute expression of onto-theological being (the notion of a transcendent God as creator) epitomized by the explication of God’s name in the third book of Moses, portrayed in Luther’s translation as “Ich werde sein, der ich sein werde.” Empedokles modifies this originary onto-theological definition of the sacred in two ways. First, he shifts his own self-understanding into the framework of the present—Luther’s translation of the name of God as “I will be that which I will be” becomes “I am not that which I am”—anticipating the thought in the *Anmerkungen zum Oedipus* that the tragic hero must become the pure condition of time and space. The pure condition of time, however, does not refer to a non-differentiated plenitude of being, but to a necessary (and hence intelligible) corruption at the heart of temporal unfolding. Second, Empedokles introduces a negation into this formulation of the divine, revealing divine betrayal—the necessity of tragic suffering, of incomprehensibility as a precondition of novelty, of the destabilizing contingency of the world of appearances (which are not that which they are)—as *part* of the fabric of the sacred,

²⁰Immediately following this passage, Empedokles interprets his own statement in this manner: “Ich bin nicht, der ich bin, Pausanias, / Und meines Bleibens ist auf Jahre nicht, / Ein Schimmer nur, der bald vorüber muß, / Im Saitenspiel ein Ton—” (MA 1: 892).

indeed, as constitutive of its very manifestation. Empedokles (as well as his mediator, Manes) therefore fuses the satanic and the divine in his formulation of the sacred name: his redemption frames itself as temptation, and temptation (as an invitation to transgress extant norms) constitutes the precise content of his form of redemption. Empedokles' formula of necessity—which inverts and negates the formula of the divine name—therefore brings together the intelligibility of necessity (as the revelation of the sacred), the presence of the real (as a shifting of temporality into the framework of the present), as well as the unpredictable negativity of possibility (the principle of non-identity as the very structure of the sacred).

VI

In the tragic mode, modality moves along an axis shifting from possibility to necessity, and it ends with the following proposition: that which is sacred is the necessity of oblivion itself. However, given Hölderlin's emphasis on the fluidity of modalization, it follows that a necessity can at any point be undone and re-modalized into a possibility. In other poetic forms—above all in lyric rather than tragic poems—the pattern of shifting modalities may be inverted, disorganized, or perturbed, and the coherence of necessity may find itself returned to a state of aporia, contingency, and dynamic instability. For Hölderlin, in contrast to Hegel, one never arrives at an equilibrium between the shifting modalities of the possible, the real, and the necessary.

Although never explicitly formulated as such by Hölderlin, one may nevertheless discern as a principle of poetic production the notion that poetry must continually perturb the order that it generates: creating a new order, retesting it and disrupting it once more, in short continually *remodalizing* experience in order to maximize cognitive effort. One may see such a reversal, for example, in the relationship between Hölderlin's poems "Der Rhein" and "Jetzt komme, Feuer!" or more precisely, in the divergent poetological functions of the Rhine and the Danube. The final gesture of "Der Rhein" addresses Isaac von Sinclair, a proxy for the poetic spirit capable of perceiving the divine amidst the semiotic overdetermination of day and the equiprimordial semiotic indeterminacy of night:

. . . nimmer ist dir
 Verborg'n das Lächeln des Herrschers
 Bei Tage, wenn
 Es fieberhaft und angekettet das
 Lebendige scheint oder auch
 Bei Nacht, wenn alles gemischt

Ist ordnungslos und wiederkehrt
Uralte Verwirrung. (MA 1: 348)

Poetic perception, which manages to orient itself amidst the double threats of overdetermination (and thus a lack of freedom) and indeterminacy (and thus a lack of order), moves in this instance along the tragic axis from the problematization of perception to an emergent intelligibility. The poem "Jetzt komme, Feuer!" (often known as "Der Ister"), however, deviates from this trajectory, culminating in regression rather than progression. This poem, which exists as a counterpoint to "Der Rhein," returns the lyrical voice to a state of aporia and confusion: "Was aber jener thuet der Strom, / Weis niemand" (MA 1: 477).

This movement of modalization from the necessary to the possible does not represent a perversion or a malfunction of the poetic act, nor a crisis that remains in a state of mere negative unproductivity, but rather, constitutes the very motor of *poiesis*. Such a poetic principle may be illustrated by following the movements of one of Hölderlin's most famous poems, "Hälfte des Lebens."

