

the sun's finitude behind and return to Greece, to the light and shadows that make Greece Greece. For Embiricos, there is no mourning, no death, except in relation to the sun, this sun that illuminates at the same time that it blinds us, this sun that both enables and prohibits sight. All photography belongs to the sun, which is why, for Embiricos, in a certain sense, it belongs to Greece.

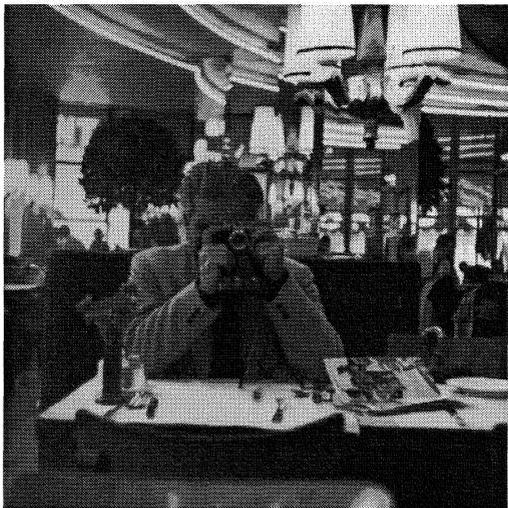


Figure 15: Paris, 1961

And it is Greece that he thinks about every day. But what is it that happens within his imagination in relation to Greece? What is it that haunts him? What is it that encourages him to focus, like a kind of camera, on the relations among photography, psychoanalysis, and the day or night of the unconscious? What is it that, for Embiricos, makes memory a Greek thing?

Embiricos' photographs are the indices of his particular vision, the traces of a declaration of love, and, if we listen to the silence of his photographs, we perhaps can hear him say, across this silence, and to the Greece he loves: "I can only find myself in relation to you, my love, even though I know that, because of this relation, I can never be simply myself. Obsessed with you, and by you, I lose myself in the madness of a single desire: to alter time. I want nothing else than to arrest time, to stop it, to seal it within the surface of a photograph. I want nothing else than to archive and preserve, within a series of photographs, not only the speed of light but also the night and oblivion without which I could never know what light could be cast on the permeable contours of my unconscious, and, yes, also the death and mourning without which neither I nor you could be what we are."

## Friedrich Hölderlin: Cultural Memory as Fiction

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The major German poet I am concerned with has never become a household name in the English-speaking world. Friedrich Hölderlin was born in 1770, the same year as Beethoven, but he was to have a much shorter creative life. Mental illness – most likely schizophrenia – set in his early 30s, and his last complete poem is usually dated to 1803. For the few years after 1803, he continued writing, occasionally producing short passages in which his genius briefly is present. In 1804 he published surprising translations of Sophocles' *Oedipus and Antigone* – surprising because, in the language of the text, German is often bent to fit Ancient Greek linguistic forms. In a translation, the qualities of the object language are usually sacrificed for the sake of the new expression. But here the opposite occurs. This is a process which began with Hölderlin's translation of seventeen of Pindar's Odes in 1800, and which ended with the occasional subordination of German to Greek.<sup>1</sup> From 1806 until his death almost 40 years later in 1843, he was confined as mentally ill and the only verse he produced in these years showed nothing of the powers that had made his mature work so extraordinary.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. R. B. Harrison, *Hölderlin and Greek Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975), p. 280: "But he regarded as inspired not only the scriptures in the narrow sense of the word, but also prophetic works from the divinely inspired Greek past. It is in this context that we must see not only Hölderlin's Sophocles translations, but also his translation and interpretation of the Pindar fragments." Cf. also David Constantine, *Hölderlin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 291: "The translation, keeping very close to the Greek, arrives at a German which is odd, but striking and intelligible; the lines retain the strangeness of translated poetry" and p. 295: "The ground of feeling in Hölderlin's work was always a longing for immanence, and his increasing preoccupation with these two holy texts and with the mechanics of tragedy has undertones of an increasing desperation. Steiner detects in Hölderlin's Sophocles 'a solicitation of chaos', rightly, I think."

Hölderlin's career as a poet – one could as well say his lack of a career as a poet – was not unusual for Germany at the time. His early poetry was very imitative of other poets who were in fashion – especially Schiller – and for that reason he had little difficulty in getting individual poems published in anthologies. He also succeeded in having a novel, *Hyperion or: The Hermit in Greece* published in two volumes, the first in 1797, the second in 1799. The question is then: what then went wrong? This has been a subject of controversy in the enormous volume of secondary literature which flourishes about Hölderlin's not very extensive works. One extreme position is to deny that anything went wrong at all – that Hölderlin, for the best part of 40 years, sought shelter in *feigned* madness as a way of avoiding political persecution. Only a minority of Hölderlin scholars believe it, and their own mental health is, in my view, a little suspect. One may well argue that his mental collapse – if he indeed suffered from schizophrenia – was in any event inevitable, and that a comfortable, undemanding existence would have done little to delay the end. I and others tend to see some hastening of his mental deterioration by the events of what was anything but a fortunate life. Hölderlin was not poor, nor from a family without any regard for education. Rather, he was amply educated, mainly in Latin and Ancient Greek, and sent in his adolescence to the *Tübinger Stift*, a Protestant theological seminary where his mastery of the classical languages increased. A fellow student and close friend was to become famous as the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

