



“An infinite approximation, as is the approximation of the square to the circle”. Hölderlin on the problem of the ideal

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Abstract. Amid a period of isolation and profound internal conflict, both in his life and in his thought, arises that which, according to Hölderlin, is “the general conflict in the human being”, namely the conflict between the “aspiration to limitation” and “the aspiration to the absolute”. The aim of this article is to analyze and, as much as possible, follow to its fullest extent, this fundamental thought: to see how it molds Hölderlin’s positions on existence and philosophy, how it meets the most poignant philosophical concerns of the time and hence directly influences Hölderlin’s reading of Fichte, and how it leads the young poet to the notion of an infinite progression of philosophy, that is, to an infinite approximation to the ideal of knowledge.

Keywords: Hölderlin; spiritual conflict; ideal; philosophy; poetry; absolute; Fichte.

Summary: 1. Hölderlin’s problem before Hölderlin; 2. Hölderlin’s spiritual conflict between limitation and absolutization; 3. Hölderlin on the aesthetic-theoretical infinite approximation to the ideal.

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1. Hölderlin's problem before Hölderlin

Among the many problems legated by Plato to his future readers, one would prove so perennial that, one could say, it would carve its own history within the history of the reception of the Greek philosopher. We refer to the myth(s) of *the creation and death of man*, which are to be found partly in *Gorgias*, partly in *Timaeus*.

The philosophical content of such myths, if read conjointly, is known by all. It inquires on the possibility, or the impossibility, of uniting the mortal with the immortal²; a Platonic formulation which, in truth, is the paramount expression for other forms which the problem would come to assume – the union of finite and infinite, conscious and unconscious, subject and object, human and divine – which, in a word, are translated into man's possibility, or not, of experiencing the absolute. At stake in the myth is, then, *life*: life as the possibility or impossibility of once again summoning to itself origin and death: the *origin* which, as the golden age of man, is sensed in life as an ideal, which brings about the notion of retrocession to an original unit, forever lost; death which, as the totalization of human knowledge, as the last degree of man's cognitions, is sensed in life as one and the same ideal, which brings about a notion of progression towards a final unit, one always sought, yet never recovered. Life is, as such, between origin and death, and hence between finite and infinite; and thus, dwelling on the eternal disunion of the latter, which is as painful as necessary, life – human reflection and feeling – strives in its now anguishing, now palliative yearning for union.

Now, how intimately some philosophers – for example, Hemsterhuis, or young idealists such as Schelling or Hegel, also readers of Hemsterhuis – would interiorize this myth, rendering it the mold of their own conceptions of the problem regarding the totality of human knowledge, is plainly visible. Hemsterhuis, a neo-Platonic, wrote several dialogues either directly pertaining, or at least alluding to this theme, such as “Alexis, ou l'Age d'Or”³; Hegel often referred to the enigma of the union between finite and infinite in the writings of his youth, between 1786 and 1793⁴; and Schelling would adopt this, which according to him was Plato's principal thought⁵, as the most fundamental vector of his rising philosophy, as is visible first of all in “Über den Geist der Platonischen Philosophie”⁶ and the “Timaeus-Kommentar”⁷, and later in “Über die Möglichkeit einer Form der Philosophie (1794)”.

A different case, however, is that of Friedrich Hölderlin. Just like his friends in the *Stift*, Hölderlin too would be strongly influenced by Plato's thought, and no less by his mythology. But Plato's mythology would not just lie at the basis of Hölderlin's philosophical thought. Plato's myths, and their problem of the absolute, which would never be expressly named as such by Hölderlin, nor ever ascribed to its

² Plato: “Timaeus”, 41d (according to Henricus Stephanus' edition, Paris, 1578).

³ Hemsterhuis (2005).

⁴ See Hegel's texts “So wie sie mehrere Gattungen”, “B Moral”, “Das Wesen des Jesus” and “eine Ethik” (also known as “The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism”, of unknown authorship), in Hegel (2014).

⁵ “(Here, suddenly, transpires the principal proposition. Popular wisdom succeeded in conserving the sub-gods. The principal thought is the conjugation between the immortal and the mortal in man. This [the principal thought], wishes Plato to express – but he does so historically. (...) The principal proposition is but the non-historical – the enigmatic union between mortal and immortal, between pure and empirical in man –)” (STPS: 313).

⁶ See Franz (1996), pp. 282-320 (Appendix II).

⁷ See Buchner (1994).

original author by the young poet, would act silently, yet efficaciously, throughout the whole of Hölderlin's activity; indeed, so silently, yet so efficaciously, that this is acknowledgeable everywhere in the evolution of his young spirit, therein assuming different shapes, such as that of Hölderlin's original spiritual conflict, his problem with philosophy, his divergence regarding Fichte and even the ulterior end of his later poetological theory. Now, one such obsession and/or dependency on the thought of a possible or impossible human experience of the absolute, and its different and singular manifestations in the spirit of a young poet-philosopher, as they would be expressed by Hölderlin's quill between 1793 and 1795, are, as such, the object of this article. An object which we propose to render explicit in two concomitant manners:

1) Firstly, by describing the spiritual conflict which is at the basis of Hölderlin's philosophical thought, and, which is the same, at the ground of Hölderlin's position on the absolute. Here we intend to discern the two fundamental tendencies of Hölderlin's thought and feeling, the *aspiration to limitation* and the *aspiration to the absolute*, their inevitable conflict and their need for resolution in favor of the poet's spiritual emancipation.

2) Lastly, by describing the natural application of Hölderlin's personal problem, which is a problem of the possible experience or not of the absolute, to the philosophy of Hölderlin's time – which, not by chance, is also anchored on the same problem. Here we intend to present Hölderlin's positions on an infinite progression of philosophy, as well as that of an infinite approximation, of a theoretical-aesthetic order, to the absolute.

2. Hölderlin's spiritual conflict between *limitation* and *absolutization*

Searching for the influences of Hölderlin's first philosophy, one realizes that these are so multiple and at the same time so explicit, that examples of this abound. Among these are the influence of the French revolution⁸; the influence of Jacobi's *Spinoza-Büchlein*⁹, or Hemsterhuis' philosophical writings¹⁰, over a whole generation of young thinkers, and especially over Hölderlin and his *Hyperion*; the influence of Kant's¹¹ philosophy on the formation of the first philosophical, aesthetic, moral

⁸ The influence of the French Revolution is patent throughout Hölderlin's correspondence, well until 1792. This influence was so great on Hölderlin and his companions Hegel and Schelling, and especially so symbolic of a revolution of thought against the theological dogmatism that ruled over Tübingen, that, in commemoration of the event, all three will have jointly planted a tree in the Stift. See also Hölderlin's 1792 hymn "An die Freiheit" (GStA I: 139-142).