Hälfte des Lebens

Mit gelben Birnen hängt
Und voll mit wilden Rosen
Das Land in den See,
Ihr holden Schwäne,
Und trunken von Küssen
Tunkt ihr das Haupt
Ins heilignüchterne Wasser.

Weh mir, wo nehm' ich, wenn
Es Winter ist, die Blumen, und wo
Den Sonnenschein,
Und Schatten der Erde?
Die Mauern stehn
Sprachlos und kalt, im Winde
Klirren die Fahnen. (MA 1: 445)

Critics have continually drawn attention to the opposition of the two strophes in this poem as a compressed articulation of crisis, whether as mid-life crisis, poetic crisis, or philosophical crisis.²¹ Within this

²¹See, for example, Jochen Schmidt, "'Sobria ebrietas'. Hölderlin's Hälfte des Lebens," in *Gedichte und Interpretationen. Klassik und Romantik*, ed. Wulf Segebrecht (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984). For a nuanced account of the multiple forms of "crisis" in the poem, including mid-life and philosophical crises, see Winfried Menninghaus, *Hälfte des Lebens: Versuch über Hölderlins Poetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005).

overarching opposition of strophes, the first strophe captures a moment at the pinnacle of plenitude, nature at its zenith, forming an equilibrium and communion of oppositions: the land, full with both fruit and flower, hangs *into* the lake, swans are drunk with kisses while simultaneously cooling the heat of their passion in holy-sober (*heiligenüchtern*) water. In this strophe, a nexus of differences—solidity and fluidity, masculinity and femininity, singularity (*das Land*) and plurality (*Schwäne*), drunkenness and sobriety, immanence and transcendence—interpenetrate and harmonize, and both inorganic nature (the land) and organic nature (the swans) partake in a ritualistic baptismal purification. Every object finds its complement and its fulfillment in another; just as the land gathers together pears and roses, just as the water gathers the swans and cools their passion, so too does the strophe itself bind together these spheres (the land hangs into the lake, *das Land in den See*) that themselves function as binding elements.

Although the first strophe reconciles oppositions, it is nevertheless embedded in a poetic act that holds open an irreconcilable strophic difference. In the second strophe, the visible order of nature appears as a palpable absence; cultural artifacts and barriers—*walls*—and the limited first-person perspective come into the foreground. The poem ends by erecting a discrete space of differentiation, drawing attention to walls that are *speechless*, at once part of and radically other than the poetic act that gives voice to this speechlessness.²² The second strophe thereby posits a space of irreconcilable difference and thus departs from the interpenetration and binding of oppositions characteristic of the first strophe. The second strophe, however, does not merely construct itself *as* an opposition—for example, as a contrast to the first strophe—but rather, negates oppositionality as such as a recuperative figure: *sunshine* and *shade of the earth*, two terms that are clearly oppositional, appear precisely as an absence or a problem for the poetic consciousness (*wo [nehm' ich] / den Sonnenschein / und Schatten der Erde?*).²³ Nature appears, but only as that which refuses to manifest itself, namely as the *invisible*: the wind, here seemingly separated from its frequent figuration as divine *pneuma* (the “spirit” of poetic inspiration), can only reveal itself indexically through the

²²Schmidt calls the silence of the walls “eine exakte Benennung des Unpoetischen.” Schmidt, “‘Sobria ebrietas’. Hölderlins Hälfte des Lebens” 264. As I hope to show, this very act belongs in its essential nature to poetry, not as crisis, but as part of its mission.

²³Schmidt notes, “in dieser Frage kommt es auf die Harmonie des Einigentgegengesetzten, des Sonnenlichts und des Schattens an, nicht auf Sonnenschein und Schatten an sich.” Schmidt, “‘Sobria ebrietas’. Hölderlins Hälfte des Lebens” 258.

clack of weathervanes or the flapping of cloth.²⁴ The indexical sign points not to a legible order of nature, but to the semantic emptiness and chaotic indeterminacy of its own sound: *klirren*.