Students at the *Tübinger Stift* were meant to become Protestant clergymen, and one of the difficulties Hölderlin was later to encounter again and again was that every time he sought employment outside the Protestant church, he needed the permission of the *Consistorium*, the ecclesiastical authority for Swabia. He experienced no dramatic loss of faith, and there was no sudden revolt against a Christian vocation on Hölderlin's part. Rather, there was a gradual process by which the authorities of orthodox Christianity were replaced by other spiritual ideals. Many of them emerged from the mutation of a non-dogmatic German Enlightenment into an idealist philosophy which could co-exist with Christianity, mainly because the abstractions of Kant and Fichte were so removed from what was preached in the churches that collisions were avoidable. But by far the most powerful spiritual authority was Ancient Greece, mainly as it was understood through its literature and a very selective and uncritical image of its history and of its society.

Hölderlin's insight that he was not suited for the life of a country parson in Swabia left open for him only one obvious alternative: to become a *Hofmeister*, or a tutor to the children of a wealthy family. Schiller, who could not but approve of Hölderlin's well-crafted imitations of his own poetry, got him his first such job. As with many things in Hölderlin's creative life, all began well and ended badly. His main preoccupations, however, underwent little change. On July 10, 1794, he writes to his friend Hegel: "My intellectual efforts are reduced to a narrow focus. Kant and the Greeks make up virtually my whole reading-matter. I am trying at present to master the aesthetic side of Kant's critical philosophy."<sup>2</sup> Shortly after, he went to Jena, where the philosopher Fichte was delivering lectures to enthusiastic audiences on his even more abstract version of Kantian Philosophy. For even as thoroughgoing an idealist as Hölderlin, there was something in the distance from concrete experience in the more abstruse doctrines of Fichte that he found inimical to poetry, which lay closer to his heart, and one might say that an overdose of idealist abstraction at the hands of Fichte confirmed once and for all his poetic vocation. Turning to poetry as a vocation also effectively cut off the prospects of an academic career as a philosopher or as a philologist, and this again left him with the choice of being either a country parson or a tutor to the children of an affluent family, because, although he could publish, he could assuredly not live by what he could earn from literature.

It was both his joy and misfortune to find the love of his life in the mother of the children he was next employed to tutor: Suzette, the wife of the wealthy Frankfurt banker, Gontard. Things took their predictable course. Hölderlin was sacked, as his attachment to the lady of the house – and of her to him – could no longer be concealed. But it was not a dismissal in disgrace. Friedrich and Suzette were never caught in bed – indeed, we know from one of Suzette's letters to Hölderlin, which they exchanged in secret after his departure from the house, that their love did not reach a sexual consummation. But this failure in his employment was a blow to Hölderlin in more senses than one. Not only was he separated from the one being he loved most on earth – Suzette was to die before he succumbed to mental illness – but finding a way to subsist now became a major issue. It should not have been so hard, since he had inherited from his father a considerable sum of money, but his mother held it in trust for

<sup>2</sup> Hölderlin, *Werke und Briefe*, Friedrich Beissner and Jochen Schmidt (eds), (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1969), vol. 2, p. 826. This and all other texts by Hölderlin in the following are translated by the author.

him and she was excessively mean in doling out the money that was really her son's, especially when he was most in need of it.

Still worse, Schiller withdrew his patronage from him in the literary sphere. We must realise that German literature at the turn of the 18th century was a very small pond indeed. Goethe's opinions carried great weight, and Goethe, unfortunately, was very bad at picking winners from among the young talents clamouring for his attention. Indeed, it took him some years from their first acquaintance to Goethe's full acknowledgement of Schiller's talent. Once Goethe and Schiller had formed a close alliance that lasted from 1794 till Schiller's death in 1805, they exercised a hegemony over literature for the cultural élite in all German-speaking countries. Their unreserved approval or lukewarm praise could make or break a career in its beginnings. Hölderlin was never on Goethe's wavelength. Hölderlin can be the most abstract of all German poets, and Goethe preferred the concrete. When Schiller began rejecting work by Hölderlin, because it made him uneasy, Goethe was the last to disagree with him, and so Hölderlin thus joined the group of younger talents who were on the outer and by no means to be encouraged. Great talents they might have been, but the fact remains that Goethe and Schiller were overtly concerned with literary politics. They wanted to foster only those young writers who would carry what they understood as their own tradition into the future, and Hölderlin did not fit the mould.

