

The Blanchot Reader

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Madness *par excellence* (1951)*

Hölderlin's madness does not disconcert medical science. It can be named. The principal features of his character – uncommunicative, unsociable, over-sensitive; the nervous disturbances which as early as adolescence caused him to fear he'd become completely insensible ('I am numb, I am stone'); the sudden onset of the illness which first manifests itself as a sort of emotional and perceptual weariness, then as a slight behavioural instability; eventually the time when these disturbances turn into a crisis and life in the world becomes impossible, without any interruption, however, in intellectual activity (Hölderlin produces a verse translation of Sophocles which Schiller and Goethe find ridiculous, but which posterity judges to be admirable, and he writes his magnificent hymns); finally, when madness sets him definitively apart, his utterly simple life, most often innocent and seemly, though foreign to the world; the mild affectation of his manners, his refusal to see anyone from outside, the flow of his desultory words and even everything that strikes us as a prodigious survival of his past self (the fact that at certain moments his memory, ordinarily so obscured, appears intact, or that he remains capable of profound observations and true reflections, but especially his constant poetic activity – his hand, so highly favoured, which does not cease writing and sometimes writes the most moving poems, even at the end, during his forty years of walled-in, useless life): all these marvels belong to the normal occurrence of schizophrenia.¹

But what does this expression mean: the normal occurrence of an anomaly? In asylums, Hölderlin is not an exception. Others resemble him. Like him, they have withdrawn from the world and they live far off in the distance – in themselves, it is said, but 'themselves' is still no one. Unbelievably absent, and yet observant, they listen and are capable of understanding; fallen into a stupor, incoherent, they are the least accessible of men, yet sometimes they awake with their reason undiminished. Like Hölderlin, they are affected, ceremonious and persistent in their insularity. If they speak, their language is an unmitigated chaos, or

they may write, or draw. Often, though already gravely ill, they demonstrate brilliant and even excessive intellectual qualities; cold reason is all in them – all too much: sometimes they are remarkable mathematicians or, in the language of the doctors, inclined to metaphysics, and they over-exercise their minds (in this respect Hölderlin, who kept working more and more and surpassing himself at a time when, in the eyes of the world, he was already mad, is still no exception).

This sketch shows what a standard analysis, determined to grasp Hölderlin's own special destiny from a general point of view, would be like. Next, it would turn to a study of the works. Finally, it would have to attack the problem of mental illnesses and their relations with creative activity. This problem attracts the imagination, but 'knowledge' has never been able to get beyond the stage of the most general assertions. Ever since the romanticism of Lombroso went out of date, people have been fond of saying that great artists are great in spite of their aberrations. Van Gogh is mad, but to be Van Gogh it does not suffice to be mad. It is also said – this is the perspective one meets most often, at least in France² – that illness does not create anything, that it never liberates any but inferior functions which were already involved in the normal carrying out of conscious life, but were surpassed or 'integrated' in that process. Depending on the level at which the dissolution sets in, the disturbances have a greater or lesser effect on the personality as a whole, but, whatever their significance, they express only the passage from superior to inferior, from a complete life to a depleted one, from liberty to anarchy, in other words, to servitude. That is essentially the idea Bergson proposed as follows: 'In the domain of the mind, illness and degeneracy create nothing, and the apparently positive characteristics which give a novel character to the abnormal condition, are nothing but a deficiency in the normal condition.' Normality is the abnormal surpassed. And the abnormal is an appearance of riches – in the most favourable cases – which indicates a real impoverishment (even from this point of view, it would seem more accurate to say only that madness is a kind of wealth that depends on an impoverishment, a lack).

Such assertions may have their importance, but as soon as one turns to a particular case, their usefulness proves surprisingly limited.

Similarly, one might wonder if all general conclusions claiming that illness has an effect on the work of art, that it favours or impedes the work's development, may not express a puerile conception of knowledge, the desire to get behind the enigma once and for all and to defeat it by keeping well away from it. Wouldn't one do better to approach it, to seek the point where one can see it without making it disappear, where it can be grasped in its enigmatic purity, just as it is, not wrapped in a vague secrecy, but in all the clarity with which it confronts anyone who looks at

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it straight on, the clarity it also affords this person who looks right at it, desiring to question it without disturbing it and to let himself be questioned by it?