The poem ends with two opposing forms of counter-signification, each of which problematizes language as an encoding of information that may be assimilated to an intelligible order. The speechlessness of the walls indicates *silence*, or the absence of discourse as information and the degradation of the walls as a channel for meaningful content; the weathervanes (or flags) generate *noise*, which, on the contrary, produce an overabundance of information that renders any process of decoding impossible. The poem oscillates between the two limit-points of intelligibility: silence as an absence of information (the “walls” as figures of differentiation that fail to generate meaning), or noise as overabundance of information (the “clack” of the weathervanes that fail even to produce legible differentiation). If the weathervanes clack, the wind travels not in a straight line, from point A to point B, but comes from all directions and leaves in all directions, producing a stochastic pattern that frustrates all attempts at decoding: a figure, turning upon itself, that revolves in the facticity of its own sonic reverberation.

And yet: in the representation of that which eludes information—or rather, in exploring the horizon of what may count as information—the poem finds its voice. This final indexical sign (*die Fahnen*) that belies its own functionality—rather than laying bare the direction of the wind as an organized and invisible presence, it foregrounds directionlessness as such—nevertheless reveals itself through the iconicity of language, through the phonic coincidence between *klirren* and the actual sound of a weathervane. Herder, in his *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, emphasizes the link between the sounds of nature and the capacity of the soul to generate language: “Der Baum wird der Rauscher, der West Säusler, die Quelle Riesler heißen—da liegt ein kleines Wörterbuch fertig, und wartet auf das Gepräge der Sprachorgane.”²⁵ The *klirren* of the weathervane thus both signals a symbolic illegibility as well as an almost archaic return to the origin of language through an onomatopoeic linguistic mimesis. Accord-

²⁴There is debate in Hölderlin scholarship as to whether the *Fahnen* refer to weathervanes or flags. Marion Hiller concludes that, in any case, the “[Klirren der Fahnen] als Wetterfahnen und Stofffahnen auf einem gestörten Zusammenspiel mit dem Wind beruht.” Marion Hiller, “*Harmonisch entgegengesetzt*”: Zur Darstellung und Darstellbarkeit in Hölderlins Poetik um 1800 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2008) 270.

²⁵Johann Gottfried Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (Christian Friedrich Voß: Berlin, 1772) 78.

ing to Herder, when the poetic mind struggles to give meaning to the sensible world, its first act consists in an attentiveness to sound. The return to a distinguishing characteristic of the physical world in the language of sound is at the same time a regression to a form of speechlessness on the verge of its own potentialization, or rather, a return to that moment just before the human being has acquired symbolic proficiency.

The importance of sound *as* sound—and hence not as a vehicle for a higher semantic intelligibility—appears as one of the ways through which the necessary order of intelligibility moves back into a space of open possibility. It is through sound *as* sound, for example, that the poem makes a transition from the harmony of the first strophe toward an evacuation of meaning from the sensible world in the second strophe, travelling via a phonetic resonance and an imperfect rhyme: from the symbolically charged final word of the first strophe, “Wasser,” to the painful expressivity in the first words of the second, “Weh mir.” Both utterances contain six letters, although the second utterance has driven a wedge between the duplicate consonant of the “ss” (from *Wasser* to *Weh mir*) and undergone a phonemic and semantic inversion. The graphically differential representation of a phonemic identity, the identity-in-difference of the double s, falls prey to a form of caesura, becoming separated out into two separate phonemes: the cry of pain that articulates the self-relation of a poetic speaker.

If the poem culminates in dissonance rather than consonance, it does so not as failure or crisis, but rather as a response to a poetic task: at a moment of plenitude where all appears to have settled into equilibrium, the poetic spirit must plunge itself back into uncertainty. The poem therefore performs an inverted poetological cognitive operation to the one described by Hölderlin as “idealistic recollection.” If the primary operation of idealistic recollection fills in gaps and explains contrasts, “Hälfte des Lebens” moves in precisely the opposite direction, creating a gap (for example, the gap between the first and second strophe) and holding it open as an irreconcilable bifurcation. At the height of natural plenitude, rather than undertaking an idealistic recollection of the past, the poet performs a potentializing projection into the future, casting the imagination suddenly into a winter landscape.²⁶ The poetic act therefore intensifies rather

²⁶Although, as we shall see, this future is at the same time a second present. Marion Hiller notes that although the final lines of the second strophe exhibit a “futurische Bedeutung” by virtue of following the phrase “wo nehm’ ich, wenn / Es Winter ist, die Blumen,” they nevertheless acquire a quasi-autonomous “präsentische Bedeutung” in their poetic execution. Hiller, “*Harmonisch entgegengesetzt*” 271.

than reconciles contrasts between one temporal frame and another, giving rise to gaps that cannot be “explained away,” but rather, enter into the very texture of poetic speech.