At first sight it is hard to see why. Goethe and Schiller had been among the pioneers of German Hellenism, and Goethe, in particular, kept returning to themes from the literature and mythology of Ancient Greece, after he had set an example, in 1785, by his radical recasting in German of Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*. Hölderlin's enthusiasm for Ancient Greek literature was based on a better knowledge of Ancient Greek than either Schiller or Goethe possessed, and yet Hölderlin's Hellenism, as expressed in poetry, did not appeal to the enthusiastic Hellenists Goethe and Schiller. Was it simply too personal, too lacking in proper distance, too much like a religious cult?

For one thing, Hölderlin began writing a different kind of German poetic diction from any that his contemporaries could readily attune to. In a sense, he found his own unmistakable poetic voice by moving – in his poetic practice – his German closer to Ancient Greek cadences and turns of phrase than was easy on contemporary ears. An extreme example – at the end of his career – are his translations from the year 1804, when complete mental collapse was imminent. Here Hölderlin's literal rendering of the Ancient Greek goes so far as to make his German at times almost

unintelligible, unless one happens to know where the text is heading anyway. But, at the height of his powers, Hölderlin's best poetic creations are unthinkable without techniques he adapted from Pindar. And yet, we find him, at the end of his creative life, subjugating his own language to that of his model, so that one could and did ask: Has this great German poet lost his grip on German? Thus we have the situation that a truly gifted poet, who shared the admiration for all things Ancient Greek that was so widespread among German writers and intellectuals in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, still ended up being marginalised. The kind of life he was obliged to live as a private tutor marginalised him anyway. The question I wish to answer here is: did this estrangement also have anything to do with Hölderlin's Hellenism?

To ask this question, we are obliged to venture into the minefield of German Hellenism itself. It is a peculiar minefield, for it is only dangerous for foreigners. From *within* German literary criticism, the question of whether the fixation on Ancient Greece was positive or negative in its effects on the course of German literature scarcely arises, indeed cannot arise. Winckelmann's enthusiasm for works of art he believed to be Greek – although many were Roman copies – began a vogue which soon produced that paradigm of German neo-Hellenism, Goethe's play *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, and without that one work the literary phase that is still called in Germany "Weimar Classicism" simply could not have got underway. How can one criticise, in these terms, the German enthusiasm for Ancient Greece, when doing so risks downgrading the Golden Epoch of one's own literature?

Looked at from outside, the story is different. In 1935, the Cambridge German scholar, Eliza M. Butler, published a seemingly authoritative book entitled *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany*. In it, she effectively accuses German Hellenism of destroying German literature. Goethe's fascination for Greece is condemned as a "contamination by that alien world". Schiller is shown as "wrestling desperately with a superhuman foe", namely Ancient Greek culture as he knew it, and, of course, losing. Winckelmann, who had given the whole craze its kick-start, is likewise a casualty: "A mysterious terror of the land he loved and his cult of Hellenic friendships together brought about his lamentable end." Incidentally, the effects on Nietzsche surpass any of these horrors: "Nietzsche's tormented mind was rent asunder by ecstatic worship of the god Dionysus."<sup>3</sup> Ms Butler had, apparently, never heard of tertiary syphilis. Eliza M. Butler is clearly over

<sup>3</sup> Eliza M. Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (London, 1935), pp. 334ff. and p. 314.

the top, and her work gathers dust on library shelves today. My guess is that she saw what Nazism was doing to Germany and decided to blame Hellenism for it. Why she did it at such length is a mystery, and I would be much more inclined to blame the Treaty of Versailles and the political conditions it forced on a defeated Germany. That eminent poets and philosophers, such as Gottfried Benn and Martin Heidegger, became fellow travellers of Nazism may have allowed Nazism's visible destruction of contemporary German culture to seem at that time to be driven by elements in German high culture itself. Certainly an enigma was there, one that Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno tried to solve in 1947 in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in terms of the Enlightenment's working through its own inherent contradictions. It has since become apparent how little use Nazism had for the intellectuals who courted it, and how it simply used high culture when expedient. But in 1935, Ms Butler blamed Hellenism, again and again. Today we can ask the question that perhaps underlies her polemics but which she never articulates: did the relationship of modern Germany to Ancient Greece appear to her as a spurious, and thus, by extension, pernicious cultural memory?