It is this point of view that Karl Jaspers has adopted in the study devoted to Strindberg, Van Gogh and Hölderlin. This work is no longer new, for it first appeared in 1922 in a collection of writings devoted to applied psychiatry. Recently republished, it now includes a preface which makes its purpose explicit and also confirms the reader in the feeling that Jaspers rightly attaches considerable importance to it. Anyone hoping for a discussion – in terms not apt to delude him – of Van Gogh and Hölderlin and the horizon of illness that surrounds their works, will find this book extremely valuable. The fact that a psychiatrist whose works are considered authoritative has become a superlative philosopher would not in itself suffice to justify this interest. But in the present case the deciding factor is that the authority, the specialist who has studied and questioned patients and learned from them as only this direct contact with them permits, has neither bowed before the incomprehensible nor tried to reduce it by understanding it, but has kept trying to understand it as irreducible. Causal explanation is a requirement which admits no exceptions; but what science explains by designating a cause is not necessarily thereby understood. Understanding seeks what escapes it, and advances vigorously and purposefully towards the moment when it is no longer possible: when the fact, in its absolutely concrete and particular reality, becomes obscure and impenetrable. But that extreme limit is not only the end of comprehension, its moment of closure, but also its opening moment, the point at which it illuminates itself against a background of darkness which it has brought to 'light'. The gaze which has succeeded in grasping something original – and this never happens by chance, but requires great patience and great strength, self-renunciation and at the same time the most personal resolve – does not claim to have seen clearly into the origin; it has simply grasped the perspective from which the event must be confronted in order that its most authentic and extreme aspects be preserved.

It seems that his encounter with Van Gogh was an awesome ordeal for Jaspers. This meeting probably took place in 1912, on the occasion of the Cologne exhibition to which he alludes in his book. Van Gogh fascinated him, he says. On confronting Van Gogh he felt, more clearly although no doubt less physically, what he had felt when coming face to face with certain schizophrenics. It is as if an ultimate source of existence made itself momentarily visible, as if hidden reasons for our being were here immediately and fully in force. This is a shock which we cannot bear for long, from which we must remove ourselves, which we find partly expressed, or soothed, in the great works of Van Gogh, not that we can bear

it very long in them, either. It is overwhelming, beyond all measure, but it is not our world: a call arises from it, calling into question, calling to existence, acting upon us productively by pressing us to transform ourselves in the vicinity of what is still the inaccessible.

This vital and profound experience explains why such a study, the first that has sought to shed light upon the sickness and the art of Van Gogh – with few documents and a knowledge of the painting that is more intense than broad – gives us such a lively feeling of the creator's truth and of his destiny. Beyond that feeling, we must understand on our own, measuring ourselves against the exceptional. If a person does not initially see the incomparable in Van Gogh's paintings, then explanations will always lead to misunderstandings and all approaches, however cautious and prudent, will be futile.

Jaspers devotes only a few pages to Hölderlin – important ones, granted, expressing the same inquiry – but perhaps Hölderlin is not so close to him; perhaps the experience of reading Hölderlin was less personal. We would like, with his help, to ask why Hölderlin's madness is so absolutely mysterious, or at least try to see what the angle is from which this mystery must appear to us.

To say of Hölderlin that his case is unique is to draw attention only to exterior circumstances. Nietzsche also went mad, but madness was the death which raised or reduced him to silence, whereas in Hölderlin poetry's necessity persisted, asserting itself and even reaching its highest point beyond death. (This is reminiscent of one of the saints, Saint Bonaventura, who, as Chateaubriand recalls for us, was allowed as a favour by God to leave his tomb in order to finish his memoirs – strange favour! the writer must live on to recount his life and then, no doubt, must survive this survival to recount it in turn, and so on endlessly.) Hölderlin does not just undergo a mild derangement, or even one of those serious but partial forms of alienation which respect the appearance of reason or leave the normal modes of expression untouched. From 1801 to 1805 (in the view of psychiatrists) – starting in 1802 (in the eyes of the world) – he is defenceless against the development of the illness which ravages his mind and makes of him the man whom Schelling, on 11 July 1803, speaks of to Hegel: *am Geist ganz zerrüttet* – the illness which, after 1805, renders him similar in appearance to any one of those insane asylum inmates of whom it is said that they have reached the terminal period; and, in fact, they have arrived at the end, they live their end unendingly. However, from 1801 and even from 1802 to 1805, though his person becomes a foreigner to the world, he writes sovereign works which unwaveringly express his poetic mastery and fidelity. After 1805 poetry does not cease to express itself in him, but it lends him a