The potentialization of the poetic act therefore moves the plenitude of semantic intelligibility back to a state of indeterminacy—and it does so precisely by instantiating an inversion of the tragic caesura. That is, just as the tragic caesura enables modal shifting along an axis from possibility to necessity, the lyric caesura—in this particular case—opens up a space of modal blending by inverting this axial directionality. And just as the emergence of the new is latent in the dissolution of the present in the tragic caesura, so too is the dissolution of the present in fact latent within the seeming integrity of the first strophe in the lyric caesura. The lyric caesura, although moving in the opposite direction than the tragic caesura, nevertheless leads to a similar conclusion, namely: that which is sacred is the necessity of oblivion itself. Each of the main figures in the first strophe—the inorganic, singular land and the organic, multiple swans—make a downward movement that cuts through a surface, generating a pictorial image of the rhetorical-figural caesura as—etymologically at least, from the verb *caedo*—that which cuts: the land *hangs into* the lake, and the swans dip their heads *into* the water.²⁷ The sacrality of the baptismal image is thus at the same time the performance of a fall or a descent. This cutting gesture, as a prefiguration of the caesura, is then materialized in the second strophe, albeit transferred from the semantic realm of figuration to the non-semantic rhythms and patterns of poetic form. Here it helps to scan the poem and draw attention to certain recurrent rhythmic patterns:

/ ∪ ∪ / ∪ Hälfte des Lebens

∪ / ∪ / ∪ / ∪ Mit gelben Birnen hängen

∪ / ∪ / ∪ / ∪ **Und voll mit wilden Rosen**

∪ / ∪ ∪ / Das Land in den See,

∪ / ∪ / ∪ Ihr holden Schwäne,

∪ / ∪ ∪ / ∪ Und trunken von Küssen

/ ∪ ∪ / **Tunkt ihr das Haupt**

∪ / ∪ / ∪ ∪ / ∪ Ins heilignüchterne Wasser.

∪ / ∪ / ∪ / or: / ∪ ∪ / ∪ / or: / / / / ∪ / Weh mir, wo nehm' ich, wenn

∪ / ∪ / ∪ / ∪ | ∪ / **Es Winter ist, die Blumen**, und wo

²⁷Menninghaus notes, “Ein solcher potentiell gefährlicher Sog hinab zur spiegelnden Seeoberfläche durchwaltet auch die strahlende Präsenz des goldenen Spätsommer- oder frühen Herbsttages in Hölderlins Gedicht.” Menninghaus, *Hälfte des Lebens* 56.

∪ / ∪ / Den Sonnenschein,
 ∪ / ∪ ∪ / ∪ Und Schatten der Erde?
 ∪ / ∪ / Die Mauern stehn
 / ∪ ∪ / | ∪ / ∪ **Sprachlos und kalt**, im Winde
 / ∪ ∪ / ∪ Klirren die Fahnen.

A cursory glance at the rhythm reveals an increase in rhythmic indeterminacy in the second strophe; the first line of the second strophe (*Weh mir, wo nehm' ich, wenn*) floats ambiguously in a space of rhythmic and metrical possibility rather than in strict formal determinacy. The line, with its commas and long vowels, interrupts and distends the flow of the poem, producing a counter-rhythmical temporal expansiveness that deviates from strict formal regularity. Although this interruption already indicates the most significant gesture of the poem—to perturb temporal equilibrium, interrupt “normalized time,” and “potentialize” temporality itself—one may go further.

The second strophe includes two rhythmical caesurae that correspond to specific elements of the first strophe, giving rise to a form whereby the second strophe may be superimposed over the first, or conversely, be read as its latent palimpsest. The first rhythmic caesura in the second strophe occurs in the second line after the word “flowers” (*Blumen*) and corresponds precisely with the second line of the first strophe, namely the “wild roses.” The second rhythmic caesura in the second strophe occurs after “speechless and cold” (*sprachlos und kalt*), but when superimposed over the first strophe, aligns precisely with the descent of the swans’ heads under the water (*tunkt ihr das Haupt*). Indeed, if “im Winde” had been moved to the final line of the poem (so that the final line would read *Im Winde klirren die Fahnen*), then the rhythm of the line would have perfectly mirrored the final line of the first strophe: *Ins heilignüchterne Wasser*. As it stands, the rhythmic form of the first strophe has been broken up, and a caesura has been generated in the second strophe to mark this subterranean rhythmic correspondence with the first strophe. The two strophes thus do not produce perfect oppositions of one another, but rather, form a spectral projection of one another, each making present the hidden watermark of the other: a watermark that can only be drawn to the surface when looking behind or beyond the written word (a semiotic function which, perhaps coincidentally, emerges from the erotically charged penetration of the holy-sober water of a lake, therefore turning around the textual-material presence of watermarks or *Wasserzeichen*). The poem moves along a current in which the caesurae inherent in a seeming equilibrium are drawn out of their latency and