A later attack on German Hellenism came in the first volume of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* in 1987.<sup>4</sup> Bernal accuses various German literary figures and scholars of having imposed what he terms the "Aryan Model" on the perspective through which Ancient Greece is viewed. Bernal's intentions have virtually nothing in common with Ms Butler's a half-century before. Bernal is quite indifferent to the issue of whether the Hellenism that arose in Germany from about 1780 onward had a positive or negative influence on German literature. He is obsessively concerned with what he sees as a defamatory denial of Egyptian and Phoenician influence on the origins of Greek culture by European Hellenists at large in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Bernal has been assailed and condemned from every possible position, indeed to the point of exhaustion in the anthology *Black Athena Revisited*, edited by Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy Maclean Rogers, a monument to nit-picking and special pleading, if ever there was one.<sup>5</sup> This is not to deny that point after point is scored against Bernal by experts in fields where he was not an expert. The problems I, as a German scholar, have with Bernal's

<sup>4</sup> Martin Bernal, *Black Athena The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, 2 vols (London: Free Association Books, 1987)

<sup>5</sup> *Black Athena Revisited*, Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy Maclean Rogers (eds), (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). See also: Mary Lefkowitz, *Not out of Africa. How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996).

attackers is that – in their zeal to crucify Bernal – they gloss over that Hellenistic tradition in Germany that was to culminate in the writings of Nietzsche, who – let us not forget – began his career as a professor of classical philology in Basel. In the chapter entitled "Bernal and the Nineteenth Century", Nietzsche is not mentioned at all, although he published a constant flow of works from 1872 until his final mental collapse in 1889. His influence in Germany grew steadily from the mid 1880s till 1945. In fact, there is no reference to Nietzsche at all in the index of *Black Athena Revisited*, and yet modes of thinking about Ancient Greece, which were later to be termed quintessentially Nietzschean, were amply evident in German literature from the late 18th century onward.<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, in his youth, certainly considered Hölderlin the greatest of all German poets, and the intellectual and emotional complex to which Nietzsche was to give the name "Dionysos" certainly did not spring fully-armed from the void in 1872 in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*.

Another tendency of Bernal's critics in *Black Athena Revisited* is to correct a genuine error on Bernal's part, while at the same time shooting themselves in the foot. This occurs in an exemplary fashion in Robert E. Norton's essay entitled: "The Tyranny of Germany over Greece?" Whilst mounting a spirited defence of something that Johann Gottfried Herder said in the eighteenth century, showing that Bernal likely got it wrong by taking it from a second-hand source, Norton racks up a large number of points against his own side by writing the following:

To begin with, it must be said that the German relationship to Greece in general has indeed been fraught with troubling ambiguities, not all of which are savoury to contemplate. Bernal is certainly correct that toward the end of the eighteenth century and then thereafter, many aspects of the German attitude toward Greece were unquestionably based on nationalistic and chauvinistic prejudice. One of the earliest and clearest examples of the German belief in a special affinity between themselves and the Greeks can be found in Friedrich Schlegel's essay "Über das Studium der Griechischen Poesie", in which he claimed that "an entirely new and incomparably higher state in the study of Greek things has been introduced by *Germans*, and it will perhaps

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Anthony Stephens, "Socrates or chorus person? The problem of individuality in Nietzsche's Hellenism", in: G.W. Clarke (ed.) *Rediscovering Hellenism the Hellenic inheritance and the English imagination*, (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 242-248.

remain for some time to come their sole possession.” [1795-96] The notion that Germans were somehow constitutionally better equipped to understand the Greeks never really dies in the succeeding decades.

The German’s belief in their special attunement to the Greeks received perhaps its most disturbing expression in the notorious interview that the philosopher Martin Heidegger – then in his seventies – gave to the news magazine *Der Spiegel* in 1966. Referring to Heidegger’s statement that a cultural “conversion” in Western Europe was necessary and that this conversion could be accomplished by dialogue with [the poetry of] Hölderlin, the interviewer asked him: “Do you believe that the Germans have special qualifications for this conversion?” Heidegger responded by saying: “I’m thinking of the special inner relationship between the German language and the language and thinkers of the Greeks. The French confirm this more and more to me now. When they begin to think, they speak German.” The deadly irony of this apparently ingenuous comment is underscored by the fact that the review also contains Heidegger’s only public discussion of his involvement with National Socialism.<sup>7</sup>

To score one point as to the political correctness of Herder in the eighteenth century, Norton blithely concedes, as far as Germany is concerned, the whole of the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century to Bernal. It is surprising that he does not toss in as well the fact that the venue for the Berlin Olympics was modelled on what was then known about the site of the original Greek Olympics, since this also is a fact.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Lefkowitz and MacLean, *Black Athena Revisited*, p. 405f.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Alexander Honold, *Nach Olympia Holderlin und die Erfindung der Antike* (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2002), pp. 164ff.: “Die Berliner Stadionanlage und ihr Umfeld präsentieren sich als ins Germanische übersetzte, zugleich auf moderne Massenveranstaltungen ausgerichtete Version des heiligen Bezirkes. Neben der Kampfbahn, dem Stadion, lagert sich das Maifeld als forum mit der Langemarckhalle als templon, die Freilichtbühne als theatron, die Reichsakademie als gymnasium und das öffentliche Erholungsgebäude als palästra. Und selbst der heilige Ölbaum am Eingang zum Tempel des olympischen Zeus [...] hat seine Wiederkehr gefunden in der deutschen Eiche, die heute am olympischen Tor die Eintretenden grüßt” (Joachim Petsch, *Baukunst und Stadtplanung im Dritten Reich*, München/Wien 1976, p. 83).”

