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PETER SZONDI AND CRITICAL HERMENEUTICS

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Introduction

Literature has been a long-standing, if sometimes hidden, topic for *Telos*. While the journal has ostensibly focused on social and political theory, in various traditions and stretching from philosophy to culture, matters of literature have frequently percolated between the lines. This interlinear presence has certainly been the case for our engagements with those thinkers who made major contributions to literary and aesthetic theory, such as Adorno, as well as Baudrillard, Benjamin, Goldmann, Gramsci, and Lukács, but more broadly to the wide-ranging efforts to interpret and reinterpret works of the past: *Telos* has been about rereading, recovering, and reinterpreting parts of the intellectual legacy with reference to questions of current urgency. While the journal did succeed in keeping a healthy distance of common sense from the vanity fair of “literary theory” that gripped the universities during the 1980s and 1990s, our interest in mapping alternatives to the mentalities of bureaucracy—traditions, communities, the life-world, and religion—also indicated an underlying interest in literature, as well as in the arts in general. This testifies, of course, to the legacy of Critical Theory and the effort to correct the dominance of instrumental reason with an aesthetic dimension; but there is a much bigger picture, beyond the specific confines of Critical Theory *per se*, the pursuit of a richer life and a resistance to all the cultural and social forces that degrade human creativity and freedom, whether one attributes them to modernity or to conditions of longer duration. As a vehicle that can enhance imagination and expressivity, literature turns out to be indispensable.

The previous issue of the journal concerned intellectuals and political power, especially problems of collaboration in Germany, France, and Italy. In this issue, we turn to intellectuals and literature through an intensive examination of one intellectual—or one exceptionally intellectual scholar—in particular. Born in Budapest in 1929 as the son of a Hungarian-Jewish psychoanalyst (who survived Bergen-Belsen), Peter Szondi became a professor at the Free University of Berlin in 1965, where he taught comparative literature until his suicide in 1971. His intellectually productive years, between his early *Theory of Modern Drama* (1956) and the posthumously published *Celan Studies* (1972) overlap with the rise and fall of the student movement, the attendant shifts in German (and not only German) intellectual life, the recovery of early twentieth-century intellectual traditions, and an expanded interest in the overlap between cultural matters on the one hand and history and politics on the other. To understand the particular German context, one must recall the public assumption of the importance of art works, traditional as

well as modernist, and the humanities. (The culture of the educated middle class, the *Bildungsbürger*, had yet to retreat fully before the instrumentalism of pre-professional education that has driven the crisis of the humanities in higher education on both sides of the Atlantic: why read, if you only have to count?) In addition, Szondi's work emerged against the background of a tepid conservatism informed in part by a narrow formalism that preferred to avoid historical questions and a Heideggerean existentialism that, tugging in a different philosophical direction, ended up with similar, if more effectively obscured, results. (The designation "tepid" refers to the specific passivity of that conservatism: no ambitious cultural conservative agenda, no significant critique of modernity, merely an interest to define a "culture" as at best a compensatory embellishment to the tedium of a routinized everyday life. In the end, this could never compete with the excitement of modernist anti-traditionalism, until it too fell victim to the recuperative powers of postmodernism.)

Szondi pursued a philosophical examination of works of art with the goal of uncovering the dialectic interplay of aesthetic form and historical substance. Because of an explicit Hegelianism in his understanding of history, this interpretive project had a critical character—hence a "critical hermeneutics"—although his understanding of the art work does not depend on the same avant-garde radicality attributed to it by Adorno. Nonetheless, Szondi's engagement with literature faced opponents on two fronts: the variously regressive accounts that, *de facto*, rendered art solely ornamental by insisting on a reified separation from the wider social condition; and the emerging instrumentalism of the student movement, which, in retrospect, appears less as an expression of a neo-radicalism and more as the great leap forward of a new class of managerial professionals, with little use for works of art.

Each of the essays collected in this co-edited issue addresses a particular aspect of Szondi's criticism as part of a more comprehensive account of his hermeneutics. The first group stakes out several approaches to the underlying assumptions and tensions inherent in any project of a study of literature: if this is a discipline, how is it possible, and what are the consequences of trying to submit the auratic specificity of literature (as art) to the conceptual constraints of scholarship? The terrains are slippery indeed: not only is the nature of the literary object elusive (may we even call it an "object"?), but so is the stance of the reader engaged in: criticism or interpretation, conceptual grasping or tentative understanding. The seemingly sedate query into the possibility of literary scholarship, in other words, opens up the wounds of the ancient quarrel that Plato had identified between philosophy and poetry. Bringing conceptual thinking (not to mention academic practices) to poetic expression runs the risk of crushing the distinctiveness of the aesthetic under the boot of philosophical abstraction, while the long-standing counter-objections remain that aesthetic experience can distract

(as escapism, for example) from more urgent matters of political life. The implicit binary inherent, therefore, in the notion of literary scholarship—conceptualizing the non-conceptual—takes the specific shape of Szondi’s project of critical hermeneutics: an understanding that, as interpretation, accepts but somehow nonetheless also criticizes.

Rainer Nägele’s essay reflects upon Szondi’s sustained attempt to establish the particularity of literary criticism as a discipline in its own right—a question that remains germane today, given the crisis in self-understanding of academic literary studies (and the humanities more broadly). According to Nägele, what guides Szondi’s undertaking is the commitment to understand “the specific nature of philological knowledge.” Toward this end, Szondi’s criticism accords priority to the specificity of the literary work of art—the subject of philological knowledge—and the ways that it distinguishes itself from other forms of writing. While Nägele interrogates the disciplinary project, Thomas Schestag queries the designation itself and its etymological burdens. Taking as the focus of his essay the “Treatise on Philological Knowledge,” Szondi’s definitive statement on literary hermeneutics, he places the term “philology” under careful examination. Reading this term according to its constituent parts—*philo-* (love) and *-logy* (science)—he asks what this compound reveals about Szondi’s notion of literary hermeneutics, particularly the ways in which such a hermeneutics can position itself vis-à-vis institutionally sanctioned models of literary studies. Especially important for Schestag is the relationship of Szondi’s criticism to the implicit meaning of philology as a critical inquiry into the organization of knowledge and its orientation to language. Claudia Brodsky provides the intellectual-historical and philosophical grounding of the constitutive ambiguity of literary scholarship through an exploration of Szondi’s reading of Hegel, especially his essay on “Hegel’s Theory of Literature.” Brodsky focuses on what Szondi called the “troubled relationship” that pertains between the study of literature and philosophy. However rather than treating this as an indication of some merely contingent methodological shortcoming unique to the Germany of the 1960s, she invokes the distance between Plato and Aristotle as a reference point before an intensive tracing of key arguments in Hegel’s aesthetics, as well as Szondi’s characteristic readings of them. While Szondi can surely lay claim to a legitimate place in the tradition of twentieth-century neo-Hegelian aesthetics, Brodsky also gestures to the distance between Adorno’s critical aesthetics of progressive or avant-garde innovation and Szondi’s hermeneutic exploration of a very different dialectic of form and history.

Yet art is hardly a deductive undertaking; it is not as if there are general principles that the artist, obeying closely, merely applies to material to produce an end result. While a normative poetics, especially the reception of Aristotle in classical theater, may have suggested an illusion of overriding rules, it is doubtful that even then the rules themselves were the origins of aesthetic creativity,

which, on the contrary, proceeds through encounters with specific materials and experience. This inductive materialism of art presents a constant challenge to the conceptual thinking of philosophy (or scholarship) whenever it addresses art; and this rebuttal of the word by the world becomes particularly pointed in that one realm of art where the material itself is the word: literature. In no other realm of art does the work confront a criticism while sharing the same medium: music criticism does not compose in response to music, art criticism does not paint in response to painting, but literary criticism writes in response to writing. Therefore the philosophical (or disciplinary, or scholarly) undertaking of literary criticism necessarily oscillates between the deductive universalism of a presumed logic of science (validity of argument, falsifiability, non-contradiction, and so forth) and an inductive extrapolation from an engagement—interpretive or critical—with the particularity of certain texts. The collection of essays here therefore turns from the general program of Szondi’s hermeneutics to more specific topics in his writings, rereadings, and interpretations.

James McFarland examines Szondi’s complicated relationship to Walter Benjamin’s intellectual and critical legacy. Though his name is not normally associated with the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School—despite his self-evident neo-Hegelianism—Szondi invoked Benjamin, along with Adorno and Lukács, as influences upon his work, although the differences among these figures, which have figured significantly in the reception of western Marxism since Szondi’s death, do not loom large in his work. Through a close reading of two texts by Szondi—*An Essay on the Tragic* and the essay “Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin”—McFarland considers the discrepancies as well as the affinities between Szondi’s criticism and Benjamin’s, bringing into his analysis the discussion of history and tragedy in the *Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Continuing the discussion of *An Essay on the Tragic*, Sebastian Wogenstein concentrates on Szondi’s relationship to Hegel with regard to the standing of Judaism within German idealism. Wogenstein begins with Hermann Cohen’s attempt to refute the notion that Judaic law contradicts the ethical foundations of Christian German culture. In doing so, Cohen found himself arguing against an intellectual tradition that asserted the supposed irrationality and slavishness of Judaism, in contrast to a presumed advantage in terms of philosophy and autonomy associated with Protestant Christianity, read from the vantage point of idealism. Among the best-known examples of this tradition are the theological writings of the young Hegel; however, as Wogenstein shows, *An Essay on the Tragic* claims to trace a “hidden turn” in the Hegel’s thinking, through which the philosopher may have corrected his earlier position on Judaism.

Yet it is tempting, and perhaps not wrong, to state that the validation of a literary scholarship, especially a philosophical approach to literature—and, in particular, a “critical hermeneutics”—depends upon the success with specific texts.

To make this assertion, however, represents an explicit tilt toward the particular and therefore the aggressive decision to challenge the priority of the programmatic enterprise (including the auxiliary support it may borrow from intellectual history). At the same time, one might hesitate: does not the appeal for specific readings convey a fetishized fascination with “results,” a narrow-minded thinking of efficiency, which then characteristically dismisses the grand theoretical aspiration? That is surely a danger, especially at our current historical moment with its decided (and hardly illegitimate) turn away from “theory,” but in the case of Szondi (as with Adorno, for that matter), the scrutiny of the text is shot through with philosophical and theoretical thinking, which, in the best examples, also remains susceptible to an infusion of poetic substance.

Joshua Robert Gold’s essay addresses Szondi’s study of the writer Friedrich Hölderlin, another major figure of German Idealism. (New English translations of three Hölderlin poems by Nick Hoff appeared in *Telos* 134.) Hölderlin is to Hegel as poetry is to philosophy, which is to say, the conflict between logical-conceptual discourse and poetic aesthetic form plays out as a division of labor within the very personalities of idealism. Gold reads Szondi’s *Hölderlin Studies* through the prism of its epigraph: *Unterschiedenes ist/gut* (“What is different is/good”). Cited from one of Hölderlin’s unfinished poems, these words provide a point of condensation for the various concerns that run throughout this book. These concerns touch upon general questions regarding the character and object of literary criticism; they also address certain assumptions that still dominated scholarship at the time when *Hölderlin Studies* was published. Russell Berman also explores Szondi on Hölderlin, but with reference to questions of poetry and politics: reading Hölderlin in the increasingly radicalized Germany of the student movement of the 1960s, Szondi grappled with the thesis (previously current in East Germany and promulgated in France by the literary historian Pierre Bertaux) that Hölderlin had not only harbored Jacobin sympathies but had taken part in a (failed) conspiracy against the monarch. (Bertaux himself had played an important role in the French resistance in World War II.) Meanwhile Szondi simultaneously confronted a conservative, anti-political reading of Hölderlin in Heidegger, for whom “history” had less to do with a narrative of emancipation (within which Jacobinism could have some validity) than with a deconcealment of Being. Szondi therefore tried to carve out a space between a dogmatic activism and a regressive existentialism: his success was at best tenuous, indicating the challenge of any effort to make hermeneutics critical.

As much as Szondi developed his theoretical enterprise in dialogue with classical idealism, his literary criticism also involved engagement with the poetry (and drama) of modernism. Focusing on Szondi’s reading of the Austrian poet and playwright Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Rochelle Tobias considers the relationship of this interpretation to Szondi’s early essay on Friedrich Schlegel, one of the

central figures of early romanticism. On first glance, there seems to be no connection between these figures: one of the primary names associated with *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, Hofmannsthal appears to have little in common with Schlegel, a contemporary of Hegel and Hölderlin. However, through a series of close readings Tobias argues how Hofmannsthal's poetics resembles the concept of romantic irony while crucially modifying it. The collection concludes with Christoph König's essay on Szondi's relationship to the poet Paul Celan. Celan's poetry was the topic of Szondi's last book, the posthumously published (and incomplete) *Celan Studies*. Nonetheless, this work represents but one moment in a story that cannot be recounted without reference to other proper names, both people and places. Carefully constellating historical and literary material, König's essay is not a tale of friendship, but an effort to understand the account of lyric poetry and subjectivity that Szondi attempted to articulate in the writings before his death.

The issue concludes with two reviews, which round out this issue devoted to problems of literary studies. For readers of Szondi, the central drama involves the confrontation of literature and philosophy, which in Hegelian terms becomes the dialectic of history. James Schall reads G. Ronald Murphy's *Gemstone of Paradise: The Holy Grail in Wolfram's Parzival*, while arguing (in line with Catherine Pickstock) that the culmination of philosophy is liturgy. The account resonates with *Telos's* interest in the standing of religion in modernity. Murphy's study however investigates the high Middle Ages, where he traces the discourse on the Holy Grail in simultaneously theological and political directions. It involves a theological revision, insofar as he shifts focus away from the Grail as chalice to a reconceptualization as the altar-stone, and therefore the movable venue of Eucharistic celebration and community. The political account, which Schall, who otherwise deeply appreciates the work, singles out for criticism, involves a critique of Murphy's description of the Crusades as senseless violence: since the altar-stone could be anywhere, a fetishized focus on the specific territory of the Holy Land verges on materialism. Instead Murphy valorizes the porous borders between Christianity and Islam in *Parzival*—precisely the point at which Schall introduces a more somber note, a concern with the historical expansionism of Islam and the degraded conditions of non-Muslims under Islamic rule. Celebrations of universalism, whether in *Parzival* or *Nathan the Wise* or elsewhere, may have value as normative ideals, but they are not convincing as descriptions of a reality disfigured by real warfare and a genuine enemy. Finally, Christian Sieg discusses Patrizia McBride's *The Void of Ethics*, a study of Robert Musil and his approach to the challenges of modernism—different from the crisis model shared by so many of his contemporaries, and particularly attractive to neo-Hegelian readings of cultural history—which depended, so McBride, on Musil's adoption of key Kantian elements. In lieu of a pursuit of an ultimate closure, an overcoming of alienation, this Kantian model explicitly involves incompatible states of mind,

a living with contradiction as the basis for ethics. While this disruption contributes to possibilities for an open society, an indisputable advantage, it also leads Musil down a path toward psychological rather than social or political analyses of the major questions of his day. Sieg points out the consequent limitations in Musil's understanding of the Nazi rise to power as an effect of "stupidity" (Musil's term). Any criticism that dwells primarily on the stupidity of one's opponents necessarily remains external to the matter at hand—a lesson still apt for political debate today.

Russell A. Berman and Joshua Robert Gold

*Peter Szondi:
Positions of a Literary Critic
(at the Border)*

Rainer Nägele

Only at the border there are little boxes that cannot be opened...¹

Peter Szondi, in a letter to Ivan Nagel

Rereading, rethinking the work of the literary critic and teacher of literature Peter Szondi today, thirty-six years after his death, is not without ambivalence. At a time when “literature” has become almost a dirty word in many literature departments of American universities, the invocation of a work that is emphatically centered around the question of the task of the literary critic and the nature of his or her subject matter either runs the risk of pure nostalgia or it offers an opportunity for a real rethinking of our task, of the task of those who are now working in departments that are, at least nominally, still referred to as literature departments. The name, of course, does not guarantee anything. When professors of comparative literature openly declare that there are today two “approaches” to literature: either cultural or philosophical, the death sentence over the discipline has been pronounced. A discipline that has been reduced to “approaches” from other fields is no longer a discipline. Those who extol the virtues of “interdisciplinary” approaches forget that the only solid ground for interdisciplinary work is provided by disciplines rigorously worked through to the limits of their possibilities, where, at their horizon, the borders come into view and can turn, perhaps, into thresholds to be crossed.

1. Peter Szondi, *Briefe*, ed. Christoph König and Thomas Sparr (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1993), p. 25. All translations are my own.

A stunning example of the dialectical relationship between rigorous discipline and interdisciplinary effect is offered by the work of the Geneva linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. It was Saussure's passion to rigorously purge from linguistics all "approaches"—historical, psychological, sociological, etc.—in order to define in the most precise terms the exact subject of the discipline. The result, as we know, was an intellectual earthquake that left not one single discipline in the humanities untouched.

In its own quiet way, Szondi's work moves within this dialectic of discipline and transgression of borders. While certainly well read in the philosophical tradition, particularly from Hegel to the Frankfurt School, Szondi never takes a philosophical "approach" in his writings on literature, but insists instead on the specificity of the literary work in its relationship and difference to other modes of writing and thinking. Labeling Szondi's method of literary criticism a "philosophical approach" is based on the common confusion of philosophy as a discipline in its own right and theory as the basic task of any particular discipline to reflect upon the nature of its subject matter. Szondi was a literary critic with a philological passion that enabled him to explore the borders and limits by exploring patiently the specific nature of philological knowledge. What follows is an attempt to trace some of these moves and their paradoxical inversions, when the concentrated immersion within the texts opens them up to their being in the world.

We begin, then, marginally, at the border, where Szondi, in a letter to Ivan Nagel on September 4, 1953, locates Kafka's little box or chest, the *Wandkästchen*, that cannot be opened. For only at the border, Szondi says, there are little boxes that cannot be opened. What is this border? A place of absurdity, Szondi says, a place where one is incapable of jumping "over there," although one stands already at the border. Jumping over the border would mean to jump into security and certainty. And yet Szondi seems to speak from a place of certainty, for the sphere to which Kafka's little box belongs seems to him thoroughly clear and fixed (*durchaus festzustehen*); it is, in one word, the religious sphere as a sphere of security and certainty. But to the degree that the sphere of the little box seems *festzustehen*, it is the figure at the border that stands fixated, unable to jump over there into the sphere of security and certainty. Szondi sees a relationship between the little box and the Tefillin. The pious Jew knows what the Tefillin contain. Thus he would never think of opening them. Kafka, however, according

to Szondi, is in complete uncertainty. He does not know what there is in the little box, he does not know whether one can or even should open it, he does not even know whether it is a box. Szondi, on the other hand, seems to know that the little box is an illusion, and to give up that illusion would mean to “jump over there” into security and certainty. But precisely because he knows that, Szondi finds himself, like Kafka, standing fixed at the border, unable to jump “over there” into security and certainty.

It is tempting to read the little parable and its exegesis as an allegory of the positions to be lived and experienced by the writer and interpreter Peter Szondi: at the border, at many borders. For as many borders as he crossed in his life, it was never a question of finding himself “over there,” wherever that might be, but always over and over again: at the border.

Politically: he certainly did not lack political commitment, engaging himself more decisively than most of his university colleagues in the political struggles of the late 1960s, but only to sum up his political experience with the wary melancholic question: “Where does all the wood come from for all the chairs between which one finds oneself placed all the time?”²

As a critic: finding himself in the last years of his life deeply ambivalent, confronted with the impact that Derrida’s mode of thought and writing had on the people in his institute and on himself: “Yes, I see very well, there is a certain ‘style,’ half-Szondi, half-Derrida, whom I find more and more interesting and at the same time dangerous,” he writes to Jean Bollack on January 24, 1971, in regard to his essay on Celan’s translation of a Shakespeare sonnet.³

But most of all, Szondi finds himself at various crucial moments of his life in the most literal sense at the border, unable to “jump over there,” repeating in an almost uncanny way a pattern in the life of the critic and writer he most admired, Walter Benjamin. In the letter to Ivan Nagel, the exegesis of Kafka’s little box abruptly breaks off with three dots and a parenthesis: “(Only at the border there are little boxes that cannot be opened...),”⁴ and then jumps, in the next paragraph, immediately to Benjamin: “I have recently reread Benjamin’s book on the German mourning play. *Quel livre!*”⁵ In his 1961 lecture and essay “Hope in the

2. Peter Szondi, *Über eine “Freie (d.h. freie) Universität”; Stellungnahmen eines Philologen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 153.

3. Szondi, *Briefe*, p. 326.

4. “(Nur auf der Grenze gibt es Wandkästchen, die sich nicht öffnen lassen...)”

5. Szondi, *Briefe*, p. 25.

Past" (*Hoffnung im Vergangenen*), which addresses Benjamin's autobiographical text *Berlin Childhood*, Szondi poses the question at the end of the essay: "What was Benjamin thinking of when he explained his refusal to emigrate overseas with the argument that there were positions to be defended in Europe?"⁶ A few years later, in 1968, the thought of a possible emigration overseas reached Szondi in a letter from Geoffrey Hartman, who wrote: "What are your own feelings at the moment about Berlin? My own secret hope is that you yourself would not be unwilling to consider us in the near future."⁷ Szondi's response seems not all too far from Benjamin's reasoning: "You will understand . . . that I am under the circumstances not in the position to make any decisions in regard to Yale. The return to Berlin has for the time being not changed much in this respect. To be sure, I don't think that I will stay here *à la longue*, but the moment when I have to leave has not yet come, and it seems to me that for several reasons I should not give up Berlin for the next two years."⁸ It is not unreasonable to assume that at least one of the reasons was the hope that there were still positions to be defended in Berlin.

But as with Benjamin, there was another simultaneously more alluring and more forbidding border. Szondi had received Hartman's letter in Jerusalem, where he taught as a visiting professor at the Hebrew University from January to April 1968, just as he had taught as a visiting professor at Princeton in the spring semester of 1965. While it was possible to cross both borders as a visitor, something blocked the possibility to "jump over there" and settle in a place of security. Of the two possibilities, it was clearly Jerusalem that constituted the crucial border for Szondi. Crossing that border meant to cross over into something foreign and to return and come home at the same time. The letter to Geoffrey Hartman begins with this ambivalent, perhaps even paradoxical experience: "You can imagine what takes place in one's mind coming here, an arrival that, as much as it may disguise itself as a visit, understands itself as a return [*sich als Rückkehr versteht*], would like to understand [*verstehen möchte*] itself as such, and yet must admit that it is not [*sich dabei doch eingestehen muß, daß sie es nicht ist*]."⁹ Arriving in Jerusalem as a visitor is a disguise, for

6. Peter Szondi, *Schriften*, ed. Jean Bollack (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), 2:294.

7. Szondi, *Briefe*, p. 249.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 247.

it really understands itself as a return and homecoming. But Szondi, the close reader and analytic critic, also reads himself and his words and shifts the *sich verstehen* into a different modality, not of a fact and reality but of a wish: *verstehen möchte*. And this modality clashes with that which is: *sie ist es nicht*. The wish, *verstehen möchte*, clashes with another modality, that of a necessity: *sich dabei doch eingestehen muß*. What is stated at the beginning as a disguise of the real meaning of the arrival, turns out to be the real state of affairs after all. Yet, just as it happens so often in Kafka's texts, the last phrase does not cancel the previous ones. The two statements stand there juxtaposed, one *stehen* against another *stehen*, the *verstehen* against the *sich eingestehen*, each one holding its place, so to speak, and holding the speaker and writer fixated there at the border.

Two weeks later, Szondi writes to Gershom Scholem, who, forty years earlier, had tried, equally unsuccessfully, to bring Benjamin to Jerusalem: "In the recent months, I had to think a lot of my stay in Israel; only now everything has come to life again. Although I often was not well, it meant much to me, enough to make of Israel, without any Zionism (if I may say so), a fixed point of my internal geography that will play an important role in all of my future considerations as a 'self displaced person' [English in the German text]. Homesickness is a curious thing. One can find (again) one's homeland in three months without noticing it [*ohne es zu bemerken*] and without accepting it [*ohne sie zu akzeptieren*]." ¹⁰ Israel has become a fixed point in the inner geography of the writer. But the writer remains fixed at the border and the little box remains closed. At the moment when Israel has entered into the inner geography as a fixed point, its effect is distanced and put off into a vague future where it will play its important role in the deliberations and considerations not only of a displaced person, which Szondi was, but of a "self displaced person," as he considered himself. In declaring himself a "self displaced person," Szondi shifts the agency of the displacement into his own self and thus radically puts into question any possible placement of and by that self. Again Israel appears to the writer as a homeland found (again)—but first, it is not noticed as such (*ohne es zu bemerken*) and when it is noticed as such it is not accepted as such (*ohne sie zu akzeptieren*). More precisely, as the subtle shift of pronouns from *es* to *sie* indicates, what is noticed or rather not noticed, is the finding, and what is not accepted is the homeland.

10. Letter from Peter Szondi to Gershom Scholem, in *ibid.*, p. 267.

And yet Szondi insists on the possibility of finding a homeland, even perhaps a fatherland. In his critical notes to Adorno's manuscript of the "Parataxis" essay, Szondi criticizes a mutilated quotation in Adorno's text. In his polemic against Heidegger's nationalistic appropriation of Hölderlin's concept of *Vaterland*, Adorno apparently had quoted only the first part of Hölderlin's verses: "Forbidden fruit, however, like the laurel is/Most of all the fatherland" (*Verbotene Frucht, wie der Lorbeer, aber ist/Am meisten das Vaterland*). Szondi remarks: "I don't think that one can quote these verses without the continuation 'that one may taste/Each one at the end...'" (*Die aber kost'/Ein jeder zuletzt...*). Adorno accepted the critique, however he added a caveat: "The continuation 'That one may taste each one at the end' probably does not so much prescribe a time schedule to the poet, but envisions the utopia where love for that which is near would be liberated from all hostility."¹¹ Of course, Szondi's concern is first of all the concern of the conscientious philologist that Szondi always was, but philological truthfulness is also the exquisite medium where the subject can confront his own truth. Thus Szondi's philological critique addresses at the same time a forbidden fruit of his own life, one that he would not taste ever, not even "at the end."

For "at the end," when he seems to accept a kind of returning, to be sure not to the elusive homeland of his inner geography, but to that other homeland, both more real and unreal at the same time, Zürich in Switzerland, where he did spend a large part of his youth, he will never arrive there to settle down and place himself, no more than he would settle in the elective home in Paris in the rue Dauphine. Fixed at the border, he crossed instead another and final border.

But it is time for a caesura, for a pause and stop at a border we have arrived at, if we have not already overstepped it, entering into a forbidden region in the attempt to taste a forbidden fruit. For what right do we have to poke into the secrets of a life, any life, but particularly a life of such discretion as that of the critic Peter Szondi? Are we not attempting to break open with force a locked chest or cabinet that is none of our business?

But what is our business? As philologists and literary critics, we might perhaps agree that our business is reading, interpreting, and—perhaps—understanding. But all understanding begins and ends with the acknowledgment of a border: the readiness and ability, at any point, of *not*

11. Szondi, *Briefe*, pp. 137f.

understanding. The collection of these essays on Peter Szondi is intended, I assume, to understand in retrospect the position and impact of an extraordinary critical work not only historically in its time, but in its actuality here and now—I am fully aware that I am using an impossible Germanicism with the word “actuality.” But none of the equivalences that the dictionaries offer come even close to the connotations of the German word—but it is a foreign word in that language, too—*Aktualität*. And its everyday use in German is again very different from its position in the works of such critics as Walter Benjamin and Max Kommerell, for example. Szondi himself hardly uses the word, as far as I can see, probably in order to avoid confusion with a false and superficial actualization. Yet every one of his major critical studies implicitly poses the question of *Aktualität* as a question of the singular and concrete relationship between the moment of the critical reading and a particular moment in the past that is in the text as potential, as δυναμικς (potentiality), and is actualized in the act of reading as ενεργεια (energy).

To read, then, the actuality of Szondi’s critical work would seem to demand first of all taking his own warning to heart in regard to certain tendencies in Hölderlin criticism. Commenting on Hölderlin’s letter to Böhlendorff in his lectures on *Poetik und Geschichtsphilosophie*, Szondi criticizes the tendency of many critics to speak of Hölderlin’s “mission” “when Hölderlin speaks as an artist of the conditions and possibilities of his writing.”¹² Szondi follows here as elsewhere Benjamin’s fundamental critical gesture of detaching the writing from all psychologizing reduction in order to analyze it in its poetological register. Accordingly, it would then be our task to read and analyze Szondi’s writing in its critical register and, to the degree that he speaks of himself, to understand this self in terms of his self-understanding and, even more, of his practice as a critic and philologist. Instead, it seems, we slipped unawares into a most problematic biographism.

But it is time again to halt and pause, to interrupt and—to shift pronouns. It is time to drop the pronoun “we” that, in the course of this essay, has become rather fake, and to write, against all resistance—and the resistance is strong, all the more so in view of a critical tradition that is marked by the names of Walter Benjamin and Peter Szondi—to write the pronoun

12. Peter Szondi, *Poetik und Geschichtsphilosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 198.

“I” with the risk of slipping into even deeper troubles and overstepping another forbidden border.

When I accepted the invitation to contribute something to this volume commemorating Peter Szondi’s critical work, I realized that I was returning, if not to a primal scene, then certainly to a very early scene of my own development as a literary critic. I never met Szondi in person, but more than any one I encountered in the course of my studies and in the early years of groping and searching, I considered him my real teacher, the one who shaped more than anyone else my ideals of a critical practice. I say: my ideals, not my practice, because the practice had its different *lange Marsch*, as one used to say in the late 1960s, through many detours to approach the critical ideal, and in the course of these detours, the ideal did not remain untouched. But that is another story.

Despite a certain attentiveness to the history and structure of institutions and their formative power over disciplines, a more latent and yet at the same time very obvious force in the institutional tradition, the very basis of tradition in the discipline and institution, the pedagogical structure of teacher and student and the forces of transfer that are involved in this structure, have, as far as I can see, received relatively little systematic analysis. Nor will it be achieved in this paper. But a particular question has often occurred to me concerning the difference in the transferential dynamics between a formation under the impact of a strong critical personality and one where the critical authority has been kept at a distance in favor of a mediated encounter in the writing without a personal presence. That the impact of the former is incomparably stronger, seems rather clear, and that it might prevent false detours, experience often shows. But that its risks are high and its traps can be fatal, is another and darker side of academic history. The mediated transfer through writing seems less risky, but then risks are necessary where the stakes are high. Yet it cannot be a question of playing one experience against the other. What I would rather suggest here, in this parenthetical paragraph, is a call for analytical case studies of transfers in the widest sense of this word, as part and perhaps even the core of an institutional history. This formulation, however, is misleading. A case in the strict analytic sense cannot be subsumed in a totalizing history. Every case is a singularity, and we can deduce strictly nothing from it about any other case without already having missed that other case. This is the experience that analysis, in Freud’s sense, and literary criticism,

if there still is such a thing, share. And yet, as Freud once said, a single and singular case could teach us everything if only our attentiveness were trained enough, not by subsuming it with other cases under a generality, but by unfolding it in its singularity with relentless attentiveness.

Attentiveness to the detail, above all the philological detail, was the first quality that struck me in my first encounters with Szondi's writings in the late 1960s, at a time when big words, concepts, and fundamental historical perspectives were the daily bread. As a member of the SDS in Göttingen, I was not untouched by the grand visions. But there were also the concrete political issues, ranging from the ferocious American politics in Vietnam to the specific political structures and power struggles at the university. A student not only interested in literature and literary criticism at that time, but in love with literature, as I was, found himself, if he also had a certain political awareness, in a difficult dilemma. With a few notable exceptions, the academic chairs of the German universities were occupied by professors who had either silently or actively cooperated with the Nazis, thus guaranteeing an ominous continuity. When one of the very few non-cooperative academic literary critics, Richard Alewyn, returned in 1949 from exile to a professorship in Cologne, a colleague is said to have remarked that the letter "A" in the name of Alewyn was not necessarily an *alpha privativum*, suggesting that it might instead affirm another name, the return of a Lewyn, a Jew, after the Germans had made such an effort of ethnic cleansing. Such anecdotes speak volumes. In literary studies, the continuity was somewhat veiled through a prevailing method of what was sold as "close reading," which, in many cases, meant above all to close one's eyes to any questions of historical and political implications. Thus, for the more politicized students, the notion of "close reading," if not the notion of reading at all, assumed more and more negative connotations. A bad alternative (which seems to repeat itself now in only slightly different terms) between historical and political criticism, on the one hand, and escapist close reading, on the other, thus developed. For the sake of brevity, I schematize in a somewhat reductive way, but such reductive schematizations were themselves very much a part of the daily debates and seem to repeat themselves in our current academic contexts with only slightly changed vocabulary.

In this constellation of unhappy alternatives, Szondi's critical writings pointed out another, liberating way, not in the form of a compromise,

but by displacing the terms of the false opposition onto another field, or more precisely into a different kind of space. For spatial categories were highly determining in these debates, above all the categories of interior and exterior. Szondi's radical shift intervened on the level of these categories of space, which, together with the categories of time, after all, are the irreducible categories of our imagination and representations, the ones that, according to Hölderlin, remain even in the situation of extreme suffering where all other categories vanish. Changing the constellations on this level means not only changing this or that concept, but changing the mode in which we imagine and represent our world; in other words, it is a change of our *Vorstellungsart*, as, again, Hölderlin put it. Szondi's difference in the spatial (and temporal) rhetoric of the time was as simple in its theoretical formulation as it was—and still is—very difficult, if not almost impossible, in its critical praxis: to read and to understand the political, social, and historical sphere not as something exterior, as a “background,” as a “basis,” or whatever the blinding metaphors might be, but as the constitutive physiognomic traits of the texts themselves.

Szondi's most programmatic formulation of this shift occurs in the introductory lecture on the “Lyrical Drama of the Fin de Siècle”:

History of a genre, as it was written and taught thirty years ago, is hardly possible any more today. The reason for this is not—as is often said—because literary criticism has given itself over to ahistorical tendencies since the last war, that is, to the art of interpretation, but because interpretation, as an immersion into the singular work, originates in and corresponds to an understanding of literature, to a concept of literature that does not allow, as was the case in previous literary histories, one to write about the works instead of with them, in going along with their mode of being, as being written [*im Nachvollzug ihres Geschriebenseins*]. . . . Thus, the only perspective that can be satisfying to us is one that allows us to see history in the work of art and not the work of art in history.¹³

The last sentence of this quotation seems to involve a mere inversion of interior and exterior: instead of seeing the work of art in history, we are to see history in the work of art. But the consequences of this inversion

13. Peter Szondi, *Das lyrische Drama des Fin de siècle* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 16.

displace the apparent symmetry, or more precisely, the inversion is already the consequence of another more radical shift in the consideration of the mode of being of the literary work: what Szondi calls its *Geschriebensein*. It is this particular mode of its “being written” that the critical act must *nachvollziehen*, a word that is almost untranslatable, but that can perhaps best be unfolded by following awkwardly its literal components: *to follow fully after* the traits of its writing. In following the traits, in following the *Zug der Schrift*, the critic has already left the space of interiority and exteriority and has shifted to the surface and readability of the written traits. It is the space of Benjamin’s *Schrifttum*, a common word at his time for literature in general, but, in Benjamin’s writing, charged with the emphatic meaning of *écriture*, with all its implications that were later unfolded by Derrida. Thus, while Szondi’s theoretical formulations still hover at the border between a conventional spatiality of texts and the envisioning of a radically different field of *écriture*, of *Schrifttum*, and of *Geschriebensein*, his critical praxis already moves on this different plane, where reading becomes a *Nachvollzug* of *Geschriebensein*.

Nachvollzug and *nachvollziehen* can of course have a very different connotation in German usage, in the sense of an empathetic understanding, a kind of understanding through *Einfühlung*, or a psychological understanding. But when Szondi writes of the *Nachvollzug ihres Geschriebenseins*, he detaches the *Nachvollzug* emphatically from all psychology and empathy, and instead shifts the word toward a physiognomic field. For Szondi shares with Benjamin and with the major classical modernists (including Freud) the horror of all psychologizing. Already in September 1953, he wrote to Bernhard Böschstein: “Whether I will remain faithful to the historical method in the future, I don’t know. But perhaps I need it in order be able to get away from psychologism.”¹⁴

Psychologizing goes hand in hand with *Einfühlung*, with empathetic understanding, with a kind of understanding and *Verstehen* that is often pronounced without a certain tremolo in the voice (and is therefore furthest away from all *Geschriebensein*). It is based on the illusion that we can reconstruct and even share the moods, feelings, intentions, and thoughts of a writer. And the illusion goes further in the form of a kind of self-deception of the reader, which Szondi, again already in 1953, criticizes in the praxis of the *Zürcher Schule*:

14. Szondi, *Briefe*, p. 31.

My objections are mainly objections against a mode of interpretation prevalent in Zürich: against its false and demagogical character in the reconstruction of the cognitive process and in the implication of the reader [*Einbeziehen des Lesers in die Erkenntnis*] into the cognition. The false pretense of a first reading without the disturbing interference of thinking disturbs me more than the thinking, which—if and when it is there—I would not want to exclude.¹⁵

Szondi's forbidding gesture not only against an illusionary reconstruction of mental processes but against any implication of the reader, while not opening any closets or boxes, confronts us with something that is at the core of Szondi's critical thinking and writing and at the same time—but perhaps this is the topography of the core—its extreme border, where the little cupboards, boxes, and chests are that cannot be opened, and where, in another field—but is it another field?—Freud encountered at the extreme limit of all analysis a navel, where the dream sits upon and is taken for a ride by the unknown. Szondi's critique of the implication of the reader (*Einbeziehen des Lesers*) seems directed against a (un-)critical stance that is the opposite of the critical task of a *Nachvollzug des Geschriebenseins*. In the *Nachvollzug*, the reader is not pulled into the text, but follows after it, retracing its traces and traits.

There is no doubt that a critical ethical imperative speaks in this gesture that keeps the reader at a forbidding distance—a distance not from the text, but from its imaginary interior, and, one must add, as it becomes clear in the development of Szondi's critical writing, not the reader as reader is to be kept at a distance, but the “I,” the narcissistic instance of the reader whose projections block the openness toward the text with the reader's own images. What Szondi reads as Hölderlin's poetic imperative is at the same time a critical imperative: “What is demanded is an openness, a receptivity that disregards one's own I [*die vom eigenen Ich absieht*].”¹⁶ Just as Benjamin was proud of the fact that his style very rarely used the pronoun “I,” the diction of Szondi's critical writing is marked by an intense and sober restraint in regard to any subjective coloring, to the point that his publisher Unseld felt almost driven to despair:

The form of your work, especially the form of your commentaries, obviously comes from your model Benjamin, as for example in his

15. Ibid., p. 18.

16. Szondi, *Schriften*, 1:300.

commentary on Brecht's poems. However one aspect I consider with a critical eye in Benjamin, namely, that his commentaries say less of the texts he comments upon and more of himself, cannot at all be criticized in your work. Here the commentator, to the regret and occasional despair of the reader, is completely hidden; one learns too little of his personal view of the poetic and tragic phenomenon.¹⁷

Yet, if it were a simple matter of excluding the critic's subjectivity from his or her critical praxis, it would be a mere inversion of a problematic alternative. What would be the difference of such an exclusion from what Hegel called "blind learnedness" (*blinde Gelehrsamkeit*), which Szondi explicitly turns against a false and deceptive scholarly objectivity:

The relationship that thus becomes evident between an autobiographical writing and a scholarly work such as the book on the German *Trauerspiel* should not surprise. When Hegel speaks in the *Aesthetics* of the "blind learnedness that misses even the clearly expressed and presented depth without grasping it," one must ask whether the depth is not always missed when, in a falsely conceived notion of scholarship, one abstracts from one's own experience [*von der eigenen Erfahrung abstrahiert wird*]. True objectivity is tied to subjectivity.¹⁸

But the question is precisely what that subjectivity is and in what way it participates in the critical writing. Szondi speaks of an abstraction from one's own experience: *von der eigenen Erfahrung abstrahiert wird*. For a reader of Benjamin, as Szondi was, the word *Erfahrung* has a precise meaning. It is first of all detached from and opposed to *Erlebnis* or unmediated lived experience. *Erfahrung* is highly mediated and, while it is certainly related to lived experience, it is not deducible from it. It is sealed, so to speak, participating in an order and register that is both constitutive of all subjectivity and transcending it. Again Szondi's reading of Hölderlin's poem "As on a holiday..." (*Wie wenn am Feiertage...*), where the intrusion of a misplaced subjectivity in the figure of the "other arrow," of an arrow of another kind, threatens and endangers the poet and the poem, is also the place for the articulation of another kind of subjectivity necessary both for the poem and for the critical text. "What is

17. Letter from Siegfried Unseld to Peter Szondi, September 5, 1960, in Szondi, *Briefe*, p. 106.

18. Szondi, *Schriften*, 2:290. Szondi here refers to G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, in *Werke in 20 Bänden* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 14:338.

demanded” of the poet (and, we might add, of the critic), Szondi says in his interpretation of Hölderlin’s poem, “is an openness, a receptivity that disregards one’s own I” (*die vom eigenen Ich absieht*). Yet this is only the one side, the negative imperative, so to speak. There is another one in Hölderlin’s poem and read by Szondi: “sharing the suffering of life, the divine wrath of nature and its blissfulness that thought does not know” (*mitleidend die Leiden des Lebens, den göttlichen Zorn der Natur, u. ihre Wonnen, die der Gedanke nicht kennt*), as the prose version articulates it, which in the poem is transformed into: “And shaken up to the depth, sharing the suffering of the stronger one . . .” (*Und tieferschütterert, die Leiden des Stärkeren/Mitleidend . . .*). With this *Mitleiden*, the writing subject is involved on the profoundest level of its subjectivity, but, as Szondi rightly points out, in a very particular way due to the specific kind of *Mitleiden* that is far away from all *Einfühlung* or empathy: “And thus *Mitleid*, compassion, does not mean being compassionate, but it is to be understood as being involved in the shock (or shattering) [*als Mitvollzug der Erschütterung*] that is supposed to awaken the universe in God’s angry approach and lead it to a new presence of the gods.”¹⁹

Again we are faced with an almost impossible task of translation: the *Nachvollzug ihres Geschriebenseins*, which was the first task of the critic, is here complemented, at least on the side of the poet—but again, everything in Szondi’s writing implies the critic no less—by an “involvement in the shock” (*Mitvollzug der Erschütterung*). *Nachvollzug*, following *after* the traits, is complemented and accompanied by a *Mitvollzug*, a performance or praxis that goes along *with* the shock and impact of an encounter. As *Mitvollzug* it is activity and performance, but as *Mitvollzug der Erschütterung* it is at the same time *Mit-leiden*, and as *Leiden* suffering, passivity, and receptivity. The com-passion through which the writing subject participates in the act of the *Mitvollzug*, in the suffering and passion of an other, does not take place on the psychological level of empathy, pity, and identification, nor does it take place in the intersubjective sphere, where one self-consciousness encounters another and mirrors itself in the other, but rather in the excentric sphere of a third agency that Szondi invokes in Hölderlin’s figure of the *Leiden des Stärkeren*, the sufferings of the stronger one. It is, for Hölderlin, the sphere of an extreme suffering where nothing remains but the conditions of time and space, that

19. Szondi, *Schriften*, 1:300.

is, in Hölderlin's rigorous Kantian thinking, the irreducible conditions of *Vorstellung*, of representation and imagination. It is therefore the sphere, as we already indicated, where not only our *Vorstellungen*, our representations and images of the world, are affected, but our *Vorstellungsarten*, the modes of our representations and imagination: that is the only sphere of a real *Erschütterung*, of a real shaking up, and perhaps even of a real revolution.

But, having arrived at this extreme border, we have perhaps been pulled already too far over the border into the excentric sphere, and that is perhaps farther than the critic Peter Szondi would allow us to go. Another caesura, another pause then is required here at the end, a turn and a turning back again to the praxis of Szondi's critical writing, a last glance, at the end, at what one could perhaps see as Szondi's most overdetermined critical encounter with a poetic work and with a poet: Paul Celan. A few traits and threads will have to suffice to indicate the texture of this encounter.

It is clearly the most personal encounter of the critic Peter Szondi with a poetic work and its author. The personal contact began in 1959 and soon developed, in the course of 1960, into a deep and lasting friendship. And yet it is in Szondi's late essays on Celan where the manifest critical distance is most rigorous, all the more so as Szondi's focus more and more shifts away from traditional hermeneutics toward an increasing attentiveness to the linguistic level, to the point that his own style as a critic seems to shift into a kind of distanciation from itself. Szondi himself remarked this shift when he wrote to Jean Bollack about his essay on Celan's translation of Shakespeare's Sonnet 105, in a letter that I quote here for the second time: "Yes, I see very well, there is a certain 'style,' half-Szondi, half-Derrida, whom I find more and more interesting and at the same time dangerous," with the words "not the style" (*pas le style*) added in handwriting.²⁰ The handwritten addition testifies to an arrow of another kind that is involved in this writing and in this style. There was a cordial personal relationship between Szondi and Derrida, but Derrida also represented a kind of *Erschütterung* for Szondi that touched him in his critical work as well as in a deeply personal way, to the degree that it also affected the relations to some of those closest to him in the Institute. The last three essays on Paul Celan—the essay on the "Poetry of Constancy," where the critical style itself seems to slip away from the writer into the style of another; the essay

20. Szondi, *Briefe*, p. 326.

on Celan's long poem *Engführung*, written in French and slipping away from a certain tradition of hermeneutics toward an emphasis on textuality; and finally the last fragmentary essay on the poem "Eden," where the relationship of biographical accidental material and poetic work is thematized—these three essays, as controlled and distanced as they present themselves, vibrate and tremble from the shock of an encounter where *Nachvollzug* and *Mitvollzug* can no longer be clearly separated. Herbert Dickmann, a very perceptive reader, seems to have noticed this when he writes to Szondi in August 1971 about two of his Celan essays: "In a certain way, aesthetic distance in the sense that is dear to me is given up—but for the sake of an almost absolute new kind of distance."²¹

In the extreme, at the last border, the erasure of all aesthetic distance goes hand in hand with absolute distance. In the ultimate distancing of the critic from himself, a kind of wound of a very personal nature opens up. Yet what is personal, particularly and singularly in a friendship like that between Szondi and Celan? In September 1960, Celan had sent an offprint of the first publication of "Conversation in the Mountains" (*Gespräch im Gebirg*) in the *Neue Rundschau* with a dedication: "For Peter Szondi, cordially and crooked-nosed, crooked-nosed and cordially / Paul Celan."²² We do not know Szondi's response to Celan, but in a letter to Rudolf Hirsch, the editor of the *Neue Rundschau*, he writes: "I am extraordinarily thankful to you that I was able to read Celan's prose piece. I will have to think a lot about it in the coming weeks. At the moment it is difficult for me to say something about it that would go beyond the most personal (my Jewishness and the memory of walks with Celan in Sils, the long minutes of silence in face of the foreign nature)."²³

At the moment when he writes the letter, Szondi is not able to say anything about the text that would go beyond the most personal. What that is, he lists in parentheses: his Jewishness, walks with Celan in Sils Maria, and the silence in the face of a foreign nature. In the middle is the memory of walks with Celan. Such walks, not in Sils but in Berlin, will later provide the material for the last fragmentary essay on the poem "Eden" and form the basis for an initial articulation of the problem of the status of such personal, biographical material. The walks are framed by two experiences that are most personal precisely in the way in which they transcend the

21. *Ibid.*, p. 353.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 97f.

personal in the shared experience of Jewishness and of a silence before a nature that is foreign. The two moments are intimately linked, and they are linked emphatically in Celan's story of the two Jews who meet in the mountains: "Silent it was, silent up there in the mountains. Not for long the silence did last, for when the Jew comes and encounters another one, it is soon over with silence, even in the mountains. For Jew and nature, those are two different things [*zweierlei*], still, even today, even here."²⁴ Jews have no relationship with nature: it is an old antisemitic cliché. But Celan's story is more than an ironic commentary on antisemitic clichés. It addresses another experience that Szondi describes as the silence in front of the foreign nature. When certain commentators on this passage, doubtlessly meaning very well, stylize the Jew into the universal figure of modern man alienated from nature, they simply assume that "Nature" is a natural home for unalienated humans. But the capitalized concept of Nature is a linguistic artifact of some Indo-European languages and, in some cultures, shaped into an ideological phantom of origin. Celan's Jew, who is emphatically not one with Nature, but *zweierlei*, and the shared silence between Celan and Szondi in front of a "foreign nature," articulate in the most personal mode no longer an *Erlebnis* but an *Erfahrung* that both emerges from the lived experience and takes leave from it, sealed by another instance and agency. We might recall here that Benjamin's earliest categorical differentiation between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* was formulated in the correspondence with Ludwig Strauss in 1912, already in an attempt to give an account of his relationship to his Jewishness, which, he writes, was not a *jüdisches Erlebnis*, but an *Erfahrung*.²⁵

Szondi's parenthesis of the most personal inverts the structure of Celan's curious dedication: "For Peter Szondi, cordially and crooked-nosed, crooked-nosed and cordially [*herzlich und krummnasig, krummnasig und herzlich*]/Paul Celan." While Szondi embeds the personal memory of the walks with Celan within the "Jewish experience," Celan's dedicatory chiasmus places the antisemitic caricature of the Jew in the middle, embedded between the double *herzlich*. The interiority of the heart forms the margin and outside of the chiasmus, while the physiological mark and

24. Paul Celan, "Gespräch im Gebirg," in *Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden*, vol. 3, *Gedichte, Prosa, Reden*, ed. Beda Allemann and Stefan Reichert (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983), pp. 169–73.

25. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 1:75.

caricature is placed in the center: an enigmatic little box at the border and limit, where the most personal is sealed and yet opens up as the enigmatic allegory of a most precarious and yet in many ways exemplary critical position, forever locked and yet exposed at the border at which our work is situated.

*Philology, Knowledge**

Thomas Schestag

“Ja was man so erkennen heißt!
Wer darf das Kind beim rechten Namen nennen?”
[“Ay! what ’mong men as knowledge doth obtain!
Who on the child its true name dares bestow?”]¹
Faust, in Goethe’s *Faust*

In 1962, Peter Szondi wrote a text with the title “On Philological Knowledge” [*Über philologische Erkenntnis*] and published it in the *Neue Rundschau*, a text that, as the first sentence informs us, “inquires into the mode of knowledge of literary science [*Literaturwissenschaft*].”² In the same year still, the text was republished under a second title, a variation

* Translated by Nils F. Schott. [Trans note: The original title of this paper is “Philologie, Erkenntnis.” In the interest both of staying as close as possible to Thomas Schestag’s text and of presenting a version accessible to the Anglophone reader, some terms, such as *Erkenntnis* and its cognates have been given traditional translations, while others, such as *Literaturwissenschaft*, *Erkennen*, and *Begreifen* have been rendered in such a way as to allow for the resonances and relations explored by this text. Wherever necessary, the German terms have been supplemented in square brackets. Similarly, the texts cited here have all been translated anew, though references to existing translations, where applicable, are given in brackets in the notes, along with the corresponding page numbers. The translator would like to thank Thomas Schestag for his invaluable comments and suggestions at all stages of the translation process.]

1. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust: Part I*, trans. Anna Swanwick (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909–14), lines 243–44.

2. Peter Szondi, “Über philologische Erkenntnis,” in *Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), 1:263 [“On Textual Understanding,” in *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 3–22; here p. 3].

on the question of the first sentence—"On the Problematic of Knowledge in Literary Science" [*Zur Erkenntnisproblematik in der Literaturwissenschaft*]³—in the *Universitätstage* 1962. And five years later, in 1967, Szondi had the small piece published a third time, this time prefacing his *Hölderlin-Studien* as "Treatise on Philological Knowledge" [*Traktat über philologische Erkenntnis*]. These are indications that those few pages constitute no occasional work, written for the moment, but record traces of the philologist's epistemological self-questioning and of philological procedures *today*, shot through with a peculiar emphasis. From the beginning, the emphasis, placed as it is between the title and the first sentence, bears on two questions: (1) the question of the *limit*, which delimits the sphere of *literary science*, as one among other *sciences*, from all other sciences and places it in relation to all others sciences; (2) the question of the *name*, between the *philology* named in the title and the *literary science* emerging out of the first sentence, not only as the question of the *proper* name of the discipline or mode of knowledge in question, but also as the question of the origin and orientation of denominating and naming—and *renaming*—in general: "Whoever inquires into the mode of knowledge of literary science enters into a sphere to which the old Briest would hardly have denied his favorite turn of phrase. It is therefore advisable to delimit the wide field from the start."³ In Fontane's novel, a resigned trait is inscribed into the favorite phrase of the *wide field*: the suspicion of a lack of prospect of positing a limit to the field in order to perceive it *as* field—among fields—in the first place—to conceive [*erkennen*] and recognize [*wiedererkennen*] it as such. The field—a *limine* non-differentiated from the world—as long as it is merely *wide*, that is, as long as it may still reach further, be *wider* than merely wide, is missing, fails. The peculiar *pleasure* taken in the turn of phrase, Briest's *favorite* turn of phrase, seems to stem from the resigned trait—insight into the unforeseeable extension of the field—being counterbalanced by the possibility that the field is, perhaps, no *field*, since it not only remains open *where* its limits lie but also *whether* it knows of any limits at all, by the possibility that the field, perhaps, bears the name of *field* merely as a *shibboleth* for namelessness. Thus, refracted ironically, the recommendation of the second sentence to delimit the wide field from the start comes too late.⁴

3. Ibid. [3].

4. Briest's favorite turn of phrase surfaces in Fontane's *Effi Briest* in a variant of the *wide field*, a second, hardly diverging version that brings the novel to a close and underscores the failure to grasp [*Fassungslosigkeit*] the wide field: "... that is *too* wide a field."

The first sentence—"On Philological Knowledge"—leaves open the question of whether the sphere of literary science opens up as a wide field only once its mode of knowledge becomes questionable, or whether literary science had to be regarded as a wide field already before the surfacing of this question: as a field the sight of which leaves open the question whether there is literary science, as the rigidly circumscribed field that is a particular science *within its limits* and among other sciences, at all. The answer to the question of its mode of *knowledge* would thus be the answer to the question of its existence as well. The path to *knowing* [*Wissen*], quintessence [*Inbegriff*] of science as archive or store, is cleared by knowledge [*Erkenntnis*]. *Modes* of knowledge are *paths* to knowledge: methods. Yet why does the methodological question of the mode of knowledge of literary science, which seeks certainty about its sphere *within its limits* and its passableness, certainty about the access to its object [*Gegenstand*] and to itself, put its existence *as science* at risk? The reason, or ground—which is no foundation—for the irritation of the *givenness* of literary *science* is laid bare in the second of the two names that Szondi names at the outset of the treatise: *philology*. At first glance, both names—*philology*, *literary science*—stand as synonyms. They name one and the same scientific milieu, in which, by means of paths traced out or yet to be traced out, access to the *knowledge* about one and the same object—*literature*—is to be disclosed. More focused attention, however, shows how the relation of *philia* and *logos* in *philology* turns the relation of *literature* and *science* in *literary science* upside down. The composite term *philology* does not represent a composite in the mould of *biology* or *anthropology*, where the first half of the word—*bio*, *anthropo*—names the object, yet the second—*logy*—names the science of this object. *Philology*, conceived of and picked apart [*auseinandergelesen*] according to this schema, would be the science—*logy*—of love, of affection, or of liking—*philo*—in general. In *philology* the translation of *-logy* as *science* is interrupted and reversed. Literary science as one among other *-logies* does not, in *philology*, encounter itself, just under a different name, but it encounters itself in the jeopardizing of its self-conception as science. What in literary science is presupposed as methodic procedure and seems to be an instrument of *knowledge* of its object in its application and circulation, namely words *as* concepts, or, to repeat this point more generally, the field of language in general in its *terminological* orientation that stores knowledge [*Erkenntnisse*] gained in the form of *sentences*, in *propositions*—*logos apophantikos*—and to keep

them available for recall: all this, in philology, becomes the object, less of *knowledge* than of a (re)search, which makes the intention of using words as bearers of *knowledge* and of applying language as a language of *terms* the center of attention and puts it up for discussion. In philology, which strictly speaking not only does not bear the name of *science* but also finds the wide field of the object of its investigation broached by the translation of *-logy* by *-science*, the scientificity of all sciences, as *-logies*, prior to the divorce into natural sciences and humanities, is put at stake. Literary science *as* philology can lay the ironic claim to being called the science of the scientificity of all sciences: alone among all sciences, philology ferries over to a discussion of the epistemological orientation of language in general, a discussion that is *critical* of *knowledge*; but this transition can take place only in the moment in which it recalls itself under the name of *philology* and follows the inversion of attention toward the *logos* truncated in *-logy* laid bare in this name, though the transition can no longer take place in the name of *-science*. *Philology*, neither *proto-* nor *meta-*science, names the *epoché* of the will to science. Philology as *literary-* names nothing but divided, divisible attention for the non-orientable opening of a field, the *literary-*, which is not determined by any concept of that which breaks into the open in the word *literary-*. The only object of philology, not as *-science* but as *limit-*, is the *limit* concept of the word: the setting of the word as concept, yet of the concept as a limit—*terminus*: the word *within its limits* (within the limits of its—*semiotic*—form as within the limits of its—*semantic*—determinations) as well as the word *as* limit (limit over against other words, limit against what is other as words). Philology as *limit* science is not the science *of the limit*, but concerns and discusses the will to the formation of words—the imagination and re-imagination of words—as a process of (im)posing limits, which oscillates between the *institution* and the *destitution* of limits.

Szondi's treatise takes place on the limit of the turnover from one into the *other*, of the turnover of both names, which name two controversial tendencies that seek to exclude each other—to butt into one another: *philology* and *literary science*. The retreat or crypt of the turnover is formed by half the word that is *-logy*, open between its translation and substitution by *-science* and the deepening of and engrossment in [*Vertiefung*] the discussion of Greek nouns and verbs—*logos* and *legein*. *Literary science*, in order to count *as* science, must lay claim to one mode of knowledge among others; yet this is precisely the claim jeopardized by *philology*, which is no

science among others and not *set* on *conceptual* knowledge. What, then, is called *knowledge* in the title of the treatise? And what *philology*?

Szondi, insofar as he inquires after the mode of *knowledge* of literary *science*, holds on to the will to *knowledge*, yet he places the word, perhaps to underscore the *so-called* in the concept, a deviation from the traditional grasping [*Begreifen*] of the concept [*Begriff*], in quotation marks: “what is to be understood by ‘knowledge’ here.” And Szondi specifies, taking recourse to a phrase from Schleiermacher’s *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, that that which *here* is to be understood by the “concept of knowledge” is *understanding*. In Schleiermacher’s words, “the perfect understanding of a speech or written text.”⁵ The strangeness of his procedure to hold on to the *concept* of *knowledge*, a procedure taken to be self-understood in regard to literary *science*, this strangeness is raised by Szondi only in regard to *philology*: “Furthermore, knowledge, a philosophical concept, may seem strange in philology.”⁶ Strange operation: the task of science is the knowledge of its object. Scientific conceiving [*Erkennen*] presupposes the concept of knowledge as quintessence of its procedure. Yet “knowledge,” as the quotation marks give us to understand, is not self-understood. What is called *knowledge* [*Erkenntnis*] can obviously not simply be presupposed but remains—to be *conceived* [*zu erkennen*]. Access to the *knowledge* of any object or state of affairs whatsoever presupposes the access to *knowledge*, to *conceptualize* conceiving, to have *conceived* it once and for all, to have fashioned and fixed a concept of knowledge, to be able to take recourse to it. The concept of knowledge depends on the grasping [*Begreifen*] of conceiving, on conceiving grasping. The concept [*Begriff*]: on the grasping of grasping. Knowledge: on the conceiving of conceiving. In the *concept of knowledge*, grasping and conceiving mesh in such a way that it cannot be decided whether conceiving is to be grasped or grasping to be conceived, where the limit between conceiving and grasping is to be drawn within the concept of knowledge. The *task*—between intention and surrender—of science, on the brink of its foundation, consists in the conceiving of conceiving, in the grasping of grasping: two turns of phrases that suspend for science the horizon of coming to understand *itself* and open up the *wide field* of infinitesimal digression.

5. Quoted in Szondi, “Über philologische Erkenntnis,” p. 263 [3].

6. *Ibid.* [3].

In reference to “what is to be understood by ‘knowledge’ here,” Szondi introduces a third turn of phrase, *understanding*: what *here*—in *literary science*—is to be understood by “knowledge” is *understanding* [*Verstehen*]. This not only says that *knowledge*, however much it must be conceived and as much as its *concept* must be grasped, can also be understood as understanding, but also—and this aligns understanding with conceiving and grasping—that understanding is not self-understood but remains to be understood. If the task of *literary science* is the perfect understanding of a text, then the task of *philology*—inversely—is to understand understanding. Perceived from this angle, philology seems to be merely a *heuristic* procedure for uncovering the *condition* of the possibility—a foundation—of understanding. Yet while literary science, *as science*, must delimit an understanding of understanding with a view to the uncovering and handling of a (understood) *concept* of understanding and to the elaboration of a *hermeneutics* as an *art* [*Kunstlehre*] or *technics* of understanding, the *philological* engrossment in understanding knows no limits, no telos, and no *term*. *Philology* does not name a *heuristic* procedure but the *caesura* not only of *literary-* but of all *-sciences* in general in the *critical* moment at which they turn toward *themselves*. One characteristic of philological attention lies—open—in its originlessness and goallessness.

Szondi’s answer to the question of the mode of *knowledge* of literary science is an ambiguous one: the amalgamation of the *concept of knowledge* and *understanding*, on the one hand, allows us to hope for an anchoring of the literary-scientific mode of knowledge in the concept of *hermeneutics* as a *Kunstlehre*; on the other hand, however, philology in the engrossment in the *question* of understanding—in the denominating word as in the process to be named by the word—holds up both the provision of the sufficient reason for the anchoring of hermeneutics as a method and the forging of the anchor in setting the understanding as concept. The first lines of the treatise “On Philological Knowledge” sketch traces of engrossment in the first half of the composite word *philology*. For all three turns of phrases—*conceiving*, *grasping*, and *understanding*—can be seen as translations or attempts at interpreting the Greek verb *philein* in order to specify the *how* of the access to the second half of the composite word *philology*—access to *logos* and *legein*. Yet philological attention aims neither at knowledge (of conceiving) nor at understanding (of understanding), nor at the grasping of the concept; it suspends the intentional and teleological trait of the moment of *reflection* that seems to be its characteristic.

Philological attention is not *intentional* but *attentional*; paying attention to the non-orientability of the *re-* in the moment of *-flexion*. Szondi's regret "that there is no theoretical hermeneutics in German studies," the reason for which he sees in "its reflexive essence," on the one hand insists on the elaboration of a literary hermeneutics as quintessence of the literary-scientific mode of knowledge in order to redress a lack, yet on the other hand also suggests that there can hardly be a *theoretical* or *literary hermeneutics* as doctrine of method or technical procedure. Szondi returns to this *hardly* of the givenness [*Gegebenheit*] of literary hermeneutics on the first page of his *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics*, given as a lecture series in the winter of 1967–68 at the Free University of Berlin:

Literary hermeneutics is the doctrine of interpretation...of literary works. Even though hermeneutics in the 20th century has left its mark on philosophy and, as self-reflection, on the humanities, the question of whether the discipline to be introduced here exists cannot simply be answered in the affirmative. That there hardly is a literary hermeneutics today...has its reason...in the quality [*Beschaffenheit*] of the hermeneutics there is today.⁷

The *hardly* of the givenness of *literary* hermeneutics names nothing but the *hardly* of the givenness of *philology* as science, as different from literary-scientific knowledge. "In hermeneutics," Szondi writes in the treatise "On Philological Knowledge," "science does not ask about its object but about itself, about how it gets to the knowledge of its object."⁸ Yet science does not ask about itself *in hermeneutics* but as *philology*: a word made up from words that presents the turn to *-logy* yet not as *-science* but as—among others—a *question* of translation. The strange aspect—which provides everything but evidence for the essence of *philology*—is evaded by Szondi in his mobilization of *understanding*, hermeneutics as doctrine of interpretation, *in place of* philology; yet, under the sway of the will to the *concept*, he mobilizes the doctrine of interpretation as one among other modes of *knowledge*. Philological knowledge, Szondi writes elsewhere in the treatise, consists "only in the uninterrupted retracing of knowing [*Wissen*] back to knowledge [*Erkenntnis*], back to understanding the poetic

7. Peter Szondi, *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik*, ed. Jean Bollack and Helen Stierlin (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 9 [*Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Martha Woodmansee (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995)].

8. Szondi, "Über philologische Erkenntnis," pp. 263–64 [4].

word.”⁹ Szondi’s focus is on philological *knowledge*, not on *philology*: as if the engrossment in this word (made up of words), *philology*, and in the opaque relation of *philein* and *legein*, threatened to ruin the claim to *knowledge* that Szondi ascribes to philology. What is jeopardized whenever philology comes up is not *how* science—*literary* science—attains to knowledge of its object, but *whether* it, whether *philology*, aims at *knowledge* of an object at all.

And yet, the strange word, *philology*, which encapsulates the ruin of all sciences’ claim to scientificity as *-logy*, entertains Szondi’s critical discussion of the other name, which at first sight seemed to be a synonym of *philology*: *literary science*.

The fact that the problematic of philological knowledge is hardly paid attention to in German studies seems to be connected with its understanding itself as science, with its seeing in knowing [*Wissen*], i.e., in a state, its essential characteristic. A look at the state of affairs in France and the Anglo-Saxon countries shows that this is by no means self-understood. . . . The scholarly engagement with works of literature, in English, is called “literary criticism,” it is not a science. The French case is similar. Even if the German word *Kritik* can hardly be salvaged for this sphere, it would be presumptuous to reproach the English, American, and French representatives of that which the word means [*meint*] in their language with non-scientificity.¹⁰

The relation of *philo-* and *-logy* in *philology* marks the *crisis*, the moment of non-orientability—a caesura—in the very moment of the reversal of the relation of the *literary-* and *-science* in *literary science*. The mobilization of the word *Kritik* (in *literary criticism* as in *critique littéraire*) at the point at which in the German we find the word for science obviously aims at interpreting the opaque relation between *philein* and *logos*: *language*, condensed into the word *-logy* and seen from the angle of *Kritik*, is not available as a medium for the communication of intended ideal contents by means of the word—the concept; underneath the word *Kritik*, the place of the Greek verb *philein* is taken by the verb *krinein*—separate, divorce, set apart—and sketches within *philology* the love of or inclination toward *discussion*, in the most incisive sense of the word, of that which seemed to be available *as* word—if we translate *logos* by *word*—put together from

9. Ibid., p. 265 [5].

10. Ibid., p. 264 [4].

letters. What is at stake in the composite word *philology*, once read apart, is a relation to the word other than the *terminological* one, which is guided neither by the *concept* of knowledge nor by the *concept* of understanding.

The confusion caused by *philology* for the will to the *concept*—of philology—as for the will to philology as *science* is traced by Friedrich Schlegel in his so called second Cologne lecture (1805–1806) under the heading “Propädeutik und Kritik.” Schlegel presumes that one ought “not to take too narrowly” the *concept of philology*, reducing philology to the most narrow sense of the term, “under which we understand merely familiarity [*Kenntnis*] with Greek and Latin,” for “the oriental languages are an essential part.” Yet Schlegel does not leave it at this expansion but holds that philology “encompasses all erudition in language [*Sprachgelehrsamkeit*].” As “a science, which is acquired and practiced not merely for its own sake, but as an auxiliary science for higher purposes,” however, philology, as it encompasses all erudition in language, at the same time also encompasses everything that can be denominated by all words in all languages, namely, all erudition in *things*, words *and* things, in short, *everything*. And Schlegel concludes—yet this conclusion remains open, it guides the gaze onto a *field too wide*: “What shines forth from all of this is that philology has an extraordinary and almost immeasurable extent.”¹¹ Further along, Schlegel calls this extent *ungeheuer*: unfathomable, incomprehensible, unlimited, monstrous. He therefore recommends—a gesture that Szondi repeats—to delimit the wide field from the start. The impossibility *completely to encompass* the entire sphere of philology is not modified by the possibility of limiting oneself *to a very small area* of that sphere such that it would be possible for the complete encompassment of its *subdisciplines* to lead to the complete encompassment of the *entire* science. Rather, philology enters, and here it resembles history and physics, *into the particular* to such an extent that the impossibility of fathoming its *entire* extent repeats itself in even its smallest sphere: impossible *entirely* to enter into the singular, entirely to encompass the *singular*. Yet philological attention is not exhausted in rubricating its parts, in abstracting a *Summa Philologiae* from the addition of its subdisciplines, but deepens the excessive and irregular divisibility and specifiability of even the most minor among them beyond what is fathomable. Philology, “which

11. Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophische Vorlesungen (1800–1807)*, pt. 2, ed. Jean-Jacques Anstett, vol. 13 of *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1964), pp. 184–85.

strictly speaking is only an auxiliary science” whose essence lies in its inessentiality, as an *auxiliary* science not only is *not*, or more precisely is *hardly*, a science in the proper sense of the word, but all sciences—conversely—remain dependent on the help of the auxiliary science: without familiarity with *language*, no familiarity with *things* [*ohne Sprachkenntnis keine Sachkenntnis*]. Not only does philology help each and every science in the acquisition of its object in the first place, it also enables it to have a *terminology* of its own. Philology specifies the outline of every science as such as the *hardly* of its givenness. The displacement of philological attention into the innermost outside of every science *within its limits* does not preclude that every use of the word as concept—quintessence of scientific procedure—is accompanied at every moment by an invitation to a (philological) engrossment in the *singular* word in such a way that, under closer scrutiny, the conceptual trait of the word frays, for in the place of that which is present as a word, as *word*, emerges the *monstrous*—because non-delimitable—possibility of deciphering homonyms and antonomasias, fragments, names, sentences, beginnings of sentences, rhymes: thus emerges, for example, from the remainder of a word that is *phil-*, the echo of the word *Hilf*... [both *auxiliary*... and *help*...].

Insofar as *philology* as uncanny *auxiliary* science, without whose help no science could come about as *-logy*, encompasses *all* that is known [alles *Wissen*] by all the sciences, encompasses erudition in *language* as well as in *things*, yet goes beyond *everything*, goes back to before *everything* since it remains incapable of encompassing completely the *singular* it enters into, it remains without grasp—without help, therefore, for all sciences that remain dependent on its help—to this extent, for Schlegel, the question of the “general concept” we are to have of philology emerges from the very word *philology*. This is the question of the *name* of the field that is *too* wide—of *philology*—that seems to be demarcated neither by the will to knowledge nor by the will to unintelligibility [*Unkenntlichkeit*]: *terra incognita*. The search for the components of philology, the attempt to denominate each component, throws name onto name, without, however, flowing into a general concept of the concept—of the incomprehensible divisibility of its field—of philology:

Philology has several parts, and several names, too, that name these parts.—Philology is often called *Kritik*, insofar as erudition in language is all about a correct understanding in explaining and interpreting the meaning of a word, about regular judgment [*Beurteilung*]. Furthermore,

grammar belongs to philology....Philology stands in close relation to the development [*Ausbildung*] of the human as human, since the object of philology is language, the main tool for the expression of intellectual activity, and literature, or the quintessence of the most exquisite works of the intellect [is also its object].... This sheds light on the connection of the concepts: humaniora—, literature—, *Kritik*, —philology.

Besides *Kritik*, grammar is one of the particulars encompassed by philology.... Grammar is also the theoretical knowledge of language. In conjunction with the doctrine of application, the doctrine of language is called rhetoric. Rhetoric is the practical knowledge of language.

Rhetoric speaks not only of the correctness of expression, but also of its beauty and its artifice.... Rhetoric as science of the artificial and the beautiful in language is closely related to aesthetics, or the science of fine arts. Indeed, strictly speaking the science of the art of beautiful speech is just a part of aesthetics in general. Aesthetics belongs to philology and is intimately related to it.... Furthermore, aesthetics presupposes a correct judgment [*Urteil*], and such a judgment in turn rests on a natural sense of beauty [*Schönheitsgefühl*] and a cultivated understanding; from this perspective, aesthetics is very closely related to *Kritik*, or the power of judgment as such, which is why it is often confused with it.

In this sense, *Kritik* is the general name for the whole field of study. It encompasses erudition in language as well as aesthetics or [more precisely] the art of judging the beautiful, to which aesthetics belongs. Indeed, even grammar and all parts of philology can be denominated by this name. *Kritik*....¹²

The wide field of attempts at denomination, at abstracting a general concept of philology as such from the names of its parts, is a battlefield. All partial spheres of philology fall apart into parts of parts, which are called incidental, obligingly divorced, either *intimately* or *very closely* related, and finally are all called “very closely related to *Kritik*, or the power of judgment in general”: related not to the *Kritik* of the power of judgment, but to *Kritik* as a different word—from out of closeness to the Greek verb *krinein*—for the word *power of judgment*, while it remains open—*crisis* of the *power* of denomination—which word is merely representative and which word stands for the thing itself: *power of judgment* or *Kritik*. It remains impossible to come to know philology, as the sphere of any familiarity encompassed by it, to denominate it once known, to call it up by its *proper* name. For the one word, a *foreign* word, that syncopates the

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 186–87.

litany of names and denominations in Schlegel's list, the word *Kritik* ruins the reason for which it is mobilized, for not only philology *in its entirety* but "all of the parts of philology" can be "denominated by this name"; this ruined reason is to name by its name and to conceive in its name the monstrous sphere of philology, *entirely* delimited, composed of *entire parts*. Philology—a *limine*—forms a *critical* whole from *critical* parts: *Kritik* does not name the *concept* of the power of judgment (in the end, Schlegel calls it a *general name*, not a *concept*) but—more incomprehensible, more incisive—the non-orientable divisibility of even the most minor of parts into which the field of philology decomposes and the irregular divisibility of what seems judgment made and passed, taken and taken pleasure in. Insofar as "the object of philology is language" and as a *limit* concept—less concept of the limit than limit of the concept—*Kritik* specifies the object of philology as language qua *terminology*. In philology, which lays fallow the will to the cultivated—*linguistic*—field, the word *as limit*, the word *within its limits*, within the limits *of its field*, words *as concepts* are at stake. The eccentric middle of philological attention is formed by—without *forming* it—*language passed* [*verbrachte Sprache*].

The imperceptible turn, entertained by the opaque relation between *philo-* and *-logy* in the word *philology* (a relation that is an explicit topic of discussion neither in Schlegel nor in Szondi but, rather, is encountered *elusively*), away from the intention to hold on to a *concept* of philology as well as to philology as *science* (of language) in order to—conversely—bring the will to conceptuality (quintessence of science as *-logy*) into the center of philological attention, comes up in a letter of Walter Benjamin's to Gershom Scholem, dated February 14, 1921. From the elliptical notes that form the main part of the letter and the origin of which Benjamin places in the time of writing his dissertation, *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*, and of an intensive engagement with the writings of, above all, Friedrich Schlegel, let me single out one sentence that Benjamin introduces as a *definition* of philology: "I define philology not as science or history of language but, in its deepest layer, as *history of terminology*, where we would certainly be dealing with a highly enigmatic concept of time and very enigmatic phenomena."¹³ At first glance,

13. Letter from Walter Benjamin to Gershom Scholem, February 14, 1921, in *Gesammelte Briefe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 2:137 [*The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910–1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 176].

the sentence is entertained by the intention to sketch philology as a field within the limits of its most appropriate determination: to set limits. Yet this field is not limited by anything but by—indefinite, indefinable—attention for *terminology*: engagement with language as *milieu* of the *institution*, *distribution*, and *destitution* of limits. According to this undermining determination, philology names no terrain plainly situated between horizons; rather, its characteristic is deepening [*Vertiefung*]: “in its deepest layers” Benjamin defines philology not as science but “as *history of terminology*.” For this very reason, the word *history* does not emerge as *concept* of history, but surfaces entangled in the *deepest layer* of philology: in these lines, *history* [*Geschichte*] steps apart, around, and away from the word *-layer-* [*-schicht-*] within. At this point, history does not name chronological linearity but results from the process of sedimentation as deposition: as a *layering* [*Geschicht*] of deposits of *words*. The *time* of the *history of terminology* that dawns in the *deepest layer* of philology is—and this is the reason for which Benjamin calls the *concept* of time of this layer *highly enigmatic*—the time of the ramification or deterioration of *concepts*: it includes the *concept* of time, in other words the incalculable mutation of the word *time*—in more than one language. *Underneath* everything as which philology can appear, back *underneath* everything that appears as philology, philology is *history of terminology* only in its deepest, least conspicuous layer, in the *underground*. What dawns as history—*layering*—of terminology in this deepest layer, Benjamin calls it, in one of the notes dated back by the letter to Scholem to the year 1918, *history of transformation*: “Philology is history of transformation, its coherence [*Einsinnigkeit*] relies on that terminol<ogy> [is] not [a] presupposition but becomes material of a new etc. In philology, the object has highest continuity.”¹⁴ The tension in these lines between *history of transformation* and *highest continuity* confirms that in the deepest layer of philology as *history of terminology* one has to do with a “highly enigmatic concept of time” and with *very enigmatic phenomena*. The *phenomenon par excellence* encountered by philology in the history of terminology as history of *transformation* is the *word*. Its *highest continuity* is not contained in its invariable objectivity

14. The original reads: “Die Philologie ist Verwandlungsgeschichte, ihre Einsinnigkeit beruht darauf daß die Terminol<ogie> nicht Voraussetzung sondern Stoff einer neuen usf. wird. In der Philologie hat der Gegenstand höchste Kontinuität.” Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–89), 6:94.

[*Gegenständigkeit*] but begins to break through in the perpetuity of its appearance's transformability. The only stable thing about the word is its instability (in form as well as in content). Yet since the *highest* continuity of the word lies in the interruption of the appearance of its objectivity, a gap gapes where we would expect the appearance of the word *itself*. This gap does not only gape in the outline of the appearing word, but also in the outline of philological attention because no concept—not the word *gap* either—exists that does not testify to the groundless variability of the word—here of the word *gap*—which word seemed to be mobilized *as* a concept.

The *highest* continuity of the object, in other words, of the *word*, in philology is enclosed in the *objectlessness* of both—of the *word* and of *philology*. The object *par excellence* of philological attention is the objectlessness of the word: unavoidable non-locatability of the word as word of *its place*, within *its limits*, and *as* limit: *terminus*. Szondi touches on this paradoxical unavailability—of *philology* as of the *word* (and here in particular of the word *philology*)—on one of the first pages of the treatise “On Philological Knowledge” with reference to the *unabated presentness* of even the oldest texts (not unlike the *highest continuity* of the object in Benjamin's note):

What characterizes literary science in distinction from the science of history [*Geschichtswissenschaft*] is the unabated presentness of even the oldest texts. While the science of history must, and can, bring in its object, events past, from the distance of times into the present of knowing, philological knowing always already has the presentness of the work of art imposed [*vorgegeben*], and against the work of art it must test itself.¹⁵

The presence [*Gegenwart*] of its object—not of the work of art as much as of the word—is always imposed on philology, *pregiven*—*ahead* of all givenness. What is running through the relation of philology to its object, to the *presence* of the word, is a peculiar *delay*: The *always already* of the object's presence. In the place of the awaited givenness of the *object*—a word of *its place*—philology *always already* comes up against the *presence* [*Gegenwart*] of the word: of the word that waits [*wartet*], that is present, that turns toward what it awaits, the word that turns away the

15. Szondi, “Über philologische Erkenntnis,” p. 265 [5].

awaited presence of the awaited object.¹⁶ The *presence* of the object—a word—resists the *givenness* of the object. Not only *literary texts*, every *word* already is, *because* it is unabatedly present, not given: not available. The presence of the word forms—without *forming* it—a *place to remain*, which remains unavailable as *place* and place of the *word*. The presence sketched in the treatise tears that very gap into the appearance of the word as object that in Benjamin’s note splits apart the *highest* continuity of the object. It is the tear that runs through the awaiting of the word to *come* as well as through the remembrance of the word that has *passed*: it opens the field of philological attention that is *too* wide.

The tear that in the treatise “On Philological Knowledge” runs through the discussion of the presence of the word and undoes the density [*Dichte*] of the word and specifies every word—especially the *poetic* [*dichterische*] word—as a permeable one [*ein undichtes*] and hesitates between *words* [*Worten*] and *waiting* [*Warten*]: Szondi inserts this tear years later in a note on his *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics* and illustrates it with the one-into-the-*other* of the words *waren* and *Waren*:

The concept of the word that has an etymology and a history from out of which the plurality of meanings can be explained, this concept, too, is problematic, since such a concept of the word does not do justice to the phenomenon of homonymy, e.g., to the coincidence of *signifiants* such as *waren*, whose significations, the simple past of the verb “to be” [as in *wir waren*, “we were”] on the one hand, the plural of “commodity” [*Waren*] on the other, cannot be traced back to an ideal unity [*ideelle Einheit*].¹⁷

No *concept* of the word that corresponds to the incomprehensible presence, namely, the *objectlessness* of the word.¹⁸ Yet nonetheless Szondi years earlier in the treatise mobilizes *against* the tearing presence of the

16. [Trans. note: The original text reads: “Durch das Verhältnis der Philologie zu ihrem Gegenstand, zur *Gegenwart* des Wortes, geht ein eigentümlicher *Verzug*: das *Immer-schon* der Gegenwart des Gegenstands. Anstelle der erwarteten Gegebenheit des *Gegenstands*—ein Wort *seines Orts*—stößt Philologie *immer schon* auf die *Gegenwart* des Wortes: auf das *wartende*, *gegenwartende*, *entgegenwartende* Wort, das die erwartete Gegenwart des erwarteten Gegenstands entgegenwärtigt.”]

17. Szondi, *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik*, p. 181.

18. The legend for the confusing presence of the word, open between *Worten*, *-warten*, *waren*, and *Waren*, has been inlaid by Franz Kafka at an inconspicuous place in his works: “‘I don’t know, she said, it’s a great mess [*Wirrwarr*]. We’re waiting [*Wir warten*] for someone to sort things out. Are you the one?’” See Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente*, ed. Jost Schillemeit (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1992), 2:227–28.

word the imperative of *testing* [*Bewährung*] against the word of philological knowing in the name of *understanding*, in other words, in the name of *knowledge* [*Erkenntnis*] that is the origin of philological knowing, an origin it has never abandoned:

Philological knowing always already has the presence of the work of art imposed, and against the work of art it must test itself. . . . There is a dynamic element proper to philological knowing. . . . since it can persevere only in the continual confrontation with the text, only in the uninterrupted linking back [*Zurückführung*] of knowing to knowledge, to the understanding of the poetic word.

Philological knowing has never abandoned its origin, knowledge. . . .¹⁹

Philological knowing, insofar as it seeks room and board in *-logy* as *Wis-**sen-*, has perhaps never abandoned its origin, knowledge. *As* knowing, it holds on to the intention never to abandon its origin, the tearing womb of *knowledge*. But what is called, and *who* calls it—in the name of knowledge, in whose name Szondi deciphers yet another name, one among many perhaps, *understanding—conceiving?* What do we call *conceiving?* The 1862 entry for the word *Erkennen* in the *Deutsche Wörterbuch* includes, as an announcement of a discussion to come on the origin of the word, the *preliminary* remark:

The deeply struck and widely spread roots will be dealt with under the simple headings *kann* and *kennen*; preliminarily, a reminder of *kuni*, *chunni*, *genus*, γένος, of *kniu*, *chnio*, *knie*, *genu*, γόνυ, of *kinnus*, *chinni*, *gena*, γένυς, of γένναω, *genero*, *gigno*, γίγνωσκω, γίνομαι, *gnosco*, *nosco*, *nascor*, *natus*, *gnatus*, *genitus*, *notus*, *cognitus* . . . *chund* and *chind* may suffice. Sensual and intellectual ideas often merge one into the other here.²⁰

And Grimm, in order to illustrate the one-into-the-*other* of *cognitus* and *coitus*, cites from translations of Genesis:

And Adam knew Eve his wife. . . . And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bare Enoch. . . . Adam knew his wife again.²¹

19. Szondi, "Über philologische Erkenntnis," p. 265 [5].

20. *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm*, vol. 3 (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1862), col. 866.

21. *Ibid.* [See Gen. 4:1, 4:17, 4:25].

What springs forth from the—philological—engrossment in and deepening of *conceiving* is—deserted by any answer—the *question of the genitive*: question of the origin, of the provenance and orientation of what comes about, comes to language *as word, as child*, of what enters appearance and throws questions onto questions, that throw back the echo of Faust's question: "Who may call the child by its right name [*Wer darf das Kind beim rechten Namen nennen*]?" What springs forth from the engrossment in the word *philology* (which is encountered *elusively* by Friedrich Schlegel, Walter Benjamin, and Peter Szondi, different in all three instances) without having sprung forth is the experience of an abandonment by the self, by what *in the name*—of naming and denominating—divides the moment of *the word's* presence. It is the experience of a philology that is *hardly* there, that *hardly can* be there.

Szondi's treatise "On Philological Knowledge" has by virtue of *how* it eludes the engrossment in the word *philology* and touches upon the *hardly* of the givenness of what it names in the place of philology—the *hardly* of the givenness of *literary hermeneutics*—remained a place of unrest that pretraces every engagement to come of the relation one toward the other of *philo-* and *-logy*, every attempt to read the field too wide of unavailable traces of language *passed*.

*Szondi and Hegel:
“The Troubled Relationship of
Literary Criticism to Philosophy”*

Claudia Brodsky

In “Hegel’s Theory of Literature” (1964–65, pub. 1974), Peter Szondi observes that without the “thoroughgoing mediation” between the general intellectual form of the “concept” and the “historical-empirical” reality of particular art forms introduced with Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics* into philosophy, such landmark works in “modern philosophy of art” as Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*, Benjamin’s *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, and Adorno’s *Philosophy of Modern Music* “are unthinkable.”¹ To Szondi’s list of Hegel’s twentieth-century theoretical descendants, we can add Szondi himself, whose insistence upon the essential relation between art and philosophy remains, like Hegel’s, invaluable for any thinking through and past the coeval tendencies toward mystification and instrumentalization to which philosophical and aesthetic reflection are equally, and recurrently, subjected.

While both are artificial forms of articulation—forms *meaningfully* deployed—art and philosophy, *as* forms, are significantly cognitively different. Their distinction owes to the difference between the acts of perception and intellection involved in their reception. Unlike the language of philosophy, the many forms of non-discursive art appear to us as sensuous material first, and even the discursive arts, in order to be conceptualized as such—rather than as inartistic instances of merely communicative speech, the instantaneous and conventional means of providing and receiving

1. Peter Szondi, “Hegels Lehre von der Dichtung,” in *Poetik und Geschichtsphilosophie*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 309. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own. All subsequent page references to *Poetik und Geschichtsphilosophie* will be documented parenthetically within the text.

information—cannot be entirely abstracted from their sensuous condition. The fact that any art that foregrounds the conceptual basis of its appearance is routinely condemned for manifesting unbeautiful or anti-aesthetic, overly intellectual, or ideological tendencies, does not detract from the fact, as Adorno himself, following Hegel, importantly concluded, that art that “cancels” its own “sensuous appearance” in favor of the full “maturity” achieved by its “intellectualization” “virtually” cancels, “along with” that sensuous perceptibility, its own identity and dialectical potency as “art.”²

Philosophy, by direct contrast, is the discursive form of intellectualization or abstraction through which we conceptualize, among other things, sensuous appearances and aesthetic experiences of every kind, including those sensuous objects and environments that owe their existence to the hand and mind—the *techne*, imagination, and calculation—of man. No theorist of the aesthetic—who was not also a practicing artist—ever singled out for philosophical consideration the specifically human or non-natural production of the aesthetic with greater force than Hegel, who states unequivocally, at the opening of the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, that the sensuous objects produced by art, or indeed any product of the spirit, must always outstrip any of the beauties of nature in philosophical significance:

For artistic beauty is beauty born and reborn out of spirit, and in as much as spirit and its productions stand higher than nature and its appearances, so is artistic beauty higher than the beauty of nature. Indeed, when considered *formally*, even a bad idea, in the way it goes through a person’s head, is *higher* than any product of nature, for in such ideas or notions spirit and freedom are always present. For example: in its *content*, of course, the sun appears as an *absolutely necessary* moment, while an askew notion appears *accidental* and, in passing, disappears; but taken in itself such a natural existence as the sun is indifferent, in itself not free

2. Theodor W. Adorno, “Arnold Schoenberg,” in *Prismen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1955), p. 211. See also Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976): “Appealing to the senses, the appearance that is essential to art constitutes itself” (29); “In every genuine work of art something appears that does not [otherwise] exist” (127); “Whenever the concretion of the aesthetic articulation is not carried out, the unbound intellect establishes itself as a kind of material layer to the second degree. Directed against the sensuous moment, intellectualization turns a blind eye to the many aspects of differentiation of the sensuous itself, its own intellectual identity, and becomes abstract” (143); “[Art] is sensuous intuition without something intuitable, similar to a concept without a concept. It is upon concepts, however, that art sets its mimetic, nonconceptual stratum free” (148).

or self-aware, and when we consider it in the context of its necessity with other things, so do we not consider it in itself and thus not as beautiful.³

For Hegel, then, “even a bad idea” or “notion” ranks “higher” than the most beautiful “appearances” of nature because, whatever its outcome and however one may finally judge it, and no matter how short-lived, “accidental,” and misconceived its passage through the mind, its origin in and transversal of the intellect makes the merest “product” of “spirit” more inherently significant than any natural beauty, whose “necessity” depends instead upon a self-perpetuating, externally related “context.” Still, while the slightest human notion, no matter how benighted, shares with made aesthetic objects a philosophical significance greater than that of the unique source of natural light, “the sun,” the discursive concepts of philosophy and the sensuous objects of aesthetics are never considered identical by Hegel or by Szondi. Indeed, it is precisely their difference from each other that not only defines them but does so *reciprocally*: for both Hegel and Szondi, the individual identities of philosophy and art, distinct but intertwined, are not so much opposed as dependent upon each other.

For it is not only their common origin in the intellect that conjoins philosophy with art. Rather, philosophy and art, while differing in the forms they use and the mental faculties they engage, are not “philosophy” and “art” independently of one another; what they are depends on the interplay of perception and intellection that they divide between them. Just as philosophy has always recognized the necessity to its own reflections of considering the epistemological and experiential status of mimesis (μίμησις), the changing conceptions of which have composed decisive turning points in the history of discursive philosophy itself,⁴ so

3. G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, in *Theorie Werkausgabe*, vols. XIII–XV (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), XIII:14 (emphasis in text). All subsequent page references to the *Lectures on Aesthetics* will be documented parenthetically as *LA* followed by the volume and page numbers of the Suhrkamp edition.

4. Foremost among these: the theorization of the relation of fictive, imitative representations to real, transitory things and ideal, permanent forms, and the hypothesis of the strictly functionalist, mimesis-free state, in Plato; the replacement by Descartes of all experiential and mimetic accounts of knowledge with the production of thinking along the lines of an algebraicized or figure-free geometric “method”; the critical centrality of the “aesthetic,” conceived as a form devoid of all mimetic, and so all conceptual, content, to the possibility of free thinking and acting theorized by Kant; and the view of the “work of art” as neither formal nor mimetic object but act of *poiesis*, a marking of “difference” opening a non-phenomenal “space” for the “unconcealment” of Being in Heidegger.

art and aesthetic perception, whether banned from the organized state or individual exercise of reason, considered critical to mediating the non-communicating spheres of reason, or to reason's own overcoming by the call of Being, have repeatedly emerged in the history of western conceptual philosophy not only as theoretically meaningful but as fundamental to the capability of theory itself to bear meaning. It is in identifying and attempting to conceptualize the "aesthetic," i.e., that which is neither philosophy nor devoid of philosophical content, that, *like* the aesthetic—while *not* in the immediately sensuous mode of the aesthetic—the discourse that understands itself as philosophy presents itself as the conceptual and interpretive basis for understanding. It is in considering the aesthetic that philosophy complicates all axiomatically formulated, purely conventional or "symbolic" "truths," exploring instead the possibilities of meaning upon which, in keeping with human life and history, and most unlike nature, all acts of interpretation and understanding, as of misinterpretation and misunderstanding, are based: the paths by which—to use Hegel's bracingly concrete formulation—any individual "notion goes through the head."

Szondi and "the Basic Intention of Hegelian Philosophy"

The particular art form upon which Szondi reflects is literature, and one may well question how this affects his interpretation of Hegel's theory of the aesthetic. For Szondi's hermeneutic view of literature as art does not stem, like Adorno's modernist revitalization of Hegel, from a desire to describe and defend the enduring possibility of an aesthetic avant-garde, to expose and articulate, through the dialectical conceptualization of the aesthetic, a philosophy of new art forms inassimilable by the culture industry or any other enterprise aimed at achieving predetermined, external ends. While Szondi understands Hegel's emphasis on the "freedom" of art to be in implicit accord with Adorno's promulgation and practice of *Kulturkritik*—"Under 'beautiful art' Hegel . . . understands art that is not the means to an end which would be external to it, but which, grounded in itself, is free and at the same time embodies freedom" (285–86)—his own understanding of art is based on the textual, rather than dialectical, model of literature, an understanding that inherently changes the relationship of internal to external in the consideration of what constitutes art, and with art, philosophy. In studies of individual authors, literary genres, and theories of interpretation spanning the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, Szondi perceived and identified the kind of textual complexity of meaning specific to the constitution and historical moment of the individual poetic work,

a meaning-bearing specificity that, first theorized with regard to secular texts by Szondi's greatest predecessor in the advancement of interpretive philology, Schleiermacher, was importantly underscored and transformed into an encompassing *aesthetic* principle for Szondi by Hegel: "One of the most brilliant aspects of Hegel's *Aesthetics* is that, despite its situation in a system of philosophy, it does justice to the work of art, understanding the artwork, like philosophy itself, as an expression of the divine, whose specific structure it takes into consideration" (289). Writing at once as literary critic and historian, Szondi understands that, if it is to "conceive" or "grasp" (*begreifen*) not some individually finite, historically determinate meaning but, rather, the enduring nature of the making and interpretation of meaning and of the written work *as art*, the study of literature requires the practice of what Schleiermacher, in his 1819 lectures on hermeneutics, first called "the art of understanding": the conception of the individual literary text as object of interpretation that, as Szondi states in "Hegel's Theory of Literature," defines it not merely as the historical document it has inevitably become but, more significantly, in "its being an artwork" in the first place (271).

It is in view of Szondi's decidedly Hegelian understanding of the artistic being of the text that the present analysis investigates Szondi's understanding, first, of Hegel's philosophy, and then, and in relation thereto, of Hegel's philosophical understanding or aesthetics of poetry. In examining Szondi's understanding of Hegel's theory of poetry, we encounter not so much the problem of whether literature constitutes a form of art, a properly Hegelian *Kunstform*, in the first place, as the different problem of whether, within a philosophy of art that conceives of art as an historical, or temporally specific production of spirit, poetry in specific remains an art form in the last place. For, just as Szondi, unlike Adorno, views philosophy of art primarily from the vantage point of the scholar, critic, and historian of meaning-bearing text, he recognizes that literature and literary history in particular and the overarching history of the art form as Hegel conceived of it generally might not be compatible or co-temporaneous; that *Dichtung* for Hegel may not embody the kind of progressive dialectical structure readily recognized by Adorno in past and new musical forms, but rather, may be threatened with extinction, surpassed, or rendered meaningless by the ongoing history of the very spirit of which it was born.

Szondi's uncertainty, his admitted equivocation, not on the subject of whether poetry is art and so a fitting object of philosophy, but as to whether an historical philosophy of art can account for the language,

whether prosaic or figural, that is the aesthetic medium of literature, is evident from the beginning of his lectures on Hegel's *Aesthetics*. Naming his discussion of Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* specifically for the "theory of poetry" that the lectures include within them, Szondi initially states that he sees no essential difference between the two. When we consider "aesthetics," in the modern, non-psychological sense of "philosophy of art," he explains, "poetry, too, is to be understood under art": "philosophy of art [is] thus also philosophy of poetry" and "aesthetics must interest literary scholarship and criticism" (*Literaturwissenschaft*) since it is "the philosophy of its own object" (269).