different voice, wherein it is not foreignness and obscurity that make themselves heard, but rather the simplest feelings, in the most regular form, where rhyme once more has a role to play – and this all during the forty years his death lasted. Schwab, who visited him when he was seventy years old, wrote: ‘The magical power which poetic form exerted on Hölderlin was prodigious. I never saw a line by him that was bereft of meaning: obscurities, weak points, yes, but the meaning was always alive, and he still wrote such lines when, during the day, no one could extract anything reasonable from him at all.’

But this is only the outer form of the development in question. As far as medical science is concerned, it is all quite ‘in order,’ or at least not surprising; it corresponds to what is known about the type of patients to whom nightmares lend a pen. If nevertheless one points out that the poems of Hölderlin’s madness – those that were written ‘at the end’ – far from being more incoherent, more extraordinary, are just more simple, in accord with the most spontaneous feelings which the clearest, though infinitely touching words express, then the psychiatrist can only respond: the final state of the illness was in Hölderlin what it is in other schizophrenics, the only difference being that this end was not the end of just any patient, but of a patient whose name was Hölderlin. But he no longer recognized himself by that name, no longer accepted it. Why, though he was similar in every respect to other madmen, was he foreign to himself, and – except in so far as poetry did not cease to find in him a true voice and a genuine heedfulness – foreign even to the poetic form which had been his?

Jaspers thinks the evolution of the illness begins around 1801. As it continues between 1802 and 1805 without, however, provoking any definitive break, the question that arises is this: are the poems written during this period different, do they reveal in their form, their inner movement, their meaning, a change with respect to the works that were written previously, at the furthest remove from madness? Jaspers thinks so. To this change, which tends toward an always greater freedom of rhythm, outside traditional and regulated forms, there corresponds, in Jaspers’s view at least, a change in the feeling of poetic vocation. Granted, Hölderlin is aware of the seriousness of his vocation at every period in his life, but for a long time he is no less aware of the obstacles he encounters within himself, outside himself; he sees his own inadequacy, he feels the weight of an unfavourable time, and it is hesitantly that he struggles with a society which burdens him with unworthy tasks. Even philosophy, which he sadly calls the hospital where the unhappy poet can always find an honourable refuge, bewilders him. But later, in the period that borders on schizophrenia, his uncertainties are effaced; the doubting, suffering consciousness becomes a firm and sovereign

strength. His work is concerned less with historical time; the solitary in him no longer worries over his solitude, for he dwells now in the world which he creates, a world closer to myth, where an immediate experience of the sacred reaches fulfilment and is expressed. But the mythic vision which comes into focus in the poems at this period is not a late discovery. Hölderlin sensed early on that nature, the truth manifest in ancient Greek civilization and the divine – these three worlds – were one single world where man was to rejoin and recognize himself. But during the period of schizophrenia this view becomes more present, Jaspers thinks: more immediate, more complete, while at the same time passing into a more general, impersonal, objective sphere. It seems that during this period Hölderlin speaks of the divine according to the experience of it which was visited upon him and in the shock which he received from it.

Of all Jaspers’s observations, those that bear upon this experience seem to us the most important. During this period, the works of Hölderlin often allude to the vehemence of divine action, to the danger of the poetic task, to the stormy, excessive ardour which the poet must confront, bareheaded and upright, in order that the light of day, calmed in the song, may be communicated to all and become the tranquil light of the community. What Hölderlin says in these works is not an allegorical manner of speaking, but must be understood as the truth, the meaning – gathered up and entrusted to poetic creation – of an immediate experience.

It seems necessary here to distinguish between two aspects. One can speak of an excessive experience, a plenitude of light, too immediate an affirmation of the sacred. With his reserve, that exemplary discretion which never forsook him, Hölderlin twice makes a veiled allusion to this in his letters: in December 1801, to Bühlendorf (apparently he is not yet ill): ‘In the past, I exulted to discover a new truth, a greater conception of what surpasses and surrounds us; now, I just fear resembling the ancient Tantalus who received from the gods more blessings than he could stand’; to Bühlendorf again, in December 1802, after his return from France: ‘As it is said of heroes, I can well say that Apollo has struck me.’