⁹ The influence of Jacobi's *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (1785), and its commencement of the so-called "Pantheismus-Streit", exerted a deep influence upon most students in Tübingen. Schelling would declare his Spinozism in a letter to Hegel dated 4th of February 1795 (See BrH I: 22); and Hölderlin himself would transcribe and annotate some passages of the book in a fragment posthumously entitled "Zu Jacobis Briefen über die Lehre des Spinoza" (GStA 4.1: 207-210). Also Jacobi's philosophical romances *Eduard Allwills Papiere* (1775) and *Woldemar* (1779) would be passionately read by a whole generation.

¹⁰ Hemsterhuis writings, especially his *Aristée, ou de la Divinité* (1779), his *Simon, ou des Facultés de l'Ame* (1787) and his *Alexis, ou de l'Age d'Or* (1787), were of great influence for Hölderlin from 1793 onwards, and hereafter for the Jena romanticist circle.

¹¹ Kant's influence is felt throughout Hölderlin's correspondence, and it is perhaps the most impacting philosophy not only for our poet, but for all thinkers and philosophers in general. This is felt from the second half of 1793 to the first half of 1796 – not by chance, dates which are almost coincidental with the ones of Hölderlin's spiritual

concepts of young thinkers; or the influence of the great theological-philosophical conflict in the University of Tübingen, which opposed Kant, and the divulger of his philosophy, Reinhold, to the supernaturalists Storr or Flatt, at the time Theology Professors of Hölderlin, Schelling or Hegel¹²; a conflict which would forever part such young thinkers from the old regime and cast them into a new regime of thought, today known under the broad designation of German Idealism.

One of Hölderlin's greatest influences is that of Plato and his myths; especially, as described above, Plato's myth of the possible union of the finite and the infinite, the limited and the absolute, that which, according to Schelling, was "the principal thought" of his philosophy (see Annotation 4). Now, for Hölderlin, as for Schelling, that which was especially relevant – and therefore influential – in this myth was not merely its importance within Plato's thought; nor its antithetical, even its seemingly paradoxical character, which only seemed to accentuate the problem of the union between finite and infinite. Truly decisive here was the fact that the myth, indeed sensible in its nature, was to promote (philosophical) thought; and that, according to the nature of the problem, the philosophical thought to be produced meant that Philosophy had to think the problem at hand to its extreme, indeed, it had to strain itself to the maximum, to correctly (philosophically) tackle a life problem: that of the oscillation of the human being between limitation and illimitation. That is, to think the problem between limitation and absolute in life, Philosophy had to quite literally take it upon itself to *live, to experience* this problem: to experience it as the problem between the limitation of human thinking and the absolute of human thinking, and only then provide life with a solution. And this, this necessary interference of Philosophy in life, this incontrovertible notion that this existential problem could only be solved – and yet, as we shall see, could never be solved – by Philosophy, in a word, this anguishing dialogue between a new, or fairly recent philosophical dimension, and Hölderlin's otherwise established, old poetical existence, and the need to conform both: I say, all this was in Hölderlin's view the key aspect in the interpretation of Plato's myth, but also and above all an example of Philosophy's true function in the scope of human life: namely, how Philosophy, by solving such a decisive existential problem as that between finite and infinite, by tackling an opposition which was crucial not only in Philosophy, but in life, was to bring life to a superior stage, of which Philosophy was to be but a necessary phase. Such a belief, as we shall see, would be paramount for Hölderlin, and it would not only be at the basis of his own philosophical thought, forcing him to have a philosophy that would tackle his existential problems, but it would guide him throughout his remaining philosophical endeavor.

As such, were we to ponder on the poet's *unitarian, fundamental thought, which may gather Hölderlin's previous influences and may be seen as the first image of a philosophical thought as such*, and Plato's challenge of a possible union between finite and infinite, the problem of the ideal, or the absolute, naturally arises as the poet's first foremost influence¹³. And so, quite unsurprisingly so, such a thought, the thought on the (possible or impossible) union between finite and infinite, would

emancipation. On Kant's influence over Hölderlin, see the end of this section.

¹² On this conflict, see Henrich (2004); Henrich (1991); Frank (1998).

¹³ On the topic of the absolute as opposed to limitation in Hölderlin, see Woezick (2010); Waibel (2014); Krell (2002); Silva (2012); Beyer (1993).

bring about a moment of decisive change in Hölderlin's life: a fracture, not a contingent, or given one, but a fracture which is generated internally after a long maturation from the poet, which the poet experiences under the form of a growing internal conflict – in a word, a silent internal scission, not to be identified promptly, but to be carefully reconstructed. Now, even though many of Hölderlin's writings allude to this fracture, even though Hölderlin at times indeed vocalizes his difficult relation with philosophy, it is not in these obvious examples that one should search for the first formulations of this conflict – as is the opinion of many of Hölderlin's critics¹⁴. To do so, one must instead consult his letters, and even amongst these, not those where the problem of philosophy is more openly expressed, rather those where Hölderlin refers to the course of his existence and the course of humanity in general, and where a personal philosophical problem hardly seems to be present.

The phenomenon in question, wherein the problem of Hölderlin's complex relation with philosophy is brought to evidence, has its peak between April 1794 and January 1795, but in truth spans over a greater period, approximately between the second half of 1793 and the final months of 1796¹⁵. This much is proved by the poet's correspondence. According to it, during his period in Waltershausen, Hölderlin leads the "life of an eremit" (GStA 6.1: 130)¹⁶, a life of "solitude, favorable to the formation of spirit and heart" (id.: 107), which would bring about a *rupture*. To quote the young poet, "Hardly a line was left of my old papers" (id.: 137). Hölderlin was "resolutely decided to separate himself from art" (id.: 113), and devoted himself to the study of philosophy, the "region of the abstract" (ibid.). And as a result of this study, a "metamorphosis" (id.: 109) takes place in him: namely, a period of internal transition or transformation, occasioned through philosophy, and solvable only through philosophy; a period in which "new ideas enthrall" (ibid.) the young poet, and which, to paraphrase Hölderlin, "would be very decisive in [his] future life" (id.: 148). Namely, in its definitive formulation, *a period of maturation, or spiritual emancipation*, which Hölderlin describes by saying that it is "The great transition from youth to the being of man, from affections to reason, from the reign of phantasy to the reign of truth and freedom" (id.: 137)¹⁷.