Yet, no sooner does Szondi assert than he goes on to question the identity of the object of aesthetics and literary criticism: "Is this consideration correct?" (269). For, rather than embracing "the theory of poetry of a Hegel or a Schelling," the discipline of *Germanistik*, Szondi remarks, has instead "bracketed [these] out," and the source of "blame" for this rejection of aesthetic poetic theory by the disciplinary study of literature is not any disciplinary or anti-philosophical bias in particular but what Szondi calls, provocatively, "the troubled relationship to philosophy that has identified *Germanistik* from its inception... the troubled relationship of literary study [or criticism] to philosophy" (269, 272).

The "troubled relationship of literary criticism to philosophy," first systematically represented in the relationship of Aristotle to Plato, remains as much in evidence today as it was when Szondi delivered his lectures on Hegel's theory of poetry over forty years ago (Göttingen, 1962; Berlin, 1964–65). One of the most important contributions made by Szondi's lectures on Hegel's *Aesthetics* is to indicate why this may still be so, although in a manner that Szondi, writing, to paraphrase his own words, as a literary critic in "relation" to a philosopher, would have been "troubled" to define. The influx of philosophical into literary study that has occurred since Szondi's death in 1971 may lead us to ask, as did Szondi, with regard to the now nearly accepted assumption that philosophical aesthetics and literary criticism take the same "object": "Is this consideration correct?" Scrutinizing Szondi's observations on Hegel's descriptions of literary form on the basis of the analysis of aesthetic form that Hegel provides, we may, in addition, ask something more: Just as one may question whether the object of literary criticism is, at one and the same time, the object of philosophy of art—artistic form—even when, like Hegel's *Aesthetics*,

such a philosophy includes among its objects the arts of poetry, so one may ask whether the “troubled relationship” of literary criticism to philosophy relates to a single object. Is the object of the “troubled relationship” between literary criticism and philosophy indeed philosophy, or philosophy alone? Or is it, or is it also, the object of literary criticism, literature, as conceptualized by philosophy? Is it literature *in addition to* or literature *rather than* philosophy that is the source of that which (still) disturbs the relationship of literary criticism to philosophy? Does philosophy—can philosophy—account for literature in accounting for literature as art?

Szondi indicates something of the difficulty in identifying the source of the disturbance in the relationship between literary studies and philosophy when he reviews the progress of literary criticism in Germany as a history of flight from the literary. This modern history, according to Szondi, extends from the “positivism” of nineteenth-century “German philology” that modeled literary study on “the natural sciences,” equating poetry with “documents” for the gathering of purely historical “facts,” to the claims of *Geistesgeschichte* in the first half of the twentieth century, which, “in reaction to positivism,” instead treated poetry as a “philosopheme” or “surrogate for philosophy,” “documents” not of the facts but rather of the “spirit of the times” (269–72). Finally, “stylistic criticism,” reacting in turn to the generalizing characterizations and claims of *Geistesgeschichte*, found its own method, and “pathos,” in the “limitation” of literary criticism to the empirical “description” of the “artwork as artwork,” proceeding as if describing the individual “thing” conceived by “Husserlian phenomenology,” and thereby failing to consider, like those methods that preceded it, what first makes an artwork an artwork (271). In “Hegels Theory of Literature,” Szondi states most forcefully that the identity of the artwork that remains “invisible” to the positivisms of scientific philology, intellectual history, and stylistic criticism alike can be objectified by “theory alone”—not through the false equation, evoked in *Geistesgeschichte*, of poetry with historical-philosophical themes and theses, but through an understanding of poetry instead as a critical “object” of theoretical reflection (272). For Szondi, this was Hegel’s signal and enduring achievement in the realm of art, and in transmitting Hegel’s aesthetic theory, Szondi hews closely to the view of the aesthetic that Hegel’s *Lectures* describes.

The same cannot be said, however, for Szondi’s view of Hegel’s philosophy, and of the position and role of the aesthetic within it. Briefly

mentioning what he calls Kant's ethical "postulate" and Schiller's "idealism," before summarizing the characterization and rejection, in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, of Schlegel's theory of "irony" (attacked with unusual energy by Hegel as a falsely posited subjective "omnipotence" merely "play[ing]" at the "resolution" of "contradiction"⁵), Szondi characterizes Hegel's own contribution to philosophy as follows:

To these different resolutions Hegel opposes his thesis, that resolution is not to be demanded and realized, but that resolution is reality. It is not first the isolated spirit of man that attempts to bring the contradictory and disparate nature of nature to unity. Rather reality itself strives toward the resolution of opposites. Hegel's dialectic is a real dialectic. (295)

As if in direct response to, and confirmation of, Hegel's critique of the spirit of irony, Szondi characterizes Hegel's "resolution" of contradiction as a "real dialectic," distinct from the spirit of man. Yet, one paradoxical result of such a characterization of the dialectic would be that art, as distinct from "nature," and so equally distinct from the "real," can arise only with the unreality or untruth of that spirit. (From Szondi's positive characterization of Hegel to Hegel's negative characterization of Schlegel is thus—ironically—only a short step.) When Szondi states, shortly thereafter, that "[a]rt arises necessarily, because spirit wants to express itself in the medium of the sensory; express itself, i.e., depart from itself, realize itself in an Other, so as to overcome that one-sidedness that, according to Hegel, is the Untrue," he reasons from the impasse to which his view of Hegel's "reality itself," "striving" to resolve contradiction, has already led him, i.e., the circular conclusion that spirit, while "Untrue," would somehow have the desire to "express" itself *as* Truth, in the Other of sensuousness, an argument that, again, comes perilously close to the kind of false resolution portrayed by Hegel in his criticism of Schlegel's—in his view—merely subjective theory of irony (299).

Szondi's "Hegel," for whom spirit and the real remain separate, is thus hardly the philosopher of the aesthetic for whom art alone initiates the

5. Indicative of the unique contempt in which he holds Friedrich Schlegel, Hegel names the section of the *Lectures on Aesthetics* devoted to his theory (and that of its successors, Solger and Tieck) not for Schlegel himself (per the preceding sections entitled "Kantian Philosophy" and "Schiller, Winckelmann, and Schelling") but instead for Schlegel's single—in Hegel's view, self-serving or cynical—aesthetic principle: "Irony" ("Die Ironie"). See Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, XIII:83, 89, 93–99.

dialectic—not of “the real” but rather *really* (or, in Hegel’s terms, as previously cited from the opening of the *Aesthetics*, “*formally*”), i.e., *between spirit and matter*. Like Szondi’s “spirit,” Szondi’s “Hegel” is more “one-sided”—more traditionally philosophical—than Hegel, for whom without art and the recognition of the necessary opposition between spirit and matter that it compels, neither philosophy itself, nor religion before it, would ever have arisen.

A similar philosophical catholicism informs Szondi’s view of the abstract in Hegel. For Szondi it is unilaterally “the concept of the concept” that occupies the “first position” in Hegel’s thought:

[W]hen we want to understand Hegel’s terminology we must take as our point of departure the basic intention of Hegelian philosophy. The concepts, which we must consider, are no new creations on Hegel’s part; on the contrary, they make up the backbone, so to speak, of every philosophy: the concepts idea, truth, freedom, and in the first place the concept of the concept itself. (332, emphasis added)

Hegel’s “concept of the concept,” “the first degree of mediation” in his philosophy, is not, according to Szondi, “the abstract representation of an object” but rather an “ideal unity” of “concrete determinations” (336–38). Within the “ideal unity” of the concept, Szondi argues, Hegel successfully mediates and cancels the defining Hegelian dynamic of contradiction; even the “ambiguity” of the word “sense” (*Sinn*)—described by Hegel (and cited by Szondi) as “this wonderful word that is itself used in two opposed meanings”—is resolved, according to Szondi, by Hegel’s concept of the concept (339). The difference between a self-defining, “intentional” use of “terminology” and referentially “ambiguous” words used “wonderful[ly]” to mean opposing things, is itself subsumed by Szondi’s summary of the former as it functions in “Hegelian philosophy.” The question, to which we shall return below, is whether such a subsumption is itself not cancelled by the “fundamental intention,” instead, *of Hegelian aesthetics*: whether the “ambiguity” of all words, and not only the “wonderful word,” “sense,” is not in fact the “point of departure” of the theory of the aesthetic that is the basis of Hegelian philosophy. Turning from Szondi’s “Hegel” to Hegel “himself,” we may also ask whether the—as we shall see—“wonderful” basis of Hegel’s aesthetics, and thus, with the arising of the aesthetic, of his philosophy, is itself not in contradiction with any supersessional “concept of the concept” theorized by his philosophy.

Finally, Hegel's philosophical theory of real resolution achieved through a conceptual unification of opposites holds true, if not truer, according to Szondi, for Hegel's concept of the most meaningful concept, that of the idea. For Hegel, Szondi states:

The idea is the concept, the reality of the concept and the unity of both. It comes doubly together and forms a new unity. Only that which is added as second to the concept is not a stranger to it, but is its own reality. In speculative reflection it is produced by the concept itself. The process from concept to idea follows the law of Hegelian dialectic. . . .

The idea is thus not fundamentally different from the concept; the concept itself transcends itself in order to be truly a concept according to *the Hegelian understanding of the word*: it destroys itself, in order to completely realize itself upon a higher plane, as idea. (340–41, emphasis added)

Here Hegel's "understanding of the word," "concept," would oppose that word, "realiz[ing] itself upon a higher plane," to the "wonderful word, sense'," whose inherent "'ambiguity'," since composed in part of the very sense of "sense," i.e., its sense as conceptual meaning, casts a shadow upon the overriding "unity" of "reality" and "concept" in the "idea" to which, according to Szondi, "the concept of the concept," relieved of all such troubling semantic doubling, transcendently ascends.

Previous to this extended explication of "Hegel's terminology" as expressing the "basic intention" of his philosophy, that of achieving, in the "idea," the absolute unification of all "concrete determinations," all meaningful contradiction and ambiguity, Szondi cites the well-known statement in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, that "art, in its highest determination, is, for us, a thing of the past" (303). Taking Hegel at his word, Szondi explicates that statement historically, stating that art whose "truth" is no longer determined by "religion" will be "outstripped" dialectically by "thought and reflection," or, in Hegel's terminology, the rise of philosophy (303). It is the art of the Greeks, in which "religion and art are internally bound," that is not only "exemplary" of the "highest determination" of art for Hegel, but, according to Szondi, that past instance of art whose "visible," immediately unifying "character" reflects, "thanks to an extraordinary coincidence . . . the philosophical intention of Hegel" himself (303).

Similarly, it is the "human body" that, according to Szondi, provides Hegel with his "paradigm" of "beauty," a paradigm that Szondi attributes, unlike Hegel, not to the "products of spirit" but to the "beauty of nature":

[The] sensory existence of the idea Hegel names beauty; the human body and its actions are for Hegel the paradigm of the beauty of nature. . . . The dominance of individuality as corporeal reality determines the Hegelian aesthetic in its entirety; thus, for example, is his preference for the plastic and for dramatic poetry, which he prefers to the remaining individual arts and genres, such as painting, music, and lyric, to be understood. (344–45)

Settling on the ancient Greeks and on the human body as Hegel's historical and generic aesthetic paradigms, Szondi's attribution of a "plastic" orientation to Hegel's aesthetics does not leave Winckelmann far behind; such an "orientation of the aesthetic, of the determination of the beautiful, upon the human body," he proceeds to observe, "is, without Winckelmann's rediscovery of the Greek art world, unthinkable" (345). He may as well have observed that, looking back upon the history of aesthetic theory antedating this exemplarily classical "Hegel," Lessing's pathbreaking differentiation of the modalities of text and bodily image need never have been written; that Hegel's aesthetic theory is merely—or predominantly—Winckelmann's own "rediscovery" in dialectical garb.

Still, the strongest sections in Szondi's review of Hegel's theory concern not the supposed closeness of that theory to Winckelmann's idealization of ancient Greece, nor the equation of the latter, and of the "preference" of Hegel's aesthetics, with the human body rendered in ideal, plastic form. The most compellingly argued, indeed profoundly Hegelian sections of "Hegel's Theory of Literature" concern the realm of symbolic art forms, in which art, far from being surpassed, is first truly born. Leapfrogging backwards (or perhaps forwards) from the moment when the "untrue" spirit attempts to "express itself" in the "Other" of the "sensory," Szondi describes a symbol that, in functioning instead "*as a sign* that indicates something else . . . , frees the intellectual for the first time from its simple identity with sensory reality" (376, emphasis added; see also 389). This is as much as to say that it is not "spirit" wishing to "express itself" but the symbol "as a sign that indicates something else" that "itself" initiates the dialectic of form and content that constitutes the history of the aesthetic in Hegel (376; see also 389).

It is Hegel's theoretical description of the symbol, rather than supposed Winckelmannian aestheticism, that is, in practice, exemplary for Szondi's own literary criticism, whose scrupulous descriptions of the sensuous, verbal reality of the individual literary work, be it classical,

romantic, or modern, are always accompanied by the critic's attention to the ability of that reality to "mean something else" (370). It is Szondi's dedication to grasping the work of art "in its being as a work of art [*in seinem Kunstwerksein*]" (271) that leads him, however, both to expound Hegel's dialectical analysis of the art form and to note the profound "disappointment" of "the literary critic" in encountering Hegel's particular analysis of "the conscious symbolism of the comparative art form," i.e., the symbolism of verbal transformation, including simile, metaphor, and mimetic description as well as riddle, fable, parable, and allegory (among others), that composes the objects of literary analysis (389–90). Transmitting Hegel's theory of literary forms, true to Hegel, as so many variations upon a dead letter, Szondi provocatively describes them as standing for Hegel "outside the movement of absolute spirit": as "lacking...almost entirely in historical-philosophical relation" (391). Thus, Szondi, the literary critic who finds Hegel's theory of art most conceptually vital, also finds his own realm of art, the literary, excluded from all continuing dialectical consideration by Hegel, as if literary forms themselves already constituted the "pastness" of art, the end of its meaningfulness, even while still situated in art's initial, symbolic phase. Summarizing the passages on literary form in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Szondi finally alludes briefly to an "insufficient conception of the being of language" on Hegel's part, and moves on (396).

A careful examination of Hegel's description of the symbol in "On the Symbol in General," the truly seminal discussion with which the section analyzing all symbolic art forms begins, can serve to put Szondi's disappointment in reviewing Hegel's review of literature in another perspective. In that analysis we find, and Szondi might have found, an understanding of the symbol "in general" that is both profoundly and distinctly literary—a supreme exposition of Szondi's own understanding of the particular power of the literary work, yet one that, on its own terms, must indeed stand outside any determinant movement of the dialectic of absolute spirit, very much as Szondi, in discussing Hegel's treatment of literary forms, describes. That Hegel's discussion of "the symbol in general" not only puts into question his description of literary terms as more or less philosophically sterile, but also unsettles his historical-dialectical prescription of the pastness of artistic meaning—both of which forms of finality Szondi faithfully transmits—may owe less to the philosopher's "insufficient" understanding of language than to "the troubled relationship of literary

criticism to philosophy” that Szondi notes, including the relationship of Szondi to the philosopher he values most.

“The Essential Ambiguity” of the Symbol in Hegel

Hegel’s definition of the symbol—the first of all “art forms”—begins as follows:

Symbol as such is an external existence, immediately present or given to perception, which, however, is not apprehended in the way it lies immediately before us, for its own sake, but is supposed to be understood in a broader and more general sense. There is thus a double distinction to be made in considering the symbol: first the *meaning* and then the *expression* of the same. *The former* is an idea or an object, no matter the content; *the latter* is a sensory existence or an image of some kind. (LA XIII:394, emphasis in text)

The “double distinction” involved in defining the symbol, then, is the very definition of the “ambiguity” signified, according to Hegel, by the “wonderful word, sense”: that of “present[ing],” on the one hand, an immediate and sensory, and on the other, an interpretable and cognitive “existence.” Even the “contradictory” senses of “sense” are resolved, Szondi has stated, by Hegel’s surpassing idea of the all-encompassing concept; yet Hegel’s definition of the symbol also determines it as that which is incommensurate with any unifying concept. Hegel introduces the symbol—origin of all art—by introducing us first to the conventional and technical, rather than interpretable *or* conceptual, aspect of its signifying, that of being, “in the first place,” a “*sign*”:

1. Now the symbol is in the first place a *sign*. In a mere designation, however, the connection that the meaning and its expression have with one another is only an entirely arbitrary linkage. This expression, this sensory thing or image, so little represents itself that it rather brings to mind a foreign content with which it need stand in no proper commonality. So it is that in languages sounds are signs of some idea, feeling, etc. . . . ; and the differences among languages consists principally in the fact that the same idea is expressed by a different sounding. . . . In this sense of such an *indifference* of the meaning and designation we may therefore not consider the symbol with respect to art, in that art as such consists in the relationship, relatedness, and concrete integration of meaning and form. (LA XIII:394–95, emphasis in text)

As something existent, something that “is” (*ist*), the symbol is, in the “first place,” a merely “arbitrarily” meaningful sign, one whose “linkage” of sensory matter and conceptual content is “different” in every language. Thus, although the symbol is, first of all, a “*sign*,” it cannot be considered in that identity in relation to (formally meaningful) art. Rather than discarding and surpassing the semiotic identity of the symbol, however, Hegel proceeds from analyzing the symbol as sign to analyzing the symbol as art by reversing the order and emphasis and altering the modal link between the two, literally co-“existent” terms:

2. It is different therefore in the case of a sign, which is meant to be a *symbol*, e.g., the lion as a symbol of courage, the fox as a symbol of cleverness, the circle as a symbol of eternity. (*LA XIII:395*)

“The symbol is, in the first place, a sign,” while, in the second place, signs that are “meant to be” symbols are intended in opposition to the arbitrary linkage of expression to meaning in the sign. Such symbols are signs of “sensorily present existences” that “possess for themselves the qualities whose meaning they are to express” (*LA XIII:395*).

Yet, as soon as the inherently meaningful sign, or “*symbol*,” defined in the second instance (“2”), is described and differentiated from the symbol, or arbitrary “*sign*,” defined in the first instance (“1”), the two opposing semantic poles, of inherent and merely conventional meaning, meet in Hegel’s analysis of “symbol” in the third instance (“3”):

3. *Third*, it is further to be remarked, that the symbol, even if it may not be, like the merely external and formal sign, inadequate in its meaning, must also, conversely, not make itself entirely commensurate in order to remain a symbol. (*LA XIII:395–96*)

In three-part, Hegelian dialectic it is, of course, the “third” instance to which the opposition between a first and a second instance leads, the third that, in “sublating” these, manifests meaningful historical change. In order to “remain” a symbol, however—i.e., to continue to be meaningful in history—the symbol, Hegel suggests, will instead have to remain poised between its first and second identities. If it is “to remain a symbol” that internally conveys meaning (“2”) rather than devolve in significance into the philosophical “inadequa[cy]” of the “merely externally formal sign” (“1”), the symbol, instead of becoming “commensurate” with its

“meaning,” must continue to raise the co-existent questions commensurate with its own double or co-“existence.” One must be able to ask of the symbol not only *what* it signifies (as sign) but *if* it signifies (as symbol). For, as Hegel observes in particular, the meaning of the sign as symbol may be “abstract, like strength, cleverness,” or it may be just the opposite, “concrete” (LA XIII:396). The quality signified may be any one of many possessed by the sensory form—“the lion, for example, is not only strong, the fox not only clever”—just as, conversely, the number of “forms and images” that can be “used as symbols” to represent a single meaning, such as “*God*,” is “entirely infinite” (LA XIII:396). Further subtending each of these semantic possibilities is the latent “doubt” as to whether, since it is a “*sign* in the first place,” a particular symbol is not also a sign in the last place: the mere “sighting of a symbol as such immediately brings along the doubt,” Hegel remarks, “as to whether a *form is to be taken as a symbol or not*” (LA XIII:397, emphasis in text).

The symbol that “remains” symbolic thus must also “remain,” Hegel concludes, “*ambiguous*”—not only in its meaning (what) and its being (if), but in the very form of its philosophical conceptualization (or “intentional” “terminological” “unification,” in Szondi’s reading of Hegel) (LA XIII:397, emphasis in text). Hegel may well reverse the order of the apparent subordination of “symbol” to “sign,” or change the sequential order in which that reversal is delineated, but his analysis of the symbol that “is” sign at one and the same time effectively makes the word that philosophically signifies the possibility of the aesthetic, and thus of philosophy—“symbol”—intellectually indistinguishable from the “wonderful word, sense,” not only in its initial, purely formal identity as a sign but, more philosophically or abstractly, in “its own concept”: “So from this follows that, according to its own concept, the symbol remains essentially *ambiguous*” (LA XIII:397, emphasis in text).⁶

Such a “concept[ually]” “essential” ambiguity “remains” unlimited by any concrete or abstract determination and irresolvable by any contextual factor; its persistent dual identity excludes it, in addition, from the classical rule of internal proportionality pertaining to individual bodies. The existential *and* conceptual web that constitutes the semantic possibilities of

6. In this description of the “essential ambiguity” of the symbol—an ambiguity occurring not by chance but “according to its own concept”—Hegel again approaches, appropriately enough, his “own” symbolic *and* conceptual antagonist, Schlegel.

the symbol thus also extends from its own “proper” to all possible images. Having declared its “ambiguity” “essential” to the symbol in particular, Hegel continues:

There thus arises the question whether a lion, whose image is brought before us, is supposed to express and mean only itself, or something else in addition, the abstract content of mere strength or the more concrete content of a hero, or of a season, of agriculture; whether such an image, as one calls it, should be taken *properly* or *at the same time improperly* or also somewhat *only improperly*. (LA XIII:397, emphasis in text)

The only way to answer such a “question” definitively is to foreclose, *by way of literature itself*, its very posing. The foreclosure, in which “such ambiguity . . . ceases,” occurs in literary works, Hegel observes, in which “both sides” of the symbol, “its meaning and its form,” are “expressly named” and “their relationship articulated”: when it is “no longer a symbol in the proper sense of the word, but a mere image” whose meaning is also exposed that is presented to us much like an equation between a “general idea . . . and its concrete image” (LA XIII:397–98). Hegel calls such an unambiguous image a “comparison” (*Vergleich*)—we know it as simile and its extended family as all manner of allegory—and indeed it is these very forms that, following the discussions of “The Symbolic Proper” at the close of the first chapter of “The Symbolic Art Form,” and of “The Symbolic of the Sublime” in the second chapter, compose the subject matter of “The Conscious Symbolic of Comparative Art Forms,” the third and final chapter of Hegel’s dialectical delineation of the symbolic, its mysterious rise and all-too-explicit fall. As referred to above, these are precisely the literary forms whose analysis by Hegel Szondi describes as “mechanical,” the “disappointing” result of achieving the systematic and abstract aims of philosophy via the concrete “being of the artwork,” an “intentional use” not only of “terminology” but of the aesthetic forms that such terms describe, itself deriving from and reflecting an “insufficient conception of language” as mere “vehicle” of thought (396–97).

If, indeed, as Hegel describes at the opening of the first part of the *Aesthetics*, “Art, in its beginnings, still leaves over something mysterious, an intimation of secrets and a longing, because its formations have not yet brought forth their full content for imaged perception”—if, that is, art is vital in its origin, and transmits that vitality into the future as a yearning for transparency precisely owing to the opacity of its form with regard to its

meaning—then the literary forms that Hegel describes at the close of “The Conscious Symbolic of Comparative Art Forms” are, as Szondi describes, hardly art at all. The “falling apart” rather than “identification” of “content and form” in the conscious symbolic spells the symbol’s demise; in “The Disappearing of the Symbolic Art Form,” the last subsection of “The Conscious Symbolic,” Hegel explains concisely why “descriptive poetry,” the penultimate genre of the suite of conscious literary forms, beginning with fable, that he defines—and to which, appropriately enough, he devotes only a single brief paragraph—cannot be considered “true art”:

While in the didactic poem the content remains essentially an unshaped *generality*, here, conversely, the *external material* stands *for itself* in its individuality and external appearance, unpenetrated by the meanings of spirit, and is now for its part represented, depicted, described in the way it customarily lies available in consciousness. Such a sensory content belongs entirely to only *one* side of true art, namely, that of external being, which in art only has the right to appear as the reality of spirit. . . , not to appear as mere externality that has departed from spirit. (*LA XIII:543*, emphasis in text)

With “descriptive poetry,” then, we encounter what Hegel famously calls “the prose of the world,” the art form of a world without art. This is the world “as it appears to one’s own and the other’s consciousness, a world of finitude and mutability, of entanglement in the relative and the pressure of the necessary, from which the individual is not in a position to withdraw himself” (*LA XIII:199*). It is the world that, having of late abandoned the mystery of art, will provide the particulars for its ultimate supersession by abstract philosophical conceptualization.

Yet, by indicating that in descriptive poetry the “external material” of what is no longer “true art” appears instead as it is “customarily” available in consciousness, Hegel also indicates that the prose of the world is, in the first place, a world of prose. For language as it is there for us “customarily” is the language of the merely external, conventional, and “arbitrarily” meaning sign, which is to say, it is precisely the language of “the symbol . . . in the first place,” the language-like art form in which the history of spirit is born.

But it is also the language in which all symbolic art ends up. Due to the “essential ambiguity” of the symbol, those images that, unambiguously, have no clear meaning are conventionally, prosaically, descriptively

named “*symbol*,” and the meaning that attaches to them does so thanks to “custom” and “convention” alone, just as in the case of the apparently non-symbolic, the “mere sign.” Hegel’s description of the ambiguous concept of symbolic art continues:

Now, this ambiguity appears all the more in the case of the symbol that, as an image with a meaning that is not expressed or otherwise already clear, as in a comparison, is called *symbol*. The ambiguity of the symbol proper is taken from it, when, due to that very uncertainty, the link between the sensory image and its meaning is made into a custom and becomes more or less conventional—as is absolutely required with regard to the mere sign. (*LA XIII:399*, emphasis in text)

Due to the enduring “uncertainty” of meaning—the “essential ambiguity,” as Hegel conceived it—of the symbol, the symbol terminologically “called *symbol*” is assigned a certain meaning. Dispossessed of the very “ambiguity” that defines “the symbol proper,” the symbol that is “called *symbol*” is defined not by the activity of spirit yearning for such certainty but by a semiotic bracketing of all such yearning *ad hoc*, the arbitrary linkage of image and meaning into “more or less conventional” “custom” that defines the sign. The clearest—if not unambiguous—indication we can have in Hegel that literary forms, the “custom” and “convention” of their prosaic description notwithstanding, do *not* “stand outside the movement of spirit” in the singular manner that Szondi observes, is that “*symbol*,” the name of the art form whose “essential ambiguity” compels the conventionalization of its meaning in the mode of “the mere sign,” was, “is,” and “remains” “a sign in the first place.” Having always been a sign to begin with (“Das Symbol ist nun zunächst ein *Zeichen*”), the symbol that must be regarded semantically as a “mere sign” if it is to mean anything certain at all, to be apprehended not as “true art” but as “finite” and “conventional,” legible and describable form—the language of the “prose of the world”—can always be encountered as a “mysterious” form once more, as “a sign which is meant to be a symbol” (“ein *Zeichen*, welches ein *Symbol* sein soll”).

This story of a sign persistently capable of being read as a symbol *because* “the symbol is, in the first place, a sign,” is the “other” story of Hegel’s dialectical aesthetic theory and of the philosophical history of art, and of philosophy, that it describes. Apparently unilaterally removed from dialectical history, it interpenetrates the dialectic, even as the sensuous

is mysteriously intertwined, in Hegel, with meaning. Hegel's art theory can never, properly, leave the symbolic behind—every symbol “remains” symbol—because, in Hegel, the symbol is, at any time, already the end of the symbol, the conventional sign. Literary forms can, of course, be described and compared, but they can never remain a dead letter in Hegel, their meaning permanently meaningless because finally, fully, exposed, in that symbols are themselves literary forms, dead letters that are, first, signs and, thus, by the same token, mysterious symbols still.

While Szondi rightly calls attention to the “disturbed relationship of literary criticism to philosophy,” in the case of the relationship of Szondi to Hegel, the philosopher “is in the first place” a literary critic and the literary critic “means to be” the philosopher, describing literary forms (in Hegel) as the “prose of the world” alone, a world of “finite” “externalit[ies] departed from spirit.” That Hegel must appear, as philosopher, to expose literary meaning to its end, and that Szondi must appear, as literary critic, to fail to read that art can only be art in Hegel because it is literature, essentially ambiguous, to begin with, may have less to do with philosophical systems and literary criticism than with the two-sided relationship of philosophy to literary criticism that literature itself—its signs—requires. Whether what defines literary form to begin with is its “being an artwork” in the philosophical sense (as it does for Szondi); or whether what defines an artwork “in the first place” is its taking the ambiguous, semiotic *and* symbolic form proper to literature (as it does for Hegel); and whether literary critic and philosopher must necessarily trade places, each indicating the meaning of the other, in its examination, it is the two-sided nature of the sign as sign and art form—which is to say, in Hegel's “wonderful” “sense” of the word, of the “symbol” that “is a sign”—that “disturbs” as it demands in its own essential ambiguity the relationship of literary criticism to philosophy.

Embodied Reading: On Peter Szondi's Benjamin Reception

James McFarland

What does it mean to take an academic writer, for instance the Hungarian philologist Peter Szondi, as himself an object of philological analysis and discussion? The question is not one of appropriateness; Szondi's philological work has been the subject of academic attention for many years now, and its seriousness is self-evident. The distinction here is nearer the difference between talking *with* someone and talking *about* someone. It is a distinction that can never be entirely abandoned by philology. However open-ended and dialogical its procedures are taken to be, philological discourse is ultimately conditioned by their participation in a field exposed as well to impersonal descriptive operations. It is precisely the transition—whether it amounts to a promotion or a fall—from participant in the former to occasion for the latter that is at stake here. Making a philologist an object of philology raises in a peculiar way the question of philological objectification itself.

If philology depends on this distinction, this is not to say that it imposes it. The transition is imposed—not to put too fine a point upon it—by death, which eventually pushes each of us out of hailing and deposits our memory into the much more vulnerable shape of our surviving inscriptions. The living can talk about, but no longer with, the dead. Philological objectification can neither entirely concede to nor entirely ignore this existential condition, which is its burden and its dignity as a discipline. It is Szondi's sensitivity to this burden and this dignity that characterizes his work. Rainer Nägele has noted the combination in Szondi's prose of, "on the one hand an objectifying, distancing gesture, an insistence on preciseness and differentiation coupled with an almost pedantic avoidance of

any subjective trace, and on the other hand a noticeable, intensive presence of the writing subject in this very gesture of objectivity, which in every phrase almost—to use a rather emphatic term—enounces the ethos of a personal calling.”¹ This paradoxical balance between presence and absence is another way of describing the same philological tact that Szondi exhibits, and that any philological engagement with his posthumous work must strive to preserve.

This tact is nowhere more apparent than in Szondi’s reception of Walter Benjamin. In terms of methodology and interests, Benjamin had very little to say to Szondi, whose tragic dialectic derived—to the extent that it derived from anyone—from Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno, and whose attention was concentrated on the Western literary canon.² Nonetheless, Benjamin’s example was profoundly resonant for Szondi and inflected his entire hermeneutic posture. Viewing Szondi’s relation to Benjamin under these auspices, and not under the rubric of influence or allegiance, permits us to acknowledge the centrality of the relation in Szondi’s intellectual career without distorting the profound differences in outlook and experience between the two men. Perhaps most basically, for Szondi literature remained a viable transcendent category to be clarified, while Benjamin understood it as an ideological phantasmagoria to be destroyed.

1. Rainer Nägele, “Text, History and the Critical Subject: Notes on Peter Szondi’s Theory and Praxis of Hermeneutics,” *boundary 2* 11 (1983): 29–42. Here, p. 30.

2. Szondi himself, of course, articulated a longer heritage in terms of the tradition of German hermeneutical thought in the *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Martha Woodmansee (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995). This raises the not entirely straightforward question, to what extent Szondi’s lectures on literary hermeneutics are to be understood as justifying his own prior practice. Szondi’s purpose in those lectures is, after all, to demarcate a *new* zone of inquiry in relation to the *literary* work, a particular dimension of understanding that has until now escaped hermeneutic characterization. The *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics* is not an introduction of the reader to an extant discipline but the introduction of the literary experience into a hermeneutics historically anchored in the exegesis of religious and legal texts, an introduction to the reader of a specifically literary hermeneutics. To countenance these explicit methodological reflections we would clearly have to add Hans-Georg Gadamer to the list above. Nonetheless, in 1965–66, a year before holding the course of lectures from which the posthumous book was assembled, Szondi held a seminar on “Problems of Literary Hermeneutics,” in which, to judge from the list of topics preserved, Benjamin did have the last word in that tradition. The last five topics are: Hermeneutics and Historicism, Droysen, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer, and Benjamin. Cf. Peter Szondi, *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik*, ed. Jean Bollack and Helen Stierlin (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 3.

The distinct attitudes toward literature are reflected in the taste of the two men. Benjamin was always leery of the canon, which he assumes and early on discusses but in his mature work does not feel compelled to explore. His attention on the contrary is drawn out of literature and toward other cultural artifacts, toward architecture, photography, newspapers, the detritus of public mass markets and isolated urban lives, and within literature to such marginal representatives of the tradition as Eduard Fuchs and Nikolai Leskov, or to its dissidents, to Baudelaire and Kafka and Brecht. Even Benjamin's validation of Baroque *Trauerspiel* reflects this interest in the neglected, the scorned and passed over. This is not how Szondi's sympathies are oriented. His historical attention concerns the monuments of the German and more broadly the Western literary tradition, and draws its oppositional energies not by choosing an unorthodox object but by adopting unorthodox interpretive positions toward recognized literary achievements. The edge of the canon appears in Szondi's writing only as its boundary with the present, where his advocacy of contemporary literary works anticipates what the canon has not yet had time to claim. Despite these fundamental discrepancies between their approaches to culture, the relation between these two writers remains exemplary and instructive. Szondi shares a profound affinity with Benjamin, one situated so deeply as to obviate issues of local influence. It is to this deeper affinity that we will try to proceed.

Szondi's relation to Benjamin is not merely receptive. He was himself an active participant in the postwar reconstruction of Benjamin's intellectual reputation. This aspect of the relation emerges most clearly in Szondi's published correspondence. In a letter to the publisher Siegfried Unseld at Suhrkamp Verlag in December 1960, for instance, Szondi suggests his candidates for a selection of Benjamin's writings that would become the German edition of *Illuminations*. In that letter, Szondi insists that Benjamin's essay "Fate and Character" be included in the collection, since it is "a sort of germinal cell" for the rest of Benjamin's production. The "Theological-Political Fragment" also deserves reissue. The "Critique of Violence," on the other hand, does not strike Szondi as indispensable, nor does the essay on Karl Kraus. And the commentaries on Brecht he finds quite unrepresentative, "among Benjamin's weakest texts: nowhere does he approach so nearly the book-report."³

3. Peter Szondi, *Briefe*, ed. Christoph König and Thomas Sparr (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), p. 25.

We recognize these emphases. In its broad outlines, Szondi's image of Benjamin is congruent with and indeed is partly responsible for a crucial aspect of his postwar reception, one that shifted the interpretive focus away from Benjamin's defining political struggle with Communist party membership, and placed it on his literary and metaphysical speculations. Given Szondi's close association with Adorno and Gershom Scholem, his sympathy for a theological and sociological version of Benjamin is unsurprising, and the objective situation of postwar Europe had itself displaced the political urgency of theory from party into academic institutions. The Benjamin that Szondi promotes, together with Adorno and the editors of the *Collected Writings*, is marked by a new compatibility between Benjamin's theorizing and an academic milieu. Szondi is an avatar of the Benjamin whose posthumous image oversees the reconstitution of the Weimar-era Institute for Social Research in a Cold War academic setting as the Frankfurt School.

This letter is one of three more or less simultaneous documents from around 1961 that triangulate Szondi's mature attitudes toward Benjamin, together with the book *An Essay on the Tragic* and the essay "Hope in the Past." The letter presents the most superficial dimension of the relation, and however grateful scholars must be for Szondi's effort at preserving a version of Benjamin in the only site it was possible to preserve him, the capitalist university, it also cannot be denied that in our own day this profile of Benjamin is reaching the end of its usefulness. Benjamin the aesthetic Preserver, the artisan of memory, speaks less directly to our troubled times than does Benjamin the political Destroyer, the acolyte of Karl Kraus and advocate of divine violence. And yet this is not to say that Szondi's *posture* toward Benjamin has become outdated. Beyond questions of interpretation, we need to reflect on how Szondi stages Benjamin, and for that we can turn to the second text from this period, the *Essay on the Tragic* from 1961.

The *Essay on the Tragic* was Szondi's *Habilitationsschrift*. Six years earlier the twenty-five-year-old Szondi had demonstrated his precocious dialectical eloquence with his dissertation, *The Theory of Modern Drama*. Though it nods to Benjamin's *Origin of German Trauerspiel* early on, that text had in fact been written with the self-conscious precedent of Georg Lukács's *Developmental History of Modern Drama* guiding its existential sociology and Theodor Adorno's *Philosophy of New Music* inspiring its

dialectical conception of aesthetic form and historical material.⁴ Indeed, the *Theory of Modern Drama* can be read as the transplantation of the sociological notion of drama that Lukács had developed with reference to the mass audience of theater into the unmoored conceptual antagonisms of an Adornian negative dialectic. Of course, these methodological commitments occupy comparatively little of Szondi's book, which lives in and from the bravura of its concrete readings of playwrights, movements, and plays. But to the extent that theory does explicitly concern Szondi's exposition there, Benjamin's example plays little role in either defining or illustrating it.

Quite different when it came to Szondi's *venia legendi* and the *Essay on the Tragic*. As Siegfried Unseld noted to the young author, this later book is steeped in Benjamin's attitudes and observations. "The form of your work, in particular the commentaries, obviously derives from your model Benjamin, for instance from his commentaries on Brecht."⁵ More profoundly, the book has a remarkable structure. The *Theory of Modern Drama* had overtly displayed its immanent dialectical organization, beginning with an abstract concept of drama, which it then pursued through internal crisis and reaction into the concrete texts of contemporary plays. Szondi's published correspondence reveals that the book was written pretty much in the order that its table of contents eventually exhibited.⁶ This is not the case for the *Essay on the Tragic*, which develops from discussions of Shakespeare that inform what turns into the second half of the finished book.⁷ Szondi's views on tragedy are not presented in the order in which he developed them but through a much more deliberately constructed expository structure.

This structure is organized as two historical sequences under the complementary rubrics of a Philosophy and an Analysis of the Tragic. The former presents a series of proper names, from Schelling to Scheler, composing a chronological development of a philosophical concept of the tragic. The latter rubric then unfolds a corresponding series of titles of artworks, chronologically arranged from *König Oedipus* to *Dantons Tod*, whose interpretations exemplify an aesthetic genre. Between these

4. Peter Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas (1880–1950)*, in *Schriften*, ed. Wolfgang Ietkau (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), 1:13.

5. Quoted in Szondi, *Briefe*, p. 106.

6. See, for instance, Szondi's letter to Ivan Nagel, Nov. 14, 1954.

7. See, for instance, Szondi's letter to Karl Kerényi, Aug. 7, 1958.

sequences is a section titled “Transition” (*Überleitung*). Without pursuing the theory much further for the moment, let us note here that Szondi’s arrangement, arrayed as it is between philosophical signatures and the titles of artworks, systematically suppresses the figure of the tragedian. That this is more than just accident is shown by a letter that Szondi wrote to Fritz Arnold at Insel Verlag, the eventual publisher of the book. “As running headers,” he writes, “I would like the first pages to have ‘Introduction,’ then the individual philosophers, then ‘Transition,’ and at last the tragedy titles (without the poets’ names).”⁸

If Szondi has suppressed the position of the tragedian in favor of a structure that pairs philosophical authors and dramatic works, the central “transitional” section between the two halves occupies a site at which these two discursive modalities pass into one another. In place of the tragedian’s authority, the “Transition” returns us to Benjamin. That central section between the philosophers and the tragedies, bearing the full title “Transition: Historical Philosophy of Tragedy and Analysis of the Tragic,” turns out to be a discussion of Benjamin’s *Origin of German Trauerspiel*, and more specifically, the theory of tragedy that it contains. What is crucial in this context is that Benjamin falls in neither of Szondi’s constitutive sequences. He is neither among the philosophers nor is his work among the tragedies, but rather he resides under that liminal designation, as the transition, the hinge upon which Szondi’s attempt is hung.

Szondi is aware, of course, that Benjamin’s theory of tragedy is opposed to his own in the most fundamental way. Benjamin’s overriding intention in the first half of the *Origin of German Trauerspiel* is to deny the possibility of the very object of Szondi’s whole book: a transhistorical concept and an historically continuous genre of tragedy. “Nothing is in fact more questionable,” Benjamin writes—contrasting his own views with an antithetical precursor, Johannes Volkelt’s *Aesthetic of the Tragic* from 1917, which had made “the thoroughly vain attempt to present the tragic as something universally human”—“Nothing is in fact more questionable than the competence of the unguided feelings of ‘modern men,’ especially where the judgment of tragedy is concerned.” The unreliability of contemporary sentimental reactions to Greek tragedy registers the deeper fact that contemporary literature cannot recreate the genre: “In denying this actual state of affairs such [humanistic] doctrines of the tragic betray the

8. Szondi, *Briefe*, p. 115.

presumption that it must still be possible to write tragedies. That is their essential but hidden motive."⁹

For Benjamin, tragedy, far from being an anthropological or aesthetic constant, is to be found in Classical Greece alone: "The signature of tragedy does not . . . consist in a 'conflict of levels' between the hero and the environment as such, . . . but the unique Greek form of such conflicts."¹⁰ The elements from which it was composed—myth, hero, sacrifice—have never again arisen in comparable purity; "only antiquity could know tragic hubris, which pays for the right to be silent with the hero's life."¹¹ What succeeds it historically is the allegorical *Trauerspiel*, with its almost-animate stage properties and its almost-mechanical intrigues. The historical inaccessibility of tragedy is a premise of Benjamin's work, and one that contradicts the entire impulse of Szondi's project.

These are all points, let us stress, that Szondi himself makes in his discussion of Benjamin. It is not a matter of any misinterpretation or distortion between them. Szondi is quite clear about Benjamin's historicist assumption and what he thinks mitigates it: "The necessity of an historical restriction to Attic Tragedy becomes dubious, since even Benjamin . . . in his historical-philosophical interpretation comes upon the moment of dialectics, the common denominator of the various idealist and post-idealist determinations of tragedy."¹² In other words, Szondi finds that despite Benjamin's explicit assertions of the historical inaccessibility of tragedy, in practice, his theory participates in the operation of dialectical conceptualization, an operation that has the greatest affinity to tragic anagnorisis and the ultimate ambivalence toward death that it implies.

The *Essay on the Tragic* situates Benjamin at the juncture of philosophy and literature, and interprets his assertion of an ultimate incompatibility between them as itself the tragic sacrifice that embodies a consequent dialectic. The *Origin of German Trauerspiel* stages the failure of philosophy to encompass the meaning of tragedy, and in that very staging, it lets philosophy achieve a tragic grandeur in the attempt. In foreclosing any essential permanence or ideal identity of tragedy, Benjamin's theory performs the dialectical disillusion that exposes it to a tragic effect. Hence

9. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977), p. 101.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

12. Peter Szondi, *Versuch über das Tragische*, in *Schriften*, 1:205.

Szondi's focus on the crucial role of sacrifice (*Opfer*) in Benjamin's tragic theory: "Although Benjamin does not want to conclude from the dialectical structure of sacrifice in Greek tragedy that there is a dialectical essence of the tragic as such, he did not fail to notice it. Rather, it appears that he . . . equated the genesis of the tragic with the genesis of dialectics, even if he did not use those terms."¹³ Benjamin *enacts* as its origin the conjunction of tragic art and theoretical acumen. His concept of tragic sacrifice as the irreversible juncture between before and after reflexively positions his own theory as antecedent to Szondi. If the *Essay on the Tragic* situates Benjamin in a way that obviates the content of his theory in favor of its eventual existence as an example of dialectical integrity, this is again because the ultimate significance of their relationship does not lie in continuities of content. The transfiguration of Benjamin from theorist of tragedy into a tragic sacrifice to theory is a version of the distinction with which we began, the fall from interlocutor into inscription, from philologist into the occasion for philology. It is Benjamin who, at the heart of Szondi's *Habilitation*, anchors the dignity of the discipline.

The revisionist stance in Szondi's reception of the *Trauerspiel* book is thus as much a reflection of different initial terminological parameters as of any substantive disagreement. Szondi's reading shifts the significance of historically substantive *Tragödie* into the formally adjectival *Tragische* by assimilating dramatic works to dialectical processes. This rescues the aesthetic genre by grafting it to an explicitly conceptual operation. Superficially this strategy resembles Volkelt's ostentatiously Hegelian *Aesthetic of the Tragic*, the antithetical reference point in Benjamin's exposition.¹⁴ Yet in his own transplantation of an ultimate aesthetic significance from the pathos of artworks to the conceptual reflection upon them, Szondi is in fact not far from Benjamin's redemption of allegory in the *Origin of German Trauerspiel*. Nor is this entirely surprising when one recalls that Szondi's ideas on the tragic had grown from considerations of Shakespeare, and for Benjamin, Shakespeare is an epitome of *Trauerspiel*.¹⁵ Szondi's intuitions about the relation of tragedy to dialectics find their

13. *Ibid.*, 1:203–4.

14. In fact, Volkelt's discussion owes as much to Hegel's epigone Eduard von Hartmann, the polemical butt of Nietzsche's scorn in the second *Untimely Observation*, "On the Use and Disadvantage of History for Life."

15. Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 1:334–35; and Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 157–58.

earliest exemplifications in a brief, elegant discussion not of Oedipus or Antigone but of Shakespeare's protagonists Romeo and Hamlet.

"On a Verse from *Romeo and Juliette*" identifies a constant element of tragic drama: the moment at which the tragic hero, in recognizing his fatal destiny, is entirely alienated from life. Szondi finds illustrations in speeches by both Hamlet and Romeo rejecting the entirety of vital concerns as contemptible at the moment when they fully recognize the mortal price of their tragic destinies. And indeed, it is the fact that Romeo expresses this alienation by rejecting material currency ("I sell thee poison, thou hast sold me none" accompanies Romeo's payment to the apothecary) that renders him ultimately a better illustration of this aspect of the tragic situation than is Hamlet. As the pure means of communal exchange, money becomes a metonymy for an irreducible externality across all vital concerns, and positions Romeo beyond them, at the threshold of death. "What seems to him to be poison is not the means to death," Szondi writes, "but what would otherwise be the means to life."¹⁶

It is not difficult to recognize what Benjamin's account in the *Origin of German Trauerspiel* had situated in this Shakespearean place where Szondi is discerning the generically tragic: the affect of melancholy. The "utensils of active life . . . lying around unused on the floor" in Dürer's woodcut *Melencolia*, are the analogues in Benjamin to Romeo's coin.¹⁷ In Benjamin, of course, melancholic *apatheia* is not an existential condition but a distinctly historical effect, a consequence of the antinomic attitude toward everyday life propounded by the Reformation and the general bleak fatalism of the Baroque. Not tragedy, obeisant to a mythical silence in the tongue of the absolute polis, but *Trauerspiel* in its historical ostentation plays—so Benjamin—to that transitory human reaction. But in anchoring melancholy to the historical milieu of *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin does not surrender its relevance entirely. As affect, this melancholy effect is not merely a quality of *Trauerspiel* but conditions the possibility of Benjamin's own treatise, for it is only to melancholic immersion that Baroque allegory delivers up its redemptive potential.

For Benjamin, melancholy links the inside of the artwork—"The prince is the paradigm of the melancholy man"—and the outside of the work, as the form of its appropriate reception.¹⁸ "For these are not so much

16. Peter Szondi, "On a Verse from Romeo and Juliette," in *Schriften*, 2:134.

17. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 140.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

plays which cause grief [*Trauer*],” writes Benjamin, “as plays through which grief finds its satisfaction: plays for the grieving [*Spiele vor Traurigen*].”¹⁹ The historical relevance of the Baroque is mediated to the present by the melancholy indigenous both to it and to today, an affinity that appears as the spark of comprehension struck by their sharp conjunction in Benjamin’s theoretical prose. Eventually it is this attitude and affinity that can realize in the allegorical skull upon Golgotha the ephemeral truth borne by the very experience of semantic collapse: “The bleak confusion of Golgotha . . . is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence. In it transitoriness is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, in its own significance, displayed as allegory.”²⁰ This shift between representation and display, from communicating allegorical content to showing in itself the ultimate impermanence of any meaning, is the redemptive pivot that melancholic concentration performs within the emblem.