made manifest in the second strophe. Plenitude of being appears as that which seeks its own downfall, in turn revealing this downfall as the latent dynamic inherent in the self-organization of its own supposedly perfect and stable landscape. Here the caesurae permit lyric modality to travel in a direction opposed to that of the tragic caesura, namely from the intelligibility of necessity to the openness of possibility and the ineluctable presence of contingency. As in the tragic act, the caesura opens a zone of modal intermingling, albeit realized in a speech act that moves in the opposite direction.

The poem therefore short-circuits the dominant ontology otherwise sought by Hölderlin, the *hen kai pan*, or one and all.²⁸ The poem's most radical gesture culminates in a *bifurcation of the present*: the present of the first strophe, "Mit gelben Birnen hängen / [. . .] / Das Land in den See," imaginatively drifts into a second and incommensurable present, "Die Mauern stehn / sprachlos und kalt." At the end of the poem, we are incapable of deciding which present the poetic voice occupies: the seemingly real present of the first strophe or the imaginative present of the second. This bifurcation describes the logic of the poem itself, or the movement from a discrete unit of singularity, from the totality of life itself, to the generation of a half. The half is incommensurable with totality, continually and willfully destabilizing it.²⁹ The poem therefore disorganizes systems that seek closure and totality by preventing its own symbolic utterance from achieving perfect transparency and equilibrium.

It was well known in antiquity that a symbol, or a *symbolon*, was constructed by two halves of an object that, when put together, made a whole that could be recognized as such. In this poem, there are two halves, and yet, when added together, one finds not an intelligible whole, but remains fixed in the figure of the half: *Hälfte des Lebens*. We have journeyed, but we have not progressed; our vision of life at its midpoint—and in fact at every point, since every point can be seen as a midpoint once the frames of reference begin to shift—is not total, even at the moment of fullness, but always partial, revisable and fragile.

²⁸For a short analysis of the sources Hölderlin draws upon in this formulation and the relevance of this idea for Hölderlin's poetic work, see Max L. Baeumer, "Hölderlin und das Hen kai pan," *Monatshefte* 59:2 (1967) 131–147.

²⁹Menninghaus also draws attention to the way in which this poem excludes any attempt, "des ungeteilten Ganzen habhaft zu werden." Menninghaus, *Hälfte des Lebens* 108. For Menninghaus, the movement of Hölderlin's poem reveals an asymmetrical force field, "in dem der Abwärtssog in einen nicht näher bestimmten Abgrund letztlich stärker ist als das frei suspendierte Hängen in Fülle und Schönheit" (Ibid. 109).

Such a work does not lay bare poetry in a mode of crisis, but in conformity with one of its essential tasks: to continually remodalize experience and move intelligibility (as necessity) back into the sphere of possibility in order to restore the poetic act to meaningfulness. Seen from this point of view, the first strophe with its hanging fruit and graceful swans appears not as perfect reconciliation or plenitude, but as a form of terror, as a beautiful, dynamic equilibrium that is itself a threat: the aestheticization of a looming internal stasis. Wallace Stevens, in "Sunday Morning," would later describe the threat of idyllic perfection in the following manner:

Is there no change of death in paradise?
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
With rivers like our own that seek for seas
They never find, the same receding shores
That never touch with inarticulate pang?
Why set the pear upon those river-banks
Or spice the shores with odors of the plum?³⁰

Hölderlin's lovely swans, sensuous as they are, evade the stasis of Stevens' transcendent paradise. And yet, the promise of reconciliation and of perfect equilibrium must always appear to the poet as an ambivalent poetic goal. In "Das untergehende Vaterland," Hölderlin describes the perfect idealistic recollection as "ein furchtbarer aber göttlicher Traum" (2.73). The *ideal recollection*—one in which gaps are filled out, contrasts are explained, and history is made intelligible—is divine, because without this necessity, the poetic act sinks into a meaningless chaos, and the cognitive excitation that it intends to stimulate degenerates into directionless and meaningless differentiation.