Apollo struck him, and that means the power of the elemental, contact with the immediate, the unparalleled moment in the relations between the divine and the poet which Goethe did not know. But here is the other aspect: Hölderlin was struck, yet remained standing; he knew a measureless experience which could not possibly leave him intact, and yet for five years he struggled, with sovereign determination, not to preserve himself and save his mere reason, but to raise to poetic form – to expression in its highest and most masterfully controlled sense – what he had grasped, which is beneath any form and lies short of all expression: it is what Heidegger calls ‘the shock of chaos which affords nothing to lean on or

brace oneself against, the power of the immediate which checks every direct grasp.'

Jaspers evokes the extraordinary tension which many schizophrenics experience in the first stages of the illness: these patients are dominated by overwhelming experiences which threaten to tear apart the personality, or by instances of rupture that are utterly anguishing because they cause the patient to live without interruption in the imminence of total collapse. These patients do not give up, they struggle energetically, and this tension to maintain continuity, meaning and rigour is often very great. Such patients say: 'I feel that I am going to go mad if I relax even for an instant.' But can one compare such a fate with the destiny of Hölderlin, even if he is grappling with an experience which has an analogous form? The reason he saves is not his, but in a way ours, poetic truth; and this effort carried out at the cost of a struggle which we cannot gauge by the difficulties characteristic of the ill – for we do not know even those difficulties – but which we can only suppose to be infinitely great, the greatest possible: such a costly effort does not aim at perpetuating reason's tranquillity, but seeks rather to give form to the extreme, form which has the vigour, the order, the sovereignty of poetic power at its highest point.

Are we here in the presence of the mystery of Hölderlin? Quite possibly, but perhaps we only see it in its fascinating aspect. We can express this aspect as follows, in line, we believe, with Jaspers's thought: at the same time that the illness begins there appears in the work a change which is not foreign to the initial goal, but which contributes something unique and exceptional, revealing a depth, a significance never before glimpsed. This happened because Hölderlin was able to raise to the supreme meaning – which is that of poetry – the experiences of illness, to link them completely to the whole of his spiritual existence and to master them for and through poetic truth. But it happened also because these experiences, suffered in the tumult of illness, were authentic and profound. Now, such experiences are made possible only by schizophrenia. Jaspers sums up as follows his observations about schizophrenia, or at least certain of its forms: in some patients, it seems that a metaphysical profundity is revealed. Everything transpires as if in the life of these beings something manifested itself briefly which exposed them to shuddering dread and ravishment. They lead their lives more passionately, more unconditionally, in an unbridled way; they are more natural but at the same time more irrational, demonic. It is as if there appeared in the world circumscribed by the narrow human horizon a meteor and, often before any witnesses have taken cognizance of the strangeness of this apparition, the demonic existence ends in psychosis or abandons itself to death.

Demonic existence, this tendency of existence to surpass itself eternally – to assert itself relentlessly with regard to the absolute, in dread and ravishment – must be considered separately from psychosis. But everything happens as if the demonic, which in the healthy man is muted, repressed by the concern for a goal, succeeded at the beginning of these illnesses in coming to light, accomplishing a breakthrough. Not that the demonic, the spirit, is sick; it keeps clear of the opposition sick-healthy. But the evolution of the illness affords an opportunity for the breakthrough, even if only for a brief time. It is as if the soul, stirred in all its reaches, shows its depths in this upheaval, and then, when the shock is over, falls into ruins, becomes chaos, becomes stone.

We must add this: what matters is not only that the ground should shudder, but that it should be rich and worthy of the shock. To understand such a development then, it is necessary to turn towards those who can make it manifest: profound artistic geniuses. There is in them a spiritual existence which schizophrenia appropriates, and what is then created, the experiences and the figures, the forms and the language, have their roots in the spirit, seem linked to the truth of this spirit, and cannot rigorously be conceived except in relation to it, and yet, without schizophrenia, they would not have been possible, would not have been able to manifest themselves in this way.