“Melancholy betrays the world for the sake of knowledge,” Benjamin writes. “But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them.”²¹ This is the attitude that Szondi’s *Essay on the Tragic* brings to its object—at its crux, not tragedy per se but Benjamin’s own melancholy treatise as the tragic sacrifice to insignificance. Where Benjamin’s theory and his example converge in the idea of sacrifice animating the dialectic of tragedy, this exemplarity necessarily produces a distance between the sacrificial victim and those for whom he is sacrificed, his survivors. The pathos of this historical distance embodies the theoretical distance between Benjamin and Szondi. It is this historical gap that Szondi articulates in the third text from 1961, “The Search for Lost Time in Walter Benjamin,” Szondi’s inaugural lecture at the Free University in Berlin.

The essay has come down to us as “Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin,” the form in which Szondi revised it for inclusion in Adorno’s *Festschrift*.²² The importance of these ceremonial occasions testifies to the regard in which Szondi held the essay. “In the inaugural lecture I’m going to talk about ‘The Search for Lost Time in Walter Benjamin,’” he had

19. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

22. Peter Szondi, “Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin,” trans. Harvey Mendelsohn, *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1978): 491–506. The translation has recently been reprinted as the introduction to Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006), pp. 1–33.

written to his friend Rudolf Hirsch at the time, "in many respects it will be a confession of faith [*Glaubensbekenntnis*]." ²³ It is the measure of the centrality of the relation that Szondi's most comprehensive discussion of Benjamin's work occasions his most personal self-presentation. But these apologetic and exegetic dimensions do not collapse into each other in a facile identification. On the contrary, the tension between them is the animating force of the essay.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the university setting in Berlin, a city that had driven Benjamin into exile and an institution that, by 1961, had not yet attempted to reclaim him, Szondi introduces the "philosopher who was a poet and a scholar as well" outside of any immediate disciplinary affiliation, but as, in the first instance, a Berliner. ²⁴ He defers in several long quotations to Benjamin's voice at its most lyrical, in the *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. This he then sets off against the crass tonalities of Nazi literary criticism and, passing through a childhood memory of Rilke's, aligns the lyric force of recollection with the crystalline French of Marcel Proust, which he leaves untranslated. Szondi's fluid exposition thus brings together passages that Benjamin wrote and passages that Benjamin read, and exhibits him at the intersection of a first-person expressive immediacy and a third-person receptive self-effacement. Outside the categories of poet or novelist, German or French, memory or translation, Benjamin and Proust exemplify a profound sensibility that registers a present moment exposed to a discontinuous and overwhelming past.

They exemplify this sensibility differently. Proust's reaction is elegiac, while Benjamin's is utopian: "Proust sets off in quest of the past in order to escape from time altogether. This endeavor is made possible by the coincidence of the past with the present, a coincidence brought about by analogous experiences. Its real goal is escape from the future, filled with dangers and threats, of which the ultimate one is death. In contrast, the future is precisely what Benjamin seeks in the past." ²⁵ The ambiguity this alternative produces in the historical sensibility common to both writers remains in Szondi himself in his ear for quotation. If, in place of Benjamin's metaphors and Proust's memories, Szondi unites past and present in his practice of precise and generous citation, whether he does so to escape from or renew history remains ultimately undecided.

23. Letter from Szondi to Rudolf Hirsch, Jan. 21, 1961, in Szondi, *Briefe*, pp. 119–20.

24. Szondi, "Hope in the Past," pp. 492–93.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 499.

Having begun with Benjamin's most personal voice, Szondi's essay ends with an evocation of the text of Benjamin's that is most permeated by anterior voices, the book of letters, *Deutsche Menschen*. "One may well apply to the ark of *Deutsche Menschen*," Szondi concludes—and we can echo, one may well apply to Szondi's own hermeneutic speculations, as well—"these lines from the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: 'Nur dem Geschichtsschreiber wohnt die Gabe bei, im Vergangenen den Funken der Hoffnung anzufachen, der davon durchdrungen ist: auch die Toten werden vor dem Feind, wenn er siegt, nicht sicher sein. Und dieser Feind hat zu siegen nicht aufgehört.'"²⁶ A lack of the philological tact that Szondi exemplifies is not simply a failure of decorum but a capitulation to this enemy. However times have changed since Peter Szondi's death, the fortunes of this enemy have never faltered. All the more reason to remember a philologist who set himself so resolutely against it.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 506. The Benjamin quotation may be translated as follows: "Only that historian has the gift of fanning the sparks of hope in the past who is thoroughly imbued with this idea: even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he triumphs. And this enemy has never ceased to triumph."

*Law and Action:
Reflections on Hermann Cohen
and Peter Szondi's Reading of Hegel
in An Essay on the Tragic*

Sebastian Wogenstein

In a 1990 lecture entitled “Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German,” Jacques Derrida comments on a controversial essay by Hermann Cohen, written early in World War I to promote solidarity with Germany abroad and to defend his position against both antisemitic and Zionist critics.¹ Cohen’s essay, “Germanness and Jewishness” (*Deutschtum und Judentum*), published in 1915, aims to prove a convergence and, indeed, an identity of both “national spirit” and the historical mission of Judaism and *Deutschtum*, or “Germanness.” Derrida criticizes Cohen for claiming a parallel “exemplarity” of the two “peoples,” a notion that Cohen develops through a comparative discussion of Kantian ethics and the writings of the Israelite prophets. Cohen’s grandiose gestures take great leaps in order to arrive at an historical interpretation of influence and even an “innermost kinship” (*innerste Verwandtschaft*).

In a famous open letter, published under the title “Against the myth of a German-Jewish dialogue,” Gershom Scholem condemned almost fifty years later, and less than two decades after the Shoah, the rhetoric of a “German-Jewish dialogue” as “mythic,” and the centuries-long German-Jewish communities’ diverse efforts to be accepted as an equal partner in the non-Jewish German society as a “scream into the void [*Schrei ins*

1. Jacques Derrida, “Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German,” *New Literary History* 22 (1991): 39–95; and Hermann Cohen, “Ein kritisches Nachwort als Vorwort,” in *Hermann Cohens jüdische Schriften*, ed. Bruno Strauß (Berlin: Schwetschke, 1924), 2:291f. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

Leere].”² For two hundred years, “Germanjewishness” (*Deutschjudentum*) had proved an illusion; any Jewish initiative for a productive dialogue had been met either by the demand for an abandonment of one’s Jewish identification or by grins and embarrassment. One of the prime examples that Scholem mentions is the “heartrending case” of Hermann Cohen, the “unrequited lover who did not shy away from taking the road from the sublime to the ridiculous.”³ Indeed, Cohen’s line of argument is certainly unusual and has led to much contempt and understandable criticism, often however at the cost of ignoring his profound insights and influential scholarship.

Next to *Griechentum*, the Greek heritage, Cohen considers Judaism the “main source” of “Germanness.”⁴ The common historical mission, in which “the messianic idea of the Israelite prophetism” and a “German ethics,” the “social politics of the individual state” and an international humanistic ethics, coincide, is to act as a vanguard of a society founded on a “religion of reason,” with reason serving as its “holy ghost” (*heilige Geist*).⁵ The “religion of reason,” which Cohen proposes in “Germanness and Jewishness” and, in more detail, in his posthumously published *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, provides the basis for his programmatic propositions for social reform—and could indeed be described as a political theology.⁶ Two of its defining and interconnected elements are the nature of law and the source of law. In the following, I will first discuss Cohen’s reflections on the law, focusing on Jewish and Christian perspectives in relation to Kantian ethics. I will then proceed to explore Peter Szondi’s reading of Hegel in *An Essay on the Tragic*, where Szondi uses related elements to comment on Hegel’s early theological writings and to claim a “hidden turn” in Hegel’s conception of law.

The “marvel of elliptical simplification, not to say distressing simple-mindedness” that Cohen, according to Derrida, reveals in his argumentation

2. Gershom Scholem: “Wider den Mythos vom deutsch-jüdischen Gespräch,” in *Judaica* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 2:8.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

4. Hermann Cohen, “Deutschtum und Judentum,” in *Hermann Cohens jüdische Schriften*, 2:238.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 290f., 245.

6. Cf. Christoph Schmidt, “Die Auferstehung der Tragödie: Tragödie zwischen Kulturidee und politischer Theologie,” in Bernhard Greiner and Maria Moog-Grünwald, eds., *Etho-Poietik: Ethik und Ästhetik im Dialog: Erwartungen, Forderungen, Abgrenzungen* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1998), pp. 135–77.

suggests an analogy or even a correspondence between Jewish law and Kantian ethics. In Cohen's narrative, both share "*en bloc*," as Derrida pointedly labels it, the "two correlating poles, the basic notion of *autonomy* and the universal *law, freedom* and *duty*."⁷ But Cohen also acknowledges an interjection to both elementary pillars of ethics, which he identifies with the Jewish law and the Kantian imperative. As Cohen writes, the basic notion (*Grundgedanke*) of Judaism, "the concept of the *Law*, has been attacked ever since *Paul*."⁸ Although Cohen does not further explicate his observations on Pauline theology in "Germanness and Jewishness," and only discusses the significance of the concept of the Law for any political unit, the state in particular, he does so in his *Religion of Reason*, where he elaborates on Paul's intentional misreading of the Law.

The (Jewish religious) Law's purpose, according to Cohen, is twofold: as ritual law, it is a "substitute for the sacrifice"; and as a moral law, it is an educational ethical standard, connecting the theory of morality with its practice.⁹ Both aspects, he argues, are contained in the description of the Law as a symbol.¹⁰ The Law in its focus on everyday practice—Cohen mentions Tefillin and fringes (*Schäufäden*, ציצית) as examples—is to serve as a *reminder* not only of religious obligations but of obligations that exist between humans as well.¹¹ As religious "ritual" law, it fuses the realms of the sacred and the profane by providing every action with a sacred

7. Derrida, "Interpretations at War," p. 68; Cohen, "Deutschtum und Judentum," pp. 245f.

8. Cohen, "Deutschtum und Judentum," p. 245.

9. Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (New York: Ungar, 1972), p. 347. The Law, in this understanding, becomes a doubled substitution: it is a substitute for sacrifice, which itself is an act of substitution.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 370.

11. Tefillin are usually rendered "phylacteries" in English texts. However, it should be added that Cohen strongly objects to the usage of this term since understanding them as *φουλακτήριον*, an amulet or means of protection, obscured their symbolic value as signs of memory (*Gedenkzeichen*). Cohen sees a similar function in the fringes worn on four-cornered garments: "[T]he commandment of the fringes does not lose its symbolic character through the fact that the action required at the putting on of the fringes is an unconditional prescription. This prescription is related to a kind of action that can only be thought of as symbolic: 'Ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments.' In itself, the fact that one commandment is made the embodiment of all other deprives the action of its absolute value, and through this relation to all the other commandments it becomes an unmistakable symbol. The fringes are therefore an instructive example of the whole class of these laws, because they are associated with seeing. Thereby, seeing becomes beholding by the mind" (*ibid.*, p. 342).

significance. This sanctification of the quotidian bridges, in Cohen's understanding, the gap between the moral idea and the actualizing practice. "[C]onsidered as a symbol," Cohen argues, the Law "becomes a lever [*positiver Hebel*] that is not only a positive support [*Stütze*] of the teaching but a means for engendering the teaching [*erzeugendes Kraftmittel der Lehre*]." ¹² Despite his focus on human action, Cohen emphatically underscores the indispensability of the monotheistic idea of "one God" since he considers it the ultimate guarantor of the sovereignty of the Law and as the archetype for human morality (*Urbild für die Sittlichkeit des Menschen*). ¹³

Contrary to Judaism's substitution of the sacrifice by the Law, Christian theology preserves a sacrifice at its center. ¹⁴ In the communion—Cohen is careful to name both Catholic transubstantiation and Protestant symbolization—the focus on the being and action of God, "his self-sacrifice for the salvation of man," marks the difference between Judaism and Christianity. ¹⁵ Aimed at the Law, Paul's "criticism and polemics" construct a dichotomy between the Law and innocence in order to establish "salvation through Christ as the only basis for human morality in its only value, eternal life." ¹⁶ But in Judaism, Cohen explains, the Law is not related to eternal life; its symbolic significance lies in its function to generate moral action as a

12. *Ibid.*, p. 370.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 344. Michael Zank describes Cohen's idea of God as the "being of the ought" that unifies the "condition of the possibility of realizing the imperative of the moral law" and an obligatory responsibility for the other. This displaces "freedom as a postulate concerning the possibility of acting in accordance with the moral law by the teleological freedom of the other, the fellow human being." An archetypal function can hence be found in that "the choice of law as the source of the ethical concept of man . . . universalizes the Jewish attitude toward the Torah as divine law." Michael Zank, "The Ethics in Hermann Cohen's Philosophical System," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 13 (2004): 12–14.

14. As Lawrence Kaplan points out, Cohen's view of sacrifice in Judaism consists not only of its historical transformation and the eventual abolishment of the physical act of sacrifice. Cohen also understands this process as the reinstatement of the difference between the human and God, whereas pagan sacrificial worship (and, in a particular version, Christianity) performatively erases this difference. Lawrence Kaplan, "Hermann Cohen's Theory of Sacrifice in 'Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism,'" in *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*—*Tradition und Ursprungsdenken in Hermann Cohens Spätwerk*, ed. Helmut Holzhey et al. (Hildesheim: Olms, 2000), pp. 192f.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, p. 343.

constant *reminder*, thus affirming both human *freedom* of action and inter-human *obligations*. Regarding human agency, “freedom of this [moral] choice is the fundamental condition of moral reason,” Cohen contends, adding: “We have already recognized this freedom as man’s responsibility.”¹⁷ It should be noted, however, that Cohen also includes a remarkable and often overlooked word of caution about the “ethical one-sidedness” of the Law in the midst of his passionate plea: “The real but also the only danger of the absolute power of the Law lies in this one-sidedness of the moral interest with regard to culture.”¹⁸

Whereas Paul’s influential disqualification of the Law engenders a perception of the Law as statutory and, with this distinction, lays the groundwork for a distinction between Christianity’s emphasis on belief and Judaism’s on Law, it is Kant whom Cohen cites in defense of the Law. Understanding Kant as Judaism’s advocate against Pauline theology is, of course, a somewhat problematic proposition. In this vein, Cohen acknowledges Kant’s attempts to reconcile Pauline doctrine with his own ethics; but, as Cohen stresses, Kant diagnoses the problem of formalism not only in the Law but also in the statutory character of belief within Pauline theology:

As much as Kant strove to bring about an agreement between the idea of Christ and the autonomy of morality, he did not fail to mention that faith can be as statutory as the law with its works. . . . Although he often takes sides with Paul against the statutory law, nevertheless he sometimes takes sides against Paul, recalling the equally grave danger of the statutory faith.¹⁹

In discussing Cohen’s approach to the Law by way of his comparison of Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed* with Aristotelian and Platonic thought, Leo Strauss recognizes this understanding of the Law as the quintessential achievement of Cohen’s neo-Kantianism, which replaces the Christian inner disposition (*Gesinnung*) and the natural law tradition’s system of abstract norms with a dynamic understanding of law as linked to action (*Handlung*):

17. *Ibid.*, p. 408.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 346.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 344.

The thought of the Law, the νόμος, is the unifying aspect of Jews and Greeks: the thought of a *concrete* binding order of life, this thought that has been obscured by the Christian tradition and that of natural law, under whose spell at least our philosophical thinking remains; through the *Christian* tradition, commencing with the apostle Paul's radical *criticism* of the Law. . . . Cohen himself leads us the way to reclaim this basic concept for humanity through substituting the perspective of inner disposition by that of action and through orienting his ethics on the principles of jurisprudence. . . .²⁰

What is at stake in this juxtaposition of Pauline criticism and the Law in the philosophical and theological debates of the early twentieth century? As Christoph Schmidt convincingly argues, the center of this discussion on the Law and the "Pauline heresy" marks a fundamental schism in the face of a crisis of subjectivity.²¹ The relation of subject and Law becomes a topic of heated discussion in an increasingly binary and conflicted understanding of their emergence, in which Law and life, life and form, interior and exterior are all perceived as intrinsically opposed to one another. Carl Schmitt and Friedrich Gogarten, for example, seem to suggest that modernity's concept of culture and its political ideal of a democratic state and parliamentary legislature express a form of idolatry of the modern subject vis-à-vis divine or monarchic sovereignty and that at the heart of this modernity's self-legitimization is a secularized Jewish nomism. Of course, this latter claim is an accusation with a Pauline undertone. But, as Cohen reminds us, the "statutoriness" is not inherent in the Law; "statutoriness" or "nomism" may just as well be found in the "circumcision of the heart."²² Cohen's approach is to anchor the Law in a sovereign God, and to identify this more or less symbolic God with Reason in order to establish both the Law and its subjects in a *collective subject* based upon a contract-like agreement: "Prototypically, action is *legal action* [*Rechtshandlung*], as it is implemented in a *contract*. Such legal action requires two parties. And it is precisely in this duality that the unity of legal action is concentrated, in the unity of the legal subject."²³

20. Leo Strauss, "Cohen und Maimuni," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, *Philosophie und Gesetz: Frühe Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Meier (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997), pp. 428f.

21. Schmidt, "Die Auferstehung der Tragödie," p. 145.

22. Rom. 2:29 and 3:28: "...circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; . . ."; "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."

23. Cohen, *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls*, 3rd ed. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1982), 2:65f.

Cohen provides this definition of the “legal subject” for the purpose of mutual elucidation in the context of discussing tragedy and his concept of the “dramatic subject.”²⁴ In both cases, the subject is not merely an individual, statutory function or property; rather, we find that at its center is a correlation or collective agreement.

In an interesting and not uncommon transition, the debate that primarily concerns the realm of ethics is continued within the realm of aesthetics. With the decline or the eventual death of tragedy as a theatrical form in modernity, tragedy—primarily the surviving Greek texts and Shakespearean plays—becomes the site of reflection upon the constitution of the subject and the crisis that this concept experiences during late modernity.²⁵ The choice of tragedy as the site of such reflection is no coincidence, of course. Tragedy has been considered the birthplace of the Western subject in the sense that tragedies can be understood as enactments of the possibility and restraint of individual action and the collisions that arise from conflicting laws and norms.²⁶ Cohen, for example, describes Greek drama as the act in which “the pure self becomes conscious of itself” and, referring to tragedy’s Dionysian cultic origins, as the public manifestation of secularization.²⁷ The theater allows for the simultaneous performance of the constitution and the crisis of subjectivity. It is the discursive and performative space of the subject’s affirmation and its self-reflexive questioning.

In *An Essay on the Tragic* (1961), Peter Szondi detects this crisis in both Greek and modern tragedy and finds in Hegel’s dialectic not only the tool to explicate tragedy and the tragic, but he claims for Hegel’s understanding of the dialectic and the tragic a common and largely identical origin. Juxtaposing Cohen’s discussion of the Law in Judaism and Kantian ethics with Szondi’s commentary on Hegel’s interpretation of tragedy

24. Ibid., p. 63.

25. Christoph Menke challenges the notion of the end of tragedy in modernity and argues that modern subjectivity cannot escape tragic irony due to a self-conscious and self-judging normativity of practice: “As long as we judge at all, we live in the presence of tragedy.” In addition, he also claims a potential for tragedy in contemporary theater when it unfolds the irreconcilable collision of play and normative practice. Christoph Menke, *Die Gegenwart der Tragödie: Versuch über Urteil und Spiel* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), pp. 8, 156.

26. Among the multitude of publications on this topic, see Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Theater und Mythos: Die Konstitution des Subjekts im Diskurs der antiken Tragödie* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1991).

27. Cohen, *Ästhetik*, pp. 61, 58.

reveals some similarities in the questions posed. Although their analyses differ, Szondi reveals the significance of Hegel's understanding of Judaism and the law for the development of Hegel's central thought—the dialectic—and hence Szondi's own methodology in his quest for “securing a general concept of the tragic.” When Szondi eventually admits to the impossibility of reaching this goal, Walter Benjamin's idea of tragedy helps Szondi calibrate his objective and salvage a modified notion of the tragic—and hence the dialectic. His discussion of Benjamin also becomes the point in which Cohen's and Szondi's reflections eventually meet, if only for an instant.

It is worth asking why Szondi is revisiting the debates on the tragic after World War II and why, compared to the other sections of the *Essay*, the section on Hegel is considerably longer than all other sections. Regarding the latter, Szondi provides the answer himself in the introduction to the *Essay*: “[T]he Hegel commentary . . . provides the basis for the other interpretations, just as Hegel must be named before all others at the beginning of this book, for its insights are indebted to Hegel and his school, without which it never could have been written.”²⁸ But besides this more obvious indebtedness to Hegel, another issue is at stake: what Szondi calls a *fundamentally German* concept of the tragic. Szondi's *Essay* is divided into two parts, “The Philosophy of the Tragic” and “Analyses of the Tragic.” Each part contains sections of commentary on theoretical approaches to tragedy from Schelling to Scheler (in the first part) and tragedies from *Oedipus Rex* to *Danton's Death* (in the second part), all in chronological order, but it is the first part of the *Essay* that seems to be strangely confined to a kind of *Nationalphilosophie*.

In the introduction to *An Essay on the Tragic*, Szondi draws a distinction between a poetics of tragedy in regard to its theatrical production, on the one hand, and the philosophical concept of the tragic, on the other. While tragedy as a form of theater has been the object of theoretical reflection since Greek antiquity, Szondi sees the latter as having its origins in Romanticism: “Since Aristotle, there has been a *poetics of tragedy*. Only since Schelling has there been a *philosophy of the tragic*.”²⁹ For his juxtaposition of the influential Aristotelian poetics of the tragedy and the philosophy of the tragic, Szondi uses the trope of an island surrounded by

28. Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2002), p. 3.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 1 (my emphasis).

the sea: “The philosophy of the tragic rises like an island above Aristotle’s powerful and monumental sphere of influence, one that knows neither national nor epochal borders.”³⁰ Whereas Aristotle’s poetics of the tragedy is portrayed as transcending time and space, the philosophy of the tragic has limits that Szondi understands in terms of a national belonging: “If one counts Kierkegaard among the German philosophers and leaves aside his students such as Unamuno, the philosophy of the tragic is proper to German philosophy. Until this day,” Szondi emphasizes, “the concept of the tragic has remained fundamentally a German one.”³¹

Within this ostensibly nationally homogeneous group of “German philosophers,” whom Szondi explores in the first part of his essay, Hegel’s contribution to the philosophy of the tragic is central and most influential. In the structure of the dialectic, it provides the capstone of the interpretative methodology that Szondi relies upon in his readings of exemplary tragedies from Sophocles to Büchner. As Peter Demetz points out, Szondi’s focus on the dominating theoretical structure develops its own momentum and, from a philological perspective, yields rather narrow results.³² In light of the importance for Szondi’s thinking, my analysis will concentrate on his Hegel commentary and, in conclusion, review the modifications he arrives at in his interpretation of Walter Benjamin’s idea of tragedy. Hegel’s analysis of tragedy and his claims about the tragic not only coincide with or can be considered analogous to the concept of the dialectic, but the tragic is, indeed, to a certain degree identical with the dialectic.³³ Szondi explains the development and the extent to which both concepts can be considered

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., p. 2.

32. Peter Demetz, “Das Tragische und die Tragödie,” *Merkur: Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken* 17.4 (1963): 401–5. Siegfried Unseld, editor-in-chief of Suhrkamp, voices a similar criticism in his rejection letter to Szondi from September 5, 1960, in which he thoroughly explains his decision not to publish the book. However, Unseld credits Szondi for his commentaries on Hegel, Hölderlin, Benjamin, and Büchner encouraging him to expand his analysis and focus. Szondi then published the *Essay on the Tragic* with Fischer. Peter Szondi, *Briefe*, ed. Christoph König and Thomas Sparr (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), pp. 105–7.

33. Szondi’s editor Fritz Arnold at the Fischer publishing house suggested that he consider the title *Dialectic of the Tragic* instead of *Essay on the Tragic*. Szondi replied in a letter from December 13, 1960, that such a title would be misleading: “Because my essay is not about the dialectic of the tragic, but about the tragic as dialectic.” Szondi, *Briefe*, p. 113. My qualifying clause, “to a certain degree,” acknowledges Szondi’s limitation on identifying the dialectic with the tragic: “But because not every form of dialectic is tragic, the tragic must be recognized as a particular form of dialectics within a particular space,

identical by way of a comparative reading of Hegel's manuscript notes on "The Spirit of Christianity," composed between 1798 and 1800, his article "The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law," published in 1802–3 in the *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie*, the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807), and his lectures on aesthetics, which Hegel held in the 1820s and which Szondi calls "a formalized echo" of the *Phenomenology*.³⁴

Szondi sees a clear continuation in the way that the tragic and the dialectic are conceived from their still disguised origin in Hegel's early manuscript notes up to his late *Aesthetics*. But he recognizes a "hidden turn" in Hegel's approach to law, which is apparent when comparing the article "The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law" with the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*.³⁵ The cause of this turn, Szondi claims, is a significant change in Hegel's understanding of the dialectic. Whereas in the early writings, Hegel subscribes to a clear division between, on one hand, a dynamic, organic life, in which the tragic and hence the dialectic can evolve, and, on the other, the abject spirit of the law, which is in clear opposition and beyond the realm of the tragic, his *Phenomenology* and the *Aesthetics* integrate the law in the dialectical movement and therefore also in his conception of the tragic. The structure of the tragic and the dialectic, which Szondi identifies as a dynamic of self-division and self-reconciliation, has not changed with this "hidden turn," but its scope has and with it, as Szondi argues, Hegel's approach to Judaism and formalist philosophy, both of which are objects of critique in his early writings.

The definition of tragedy that Hegel provides in his "Natural Law" article consists in an act of self-division, a self-division that he first describes as an act of sacrifice. In his attempts to counter the dualistic opposition between "organic life" and the "inorganic" or "dead" law, which he attacks in the formalist ethics of Kant and Fichte as well as earlier in Judaism, Hegel argues for a "real absolute ethical life" (*reale absolute Sittlichkeit*).³⁶ This real absolute ethical life provides the unity

especially by differentiating it from its counterconcepts, which are also dialectically structured: the comical, irony, and humor" (Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic*, p. 55).

34. Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic*, p. 20. For many insights and fruitful discussions, I thank the Hegel Study Group at the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute, notably Charles Mahoney, Samuel Wheeler III, Christopher Larkosh, Ramon Elinevsky, and Randall Cream.

35. Ibid.

36. G. W. F. Hegel, *Natural Law: The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, Its Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law*, trans. T. M. Knox ([Philadelphia]: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), p. 112.

within which the struggle between “inorganic nature,” which is brought forth from *within*, and the “living,” which recognizes and separates what it knows as an objectified “part of itself,” can achieve a state of reconciliation: “[T]he living, by placing into the inorganic what it knows to be a part of itself and surrendering it to death [*dem Tode opfert*], has all at once recognized the right of the inorganic and cleansed itself of it.”³⁷

This “performance, on the ethical plane, of the tragedy [*Aufführung der Tragödie im sittlichen*]” also becomes the basis for Hegel’s definition of tragedy, once more emphasizing the indivisibility of his understanding of tragedy and the realm of “ethical life,” which will later be dominated by the concept of the dialectic:

Tragedy consists in this, that ethical nature segregates its inorganic nature (in order not to become embroiled in it), as a fate, and places it outside itself; and by acknowledging this fate in the struggle against it, ethical nature is reconciled with the Divine being as the unity of both.³⁸

The tragic and hence dialectical movement at work is the self-division by which fate is brought about through action, and a struggle between the acting “organic” entity and fate ensues. As Szondi observes, fate—the “inorganic” aspect of nature, to which a separated part of the living is sacrificed—functions as a self-established law. In this way, Hegel can integrate law into his “absolute ethics” without having to revert to the dualistic dominative relationship between the individual and an external law, which he criticizes in Kant and Fichte:

Fate is “nothing foreign like punishment,” which belongs to the foreign law, but rather “consciousness of oneself, yet as something hostile.” In fate absolute ethics divides itself within itself. . . . [I]n the form of fate, absolute ethics has before it the law that it itself established in the course of acting.³⁹

The self-established law allows Hegel to complete the dialectical process with an eventual moment of reconciliation, which is reached in recognizing the struggle as a process that is generated from *within*. Szondi underlines the dialectical nature of this process by quoting Hegel from

37. Hegel, “Natural Law,” p. 104.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

39. Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic*, p. 17.

the “Natural Law” article, where both the sacrifice and the aspect of the viewing (*Anschauung*) are emphasized, foregrounding a similar approach to the concept of dialectic in the *Phenomenology*:

[T]he force of the sacrifice lies in facing [*Anschauung*] and objectifying the involvement with the inorganic. This involvement is dissolved by being faced; the inorganic is separated and, recognized for what it is, is itself taken up into indifference...⁴⁰

Szondi, however, does not claim that the “Natural Law” article is the original predecessor to Hegel’s formulation of the dialectic. Rather, he finds the origin of the coincidence of the tragic and the dialectic in Hegel’s manuscript notes “On the Spirit of Christianity,” which Szondi reads as their *Ursprungsgeschichte*. This narrative of the origin marks the *Ur-sprung* of the dialectic and the tragic, their “original emergence” and, read against the grain, the “original fissure” or “split.” The narrative not only creates the dialectic, it also presents its own history: “It is significant that the origin [*Ursprung*] of the Hegelian dialectic is a history of the origin of the dialectic as such.”⁴¹

Hegel’s reading of the division and the differences between Judaism and Christianity becomes the ground on which he first develops the concept of the tragic and the dialectic. Although the words “tragic” and “dialectic” never appear in these early notes, Szondi nonetheless bases his claim to have located the *Ursprung* of the Hegelian dialectic on a number of themes that Hegel addresses in “The Spirit of Christianity” and in his reading of *Macbeth*. These include the notion of fate, the exclusion of the law as something foreign, and the movement of self-division and reconciliation. It is perhaps against this background and the “hidden turn” that Szondi detects in Hegel’s later writings that he also remains silent on the blatant antisemitism displayed in these notes.⁴² In aligning Hegel’s attacks on Judaism with his attacks on the formalism of Kant and Fichte, and in equating Hegel’s subsequent inclusion of the law into the dialectic as the

40. Hegel, “Natural Law,” p. 104.

41. Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic*, pp. 16f.

42. It should be noted that Jews and the founders of Judaism are portrayed using strong antisemitic invectives speaking of irreconcilability, estrangement, uprootedness, separatism, cowardice, and avarice. See, e.g., G. W. F. Hegel, “The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate,” in *On Christianity: Early Theological Writings by Friedrich Hegel*, trans. T. M. Knox (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1970), pp. 185ff., 265.

inclusion of Judaism, Szondi seems to understand Hegel's development as a correction of an earlier position.

In his early notes, Hegel maintains that the "Spirit of Judaism" is characterized by a dualism of a dominating "external law" (*äußeres Gesetz*) and its submissive subjects: "The root of Judaism is the objective, i.e., bondage, servitude to something foreign [*Knechtschaft eines Fremden*]." ⁴³ The basic principle of Judaism he considers the "spirit inherited from his [Moses'] forefathers, i.e., . . . the infinite Object [*das unendliche Objekt*]." ⁴⁴ In contrast, Christianity gives rise to the organic "living individuality" by positing the subject against the Law. In a Pauline move, Hegel describes the primal scene of Christianity's innovation as the positing of subjectivity: "Against purely objective commands Jesus set something totally foreign to them, namely, the subjective in general." ⁴⁵ Although this act of "setting" (*setzen*) of the subject results in regulatory functions, which are "set" (*gesetzt*), it is *subjected* through its own agency. Through its actions it creates its fate, demanding and receiving as sacrifice parts of the self in order to reach the stage of reconciliation. Later, in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and particularly in his famous readings of Sophocles' *Antigone*, Hegel accepts the function of external law with which *Antigone* collides:

More interesting still, although entirely transferred into human feeling and action, the same clash appears in the *Antigone*, one of the most sublime and in every respect most excellent works of art of all time. Everything in this tragedy is logical; the public law of the state is set in conflict over against inner family love and duty to a brother; the woman, *Antigone*, has the family interest as her "pathos," Creon, the man, has the welfare of the community as his. ⁴⁶

But Szondi sees this eventual inclusion of the law in the dialectical process and the implications for Hegel's perception of Judaism foreshadowed already in a twofold and contradictory interpretation of the Shakespearean character Macbeth, to whom he refers in the attempt to exemplify the Christian notion of fate as a self-division:

43. G. W. F. Hegel, "Das Grundgesetz zum Geist des Christentums" ["The Basic Law of the Spirit of Christianity," supplement to "The Spirit of Christianity"], ed. Herman Nohl (Tübingen: Mohr, 1907), p. 386.

44. Hegel, "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate," p. 191.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

46. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 1:464.

After murdering Banquo, Macbeth is not confronted with an alien law existing independently of him; rather, in the form of Banquo's ghost, he faces injured life itself, which is nothing foreign, but his "own forfeited life": "It is now for the first time that the injured life appears as a hostile power against the criminal and mistreats him, just as he has mistreated others. Hence, punishment as fate is the equal reaction of the criminal's own deed, of a power that he himself has armed, of an enemy that he himself created."⁴⁷

In accordance with the dialectic paradigm that he established with regard to fate as an objectifying and sacrificing function of subjectivity, Hegel presents this Shakespearean example as an instance of a concept *within the "Spirit of Christianity."* Instead of *passive* submission to an external law (with an expectation of external punishment), there is an *active* struggle in which Macbeth "faces injured life itself" and recognizes fate as "his own forfeited life." His own self becomes the enemy.

Whereas Macbeth thus serves Hegel as a prime example of the "Spirit of Christianity," Szondi points to another interpretation of Macbeth that Hegel presents in the very same notes. Here, Hegel writes: "The fate of the Jewish people is the fate of Macbeth, who stepped out of nature itself, clung to foreign beings, and thus in their service had to trample and slay everything holy in human nature, had at last to be forsaken by his gods (for they were objects and he their slave), and be crushed to pieces on his faith himself."⁴⁸ This "twofold interpretation and the twofold use of the figure of Macbeth" Szondi understands as the prefiguration of the "hidden turn" in accepting the sphere of the law as an equal force in the dialectic, and as an attempt to construct a sublation of Christianity and Judaism in this same figuration. According to Szondi, this sublation expresses itself in "Hegel's image of antiquity," i.e., in his interpretation of certain Greek tragedies (such as *Antigone* and the *Eumenides*) in terms of the reconciliation of the tragic and the dialectic collision of Judaism and Christianity:

Hegel...recognizes the fundamental, tragic conflict as precisely the conflict that necessarily arises between the origin of the dialectic and the realm from which it distanced itself in its coming to be. In Hegel's image of antiquity, the opposition between Judaism and Christianity is sublated.⁴⁹

47. Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic*, p. 18.

48. Hegel, "The Spirit of Christianity," p. 205.

49. Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic*, p. 21.

The chapter "Transition," located between the two parts of Szondi's book, begins with the assertion that the "history of the philosophy of the tragic is itself not free from the tragic."⁵⁰ In conclusion, I want to propose two readings of the chapter with this programmatic first sentence, the one based on Szondi's incorporation of Walter Benjamin's thought, the other on Jean Bollack's observation that "Szondi's critical thinking is to be understood from within its own time, i.e., the postwar era."⁵¹ As Szondi explains, the tragic aspect of the philosophy of the tragic lies in the inversely proportional relation to the philosophy's foundation when attempting to reach a general concept of the tragic: "The closer thought comes to the general concept, the less... the substantial, the source of thought's uplift, adheres to it."⁵² Benjamin seems to provide an alternative to the *concept* and its subsumption of the particular under a general law with his understanding of the *idea* in the sense of "configuration" or "virtual arrangement." But Szondi detects the dialectical structure even in Benjamin's idea of tragedy, which he finds in Benjamin's discussion of the sacrifice, the tragic hero's silence, and the agon. However, there is a turn in Szondi's attempt to show that "Benjamin (like Hegel in his early essay 'The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate') posits the genesis of the tragic as identical with the genesis of the dialectic":⁵³ while Szondi tries to align Benjamin's idea of tragedy with a Hegelian dialectic, Szondi's argumentation develops a momentum that leaves him siding with Benjamin against Hegel's theory of tragedy.

This momentum derives from Benjamin's theory of the relationship between myth and tragedy. As Winfried Menninghaus points out, Hegel's interpretation of tragedy sees as a restitution of the absolute ethical order. Whereas for Hegel the "tragic reconciliation... depends on the advance of specific ethical substantive powers out of their opposition to their true harmony," Benjamin strongly objects to such restitution in his essay "Fate and Character": "There is no question of the 'moral world order' (*sittliche Weltordnung*) being restored; instead, the moral hero, still dumb, . . . wishes to raise himself by shaking that tormented world."⁵⁴ While this moral hero

50. Ibid., p. 49.

51. Jean Bollack, "Zukunft im Vergangenen: Peter Szondis materiale Hermeneutik," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 64 (1990): 382.

52. Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic*, p. 49.

53. Ibid., p. 51.

54. Winfried Menninghaus, *Schwellenkunde: Walter Benjamins Passage des Mythos* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), pp. 82f.; Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 2:1217; Walter Benjamin,

is still bound to the “old” mythic order, his or her resistance announces its end, as Szondi’s reading of Benjamin suggests: “The emancipation from ‘ancient right’ (*altes Recht*) can only occur by revering it once again; the removal of ‘fatal obligations’ demands, in turn, death as its price.”⁵⁵ To be sure, there is a seemingly comparable line of argument in Hegel, which Szondi also cites. It is Hegel’s interpretation of Socrates’ fate as “genuinely tragic.” Socrates’ subjective sovereignty collides with the laws of Athens and is considered a crime, yet Socrates’ death is purposeful: “This is the position of heroes in world history in general; through them, a new world rises.”⁵⁶ It is important, however, to note that Hegel’s and Benjamin’s tragic heroes collide with different world orders. Szondi is not oblivious to this demarcation. In Benjamin’s tragic collision, the hero becomes a witness against a mythic order; in Hegel, the tragic hero’s conflict is with “a man-made law.”⁵⁷ According to Szondi, these diametrically opposed directions are motivated by Hegel’s and Benjamin’s different historical environments. Whereas Hegel aims against the “remainders of the rationalist Enlightenment,” Szondi reads Benjamin as defending “the new Enlightenment, rising up against the irrationalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and its surrender to myth.”⁵⁸

Between 1950 and 1967, Peter Szondi corresponded with the philologist Karl Kerényi. Responding positively to Szondi’s queries and his *Oedipus* interpretation, Kerényi noted that Szondi seemed to have ensconced himself in the *Tragicum*, and added: “For me, the *Tragicum* is concrete insofar as one can ensconce oneself in it. Since it is not only a ‘place,’ it is independent from all location also present in the world of abstraction—and most certainly not only in aesthetics.”⁵⁹ Szondi’s own conclusion sounds

“Fate and Character,” trans. Edmund Jephcott, *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1996), 1:203.

55. Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic*, p. 51.

56. Hegel, cited in *ibid.*, p. 51.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 52. See also, regarding this context, Hermann Cohen’s theory of tragedy. On the occasion of discussing fate and the mythic order in his “Critique of Violence,” Benjamin quotes Cohen’s *Ethics of Pure Will* on the “ancients’ conception of fate” (Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in *Selected Writings*, 1:249). But the section of Cohen’s *Ethics*, which Benjamin is quoting from, also discusses tragedy’s and Mosaism’s disengagement from myth. Contrary to the mythic world, in which “fate’s orders themselves . . . seem to cause and bring about . . . this offense,” tragedy and religion mark a milestone for Cohen in the development of ethical culture in accounting for human action. See Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens*, 2nd rev. ed. (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1907), pp. 362ff.

58. Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic*, p. 52.

59. Szondi, *Briefe*, pp. 78f.

less habitable and shows the contrast with Hegel's reconciliatory interpretation of tragedy clearly: "Only the demise of something that should not meet its demise, whose removal does not allow the wound to heal, is tragic."⁶⁰ Such a post-idealistic understanding of the tragic no longer allows for Hegelian sublation. Traces of this negative dialectical mode of thinking are still discernible in *Celan Studies*, published ten years after *An Essay on the Tragic*. Reading Celan's poem "Engführung," Szondi argues that "the evocation of the death camps is not only the end of Celan's poetry, but its precondition."⁶¹ There is no tragic self-dividing agency in this, let alone any notion of sublation, but in its fragility and fractures, Szondi senses a non-affirmative dialectic in the *aporia* of language that is memory (*Gedächtnis*, *Eingedenken*), as his commentary on the line "Nothing,/nothing is lost" reveals:

The first thing we read here is the word "Nothing." It doesn't mean that *nothing* has been lost, it isn't the first word of a sentence that will go on to say this. "Nothing" means "nothing." Only after having *said*, or rather *posited* the word "nothing," perhaps, is it possible for the poet to go on to assure us that "nothing is lost." There can be existence here only when it transforms itself into the memory, the "trace," of nonexistence.⁶²

60. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

61. Peter Szondi, *Celan Studies*, trans. Susan Bernofsky with Harvey Mendelsohn (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003), p. 74.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Minority Report: Approaching Peter Szondi's Hölderlin Studies

Joshua Robert Gold

Shortly before his death, Peter Szondi noted in a talk entitled “Remarks on the Research Situation of Literary Hermeneutics” (1970): “At a hermeneutics symposium today, the scholar of literature [*Literaturwissenschaftler*] sits beside the theologian and the jurist as the poor relation at the table. His place is indeed inherited, and the row of his ancestors is neither the shortest nor the worst. But he cannot contribute much.” The talk goes on to describe how two main trends in literary scholarship, positivism and text-immanent interpretation, lack the prerequisites for “the cultivation [*Ausbildung*] of a specifically literary hermeneutics.”¹ The first, taking empirical evidence for granted, never asks how an interpretation confers validity upon facts; the other never considers the conditions that allow understanding to operate in the first place. Before his discussion turns to the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Walter Benjamin, Szondi names two preconditions for a specifically literary hermeneutics: “insight into the linguistically conditioned character of literature, and the thesis of the conditioned character of historical knowledge through the historicity of knowing [*die Historizität des Erkennens*].”² Reducible to neither facts nor reading, literary hermeneutics aims to constellate linguistic and historical material together.³

1. Peter Szondi, “Bemerkungen zur Forschungslage der literarischen Hermeneutik,” in *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik*, ed. Jean Bollack and Helen Stierlin (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975), p. 404. All translations from this text are mine.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 405.

3. For a detailed discussion of the relationship of Szondi’s hermeneutics to history, see Rainer Nägele, “Text, History and the Critical Subject: Notes on Peter Szondi’s Theory and Praxis of Hermeneutics,” *boundary 2* 11 (1983): 29–42.

In the context of Szondi's critical undertaking, which involves nothing less than elaborating a literary hermeneutics, the writing of the poet Friedrich Hölderlin occupies a strategic place. Hölderlin's name never appears in "Remarks on the Research Situation of Literary Hermeneutics," but positivism as well as text-immanent criticism, the two objects of Szondi's critique, pertain directly to the reception history of Hölderlin's writing. Owing to the fact that many if not most of his poems have come down to posterity as unpublished drafts or fragments, certain scholars have stressed philological meticulousness at the cost of interpretive subtlety. The abstract quality of Hölderlin's language has led other commentators to pursue speculative readings with no regard for the circumstances surrounding the emergence of the text. From this perspective, Hölderlin's writing provides a sort of testing ground for the activity of literary hermeneutics, whose interpretations integrate both language and history.

Taking as their focus Szondi's essay collection *Hölderlin Studies* (1967), the following pages consider how the epigraph to this book reveals the critical and ethical stakes of these readings. *Unterschiedenes ist/gut*—"What is different is/good": is one justified in placing such emphasis upon these words? This approach goes against conventional wisdom, which ascribes to criticism a position of authority or mastery vis-à-vis literature. Consequently, to illuminate Szondi through Hölderlin violates the accepted critical practice by privileging a literary text (and an apparently deficient one at that) over a completed work of interpretation. Such hesitations notwithstanding, this reading contends that *Unterschiedenes ist/gut* provides a lens through which to view the argument of *Hölderlin Studies*. Following some preliminary remarks on the organization of Szondi's book, the argument examines the passage from which he takes the epigraph. Reading these lines in their original context enables us to relate them to a theme that runs throughout Hölderlin's writing: the necessity of upholding borders to safeguard against potentially destructive transgression. To the extent that this insistence upon differentiation informs Szondi's argument regarding literary studies as a distinct discipline, the epigraph of *Hölderlin Studies* pertains to these institutional concerns. *Unterschiedenes ist/gut* is also significant with respect to Hölderlin's reception in the early twentieth century, when commentators, in disregard of his political commitments, chose instead to interpret the poet as an advocate of German nationalism. To repudiate this account of Hölderlin as a visionary of the German nation, and to underscore how his poetics recognizes its debt to and dependence upon the foreign, constitutes a major, if unspoken, concern

guiding Szondi's undertaking. (In this regard, *Hölderlin Studies*, along with Benjamin's "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin" and Theodor W. Adorno's "Parataxis," belongs to a tradition of dissent within Hölderlin commentary.) However, in recalling the receptivity of Hölderlin's writing toward the foreign, the phrase *Unterschiedenes ist/gut* also applies to his very language, which refuses to capitulate to convention. Focusing on episodes from Hölderlin's struggle to develop a form of poetic speech all his own, *Hölderlin Studies* ultimately concerns the particularity of literary language, not merely as it manifests itself in an identifiable style, but in the individual artwork as well.

Unterschiedenes ist/gut: these lines immediately alert us to the way that Szondi's book addresses the question of what is different.⁴ That he chooses to convey this matter through a Hölderlin citation is appropriate, and not only because Hölderlin's poetry is the subject matter of this book. Hölderlin's writing, as we noted above, addresses necessary boundaries, and in this regard it concerns what is different. This question is hardly an improper point of departure: after all, epigraphs cue readers to the themes that a writer intends to address in his or her text. However, the citation in question poses difficulties owing to its fragmentary character. To be sure, this problem is hardly unusual in Hölderlin's case; most of his mature writing, composed between 1796 and 1806, consists of unpublished, often incomplete drafts. In the matter at hand, such fragmentation appears especially disadvantageous. After all, when a book contains an epigraph, readers, by taking this quotation as a clue, can consult the original context. But what would this mean when the epigraph, excerpted from an unfinished poem, is the fragment of a fragment?

4. The epigraph can be found in Peter Szondi, *Hölderlin Studien: Mit einem Traktat über philologische Erkenntnis*, in *Schriften*, ed. Jean Bollack et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), 1:262. A word of explanation is in order regarding the decision to render *Unterschiedenes ist/gut* as "What is different is/good." Though admittedly cumbersome, this translation seems to be the best option available. In addition to being inaccurate, "Difference is/good" has the added disadvantage of falling back upon a word whose connotations are overdetermined in the context of contemporary theoretical discussions. Another possibility—"What is differentiated is good"—is truer to the original German (*Unterschiedliches* rather than *Unterschiedenes* is a more fitting word for "What is different"). Even so, "What is different" is preferable to "What is differentiated" for stylistic reasons. Since what is different is de facto what has been differentiated, translating *Unterschiedenes ist/gut* as "What is different is/good" still maintains the sense of Hölderlin's language. This is especially true when one considers the line that opens the fragment from which *Hölderlin Studies* takes its epigraph: *Ein anderes freilich ists* ("Admittedly it is another"). While the fragment remains incomplete, the consistency between the expression *Ein anderes* ("another") and the word *Unterschiedenes* is discernible.