Such an emancipation, we believe, should be understood first and foremost in its literal sense – and hence, in an *existential* regard. Namely, the "great transition" through which the poet describes his period of rupture, his "metamorphosis", consists of a "transition from affections to reason, from the reign of fantasy to the reign of truth and freedom" (id.: 137). Hence, these words describe a profound personal

¹⁴ Hölderlin's posterior difficult relation with philosophy is well documented, yet not so much its origin from an early spiritual conflict, and much less from a spiritual conflict led by a philosophical issue as is that of the human possibility of attaining the absolute. On exceptions to this omission, see: Frank (1998); Frank (2004); Henrich (1991); Henrich (1986); Itô (1974); Jäger (1949); Jamme (2003); Kreuzer (2002).

¹⁵ Hölderlin's internal "metamorphosis" may be said to have begun approximately with the intensification of his readings in Kant (see Hölderlin's first references to Kant in GStA 6.1: 84, 105, etc.). Such an influence, as well as that of Fichte's philosophy, would last throughout the next two years, until the first months of 1797, when Hölderlin states: "I (...) hardly philosophize anymore" (id.: 235).

¹⁶ All citations, not only Hölderlin's, but also from other authors, will be presented in a traditional manner (Abbreviation of work, Volume of work, number of page(s)). The abbreviation of each work cited finds correspondence in the final bibliographical section. All citations have been translated from their original German language into English and are of my own translation.

¹⁷ A transition which, still according to Hölderlin, "seems to me to be worthy of such a long development" (GStA 6.1: 137).

experience, a key-moment in Hölderlin's own *formation* as a man, in this case, his difficult emancipation from a life as a poet to a life as a philosopher – a transition which, quite naturally, presupposed something as a reformulation of the powers of his spirit, namely, one which privileged reason and the understanding in detriment of affections, the power of imagination or fantasy. This difficult, very painful acquisition of a greater order, or a lesser dispersion, Hölderlin believed, is what resulted from his coexistence with philosophy and the rational powers of the spirit; but, conversely, only through the experience of this conflict, and in the very terms of the latter, could he attain the much-desired emancipation of his spirit. This is why Hölderlin subdued himself rather than voluntarily exposed himself to the yoke of the tyrant philosophy¹⁸. And hence, first and foremost, but not only, Hölderlin's difficult relation with philosophy¹⁹.

However, such an emancipation must be understood more profoundly, also in a *theoretical* regard – and this, we believe, is implied by the latter's existential aspect. For, indeed, Hölderlin's emancipation involves the powers of the spirit not only because it came to be accepted to connect certain powers to certain expressions of the human spirit, such as reason and the understanding to philosophy, or fantasy and affections to poetry. No. This emancipation evokes the powers of the spirit because it is in such powers, and the specific vision which Hölderlin had of them, that lies the core of the comprehension of the poet's problem with philosophy. Because, as such, the resolution of the problem of philosophy, as well as Hölderlin's prospect of spiritual emancipation, depend on that specificity of the powers of the mind; a problematic construct which cannot be restricted to the condition of a mere personal experience, rather must be considered as a human phenomenon in general.

Let us explain our words, yet resorting to Hölderlin's own elucidation of this problem in a letter to his step-brother, Karl Gok, on the 2nd of June 1796. Hölderlin believed that man is a being of oppositions, and that one of the most distinct manifestations thereof lies precisely in the procedure of the powers of his spirit – powers which are, after all, the expression of his feeling and thinking. As such, then, reason, the power of all powers, is characterized by ascribing itself, as well as the remaining powers, *two opposite directions*. *On the one hand*, reason *lays the ground* (“legt den Grund” (GStA 6.1: 208)) of human life, and this through “its principles, the laws of acting and thinking” (id.). To be sure, the ground is to be understood here as the foundation: reason founds human action and thought and, in addition, thus are founded action and philosophy, as well as *a first sense, in this case a restrictive one, of the latter*. Reason, one could say, thus aspires to an origin, a zero-degree of human knowledge.

But, on the other hand – and here is the problem for Hölderlin – this is just one of the tendencies of human reason. Reason, as such, must also be taken in all its span,

¹⁸ “Philosophy is a tyrant, and I rather tolerate its yoke than submit myself voluntarily to it” (GStA 6.1: 203).

¹⁹ Hölderlin would describe philosophy as “an hospital where to every disgraced poet such as myself may honorably flee” (See GStA 6.1: 289). Coincidentally, or not so much, other poets, not unrelated to Hölderlin, would also experience such a difficult relation with philosophy – although in somewhat different terms. As an example, let it be stated that, according to Wilhelm von Humboldt, Schiller too suffered from an “apparent oscillation between poetry and philosophy, a lack of confidence in his poetic task” (Werke, II: 358); and also Novalis, in a letter to K. L. Reinhold, denounced one such difficulty in reconciling the dispersions of philosophy with the order of philosophical thought (See NS, I: 508-514). In all these cases, such a spiritual conflict would prove decisive for the future spiritual development of its hosts.

in all its humanity, and hence in the total scope of human knowledge; and so, just as reason grounds human action and thought, thereby laying the ground – the zero-degree – of the latter (for this minimization, this eternal reference to an origin, are proof and characteristic of its humanity), so must reason likewise refer said human action and thought to another point, in this case, a maximum of human knowledge. Namely, reason must refer to the ideal, for the ideal is also a specific trait of human reason and an essential objective of human thought and action²⁰, and since it lays the ground, but cannot refer the ground but to the ideal, “the highest ground of all”, then what reason does is to “once again ground”, to relay the ground, to re-found said human action and thought, thus once again casting them in search of an ideal ground: “But those principles of reason are themselves once again grounded through reason, insofar as they are referred by the reason to the ideal, the highest ground of all” (GStA 6.1: 208). And hence, the result of this, this standardization of the relation between I and human knowledge, is first and foremost a conflict which extends to all powers of the mind: namely, regarding reason, which here stands for humanity itself²¹, this means a conflict of reason with itself, a conflict surely not brought about by reason, but of which reason is object. Concerning the understanding, which here conceives (*begreift*) human action and thought in their limitative and absolutizing tendencies, this means that the conflict of tendencies does indeed produce the concepts of the understanding: “the concepts of substance and accident, of effect and counter-effect, duty and right” (id.: 209); but those general concepts of the understanding are always opposites, as opposite are the tendencies which caused them to be²². And concerning the power of imagination, one subsumes, this conflict of reason with itself must give rise to several interpretations of imagination, as well as to various uses of the latter, according to the enforced tendency.