One senses now why the poems of Hölderlin are unique in literature: nothing can compare with them, whereas Goethe, as supreme representative of humanness, can enter into a comparison with others. Jaspers says this forcefully: Goethe is capable of everything, except the late poems of Hölderlin and the paintings of Van Gogh. In such works the creator perishes; not of exertion, not from excessive creative expenditure; but the subjective experiences and emotions, in relation with the upheaval of the soul – the experiences whose expression the artist creates and which he raises to the truth of an objective form – comprise at the same time the development which leads to collapse. Thus we must repeat: schizophrenia is not in itself creative. In creative personalities only, schizophrenia is the condition (if one adopts provisionally the causal point of view) for the opening of the depths. A poet who in good health was sovereign becomes schizophrenic: such a combination has not occurred again. To see it reappear one must turn to other arts, and then the name of the incomparable is Van Gogh.

But can we leave the question there? Perhaps we can go no further; it is even possible that we have gone too far. For the mystery of Hölderlin is coupled now with the mystery of schizophrenia, and the mysterious essence of this illness has come and installed itself behind the mysterious figure of the poet, making the latter appear as the radiance and the figure

of the extremely profound and the invisible. Perhaps this is really the case. There is nothing in this manner of seeing that seems to us to diminish the real meaning of the creative force – and besides, it is truth we seek, not an account that respects or exalts. But precisely, hasn't mystery been overdone in a way which has also strained and altered the exact configuration of the occurrence? Every affirmation is difficult here; and yet:

Jaspers thinks that, starting in 1801, the time at which he situates the beginning of the illness's development, Hölderlin's work shows a profound change; this change appears, according to Jaspers, in the inner and the outer style, and also in the new manner – firmer, more immediate – with which the poet asserts himself and affirms (indifferent, from here on, to the world) the mythic reality of the universe he creates. Jaspers sees here the same conjunction that he sees in Van Gogh: between the curve of the disease's evolution and the changes which profoundly modify the creative style.

Perhaps this is true for Van Gogh, but with Hölderlin it is the opposite that strikes one initially. We are necessarily limited to observations on a general scale, but the essential point remains clear, and Hellingrath, whom Jaspers indeed cites, expresses it: there is no turning-point in the work of Hölderlin, but a continuous development, a supreme fidelity to his goals which he approaches little by little through patient investigation and with a control ever greater and better suited to the truth of what he seeks and what he sees. A change can be discerned in Hölderlin's poetry, a decisive moment which puts him face to face with himself and distances him definitively from the form of his youthful works and even of *Hyperion*: it is the moment when he becomes master of the hymn – of what is termed mythic lyricism. The tragedy *Empedocles* was its first expression. But that moment occurs before 1800, and several of the hymns wherein Hölderlin gives form to poetry in its purest intensity are from that period, which continues up to 1801. The hymn *So, on a Holiday* is from 1800; the elegy *Bread and Wine* belongs to the same interval. The hymns which were written a little later show no change from these models. The last works may seem, by the increased tension and abrupt density of their language, to correspond to a new development; but this departure is not altogether new, it simply indicates that Hölderlin's poetic language does not maintain itself at the point it has already attained, but continues its movement, in fidelity to this movement which it carries ever further, as near as possible to its extreme point, thereby realizing what, at a much earlier period and even right from his youth, he had regarded, in his theoretical conceptions, as the essential poetic form.³

It is very difficult to discern the changes Jaspers believes he recognizes in what he considers Hölderlin's new consciousness of himself and in the 'mythic vision' which the poems bring close to us. At the most one can

acknowledge differences in attitude between the adolescent and the poet who in 1800 reached the maturity of a thirty-year-old – differences which it would be strange not to encounter. They have to do with youth and maturity, with changes in the times and different experiences; they are linked above all with political history which initially grants the young Hölderlin the perspective of a real revolution, whereas, to Hölderlin at thirty, it brings the deep disappointment of a political world closed to the future. The essential difference, however, lies entirely in this fact: at first, Hölderlin knows that poetry is his vocation; he feels himself called and bound to poetry, but he has not yet tested himself in the plenitude of the poem, the hymn. At first, he does not yet exist; later, his existence has the certainty, but also the infinitely dangerous reality of poetic presence;⁴ later, in the end, he will once again cease to exist; having passed into transparency he will no longer be Hölderlin, but just the mystery of his name.