The table of contents of *Hölderlin Studies*, insofar as it indicates a link between the epigraph and the organization of Szondi's essays, offers one possible way around this difficulty. In addition to the introductory essay "On Philological Knowledge" (*Über philologische Erkenntnis*), Szondi's lengthiest theoretical statement, the book comprises two untitled parts.⁵ The first, containing the essays "The Other Arrow: On the Genesis of the Late Hymnic Style" and "Himself, the Prince of the Festival," addresses Hölderlin's poetry through close readings of the hymns "As on a Holiday . . ." and "Celebration of Peace." The second half includes the essays "The Overcoming of Classicism" and "The Poetics of Genre and the Philosophy of History," which both address theoretical aspects of Hölderlin's writing.⁶ Poetry on the one hand, poetology on the other: the very structure of *Hölderlin Studies* conveys to readers that these essays concern distinct, though hardly unrelated, practices of writing.

However, there is another way of approaching the lines *Unterschiedenes ist/gut*. Regardless of the case under consideration, an epigraph touches upon the question of what is different by virtue of its very form. For an epigraph is not merely a citation from another text, but a citation that has the purpose of representing some crucial aspect or theme that concerns the text to which it is now affixed; in other words, an epigraph allows another's words to speak for the text in question. Included in the text yet set apart from it, an epigraph occupies a space that permits a foreign voice to inhabit its host. Thus, in its function as an epigraph, *Unterschiedenes ist/gut* indicates that *Hölderlin Studies* has something to do with a certain way of speaking as well as a distinct relationship to this speech. More specifically, Szondi's undertaking does not merely acknowledge another's words, but attempts to provide the conditions that will allow these words to be heard. In this respect, there is a giving over of one's self to another that still upholds the distinction between self and other. At the same time, Szondi did not cite *Unterschiedenes ist/gut* at random; one could not substitute it with any other quotation and expect it to have the same significance simply by virtue of its being an epigraph.

5. "Über philologische Erkenntnis" is one of two essays from *Hölderlin Studies* that have been translated into English. The present discussion will refer to "On Textual Understanding," in Peter Szondi, *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 3–22.

6. With the exception of "The Other Arrow: On the Genesis of the Late Hymnic Style," which is Mendelsohn's rendition of the German, the translations of the titles listed above are mine.

Far from hindering interpretation, the incompleteness of these lines provides an entry point for reading them. Their very fragmentation, by confronting us as something that appears impenetrable in its strangeness, is the first way in which the poem places us as readers in a relationship to what is different. An apparent obstruction thus provides access to the text—but how does the poem unfold what is different? The key word of the first line is *Ein anderes* (“another”): by naming a term that is distinct from what is one’s own, this line shows that what is different is at issue here. Instead of attempting to master something foreign or strange, this act of naming makes it accessible without fixing it in an explanation or definition. By enabling the foreign to abide in this manner, these lines also maintain the incomprehensibility of what is another. In doing so, they do not glorify obscurity for its own sake, but render incomprehensibility intelligible by allowing it to be expressed. At the same time, they allow incomprehensibility to persist *in* its incomprehensibility. This delivering of another leads to the lines that serve as the epigraph to *Hölderlin Studies: Unterschiedenes ist/gut*. These lines go further than merely acknowledging the existence of another; upon stating that another is, they go on to state that what is different has a positive value. Moreover, while the sentence that begins with *Ein jeder* (“Everyone”) remains lost to us, this affirmation receives reinforcement from the conclusion *und es hat/Ein jeder das Seine* (“and everyone/Has what is his”). The word that deserves emphasis here is *das Seine* (“what is his”), a term that alludes to what is proper to specific entities, faculties, or regions of existence. Taken together, these lines involve the recognition and affirmation of what is different.

To the extent that it positively evaluates distinction or differentiation, this passage returns to a preoccupation that runs throughout Hölderlin’s writing: the importance of and need for boundaries. This gesture of differentiation is already discernible in the early fragment “Judgment and Being,” which describes the necessary separation of self-consciousness from a primordial, pre-reflexive ontological ground, and continues through the “Remarks on Antigone,” a work of commentary included in Hölderlin’s translation of Sophocles nearly a decade later. Over the years the terms in his writing vary, but the basic move is identifiable: the absolute must remain inaccessible to finite consciousness. The best-known border that Hölderlin’s writing describes is the one that separates humans and gods and insures that mere mortals do not forget their place in the cosmic order. Violating this border incurs disaster; thus, apropos of mortals who

aspire for parity with the gods, the hymn "The Rhine" remarks: "He shall demolish his/Own house and curse like an enemy/Those dearest to him and under the rubble/ Shall bury his father and child."⁸ It is precisely on account of this concern with limits, particularly as they bear upon claims regarding the accessibility of the absolute to human experience, that Hölderlin deserves recognition as a Kantian poet.⁹

In a gesture that is consistent with Hölderlin's poetry and Kant's philosophy, Szondi aims to elaborate the disciplinary specificity of literary studies (an admittedly imperfect translation for the German word *Literaturwissenschaft*). Like Hölderlin and Kant, Szondi recognizes the need for differentiation; however, where Hölderlin differentiates between the sacred and the profane, and Kant between functions of cognition, Szondi distinguishes the respective approaches that correspond to particular areas of knowledge. Once again, it is useful to consider "Remarks on the Research Situation of Literary Hermeneutics," where Szondi writes, "if Da-sein is understanding, the conditions for the possibility of understanding are a matter of fundamental ontology; a critique of literary reason

8. Friedrich Hölderlin, "The Rhine," in *Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil Press, 1994), p. 437.

9. Hölderlin's admiration for Kant has never been a secret; for recent discussions of the Hölderlin-Kant connection, see Rodolphe Gasché, "Der unterbrechende Augenblick: Hölderlin über Zäsur, Zeit und Gefühl," trans. Kathrin Thiele, in "*Es bleibet aber eine Spur/Doch eines Wortes*": zur späten Hymnik und Tragödientheorie Friedrich Hölderlins, ed. Christoph Jamme and Anja Lemke (Munich: Fink Verlag, 2004), pp. 419–45; and Rainer Nägele, *Hölderlins Kritik der poetischen Vernunft* (Basel: Urs Engeler Verlag, 2005). What matters for the present discussion is how Hölderlin's writing, without being a philosophical argument cloaked in literary language, nonetheless repeats a fundamentally Kantian gesture by insisting upon the need for borders. This gesture underlies the three *Critiques*, which aim to establish the legitimate use of the three faculties of the human mind: understanding, reason, and judgment. It is especially worth recalling here Kant's remark that "Reason concerns itself exclusively with absolute totality in the employment of the concepts of the understanding, and endeavors to carry the synthetic unity, which is thought in the category, up to the completely unconditioned." According to Kant, the tendency of reason to ascribe completion to our experience is unavoidable. While he acknowledges that the ideas that reason generates have their rightful place in the context of our moral concerns, reason, he continues, oversteps its boundaries when it aspires to bring ideas, which by definition are estranged from sense experience, to bear upon our knowledge of natural laws. These comments are worth keeping in mind in the case of Hölderlin's writing, which names and warns against the temptation to secure some form of absolute ontological consistency. In this regard his literary undertaking bears comparison with Kant's argument in the Transcendental Dialectic. See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan and Co., 1929), pp. 318, 328.

would become less than even a desideratum.”¹⁰ Implicitly addressed to Martin Heidegger, this remark challenges the notion that understanding is an ontological rather than a disciplinary affair—that it has to do with the primordial constitution of our being-in-the-world rather than with the institutionally and historically conditioned organization of knowledge. As Szondi points out, the stakes here are considerable: if understanding no longer concerns a procedure but pertains to the way we are, then literary hermeneutics would be a derivative manifestation of a more elemental activity. In a word, Szondi’s critique of Heidegger involves nothing less than establishing the autonomy of literary studies, a goal that critics will only achieve by inquiring into the disciplinary logic that sets their field apart from other regions of knowledge.¹¹

The same concern guides the argument of “On Philological Knowledge,” Szondi’s most sustained treatment of literary hermeneutics. Keeping with the epigraph of *Hölderlin Studies—Unterschiedenes ist/gut*—this text concerns the differences between literary studies and other disciplines, particularly history and the natural sciences. Quoting Friedrich Schleiermacher’s definition of hermeneutics as “a theory of art or a technique” that has as its goal “[t]he perfect understanding of speech or writing,” Szondi asks: “why has literary studies, which should see its task in the ‘perfect understanding of a text,’ failed to develop further the theory that Schleiermacher called for and that he even sketched out in his theological lectures; indeed, why has it virtually closed itself off entirely from the problems of hermeneutics?”¹² The reason, he goes on to note, has to do with “the self-image of literary studies,” according to which it aspires to model itself on the natural sciences. Consequently, owing to “its tendency to consider itself a ‘science’ [*Wissenschaft*] and to see its defining characteristics as the accumulation of (factual) knowledge [*Wissen*], that is, as a static *condition*,” literary studies avoids the question of whether the interpretation of literary texts does not involve other criteria for truth.¹³

10. Szondi, “Bemerkungen zur Forschungslage,” p. 404.

11. For a detailed discussion of Szondi’s critique of philosophical hermeneutics and his attempt to elaborate a specifically literary hermeneutic procedure, see Jean Bollack, “Zukunft im Vergangenen: Peter Szondis materiale Hermeneutik,” trans. Beatrice Schulz, *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 4 (1990): 370–90.

12. Szondi, “On Textual Understanding,” pp. 3–4 (translation modified).

13. *Ibid.*, p. 4 (translation modified).

In their readiness to assimilate the method of one area of knowledge to another, scholars of literature have failed to think through with sufficient rigor the approach that the study of literature presupposes.¹⁴

Upon characterizing the problem in this manner, Szondi proceeds to point out the differences between literary studies and other disciplines. As he notes, despite its misguided objectives and self-understanding, literary studies does not simply involve the acquisition of facts, but “possesses a dynamic aspect that is peculiarly its own [*eigen*].” Szondi’s use of the term *eigen* here is suggestive: it underscores his aim of illuminating all that separates literary studies from other disciplines. This leads him to refer to the “dynamic” character of criticism, not simply because it is “altered by new points of view and new finds” from time to time, “but because it can exist in the first place, only through constantly confronting texts, only through continuously referring knowledge [*Wissen*] back to its source in cognition [*Erkenntnis*], that is to say, by relating it to the understanding [*Verstehen*] of the poetic word.”¹⁵ That literary studies always finds itself revisiting texts in this manner has to do with the way “that understanding of works of art requires, and makes possible, another kind of knowledge than that recognized by other sciences.”¹⁶ A literary text does not call for explanation in the same way that a problem in the natural sciences or mathematics requires a solution. Because “even the most ancient text is present to an undiminished degree,” philological knowledge “is always assured of the presence (and presentness) of the work of art, against which it must measure itself again and again, each time proving its validity anew.”¹⁷ From these last remarks one can conclude that even when the artwork gives rise to a tradition of commentary, such a tradition does not represent a steady compiling of knowledge that will eventually yield the meaning of a work. No: even with its reception history, the artwork calls for “perpetually renewed understanding [*perpetuierte Erkenntnis*].”¹⁸

14. Although the emphasis in the present discussion falls upon Szondi’s concerns with disciplinary boundaries, one would be remiss in neglecting to mention how his approach to literary studies was out of step with the dominant institutional trends of the time. For a lengthier discussion of Szondi’s uneasy relationship to the university and to the discipline of literary studies in Germany, see Christoph König, *Engführungen: Peter Szondi und die Literatur* (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schiller Gesellschaft, 2004), pp. 73–80.

15. Szondi, “On Textual Understanding,” p. 5.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

18. *Ibid.*

This is not to argue that literary criticism has nothing to do with facts. Quite the contrary: according to Szondi, the act of reading always requires the critic to negotiate the facts at hand. Composition or publication history, the relationship of a genre to the tradition within which a writer is working, the meaning of a particular word at a given historical moment: such details exemplify the kinds of material with which literary hermeneutics is concerned. To the extent that facts circumscribe the area within which the critic maneuvers, they prevent him from imposing arbitrary interpretations upon the text in question. However, what distinguishes literary hermeneutics from mere positivism is that the former recognizes that facts have no significance in themselves. The act of reading demands the critic's intervention to decide upon which facts are capable of verifying the reading in question. The interpretive moment is one of evaluation that requires the critic to weigh the facts according to their capacity to furnish proof. Facts and interpretation therefore have a reciprocal relationship to one another. As Szondi writes: "The interpreter who disregards the facts also disregards the rules of interpretation (there exists no 'overinterpretation' that is not false); and the positivist who abstains from understanding, decrying it as something notoriously subjective, forgoes the possibility of investigating 'the facts'."¹⁹ Facts are therefore a precondition for interpretation, yet interpretation determines the relevance of the facts. To cite "On Textual Understanding" once again: "[T]he evidential character of the facts is first revealed by the interpretation, while, conversely, the facts indicate the path that interpretation should pursue. The interdependence of proof and understanding is a manifestation of the hermeneutic circle."²⁰ Thus, unlike the natural sciences, the activity of literary hermeneutics recognizes its own distinctly circular temporality.²¹

The question of the disciplinary status of literary hermeneutics is not the only way in which the epigraph to *Hölderlin Studies—Unterschiedenes*

19. *Ibid.*, p. 7. As Szondi notes further on in this text: "A demonstration that tries to keep strictly to the facts breaks down for the reason that not enough attention is given to its epistemological presuppositions, and the latter are insufficiently examined because of a blind trust in the facts. The appeal to the facts, however, does not relieve one of the obligation to consider the conditions under which they are known—any more than the act of interpretation allows one to ignore the facts furnished by the text and the history of the text" (*ibid.*, p. 15).

20. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

21. Szondi's hermeneutics is also attuned to matters of temporality inasmuch as it considers the various tensions through which the historicity of the text is crystallized. See Nägele, "Text, History and the Critical Subject," pp. 36–37.

ist/gut—touches upon the institutional implications of Szondi's readings. There is the additional matter of how Szondi, in emphasizing the way that Hölderlin's writing thematizes the relationship between self and other, goes against the grain of some of the dominant tendencies in twentieth-century Hölderlin commentary. In order to see how this is the case, a detour through Hölderlin's reception history is called for.

The notion of recuperating Hölderlin in the name of a German national project, which persisted through the first decades of the last century, was based upon a complicated and potent confluence of art, religion, and politics. Much of this language was simply a variation on the idea of the poet as visionary or prophet, one of the mainstays of Romanticism. Indeed, one need not look further than the unfinished ode "Rousseau" for the persistence of this motif in Hölderlin's own writing. Claiming that "some there are whose vision outflies their time," the text apostrophizes the Swiss writer and extols his connection to the gods: "You've heard and comprehended the strangers' tone,/ Interpreted their soul!"²² However, to this model of poeticizing the group of writers and intellectuals surrounding the poet Stefan George, which was largely responsible for the Hölderlin's rediscovery at the start of the twentieth century, contributed a strong nationalist element.²³ This mixture of aestheticism and nationalism

22. Friedrich Hölderlin, "Rousseau," in *Poems and Fragments*, pp. 124, 125.

23. Lest one conclude that George's conception of the poet is quaintly antiquated, it is worth noting his influence upon subsequent criticism and philosophy. The most outstanding example of this phenomenon is Martin Heidegger, whose interpretation of Hölderlin's poem "As on a Holiday . . ." draws upon the motif of poets as leaders or prophets. In his well-known conclusion to his reading of this text, Heidegger describes how Hölderlin's poem allows the sacred to abide in its language insofar as this language is the very happening of the sacred: "The holy bestows the word, and itself comes into this word. This word is the primal event of the holy. Hölderlin's poetry is now a primordial calling which, called by what is coming, says this and only this as the holy." It is precisely this moment in Heidegger's reading that Paul de Man challenges in "Heidegger's Exegesis of Hölderlin," one of his most important essays. Commenting on Heidegger's interpretation of "As on a Holiday . . ." de Man renders inoperative any reading that might treat Hölderlin's poem as an event manifesting the sacred. Because his criticism recognizes the movement of non-coinciding that occurs in literary language, de Man argues that the hymn "cannot establish it [i.e., the presence of Being] for as soon as the word is uttered, it destroys the immediate and discovers that instead of stating Being, it can only state mediation." In other words, Hölderlin's language, far from coinciding with the truth of Being, illustrates instead how language, to the extent that it substitutes words for things, testifies to the absence of what it names. "Heidegger's Exegesis of Hölderlin" was published in the French journal *Critique* in 1955, yet echoes of de Man's George critique are still discernible nearly thirty

was expressed most forcefully by Norbert von Hellingrath, the German classicist affiliated with the George Circle who produced the first complete edition of Hölderlin's texts.²⁴ Shortly before his death in the trenches of Verdun in 1916, von Hellingrath wrote that Hölderlin regarded his late hymns as "the word of God" that was "spoken entirely as from the 'good spirit of the Fatherland,' like the prophets of the Jews understood their words as uttered by the Lord."²⁵ Such sentiments were typical of German nationalist circles through the Second World War, and von Hellingrath himself came to be regarded as a martyr for the German cause.²⁶

years later in his reading of Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of Translator." Arguing against the claim that this text affirms a messianic or divine language, de Man notes in the discussion following his talk that Benjamin understands translation as "a way of reading the original which will reveal those inherent weaknesses in the original, not in the sense that the original is then no longer a great work or anything, or that it wouldn't be worthy of admiration or anything of the sort, but in a much more fundamental way: that the original is not canonical, that the original is a piece of ordinary language, in a way—prosaic ordinary language—which as such belongs as much to that category as [to the category of the original]. It is desacralized. Decanonized, desacralized, in a very fundamental way." The issue at hand is not Heidegger's considerable contributions to the way that we approach poetry; rather, it is the way that his writings demonstrate the endurance of George's aesthetics. As de Man's writings suggest, there is a sense in which specific debates in American literary theory in recent decades merely represent the latest phase in an ongoing attempt to work through the consequences of this "aesthetic ideology." See Martin Heidegger, "'As on a Holiday . . .,'" in *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), p. 98; Paul de Man, "Heidegger's Exegesis of Hölderlin," trans. Wlad Godzich, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 259; Paul de Man, "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,'" in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 98.

24. For a discussion of the relationship between von Hellingrath's Hölderlin interpretation and his politics, see Henning Bothe, "*Ein Zeichen sind wir, deutunglos*": Die Rezeption Hölderlins von ihren Anfängen bis zu Stefan George (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1992), pp. 101–14.

25. Norbert von Hellingrath, "Vorrede," in Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 4, *Gedichte: 1800–1806* (Berlin: Propyläen-Verlag, 1923), p. xi (my translation). Max Kommerell, another major figure associated with the George Circle—and, not insignificantly, one whose name does not show up in the bibliography of *Hölderlin Studies*—wrote another, lengthier interpretation that placed a similar emphasis upon the sacred (and supposedly martial) element of the Hölderlin's writing. See Kommerell, *Der Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik: Klopstock, Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Jean Paul, Hölderlin*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1982), pp. 395–483.

26. For an historical overview of the relationship between Hölderlin's writing and right-wing politics, see Gerhard Kurz, "Hölderlin 1943," in *Hölderlin und Nürtingen*,

Despite von Hellingrath's contributions to scholarship, Hölderlin's writing fails to conform to this nationalist interpretation.²⁷ Much could be said about this topic, though it is worth observing that nationalist readings of Hölderlin conveniently overlooked his republican sympathies.²⁸ Like many German writers and philosophers during the last decade of the eighteenth century, Hölderlin ardently supported the French Revolution, and never turned his back on the values of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. "It is also good, and even the first condition of all life and all organization that no force in heaven or on earth is monarchic": excerpted from a 1798 letter to his friend Isaak von Sinklair, these words succinctly express his political convictions.²⁹

Yet one cannot simply dismiss von Hellingrath as a member of some right-wing fringe element. As the 1915 talk "Hölderlin and the Germans" suggests, von Hellingrath's interpretation of Hölderlin, whatever its inaccuracies, nonetheless presupposes a distinct conception of reading and

ed. Peter Härtling and Gerhard Kurz (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 1994), pp. 103–28; Norbert Rath, "Kriegskamerad Hölderlin: Zitate zur Sinngeschiede," in *Neue Wege zu Hölderlin*, ed. Uwe Beyer (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1994), pp. 219–41; Claudia Albert, "'Dient Kulturarbeit dem Sieg?' Hölderlin-Rezeption von 1933–1945," in *Hölderlin und die Moderne: Eine Bestandsaufnahme*, ed. Gerhard Kurz, Valérie Lawitschka, and Jürgen Wertheimer (Tübingen: Attempo Verlag, 1995), pp. 153–73.

27. Von Hellingrath's dissertation on Pindar and Hölderlin, *Pindarübertragungen von Hölderlin (Hölderlin's Pindar Translations)*, was instrumental in demonstrating that the complexities of Hölderlin's style were not an expression of mental illness, but the result of a sustained engagement with an ancient predecessor. This study has the merit of focusing attention on Hölderlin's debt to Pindar for the stylistic structuring principle of "hard joining" (*harte Fügung*). Despite their respective critiques of the nationalist account of Hölderlin, Benjamin, Adorno, and Szondi are deeply indebted to this aspect of von Hellingrath's work. See Norbert von Hellingrath, *Pindarübertragungen von Hölderlin*, in *Hölderlin-Vermächtnis: Forschungen und Vorträge* (Munich: F. Bruckmann A. B., 1936), pp. 15–93.

28. Scholarship gradually placed greater emphasis upon this aspect of Hölderlin's life and writing in the years following the Second World War. Two well-known examples that differ greatly from one another in terms of approach and sophistication are Pierre Bertaux, *Hölderlin und die französische Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969); and Gerhard Kurz, *Mittelbarkeit und Vereinigung: Zum Verhältnis von Poesie, Reflexion, und Revolution bei Hölderlin* (Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, 1975). See also Peter Szondi, "Der Fürstenmord, der nicht stattfand: Hölderlin und die französische Revolution," in *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik*, pp. 409–26.

29. Letter no. 171, Hölderlin to Isaac von Sinklair, December 24, 1798, in Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke: Stuttgarter Hölderlin-Ausgabe*, ed. Friedrich Beissner, vol. 6, pt. 1, *Briefe: Text* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1954), p. 300 (my translation).

language. Keeping with the idea of Hölderlin as a German prophet, von Hellingrath notes that Germany has mistakenly been called “Goethe’s nation” (*Volk Goethes*). In place of this designation, he proposes that Germany be known as “Hölderlin’s nation,” since “it lies most deeply in the German essence [*Wesen*] that its innermost glowing kernel, infinitely distant beneath the crust of slag that is its surface, comes only to light in a *secret* Germany [*geheimen Deutschland*].” The essence of the nation, he continues, “expresses itself in people, who must have at least died long ago before they are seen and find some resonance; in works that entrust their secret [*Geheimnis*] to few, indeed remain silent to most, are certainly never accessible to non-Germans.”³⁰ Keeping with this line of thought, von Hellingrath goes on to note that a nation does not owe its significance (*Bedeutung*) to the descent (*Abstammung*) of its members or to the state, but to its language. Moreover, if “[l]anguage is soul of the nation,” then poets (*Dichter*) are “[t]rustees [*Verwalter*] of this most valuable national possession.”³¹ These quotations admittedly do not add up to a fully developed theory of interpretation, but the implication is clear: insofar as it constitutes a kind of sacred scripture, Hölderlin’s writing contains its own esoteric meaning to which only a national elite has access.

It is against this Hölderlin, harbinger of the “secret Germany,” that Szondi, along with Benjamin and Adorno, is writing; together, these three figures constitute a tradition of dissent—a minority report, as it were—in the history of German Hölderlin reception.³² Owing to its complexity, the relationship between these three commentators cannot be treated exhaustively here. Among other things, these readings share a concern with drawing attention to those aspects of Hölderlin’s texts that bear traces of what is foreign. Taking as his example the changes that Hölderlin incorporated in his revision of an ode, Benjamin characterizes the organizing principle of Hölderlin’s late style as “the Oriental, mystical principle, overcoming limits, which in this poem [i.e., “Timidity”] again and again so manifestly

30. Norbert von Hellingrath, “Hölderlin und die Deutschen,” in *Hölderlin-Vermächtnis*, pp. 124–25 (my translation).

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 128, 129.

32. So far it appears that only Marlies Janz has attempted to read Benjamin, Adorno, and Szondi in conjunction with one another. See Janz, “Benjamin—Adorno—Szondi,” in *Hölderlin-Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, ed. Johann Kreuzer (Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, 2002), pp. 439–43.

sublates the Greek shaping principle.”³³ Published nearly fifty years after Benjamin wrote his interpretation, Adorno’s essay criticizes any attempt to enlist Hölderlin’s poetry for the nationalist cause; thus, writing of the poet’s use of the word *Vaterland*, he notes: “Love of what is close at hand and nostalgia for the warmth of childhood have developed into something exclusionary, into hatred for the Other, and that cannot be eliminated from the word. It has become permeated with a nationalism of which there is no trace whatsoever in Hölderlin.”³⁴ Finally, Szondi argues that the decisive

33. Walter Benjamin, “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin: ‘The Poet’s Courage’ and ‘Timidity,’” trans. Stanley Corngold, in *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1996), p. 34. Here it is worth noting that Benjamin, unlike either Adorno or Szondi, wrote his essay during the First World War—in other words, at a moment when militarist circles were invoking Hölderlin’s name as a part of a wider campaign to justify the German war effort. For an overview of the historical and biographical circumstances surrounding the composition of Benjamin’s text, and an account of the various levels on which it attempts to repudiate the nationalist appropriation of Hölderlin, see Alexander Honold, “Der Tod des Dichters: Hölderlin,” in *Der Leser Walter Benjamin: Bruchstücke einer deutschen Literaturgeschichte* (Berlin: Verlag Vorwerk 8, 2000), pp. 52–106.

34. Theodor W. Adorno, “Parataxis: On Hölderlin’s Late Poetry,” trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia UP, 1992), p. 119. These remarks are only the most explicit example of how Hölderlin’s poetry provides Adorno with an occasion to address the relationship between self and other. In this context it is also worth noting the dedication, printed in smaller, italicized type, between the title of the essay and its beginning: *Peter Szondi gewidmet* (“Dedicated to Peter Szondi”). From a philological standpoint this detail indicates the complicated line of influence between Adorno and Szondi with regard to Hölderlin. While the 1964 publication of “Parataxis” indeed precedes that of *Hölderlin Studies*, Szondi actually read Adorno’s manuscript upon the latter’s request and suggested a number of changes. Yet the significance of the dedication goes beyond the matter of influence; more importantly, this dedication is consistent with Adorno’s understanding of Hölderlin as a writer whose poetry positively evaluates what is foreign. This reading pertains to the dedication to the extent that a dedication, much like an epigraph, permits another to inhabit the text, even when there is no direct citation of another’s words. “Parataxis” acknowledges another through a proper name (that of Peter Szondi), thereby constituting an indissoluble bond between this particular essay and a second party. Moreover, a dedication constitutes an act of giving, a handing over of something from one party to another. Though this act is often for purposes of memorializing, “Parataxis” makes use of the dedication in order to acknowledge a debt. Interpreting Hölderlin therefore provides Adorno with an occasion to show that he does not fully own his words, not simply because one will also associate them with another name from this point on, or even because he is offering his words to another as a gesture of thanks; it is also because Szondi’s name bears witness to a process of intellectual collaboration. At the same time, Szondi’s acceptance of this dedication constitutes a form of acknowledgment in its

point of Hölderlin's historical poetics is how the "appropriation of what is one's own [*Aneignung des Eigenen*] must not come at the cost of the loss of what is foreign [*des Fremden*]; in other words, Hölderlin "does not demand the turning away from what is foreign and the path into what is one's own, but rather the harmonious opposition [*harmonische Entgegensetzung*] of both as a poetic means."³⁵ Despite their brevity, these citations indicate how Benjamin, Adorno, and Szondi each brush Hölderlin's writing against the grain in their own way.

To be sure, the epigraph to *Hölderlin Studies—Unterschiedenes ist/gut*—alludes to the way that Hölderlin's texts thematize or incorporate foreignness; however, it also relates to the way that this sympathy with the foreign informs Hölderlin's practice as a writer. In order to understand how this is the case, it helps to recall his comments in the preface to the hymn "Celebration of Peace": "All I ask is to read this page in a good-natured way. In that case it will surely not be incomprehensible [*unfaßlich*], even less objectionable. But should some nonetheless find such a language too little conventional, I must confess: I cannot do anything else."³⁶ What

own way. As Adorno observed in a 1963 letter to Szondi, accepting this dedication entailed potential professional risks: "I am immodest enough to imagine that the dedication will bring you joy; but I am familiar with the customs and needs of the academic world all too well not to know that a dedication from me, and precisely the one of this text, and precisely the one at this time, when indeed a profession for you must soon become pressing, can possibly harm you. If that is the case, you are able only to decline. In no case would I like you to incur a possible disadvantage out of solidarity or heroism. You can imagine, on the other hand, how very much it would make me happy to announce publicly that solidarity through the dedication." In his response, Szondi called the dedication "a sign of sympathy and acknowledgement" (*ein Zeichen von Sympathie und Anerkennung*). The dedication to "Parataxis" therefore involves a more complicated dynamic than first meets the eye. Keeping with his reading of Hölderlin's poetry, Adorno's dedication is a way of creating a space for what is foreign within his own text. By consenting to receive this dedication before an audience of readers, Szondi shows his willingness to place himself in a vulnerable position for the sake of expressing his gratitude. See letter no. 52, Szondi to Theodor W. Adorno, December 5, 1963, in Szondi, *Briefe*, ed. Christoph König and Thomas Sparr (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1993), pp. 135 and 141–42n1.

35. Peter Szondi, "Überwindung des Klassizismus: Der Brief an Böhlendorff von 4. Dezember 1801," in *Hölderlin Studien*, p. 357 (my translation). For a discussion of how Szondi's reading of Hölderlin's letter to Böhlendorff goes against the dominant trends in scholarship, see Bernard Böschstein, "Peter Szondi: 'Studies on Hölderlin'; Exemplarity of a Path," trans. Kristine Anderson, *boundary 2* 11 (1983): 100–101.

36. Friedrich Hölderlin, "Celebration of Peace," in *Poems and Fragments*, pp. 454–55 (translation modified).

is striking is how these words, by addressing readers directly, testify to Hölderlin's desire to communicate. This desire, in turn, bears witness to his recognition that writing, in order to be meaningful, depends upon an exchange with others.³⁷ In short, the act of writing, by addressing others, is an invitation to dialogue.

From this observation it does not follow that Hölderlin writes with readers' comfort in mind. In tension with this reliance upon an addressee is his refusal to obey dominant norms of expression. To poeticize for Hölderlin means developing a different way of speaking, and in the fragment "On the Operations of the Poetic Spirit," he notes that a poet, in order to realize this distinct language, "takes nothing for granted, proceeds from nothing positive . . . nature and art, as he has come to know them and sees them, speak not until there exists a language for him, that is, until what is now unknown and unnamed in his world becomes known and named precisely by way of having been compared and found in congruence with his mood."³⁸ In the preface to "Celebration of Peace," Hölderlin's acknowledgement that some will find his style "too little conventional" (*zu wenig konventionell*) testifies to his awareness that his commitment to the autonomy of poetic language potentially stands at cross-purposes with his need to communicate.³⁹

Yet realizing one's own language, according to Hölderlin, paradoxically comes at the cost of self-expression; its precondition is depersonalization. To state the matter differently: to achieve a distinct way of speaking is only possible by subordinating one's self to the demands of writing. From this perspective, what is different does not merely concern the poet's addressee, or even the unique character of his style, but the very language that he serves. It is telling that Hölderlin, in the preface to "Celebration of Peace," refers to "such a language" (*eine solche Sprache*) rather than to "my language": the impersonal tone of *eine solche Sprache* implies that

37. This notion provides the guiding assumption of the final version of Hölderlin's novel *Hyperion* (1797–99), whose eponymous character makes sense of his past by recounting it in a series of letters to a friend. See Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion, or the Hermit in Greece*, trans. William R. Trask, in *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, ed. Eric L. Santner (New York: Continuum, 1990), pp. 1–133.

38. Friedrich Hölderlin, "On the Operations of the Poetic Spirit," in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1988), p. 81.

39. See also Rainer Nägele, "Hermetik und Öffentlichkeit: Zu einigen historischen Voraussetzungen der Moderne bei Hölderlin," *Hölderlin-Jahrbuch* 19/20 (1975–77): 358–86.

this language confronts him as something alien. More significantly, this text also suggests that writing, far from being an act of free will, requires fidelity and obedience to something that the poet does not entirely own: “I *must* confess,” “I *cannot* do anything else.” These expressions suggest that a poet is able to find a voice with which to speak by submitting himself to the singular logic that this particular language demands of him.⁴⁰

Taking as its reference points specific moments from the history of Hölderlin’s literary activities, Szondi’s study attempts to reconstruct the process through which Hölderlin realized the language of his late style. As the foregoing remarks regarding the preface to “Celebration of Peace” indicate, this language pertains directly to the epigraph *Unterschiedenes ist/gut*. Keeping with the respective readings of Benjamin and Adorno, the last essay in *Hölderlin Studies*, “The Poetics of Genre and the Philosophy of History,” argues that the paratactic construction of Hölderlin’s late poetry affirms “[t]he apriority [*Apriorität*] of the individual over the totality.”⁴¹ The very technique of Hölderlin’s poetry therefore relates to what is different to the extent that he elevates his commitment to individual elements to a poetic organizing principle.⁴² Equally significant for Szondi, however, is the way that this speech, which affirms what is different, arises out of a process of differentiation at work within Hölderlin’s activity as a writer. This last point brings us to one of Szondi’s observations regarding the approach of literary hermeneutics: “Confronted with an array of facts whose organization has been destroyed by their transformation into illustrative examples, the method attempts to reproduce this organization in a dynamic fashion by reconstructing the genesis of the work.”⁴³ As

40. Adorno touches upon this aspect of Hölderlin’s writing in his essay: “Hölderlin attempted to rescue language from conformity, ‘use,’ by elevating it above the subject through subjective freedom. In this process the illusion that language would be consonant with the subject or that the truth manifested in language would be identical with a subjectivity manifesting itself disintegrates. The linguistic technique coincides with the antisubjectivism of its content. It revises the deceptive middle-of-the-road synthesis from an extreme point—from language itself; it provides a corrective to the primacy of the subject as an organon of such synthesis. Hölderlin’s procedure takes into account the fact that the subject, which mistakes itself for something immediate and ultimate, is something utterly mediated” (Adorno, “Parataxis,” p. 137).

41. Peter Szondi, “Gattungspoetik und Geschichtsphilosophie: Mit einem Exkurs über Schiller, Schlegel und Hölderlin,” in *Hölderlin Studien*, p. 400. The citation is Hölderlin’s (my translation).

42. See also König, *Engführungen*, pp. 40–43.

43. Szondi, “On Textual Understanding,” p. 17.

Hölderlin Studies shows, literary hermeneutics does not restrict itself to reconstructing this process whereby a work comes into being; the critic also aims to account for the emergence of a writer's language.

This last concern leads Szondi to adopt an alternate way of describing stylistic differentiation within Hölderlin's *oeuvre*. In his reading of "As on a Holiday . . .," Szondi, remarking that Hölderlin renounces the poetics of self-expression upon his failure to complete this hymn, notes that "a qualitative jump separates the two forms [i.e., elegy and hymn], the jump from the lyric of personal experience [*Erlebnislyrik*] to the selfless exaltation of the gods."⁴⁴ Drawing a distinction between two moments in Hölderlin's artistic activity, this remark touches upon what is different, but it does so by describing the shift from elegy to hymn as "a qualitative leap" (*ein qualitativer Sprung*).⁴⁵ Differentiation is therefore a matter of the instantaneous rather than the linear, and this expression resurfaces in "The Poetics of Genre and the Philosophy of History." There Szondi notes that Hölderlin's last texts cease to describe "moments of what is one's own and what is foreign with one another" in terms of mediation; instead, the difference (*Unterschied*) between antiquity and modernity "becomes a qualitative leap" (*er wird zum qualitativen Sprung*).⁴⁶ As these citations suggest, the argument in *Hölderlin Studies* follows a trajectory that commences with one *Sprung* and concludes upon another.

According to Szondi, Hölderlin's texts also testify to the capacity of literature to name what is different to the extent that they reveal how artworks assume the voice of the minority.⁴⁷ From this perspective, to speak of a language or style proves insufficient, even when the intention is to affirm a writer's uniqueness. Referring to this affirmation of particularity, Szondi writes that "every work of art possesses a certain monarchical

44. Peter Szondi, "The Other Arrow: On the Genesis of the Late Hymnic Style," in *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, p. 42.

45. Peter Szondi, "Der andere Pfeil: Zur Entstehungsgeschichte des hymnischen Spätstils," in *Schriften*, 1:313.

46. Szondi, "Gattungspoetik und Geschichtsphilosophie," p. 406 (my translation).

47. Nägele rightfully observes how respect for the particularity of the artwork informs Szondi's entire critical enterprise: "The hermeneutical text attempts to trace the interpreted text as closely as possible, but in doing so it runs the danger of occupying its place and displacing it. To understand does not mean to appropriate the other text, but to understand as the other, i.e., to understand the specific difference. To constitute and articulate that difference is the ultimate and unfinishable hermeneutical act, the infinite, but strictly limited, interpretation" (Nägele, "Text, History and the Critical Subject," p. 39).

strain, that—as Valéry put the matter—simply by its very existence it would like to destroy all other works of art. . . . No work of art claims that it is incomparable (this would be claimed, in any event, only by the artist or the critic); rather, it demands that it simply not be compared.” In other words, each artwork, inasmuch as it understands itself as a monad, calls “[to] be treated as existing in absolute independence of all others,” “seeks to be a whole, a microcosm.”⁴⁸ That each of Hölderlin’s texts presupposes this notion, and that the critic according to Szondi is obliged to respect this particularity, is evident from the reading of “Celebration of Peace” in *Hölderlin Studies*. There Szondi, rather than attempt to explain the poem by referring to historical events (in particular, the 1801 Treaty of Lunéville), interprets this text according to the inner dynamic that governs the movement of its language.⁴⁹ Borrowing an expression from Hölderlin’s notes on the composition of “The Rhine,” Szondi calls this dynamic “the law of the song” (*das Gesetz des Gesanges*).⁵⁰ This notion is a paradoxical one, for a law by definition constitutes a general rule that must be applicable to a potentially inexhaustible series of individual cases. Yet the law that Szondi, following Hölderlin, invokes here, applies to one case only: that of a specific poem. Thus, in contrast to the everyday understanding of the concept of law, the “law of the song” constitutes a principle of regulation whose validity is restricted to a single instance. What Hölderlin’s notion of the law of the song therefore reveals, and what Szondi’s account of the artwork similarly acknowledges, is nothing less than the act of self-legislation through which the artwork constitutes itself. In other words, the law of the song attests to how each artwork prescribes to itself the necessary

48. Szondi, “On Textual Understanding,” p. 14.

49. As Böschenstein writes apropos of Szondi’s reading: “For Szondi, the dismantling of different theses on the ‘prince of the celebration’ represents the establishment of and the confirmation of his methodology *ex negativo*. Each of the interpretations that he examines is dependent upon a regional point of view, fixed in the particular co-ordinates of a personal space and historical place existing before the analysis of the hymn. Each one thus usurps the deliberately unfixed, not definitely designated status of the ‘prince of celebration’ by supplying the still virgin place with an affirmation coming from a context totally foreign to the poem: patriotic, christological, pagan, neo-classic, according to the needs of the critic whose own deficiencies the poet seems to supply, thus constituting the epiphany of a private messiah and not an architecture which is regulated by intrinsic laws” (Böschenstein, “Peter Szondi: ‘Studies on Hölderlin,’” p. 97).

50. See Friedrich Hölderlin, “Das Gesetz dieses Gesanges . . .,” in *Gesänge*, vol. 7, pt. 1, pp. 160–61. Nägele devotes an entire chapter to this notion in his most recent book on Hölderlin. See Nägele, *Hölderlins Kritik*, pp. 29–76.

rules, at once internally cohesive yet entirely unique, that govern it and it alone. To be sure, Szondi recognized that criticism also deals with “an entire *oeuvre*, the style of a given period, or an historical development.”⁵¹ Nonetheless, criticism heeds the aspiration of the artwork toward sovereignty, for only the artwork, in its refusal to capitulate to the demands of the administered world, affirms that all is not lost, that a solitary voice persists—that *Unterschiedenes ist/gut*.

51. Szondi, “On Textual Understanding,” p. 14.

Conspiracy Theories: Szondi on Hölderlin's Jacobinism

Russell A. Berman

For Peter Szondi the historicity of form has a double character, concerning both the standing of form within the context of historical processes and the transformative vicissitudes of the formal structure of literary works. These two aspects, external and internal, are linked to each other in complicated ways. The particular form of the work of art acquires objectivity through its location in surrounding social conditions, but that context itself and the form of art are both in constant motion. Therefore the presumed stability of form and the alleged objectivity of a historical grounding are always tenuous due to the instability of history: temporal change and formal coherence remain at odds. Hermeneutics explores the dynamic force field between the two.

This conditionality of form pertains not only to literature, but to academic form as well. Szondi's writings characteristically reflect on the pressures for change operating within the university and their implications for the mission of scholarship. To the extent that knowledge production is refracted through the structures of the university, the specific knowledge we have of literature also depends on the character of the academy. Hence his comments in his *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics* on the aging of the lecture format itself: "In Hegel's time, lectures still proceeded from their own or a foreign compendium. The point of the lecture was not the transference of knowledge—books could and can do that much better—but rather to provide commentary and discussion of a text available to all listeners. While there was certainly the possibility to criticize the foreign compendium, this form of presentation presumed a certain legitimacy of the chosen text and a scientific consensus. Nineteenth-century

individualism decoupled the lecture from the compendium, without however guaranteeing the originality of the presentation. Since we currently encounter a growing criticism of the lecture format, it is useful to recall this historical development and perhaps to replace the ‘big lectures’ with, on the one hand, research seminars, and on the other with colloquia, in which a given text would be examined, no longer in monologue but rather in discussion.”¹

The passage combines several claims: a description of the history of the university; an assertion regarding a transition in the character of public culture; a report on contemporary issues in academic life, no doubt still relevant, and not only in Germany; and a proposal for a reform of academic rhetoric, a shift from a monologic to a dialogic principle of representation. In current parlance, this transition involves the emergence of a student-centered pedagogy in which learning processes through participatory discussion replace the authoritative pronouncement of knowledge from the podium. Ironically, Szondi delivers this statement in precisely one of the big lectures that he otherwise declares obsolete, and, moreover, we find it in a published version of the lecture. The published format references while also concealing the original oral performance, which was itself a matter of a secondary orality, the reading of a written text. (The convention of reading a written lecture verbatim remains much more characteristic of the humanities than the natural sciences, reflecting both a greater appreciation of the value of the word and an eccentric discomfort with the instability of discussion than characterizes the culture of other realms of scholarship.) These underlying tensions demonstrate how Szondi’s proposed transition to a dialogic teaching implies a major revision of the institutionalized relationship between writing and speech. The pressure of modern subjectivity and its democratizing challenge to authority, so he argues, displace writing in order to allow for a multiplicity of voices. In another context, one would have to ask what can we make of the fate of literature, as writing declines in importance.

Szondi’s criticism of the decline of the lecture format maps onto his extended presentation of the history of hermeneutics in a complex way because the projection of a dialogic future runs strangely counter to aspects of the narrated past. His references to ancient and medieval hermeneutics

1. Peter Szondi, *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 99. Further references will be documented parenthetically within the text. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

are cursory and function primarily as a foil to modern hermeneutics, but it is crucial to note how he characterizes that past as marked by an irresponsible semantic ambiguity. Pre-modern interpretation is associated ultimately with degraded claims of multiple meanings that open hermeneutics to the corruption of arbitrary projections and dogmatic assertiveness: an interpretation just becomes the interpreter's idiosyncratic opinion. The Lutheran pursuit of a determinate meaning and the demands of modern, non-dogmatic subjectivity transform the terrain, which in Szondi's account begins with Johann Martin Chladenius's eighteenth-century turn to questions of authorial intention and the effort to understand it. How can we aspire to a binding meaning that is not dogmatic? Szondi's historical narrative moves from the plural arbitrariness of simultaneous meanings, as in patristic hermeneutics, to a singular intent, a tendency that seems to curiously reverse his call to reject the lecture format and to turn instead to dialogue. To be sure, Szondi treats authorial intent as historical and therefore, in a sense, non-singular, because of its metamorphoses through time. Nonetheless this intrasubjective plurality is hardly the same as the intersubjectivity of an interpretive community, as in the envisioned colloquia. But why are such colloquia not a return to the premodern arbitrariness of opinion? Such is the shaky underpinning of Szondi's project for a critical hermeneutics.

A particular difficulty ensues from the condition that Szondi, through his recapitulation of Schleiermacher, defines as determinant of modern hermeneutics. In the effort to engage in *Verstehen*, its assumptions regarding subjective intentionality, and the presumption of historical change (both in the formation of textual works and in the larger social process), hermeneutics is situated as emphatically modern, as post-scholastic, and, in a profound sense, as post-rhetorical because it depends on a model of subjective meaning formation. Hermeneutics involves meaning and intention, rather than performance and rhetoric. The modernity of individual authorial meaning elicits hermeneutics, in contrast with the pre-modernity of rhetorical performance. Yet in the last third of the twentieth century, a return to rhetoric became prevalent in literary scholarship. In that context, what is the standing of Szondi's pursuit of interpretive meaning? To ask about Szondi's rhetoric of hermeneutics involves an inquiry into the fault lines of modernity itself.

With our past before us, do we therefore find ourselves on a Mobius strip, a space curved back on itself? The aspiration for a rhetorical account

of hermeneutics could be phrased as an inquiry into the rhetorics of post-rhetorical theory. We can account for this paradoxical formulation in two distinct ways. The first involves the temporal structure of postmodernity as described famously by Lyotard: “the fact that work and text have the character of an *event*; [unlike for Szondi, for whom it is a matter of meaning and, as we will soon see, the explicit alternative to an event, even to an event that has not transpired—RB] they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their being put into work, their realization (*mise en oeuvre*) always begins too soon. *Postmodern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).”² In this light, rhetorical inquiry examines the assumptions regarding the convergence of histories in Szondi’s hermeneutics, the presumed appropriateness of form to context, or to the developmental history of authorial intent. That insinuated appropriateness, however, is nothing other than a metaphysics of presence, implying that the full weight of de Man’s argument against Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel* could be brought to bear against Szondi as well.³ But that argument holds only as long as one is prepared to join Lyotard and jettison the emancipatory teleology that underpins Szondi’s historiography.

In order to maintain that historiography, however, and still describe a rhetoric of post-rhetoric, one can propose a second account by invoking the Habermasian thesis of a refeudalization: the emergence of a public sphere undermined by pre-modern structures of power and authority.⁴ The unquestioned authority of tradition faced the challenge posed by the expectations of reason and, ultimately, the normative implication of the demand for meaning. Social-historical developments in the course of the nineteenth century subverted this emancipatory aspiration of modernity. The possibility of an ideology criticism directed against postmodernism follows due to its denigration of subjectivity, intentionality, etc., and, especially, the dismissal of *Verstehen* in the name of rhetoric. At stake then is a familiar debate on the underlying significance of postmodernity. Does the rhetorical turn represent a liberating alternative to the repressively identitarian

2. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 81.

3. See Paul de Man, “Georg Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*,” *Modern Language Notes* 81 (1966): 527–34.

4. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 231–32.

logic of hermeneutics? Or does a regression from hermeneutic meaning to rhetorical performance undermine the core criteria of freedom?

Can a rhetorical interrogation describe a third alternative that is not a compromise between de Man and Habermas, in relationship to hermeneutics? In other words, rather than dismissing Szondi's project for a critical hermeneutics because of an alleged implication in a necessarily totalitarian temporality (de Man on Lukács) and rather than denouncing the anti-subjective paradigms of postmodernity as tendentially conservative (Habermas), can one, through a rhetorical anatomy, diagnose the limits and self-limitations of the emancipation project in its hermeneutic variant? In this sense, attention to Szondi's rhetoric might provide an opportunity for reflection and correction. If, for example, the goal of the hermeneutic endeavor could be exemplified (to stay with the initial example) by the dialogic form of the colloquium, rhetoric may be able to locate the resistance and ambiguities that defer the realization of a genuine culture of dialogue. Rhetoric might draw attention to the consequences of maintaining a distance from the semantic arbitrariness projected onto pre-modern hermeneutics: if multiple meanings were problematic in the past, then the foundations of future dialogue may be destabilized. Does modernity's repression of the past render modernity congenitally repressive? Furthermore, rhetoric sheds light on a constitutive political ambiguity associated with dialogue, i.e., the relationship of speech (dialogic or otherwise) to the political deed. "Big talk, no action," goes the saying. A definition of freedom as autonomy in terms of orality—*Mündigkeit*—in general, the right to speak or to participate in dialogue in particular, implies a potential structural inadequacy as measured against politics as deed. The forms that inhabit the border between these realms, between speech and deed, are decisionism and conspiracy.