Hence, to summarize these two opposite tendencies of the powers of the mind, what results from this is not just any incongruence, or a mere conflict of interests of the latter with themselves. Quite on the contrary – so says Hölderlin – the result of this is “a general conflict in man” (id.: 208), not just in the individual, but in the whole human species: “the conflict of the aspiration to the absolute and the aspiration to limitation” (ibid.). Namely, the conflict, of a Platonic nature, between two tendencies of human powers, one striving for a return to the origin, for an eternal reference to the fundamental ground, to the first principles of human knowledge and action – which, according to Hölderlin, is an “aspiration to limitation” [*Streben zur Beschränkung*], and another one striving for a progression towards the end, for an eternal reference to the ideal, to the final frontiers of human knowledge and action – which, according to Hölderlin, is an “aspiration to the absolute” [*Streben zum Absoluten*]. And because such proclivities are part of, and in last instance compose human action and thought, and because both have to be taken here in their unceasing nature – as “a relentless activity” (GStA 6.1: 131) – then this only accentuates the conflict at hand, the double

²⁰ “There is in every human activity a consummation, even in acts” (GStA 6.1: 251).

²¹ See Hölderlin’s letter to Schiller, 20th of March 1794: “(...) all humanity, which is called in no other words reason (...)” (GStA 6.1: 111).

²² The whole sentence reads: “(...) then all union of this conflict [the conflict of aspirations] must produce a result, and these results of the general union of the conflict are then the general concepts of the understanding, for instance, the concepts of substance and accident, of effect and counter-effect, duty and right, etc. These concepts are to the understanding precisely what the ideal is to reason; just as reason forms its laws according to the ideal, so does the understanding form its maxima according to these concepts” (GStA 6.1: 208-209).

opposite propension of the human being and its expression through said powers of the mind, thus casting the I, and the human species in general, their life and philosophy, into a state of contradiction and confusion. Whence, once again, but now with greater appropriateness, Hölderlin's difficulty with philosophy; and whence the complexity of the process of poetical-philosophical, fanciful-rational emancipation to which Hölderlin subjected himself.

Now, thus considered Hölderlin's problem in its philosophical aspect, let us return to its *existential dimension*; namely, by taking into consideration Hölderlin's insistent references to the real repercussions of the former upon the latter and see if from the mutual consideration of both sides, and said repercussions, a reciprocal and more complete image of Hölderlin's problem may arise.

To do so, let us consider a letter from Hölderlin to his brother dated 21st of August 1794, written still in Waltershausen. Here Hölderlin refers to the *conditions* of that which he would come to consider, not two months past, the aforementioned "great transition (...) into the being of man" (GStA 6.1: 137); to be sure, the existential conditions for his by then germinating philosophical problem. According to the poet, then, one such emancipatory transition requires a "relentless activity" (id.: 131) – the abovementioned incessant activity of a search for the ground(s); and this search is of a *double nature*. Now, on the one hand, this emancipation requested from Hölderlin a "silent persistence" (ibid.), "an aspiration to act out of duty" (ibid.): more specifically, and on a more intimate level, a "renunciation to desires" (ibid.), a "negation and supplanting of the egoistic part of our being" (ibid.) and hence, a "unceasing aspiration to correct and expand concepts" (ibid.): all phenomena to which Hölderlin then abided, and which are very analogous to the aspiration to limitation which is part of philosophy. Namely, to put it briefly, it is characteristic of philosophy, and here more precisely of the limitative aspiration of reason, that the I, his life, his thought, restrict themselves to "an exiguous circle of action" (ibid.)²³. And hence, let it be noted, it is especially characteristic of philosophy, and the aspiration of *its* reason, that these are reflected in the life of the I, in such a way that the I restricts himself, shields himself from the infinite multiplicity of human life, of the constant dispersion and disorder of the world, and thus undertakes a concentration²⁴, a limitation of the powers of his mind, as well as the forces and occupations that are his. This, in a word, means that the philosophical limitation of reason takes place not only internally, or theoretically, concerning its repercussion in the powers of the mind, envisaging the limitation to an harmonious spiritual unity, but also externally, or existentially, concerning Hölderlin's experience as a human being, envisaging the limitation to an harmonious existential unity – only to be experienced, the former as well as the latter, in the minimum unity of human thought and action, in the origin.

However, on the other hand, Hölderlin says in the same letter of 21st of August 1794, and in the same passage of the previous enumeration of the conditions for the emancipation, that this limitative tendency of reason, this limitative tendency of philosophy, is opposed by an idealizing tendency – referring to the ideal – one which is contrary to the restrictive nature of the former one, but also necessary to the emancipation of the I and hence to the important transitional phase in the life of

²³ See Hölderlin's words: "(...) it is also great, to restrict one's forces to an exiguous circle of action" (GStA 6.1: 131).