Friedrich Schlegel finished the essay quoted above in 1796, and Hölderlin doubtless knew it. But by what alchemy does Norton conjure up “the German attitude to Greece”? Is this not exactly what he and his fellow critics attack in Bernal? What Norton has rehearsed is one strand of thinking, familiar to any scholar of German literature, that was readily assimilable both by the Nazis and by the unfortunate Heidegger, a confused thinker, but a murderer only of German stylistics.

Since 1770, there has always been a plurality of attitudes to Ancient Greek culture among German-speaking peoples. And these changed over time. Goethe was quite uninterested in the constant wars that were waged between Ancient Greek cities and states. Hölderlin shows no awareness that Ancient Greek society depended on slave-labour. Nietzsche, on the other hand, approved of slavery as a social institution and was more than willing to recognise that warfare was endemic in Ancient Greek societies, writing in 1878: “But just as the Greeks ran amok, spilling the blood of other Greeks, so do the Europeans now bathe in the blood of their fellow Europeans [...]”<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche is not in favour of this – not for any humanitarian reasons, but out of eugenic considerations: the well-educated officers and bravest soldiers would after all, if they survived, beget the strongest children. But alas! they are more likely to get killed than cowards because they put themselves in danger. Cowards are more likely to survive and beget cowardly children. Is this “the German attitude to Greece”. No, it is the attitude of one, lonely, pensioned-off academic, living in Switzerland, who admired strength and despised weakness.

This brings us to two provisional conclusions: firstly, errors and all, Bernal makes a reasonable fist of tracing one strand of German Hellenism through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that had some influence on aspects of Nazism, but not – I stress – in the racist sphere. The Nazis were pig-headedly and wholeheartedly racist enough already. They did not *need* any support from German high-culture Hellenism. Secondly, Bernal’s arguments about racism are largely irrelevant to the strand of German Hellenism he traces. *He* may think it mattered to the majority of German enthusiasts for Ancient Greece whether Cleopatra’s skin was white, black or milk-chocolate. But I am more of the persuasion that the question simply did not enter their minds, and would have been dismissed as trivial if it had. Another of the authors in *Black Athena Revisited*, Robert Palter, gets into knots as to the racism or otherwise of the writer Georg Forster, who had

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke in drei Bänden*, Karl Schlechta (ed.), (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1966), vol. 2, p. 667, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* I, § 442

accompanied Captain Cook on one of his voyages.<sup>10</sup> Forster, who was a poet as well as an explorer, used his fluency in English to translate into German the Sanskrit drama *Sakontala*, by the poet Kalidasa. This drama was greeted with such enthusiasm by Goethe that he wrote an elegant poem in its praise. Schiller wanted to adapt it for the German stage. Schlegel praised it too, but nowhere in what they wrote about *Sakontala* does the question of the skin-colour of the author or characters arise. Goethe is as flattering about it as about any work of the Ancient Greek masters, but the object of his enthusiasm is a text which he knows very well he is reading at third-hand, and not the question of its ethnic origins. He is fascinated by a text, and gives us to understand that the words speak to his heart.

But there is a nugget of gold in the blunderbuss that Robert E. Norton – that intrepid but inept defender of Herder – discharges at Martin Bernal. It is his paraphrase of Schlegel: “the notion that the Germans were constitutionally better equipped to understand the Greeks”. Again I stress: I am not saying that this is “*the* German attitude to Greece” – since I believe one would, at the moment, find a higher statistical proportion of Germans who felt that they were “constitutionally better equipped to understand” soccer than other nations of the world, despite Germany’s miserable performance in the last World Cup.

There is, however, no doubt that, in Hölderlin’s productive years, the majority of Germany’s literary élite felt possessive towards Ancient Greek culture in the manner Schlegel indicates, and this is the aspect of German Hellenism that Bernal, for all his minor inaccuracies, seems to me to get right. The argument runs something like this: the most admired writers of the French Enlightenment, according to Peter Gay, tended to be Roman: Lucretius, Seneca and Cicero. About 1774, Herder and the youthful Goethe were in search of new cultural affinities that also had the cachet of antiquity. They began by reinfusing the architectural achievements of the Middle-Ages with charisma – as in Goethe’s essay on the Strasburg cathedral – but, enthused by Winckelmann, came to the conclusion that Ancient Greece offered ancestral cultural territories of the spirit that were, given the then subjugation of Greece by the Ottoman empire, looking for an owner. By and large, Goethe’s generation was cautious about taking possession.<sup>11</sup> But Goethe was born in 1749, and Hölderlin, born in 1770, had far fewer inhibitions.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Palter, “Eighteenth Century Historiography in *Black Athena*”, in: Lefkowitz and MacLean, *Black Athena Revisited*, p. 380f.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Honold, *Nach Olympia*, p. 29f.: “Nicht zuletzt seine räumliche Unerreichbarkeit hatte dem alten Hellas im Denken Winckelmanns und Lessings, Wielands, Goethes und Schillers seinen unantastbaren