Politics of Hermeneutics

Szondi concludes his account of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics by underscoring a critical and ultimately political potential, dependent on his "conception of hermeneutics as a reversal of grammar and poetics. Through this reversal, we can get behind the ossified systems of rules of these two disciplines, as well as behind the hypostasis of the given; we can inquire into premises and conditions as well as the interdependence of facts and their dialectic, thanks to the overcoming of positivism. Understood this way, hermeneutics is criticism" (191). Hermeneutics can be critical

because it undermines the authoritarianism of normative poetics via its historical inquiries. This is the standard identification of the liberal tilt in any historicizing relativism. However in addition, and more importantly, Szondi underscores the skepticism that interpretation necessarily directs toward the merely given, the hypostasis of a reified reality. This questioning of facticity depends furthermore on recognizing the interdependence of facts, a formulation that points not only toward intersubjectivity as a corollary but also toward the possibility of a complex and multi-tiered conception of totality.

Nonetheless the passage also betrays the riskiness of the project, the potential to slide from a questioning of the facts (in order to overcome positivism) to a denial or at least an evasion of facts. Szondi's injunction to consider their "interdependence" simultaneously preserves the facts (indicating the recognition that they might otherwise be lost) and threatens to submerge them in an idealistic formulation, an imposed totality. The suggestion that thinking the totality is necessarily totalitarian is not warranted. In the form of "mitigating circumstances," the appeal to context may indicate wisdom, but it may also dissolve the lived brutality of an event through the liberal invocation of the burden of milieu, and the implied disadvantage of milieu becomes the rationale for political and bureaucratic intrusion. In that sense, some formulations of totality, context, or interdependence surely do become repressive. What rights do facts have against their imputed "interdependence"? What rights do victims have against a bureaucracy legitimized by context?

Yet it is not only through the appeal to interdependence that hermeneutics can repress facts. Overcoming positivism means overcoming facts, and this can mean expunging the data of material history from consideration. "The scandal of the [hermeneutic] circle, in which understanding had to recognize its own limitations, turned into a sedative. That [now quoting from *Being and Time*—RB] 'the decisive point [...] is not to get out of the circle—but to get into it the right way'—a thesis which is doubtlessly correct—did not have to be repeated by Heidegger; henceforth any questions or doubts concerning methodology were met with the formulaic answer that one was moving in the hermeneutic circle. This art of interpretation could not articulate a material theory of interpretation, which could have very well been based on the circularity of understanding" (13). While endorsing the circular features of modern hermeneutics and the skepticism toward the positivistic construction of facticity, Szondi insists on retaining

a norm of factual accuracy in argument, demonstrable through evidence of authorial intent, and linked to an extra-textual, historical reality. The predisposition of twentieth-century hermeneutics, in the wake of Dilthey and especially Heidegger, to ignore material history explains the depoliticizing character of institutionalized hermeneutic practice, from which Szondi maintains a dismissive distance. For Szondi, authorial intention develops both through the substance of language and in response to a world of interdependent facts in which politics transpire and to which the author responds. Hence, for example, his denunciation of Heidegger's evasion of politics and context in his reading of Hölderlin's "Celebration of Peace" (*Friedensfeier*): "Heidegger evidently gets to his interpretation because he wants to free Hölderlin's poem from the bonds of what he denigrates as 'history' [*Historie*] and place it instead in the history [*Geschichte*] of Being, the authentic history. One may be as irritated by the connection between the hymn to peace and the coalition wars, between *Friedensfeier* and the Peace of Luneville as by Rilke's war poetry of 1914—nonetheless one is obligated to base the interpretation on the documents of the poet—in our case, Hölderlin's poems and letters—rather than on one's own biases" (251–52). He then proceeds to cite chapter and verse, a set of parallel passages from Hölderlin, in order to substantiate the claim that the peace in *Friedensfeier* indeed does respond to the current events of the Napoleonic wars.

The aspiration to overcome positivism implies demoting biographical or historical data from a determinant position in relation to the work, and, furthermore, reducing their importance by inquiring into their interdependence. Nonetheless facticity remains for Szondi a constitutive element of the interpretive process. Hence the risk referred to above: when does the demotion of facticity turn into the denial of historicity associated with conservative hermeneutics? Furthermore, the hermeneutic enterprise outlined by Szondi suggests an ontological foundation for politics (even if contemporary fundamental ontology appeared to repress any emancipatory politics). The intentionality of the individual subject, which it is the goal of the hermeneutic critic to understand, is central to the social condition. This implies that society is conceived precisely not as authoritarian, not as a preestablished harmony, and certainly not as a reified totality. This individuality resides in a world of intersubjectivity defined as participation in communities of political dispute. These communities are historical because they change through time. Szondi's pursuit of the historicity of

form explores how the history of subjectivity maps onto the history of form, in both politics and literature. In one sense, subjectivity and individuality are phenomenological, indeed biological conditions of humanity. However, what are at stake are the consequences drawn from this condition, the progressive self-consciousness of humanity in its ongoing inquiry into its own condition and the historical forms, political and aesthetic, that this condition demands.

Hölderlin

Given a society of subjects imbued with intentionality and capable of understanding, the core question for the literary historian becomes the relationship of an emancipated art, autonomous aesthetics, to the political form of emancipated individuals, i.e., democracy. This program is however susceptible, on a large scale, to the same instability already identified in the hermeneutic enterprise. Overcoming positivism can mean overcoming the tyranny of the merely given, but it can also indicate an evasion, a regressive denial of the real, and therefore a flight from politics. The problem is evident in Szondi's comments on Pierre Bertaux's thesis that Hölderlin participated in an aborted conspiracy to assassinate the *Kurfürst* of Württemberg. Szondi objects to Bertaux's claim; in other words, he wants to rescue the poet from the assertion (which Bertaux meant as praise) that he participated in a terrorist conspiracy. The text "The Regicide [*Fürstenmord*] that did not take place: Hölderlin and the French Revolution" presents a brief for the political standing of autonomy aesthetics, but its rhetorical structure betrays defining characteristics of Szondi's agenda, its aspirations and its limitations.

The text is included in the fifth volume of the *Studienausgabe der Vorlesungen* (*Study Edition of the Lectures*) as *Anhang B* (*Appendix B*). The volume consists primarily of the two extensive lecture series, *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik* (*Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics*), which also serves as the title of the volume, and *Interpretationsprobleme* (*Problems of Interpretation*), which bears a parenthetical subtitle "(Hölderlin, Feiertagshymne, Friedensfeier)." The short *Anhang A* addresses "Bemerkungen zur Forschungslage der literarischen Hermeneutik" ("Comments on the State of Research in Literary Hermeneutics"). This volume structure suggests a sequenced logic of theory and practice. It begins with the long introduction to hermeneutics, followed by extensive interpretations of Hölderlin; and this pair is then trailed by a miniature echo, the

brief report on hermeneutic research and then, in final position, the single case study of Hölderlin's politics. One might debate this editorial decision, which buries the most political document at the end; an alternative might have been to put it first and title the volume *Fürstenmord (Regicide)*. That is a historical speculation, the pursuit of which would require a recollection of the political atmosphere of the Federal Republic in the 1970s.

For the purposes of an examination of Szondi's writing, however, an alternative matter has much greater saliency. The text is a reworked version of a radio discussion that took place on the *Westdeutscher Rundfunk* in April 1970. The only reference to this provenance is in the editor's introduction to the volume with the laconic footnote: "The discussion was preserved in a form worked over by Szondi and Ulrich Gemhardt, in which the dialogue was eliminated" (4). The passive construction is chilling: what drives this elimination, the decision to suppress the dialogic past of this discussion? It is certainly a noteworthy rhetorical move, particularly in light of the insistence on the obsolescence of the monologic lecture format. Moreover the presentation in the written format, a stringent argument with numbered assertions and theses, has a character distinct from the lectures, which tend to be driven more by an oscillation between reflection and citation. In contrast, this text seems like a lawyerly advocacy, and this, one might argue, is quite in accordance with the subject matter: Szondi is defending Hölderlin against the charge of terrorism, a *J'accuse*, but in reverse: *J'excuse*. Hence the effort to project a linearity of logic, a forceful adversariality that tries to leave no space for opposing counsel.

We have seen Szondi's insistence on the importance of historical biographical material, even if that material has had to surrender its primacy, due to the "overcoming of positivism." The suppression of dialogue allows for an assertion of facts. Szondi therefore asserts Hölderlin's Jacobinism unambiguously, even proudly (against a conservative reception history that denies the politics), while simultaneously insisting on his innocence (against the radicals who would claim him for the conspiracy but presumably also, retroactively, against a state that would then be obliged to indict him). Szondi is trying to find a place for the poet between the competing versions offered by Heidegger and Bertaux.

Szondi has no difficulty demonstrating the significance of political thought and current events to the genesis of Hölderlin's poetry. On the contrary, he spares no sarcasm in his comments on Heidegger's nationalizing efforts to exorcise Hölderlin's radicalism. However, while insisting

on the political moment, he is also anxious to dismiss Bertaux's thesis that Hölderlin (and his friend Isaak Sinclair) were involved in an assassination conspiracy. He wants to ascribe to Hölderlin the presumed nobility of radicalism, while reserving for him the other nobility: the reticence to engage in political action, restricting his engagement to an imaginary sphere. Attempting to make this complex case with its internal tensions, Szondi must describe a space between the repressive denial of Hölderlin's politics, on the one hand, and on the other, the reduction of politics to a one-dimensional and itself repressive actionism. To do so he resorts to a highly structured argument. He begins with three numbered facts: *Faktum 1*, *Faktum 2*, *Faktum 3*, followed by three theses, then by three comments on each of the facts, and finally three comments on each of the theses. An extremely schematic presentation (one recalls: in place of a discussion) amounts to a matrix of twelve points, with internal logical relationships. Across the three topical columns, one can trace a movement from (first) identity or ideology, i.e., political affiliation, to (second) political action, to (third) literature. Thus the three "facts" involve first the assertion of ideology, that Hölderlin was a Jacobin; second, regarding political action, the fact that police investigations were undertaken against the poet's friend Sinclair due to the conspiracy allegations, and that Hölderlin was spared interrogation only because of medical documentation of his mental condition; and third, the determination that regicide and assassination are addressed in Hölderlin's writings. The conceptual organization, from fact to thesis and then the double commentary, traces a path of abstraction and elaboration.

I will summarize only one of the three parallel columns. Beginning with the first fact, asserting the Jacobin affiliation, Szondi puts forward the brief thesis that this history has been repressed. He proceeds to comment on the fact by citing Hölderlin's letters to his brother corroborating this claim (but also including evidence that despite his Jacobinism he approved of the executions of the Jacobin leaders Robespierre and Marat). He then concludes with the commentary on the thesis, the reception history, that was especially prominent in the GDR (always eager to find revolutionaries in the German past) and France (Bertaux) but very sparse in the conservative Federal Republic. Szondi comments: "A change in these matters has just begun in recent years, and in direct connection to what has been called the student movement" (415). This comment suggests that this text, including the suppression of dialogue—be it a consequence of repressive

activism or of protective solidarity—should itself be read as a document of the student movement and its political and aesthetic ambiguities.

I draw attention to one point in this matrix, a dark spot in the sense of Szondi's treatment of enigmatic passages in Chladenius's hermeneutics (41–43). It is the comment on the second fact (political action). This is the crux of the debate with Bertaux: against Bertaux's assertion that Hölderlin's insanity was feigned in order to avoid prosecution for a really existing conspiracy, Szondi wants to claim that evidence proves that Hölderlin was indeed already mentally ill. Szondi will also later argue that there was no conspiracy, i.e., that Hölderlin (and Sinclair) projected politics into imaginary and aesthetic dimensions. Such is Szondi's intent. His rhetoric however is to refrain from making this claim of deferred politics at this point, where it would properly belong, given the logical matrix of his argument. Instead he defers, commencing this section, presumably the section devoted to the facticity of politics, with the announcement that he will not treat political action until he comes to comment on the third thesis, i.e., the most abstract venue, where the topic is aesthetics. This displacement of politics into aesthetics is intriguing.

However, the key point is not Szondi's interest in defining a political substance within the aesthetic sphere; rather it is his choice to expunge any political action from the political sphere. For all of the importance given to maintaining historical facticity against conservative evasions, Szondi's site of politics, the political realm, is markedly empty. The passage displays multiple absences through a syntax of conditionality and by a subjunctive mood of irreality. German revolutionary politics rests on the tenuous claim that "Hölderlin would have been brought to Stuttgart, to be interrogated, if a doctor had not provided him the certification that his mental condition would not allow it" (411). At stake is not the cogency of Szondi's point against Bertaux but the rhetorical move itself: the centrality of the subjunctive to the argumentative schema, the identification of absence at the center of the political presentation, and the foundational status of unreality. No revolution by reason of insanity: hence *J'excuse*. The center is the absent event, the regicide that did not take place: it is not the sovereign who is expunged (as took place in revolutionary Paris) but the event itself. Hölderlin's poetic accomplishments, and by extension autonomy aesthetics in general, are interpreted as a sign of failure rather than as a positive and constitutive component of modernity: poetry, in lieu of revolution.

The schematic presentation displays the rhetorical tension that defines Szondi's intersection of hermeneutics and politics: it asserts facts and projects linearity, but it multiplies meaning and introduces ambiguity. The three "facts" are posed and then immediately modified, nearly a return to scholastic hermeneutics and levels of interpretation. Against conservative denial, Szondi insists on facts and historical material; against positivist facts, he insists on hermeneutic reconstruction. The political corollary lies in between political dogmatism and anti-political escapism. However the tenuousness of this formula is demonstrated by the shaky parallelism of the final sentence: "Bertaux confuses poetry with reality, while Sinclair and Hölderlin did not confuse reality with poetry but escaped from reality into poetry in order to 'realize' in poetry that which had not yet become reality" (426).

Bertaux's confusion indicates an empirical, factual inaccuracy: not the irrelevance of facts (as Szondi would suggest pertains to Heidegger) but getting the facts wrong (which implies, in turn, the importance of facts for Szondi). In contrast, for Hölderlin and Sinclair "confusion" is not quite the right term; a displacement occurs but one in which empirical falsifiability is not a legitimate norm. It is instead "*ausweichen*," an avoidance or escape, of which Szondi appears to approve. The formulation approaches but then diverges from a Marxian rhetoric of chiasmic inversion: the alternative to *verwechseln* (confuse) is not exactly its opposite. This distance gains for the aesthetic imagination a degree of freedom, although it is modified by the final clause: "to 'realize' in poetry that which had not yet become reality."

Both Hölderlin and Schiller developed programs for aesthetic autonomy in relation to the French Revolution. Schiller, who suffered from the absolutism of the same dynastic power against which Hölderlin may have only imagined resorting to violence, came to oppose the fact of the revolution: Szondi therefore denounces him as "counterrevolutionary" (419).⁵

5. It is hard for Szondi to engage in this rhetoric of denunciation and designate Schiller as a "counter-revolutionary." Indeed at first he states the opposite: "Schiller was no counter-revolutionary, but tried, like the most important philosophers of German idealism, to achieve what the French wanted to achieve, and what they partially did achieve, but he pursued it in philosophy, and through philosophy and through what he called the 'aesthetic education of mankind'" (418–19). Yet by the bottom of the page, Szondi in fact reverses himself and adopts the characterization of Schiller as a counter-revolutionary: "Schiller's philosophy, indeed his philosophy of revolution, is a reaction to the French Revolution, a substitute for what really took place in France. In this sense, one might have to say that he

Schiller nonetheless tries to rescue the emancipatory character of aesthetic education. Hölderlin comes to an alternative political judgment on the revolution (whether or not he truly acted on that judgment and in whatever mental state), but his description of an emancipatory character of art is similar to Schiller's. Szondi's text therefore implicitly demonstrates that the connection between political belief, narrowly defined, and aesthetic vocation is at best a loose one. Revolutionary Hölderlin and counter-revolutionary Schiller, opponents in politics, converge in poetry. Political fact does not denounce artistic authenticity.

Indeed Szondi links the artistic surpassing of politics to a broader imaginary capacity in his references to "daydream," perhaps an homage to Freud, but surely a way for him to talk about Sinclair as well as Hölderlin. The political agenda is precisely not to save Hölderlin, the poet, by giving up Sinclair, the political dreamer, to the prosecutors of the past. Both have engaged in reality-evasion, with different consequences no doubt, but it is such imagined modification of the real, literary or not, that Szondi places at the intersection of politics and art. The assassination plan was a daydream, but "Hölderlin realized it as a motif in his poetry." Szondi continues: "I insist on this word: for there is a reality to poetry that is not identical with empirical reality, but which is therefore not a matter of inconsequential unreality" (425).

The imaginary reality however is fragile, be it in poetry, in daydream, or in an unprotected conversation among friends. When does conversation become conspiracy? Whenever someone confuses political facts with political imagination (or when practice and theory are prematurely collapsed, as Adorno repeatedly emphasized). Szondi draws on Werner Kirchner's 1949 historical volume *Der Hochverratsprozeß gegen Sinclair* and its account of an 1804 gathering in the home of a man named Baz. Hölderlin and Sinclair were present. Szondi quotes Kirchner commenting on Baz's report: "A conversation among friends 'over a bottle of wine and a few bowls of tobacco,' at a time when even the most unrealistic enthusiast would not have imagined believing in the realization of his political dreams, is not punishable. Baz let all the details glimmer through, daringly, indeed suggestively, and then risked the remark, 'Might not someone who has been hurt repeatedly, unhappy about his undeserved fate, let slip a wish in the context of such a circle of friends which, coldly considered,

was counter-revolutionary. He was not against the ideas of the French Revolution, but he was against the revolution as a fact" (419).

he would not have even dared to think?” (426). The binary of cold consideration and the conviviality of the circle of friends—or are those not the positions of positivism and hermeneutics?—points to the condition of the political/aesthetic imaginary and alerts us to Szondi’s choice of a citation. In this text, the suppressed discussion of 1970, he showcases a recollection of a discussion of 1804. On the one hand, Kirchner citing Baz reporting on the talk with Hölderlin and, on the other, the rhetoric of Szondi’s *Fürstenmord* establishes a literary political continuity: of aspiration, repression, and evasion. Behind the WDR radio discussion, one finds the gathering of friends “over a bottle of wine and a few bowls of tobacco” reappearing, setting a standard for the possibility of imagination. Between them stretches the history of modern subjectivity, aesthetic autonomy, and democracy, the terrain of Szondi’s writing.

Romantic Irony and the Modern Lyric: Szondi on Hofmannsthal

Rochelle Tobias

Peter Szondi concludes his 1963 essay “Lyric and Lyric Drama in Hofmannsthal’s Early Work” on a curious note.¹ Following a brief but provocative analysis of the ways in which Hofmannsthal’s poetry departs from the aestheticism of his early dramatic works, Szondi suggests a model for understanding the poem that remains a mere proposal in the absence of any explanation: “If, in the ‘Conversation [about Poems],’ the poem is like the wind that brushes over the fields [*Wiesen*], then Hofmannsthal’s verses on the spring wind are at once, and without warning to anyone but the initiated, a poem about the poem, about the lyric word.”² One is tempted to see in this concluding comment a reference to another critic’s work—a reference that would be evident only to those “initiated” in the body of Hofmannsthal criticism, since it lies hidden in the text. It is arguable that the fields [*Wiesen*] over which the wind brushes function as a cryptogram for Adorno’s original surname, Wiesengrund, which the philosopher never fully renounced, to the extent that he insisted on publishing his work with his middle initial.³ The assumption is justified to the degree that Szondi’s analysis is, among other things, a response to Adorno’s critique of

1. Peter Szondi, “Lyrik und lyrische Dramatik in Hofmannsthals Frühwerk,” in *Schriften*, vol. 2, ed. Jean Bollack with Henriette Beese et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), pp. 243–56. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the German are my own.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

3. The reference is also to a line in Hofmannsthal’s “Conversation about Poems” that I discuss later in the essay. See Hugo von Hofmannsthal, “Das Gespräch über Gedichte,” in *Gesammelte Werke in zehn Einzelbänden*, ed. Bernd Schoeller with Rudolf Hirsch (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979), 7:507.

Hofmannsthal in his essay “George und Hofmannsthal,” first published in 1942 and then revised in 1955.

In the essay, Adorno accuses the poet of artistic and political complacency.⁴ An aristocrat by birth, Hofmannsthal remained beholden to the interests of his class. This is at least the recurrent motif in Adorno’s analysis of Hofmannsthal’s work, which at times borders on an ad hominem attack on the poet. Hofmannsthal is, in Adorno’s words, the “Peter Pan of lyric poetry,” who feigned youthfulness in order to avoid having to take a stand and who sought to ingratiate himself to the ruling elite through one of two strategies: either by espousing the virtues of a pastoral life or by constructing the fantasy of an aristocratic society devoted to beauty.⁵ Adorno argues that such a fantasy “works in the service of propaganda in its own way. Its cool restraint denies unrestrained horrors.”⁶ The idea that the denial of violence is itself an endorsement of violence is familiar to readers of Adorno as the defining feature of barbarism. And, indeed, in this essay Adorno does not hesitate to suggest that there is a direct line leading from Hofmannsthal’s aesthetic positions to the ideology of National Socialism.⁷ Yet if Hofmannsthal is, as Adorno would have it, a proto-fascist poet, the question remains why. Adorno’s response to this question is as startling as it is disturbing in its unwitting echo of antisemitic stereotypes. Whereas Adorno lauds the elder poet Stefan George for his “heroism,” “defiance,” and “resolve,” he repeatedly condemns Hofmannsthal for his timidity and obsequiousness in the face of authority.⁸ This accusation is all the more astonishing given that Adorno published the first version of the essay in 1942, when George was lionized as a German poet while Hofmannsthal was dismissed as a marginal, if not degenerate, figure owing to his Jewish ancestry. (Hofmannsthal considered himself, if anything, a Catholic.) Adorno’s critique of Hofmannsthal no doubt stems from the poet’s support of native Austrian culture and the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in his later years in such texts as “Writing as the Spiritual Realm of a Nation,” published in 1926. Adorno’s indictment of Hofmannsthal, however, is

4. Theodor W. Adorno, “George und Hofmannsthal: Zum Briefwechsel: 1891–1906,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), pp. 195–237.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 204–5, 212.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 205–6.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 214–16.

not limited to his essays but also covers his lyric and dramatic work. The writer is, in his opinion, a coward motivated by fear to such a degree that he is willing to sacrifice his autonomy as a subject in order to save his own skin.

This is Adorno's interpretation of Hofmannsthal's remarks concerning the nature of symbols in the "Conversation about Poems." Near the end of the dialogue, Hofmannsthal's alter-ego Gabriel declares that the individual who performs a sacrifice actually dies in the sacrificed animal for a time to underscore the magic power of symbols. Adorno concurs with this view but for reasons that Hofmannsthal could not have anticipated, since they supposedly call his aesthetic practice into question. For Adorno, the individual dies "by throwing himself away and making himself into the mere mouthpiece for things."⁹ In other words, he forsakes his subjectivity to escape the threat of death and in so doing becomes a mere thing, petrified and inanimate. The construction of symbols in this fashion thus comes at a price. The subject becomes a symbol of things rather than the reverse.

Adorno's conclusions could not be more at odds with Szondi's assertion that the text "Early Spring" (*Vorfrühling*) is a "poem about the poem," as are presumably most of Hofmannsthal's other lyrics. In highlighting this particular aspect of Hofmannsthal's poetry, Szondi all but reiterates Friedrich Schlegel's famous dictum, "Poetry should describe itself in every one of its descriptions, and everywhere be simultaneously poetry and *the poetry of poetry*."¹⁰ Szondi would have been aware of this link for numerous reasons, including the groundbreaking essay he wrote in 1954, "Friedrich Schlegel and Romantic Irony," devoted to the temporal dimensions of reflection.¹¹ Why Szondi would allude to the theory of romantic irony in his exploration of Hofmannsthal's work will be the subject of this essay. With regard to Adorno's interpretation, however, it can be said that a poem that reflects on itself does not renounce subjectivity. On the contrary it makes subjectivity its basis by contemplating the conditions that make it possible, which is to say by questioning and examining itself.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

10. Friedrich Schlegel, Athenaeum Fragment 238, cited in the English translation of Peter Szondi, "Friedrich Schlegel and Romantic Irony, with Some Remarks on Tieck's Comedies," in *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 62 (emphasis added).

11. Szondi, "Friedrich Schlegel and Romantic Irony," pp. 57–73. The essay originally appeared in *Euphorion* 48 (1954): 397–411 and is reprinted in *Schriften*, 2:11–31.

This structure is hardly unique to Hofmannsthal, but it receives a unique turn in his work given the poet's efforts to surmount his problematic ego or self, which in its solipsism undermines the reality of both the world and itself. That self-reflection would provide an alternative to such solipsism may come as a surprise. Yet it is a tribute to Schlegel's notion of reflection as well as Szondi's reading thereof that the process never devolves into self-immersion, for in it the self becomes another. One could say that Rimbaud's programmatic statement, "Je est un autre" ("I is another"), finds a complement in Hofmannsthal's verse, which unites the French symbolist tradition with romantic irony.

The Place of the Lyric

Szondi's Hofmannsthal essay is primarily concerned with the place of the lyric in the poet's early work. This may seem a routine task, but in the case of Hofmannsthal's oeuvre it is complicated by several factors. Most notable among these is the fictional letter that Hofmannsthal wrote in 1902—the "Lord Chandos Letter"—which has often been interpreted as his farewell to the lyric tradition. It is generally assumed that Hofmannsthal ceased writing poetry around 1897, although Szondi disputes whether the break was as radical as the poet made it seem. He notes that Hofmannsthal published roughly eighty poems in various journals throughout the 1890s, and nearly fifty poems were found in his posthumous papers.¹² That the break would nonetheless seem so extreme is due to Hofmannsthal's efforts to shape the interpretation of his early work in his later career. In 1903 he published the anthology *Selected Poems*, which contained only fourteen lyrics.¹³ The 1911 anthology *Poems and Short Dramas* expanded the first collection by a few poems, although it did include numerous works in verse (i.e., lyric dramas, prologues, eulogies, etc.). To complicate matters, in his unfinished autobiography *Ad me ipsum* Hofmannsthal classified his oeuvre from 1891 to 1897 as belonging to his "preexistence," which was the concept he coined to describe the period when he still felt one with the world.¹⁴

12. Szondi, "Lyrik und lyrische Dramatik," p. 247.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

14. Andreas Huyssen interprets Lord Chandos's statement, "In everything I felt the presence of Nature; and in all expressions of Nature I felt myself," as a compact expression of the state of preexistence in which the self and everything that is not the self merge as one. See Huyssen, "The Disturbance of Vision in Vienna Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 5 (1998): 36.

Szondi argues that Hofmannsthal's retroactive evaluations of his own work have obscured the differences between the various genres with which he experimented during this period. In particular they have obscured the difference between the lyric dramas that the poet composed between 1891 and 1893 when still grappling with aestheticism, and the short dramas that he wrote in 1897 after a four-year hiatus. In Szondi's view the latter plays demonstrate a newfound objectivity, as the poet finally secures a relation to a world apart from the self: "*The Emperor and the Witch* shows the overcoming of aestheticism through the social sphere, *The White Fan* even allows itself an ironic play with fidelity... and *The Little Theater of the World* attests in its subtitle, *The Fortunate Ones*, to the overcoming of everything that made the first dramas possible."¹⁵ Between these two phases stands a four-year period (1893–97), in which Hofmannsthal devoted himself almost exclusively to the lyric. Szondi is quick to caution that the poems should not be read merely as a transitional stage between the lugubrious lyric dramas and the playful dramatic works.¹⁶ He points out that Hofmannsthal's poetry is by no means uniform and there are poems that date back to 1891 as well as to the period when the poet supposedly abandoned the genre. And yet for all of Szondi's protests, this is precisely what he does in the essay. He reads in Hofmannsthal's most famous poems a critical potential that was at best latent in the dramas in verse and which allows for a relation to another, even if that other is the self.¹⁷

Not surprisingly Szondi turns to Hofmannsthal's poetological writings to locate this shift from a self that is properly speaking lost in itself to a self that looks back at itself from a distance. The example that Szondi chooses in order to make this point could not be more concrete, as it involves an instance in which Hofmannsthal hides a reference to himself by citing Stefan George and Goethe in his place. The example stems from the "Conversation about Poems," which is ostensibly about Stefan George's work, in particular the poetic cycle *The Year of the Soul* (*Das Jahr der Seele*),

15. Szondi, "Lyrik und lyrische Dramatik," p. 246.

16. Ibid.

17. Szondi, like Richard Alewyn, argues that the lyric dramas contain a critique of aestheticism, even if they would seem to participate in this movement. He proposes that this critique is implicit in *Yesterday* and *The Death of Tizian* and all but explicit in *Death and the Fool*, especially when the hero Claudio remarks at the end, "Since my life was dead, you are my life, Death." See Szondi, "Lyrik und lyrische Dramatik," p. 245; and Richard Alewyn, "Der Tod des Ästheten," in *Über Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, 4th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), pp. 64–77.

which for Hofmannsthal's alter-ego Gabriel represents a new form of metaphor and, hence, a new reality or realm of experience. The dialogue consequently begins with a recitation of verses from the cycle's opening three sections, which are devoted to the seasons. Following this performance, Gabriel declares, "This is an autumn and more than an autumn. This is a winter and more than a winter. These seasons, these landscapes are nothing but vehicles of something other [*Träger des anderen*]."18 The significance of Gabriel's insistence that the poem is at once identical with what it names as well as in excess of it will be discussed shortly. For Szondi, however, what stands out is that the poems cited in the dialogue function literally as vehicles for something else. They carry Hofmannsthal's verse within them.

In a lengthy passage that begins with a discussion of George and ends with a reflection on Goethe, Szondi sees echoes of the poems "Early Spring" and "World-Secret," which are among Hofmannsthal's most famous lyrics:

The soul draws its nourishment from a poem that wafts toward it like a summer wind that brushes over freshly cut fields in the evening. The poem drifts toward us with the breath of death and life, the anticipation of blossoms and the shudder of decay, a here, a now, and at the same time a beyond, a monstrous beyond. Every complete poem is anticipation and presence, longing and fulfillment at once. It is a transparent sprite or a sleepless messenger . . . darting through the air on a mysterious assignment. Hovering among the clouds, the stars, the treetops, he draws from each the deepest breath of their essence [*den tiefsten Hauch ihres Wesens*]. Then a magical incantation pours forth from his mouth, which sounds so faithful and yet so confused, laced with the mysteries of the clouds, the stars, the treetops. And Goethe? His accomplishments are many like those of a wandering god. . . . The songs of his youth are filled with the breath of life. Each is the newly born spirit of the moment that propels itself to the heights and lingers there radiantly and absorbs all the blissfulness of the moment before releasing it into the clear ether and dissolving itself. The poetry of his later years is at times like a dark, deep fountain, over whose surface faces glide. The eye staring up from this surface never perceives these faces and they never becomes visible to anyone in the world but the one who leans over the deep, dark waters of a long life.¹⁹

18. Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke*, 7:497.

19. *Ibid.*, 7:507–8.

Szondi notes that the comparison of a poem to a summer wind that brings the “anticipation of blossoms” and the “shudder of decay” serves as a scarcely veiled allusion to “Early Spring,” whose opening stanza reads:

Es läuft der Frühlingswind
Durch kahle Allen,
Seltsame Dinge sind
In seinem Wehn.²⁰

[Comes the wind of spring
on empty lanes
strange is everything
in its train]²¹

Similarly the image of “the dark, deep fountain, over whose surface faces glide” represents a modest variation on the third and fourth stanzas of “World-Secret”:

Die tiefe Brunnen weiß es wohl;
In den gebückt, begriffs ein Mann,
Begriff es und verlor es dann.

Und redet’ irr und sang ein Lied—
Auf dessen dunklen Spiegel bückt
Sich einst ein Kind und wird entrückt.²²

[The deep well knows it certainly;
And leaning there a man would know,
But rising up, would lose it so,

Would wildly talk, and make a song—
O’er this dark mirror, as it chanced,
A child leant down and was entranced.]²³

20. *Ibid.*, 1:17.

21. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, “Forespring,” trans. Christopher Mulrooney, available online at the Brindin Press website, <http://www.brindin.com/pghofvor.htm>. Mulrooney’s translation strikes me as a daring and very successful translation of Hofmannsthal’s poem. Mulrooney is particularly sensitive to the rhythms of Hofmannsthal’s verse. In two instances he takes liberties with the original that I wish he had not, but the translation as a whole is convincing and deft.

22. Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:20.

23. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, “World-Secret,” in *The Lyric Poems of Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, trans. Charles Wharton Stock (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1918), p. 32.

For a critic known for the detail of his readings, Szondi is remarkably clipped in his analysis of these convergences. Indeed, he seems to confuse two points in order to make a larger statement about Hofmannsthal's poetry. Insofar as the poet refers to his own poems in a poetological text, his poetry must likewise refer to itself.²⁴ An unkind reader might venture that it was only in a fictional dialogue, a dramatic work, that Hofmannsthal could formulate a theory of poetry that was absent from his verse. Such an objection, however, constitutes more of a dismissal of Szondi's reading than an elaboration of it. The thrust of Szondi's entire essay is that the lyric poems Hofmannsthal wrote between 1894 and 1896 demonstrate a "turn away from the problematic ego [*das problematische Ich*]" that characterized the lyric dramas, whose heroes were hopelessly lost in themselves.²⁵ In essence, he leaves the reader with the task of finding out whether the poems are informed by an ironic consciousness.

Poetic Belatedness

Szondi's remark that "Early Spring" is "a poem about the poem, about the lyric word" merits closer examination on the basis of the text in question.²⁶ The poem reads:

Es läuft der Frühlingswind Durch kahle Alleen, Seltsame Dinge sind In seinem Wehn.	[Comes the wind of spring on empty lanes strange is everything in its train
Er hat sich gewiegt, Wo weinen war, Und hat sich geschmiegt In zerrüttetes Haar.	it has made its nest where weeping was and taken its rest in tousled hair
Er schüttelte nieder Akazienblüten Und kühlte die Glieder, Die atmend glühten.	it trembled under acacia leaves and cooled the members that hotly breathed.
Lippen im Lachen Hat er berührt,	lips with laughter hath it plied

24. Szondi, "Lyrik und lyrische Dramatik," pp. 254–55.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

Die weichen und wachen Fluren durchspürt.	the witcher and watcher in fields espied
Er glitt durch die Flöte Als schluchzender Schrei, An dämmernder Röte Flog er vorbei.	through flutes it slid in sobbing cry in red twilit it flew right by
Er flog mit Schweigen Durch flüsternde Zimmer Und löschte im Neigen Der Ampel Schimmer.	in silence it flew through whispering chambers and declining blew the lanterns into embers
Es läuft der Frühlingswind Durch kahle Alleen, Seltsame Dinge sind In seinem Wehn.	comes the wind of spring on empty lanes strange is everything in its train
Durch die glatten Kahlen Alleen Treibt sein Wehn Blasse Schatten	through the even empty lanes pale shades move in its breathing
Und den Duft, Den er gebracht, Von wo er gekommen Seit gestern nacht. ²⁷	and the scent which it brought whence it came yesternight] ²⁸

Much like the “sleepless messenger” in the “Conversation about Poems,” who draws in the breath of everything he touches, so too the spring wind absorbs the essence of every place it visits to deliver a “scent” to the reader. This scent comes from a bygone place and time, as the final stanza indicates in its emphasis on the wind’s previous whereabouts. Seen in this light, the poem is marked by a temporal paradox. Although the title “Vorfrühling” (literally “Pre-Spring”) would suggest that the poem is about the advance messenger of spring or, in German, *der Vorbote des Frühlings*, the final three stanzas introduce a surprisingly retrospective element into the text. It is, of course, arguable that the scent brought by

27. Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:17–18.

28. Hofmannsthal, “Forespring.”

the wind drives out the “pale shades” of winter that inhabit “empty lanes.” This would be in keeping with the general idea of spring as the season of new life, as opposed to the barrenness of winter. Such a reading, however, erases a more disturbing aspect of the poem. “Strange things,” we are told, are at home in the wind’s billowing movement or “train” (*Wehn*), and what makes these things strange is precisely that they are belated. The wind delivers something into the present of the text which does not belong to this time or place.

What it brings is the poem as something that comes too late, something that in its emergence is already marked by its disappearance, as if its birth were simultaneous with its death. Birth and death were already thematic elements in the poem in its play on the changing seasons, but they become integral aspects of the text as soon the poem begins to identify itself with the wind and, more specifically, with the wind’s incarnation as a breath. Szondi omits a crucial step with regard to the wind in his brief remarks on the poem. He posits that the wind is identical with the text based on the lengthy passage from the “Conversation about Poems,” in which Gabriel compares poetry to a summer wind and declares, “The poems of [Goethe’s] youth are nothing but a breath.” For a critic who warned against assuming that parallel text passages could elucidate one another, the move is surprising, if also attributable to the brevity of his analysis.²⁹ Yet in the poem, it is of key importance that the wind passes through parted lips and then flutes reminiscent of anatomical wind pipes, for only in this manner does the poem signal that it is a poem about a poem, a song originally sung on a lyre. The lyric emerges as a theme as the poem traces its genesis as a song borne not by the wind but a breath, which is the destiny of the wind once it enters the body, as if the body were its instrument.

And, indeed, the body may be an instrument, according to the fifth and sixth stanzas which juxtapose sights and sounds. In particular, they couple the body as seen from within with acoustic phenomena heard from without. First, the wind rushing through flutes or wind pipes releases “a sobbing cry.” The sound is then associated with a “red twilight” (*dämmernder Röte*), which evokes the redness of a throat raw from crying. Following this, the wind enters a whispering chamber with dimmed lights, which would suggest that the body that the wind inhabits is about to expire:

29. Peter Szondi, “On Textual Understanding,” in *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, pp. 8–13.

Er flog mit Schweigen
 Durch flüsternde Zimmer
 Und löschte im Neigen
 Der Ampel Schimmer.

[in silence it flew
 through whispering chambers
 and declining blew
 the lanterns into embers]

At first glance it would seem that the wind is silent, because the body is no longer an instrument for it as it fades and dies. On closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that the wind's silence is also a sound: the sound of a last breath passing through the body. Hence the wind comes to a halt at the same time that it blows "the lanterns into embers." It ceases coursing through the body in this stanza because its course is already complete; once the body through which the wind has passed expires, it no longer produces a sound (e.g., "laughter," a "sobbing cry"), only the silence of passing air. This is the conclusion of the song or the poem known to us as "Vorfrühling," or "Early Spring." For this reason, the poem does not move forward from this juncture but instead steps back, reiterating the first stanza in the seventh and, in so doing, joining its end with its beginning.

The seventh stanza, however, does not constitute the end of the poem. Instead it lingers on, which raises the question of what remains when the poem has already completed its cycle from birth to death and death to birth. The simple answer to the question is that the poem remains as an echo of itself or as the "scent" of something that is no longer or that belongs to yesterday. Such a description, however, discounts the "thingliness" of the poem, its character as something that comes too late and which as a result cannot be referred to any known creature or object in nature. In the absence of such a reference, the poem would appear to be something ethereal, as the motif of a "scent" already implies, as do all the references to wind, air, breath, and celestial spheres in the previously cited passage from the "Conversation about Poems." This appearance, however, constitutes the conceit of the poem. The poem is neither an ethereal being nor material found on earth. It is, rather, the "strange thing" that we call a text: something we read in silence and which enables us to recall what is no longer present. Far from the Orphic tradition, Hofmannsthal's poetry does not seek to revive the lyric as an oral performance. On the contrary,

it underscores the loss of song through its consistent meters and emphatic rhymes, which continue to be audible even in a silent reading as the mark of a voice that no longer sounds. This is the “thingliness” of the poem: its obdurate presence as the trace of a voice or what Gabriel in the “Conversation about Poems” describes much more eloquently as “a here, a now, and at the same time a beyond, a monstrous beyond.” In his commentary on Hofmannsthal, Adorno sets up a false dichotomy between the subject and nature, by means of which he accuses the poet of turning the subject into the symbol of things rather than things into the symbol of the subject. The dichotomy prevents him from noticing another option, namely, that things for Hofmannsthal are the symbols of the non-identity of the subject. The question that remains is whether a non-identical subject can ever be ironic.

Romantic Irony and Modern Verse

In the “Conversation about Poems,” Gabriel tells his interlocutor Clemens, “Should we want to find ourselves we must not dive into our interior. We are to be found outside, outside.”³⁰ The remark is, among other things, a reversal of Novalis’s aphorism from *Grains of Pollen (Blüthenstaub)*: “We dream of voyages through the cosmos. Is the cosmos then not in us? The mysterious path leads inward. Eternity lies in us, or nowhere, with its many worlds.”³¹ It is hard to imagine two remarks that could be more opposed to each other in their conception of the self and the other. For Novalis, the entire cosmos is located in the self to the extent that the self dreams of something that in its infinity can never be externally manifest. The paradox enables him to suggest that the physical world, no matter how vast it may appear, is bound in time and space, whereas the self in its spiritual capacities is properly limitless. Gabriel, by contrast, calls into question whether the self exists at all by insisting that our interiority is to be found outside of us, which is to say, in a place where there is no interior space.

The opposition between these two remarks is too glaring to deny, but in their almost complete reversal of each other they bring a common structure to the foreground. For Novalis, the self is the basis for the world, since

30. Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke*, 7:497.

31. Novalis [Friedrich von Hardenberg], Aphorism 16, *Blüthenstaub*, in *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, ed. Hans-Joachim Mähl and Richard Samuel (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1978–87), 2:233.

only the self possesses spirit; for Hofmannsthal, by contrast, the world is the basis for the self, since only the world possesses spirit. Hofmannsthal does not make this point directly but intimates as much in the continuation of the above-cited passage: “We do not possess a ‘self.’ It drifts toward us from outside. It flies away from us for a long time and then returns to us as a breath. Indeed, the self. The word is such a metaphor. Emotions return that once nested here before.”³² As in “Early Spring” the self comes to be after the fact. It emerges in the mode of a return, although this return has to be read with caution since the self, as Gabriel indicates, does not belong to us. “We do not possess a ‘self.’” If anything, the self possesses us like a bird that temporarily nests in a “dovecote” (*Taubenschlag*) before finding another place to perch. This is the metaphor that Gabriel turns to at the end of the passage to describe us, a metaphor that is more significant than it may seem since the dove is a traditional symbol for the Holy Spirit in Christian iconography. Spirit comes to us from without, and it does so in many forms including that of a breath (*Hauch*), which could also be read as a translation of *pneuma*. In this sense, “we are to be found outside,” as Gabriel put it at the outset of the passage. Our being does not reside in us, and the “self” that we assume we have is nothing but a metaphor for the spirit we lack as empty frames or hollow vessels. But the reverse of this statement is true as well. Insofar as our being does not belong to us, we are metaphors for something else. We are a figure crafted by another hand, a letter that awaits its reading and its revival through this act.

It is this view of the human being as well as all other creatures that enables Gabriel to claim that poetry, on the one hand, is “[the] vehicle of something other” (*Träger des anderen*) and, on the other, posits nothing but itself: “Poetry never posits one thing for another. It is in fact poetry that feverishly strives to posit the thing itself.”³³ These two statements would appear to contradict one another owing to their respective claims that poetry stands for something and for nothing but itself, which is one way of summarizing the two positions. Yet it is precisely this understanding of language that Gabriel argues against. Poetic language does not refer to anything outside of it, as Gabriel tells his interlocutor Clemens; it is not the figurative expression of something that has a proper name. Rather, it reiterates the figurative nature of everything that exists as the text of a text

32. Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke*, 7:497.

33. *Ibid.*, 7:498–99.

or the script of a script. In keeping with the historical view that nature is a book written by God, Gabriel asserts that the natural world is nothing but a collection of hieroglyphs and ciphers. Poetry rewrites this writing, at once natural and divine, and in so doing contributes to the proliferation of metaphors and figures “that language is incapable of unlocking.”³⁴ Even the word “thing” in the above-cited passage could be interpreted as a figurative expression for a thing that is, likewise, the figure for something else in a chain that could continue *ad infinitum*. And indeed it does. The writing of nature continually expands and redoubles itself in what could be considered a modern variation on Schlegel’s notion of a “progressive, universal poetry.”

Yet there is a key difference between Hofmannsthal’s ever expanding text and Schlegel’s notion of a universal poetry, which, if ever achieved, would unite everything divided, including the subject and the object. For Schlegel what drives poetry into the future and makes it progressive is the excess of spirit that characterizes the modern age as opposed to antiquity:

There exists a negative feeling [*Sinn*] which is much better than zero, but which is also much rarer. One can love something passionately precisely because one does not possess it; this gives at least a premonition of it without a conclusion. Even outright incapacity of which one is fully aware, or which may indeed be mixed with strong antipathy, is wholly impossible in the case of complete lack, and it presupposes at least a partial capacity and sympathy. Like the Platonic Eros, therefore, this negative sense is no doubt the son of abundance and poverty. It is born when one has only the spirit without the letter.³⁵

Szondi isolates this passage from the *Lyceum* in “Friedrich Schlegel and Romantic Irony” because it pointedly demonstrates the ways in which Schlegel transforms negativity into something positive. To the extent that we are *capable* of conceiving our *incapacity*, we are not utterly bereft. Our capacity to conceive our weakness proves that we are in possession of greater powers, even if those powers have yet to be realized in the present. This structure informs much of Schlegel’s writing, according to Szondi. The subject is “temporally ahead of himself” as a result of the process of

34. *Ibid.*, 7:501.

35. Friedrich Schlegel, *Lyceum-Fragment 69*, cited in English translation in Szondi, “Friedrich Schlegel and Romantic Irony,” p. 60.

reflection, which enables him to transcend his present condition by dividing him from himself.³⁶ Admittedly the freedom that the subject gains in this manner comes at a cost, but the cost is not primarily his division into a subject and an object. Rather what he loses is the immediacy of his being through the process of reflection, for in contemplating it he transforms it into its opposite: an appearance, a semblance. This failure triggers renewed reflection but the split between the subject and himself is not to be overcome in this fashion. This is the tragedy of romantic irony for Szondi: "Tolerant of completion only in the past or in the future, whatever irony encounters in the present it measures against infinity and thus destroys it."³⁷ Irony turns the condition of its possibility—spirit—into the impossibility of its craft, since the craft of irony requires the letter for its execution and, as Schlegel underscores, the letter is never adequate to spirit.

Hofmannsthal represents the diametrical opposite of Schlegel on this front. For him, there is no shortage of letters. Indeed they exist in abundance in the absence of anything literal that could bring the process of figuration or, more generally, writing to a halt. Like Schlegel, he consequently sees poetry as a continuously unfolding text driven by the division between the spirit and the letter, the tenor and its vehicle. But whereas for Schlegel, the spirit drew the text into the future in its repeated efforts to represent itself, for Hofmannsthal the letter draws the text into the past in its feverish search for an origin, an inspiration. The differences between the two authors could be treated more extensively, but suffice it to say that the opposition between them derives from where they locate spirit. Schlegel locates it in a subject that is yet to be manifest, Hofmannsthal in a subject that has long since vanished. Can Hofmannsthal's poetry be ironic if it is not propelled by a subject who strives to represent himself in his unconditional freedom, his transcendence of space and time? This was the question at the outset of the essay, prompted by Szondi's remark that Hofmannsthal's "Early Spring" is "at once, and without warning to anyone but the initiated, a poem about the poem, about the lyric word." In the curious side note that Szondi throws into this statement, he explains why a poem that is not motivated by a reflecting subject can still be ironic. What Szondi calls "the initiated" are none other than the readers, who hear in the text the echo of a subject who is no longer present. They hear

36. Szondi, "Friedrich Schlegel and Romantic Irony," p. 64.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

a voice that returns to the hollow of the text and makes the text adumbrate with meaning, even if that meaning is more illusory than real. In another context, Schlegel wrote, “Our failings are also our hopes.”³⁸ This is true of Hofmannsthal’s poetry—and of poetry for Hofmannsthal—as the writing of a spirit that can never again be immanent, save as a metaphor.