And yet: Hölderlin describes this very same act as *terrible*. Indeed, if ever it were to be achieved, the poetic act would itself become superfluous and cease to be meaningful. That is, if the poetic act succeeds in guaranteeing the necessity of a problematic reality, such a success would then render its own act unnecessary, thereby negating its own reason for being. In order to avoid this sacred but terrible stasis and the self-annihilation of its own act, the real as given through the poetic act must be turned against itself, plenitude must be emptied

³⁰Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage, 1982) 69.

out, equilibrium must be perturbed, and we must be returned—like the weathervanes that clack or flags that wave in every direction—to a state of contingency, possibility, and deprivation, a state that indeed calls for and beckons yet another poetic act that might perhaps generate a provisional intelligibility. The poem therefore represents not a moment of crisis—although it is coextensive with pain, confusion, and loneliness—but maintains itself in the very condition in which the desire for poetry itself is generated.³¹

Over and against the threat of closure represented by the first strophe, the speaker in “Hälfte des Lebens” provokes the destabilization of this moment of plenitude by asking a question—*wo nehm’ ich, wenn / Es Winter ist, die Blumen*—that only another poetic act can satisfy. And in this case, reading backwards, the first strophe—with its wild roses, yellow pears, and graceful swans—might even be construed as a response to this question. But if this is so, in this response, the question is built into the solution yet again as that which follows, and we must repeat the poem, *ad infinitum*. The poem therefore opens up the closure performed in idealistic recollection only to once again make present a provisional order: an equilibrium that triggers its own perturbation. “Hälfte des Lebens” therefore posits the normalization of reconciliation as a threat to its own poetic act, choosing instead to produce the state from which emerges the need for poetry rather than total fulfillment.

Hölderlin’s poetry nevertheless suggests that although there can be no perfectly stable plenitude, it does not follow that necessity can only be understood as a failed or “unnecessary” modality, one that must be excluded permanently from the horizon of the modern subject. For Hölderlin, the modality of necessity as the verification of the intelligibility of the sensible world constitutes an essential precondition of the poetic process; without it, the opening of a space of contingency would cease to be meaningful; cognitive work would spin in an empty vortex of its own making; and the very purpose of the poetic act—to exert itself and deploy its powers within the world of the sensible—would lose its reason for being. While Hölderlin’s poetry may ultimately seek something akin to a second-order conception of necessity as the necessity of contingency in the tragic

³¹Menninghaus draws out the importance of this idea for Hölderlin in his analysis of the antique conception of eros as implying a lack that cannot—and indeed should not—be fully satisfied: “Denn das Fehlen des Fehlens, die Mangellosigkeit einer dauerhaften Aneignung des Schönen würde nichts zu ‘wünschen’ übriglassen und mit dem ‘Leiden’ zugleich das ‘Leben’ tilgen.” Menninghaus, *Hälfte des Lebens* 64–65.

mode, it does so not as a *logical* presupposition, but precisely as that which must be wrested from poetic agony, from a struggle with its particular subject matter, with its own tortured history and its own problematic form. The poetic act aims at the necessity of a specific contingent particular (e.g. the necessity of the death of the hero or the necessity of confusion at a moment of radical change) rather than at the necessity of contingency as such. Necessity thus appears not as an ontologically stable category that applies indiscriminately and equally to all phenomena, but as a precarious and provisional state of mind that can—and at times, should—be undone. The subject of poetry therefore must be carefully attuned to the perpetual process of remodalization, to movements that oscillate between the verification and confirmation of our norms and ways of being and the continual subjection of this verification to the irreducible openness of possibility. In the process of opening up our experience to remodalization, we expose ourselves to pain and disorientation; we learn to accept a return to the very state of uncertainty from which the poetic act was supposed to secure us. We are made fragile, and yet, from this fragility emerges the peculiar strength of poetic experience, namely, that it may at any moment render solid that which dissolves or loosen that which binds, resolving itself into a form of hope that affirms the elusiveness of its own aspirations.