While the redoubtable Mary R. Lefkowitz is fond of speaking of “cultural borrowings”,<sup>12</sup> I suggest that we are really addressing the process of appropriation, of making another culture’s specificities into functions within one’s own. They may be altered in the transmission to suit their new function, but they are clearly not used for a while and then handed back, as the metaphor of borrowing would imply. Rather than deal in phantom borrowings, we should rather speak – in terms suggested by Mario Liverani – of the appropriation by one culture of aspects of another “for the sake of its own development”.<sup>13</sup> Let us be clear from the outset that this involves an act of taking possession which readily involves fictional elements. For the other is never really owned, for as long as it remains identifiable as that which has been appropriated, nor can its return ever be demanded. Fictionality can enter the process when the act of ownership wants to divest itself of its own metaphorical character, its own “as if”. Once its overt “foreignness” or “otherness” fades, however, through the familiarity of tradition, then we can readily have a fiction of a cultural memory. This brings us back to Hölderlin. Of course, Hölderlin had to labour over learning Ancient Greek grammar, but he did this as a child. Once he was an adult, there was nothing to prevent him from experiencing intensively and immediately that affinity of Germany with Ancient Greece which Goethe’s generation had established and which Friedrich Schlegel – also of Hölderlin’s generation – had further developed and legitimised.

Hölderlin’s appropriation of Ancient Greek culture was, from the beginning, of exceptional intensity. In a very early letter from the *Tübinger Stift*, he writes of seeking asylum in solitude with “my Greeks and the Holy Muse”, since he deplored the daily round of what was both a monastery and a prison.<sup>14</sup> It becomes a recurrent pattern of his life that he fled from external failure into a fantasy world largely formed from what he knew of Ancient Greece. It was likely the very intensity of Hölderlin’s claim to an immediate knowledge of what Ancient Greece had been that isolated him among his contemporaries. He had a great gift for abstract thought, for

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Rang gesichert. Ihr Griechenland lag vollständig im Imaginären einer kulturellen Konstruktion. Es konnte somit nicht getrübt werden durch unangenehme Vergleiche mit jenen neuzeitlichen Verfallsstufen, wie sie sich den Italienreisenden poartout aufdrängen.”

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Lefkowitz and MacClean, *Black Athena Revisited*, p. 6: “Borrowings, even when they can be demonstrated, are only borrowings. They do not, in most cases, amount to a transformation of identity. And even when borrowings do overwhelm a people or a culture sufficiently to transform it, they still shed little light on the actual historical beginnings of the borrowers.”

<sup>13</sup> Marion Liverani, “The Bathwater and the Baby”, in Lefkowitz and MacClean, *Black Athena Revisited*, p. 423.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of Hölderlin’s personal appropriation of Ancient Greek culture, cf. Hans Dieter Schäfer, “Hyperions Griechenland”, in: *Zwischen den Wissenschaften. Beiträge zur deutschen Literaturgeschichte* (Regensburg, 1994), pp. 274-291.

devising intellectual structures, and he deployed this in creating a metaphysical system which both underlay his poetry and became his own religion. In other words, his genius collapsed – almost without thinking – the distance between his own mind and the sphere of the divine, in which the Christian God could peacefully coexist with Zeus, Apollo, the Muses and Dionysos. To Hölderlin this was self-evident – to contemporaries of the older generation, such as Goethe and Schiller, it appeared as an almost pathological disdain for the necessary distance between the Antiquity one admired and the present in which literary politics were necessarily partisan. Moreover, Hölderlin did not hesitate to regard the best poetry, including his own, as divinely inspired and sacred utterance. To translate only one of many such contexts, I select a fragment from an incomplete hymn, which shows Hölderlin's theory of poetry in the process of abolishing the gap between the mythical past and the present:

*The thoughts of the Universal Spirit reach  
their silent destination in the poet's soul,*

*so that it, as if reeling from a blow, now  
begins to resonate with memory, and,  
set burning by sacred lightning, then brings forth the  
miraculous  
fruit, the hymn that is the work of gods and man,  
so that this may equally give life to both in turn.<sup>15</sup>*

The key word here is memory. Hölderlin's aesthetic ultimately depends on a Platonic anamnesis. To produce great poetry, in Hölderlin's sense, there must be a direct affective link between the act of poetic composition and the emotional reality of that age when – as he says in another poem – "gods once walked among humankind".<sup>16</sup> Memory thus becomes both a cultural artefact and the cornerstone of Hölderlin's aesthetic edifice – and yet it is also necessarily a fiction created to fulfil a function or series of functions.