In all this what persistently impresses us is not change but rather fidelity, the continuity of Hölderlin's destiny, the movement which raises him to an always clearer consciousness, not more secure, but more sure of the danger which is his and of the truth of what exposes him to danger. Right from the first he expresses the problem which he feels to be at the centre of his life, and indeed to be the heart, not only of his everyday life but also of poetic life – the problem whose contrary demands he must maintain with firm decisiveness. He expresses it in a form which is entirely abstract yet intimately close to him: how can anything finite and determined bear a true relation with the undetermined? On the one hand, the greatest hostility to formlessness, the strongest confidence in the capacity to give form – *der Bildungstrieb* – on the other, the refusal to let himself be determined, *die Flucht bestimmter Verhältnisse*, the renunciation of self, the call of the impersonal, the demand of the All, the origin. This double movement is translated on the everyday plane by Hölderlin's refusal to accept a pastor's tranquil career, a refusal which he resolutely maintains, but not without feeling it none the less as a shortcoming, for he also belongs to the world which respects limits.⁵ On the level of poetic conception the demand is asserted in these terms: *die höchste Form im höchsten Leben*, 'in extreme life, supreme form,' or again: *dem Geistigen sein Leben, dem Lebendigen seine Gestalt*, 'to the spirit its life, to the living its form.' Finally, in the sphere of pure poetic truth, the double requirement will be expressed as the destiny of the poet, who becomes the mediator of the sacred, who is in immediate relation with the sacred and envelops it in the silence of the poem in order to calm it and communicate it to men, a communication requiring that the poet remain upright yet be stricken none the less, a mediation which does not merely result in a torn existence, but is this very division of the poet, the effacement at the

heart of the word which, existence having disappeared, continues, affirming itself all alone. And, to be sure, it is easy to provide, for this opposition of the two movements concentrated in destiny's unique moment, a translation into psychiatric language as well, or at least into the language which Jaspers has placed at our disposal: then it becomes a matter of the extreme tension he spoke of, between the overwhelming experience and the sovereign will which undertakes to give it form, to unveil it in the creation.

Yes, this is easy to do, it is even necessary (for the mystery lies also in this simultaneous double reading of an event which can be situated neither in one nor the other of its versions). But here is the extraordinary thing: this opposition and this tension, though they may coincide for an instant with the development of the illness, nevertheless have nothing essentially in common with it, since they do not correspond with the moment of its appearance, but belong to the whole of the life whose firmest and most conscious necessity they form – its constantly deepened and sustained purpose, carried all the way to the goal – so that schizophrenia seems to be just the projection of that life at a certain moment and on a certain plane, the point of the trajectory where the truth of existence in its entirety, having become sheer poetic affirmation, sacrifices the normal conditions of possibility, and continues to reverberate from the deep of the impossible as pure language, the nearest to the undetermined and yet the most elevated – language unfounded, founded on the abyss – which is announced also by this fact: that the world is destroyed.

One might be tempted to say the following: in Hölderlin, poetry reached the depth where illness came to take possession of it. Not that illness, even as the experience of the depths, was necessary to explain this development: poetic power met illness at its extreme point, but did not need illness in order to arrive there. This could be expressed in a different way: Hölderlin is the necessity which doomed the poet to collapse, with the consequence that collapse has in turn taken on poetic meaning. All these formulae, however, seem to us insufficient, too general; they still neglect the essential.

One cannot be content to see in Hölderlin's destiny that of an individuality, admirable or sublime, which, having too intensely wanted something great, had to press on all the way to the point where it broke down. His fate is his alone, but he himself belongs to what he expressed and discovered, not as his, but as the truth and affirmation of the poetic essence. He does not seek to realize (to surpass) himself in a Promethean tension that would doom him to catastrophe. It is not his destiny that he decides, but that of poetry; it is truth's meaning that he takes on as a task to accomplish, and that he does accomplish silently, obediently, with all

the strengths of mastery and decisiveness, and this movement is not his own, it is the realization of the true which, at a certain point and in spite of him, demands of his personal reason that it become pure impersonal transparency whence there is no return.

We cannot represent even the principal moments of this evolution. Besides, only the poems have any power here to draw us closer to themselves and to a true understanding of them. What must none the less be said is this: in the elegy *Bread and Wine* Hölderlin evokes night, the derangement that night brings, and the light which continues to keep watch over night:

Indeed it is fitting to consecrate garlands to Night, and song
because she is sacred to those astray and to the dead,
though herself she subsists, everlasting, most free in spirit.⁶

Night is sacred because it touches a sacred region of the world – it touches madness and death – but still more deeply because it is united with the spirit's pure freedom. Beyond night, short of day, this freedom is also the original power in us that no force must stop or repress: day or night, it matters not at all:

The divine fire also by day and by night impels us
to set out. Then, come! that we may see open spaces
[*das Offene schauen*].