²⁴ See Hölderlin's words: "My occupation is now quite concentrated (...)" (GStA 6.1: 128).

the poet. Hence, a “relentless activity” is indeed necessary; an “exiguous circle of action”, a “renunciation to desires”, a “negation and supplanting of the egoistic part of our being” are indeed necessary, both on a philosophical and on an existential level. But, according to Hölderlin, at the same time, from this restriction, from this gradual contraction of the powers of the mind and the respective experiential activity of the I, there arises something equally necessary, equally “relentless”, but opposite in nature. Namely, from this “a greater circle of action opens” (GStA 6.1: 131); that is, so to say, a concession to desires, an affirmation of the egoistic, universalizing part of our being, to be sure, a natural reflex of another tendency of reason and the remaining powers, and of philosophy itself, is herein brought into play. In Hölderlin’s own words, a “silent persistence” (ibid.), a “tranquility” (ibid.), characteristic of the correction and amplification – the discrimination – of the concepts of the understanding is indeed necessary, for this much is required by the *aspiration to limitation* of reason. But at the same time, and during the limitative impetus of rational thought, there emerges quite naturally a “feeling of self-imperfection” (ibid.), or incompleteness of the I, something which Hölderlin certainly identifies with the opening of the previous circle of action and thought, and which translates into a thirst for consummation²⁵, an irrepressible yearning for perfection, and universalization – the attainment of the ideal – in a word, all phenomena which are likewise analogous to those of the *aspiration to the absolute* of philosophy, and which Hölderlin brings to light oftentimes as a second essential impulse enrooted in himself²⁶. As a proof of this – already in September of 1793, and not without a Kantian tone, Hölderlin describes this as the “sacred objective of my desires and my activity” (id.: 93): namely, that he, Hölderlin, imbued with such an idealizing impulse, could “awake in our time the germs which in a future epoch would ripen” (ibid.) – the “germs of enlightenment” (ibid.), “for the formation of the human species” (ibid.). As another proof, Hölderlin states in an even more Kantian tone: “I would like to act on the universal (...). And now, brother of my heart! That objective, formation, improvement of the human species, that objective which we will perhaps attain only incompletely in our earthly life, but which will be attained more easily by a better posterity the more we prepare ourselves in our circle of action – that objective, my Karl! lives (...) also in your soul” (ibid.). And as the ultimate proof, Hölderlin states, on a letter dated from the 13th of April 1795, and in an unequivocally Kantian tone, that this universalizing progression, this search for the ideal is “irrefutable demand of our law” (id.: 163). For, according to Hölderlin, the “aspiration to the infinite” (ibid.) is real, and be it under the attire of an ideal of morality, as is the “highest possible morality” (ibid.), or an ideal of beauty, as is the *hen kai pan*, the One in the Whole, or an ideal of formation, as is that of the consummation of manhood, *this aspiration to the absolute exists*, and it is so strong that it must encompass the “belief” that “where the power of our will does not reach, be things as they are, they themselves will cooperate towards that end” (ibid.), and they themselves “will dispose themselves” (ibid.) towards that end. A belief in an arrangement of the ends of human life to which, as it seems, Hölderlin did not adhere just in a philosophical sense, regarding the thought and feeling of the I, but also in an existential sense, designating it merely as one’s “destiny” (GStA 6.1: 200).

²⁵ Not infrequently, Hölderlin refers to the wish “to satiate [his] consummation-thirsty soul” (GStA 6.1: 263).

²⁶ On this Hölderlin himself would say: “For this is also sheer profoundness, namely, complete cognition of the parts which we must ground and conceive in one, and deep, penetrating to the most extreme end of knowledge cognition of the one grounding and the one grounded. (GStA 6.1: 208).

Now, to sum up – and to finally bring to word Hölderlin’s true problem – so similar are the poet’s designations on his own spiritual conflict and those on his philosophical conflict; so similar are the opposing tendencies of the rational human powers, the “aspiration to limitation” and the “aspiration to the absolute”, and the opposing tendencies which Hölderlin then felt in his own life, the aspirations to a maximum of formation, or moral liberty, or beauty, and to a unitary minimum restriction of the latter; so similar were all these, that hardly could one sustain that all these were not the causes of Hölderlin’s “metamorphosis”, or spiritual rupture. These are, then, the manifestations of, and reasons for, Hölderlin’s personal conflict – a sign that Hölderlin would have to think the conflict of his life in philosophy – and of a conflict which is thus intimately double – a sign that Hölderlin would have to live, through philosophy, the conflict of his life. And indeed so it was, and all the letters, all of Hölderlin’s work seems to prove this very double and inevitable intertwining.

But, despite this important fact, this is not all as far as this last fold of Hölderlin’s philosophical conflict over his existential conflict is concerned. To be sure, the kern of both problems is not only in the conflicting character of two antithetical aspirations – and, as such, nor is this that which Hölderlin found truly problematic, or painful, in his experience of philosophy, in the philosophizing of his spiritual conflict. Truly difficult for the poet in particular and for the human species in general, is not the adoption of one or the other points of view, the concession to one or the other aspiration of his nature: nor would it be the alternate unfolding between each of these propensions, and their different dispositions of the powers of the mind. The conflict, according to Hölderlin, takes place because these two philosophical-existential aspirations, the two aspirations of man, and his powers, to the absolute and to limitation, are indeed simultaneous, and, as it seems, act independently from each other, yet nonetheless in their necessary interconnection: one striving for the absolute-maximum, instilling convictions of perfection and completeness, aspiring to the ideal and hence preventing the regression of the other; the other one striving for the absolute-minimum, instilling convictions of purity and originality, aspiring to the origin and hence preventing the progression of its counterpart. Namely, Hölderlin’s problem with the conflict of the aspirations to the absolute and to limitation resides not only in what is conflicting in it, but especially in the simultaneity, in the quite independent inter-dependence, the heterogeneous intimacy of the two drives of the human head and the human heart, which in truth seems to divide the human being and the powers of his mind, seems to cast him in a state of even greater confusion than that of the mere perception of the contradicting aspirations which rule over him – and, what is even more painful and anguishing than this, seems to perpetuate his fracture, to prevent his emancipation, his transition into humanity. And that is what is truly difficult for Hölderlin, that is what is truly thorny in his relation with philosophy and truly fracturing in his poetic soul: that one such dilemma, or apparent impasse in the aspirations of the human being, and the natural aspirations which constitute his thought and his action, was real in the human being, and visible not only in his actions, but also in his thought, in philosophy; and, on a private level, that this conflict was even more real in him, Hölderlin, a poet whose spirit never could detach life from thought, experience from theory.

Thus immersed in such a complex relation with philosophy, and at the peak of his emancipatory fracture, Hölderlin arrived in Jena, by then the capital of the philosophical debate of the age, in November 1794. And there would he stay

until June 1795, by then in possession of more solid philosophical grounds for his problem, and hence in a new stage of his “metamorphosis”. It is our task, then, to ascertain how the philosophy of the time would meet Hölderlin’s previous concerns, how Hölderlin would incorporate them in the body of his problem and, consequently, how he would arrive at Nürtingen in the second half of 1795.