38. Schlegel, “On the Limits of the Beautiful,” cited in *ibid.*, p. 65.

*Reflections of Reading: On Paul Celan and Peter Szondi**

Christoph König

Verloren war Unverloren,
das Herz ein befestigter Ort.

[things lost were things not lost,
the heart was a place made fast.]

Paul Celan, “Afternoon with Circus and Citadel”¹

Without rhythm, but constantly

Rarely is the weight evenly balanced within a correspondence. Out of the difference between the partners, the stronger one takes charge. “Thou”—*Du*—becomes a means to develop one’s own subjectivity. In the letters of poets since modernity, this general feature of correspondence came to acquire an artistic quality. The foundation of modernist aesthetics rested upon the conviction that only in art could one fashion a life by giving it sense and direction. Letters thus became one more means employed by artists to creatively shape language, and these artists not only grew stronger in their own domain but were also able to make new, specifically formal demands on their partners. Poets used this correspondence as an early stage of their works and of the subject they constructed therein. In

* Translated by Michael Thomas Taylor.

1. Paul Celan, *Selected Poems*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 205. The translation of the poem’s title is from Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: Norton, 2000), p. 183. [Trans. note: In general, texts not originally published in English will be cited according to available English translations. Where no translation is cited, translations are my own in cooperation with Christoph König.]

the letters that Rainer Maria Rilke exchanged with women, for instance, the poet ecstatically expanded his linguistic powers and sheltered, in an intensely sacral tone that was echoed by his partners, the newness of his poetry.

By means of these letters, a new idiom thus originates that nevertheless takes on highly different functions in the history of modern lyric. Paul Celan decidedly opposed a poetic-theological speculation that, grounded in tradition, still shapes the reception of his work today—be it that one sees particularly poetic speech as the ontological opening to a higher form of language or that one considers the decisions of the lyrical subject to disappear within an all-present textuality that deconstructs the sense of the text. Celan instead trusted the basic principle of hermeneutics, namely that nothing can be understood that has not already been perceived. In the process of creation, he was still interpreting. The procedure toward which he strove is paradoxical. On the one hand, that which comes to the poet's mind should already have been given a poetic form, that is to say, have been "understood"—as is the case, for instance, in the letters. But on the other hand, the poet himself changes that which he thus understands in favor of a better, more radical understanding. The aesthetic critique that allowed Celan to visibly distance himself, in his language, from all preliminary insights thus becomes a part of understanding. He created his own unique idiom: Celan did everything he could to increase his influence over the written and spoken language that was his material. The letters themselves were not as important as the mastery of language in general, and of the German language in particular, in a non-poetic, prosaic realm. His letters are not the letters of a poet but testify more generally of a faculty for language.

All of his letters refer to specific situations. They are concrete because, among other things, they differ from one partner to another. Exercises in poetics were only secondary, though his addressees helped him practice. These addressees played a specific role that Celan practically created for them, depending on the particular balance of power in each relationship. Behind everything stood Celan's conviction of the uniqueness of his work: especially when he was personally attacked, he defended himself with the impersonal claim that he was the only one speaking the truth. Empathy, sympathy, and small talk are thus mostly lacking in his letters. The topic was his literature, whether he spoke objectively about the reception of his work or subjectively as an expression of his own poetic creativity. Perhaps

the women he loved were able to grasp his idiomatic poems more quickly than others and so gain a kind of closeness to them in the private language of their letters—for instance, his wife, Gisèle Celan-Lestrange,² or his late friend Ilana Shmueli³ (the letters he exchanged with Ingeborg Bachmann, which were essential, are sealed). Franz Wurm was a partner with whom Celan needed daily exchange.⁴ Such comradely immediacy was missing between Celan and Peter Szondi, who was neither a *Du* nor a stranger. Though Szondi, too, wanted things this way, the distance he shared with Celan was of a different nature—more a kind of defense. Szondi took up the cause of people in addition to that of written words and tradition.

In order to intervene in language, Celan distanced himself from it to assert—from without—a thought by means of it and often against it. On August 11, 1961, he wrote a letter to Szondi that establishes the center of their correspondence; he concentrated his thoughts in one sentence that the Jew “is nothing but one human figure [*Gestalt*], yet a *figure* all the same.”⁵ Celan’s point of departure was his Jewishness, which gains its figure in the memory of the murder of the Jews and, through this figure, can become a precondition of the “human.” But which “figure” did Celan mean? He himself takes a stand toward the word “figure” [*Gestalt*], even graphically emphasizing it. Keeping with a long German tradition, the word means an organism that is constantly *changing*—often something higher and more beautiful, such as Helena, the “figure of all figures.”⁶ In the Nazi period, the word was given a heroically Germanic inflection: the political leaders were such “figures.” Against this inhumanity, Celan held up the humanity

2. Cf. Paul Celan and Gisèle Celan-Lestrange, *Briefwechsel: mit einer Auswahl von Briefen Paul Celans an seinen Sohn Eric*, trans. Eugen Helmlé, ed. Bertrand Badiou with Eric Celan (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001).

3. Cf. Paul Celan and Ilana Shmueli, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Ilana Shmueli and Thomas Sparr (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004).

4. Paul Celan and Franz Wurm, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Barbara Wiedemann with Franz Wurm (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995).

5. Paul Celan and Peter Szondi, *Briefwechsel: mit Briefen von Gisèle Celan-Lestrange an Peter Szondi und Auszügen aus dem Briefwechsel zwischen Peter Szondi und Jean und Mayotte Bollack*, ed. Christoph König (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2005), Letter 52, p. 40. Individual letters from this collection will be cited as “Letter” along with their corresponding number.

6. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust: Texte*, ed. Albrecht Schöne, in *Sämtliche Werke: Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, vol. 7, bk. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1984), V. 8907. Cf. Christoph König, “Wissensvorstellungen in Goethes Faust II,” *Euphorion* 93 (1999): 227–49.

of constancy, of that which does not change. This was the thought that he formed outside of language: in addition to practice and situation, irony became another sign of his mastery over language, acquiring a particular character from his Jewish non-belonging (German was foreign to both Celan and Szondi, but in different ways). This was where Celan wanted to bring Szondi.

Paul Celan (1920–70) and Peter Szondi (1929–71) exchanged over one hundred letters, postcards, telegrams, and dedications from 1959 until Celan's death. Still a leading figure of literary scholarship today, Szondi was born as the son of the psychiatrist Leopold Szondi, the founder of the phenomenological analysis of fate [*Schicksalsanalyse*]. The family barely escaped the National Socialist murder of the Hungarian Jews: they were rescued, first from Budapest and then out of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp into Switzerland, where Szondi studied in Zürich. His first book, *Theory of the Modern Drama* (1956), made him famous.⁷ He then turned to the topic of tragedy—his *Habilitationsschrift* (the second work required to teach at a German university) from the year 1961 is entitled *An Essay on the Tragic*⁸—and to the Romantic philosophy of art, above all to French poets, to Hölderlin and Celan. Szondi received an early call to a position at the Free University in Berlin, where he fought—in the spirit of 1968—for the institutional and political fundamentals of his philology. But the intellectual center of his engagement and his research lay elsewhere. This is already evident from his friendships with Celan and Jean Bollack, Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem. This was an “outside” that he himself chose and set up within himself—an outside that originated out of an ethical decision.

Although the exchange between Celan and Szondi does not exhibit any real continuity, individual phases can be clearly discerned, which, bound to places, gain their own topical meaning: the first meetings in Paris and Sils (1959); the Goll Affair and, orchestrated from Zürich, Szondi's struggle

7. Peter Szondi, *Theory of the Modern Drama: A Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. Michael Hays (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987). As with Celan, Szondi's texts will be quoted according to published English translations except where noted. The original German texts are collected in the two-volume *Schriften*, ed. Jean Bollack (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), as well as in the five-volume *Studienausgabe der Vorlesungen*, ed. Jean Bollack (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973–75).

8. Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2002).

for Celan (1960–61, with a replay in the summer of 1961); two cancelled visits by Celan to Heidelberg and Lausanne; Celan’s letters about his travels, written after an almost unbroken pause in the correspondence caused by both Celan’s treatment in a psychiatric clinic and a lasting depression from which Szondi suffered until the beginning of 1964; then in 1965–66, Szondi’s advice to Celan in the question of whether Celan should switch to the Suhrkamp publishing house; another long interruption, again caused by Celan’s illness; and a last climax with Celan’s visit to Berlin in 1967, which had been in planning for over a year. Celan occasionally reflected upon the sense of this topography in order to measure the distance to Germany that he shared with Szondi but also the difference between them, between the Jew from Czernowitz and the Jew from the more western city of Budapest. On December 7, 1961, when Celan wrote to Szondi, Szondi represented the professor of German in Heidelberg: “But Heidelberg—this seems, if all glorious student days do not deceive, to lie in the most restful way between, meaning that I could, between Hesse and Swabia, still chat away several leisurely eastern to central European hours with you. But I cannot name for you—and here things are becoming pronouncedly *east* European—the time (down to the last dot), I will call you [*Sie*] or, [inserted: “as it is said in Helvetic, *Ihnen*—”] from Frankfurt.”⁹ The places from which they write are often themselves the idiomatic meaning of their letters.

The idiomatic usage of names, words, rhetorical expressions, and sentences took the place of news or tried to dominate it. The two men barely explored the things dear to both of them, such as Celan’s poetry or Szondi’s writings, Szondi’s political struggles at the university, or both of their illnesses.¹⁰ Celan furthermore almost never wrote about his works. At the most, he shared himself only if necessary to combat a refusal of the other to understand him: for him, this resistance constituted a real situation with which he could engage. In this sense, this situation belonged to his creativity and was not meant to be disturbed by explication. (This changed later; he began to occasionally interpret his poems and accepted suggestions for changes, for example, in 1967 from Wurm for the poem “Think of it” [“Denk dir”]¹¹ or from Szondi).¹² Szondi visibly accommodated

9. Letter 55, p. 42.

10. For exceptions, see Letters 97 and 98.

11. Celan and Wurm, *Briefwechsel*, p. 77.

12. Cf. Letter 98.

himself to the silence: instead of communication, the letters thus often exhibit a dramatic scene, even a comedy, featuring a Celan who is decidedly aggressive without crossing a certain point in order to avoid injuring Szondi. The thought upon which Celan insisted took control of the letters and their language; poetry sought to violently assert itself in Szondi's life. The foundations of this thought were not so much a sheer desire for power as Celan's conviction that a transformed, "false" speech gained a sense of its own by reflecting the way in which traditional language is always already false. He signed one draft of a letter: "Paul Antschel, *false* Paul Celan."¹³

The idiomatic speech of this correspondence developed in the space of an agon. Celan and Szondi reacted sensitively and precisely to one another. When Szondi accidentally signed with his last name, Celan soon replied by expressly striking the name "Celan" and writing "Paul" next to it.¹⁴ Or they banded expressions back and forth: when Celan wrote "the Jeune Parque is now taking revenge, my quill has refused its services since my return,"¹⁵ Szondi replied that he, the interpreter, had no fate watching him whom it might be risky to name: "My quill has also gone over to those refusing their duty, and I lack even the comfort of knowing who or what is thus taking revenge."¹⁶ They gave each other tasks and refused them: at the height of the Goll Affair, Szondi suggested that Celan should put together some notes for an article to be given to Gody Suter, the head of the arts section in the Swiss paper *Weltwoche*, which Celan rebuffed with the words: "I also have work to do."¹⁷ This, too, was thus a topic. They obstinately weighed their work against each other; in the final paragraph of many letters, for instance, Szondi almost rhetorically names his own lectures and books.¹⁸ Szondi saw in Celan the great poet, and at the same time he asserted himself. From Szondi's perspective, this duality was the condition for speaking clearly—as if to say: "I am at your service, because I admire you, but I am not your servant."

That is, until Celan decided the relative rank of their works by giving one word a new meaning: "Have my thanks, Peter, for your book. When I have returned to Paris (where a real reading-time will begin for me),

13. Letter 61, p. 48.

14. Cf. Letters 97 and 100.

15. Letter 6, p. 11.

16. Letter 7, p. 12.

17. Letter 42, p. 33.

18. For example, in Letters 29, 33, 43, and 74.

I shall read it carefully.”¹⁹ Only after writing poetry was there time for books that would not be “read” in the way that books are usually “read.”²⁰ The lecture that Szondi delivered upon taking up his professorship, “Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin,”²¹ was the only instance in which Celan voiced a dedication: “To Peter Szondi / after reading his inaugural lecture, / with moved [*ergriffenen*] thoughts and / sincere greetings / 11.10.61 / Paul Celan.”²² Celan did not mean to express a feeling but rather joined two “names”—names in the sense of words that had been reinterpreted. His “thoughts” are bound to the historical event that he grasps [*greifen*, with writing hands]—having grasped [*gegriffen*] the destruction of the Jews. By the time Szondi received this dedication, he had already decided to take up Celan’s cause. His lecture ended by remarking how deceptive Benjamin’s hope proved to be—that is, Benjamin’s hope that his collection of letters “German Men and Women” (1936) might still reach blinded Germans and Jews, and that his book—as an ark—might save them.²³ The ark, Szondi concluded, “sailed forth in the hope that it could reach even those who viewed as a fecund inundation what was in truth the Flood.”²⁴

If Szondi at first showed himself to be up to Celan’s level and capable of defending himself, he eventually lost the usual dialectic sharpness of his thinking and regularly invoked his own world: he, too, had his difficulties, published, led his own life. This change was rooted in Szondi’s historical and psychological disposition, which also made him receptive to Celan’s concise literary demands. That which maintained his own strength, his sharpness, weakened him against the poet. Celan recognized this. He saw in Szondi more a representative of the literary sphere than the academic world—in contrast to Beda Allemann, the protector of poetry (in the tradition of Heidegger²⁵) and the university professor whom Celan entrusted with the “institution” of the complete edition of his works. Not without reason was Szondi a friend of Ingeborg Bachmann, who developed an

19. Letter 52, p. 40.

20. On the semantics of “reading,” see also Letters 61, 62, and 70.

21. Peter Szondi, “Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin,” in *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 145–59.

22. Letter 53, p. 41.

23. Walter Benjamin, “German Men and Women: A Sequence of Letters,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 3, 1935–1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002), pp. 167–235.

24. Szondi, “Hope in the Past,” p. 159.

25. Cf. Beda Allemann, *Hölderlin und Heidegger* (Zürich: Atlantis Verlag, 1954).

appreciation of his *Habilitationsschrift*, “An Essay on the Tragic,” in terms of her own poetics.²⁶

Szondi, too, attempted to organize his life, almost artistically, around a single point so as to fight off his melancholy and his own history.²⁷ His writings reconstruct in a rare way the (objective) sense of literary objects that particularly touched him, the interpreter, as a human being—from drama to the small, pithy line “La syntaxe est une faculté de l’âme.” This sentence belonged to the aphorisms that Szondi chose and translated for the volume *Paul Valéry, Windstriche: Aufzeichnungen und Aphorismen* [*Gusts of Wind: Notes and Aphorisms*]: “Syntax is a faculty of the soul.”²⁸ Szondi chose this aphorism because the thought struck the core of his person; and in choosing what struck him, he underscored Valéry’s thoughts. The idea that the soul could express itself poetically because the strictness of syntax is proper to it shows that the conditions created by syntax in its artificial “world” can prevail in the soul. In the style of his prose, Szondi possessed “syntax.” Yet if he were able to sharpen his senses by beholding himself in the object, not every object could form him in such a controlled artistic, cathartic way. Only “objects” that had chosen strict procedure as their own law could function thus. He found such objects above all in literature and theater, especially favoring works from Racine to French Symbolism and Proust. He and Celan shared this kind of reading as their primary occupation.²⁹ Their friendship took place in the realm of literature.

The correspondence was not determined by an exchange between Celan and Szondi, nor by a rhythm of letters guided by an exchange, but rather by an intention bound neither to time nor to changing events. The letters gain a positivity and a trenchant tone of their own: it is *constancy* that unfolds in the obstinacy of idiomatic speech. The constancy that Szondi later praised in Celan’s translation of William Shakespeare’s Sonnet 105 found its form of life in faithfulness.³⁰ When Szondi declined to interpret

26. Cf. Christoph König with Andreas Isenschmidt, *Engführungen: Peter Szondi und die Literatur* (*Marbacher Magazin* 108), 2nd rev. ed. (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 2005), pp. 46f.

27. Cf. König, *Engführungen*, pp. 4–13.

28. Peter Szondi, *Paul Valéry, Windstriche: Aufzeichnungen und Aphorismen* (Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1959).

29. “Lektüren und Lektionen” was the name of a collection of Szondi’s scholarly essays that he planned and which was posthumously published in 1972.

30. Peter Szondi, “The Poetry of Constancy: Paul Celan’s Translation of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 105,” in *Celan Studies*, trans. Susan Bernofsky with Harvey Mendelsohn (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003), pp. 1–26.

a poem by Celan for Hilde Domin's book project *Double Interpretations*, she replied by speaking, in the words of Albert Camus, of the wrong that could be inflicted by the abused.³¹ It is better, Szondi replied, to be a victim than an executioner. He wrote on May 14, 1965: "We are all survivors, and each of us tries in his own way to deal with this humiliation. The faithfulness that you would have me abandon is perhaps one way. . . . It is precisely also because Celan is a victim that I stand by him—it mystifies me that you would use Camus's words against me."³²

Correspondence of three and four

A commentary usually reconstructs what was familiar to the partners in a correspondence, namely the world that is no longer known. Here, by contrast, a unique intention *not* to name certain things opposes the forgetting that a traditional commentary seeks to counteract. In this intention, a "figure" originates that—from a distance—creates the historically determinable sense of each passage. "Allow me to address these few lines to you today in a completely sober matter," Szondi wrote in order to mark the difference in register.³³ Just before this line, Szondi had written: "Dear Mr. Celan, you are still present in our discussions and our thoughts."³⁴ Yet this line is wholly different. This "presence" itself was meant to guarantee to Celan that the discussions were discussions in support of his position—something that Celan decidedly doubted.

Part of the life that anarchically unfolds in the commentary against the text of the letters, as if it gave the text its correct meaning, is Szondi's correspondence with a third person: namely, the scholar of ancient Greek Jean Bollack (born 1923), occasionally also with his wife, the Latinist Mayotte Bollack (born 1928), or with both of them together. Between 1959 and Szondi's death in 1972, he exchanged more than three hundred letters with the Bollacks, more than with anyone else.³⁵ Time and time again they returned to the topic of their common friend, Paul Celan. During the long interruptions in the correspondence between Szondi and Celan, their conversation continued via the Bollacks with news that was meant to be passed along or with explanations of things that Celan only indirectly

31. Hilde Domin, *Doppelinterpretationen: Das zeitgenössische deutsche Gedicht zwischen Autor und Leser* (Frankfurt am Main and Bonn: Athenäum Verlag, 1966).

32. Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach, A: Domin.

33. Letter 23, p. 18.

34. Letter 21, p. 18.

35. The originals are in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach.

hinted at. In this regard, these letters are also a part of the correspondence between Szondi and Celan.³⁶

This triangle existed from the very first letter onward, in which one reads: “I am staying with Jean Bollack”; and already during the first visit between all three, Celan wanted to exert his influence over it.³⁷ On the recommendation of Bernhard Böschenstein, Szondi came to Paris in early 1959 from Zürich, where he met Jean Bollack and, later, Mayotte. Szondi visited Celan for the first time on April 8, 1959, in Celan’s apartment in the Rue de Longchamp; he soon planned a second visit together with Jean Bollack, and on Sunday, April 26, 1959, they both visited Celan. At the time, Celan was finishing the manuscript for the volume *Osip Mandelstam: Poems*, which he “rendered [*übertragen*] from the Russian.” The book was published that year by S. Fischer.³⁸ Celan reflected upon the situation of the three of them together and left his mark by reading one of these poems aloud to the classical philologist and the literary scholar: “Insomnia. Homer,” from Mandelstam’s first volume of poetry, *Stone*.³⁹ Celan placed the understanding of literary works at the center of the triangle with Szondi and Bollack and chose, with translation, its most radical form.

This was Celan’s thought: for one poet to translate another, he must hear what counted for the other. But what counted usually lies hidden. In order, nevertheless, to speak “in the matter of another,” the reading should in fact fail, thus becoming aware of the difference between what was said and the transformation that the literary translator has brought about.⁴⁰ In this new interpretation, so Celan argues, the poems acquire their particularity: they develop a defense against themselves, that is to say, against

36. Passages dedicated to Celan have been chronologically interpolated into the commentary of Celan and Szondi, *Briefwechsel*, as additional letters (cited hereafter as “Additional Letters” along with their corresponding number).

37. Letter 1, p. 9.

38. Osip Mandelstam, *Gedichte, aus dem Russischen übertragen von Paul Celan* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1959).

39. Osip Mandelstam, *Kamen*, 2nd ed. (1916); cf. *Osip Mandelstam’s Stone*, trans. and intr. by Robert Tracy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1980); see also Christoph König, “Schlaflosigkeit. Homer: Celan, die Philologen und Mandelstam,” in *Antike in Sicht: Strandgut aus dem Deutschen Literaturarchiv (Marbacher Magazin 107)*, ed. Jochen Meyer (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 2004), pp. 48–51.

40. Paul Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Entwürfe, Materialien*, ed. Bernhard Böschenstein and Heino Schmuil, with Michael Schwarzkopf and Christiane Wittkopf (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1999), 31b.

the hollow chattering [*Gerede*] into which their language degrades if it remains uncontrolled and unmastered—compulsively so when the poems do not shrink back from their own abyss. When reading comes to a stop, it is on the right path. It is in this sense that Celan translated Mandelstam's poem—obstinately in the sense of the author and his Jewishness.

Already on June 2, 1960, Szondi wrote Celan, mindful of the double doctrine of ethics and critique: "The deep impression that the poem 'Insomnia. Homer . . .' left on me on that Sunday afternoon last year, when you read it to me and Jean Bollack, makes itself felt again and again while I read your book—as does the memory of our last discussions, which of course also intensely occupies me."⁴¹ These discussions were about Jewishness and probably also about the Goll Affair. In the correspondence between the three of them (in addition to the few letters between Celan and Bollack, one must also include many telephone conversations, walks in Paris and in the Alps, as well as visits that Bollack partly recorded), the beginnings of a Celan-philology already manifest themselves that pose the question of the hour: how can the poet's solidarity—for example, with Mandelstam—be renewed?

Not until long after Celan's death did Bollack take up Szondi's experimental *Celan Studies*, which are situated between the history of philosophy, textuality in the sense of deconstruction, and hermeneutics—that is, within the field of a *literary* hermeneutics that responds to the historical decisions of the author as they are preserved in the language that he used. In the idiom of Celan's poems, Bollack discovered the poet's means of taking a stand toward language, and he analyzed the system at the foundation of this idiom, namely, the possibility for the lyric subject to constitute itself in a thou, a *Du*.⁴² The motivation that drove Celan to send traditional language through the "chasm" and thereby "resemanticize" it thus became crucial. Szondi had already recognized this motivation—in spite of his own initial theses. Celan wanted to respond to the destruction of the Jews,

41. Letter 18, p. 16.

42. Cf. Jean Bollack, *Paul Celan: Poetik der Fremdheit*, trans. Werner Wögerbauer (Vienna: Zsolnay Verlag, 2000); and *Dichtung wider Dichtung: Paul Celan und die Literatur*, trans. Werner Wögerbauer, with Barbara Heber-Schärer, Christoph König, and Tim Trzaskalik, ed. Werner Wögerbauer (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2006). On Bollack, see Pierre Judet de La Combe, "Interprétation et poésie critique," *Critique* 672 (2003): 317–31; Christoph König, "Kritische Philologie heute," in Jörg Schönert, ed., *Literaturwissenschaft und Wissenschaftsforschung* (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler Verlag, 2000), pp. 317–35; Denis Thouard, "L'enjeu de la philologie," *Critique* 672 (2003): 346–59.

which he interpreted culturally (rather than economically or politically), since the German poets had also played their particular part in this cultural history.

Looking back, Bollack explains a delay, a kind of hysteresis: “At the time I was not capable of understanding what Celan gave me to read. It was necessary for a certain amount of time to pass. What happened was a delay, something belated. I myself felt it as an obligation to make up for what had not happened.”⁴³ The tone Bollack assumed toward Celan was, from the beginning, different: more direct, simple, sincere. Even if he only turned to the poems belatedly, the effect was the same as with the method that determined his engagement with the best of Greek literature and philosophy: Bollack did not so much seek a literary relationship to his objects nor make a claim for a privileged, intensified relationship that could hermeneutically mediate between himself and poetry. Instead, he reconstructed the (inner) logic of the works.

At first, Bollack’s analysis concerned only Celan’s *person* and its “coherence.” He and his wife often received Celan as a visitor in the Rue de Bourgogne, and as Celan was hospitalized again and again, they eventually cared for him in close consultation with Gisèle Celan-Lestrange. Bollack’s report to Szondi from January 7, 1961, is a model of the “pure reason” that Bollack held up against Celan’s complaints.⁴⁴ Like all of the letters between the Bollacks and Szondi, it was written in French:

As I returned last Saturday from the telephone booth, I found a response from Jens that corresponded perfectly to what one might expect, very kind if not more than kind. He said he told the editor of “Die Zeit” right away on the phone to refrain from publishing these despicable and silly things. Paul also wrote him, by the way. / All this is fine. What is not so fine is the insatiable suspicion that animates Paul’s steps. He writes to Jens above all to confirm that he has been the victim of a miraculously well-consolidated mafia (I myself believe rather in a collusion of aversions), despite the fact that Jens has acted so spontaneously not only to testify of his admiration and his sympathy, but also to show and tell him that a group of outstanding intellectuals has come together to help his spirits, a good side. / I promised Paul to never listen to the gossip about him that explains his “case” as a mental disorder [*défaillance*] referred

43. Jean Bollack, *Sinn wider Sinn: Wie liest man? Gespräche mit Patrick Llored*, trans. Renate Schlesier (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003), p. 177.

44. Additional Letters 9 and 17, pp. 170ff. and 195.

to by different names. / It is however no less true that he expects from his friends that they act on his behalf and testify for him, he expects almost nothing else. The very judgments that he makes about the works can be explained precisely because of this attitude. . . . Mayotte told me yesterday that little Eric, in the classroom, refrains from attacking his little comrades, whom he considers to be his enemies, preferring instead to remain cloistered in his “prudence” (as he says and as one makes him say), but he expects his fellow pupils to take charge of the attack. / No, I would never say of Paul that he is “mad,” even if I had been forced to think so, but rather [that he is] hunted, to be sure, and that he jealously guards his persecution, drawing from his state of being under siege—which is in truth carefully guarded and deliberately bounded—the rights of a judicial majesty.⁴⁵

This is an analysis in several steps. Celan responds to Walter Jens’s real defense with suspicion, but Bollack refuses to speak of a “défaillance” (a mental disorder)—only to nevertheless “recover” it again in order to give it a place in his argument, namely, that it nourishes Celan’s suspicion. Celan jealously guards his persecution, and as he sees it, this persecution finally results in the only attitude that his friends (and interpreters) can assume toward him: “that they act in his behalf and testify for him.” Szondi was always immediately informed of the stages of Celan’s illness through such analytical reports—decades before details from more recent editions, most importantly in the correspondence between Celan and his wife, established biographical information as a new center of explanation in the place of the poems themselves.⁴⁶

Despite everything, Bollack lived in a different world: during the 1960s, he worked on a large edition and commentary of Empedocles, of which the first volume was published in 1965 and the last three in 1969.⁴⁷ He thereby sought to fathom the philosophical system determining Empedocles’ use of literary tradition, and he further developed a “science of the work” that critically rejected what had accumulated in the history of interpretation. Together with Pierre Bourdieu, his colleague at the Uni-

45. Additional Letter 9, pp. 170f.

46. Cf. Celan and Celan-Lestrangé, *Briefwechsel*, p. 7, as well as Christoph König, “‘Give the word’: Zur Kritik der Briefe Paul Celans in seinen Gedichten,” *Euphorion* 97 (2003): 473–97.

47. Jean Bollack, *Empédocle*, vol. 1, *Introduction à l’ancienne physique*; vols. 2–4, *Les Origines: Edition, traduction et commentaire des fragments* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1969; 2nd ed. Gallimard, 1992).

versity of Lille, he sought to understand the deficits of this tradition of scholarship in sociological terms. Only when Szondi asked Bollack to read and comment upon his scholarly essays on Celan did Bollack employ his philology to approach Celan's poems.⁴⁸ A first step was his participation in the Celan Seminar of the Paris Goethe Institute in 1972.⁴⁹

Decisions for Jewishness

Inconspicuous sentences written on August 4, 1959: "Adorno has not yet received 'Speech-Grille' [*Sprachgitter*] and would naturally be quite happy if you would send it to him. You know how sorry he is to have missed you here."⁵⁰ Through Szondi's mediation, Celan and Adorno were supposed to have met in Sils Maria in July 1959. But Celan left early, undoubtedly not without careful consideration, and composed the work of prose "Conversation in the Mountains" [*Gespräch im Gebirge*] from the distance of Paris.⁵¹ Szondi stood between Celan and Adorno, to whom Szondi felt bound in a very different way than to Emil Staiger, with whom he had studied literature in Zürich: Adorno announced an independent interest in literature that grew out of his social theory. Szondi referred to the theories of Benjamin, Georg Lukács, and of course Adorno in creating a unique form for his book *Theory of the Modern Drama*. He interpreted how social conflicts, namely, the dialogicity of the modern human, precipitated into various dramatic forms.

At the same time, however, Adorno's dictum of 1949 that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, and this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today" did away with the possibility of eluding a form of reason that had become practical, pragmatic, and instrumental.⁵² Szondi wrote to Celan: "I immediately forwarded your packet of books and did not acknowledge its receipt only because Adorno told me that he himself would write to you soon. Apparently his work and society (in the most concrete sense) has hindered him until now

48. Cf. Additional Letters 53ff.

49. Cf. Additional Letter 60.

50. Letter 5, p. 10.

51. Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden*, vol. 3, *Gedichte, Prosa, Reden*, ed. Beda Allemann and Stefan Reichert, with Rudolf Bücher (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983). Cf. Paul Celan, "Conversation in the Mountains," trans. John Felstiner, in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* (New York: Norton, 2001), pp. 397–400.

52. Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT UP, 1981), p. 34.

from doing so. But he was very happy.”⁵³ The subject seemed to find itself delivered up to the powers of reason, with the help of which it liberated itself. Dialectical reason could not secure the happiness of being free, which was waiting in a completely different place—perhaps in the utopia of a pure language into which the poet could suddenly transport himself. It was in this sense that Adorno, even late in his career, interpreted the works of Stefan George and Rudolf Borchardt. But this was not the place from which Celan’s poems could be understood. Adorno’s criticism presupposed another place, in poetry. His mysticism denied Celan’s poems their justification (he later addressed all the objections to the sentence that he had once uttered), yet Celan defended himself, and the leap he had made, in his own way: the “Conversation in the Mountains” took the place of the conversation that did not occur. In the place of Adorno, it substitutes another figure with whom one can haggle and who is actually a great Jew or is great as a Jew.⁵⁴ Szondi felt the tension and wrote to Celan as if wanting to say: “You don’t know at all how much you have hurt him, and now twice.”⁵⁵

The insistence on the proper name (which Adorno had given up along with the name of his father, “Wiesengrund”) is one of the mottoes or even slogans of the letters that Celan wrote to Szondi (alias Sonnenschein: Szondi’s father Leopold had Hungarianized the name) in order to win Szondi over to his side. Szondi could have become another Adorno, who maintained or reclaimed his proper name in the sense of a certain tradition. (Celan sarcastically noted in the draft of a letter to Reinhard Federmann from March 15, 1962: “Heidelberg on the Neckar is where my ‘defender’ Peter (Sonnenschein-) Szondi, a Kastner Jew, lectures.”)⁵⁶ The “name” belongs to the language that Celan renewed for his poems and in which he wanted to train Szondi. In 1960, Celan sent Szondi the “Conversation in the Mountains,” which had just been published, with the dedication: “For Peter Szondi, /heartfelt and with a crooked nose, with a crooked

53. Szondi to Celan, Letter 7, p. 12.

54. Cf. König, “Give the word.”

55. Szondi writes on August 4, 1959 (Letter 5): “Adorno did not in fact receive *Sprachgitter* and would naturally be very happy if you would send it to him. You know how sorry he is to have missed you here.” Szondi thus refers to both injuries that Celan inflicted upon Adorno.

56. Barbara Wiedemann, ed., *Paul Celan, Die Goll-Affäre: Dokumente zu einer ‘Infamie’*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), p. 506.

nose and /heartfelt/ Paul Celan / in September 1960.”⁵⁷ These words have a sense of their own, as does the date, which Celan corrected by hand from October to September—the month of plenty and of shadows, in which the roses blossom a second time; the autumn month in which poetry may arise because one says things a second and a third time: “When / when will blossom, when / when will blossom the, sosometheblös / sösömthebleu, yes those, the September- / roses?”⁵⁸ The dedication, a chiasmus with the form a-b-b-a, describes two paths—from heartfelt [*herzlich*] to the crooked nose [*krummnasig*] and from the crooked nose to heartfelt—and privileges the second with a line break. The difference rests in the freestanding “and,” which should be understood causally, meaning that one element syntactically determines the sense of the other. If one has a crooked nose because of a superficial politeness, a *Herzlichkeit*, it remains uncertain whether one will ever unequivocally make a decision for a Jewishness that is nevertheless not about religion. But if the order is reversed, one begins with this decision [*krummnasig*] and is heartfelt [*herzlich*] in the sense of remembrance, as the German word “Denken” contains for Celan the remembrance with which *Denken* and *Herz* are bound up in his idiom. Szondi understood the repeated admonition.

Szondi defended Celan and, in the Goll Affair, did so publicly. This was something his institution, the university, did not expect; it firmly held to the fiction of a division between methodological science, cultural values, and its own structural interests. Szondi took a large risk for his career in almost symbolically taking up at the same time both Celan’s cause and the hurdles of his *Habilitation*.⁵⁹ At first, however, he argued strictly within the boundaries of his philological métier by carefully attending to the chronology of the material before him. At the center of the Goll Affair was Claire Goll’s accusation that Celan had copied poems in *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (1952) from Yvan Goll’s volume *Traumkraut* (1951), which was an anthology of Goll’s last German poems—or at least that Celan’s work had been based upon his knowledge of Goll’s poems from *Chansons malaises* (1934), *Élégie d’Ihpétonga* (1947), and *Les Géorgiques Parisiennes* (1951), which Celan translated into German. Yet Claire Goll’s

57. Letter 22, p. 18.

58. From the poem “Huhediblu,” in Celan, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1, p. 275. The original lines read: “Wann / wann blühen wann, / wann blühen die, hühendibluh, huhediblu, ja sie, die September- / rosen?”

59. Cf. Letters 40, 43, and 46.

accusations referred to poems that had already appeared in the volume *Der Sand aus den Urnen* (1948), of which she had no knowledge. Celan's defenders thus demonstrated that those poems that had made their way from *Der Sand aus Urnen* into *Mohn und Gedächtnis* had already been written before Celan had met Goll and become familiar with the poems of the *Traumkraut* group. Celan's first visit with the Golls did not take place until the end of 1949.

On November 11, 1960, Szondi's article "Borrowing or Slander?" appeared in the *Neue Züricher Zeitung*.⁶⁰ A letter to the editor appeared in *Christ und Welt* a bit later, on December 1, 1960,⁶¹ followed by a "Short Chronology" in the *Neue Züricher Zeitung* on January 24, 1961.⁶² In addition, Szondi coordinated Celan's defense.⁶³ He did all of this out of a conviction for his métier: "The only philological response" consisted in "giving the chronology and the authentic wording in each individual case, to prove the impossibility that Celan's verses depended upon Goll's, and—in light of the contradictions and with a view toward the possibility of a reverse influence—to question when the individual poems from Goll's papers were written."⁶⁴ Szondi did not consider the possibility that, with a knowledge of Celan's first volume of poetry, Claire Goll might have manipulated poems or translations of poems by Yvan Goll written after the publication of Celan's *Der Sand aus den Urnen*—poems that he had left behind in his papers but that had not yet been published.⁶⁵ Celan regularly insisted—and rightly so—that this was the case. The polite salutation in the middle of one letter was his idiomatically rhetorical way of saying that Szondi was not quite on top of things: "Dear Peter, please allow me to return to this issue: I believe that the authenticity of [Goll's] papers . . . must be questioned."⁶⁶ Accompanying this accusation was another that concerned Szondi's method: as long as one only compared the wording of passages (in order to determine chronology), one would miss the words' uniquely proper sense [*Worteigensinn*]. It would thus become easy to prove Celan

60. "Anleihe oder Verleumdung?" reprinted as Document 5 in Celan and Szondi, *Briefwechsel*, pp. 87ff. The text is almost identically reproduced in *Neue Deutsche Hefte*, January 1961.

61. Cf. Document 3, in Celan and Szondi, *Briefwechsel*.

62. Cf. Document 12, in *ibid.*

63. Cf., for instance, Documents 33 and 40, in *ibid.*

64. Letter 41, p. 33. On Szondi's lists, see Document 9, in *ibid.*

65. Cf. Letter 30/2.

66. Letter 37, p. 29; cf. Letters 35 and 42.

guilty of further literary historical dependency and thus of lacking originality. Inasmuch as this argument was also used antisemitically during the Goll Affair, which was a point that Szondi did not address, Celan did not consider Szondi's thinking to be up to the task. Relying upon notions such as the concept of "wandering images,"⁶⁷ Fritz Martini and Reinhard Döhl made reference to Szondi when they presented such a "philological" proof in an intervention before the Germany Academy for Language and Poetry.⁶⁸

(Methodological) Domination

In 1961, coinciding with the completion of his *Habilitation*, a phase of Szondi's life came to an end. Celan, however, did not engage with the depression that manifested itself in Szondi's letters. Quite the contrary: he wrote Szondi on August 11, 1961, and took control of their correspondence. At the time, Celan was in Trébabu, the furthestmost western tip of Brittany, writing almost the entire third cycle of his volume of poetry *Die Niemandrose*.⁶⁹ The constancy exemplified in the lines "things lost were not lost, / the heart was a place made fast" [*Verloren war Unverloren, / das Herz ein befestigter Ort*]⁷⁰ from the poem "Afternoon with Circus and Citadel" [*Nachmittag mit Zirkus und Zitadelle*], written at this time, marks the distinctiveness of these poems.⁷¹ Their triumphal, confident, optimistic character further determined Celan's letter to Szondi, a replay of the events a year before. Celan transposed the personal aggression of an earlier draft⁷² into the frame of a "spiritual [*geistigen*] world"⁷³ that would bind both partners, thus setting the rules for their correspondence:

Dear Peter, I am not at all mad at you, my old feelings are still there, but they have been joined by the painful realization that it was possible to use your name for the purposes of this dark Döhl—Martini—Kasack con-

67. Cf. Letter 50/2.

68. Cf. *ibid.*

69. Paul Celan, "Die Niemandrose," in *Werke: Tübinger Ausgabe*, ed. Jürgen Wertheimer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996). For English translations, see the volumes cited in note 1.

70. Celan, "Die Niemandrose," p. 93.

71. Cf. Werner Wögerbauer, *Invarianz und Indifferenz: Zum 'bretonischen' Zyklus in Paul Celans 'Die Niemandrose'*, unpublished manuscript, 2003.

72. Cf. Letter 50, p. 38: "Now—and not only now—you have an opportunity to prove this."

73. Letter 61, p. 48.

coction,—but what isn't done today.../Do you remember I once wrote you that this matter is *bottomless*? It is, Peter./You are, as I am, a Jew, and thus I can pass over certain things here and, in *this* context, express a thought which, God knows, doesn't appear to me to be made up out of thin air: even the very "best" people are all too happy to suspend the Jew as a subject—and this is of course nothing but one human figure, yet a *figure* all the same—and pervert him into an object or a "Sujet." In many cases this might be an unconscious compulsion—although that which is externally imposed, even by "Jews," naturally plays a role. What is fatal is that some people believe in all seriousness and perhaps in all simplicity that the "claw" can replace the hand.⁷⁴

This letter takes precise aim at the field of interpreters surrounding Szondi. Celan knew what he was talking about: he constructed the scholarly and critical position that he wanted Szondi to take. Szondi should free himself from Germanists like Fritz Martini, from the poets and critics like Ingeborg Bachmann and Werner Weber (whom Celan might have meant by "the best of them"), and from Adorno, the Jew who is a Jew but does not understand himself as such (he is set apart by quotation marks) and thereby, with his negative dialectic, offers Szondi the wrong help. Jewishness—a *form* that turns against the wavering "figure" of the Jew and in which the humanity that develops out of "being human" can articulate itself—requires a writing "hand" instead of a bestial "claw." Celan wanted his interpreter to have this hand.

Celan's letter continued:

If I may skip over a few things here—: this whole metaphor-trend* also comes from this direction; one translates in order...to carry off and away, one puts things into images that one cannot perceive, doesn't want to perceive; *Time* and *Place* are talked to shreds. Now, of course Auschwitz was both a commonplace and a thousandplace.../Give my greetings to Sils and to Chasté!/Sincerely yours/Paul// *I wrote Walter Jens that "Aschenkraut" was the *name* of the Cineraria. In his essay he calls this *word* a "translation"...("because nothing can be that may not be"...)⁷⁵

Celan's claim to dominate the correspondence had methodological consequences. Szondi reacted in his tractatus "On the Problem of Knowledge

74. Letter 52, pp. 39f.

75. Letter 52, p. 41. [Trans. note: *Aschenkraut* translates literally into English as "ashweed."]

[*Erkenntnis*] in Literary Scholarship” by differentiating passages of text according to their function in the text: his argument was directed above all at the notion of “parallel” passages within a work or in the comparison of different works.⁷⁶ Although Szondi does not mention the Goll Affair, this argument would prevent such abuse. Yet if Szondi also determined the place of a citation within the whole, he did not yet determine its idiomatic sense in the poems. Celan’s admonition that names were at stake in which lexical meaning becomes individual did not yet make itself felt. All the same, Szondi received a hint of the instance that these names can create: in contrast to Jens, he should note that the “hand” of the poet is capable of writing “names” that gain their sense from a standpoint vis-à-vis language. Hence “ashes” remembered the Jewish catastrophe in a different way than the (German) “kraut,” the meaning of which was therefore transformed in being compounded. This was the reason for the critique of metaphors that runs through the entire correspondence. Instead of leaving it to language to produce a new meaning in metaphor, poetry should gain its particularity from a standpoint outside of language—a standpoint marked by Jewishness. As the precise analysis of the “topos” Auschwitz as chatter shows, its historical reality (a place for thousands) originates in the negation of the use of metaphors. In this sense, Celan called himself a “dealer in old metaphors.”⁷⁷ Interrupting Szondi, who had invoked Mallarmé,⁷⁸ Celan noted in his “Meridian” speech: “Gedichte, n’en déplaît à Mallarmé, werden nicht aus Worten . . . gemacht” [“In this, one must contradict Mallarmé: poems are not made of words”].⁷⁹ Though Celan defended Mallarmé against those theologically minded Germanists who despised him for being all too playful, he was not so much interested in aesthetic speculation as in historical truth—when poems are no longer mere words.

Literary, philological hermeneutics

Because of the rigor of his reading, Szondi learned to differentiate and thus protect individuality. In literature, he found the proper object for the inner rigor of language, leading him to the domain of hermeneutics, to

76. Peter Szondi, “Zur Erkenntnisproblematik in der Literaturwissenschaft,” in Szondi, *Schriften*, 1:263–86.

77. Paul Celan, Hanne and Hermann Lenz, *Briefwechsel: mit drei Briefen von Gisèle Celan-Lestrange*, ed. Barbara Wiedemann with Hanne Lenz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001).

78. Szondi, *Schriften*, 1:283f.

79. Celan, “Meridian,” in *Werke: Tübinger Ausgabe*, p. 74.

the doctrine for understanding linguistic articulations, which he further developed into a doctrine for understanding *individual* linguistic articulations. He called this a literary hermeneutics that is material because it should be concrete. Understanding the individual, concrete work becomes an act of solidarity. The fact that Szondi occupies an exceptional place in the literary scholarship of his day precisely because of his contributions to hermeneutic reflection is almost paradoxical, for hermeneutics had hardly touched the history of the philological disciplines, including Germanistik. They were two histories without any contact.

Yet while the hermeneutic philological tradition with all of its competing models had been forgotten, a philosophical hermeneutics made its appearance with Martin Heidegger (for whom Szondi's teacher in Zürich, Emil Staiger, sought to be a mouthpiece) and later with Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose book *Truth and Method* appeared in 1960. This new kind of hermeneutics made demands on the discipline of Germanistik and developed principles for its analysis of literary and cultural tradition. Szondi rejected this offer of a philosophical foundation for hermeneutics, as influential as it was in the 1950s and 60s. A "deep hermeneutics" motivated by the idea that a power, be it language or tradition, sovereignly asserts itself in the work of art was neither for Szondi nor for his hermeneutics, as he was concerned with differentiating individuality.⁸⁰ To put it another way: Szondi counteracted traditional models of literary studies by invoking the method of hermeneutics in a way that completely rejected its contemporaneous, widely accepted renaissance. He had already found his position "outside"—in poetry, the reflexive potential of which he took seriously.

Two kinds of reflection meet here, however, both of which demand their rights: aesthetic rationality and an interpretation guided by theory. Solidarity succeeds only when it takes into account a paradoxical relationship: the researcher would like to understand an object that he would destroy if he had to make it up himself. The problem goes to the heart of hermeneutics: the interpreter's reflection presupposes a literary work that reflects upon itself (otherwise this understanding would not be possible)—but in a productive way, through production. How can the inner logic of works be laid bare without being caught in the mental effort of

80. Peter Szondi, "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics Today," in *On Textual Understanding*, pp. 95–114; Peter Szondi, *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Martha Woodmansee (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1995).

external (aesthetic) norms? If understanding is grounded in the reflexivity of works, then the practice of reading corresponds—before theory—to this reflexivity. A reflection upon this practice of reading is thus the appropriate literary theory.

When Israel Chalfen asked, in 1961, for an interpretation of a poem, Celan replied: “Read! Just keep on reading. Understanding will come by itself.”⁸¹ In these words, practice comes forward and turns against a prejudiced interpretation existing then—as Celan knew—in the two forms named earlier in this essay: a philosophical-hermeneutic form and a scientific form, in Emil Staiger’s art of interpretation (inspired by Heidegger) and in the linguistics (influenced by structuralism) coming out of America, France, and Russia.⁸² If practice (“Read!”) thus takes the place of philosophy and theory, one wants to know more precisely what is being read when one simply reads. And the question arises how the activity of reading can in this case live up to objective, scholarly demands. Hermeneutics as theory must be tested in reflection on a practice of reading that would be a theory of philological practice. Philological knowledge would thus be understood procedurally. It would consist in objectifying the procedure—in this case, reading—and bringing out its inherent clarity.

To ask what is being read when one simply reads is to pose the question of this clarity. If one cannot understand or perceive anything that has not already been understood or perceived, then the interpreter reads what the author has already read, namely, the reflection that grows out of his or her own observation during the writing—a *secondary* reflection. One reads Celan’s self-interpretations and critically tests their scope. But a *primary* reflection forms the touchstone, for writing is already a considered act, the rationality of which shows itself in its progression, that is to say, in the reasons that lead from one word (understood in the broadest sense) to the next. Reading and writing are the same; the difference produced by this work of meaning is rational.⁸³ If one reads what has already been read, then philological knowledge consists in the hermeneutic reconstruction [*Nachvollzug*] of a process of reading. To quote Theophil Spoerri, a

81. Israel Chalfen, *Paul Celan: Eine Biographie seiner Jugend* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1979), p. 7.

82. Cf. Christoph König and Ulrike Haß, *Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik von 1960 bis heute* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003).

83. Regarding Mallarmé, see Jean Bollack: “Enigmatization itself brings clarity; in the process of decoding reflection makes itself known as reflection”; from “Die Dichtung und die Religion: Zu Mallarmés ‘Toast funèbre,’” *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 51 (2006): 104. This means: enigmatization is decoding by reading.