Hölderlin was twelve when the French Revolutionary Wars began, that turbulent era in Europe that was only to end in 1815, by which time Hölderlin was incapable of any interest in contemporary history. His most creative period therefore fell in the years that led up to Napoleon's crowning himself emperor in 1804. Like many young men at the time,

<sup>15</sup> Hölderlin, *Werke und Briefe*, vol. 1, p. 136, fragment beginning: "Wie wenn am Feiertage [...]".

<sup>16</sup> Hölderlin, *Werke und Briefe*, vol. 1, p. 32 ["Götter wandelten einst..."].

Hölderlin could not help but be stirred by the prospect of a shake-up of the ossified German political structures, and yet, the beheading of the French King and the subsequent terror disillusioned him as they did the vast majority of Germans who had at first welcomed the Revolution. Both early in his most creative period (1799) and at the end of it (1803), he was to address admiring fragments to Napoleon, but the realities of these years of carnage in Europe, especially the rapaciousness of French military conquests, were to prevent Hölderlin from giving this admiration a central place in his metaphysical view of history. The times his poetry reflects are, by and large, a period of disorder and disappointed hopes.

His novel *Hyperion or the Hermit in Greece*, whose second volume appeared in 1799, has a contemporary Greek setting, which is not unrelated to his response to the French Revolution. The material from his novel comes from his reading of Greek literature and philosophy, his projection onto contemporary Greece of German idealist philosophy and – for the backgrounds – such accounts by travellers in 18th century Greece as were available in German, since Hölderlin had no English. His main sources were Richard Chandler's *Travels in Asia Minor* and *Travels in Greece*, translated into German in 1776 and 1777, and also le comte Choiseul-Gouffier's *Voyage pittoresque de la Grèce*, parts of which had been rendered into German in 1781-82.<sup>17</sup> Hölderlin was not alone among German Hellenists in having to rely on travellers' accounts, because no German Hellenist of his time actually set foot in Greece. In setting his novel in Greece, Hölderlin was thus doubling the fictionality of his cultural memory. The novel is written in the first person and in letter form. The letters are written by the central character, a Greek in the second half of the eighteenth century, to a German friend, none of whose letters form part of the text. This means that Hölderlin constantly evokes landscapes, ruins and cities he has never seen, by skilfully adapting the German translations of Chandler and Choiseul-Gouffier so as to create the impression of first-hand experience. Why does he insist on a setting he can only know at third-hand? One reason may have been that an imaginary Greece, no matter how derivative, was at least as real to him as Germany during the Revolutionary Wars. A subsidiary reason was possibly to have a safe setting in which he could vent his political resentments. Hölderlin chose to involve his hero in

<sup>17</sup> For the literature available to Hölderlin, cf. David Constantine, *Early Greek Travellers and the Hellenic Ideal* (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1984), especially Chapter 8, "The Insurrection of 1770" (pp. 168-187), and Chapter 9, "Richard Chandler's Expedition" (pp. 188-189). For details of the translations into German of Richard Chandler's *Travels in Asia Minor* and *Travels in Greece* and of Choiseul-Gouffier's *Voyage pittoresque de la Grèce*, which Hölderlin read and adapted, cf. Constantine, *Holderlin*, p. 85.

the Greek insurgency that followed the Russian defeat of the Turkish fleet in 1770 – the year of Hölderlin’s own birth. As I have stressed, the young Hölderlin admired Napoleon and would perhaps have joined in a German insurgency, if any such had been possible. In the novel, *Hyperion* is full of enthusiasm for the insurrection of 1770 and joins in the fighting. His bitterness over the failure of the uprising stems – interestingly – not from the defeat itself, but from his perception that his fellow Greeks are not a fraternity of idealists, but a mob of bandits. A curious irony surrounds this, because the German translation of Choiseul-Gouffier misrepresents the author’s attitudes on this very point, but Hölderlin had no access to the original and was misled.<sup>18</sup> But disillusionment over violent insurrection, with a consequent displacement of emphasis onto a politically quietist pursuit of purely inner freedom and self-cultivation, was a standard German response to the failure of the French Revolution to make its ideals reality. The plot of Hölderlin’s novel, which has its main character gaining maturity through reflecting on his own youth’s “eccentric course”, conforms, in its quietist tendencies, to the fundamental concept of Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Humanity* (1795).

In another sense, Hölderlin’s conviction after 1799 that nothing admirable or inspirational was to be expected of his contemporary Greeks, allowed him to write them off as potential claimants to the Ancient Greek spiritual heritage. It thus became for him even more of a *terra nullius*, ripe for complete appropriation. In other words, there was now no modern impediment to his making “memory” – as the religious version of Schlegel’s claim of a special affinity between the minds of contemporary educated Germans and those of the creators of Ancient Greek culture – into the essence of his own poetic inspiration. Of course, such cultural memory had to be fictional. There was so much of Ancient Greek art and society that Hölderlin simply did not know or was not interested in. His cultural memory as fiction could therefore be as selective as he liked – there was no one he knew whose thinking was sufficiently like his to administer any correctives.