3. Hölderlin on the aesthetic-theoretical infinite approximation to the ideal

Already in Jena, and at the height of “a period which would be decisive for [his] future” (GStA 6.1: 148), Hölderlin at last puts quill to paper and delineates the problem of his emancipation.

The embodiment of Hölderlin’s spiritual conflict may be sought in various areas, and various authors whose opinion on the problem of the simultaneous confrontation between an *aspiration to limitation* and an *aspiration to the absolute* surely influenced the young poet. The question, to be sure, is a truly controversial one since the end of the *Aufklärung* and would continue to be so throughout German Idealism and Romanticism; for be it under the guise of a conflict between finite and infinite, object and subject or origin and end, such a problem had been dealt with by other authors, and many more authors would still labor on it. One of these authors, the one who would handle the question most radically, and hence is of special interest to us, is *Fichte*; the same Fichte whose classes Hölderlin would devotedly attend, whose personal acquaintance Hölderlin would make and whom he would frequently praise²⁷, but also the same Fichte from whom Hölderlin would ultimately grow apart, and whose notion of the problem, so opposite was it from Hölderlin’s, would become the propeller spring for the (possible) resolution of the poet’s problem.

The problem of Hölderlin’s reading of Fichte, here etched broadly, is evident and faithfully reflects, though in more rigorously philosophical contours, the problem of the poet’s spiritual emancipation. It is approached in “Urtheil und Seyn” (GStA 4.1: 216-217), and replied almost *ipsis verbis* in letters to Hegel, dated 26th of January 1795, and to Karl Gok, dated 13th of April 1795, and resides on the absolute and/or limited nature of Fichte’s absolute I. Namely, Fichte had postulated an absolute I which, according to himself, was so because his procedure was a circular one, and because, once inside such a circle, the I and his self-interpretation could not leave it; that is, “if the I is to proceed being I” (W, 1: 70). And so, without changing a comma to Fichte’s words, Hölderlin sustains that Fichte’s absolute I does indeed “contain all reality, it is all, and outside of it nothing is” (GStA 6.1: 155). But, Hölderlin adduces, because the I is absolute, this means that “for this absolute I there is no object, otherwise, not all reality would be in it” (id.). Now, human consciousness and its most human manifestations, as are freedom, or beauty, *must have an object*, simply because “a consciousness without object is (...) unthinkable” (ibid.). An object, Hölderlin adds, which may and should be *the I itself*, which is here, in his self-consciousness, “necessarily limited (...) hence not absolute” (ibid.). And if, as is the case, this consciousness has no object, no limitation, then this means that “no consciousness may be thought in the absolute I” (ibid.), that hence “as an absolute I, I have no consciousness” (ibid.) and the “absolute I is (for itself) nothing” (ibid.).

²⁷ See on all these topics GStA 6.1: 139-140; 142; 152; 155; 164.

Now, if one translates the main problem of philosophy into that which by then assailed Hölderlin's spirit, the translation not only results obvious but it may lead us to new conclusions. The reason is simple. In Hölderlin's spirit as in Fichte's philosophy, central was the conflict between antinomic poles and the course of the I between the latter: a course which now adopted an absolutizing stance, now a limiting stance, and from then on weaved different philosophies, different destinations for the human being. Hence, on the one hand there is Fichte's synthetic philosophy, which progresses from finite to infinite, according to which the ideal of the I, the absolute, not only can be attained, but is indeed attained at every moment of the existence of an absolute consciousness. To resume Hölderlin's view of the problem, in Fichte's theory reason *lays the ground* (*legt den Grund* (GStA 6.1: 208)), but, precisely as it lays the ground, or the foundation, it lays the ideal, and reason, the understanding, the power of judgment, all are enthralled by it, hence re-founding, re-grounding, thus falling into the height of the absolute. And thus arises the absolute, or the ideal. *On the other hand*, there is the philosophy of analytics, which progresses from infinite to finite, where reason envisages only the ground it itself lays, and to have it back decomposes and to recover that ground it [reason] dismembers everything until it returns to the fist origin of human knowledge. And thus, from this limitation, arise the general concepts of the understanding, or the opposites. Hence, on one side, the ideal of human spirit is the image of an absolute I; on the other, the reality of the human spirit is the image of an empirical I. On one side, the amplest circle of action of the I, the glorification of the *aspiration to the absolute*, which Hölderlin too exerted and felt in himself; on the other, the most exiguous circle of action of the I, the crystallization of the *aspiration to limitation*, which Hölderlin too exerted and felt in himself. Reasons which, we believe, are more than sufficient to prove the close affinity between the problem of philosophy in general and that of Hölderlin.

However, it just so happens that the mere identification of Fichte's problem with Hölderlin's existential and philosophical problem does not bring us much further in the resolution of the latter. As it seems, such an identification must be complete, and to do so, one must take heed of Hölderlin's full reaction to this question. As such, the *aspiration to limitation* and the *aspiration to the absolute* are the two constituting elements of the "general conflict in the human being" (GStA 6.1: 208); and, according to our vision of them, they carry on being conflicting, as they are in the maximum example of a consciousness devoid of object, an absolute I devoid of consciousness, an opposite without the other – or its antipode, which is also not to be desired. Now, according to Hölderlin's suggestion, the conflict lies therefore in the total isolation of such tendencies; for this isolation seems to result only in univocity. But let us recall that, because in each of these tendencies is only the negation of the other, in those tendencies resides also – and always – their inter-dependence; and this inter-dependence, which is simultaneous, is even more problematic – it is, to be fair, the whole problem, of which a simple dissolution, or separation, which is never total, and does not exist as such, is not a solution. And hence, one could infer that if the conflict is both in the simultaneity of both aspirations, in limitation, as in absolutization; as well as in its apparent separation, then neither mere separation, nor mere coexistence, can serve here as solutions. Quite on the contrary, according to the young poet, something of both of them, but something of neither of them, must take place. Namely, because the dissolution of any of them can never really occur, then they must indeed be brought to one another in their separation; but because the

bringing to one another is not at all desired, then they must be somehow separated in their union. That is, the aspiration to the absolute and the aspiration to limitation, as is rendered obvious by Fichte's theory, or would be by the antipode of the latter, must be brought to such a state of union that is a separation, a separation that is union: in a word, a resistance between opposites, and one such resistance which not only shows that the opposites must exist, for that is part of the natural procedure of the human spirit, but also shows that they cannot exist, for that is the other part of the natural procedure of the human spirit. Between subject and object, finite and infinite, limitation and absolute, there must be neither unhindered, nor completely hindered progression or regression, rather a mutual resistance, a productive tension of eternal mutual supplanting, between opposing tendencies: in Hölderlin's own words, *a state of fermentation*²⁸, a third state of production of the unheard of, of the unexpected in the human spirit, something like an object between pure I and empirical I, which brings the opposites to a necessary alternative *state of union in disunion*.