Romanist and teacher of Szondi: “The interpreter has no other means of knowing a work than creating it anew [*ré-création*].” This emphasizes an idea of hermeneutics that feels obliged to the model of repetition.⁸⁴ The ascetic process of reading continues (“just keep on reading”) because the reader constantly returns to what he or she has come to know and expands its boundaries.

So what is the difference between the ways that poets and interpreters read, between Celan and Szondi? And what scholarly claims does the philologist make? Celan made translation his model of reading—translation in the sense of a counter-reading that helps the poet being translated to better reach the aim that he had in mind, and which thus corrects the poet. This cannot be the model of philological-hermeneutic “*récréation*.” It is not the process that should be translated; interpretation should not be *performative*, for this would only replace the object to be interpreted with another obscure object—thereby changing it. Instead, the sense of this counter-reading must be historically reconstructed in the process of its creation and its own self-reflection.

The correspondence between Celan and Szondi shows that Celan forced his philological friend to take up, under the sign of their common Jewishness, a certain idiomatic kind of reading that orients itself toward the “name,” toward the *individual figure*. In the letters, one encounters a course in reading. Without Celan, there would be no *Celan Studies*.

At the beginnings of philology around 1800, however, hermeneutics already counted as a genuine theory of philological practice. August Wilhelm Boeckh gave a textbook summary of this tradition in his *Encyclopedia and Methodology of Philological Science* (his lectures, posthumously published in 1877), which already stood at the end of a tradition that originated in the world of Goethe, Friedrich August Wolf, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Schiller. Seen from this tradition, philology originally concerned itself with texts from all possible areas of cultural history. It did not aim to intervene into the business of the natural scientist, the politician, or the philosopher, whose writings it read. But it did aim to understand them:

The acting and producing that occupies politics and the theory of art does not concern the philologist, but the knowing of that which each theory

84. Klaus Weimar, “Hermeneutik,” entry in Weimar, ed., *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft: Neubearbeitung der deutschen Literaturgeschichte* (Berlin and New York: W. de Gruyter, 2000), pp. 25–29.

produces [does concern him]. The proper task of philology therefore appears to be the knowing of that which has been produced by human spirit, that is to say, that which has been perceived.⁸⁵

Thus does language come into play:

Since philology therefore everywhere presupposes a given knowing, it cannot exist without communication [*Mittheilung*]. The human spirit communicates itself in all kinds of signs and symbols, but the most adequate expression of knowledge is language. To investigate the spoken or written word is, as the name Philology itself says, the original philological drive.⁸⁶

Understanding linguistic articulations, Boeckh further explains, is a practice—but a practice containing an implicit theory. Made explicit, this theory would transform philology into an artistic faculty of its own:

Even famous philologists often have little understanding for understanding; even the best often make mistakes. If there is really art involved here, then it must have a theory. This theory must include a scientific development of the *laws* of understanding and not—as is the case, of course, in most treatments of hermeneutic and critique—merely practical rules. . . . Thus only through theory does philology become art, although many philologists already consider a mere empirical skill in explication and critique to be art.⁸⁷

“Art” here hardly means art in an aesthetic sense but rather the carefully considered mastery and control over philological practice. Boeckh’s formulation is intricate. As mere theory, so one reads, this practice would not be art; and as a naïve practice it would go astray and find itself far from its object, which is art. The solution lies in combining both possibilities: theory brings philological practice closer to aesthetic practice. Its “art” consists in understanding art without being art. Both have in common a reflexivity guided by theory; understanding builds upon a mental relationship of the author (both the artist and the philologist) to his creativity.

The theory that Boeckh empirically gleaned from the activity of the philologist is of course hermeneutics, the principles of which he sketched

85. August Wilhelm Boeckh, *Encyklopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften*, ed. Ernst Bratuschek (Leipzig: B. G. Tuebner Verlag, 1877), p. 10.

86. *Ibid.* p. 11.

87. *Ibid.* p. 76.

in close adherence to Schleiermacher. At the center of this enterprise is the connection between, on the one hand, grammatic interpretation concerned with language *in general*, that is to say, with vocabulary and grammar, and, on the other hand, *individual* interpretation dedicated to the subjective use of language in speech.

Of course, it was not a philologically grounded hermeneutics that established itself at the German University during the nineteenth century but rather, in the wake of Karl Lachmann, an abbreviated, technical treatment of works. This was a *restricted* philology that took the standpoint of being concerned only with knowledge, meaning with the knowledge of tradition and of language, as well as *realia*—the material context to which the noble name of “antiquities” was given. An interest in the object as the construction of an individual appropriation counted as something private, elite, and reprehensible. *Activity* was emphasized apart from reflection upon its preconditions, including the individuality of poetic works.

Experiments in the Celan Studies

With his *Celan Studies*, Szondi kept a promise that he had made to Celan to write about him.⁸⁸ Although these works evince the poet’s influence, Szondi’s objective aims led him to subordinate his literary object to strict methodological principles, namely, the necessity of an argumentation that, led by theory, finds its concrete model in the “logic of its produced-reality” [*Logik des Produziertseins*] (Adorno), as well as in the demand to be concrete by grounding interpretation in the matter of language. This model was aimed against Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. And Szondi’s ethics of seeing a universal humanistic norm in the struggle for the individual finally emerged as a philological claim: to recognize the individuality of poetry—its “figure” in Celan’s sense. Szondi regained the rigorous focus, the distance that had been lost in the letters. His text “Schleiermacher’s Hermeneutics Today,” which is dedicated “to the memory of Paul Celan,” takes up the conditions of recognizing individuality.⁸⁹ Outside the tradition of a poetic scholarship, against which Szondi’s claims positioned his work, it was entirely unusual to dedicate a methodological treatise to a poet.

88. Cf. Additional Letter 56.

89. Published in 1976; originally published in 1970 as “L’herméneutique de Schleiermacher,” *Poétique* 2 (1970): 141–55, with Szondi’s dedication “To Paul Celan” glued into the galley proofs. For Szondi’s request, cf. Letter 109. Bollack returned a telegram on March 3, 1970: “Paul accepts, being very touched” (Additional Letter 49).

Yet how can a text gain its individuality out of itself? In his first Celan study, “Poetry of Constancy—Poetik der Beständigkeit,” which he wrote in December 1970, Szondi gave an answer that loosely divides the works of both Celan and Shakespeare according to their respective epochs.⁹⁰ That which Shakespeare glorifies in his Sonnet 105, namely constancy, becomes in Celan’s modernity the act of the poem itself, as can be seen in the repetition of words. Celan’s “intention toward language” (Walter Benjamin),⁹¹ which changes according to the measure of its epoch, thereby manifests itself as distrustful of language’s own expressive potential. Szondi writes: “Celan does not have the poet insist that his verse leaves out difference. Rather, he lets the poet speak in a language in which differences have been left out.”⁹² The viewpoint of one epoch, however, misses the differences between the individual poems.

In the second of his Celan studies, Szondi went beyond this epochal intention with a desire to trust in “textuality.” Thinking “syntactically” in relationships created by the text, he goes beyond “representation,” meaning the potential of a word to mean something. He thus encounters the elusive movement within the text by means of which he considered it possible to recognize the *functional* uniqueness of individual passages. His text “Reading ‘Engführung’” strictly follows the course of the strophes in the poem (from “Speech-Grille” [*Sprachgitter*] 1959).⁹³ Although the poem had occupied him since 1961, he did not write the essay until January 1971.⁹⁴ Szondi turned his back upon both Germanistik and the German public: writing in French, he published the text, together with Jean Bollack’s revisions,⁹⁵ in the journal *Critique*,⁹⁶ which was published by Jacques Derrida, a man with whom Szondi was on friendly terms and to whose style of “deconstruction” he was attracted.⁹⁷ Szondi’s closeness to Derrida’s method predated its later triumphs, and deconstruction’s consequences for interpretation had not yet become evident. Szondi was

90. Szondi, “The Poetry of Constancy,” pp. 1–26.

91. Charles Baudelaire, *Tableaux parisiens: deutsche Übertragung mit einem Vorwort über die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, bk. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981), p. 16.

92. Szondi, *Schriften*, 2:344. Cf. Szondi, “The Poetry of Constancy,” pp. 25ff.

93. Peter Szondi, “Reading ‘Engführung,’” in *Celan Studies*, pp. 27–82.

94. Cf. Letters 51, 90, and 97.

95. Cf. Additional Letters 53ff.

96. Peter Szondi, “Lecture de Strette: Essai sur la poésie de Paul Celan,” *Critique* 288 (1971): 387–420.

97. Cf. Additional Letter 54.

attracted by deconstruction's focus on the text and by the high level of reflexivity manifested in its analyses, but he was not yet concretely aware of what was at stake: if made into a doctrine, the polysemy that Szondi also held to be one possibility of expression contradicted his hermeneutics by principally destroying the meaning of a text. In Szondi's interpretation of "Engführung," however, meaning nevertheless took priority over the textuality that had attracted Szondi's attention, for Szondi partly read the text as an expression of the Jewish catastrophe—an example of which is in the transition between strophes VIII/2 and VIII/3. The line "visible, once/more: the/grooves, the" (VIII/2) is followed by "choirs at that time, the/psalms. Ho, ho-/sanna" (VIII/3).⁹⁸ Szondi comments: "It is known that the deported Jews often would begin to pray and sing psalms when faced with execution."⁹⁹ He concludes:

"Engführung" is in a quite precise sense a refutation of Theodor W. Adorno's now all-too-famous thesis: "After Auschwitz, one can no longer write poetry." Adorno, who for years had wanted to write a long essay on Celan, whom he considered the most important post-war writer besides Beckett, understood perfectly well that his thesis was open to misunderstanding, and perhaps even false. After Auschwitz, one can no longer write poetry, except with respect to Auschwitz. Nowhere did Celan demonstrate more clearly or convincingly than in "Engführung" how well-founded the secret credo of his work was, its essentially non-confessional, impersonal character.¹⁰⁰

In the *Celan Studies*, Szondi undertook two experiments. Until this point, he had tried to get by with mere *textuality*, without parallel passages or references to reality. But this thought could not be maintained: in Szondi's critique of Celan's translation of Shakespeare, the entire poem became an example. Finally, in "Engführung," the black reality of the Holocaust proved to determine the textual relations. Szondi did not yet consider the idea that individual words could change their meaning, and he therefore left Celan's vocabulary untouched. He saw certain, predetermined meanings of words realized according to the measure of the syntax in the poem. The second experiment thus concerned an assumption that he

98. Paul Celan, "The Straitening [*Engführung*]," in *Selected Poems*, p. 151; cf. Celan, "Stretto," in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 129.

99. Szondi, "Reading 'Engführung,'" p. 73.

100. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

had, from the beginning, presented as methodologically absurd, namely, to base interpretation in reality. But he discovered that he could not simply return to textuality from the real world, indeed, that the notion of textual autonomy proved to be too dogmatic.

In the end, Szondi contributed to the image of a Celan who takes a position toward social and historical questions in his poems. By means of biography, which in the end became the same as politics, Szondi sought to close the gap between his own aesthetic interest for modes of poetry, as in his analyses of Hölderlin and Schlegel, and the relationship that genres bear to the historical world. As a dedication, Celan copied the poem “You lie” [*Du liegst*] into the volume “Breath-Turn” [*Atemwende*] (1967),¹⁰¹ which he gave to his host and friend as a reminder of a shared drive through a wintry Berlin in December 1967, where he had given a reading of his poetry on the invitation of Walter Höllerer and Szondi.¹⁰² The experience with these two experiments left a deep mark upon Szondi’s last, unfinished essay, which he wrote between April and September 1971 and which took up this poem.¹⁰³ Celan drove through Berlin with others, too; and after asking both Walter Georgi and Marlies Janz for more information, Szondi produced an interpretation that connected the poem’s various stations with these drives. The attempt to nevertheless maintain the autonomy of the poem failed, and in the middle of the interpretation Szondi deleted a long paragraph that was meant to prepare an analysis of this autonomy. He wrote there, against reality: “One takes recourse to reality only to test whether the analysis does not in fact draw its material from it as a kind of smuggled goods.”¹⁰⁴ He deleted the passage because he realized that Celan’s perception had already made a selection among things, before writing, and had furthermore narrowed [*enggeführt*] the meanings of words into individual *names*. The word “Eden” (for Paradise), which Celan identified with the hotel in which Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht spent their last hours before being murdered, became just such a name: the poem later bears this name as its title, the “bitter word-pit of the poem,” as Szondi noted.¹⁰⁵ Szondi, however, had helped Celan arrive at this idiom. Biography joined itself with poetry, the interpreter anticipated

101. Letter 102, pp. 71f.

102. Cf. Additional Letter 37/1.

103. Peter Szondi, “Eden,” in *Celan Studies*, pp. 83–92.

104. Cf. König, *Engführungen*, p. 70.

105. Cf. *ibid.*

in life the poem's interpretation: Szondi had given Celan a book to read into which the path of Rosa Luxemburg's murder and the removal of her body had been marked.¹⁰⁶ After years of friendship, Szondi knew which route to seek for Celan.

Szondi's reading determined his methodological premises. From one kind of reading, based on the text, he arrived at another, based on biography, that nevertheless came to an abrupt end. This process is dialogical and can be systematized. The dialogue requires many participants; the history of knowledge opens a wide space of discourse in which it becomes systematically possible to develop a theory of practice that takes into account the individuality of the work.

106. Elisabeth Hannover-Drück and Heinrich Hannover, eds., *Der Mord an Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht: Dokumentation eines politischen Verbrechens* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1967), p. 38.

*The Holy Grail:
At the Liturgical Center of the Universe*

James V. Schall, S.J.

G. Ronald Murphy, S.J. *Gemstone of Paradise: The Holy Grail in Wolfram's Parzival*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. ix + 241.

The literal fidelity of the Templars to the Holy Sepulcher of Jesus in Jerusalem, the devout cause of the first crusaders, can perhaps now be brought to a final end, to be replaced by a less literal but just as devout fidelity to the portable altar stone and its sepulcher in which the Body of Christ is present and on which the Spirit descends to refresh its sacred outflow in the Mass and baptism.

G. Ronald Murphy, S.J., *Gemstone of Paradise*

I.

One of the pleasures of living in a Jesuit academic community is the opportunity to observe one's colleagues as they think their way through something that interests them, something they are working on. Previously, I had commented on two of Ronald Murphy's earlier books, the one on the *Heiland* and the one on Grimms' *Fairy Tales*. I recall some time ago also seeing his book on Brecht.¹ Murphy is a professor in the German Department here at Georgetown. He has faculties to celebrate Mass in the Byzantine tradition, which he occasionally does with the solemnity befitting that rite. For some time he was the director of a home for troubled boys and young men. He is a man of many parts, of great erudition. He is an engaging conversationalist. I would always look forward to his return accounts from Germany during the periods when he was researching his books on the Saxon Gospel, the Grimm brothers, or the Holy Grail. One might, at first sight, be amused that someone with such an Irish name specializes in German things, but even I have seen the statues of Celtic saints in German towns.

The present essay is not a "review" or survey of Murphy's thought and works, let alone a critique. Rather, it is an appreciation with some comments on

1. G. Ronald Murphy, S.J., *Brecht and the Bible: A Study of Religious Nihilism and Human Weakness* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1980).

the problematic of his latest work on the Holy Grail. The best remote preparation for reading this latter fascinating study, I think, would be (a) to have participated in the Russian Easter Liturgy, at least once in one's life; (b) to have been present at a Solemn High Liturgical Celebration of the Good Friday Service in the old Tridentine Rite; (c) to have heard and seen performed, in its full glory and its many hours, Wagner's opera *Parsifal*; and finally (d) to be familiar with Catherine Pickstock's book *After Writing: The Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*.

To appreciate this book on von Eschenbach's epic, one needs some sense of the way that beauty and transcendence can sweep us up to understand what Murphy is driving at, as well as some hint about its deeper intelligibility. As he implies in treating why Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* does not do what *Parzival* does, Murphy understands that our knowledge of things, though with an identifiable intellectual component, requires much more; it also needs passion, sentiment, and a sense of the fullness of being. Ultimately, the core of Murphy's argument, while not anti-philosophical, is "beyond" philosophy, closer than anything else I know to Catherine Pickstock's phrase about philosophy needing "consummation" in liturgy.

Another way of making the same point is to recall a lecture that Josef Cardinal Ratzinger gave over a decade ago to the Italian Bishops' Conference. In it, he recalled the famous incident when the Prince in Kiev in 989 A.D. wanted to decide which religion he should embrace. So he sent emissaries, as I recall, to Jerusalem, to perhaps Rome or Germany, and to Constantinople. When they had reported back, the Prince chose for Byzantium. Why? The emissaries explained to him that in beholding the Liturgy in Santa Sofia, its beauty and profundity, they realized that it was not "for" anything else. It was for its own sake. It was a pure worship of God that drew all things to itself by being what it was, by being itself beautiful. Give or take a few distinctions, Murphy's understanding of *Parzifal* makes the same point.

II.

Gemstone of Paradise is the result of Murphy's attempt to identify what Wolfram von Eschenbach, early in the thirteenth century, was referring to in his version, the third famous rendition, after Chrétien de Troyes and Robert de Boron, of the story of Perceval or Parzival and the Holy Grail. At first sight, one might be surprised that what appears to be such an obscure study takes us directly into the heart of what is the meaning of European culture, into its origins and immediate destiny. The search for the "Holy Grail" has, in fact, always been, in one way or another, the search for what we really are, for how to respond to what we are.

Murphy's book has many levels. First, it is an autobiographical account of the author's own effort, almost passion, to identify in Belgian and German museums

and churches whether the actual “stone” or “altar-stone” that inspired Wolfram von Eschenbach’s long poem still existed? And if so, we want to know where and what was it? Thus, in this pursuit, the book takes the reader in the footsteps of the author through Frankfurt, Brussels, Bamberg, and to I do not know how many smaller German towns, monasteries, and libraries. Murphy tells of being lost, tired, confused, and elated in the course of his research. The book, as a result, is, at the same time, both scholarly and charming; contrary to all staid academic instincts, one mutually reinforces the other.

In the end, Murphy is convinced that he has in fact located the exact altar-stone that Wolfram was using in writing his work. It is in Bamberg, but few, even its custodians, have realized its real significance. One cannot help but be affected by Murphy’s enthusiasm and critical attention to evidence and detail. Because of the influence of ancient and medieval views of stones and especially precious gems with their medicinal and symbolic meanings, the book is also a lesson in gemology and its history. We learn that Hildegard of Bingen, Albert the Great, and Marbode, the Bishop of Rennes, each wrote knowingly about stones and gems, as did the great Augustine. Even Aquinas touched on the topic.

The book is, secondly, a study of the craft of identifying and using such stones, particularly in connection with the sacred objects that surround the liturgy. Murphy tells us that altar-stones can be found in practically every museum in Germany, each presumably worth a look. But he has read von Eschenbach carefully and knows what he is looking for, a peculiar combination of red tones and green stones. He describes what he hopes to find before he finds it. Following certain passages in Genesis, precious stones are all seen as flowing out of the four rivers of the Garden of Eden, hence the title of the book.

We are not surprised to find the destiny or meaning of such stones to be eventually incorporated into the splendor of the highest act of our Redemption, in the Mass and in what it requires for its worthy celebration—chalices, patens, altars, and linens, all physical things that can be found and looked at. Nor is it forgotten that the very word Peter, which means “rock,” itself is first given to a man by the name of Simon. In turn “Rock” as a symbol of God’s permanence often appears in the Psalms and other Old Testament sources. Even the very stones point both to our beginning and to our end.

At a third level, Murphy works his way through the various earlier English, German, and French versions of this story, where the Grail was thought to be a serving dish or the cup that Christ used in the Last Supper, as in Wagner’s opera. Murphy is aware that the shift from conceiving the Grail as an altar-stone rather than a chalice or paten might have profound meaning, even theological meaning. To comprehend the significance of *Parzival*, Murphy has to know about the effect of the Crusades on medieval piety and politics. Nor can he write about

these things without the background of the classical Greek and Roman gods and goddesses with their particular ambience, together with their previous reading by Christian authors.

Murphy also has to be aware of related Norse mythology, especially in English versions of Perceval, and of early Germanic lore. Indeed, he has to know of astronomy and astrology, in fact, another of Murphy's hobbies. I recall once borrowing from him the latest edition of *Sky & Telescope* for some reason or another I do not recall. I now see that for him, astronomy was more than a hobby. The foreboding confluence of the planets Jupiter and Mars in Constellation Leo in Wolfram's lifetime, the two planets symbolizing the gods of dominance and war, serve to point both to dangerous times and to an alternative to these military and political ways of dealing with men. Knighthood has to find a new outlet. Indeed, one is already available if it can only be seen.

Above all, Murphy has to know both his theology and his liturgical history in all their historic periods and nuances. In fact, this book is one of the best refresher courses possible in understanding what the Mass is about, why we have corporals, altars, altar-stones, relics, chalices, patens, linens on the altar, bread and wine, holy water, vestments, candles, and a tabernacle. Everything has a reason. None of these items, familiar to anyone who attends Mass, is present haphazardly on our altars. All go back to recall some specific aspect of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ now made present in the single Mass everywhere celebrated. All items used in the liturgy in fact relate to one event, to one time and place, with its own historical preparation from Hebrew history, namely, to repeat, the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Hence, we find also the themes and realities of light and darkness—the "light" of the world, "outer" darkness. We need to know something about time and place, hence metaphysics. Above all we need to understand the basic meaning of Trinity and Incarnation. We need to know who is opposed to these understandings and why. We need to understand the Church as the locus of the presence of the one Sacrifice that is the only proper way to worship the God who revealed Himself in Christ. As in the case of Dante and other medieval poets, not to know this theological background means simply not to understand our literature's meaning. And, as Murphy implies, to see it only as literature is likewise not to see it at all.

Such is more than a handful of background knowledge, I know, but Murphy works his way deftly and carefully through a story that depends on our knowing what these things mean. He understands the liberty of poets to invent or modify stories that are "true," even if mythological. He knows that the Greeks told the same story, say, of Agamemnon or Oedipus, over and over, always the same, always different, always seeking some truth that was present in the story. The story of the Holy Grail can be and has been told in different ways in literature. But the story about which it is narrated was not itself originally "written" by the

poets, unless we speak of a divine poet, as perhaps we can since Aquinas himself compares creation itself not to God's "theoretical" intellect but to His "practical" intellect, to things that might have been otherwise, but, in the end, were not. God relates to His own external work as an artist to his matter.

III.

In almost a lightsome way, Murphy employs the full force of his careful study of this famous medieval poem about the Holy Grail. Here in Bamberg, where is buried a pope, whose sarcophagus is important to Wolfram's history, Murphy is concerned with whether an altar-stone located in the Museum is the same one that inspired Wolfram von Eschenbach. But Murphy's real story only begins, as it were, when he is finally convinced that the altar-stone in Bamberg is the very one that he has been searching for. He is more particularly concerned with just what Wolfram was really driving at in the changed context of his later version of *Parzival*.

As we read Murphy's account, we have the sense of an almost "missionary" zeal in his works, something we also find in his account of the *Heiland* and in the stories of the Brothers Grimm. Though he makes his points subtly and delicately, the reader is quickly conscious that Murphy regards Wolfram von Eschenbach, a key poet in German literature, though, to be sure, one most of his readers do not know well, as a major thinker. Beyond his own poetic competence and indeed beyond his own age, he has something to tell us.

The Holy Grail, whether it be seen as the serving dish, or the chalice, or the tomb/altar-stone in which Christ was buried, was, as the classic storyline goes, in need of location and discovery. It is lost or hidden, mysterious. To this noble task of finding it was directed the very core of medieval knighthood. The knights determined to protect those things that were bequeathed to us when Christ lived on earth, whether they be in pagan or Muslim hands. For this purpose, the knights leave kingdom, land, home, ladies, and family to pursue something understood to be of transcendent nobility. All men search for a cause worthy of their sacrifice.

In this pursuit, very strict rules of chivalry exist, including rules of war, the violations of which are part of the story of the pursuit of the Grail. Parzival is a somewhat youthful and innocent knight. It turns out that his noble father in fact had initially begotten another son by a Saracen mother on one of his forays. In the end, the two brothers, their identity unbeknownst to each other, become locked in mortal combat only to recognize finally that they are brothers. Hence symbolically is revealed the futility of war that pits brother against brother.

Needless to say, the theme of brothers fighting each other recalls both Romulus and Remus and Cain and Abel, the founders of our very cities. Likewise, in Sophocles, Eteocles and Polynices, in Genesis, Ishmael and Isaac fit into this pattern. Parzival and Feirefiz are purported to be respectively the sons of the same

father and hence half-brothers. Thus, through the Jews, Christians and Muslims are really brothers, what else? Since we are all theologically brothers, why do we have to fight? We don't; therefore, we have first to recognize this brotherhood and find some central event that will illustrate or transcend into a higher unity any fratricidal relationship. This "event" or ceremony that accomplishes this feat is the central point of the drama.

Who suffer most from warfare? Women and families do, of course. This fact allows us, as the Gospels do, to bring not the wars of men but the sorrows and loves of women to the center of things. Five women appear in Parzival's life, from his own mother, Herzeloide, and ending with Repanse de Schoye, a woman of surpassing beauty who in the end bears the Grail in procession on Mount Salvation. The women, whose very names are part of the construction of Wolfram's work, represent all the kinds of love that are the alternates to or consequence of fratricidal warfare. And of course, a kind of devoted if adulatory or distant love of some exalted lady is behind almost all of the themes of chivalry, a love that is closer to trust and service than erotic passion.

Then we have the Crusades themselves and more broadly, the question, "What were the Middle Ages anyhow?" Wolfram's own lifetime more or less coincided with the last crusades and their still brooded-about scandal, the sack of Constantinople in 1203-4. Already, however, had taken place the decisive defeat of the crusaders in the Holy Land under the sword of Saladin at the Battle of the Horns of Hattin in 1187. A common historical theme, in the explanation of the growing vitality of the later Middle Ages, was that this final defeat by Islam forced what remained of Europe to turn in on itself, away from foreign adventures. Eventually, it is from this Middle Ages that we get modernity, that great and ambiguous understanding of our present lot and Islam's relation to it. In any case, Wolfram is depicted as shocked and scandalized at the conduct of the warriors, indeed of Christendom itself. The whole enterprise seems senseless.

The Crusades were thus misconceived. There was no need for them. In fact, they were rooted in a radical misunderstanding of what Christianity itself was about. No theological imperative to recapture the Holy Land could be established. What was important was not the actual physical places where Christ was born, lived, and died. To think so is a kind of misplaced materialism. It was not just the aberrations of the Crusaders, such as the sack of Constantinople, that were the problem. Urban II, of course, did not envision these abuses when he first proclaimed the Crusades in 1096. No, even if the Crusades are understood as a clever excuse to get rid of the internal turmoil of feudal society, they were not rightly conceived. Even had there been no sack of Constantinople, they still were not rightly pursued.

Thus Murphy reads Wolfram's *Parzival* as a master-stroke to provide a dramatic alternative that would not only reject the war society but provide a location for "brothers" to come together in a common work. This second possible path

is really what the Grail was about. This is why it was a portable “altar-stone” and not a chalice or paten or serving dish. What, then, was the “theology” of the “altar-stone”? Though in the beginning of Christianity, Mass was evidently said on tables of wood, early on the altar came to be made of stone. The reason for this change is because the altar represented the tomb of Good Friday and Holy Saturday where the body of Christ was placed. It is from this tomb that Christ is raised from the dead. This “memorial” is what the Mass is about. But its abiding validity does not depend on Christendom possessing, capturing, or guarding the presumed actual stone tomb in Jerusalem.

Robert de Boron’s *Joseph d’Arimathie* taught many readers at the time to understand the enormous significance of the place in which Christ is laid to rest after the Crucifixion. The Crusaders were not wrong to see the historic significance of these actual events of the life of Christ. They did happen, and Christian philosophy, at bottom, is an understanding of the mind that guarantees access to reality. The Crusaders were not even wrong to want to assure us that these events really happened. This assurance could, in their minds, best be proved by possessing and protecting what is left of them from those who do not believe.

The slab that covered the tomb is to become the locus where are placed signs of these events; indeed where the event itself is present. The men of the Crusades could not carry about heavy altars on their adventures. Altars in cathedrals and churches were to be rooted in bedrock. No, the clergy had to invent small portable altars, the remnants of which we still have in our altars. All that was needed was a stone that recalled the sepulcher in which Christ was buried and on which to place the chalice and paten. It is here, wherever it is, that the command to “do this in memory of Me” is to be carried out. The linens are the cloth that wrapped the body. The cup, the paten, the wine and water recall and make present the Last Supper in which these things were foreseen and anticipated.

Thus, the plea of *Parzival* was in essence theological. Everything that the Crusaders wanted could be had at home. The ladies were right. The proper worship was not limited to or restricted by the physical place where Christ had lived. We are now released from that locality. This understanding was considered a relief from the burdens of war to recover the Holy Land, the sacred places. But its other side was the drama, the pageant, the transcendent procession and liturgy that enabled everyone, Christian and Saracen, to be caught up into something greater. Hence the majestic solemnities of the drama reach their climax in the fact that what the tomb in Jerusalem once held is now available to everyone, everywhere because of the Holy Grail.

IV.

What are we to make of this understanding? It is a question of making brother see that he is fighting brother, that religious differences make no difference. The trouble is that considerable empirical evidence exists showing that at least certain

theologies, if not all theologies, make a distinct difference to politics. These differences cannot always be ignored, as it were, by those on the ground, by those responsible for the good and safety of actual people. Interestingly, throughout this book, Muslims are habitually called “pagans.” The language used is mostly of Christian and pagan, when we know that, in context, it is Christian vs. Muslim. The situation is different in earlier versions of the tale because the Saxons or Vikings or Celts were pagans. At one point the speaking of the “heathen” tongue is actually identified as “Arabic” (212). Both Christians and Muslims, I think, have been known to call each other “infidels,” but neither are “pagans.” Both purport to believe in one God who has, however diversely, revealed Himself.

Both the mother of Parzifal’s half-brother and his half-brother himself are said to be ready to convert to Christianity from Islam. The mother is a Moor, like Othello. But such conversions are very rare historically and usually personally dangerous because of Islamic custom or law. Saladin, in victory, is also the picture of tolerance and generosity. As I mentioned in the beginning, I want at least to note or comment on a certain problematic background to the assumptions of this book’s understanding of Parzival. Its understanding of what must be called, in lack of a better word, politics, particularly the politics of that time and place, almost seems to verge on utopianism.

Reading along in this book, then, the argument proposed about the alternative to warfare frequently made me think of Joachim of Flora (d. 1202). He was thus a contemporary of von Eschenbach. He is often seen to be the founder or inspirer of a modern ideology, the coming of the Age of the Spirit, the replacement of the disorders of this world in some transcendent brotherhood that has abolished the laws. This theme is something we find described in Voegelin, but some hints of it seem to be here, especially the ease with which the anti-war position is presented as entailing no consequences. Wars and rumors of war need not, it is implied in this background, always be with us. Men and governments themselves are the problem. The going to war is never just. Nothing needs defending. Both sides will get along. No fundamental issue between them exists.

I am in fact sympathetic with the main teaching of this book about the universality of the Grail understood as the altar-stone and its implication that the rite of the New Covenant is not restricted to a single historical place where the events of Christ’s life happened. I am also in agreement with Murphy’s critique of rationalism and his emphasis on emotion and the things of the heart, of trust, especially those feelings passing through the family. They tell us things that, as Pascal was later to say so memorably, the mind did not know of but the heart did. Such are tremendous teachings. We surely get a sense of this fullness of reason, passion, and love in *Parzival*.

Moreover, I mentioned that Catherine Pickstock’s notion of precisely a “liturgical consummation” of philosophy was insightful in understanding of this book. I meant what I think Murphy implied about the rite and celebration of what is the

proper way to acknowledge transcendence. It is not, I think, something that can be decided philosophically, though it can be recognized as possible philosophically. Philosophy ends in knowledge, but knowledge ends in being, in *what is*. From Plato on at least, our kind has sought the answer to the question of what is the proper way to acknowledge the Godhead. Plato's "singing, dancing, and sacrificing" is on the right track. But I think the Russian emissaries at Santa Sofia and Pickstock's remarks about the Tridentine rite are more directly appropriate. There is no answer to this question apart from divine positive revelation. But once that is given, the Grail procession, now everywhere possible because of the altar-stone, to its origin in the Tomb in Jerusalem begins and continues in time, intended for all places and times.

But the Crusades cannot properly be understood as merely aggressive Christian warfare against an innocent and passive Islam that did nothing to provoke them. The Battle of Tours had already taken place (732), Vienna was some four centuries hence (1683), the fall of Constantinople sooner (1257). The Crusades were in fact very belated and almost fatally slow and insufficient efforts to stop the constant aggression of Islam in every direction since its very founding, as much in the direction of Asia as Europe and Africa. Most of the south and east, even Spain, had already fallen. The real question is why did Islam not succeed in taking Europe? At least part of the answer, but a vital part, was the Crusades, though they too ultimately failed their immediate purpose.

The casting of the drama of *Parzival* in terms of blood or theological brothers, however poignant, does not actually come to terms with what historically happens when Islamic armies conquer. Those conquered are either killed, converted, or reduced to second-class status, even in law. And the very conquests themselves have a religious purpose within Islamic theology, which has a world mission. Whether we like this or not, one can hardly propose a brotherhood that does not deal with a system that forbids in both theology and principle the proposed solution to the brotherhood division, namely, the celebration of the Grail and what it stands for. Trinity and Incarnation and their consequences, in this context, are causes of division, not unity. This concern is why I think the "problematic" of the poem is not grounded in any sort of realism, either of politics or theology, however noble sounding at first sight.

Whether this result has much changed is still being debated every day in the press. This debate is why this book's claim to current relevance is particularly worthy of attention. The very act on the Holy Grail, on the altar-stone, that is said to transcend the divisions is not allowed and indeed is considered blasphemous. The Trinitarian God and the Incarnation of the Word are not allowed by or to the worshippers of Allah. The ease of conversion pictured in the case of Parzival and his mother, and implied by the thesis of the poem, does not correspond to any but a highly exceptional historical situation, if at all.

That this background is not sufficiently worried about in this book constitutes its single limitation. The actual divisions of mankind and their implications, especially military implications, must be attended to. Political boundaries are also theological boundaries, even when they are liberal in statement. The medieval knights knew something that Wolfram von Eschenbach seems to have missed: the consequences of defeat at the hands of “pagan” armies. The consequence is not solely the result of the existence of armies or Christian knightly ambitions. Armies exist because one realizes what happens if one loses a certain kind of war, something evidently much more apparent to the Crusaders than to Wolfram. Belloc’s reading of the significance of the defeat of the Crusaders at Hattin, I think, is much more perceptive than that of Wolfram.

Whatever value of the caveat about what was at stake in the actual wars described by Wolfram von Eschenbach, the *Heiland* was still right—the sons of men, in the middle world, became aware of something beyond themselves because of what took flesh, what took on human nature. We do need, as the Brothers Grimm intimated, “room for reverence for God” as Father and Son and Spirit. The cause of the First Crusade can be fulfilled anywhere there is an altar-stone.

The day after the great city of Byzantium fell to the Turks in 1453, no further Solemn High Liturgy was heard in Santa Sofia. To witness it, the Prince of Kiev would have to return to his own city. In the end, however, Wolfram von Eschenbach was right. Not the Holy Sepulcher, not Hagia Sofia, but the portable altar-stone, the gemstone of Paradise, is ultimately the locus of the lightsome transcendence we have in this world. The Holy Grail remains at the center of the universe. The consummation of philosophy is in liturgy, as even Plato, I think, suspected it would be.

Kantian Meditations on the Experience of Modernity

Christian Sieg

The Void of Ethics: Robert Musil and the Experience of Modernity. By Patrizia C. McBride. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006. Pp. xi + 231.

Robert Musil “did not think in terms of crisis, rather in terms of potential and perplexity,” Dagmar Barnouw notes in passing in her book on the intellectual debates of the interwar period, thereby emphasizing what distinguishes the Viennese intellectual and novelist from many of his contemporaries.¹ Musil’s insight that the loss of ethical, political, and moral certainties is not only a temporary deficit of his own time but a general condition of human conduct might explain the attraction that his thought and literary texts hold for us today. Patrizia C. McBride’s compelling new study, *The Void of Ethics: Robert Musil and the Experience of Modernity*, is a case in point.² She emphasizes that, in contrast to the prevailing modernist narratives, as exemplified in Hofmannsthal’s “Chandos Letter,” Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, or Hermann Broch’s *The Sleepwalkers*, Musil’s branch of modernism does not assume a historical caesura after which the linguistic or ethical states of affairs were fundamentally altered. While the concept of crisis calls for solutions, Musil understands the vanishing of meta-narratives as a chance to recognize the unfounded character of ethical conduct that, so far, has been effectively concealed. McBride argues that the void of ethics, which for Musil characterizes the experience of modernity, does not result from the loss of an ethical substance, but points to a structural condition that essentially defines human affairs. In order to sharpen the view on Musil’s thesis, McBride shows how Kantian tropes and images inform Musil’s thinking, which itself proceeds along psychological lines. For Musil, the void of ethics results from the fundamental discrepancy between the human faculties of feeling and intellect—according to McBride, a variant of Kant’s dichotomy of imagination and understanding.

1. Dagmar Barnouw, *Weimar Intellectuals and the Threat of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988), p. 81.

2. Another recently published book that is also fascinated by Musil’s postmodern sensibility is Stefan Jonsson’s *Subject Without Nation: Robert Musil and the History of Modern Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001).

Starting with a discussion of Musil's first novel, *The Confusion of Young Törless*, and concluding with a reconsideration of his magnum opus, *The Man Without Qualities*, *The Void of Ethics* traces Musil's ethical considerations throughout his oeuvre. While McBride avoids placing Musil's thought in the history of ethics as a discipline and, instead, stresses the contemporary cultural-philosophical horizon, she repeatedly points to the significance of love for Musil's idea of an ethical life. Musil's ethical vision does not focus on questions of rightful actions; instead, he aims to elucidate, from a more Aristotelian perspective, what it means to live a good life.³ For Musil, McBride maintains, ethics can be described in terms of an alternate modality of experience that fundamentally breaks with the ordinary mind-set. It is only from this vantage point that Musil's convergence of ethics and aesthetics becomes understandable. The good life and aesthetic pleasure transgress utilitarian logic(s) and are ends in themselves—laying claim to an essential singularity. On these grounds McBride establishes her main thesis, namely, that Musil may be best understood as a Kantian. However, it is not the second *Critique* that is crucial for her reading of Musil, but the *Critique of Judgment*. Similar to Kant's transcendental grounding of aesthetic pleasure, Musil turns the gaze away from the aesthetic object or ethical practice and toward the human faculties that are involved in its perception, toward ethical and aesthetic experience. While McBride's argument relies heavily on this parallel between Kant and Musil, she repeatedly emphasizes that Musil appropriates the transcendental dichotomy for his psychological approach and transforms it into two incommensurable states of mind. Musil adds to the cognitive realm of ordinary experience an "Other Condition"—a state of mind that on the one hand defies representation but on the other founds ethical experience. Carving out the Kantian lines of Musil's psychological argumentation, McBride is able to elucidate the role and significance of rationality in Musil's thought—thereby further distinguishing Musil's response to modernity from many of his contemporaries who, in the name of fashionable concepts like "vitality," blamed reason for the instrumentalization of life. Musil does refrain from the prominent dichotomy of the rational and irrational, choosing instead to emphasize a particular mode of interaction between intellect and feeling. For Musil, aesthetic experience "triggered by aesthetic feeling favors a reshuffling in the individual's perception of reality and disrupts formulaic modes of experience, releasing the individual from the spell of established pictures of the world" (19). In aesthetic experience, Musil maintains, the individual temporarily acquires a new, non-representational view of the world, which breaks with the well-trodden paths of ordinary conceptual grasp. However, the "Other Condition" is not

3. See Sabine A. Döring, *Ästhetische Erfahrung als Erkenntnis des Ethischen: Die Kunsttheorie Robert Musils und die analytische Philosophie*, ed. Harald Fricke and Gottfried Gabriel (Paderborn: Mentis, 1999).

permanent—it only amounts to a “shadowy double of our world,” since it lacks definite “measure,” without which ordinary life is impossible.⁴ Describing the “Other Condition” further, Musil claims: “It seems, then, like a dependent condition, like a bridge arching from solid ground as if it possessed a corresponding pier in the realm of the imaginary.”⁵ It is in the figure of the bridge as exemplified in the quote above that McBride notices Kant’s influence on Musil: “Under Musil’s different epistemological premises, Kant’s idea of a bridge between the sensible world and the domain of morality is reconfigured as the momentary contact of two incompatible states of mind in the individual, namely, that of ordinary experience and that of its inaccessible foil, an ethical Other Condition” (106–7). This is not the only token of affinity between Musil and Kant. As McBride cogently argues, the condition of possibility for this bridging experience is nothing but disinterestedness, the absence of pragmatic and moral considerations, which, according to Kant, lies at the heart of the aesthetic. At the same time, this debt to Kant’s aesthetics points to the limits of Musil’s understanding of ethics. Its contemplative nature suggests a radically individualistic and, in the end, passive answer to the ethical question—a point to which I will return.

McBride’s final chapter offers an enthralling reading of Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*, which understands the novel as an experimental ground for Musil’s thoughts on ethics. Due to the polyphonic possibilities of the novel as a genre, McBride argues, Musil’s magnum opus contributes decisively to his quest for an ethical life. Far from simply reiterating the philosophical points made in his essays, the novel not only states the lack of an Archimedean point of view but inscribes “it onto a form driven by the proliferation of clashing discourses and perspectives” (131). While McBride shows how Musil’s ironic gaze sharpens and contextualizes the quest of the man without qualities for an ethical life, she concentrates on the two ethical utopias—the existential essayism of the first book and the mystical sibling love of the second book. The Kantian framework established by McBride allows her to show how, despite the fundamentally private character of the second utopia, Ulrich’s idea to live an essayistic life and his later incestuous attempt at a mystical union are “two sides of the same coin.”

Ulrich’s existential essayism surely ranks among the most prominent topics of *The Man Without Qualities*. Fascinated by the singularity and precision of the essay, which refrains from overhasty categorization in favor of multiple perspectives, Ulrich aims to erase the difference between life and art and lives by an essayistic ideal that takes advantage of aesthetic imagination. To be sure, it is Ulrich himself who finally recognizes the pragmatic impossibility of such an

4. Robert Musil, *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, trans. Burton Pike and David S. Luft (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 199.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

endeavor: “And as little as one can make a truth out of the genuine elements of an essay can one gain a conviction from such a condition—at least not without abandoning the condition, as the lover has to abandon love in order to describe it.”⁶ As McBride argues, the momentary bridging of two states of mind, this free play of human faculties, as it were, allows for ethical experiences but cannot be transformed into a way of life. Ordinary life precisely demands the rules and certainties that the aesthetic condition otherwise brings into free play. While Ulrich’s essayistic approach fails because the “Other Condition” does not allow for orientation in everyday life, the incestuous encounter with his sister can be read as the attempt to erase ordinary experience in the bliss of love. The incestuous quality of this love is crucial, since Ulrich finds in his forgotten sister a variant of his own self and declares that she is the self-love that he always lacked.⁷ As the designation “Siamese twins” for the siblings abundantly makes clear, Musil here employs a synthetic figure in which difference and sameness are united. Recalling ideas of Romanticism, the adventure of the sibling’s love as manifest in infinite conversations is above all self-reflective: “In the dialogue as the mirror that enables the self-referential exchange the two poles become able to perceive their unity beyond mutual difference” (156). However, as McBride argues, the longing to make the “Other Condition” permanent is again hampered, this time by the progressive character of love, which always aims at unity but never realizes it, linguistically speaking: “only through the medium of an endlessly renewed dialogue can the unity that underlies difference be seen.” (156). The import of the episodes that recount the siblings’ retreat from life is, however, not only to be seen in Ulrich’s renewed failure to reconcile the ordinary with the “Other Condition,” but in the self-reflection on the relation between art and ethics that takes place through the sibling’s experiment. Not only are love and art based on disinterestedness in the Kantian sense, they also allow a harmonious play of two states of mind; that is, in both love and aesthetic pleasure feeling and intellect are united.

Faithful to her intention to follow Musil’s reflections on ethics through his oeuvre, McBride concludes her study by analyzing parts of *The Man Without Qualities* that Musil wrote in his last days. The impossibility of permanently reconciling feeling and intellect—of settling, once and for all, the question of how to live a good life—stands at the end of Musil’s magnum opus. Emphasizing that Musil is nevertheless far away from ethical nihilism, McBride briefly points to fragments of an “inductive ethics” in Musil’s unpublished papers (166). While the negative lesson of the man without qualities stands at the end of *The Void of Ethics*, there is another section of McBride’s study that turns its attention to a more positive characterization of ethical agency. Since it is only in this section

6. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike (New York: Knopf, 1995), 1:275.

7. *Ibid.*, 2:975.

that McBride discusses texts by Musil that directly touch upon political aspects, these pages deserve attention.

McBride's discussion of Musil's essay "On Stupidity" is, in fact, one of her book's most theoretically captivating points, but at the same time it is highly disputable with respect to Musil's political claims. While the Kantian lens through which McBride reads the essay is extremely stimulating and opens new perspectives, the political ramifications of Musil's considerations are, to say the least, troubling. Analogous to Kant's notion of the exemplarity of the artwork—"as the example of a universal rule we cannot state"—in his "On Stupidity" Musil pursues an immanent principle of orientation that can do without fixed reference points.⁸ From this perspective, stupidity amounts to the deterioration of "the depository of an immanent, nongeneralizable principle of purposive human conduct, which is fundamentally aesthetic in nature, since it is guided by feeling and not by concepts" (19). McBride bases her sharp, memorable analysis of Musil's essay on Jean-François Lyotard's discussion of Kant's judgment of the beautiful—a judgment that paradoxically proceeds without stable ground, i.e., without criteria for the legitimacy of judgment. Critical thinking, Lyotard maintains, has an immanent criteria of orientation, a reflective procedure based on aesthetic feeling, which accompanies its operation. In the judgment of the beautiful, "thinking feels that it is happy" and thereby acquires orientation.⁹ The Kantian horizon of Musil's inquiry, McBride argues, becomes obvious insofar as Musil does not seek to define stupidity as a quality of an object, but, at a decisive point in his essay, he bases his analysis on the judgment of stupidity. To regard one's environment as stupid, Musil emphasizes, is nothing but a capitulation in the face of a complicated situation that requires skillfulness rather than rigid vantage points. It is this operational logic that Musil sees deteriorating in his time. Faced with a contingent situation, which—to appropriate a term of Helmuth Plessner—requires a "dancing spirit," Musil charges his contemporaries with taking refuge in the simplifying thought patterns of National Socialism. Hence, Musil's meditation on stupidity turns out not merely to suggest an explanation of the German's susceptibility to National Socialism but, in a broader context, to offer a theory of totalitarianism in general. But how does it help to blame the rise of National Socialism on a psychological imbalance? Why was the German psyche in particular so receptive to its simplifying worldview? And, more generally: Do simplifying worldviews exclusively characterize totalitarian ideologies? It appears questionable to me whether this particular strain of Musil's ethical thinking really "speaks volumes to our time," as McBride suggests in the overall context of his oeuvre (8). Rather

8. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. John Henry Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), p. 74.

9. Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elisabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1994), p. 89.

than contributing to the understanding of totalitarianism, Musil's psychological framework, in which ethics pertains to the question of the good life, fails to offer illumination when it touches on political concerns.

However, this is not a fundamental flaw in Musil's consideration, but rather it marks the necessary limits of his otherwise intriguing search for the good life. The limitations of Musil's focus on ethics, though, does not reduce the value of McBride's compelling study. Offering new insights into Musil's lifelong reflections on ethics, *The Void of Ethics* displays an extremely subtle understanding of Musil's project. The Kantian vantage point from which McBride reads Musil allows us to observe the continuity of Musil's thought on ethics, which would otherwise remain invisible. By placing Musil in the philosophical and political debates of his times, McBride contributes significantly to the understanding of a strain of modernism that is of the utmost import for scholarship today.