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Constantine, *Holderlin*, p. 86: “Hölderlin got his view of the events of 1770 from Reichard’s translation of Choiseul-Gouffier, and that was a muddled source, for Reichard, perhaps to vent to vent his own philhellene disappointment over the modern Greeks, travestied the even-handed French account as he translated it. Hölderlin, following Reichard, depicted *Hyperion*’s men as desperate brigands and cowards – and not because he was himself prejudiced or unduly credulous, but because it suited his overall purpose to depict them thus. He was not using his novel as the vehicle of historical facts but was realising a poetic-philosophical scheme in it, and *Hyperion*’s disillusioning, in the cruellest possible circumstances, was an essential component in that process.”

Isolation within this highly structured poetic world of his own was certainly part of Hölderlin’s tragedy, as he came closer to his final mental collapse, but it was also a precondition of his greatest triumphs. The glorious odes, elegies and hymns he writes between 1800 and 1803 are esoteric, but have nothing of the diffuseness of William Blake’s prophetic books. Rather, the architectonics of their structures surpass those of any other poems in German until Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, which were completed in 1922.

As a final point, I venture the comment that, in grafting the principle of poetic inspiration onto what could only be a fictional – albeit “transcendent” – memory, Hölderlin was inadvertently setting a trap for himself. His equation of memory, in his uniquely charged sense, with poetic inspiration as such left him especially vulnerable to the unravelling of the elaborate cultural fictions he had woven about Ancient Greece. Memory, in Hölderlin’s specific terms, amounts to a myth of presence, in which he believes and on which he depends despite its heterogeneous and selective origins. For as long as it holds together in precarious synthesis, as in his great elegies and hymns, it underpins a poetic world unlike any other. But it is sustained by a “willing suspension of disbelief” in its own fictionality. Once an awareness of fictionality intrudes, the triumphant hymnic tone modulates into melancholy. As his mental powers began to fail in 1803, he wrote one final hymn to the goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, mother of the muses, which I here offer in a very imperfect English translation. The poem, overleaf, is full of the abrupt transitions and exotic references typical of Hölderlin’s last completed texts. There is little one can do to smooth them out in English. Hölderlin saw lament as impiety, as a temptation one should not yield to – and yet the whole poem is a lament for a whole poetic world that is based on a fiction of memory, a structural mimesis of its collapse.

MNEMOSYNE

*Third Version*<sup>19</sup>

Ripe the fruit, dipped, boiled  
In fire, tested upon the earth, and a law  
That all things must return, like snakes  
Into earth, sits prophetic,  
Dreaming on the  
Hills of Heaven. And much,  
Like a burden of chopped wood  
On the shoulders, must  
Be retained. But the paths are  
Misleading, for wild  
As horses are become the  
Imprisoned elements and ancient  
Laws of the earth. But much  
Must be retained. And we need faithfulness.  
But we wish to see neither  
Future nor past, just let ourselves rock as in  
An unsteady boat on the sea.

The earth's shapes delight me. Sunshine we see  
On the ground, and dry soil. The forests' shade  
Is like home, and smoke blooms  
Peacefully from rooftops, by the old tower's crown.  
For if the soul's been wounded,  
Contradicted by a god,  
There is balm in everyday things.  
For snow, meaning, like  
May-flowers, the light of souls,  
Wherever it be, shines  
Half-covering the Alps'  
Green meadows, where,  
Speaking of the cross that calls  
Dead travellers to memory, a wanderer  
Crosses the high pass  
In godly rage, his thoughts  
With one distant – but what is this?

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<sup>19</sup> I base this translation on Michael Knaupp's critical reconstruction of the text. Cf. Michael Knaupp, "... eine / Last von Scheitern ...". Textkritische Untersuchung zu Hölderlin's Gesang 'Mnemosyne'", in Heinz Ludwig Arnold (ed) *Text + Kritik VIII/96: Friedrich Hölderlin* (Munich 1996), pp. 182-192. The usually accepted version is found in Hölderlin, *Werke und Briefe*, vol. 1, p. 201f.

By the fig-tree did my  
Achilles die,  
And Ajax lies  
By sea-caves, by streams near the Skamandros,  
His temples buzzing, whipped by the wind,  
Such as it ever blows at Salamis,  
Great Ajax died.  
But Patroklos died in the King's armour.  
And many others died likewise.  
On Cithaeron there stood, Elevation, Mnemosyne's city.  
But when God resigned his rule on earth, the West cut  
From her head too one lock,  
Marked her for sacrifice.  
But the Divine ones are not pleased,  
If we, for our soul's sake, do not force composure.  
On ourselves. But we have to. Who cannot do so  
Commits the same sin as lament.