Hölderlin himself, not long after the first wave of influence of Fichte's doctrine of science, brings to word this problem. The kern of the question, however, is how he does this. Hölderlin approaches the question at least twice in his correspondence. The first one takes place on the 4th of September 1795, in a letter to Schiller, wherein arises a first statement of the wish to show "the unavoidable demand that must be made to every system, the union of subject and object in one absolute – I, or however one wishes to call it" (GStA 6.1: 181), and the second one on the 24th of February 1796, in a letter to Niethammer, where Hölderlin says, even more explicitly, that "I want to find the principle that explains the separations in which we think and exist, which is however capable of rendering in-existent the conflict, the conflict between subject and object, between our self and the world, even between reason and revelation – theoretically, in the intellectual intuition, in without our practical reason having to come to aid. For this we need aesthetic sense and I shall call my philosophical letters "New Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man" (id.: 203).

Now, one such purpose, as it seems, obeys certain conditions.

The first condition, Hölderlin says in both occasions, is that this is carried out "theoretically, in the intellectual intuition, in such a way that our practical reason must not come to our aid" (ibid.). That is, the first condition of a possible union between the aspiration to limitation and the aspiration to the absolute, object and subject, is that it is undertaken theoretically – theoretically, to be sure, referring here to the manner of progression of the human spirit now towards the ideal, the absolute, now towards the origin, the limitation. Now, as concerns the progression of the human spirit towards the ideal(s), Hölderlin's position is clear. For, according to the poet, if one takes the human progress towards the ideal of absoluteness in a practical manner, then this means that the ideal would have to act constitutively upon the spirit – which would surely be the case if man were a being in eternal unity, if his course towards the ideal or the origin were unhindered, or if the ideal were in any of these cases always at hand. The case, however, is not this – and hence, the constitutive action of practical reason cannot "come to the aid" of this question. It is therefore necessary to understand the question *theoretically*, for, from this point of view, the ideal acts in its merely regulating function upon the spirit, and hence there is no heteronomy between the human spirit and the super-human absolute. As such, then, this means

²⁸ See GStA 6.1: 229, 277.

that between the human spirit and its ideal(s) there is no close connection, there is no mere prescience of a totality waiting to be fulfilled, there is no simple proximity, nor simple progression. Quite on the contrary, the fact that the I proceeds regulatively in relation to the absolute, or the origin, means that there is between it and any of these something as a *barrier* – a barrier which is set by their mutual distance, thus bringing about the “general conflict in the human being” (GStA 6.1: 208), as well as Hölderlin’s problem as we know it. This barrier, let it be noted, is precisely the resistance which Hölderlin believed must exist between the opposites, and which the human being must feel in itself if he is truly human; and because the absolute must be regulative, and the I must then be at once divided and united by the opposites which are his own being, then it is Hölderlin’s conclusion, as well as *condition*, that *human progression can never be a finite one*. It may surely be an auspicious one, but never one fully quenched, for it regenerates from its own satiation. Such a progression is only possible through the “idea of an infinite progression of philosophy” (id.: 181)²⁹.

The *second and last condition* derives from the former one and is no less important. For, according to Hölderlin, it is indeed indispensable that man approaches the ideal of the absolute theoretically. But, so says the poet, this means that man “needs for this aesthetic sense” – and hence must undertake this not only theoretically, but also, what is seemingly identical, *aesthetically*.

As we see it, the question lies here in a more minute – but hence more fundamental – meaning of the problem: that of the reciprocal relation between the opposites and the comprehension of their resistance. Now, as was seen, the ideal acts regulatively upon the human spirit, which renders it unattainable for the latter. The same happens with the ideal of limitation, or the origin, which Hölderlin never separates from that of the absolute insofar as these are two sides of the same coin. This means, then – to resume Hölderlin’s problem – that human reason, the understanding, are led to extend in their maximum ampleness between ideals. But because both these ideals act simultaneously, then their ampleness, though maximum, is insufficient to untie this Gordian knot, not even to ascribe it a different form, perhaps one less Gordian, of reciprocity between opposing aspirations. In other words, reason and the understanding, in their intrinsic rationality, do not possess the agility to comprehend the problem but in its statically problematic form; and whenever they are faced with the abovementioned mutual resistance or productive tension between opposites, they cannot conceive this and halt, thus bringing about the irresoluble problem. However, so says Hölderlin, the fact that this problem seems irresoluble in the eyes of “mere understanding, mere reason, the Kings of the North”, (GStA 3: 83), this does not mean that the problem is indeed irresoluble. For if Man, when faced with this intricate problem that takes place in himself, adopts a more ductile disposition, less prone to what man thinks, and more prone to what man feels in it, the problem is solvable. Namely, it is solvable if one comprehends that the opposites, the opposing aspirations of the human spirit, are indeed incompatible and are indeed completely insatiable. But, at the same time, if one discerns that it is possible that between origin and absolute nothing differs but a name, and that both are one and the same image of infinity; if one discerns that from mere understanding and mere reason nothing good and productive may come forth towards the solution of such a complex

²⁹ See also Hölderlin’s fragment “Hermokrates an Cephalus” (GStA 4.1: 213). On this matter, see, among others, Frank (1998); Hoffmeister (1944); Lacoue-Labarthe (1998).

problem, but that from a different point of view of the latter the comprehension of the communion of origin and absolute may be attained, then, the vision of a linear, finite progression towards the ideal(s) is rendered meaningless and must be replaced by something radically different: a non-linear, never attainable yet infinitely pursuable, never finite yet always infinite, progression towards the absolute: “an infinite approximation (...), as is the approximation of the square to the circle” (GStA 6.1: 181)³⁰. For, it is Hölderlin’s conclusion, “in order to render real a system of thought, it is necessary an immortality, as much as it is for a system of action” (id.). Upon assuming this, Hölderlin discerns that the aim of such a search for union is not in pursuing an impossible absolute point, rather in pursuing the possibility of the impossible, in living this experience beyond what it may have of intellectuality and within what it may have of truly sensible. In a word, once it perceives this, and sees the impossibility of this desideratum and yet the possibility of persevering in the path towards the ideal, then the human being is left with no other choice than to approach it *aesthetically*, through the double, mutual reverse of those two sides of the same coin: not through the limited, or the absolute, but first and foremost through a different aspect, a different employment of both the understanding and reason, one visible in the “divine εν διαφερον εαυτώ, the ideal of beauty of the aspiring reason” (GStA 3: 83)³¹. For, according to Hölderlin, “From mere understanding comes no philosophy, for philosophy is more than just the *limited* knowledge of what exists” (id., my it.), and “From mere reason comes no philosophy, for philosophy is more than blind demand of a *never-ending progression* in union and differentiation of a possible matter” (ibid., my it.). And if this is so, if philosophy is more than just aspiration to limitation and/or aspiration to the absolute, then this means that it must be something in-between: namely, philosophy is the union in disunion, or the union in differentiation of the opposites, of all opposites, including limitation and the absolute; and such opposites are here unattainable, yet pursuable as long as we see them aesthetically, that is, when understanding and reason cease their common searches for the absolute and limitation, and rather see such aspirations as they were not seen before: in their “fermentation”, in their progressive resistance, in their heterogeneous homogeneity.

At last, one may ask what comes from these two conditions, if both seem to fail their purpose and are after all conditions for the unattainability of the end which is theirs?

³⁰ To be sure, Hölderlin was far from being alone in this conception of an infinite progression towards the ideal, nor were this image, or that of the *quadrature of the circle*, the only images that expressed such a notion. For the sake of completion, let it be stated that some authors still referred to the notion of an infinite progression as the *philosopher’s stone*, or even as the *infinite weaving of a ball of thread* (“Knäuel”). On this I quote Johann Benjamin Erhard, who, not without a touch of irony, states: “This procedure of searching for the supreme grounds through reflections, of correctly subsuming the consequences and comparing the concordance of these consequences with that which was proved correct in experience, and of deeming this as true only in face of its harmony with experience (...), was to this day the method of the sane human understanding, and it is advisable that we abide by it until philosophical adepts are granted the opportunity to find the philosopher’s stone or the supreme principle, of which all truths are to be weaved as from a ball of thread (ErRVV: 10); and still Friedrich Karl Forberg, who, by alluding to Erhard’s previous passage, adds: “That speculative reason is in want of a supreme principle, from which all truths are to be weaved as from a ball of thread, is undeniable. But I fear that what happened to alchemists, with their philosopher’s stone, shall happen to philosophers and their supreme principle. They shall search for it endlessly and shall never find it. This is a task that nature gave reason not so that reason finds its resolution, but so that reason searches for it» (UA: 452-453).

³¹ “The great word, the εν διαφερον εαυτώ, (The One in itself differentiated) (...), for this is the essence of beauty, and ere it was found there was no philosophy” (GStA 3: 81).

Hölderlin's answer seems to be manifest and to coincide with this first impression: one cannot hope for them to unite, nor for them to be simply disunited, and hence one cannot expect from them a solution for the problem of philosophy. From them none of these things is to be hoped, simply because their resolution is impossible, *and must be impossible*. And yet, in that which does in fact result from them, in the notion of an infinite approximation of a theoretical, i.e. aesthetical nature, to the ideals of limitation and absolute, is nonetheless more than just a new collocation of the problem. In it is, in all truth, an *advancement* in the problem. Namely, in these two conditions is a whole new disposition of the I in his self-interpretative cognition, and its cognition of the world, for in it is the exact delimitation of human forces in their measurement against the divine ones, and hence the exact degree of possible limitation as well as the exact degree of possible absolutization of the human being. In these two conditions, then, is the exact, and possible – for within disproportion and impossibility – proportion of the two opposing aspirations which command the human being and are the archetype of all the opposites ones that grant man its humanity. And in this proportion, in this singular intermediate path between the aspiration to limitation and the aspiration to the absolute is that which Hölderlin deems the “eccentric path” (GStA 3: 236), which all must follow from childhood to adulthood, and then to consummation. An “eccentric path” according to which man was once one with nature, and hence it is now man's task to “return to the arms of the eternally young nature, from whence we departed” (GStA 6.1: 210)³²; but according to which, upon tearing himself away from the pacific *ἐν καὶ πᾶν* of the world, through the birth of philosophy, man only did so to “restore it through [himself]” (GStA 3: 236): “The blissful Unicity, the Being, in the unique sense of the word, is lost for us, and we had to lose it if we were to aspire and to fight for it” (id.)³³. In other words, Hölderlin adds, “to put an end to that eternal conflict between our self and the world, to restore (...) the peace of all peaces, to unite ourselves with nature in an infinite whole, such is the objective of our aspiration” (ibid.); and yet, Hölderlin adds, “neither our knowledge nor our action may reach in any period of existence there, where all the conflict ceases, where everything is one; the determined line unites with the undetermined one only in infinite approximation” (ibid.). Namely, then, the “eccentric path” of a union in disunion, of the (im-)possible infinite approximation to the absolute, which ultimately tells us that we have lost our much-sought unity, but that we lost it only so we could come to know of it, through the feeling of its loss, through the aspirations to the maxima which guide us, through the opposites which give us our humanity, even through the blind, machine-like and excessive uses of our reason and our understanding, which bring about and must bring about, the internal conflicts of man – as is that of Hölderlin.

³² “It is a warm and consoling felling, that of sensing and as much as possible understanding the affinity in which we are with regard to the ample and joyous nature” (GStA 6.1: 202).

³³ “We now feel profoundly the restriction of our being, and the benumbed force fights impatiently against its chains, and yet there is something in us that prefers to maintain these chains – for were the divine in us restricted by no resistance, we would know nothing outside of us, nor would we know of ourselves, and to know nothing of oneself, not to feel oneself, and to be destroyed, is for us one and the same thing.” (GStA 3: 194).

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