Das Offene, the Open, the reason why truth opens up, the original uprising wherein all that appears is lost, but also founded, in the tear of its apparition, and it is there that we must go:

That we may seek what is proper to us
One thing remains sure; whether it be towards noon or late
towards midnight, always a measure subsists
common to all . . .

Greece is the mythic country of this common measure. Among the Greeks, no one had to bear life alone and the original cry, lived, exchanged, grasped in common became jubilant acclaim, the power of language. Such a moment is no longer ours. We come too late. The gods live, but overhead, in another world. For man is not always able to sustain plenitude. Our life no longer consists in living divine life, but in dreaming it. Thus the meaning of night becomes apparent, and the truth of derangement: it is a power whereby, in an empty time, we can still communicate with the divine.

Only at times can men bear the plenitude of the divine.
Henceforth our life is a dream about them. But to wander astray
helps, like sleep, and need and night make us strong.

These few signs exist only to indicate in what general direction derangement, at an early stage and in one of its aspects, is situated. Error, straying, the sorrow of wandering are linked to a time in history, the time of distress when the gods are absent twice over, because they are no longer here, because they are not here yet. This empty time is that of error, when we do nothing but err, because we lack the certainty of presence, of a 'here'.

but so much happens
nothing takes effect, for we are heartless, mere shadows.

It is this absence of vigour, of deep truth that turns us into shadows and prevents us from making the events that do, nevertheless, occur (such as the return of the gods), true. And yet, error, 'to wander astray helps,' *das Irrsal hilft*: error is a moment of truth, it is the waiting which senses truth, the deep of sleep which is also vigilance, forgetting, the intimacy of sacred memory. In all of this, derangement is the silence whereby what is no longer here, the divine, the true, is however here, here in the mode of waiting, of premonition, and escapes the disfigurement of the false (the indefiniteness of error preserves us from falsehood, the inauthentic).

In holy night,
where silent Nature thinks out the days to come
even in most crooked Orcus
does not a straightness, a rightness prevail?

This I discovered.⁷

That is why the poet must consent to stray: it is necessary that at a certain moment he become blind. He descends into the night, the night that provokes the frightful stupor, but his heart remains awake, and this wakefulness of the heart which precedes the first light and makes it possible, is the courageous premonition of dawn (*Chiron*).

The poet is the intimacy of distress; he lives the empty time of absence profoundly, and in him error becomes the deep of derangement, where he recaptures steadfast strength, the spirit at its freest point. That is the original power for which he bears witness and to whose possibility he attests, by founding it. Night in him becomes the intimacy of night, immune to weariness and tranquil somnolence; and the sterility of the

empty moment becomes the plenitude of waiting, the reality of the future, the premonition which divines and presents.

But now day breaks. I waited and saw it come
and what I saw, it is holy, now be my word.⁸

Waiting has ripened time. In the poet waiting is not that of a life plunged in particularity, but that of all nature, of nature as all, the All itself. In the poet, therefore, waiting becomes vision, just as true language makes what it calls come. And what it calls is the day, not the prudent day (*der besonnene Tag*), but the day that rises, that is its own beginning, the origin, the point where the Sacred communicates and founds itself in the firm resolve of language.

The poet is now the relation with the immediate, with the undetermined, the Open, wherein possibility finds its origin, but which is the impossible and the forbidden, to men and to gods: the Sacred. Of course he does not have the power to communicate the incommunicable, but in him – through the relation which he sustains with the gods, with the portion of divinity which resides in time, the deep of pure becoming – the incommunicable becomes what makes communication possible, and the impossible becomes pure power, and the immediate, the freedom of a pure law. The poet is the one in whom transparency becomes daybreak, and his word is what restrains the limitless, what gathers in and contains the infinitely expansive strength of the spirit, on the condition that this word be authentic: the poet's must be language which mediates because in it the mediator disappears, puts an end to his particularity, returns to the element whence he comes: divine sobriety.

The poet – to the extent this can be said – is the locus of a dialectic of derangement, which reproduces and makes possible the very movement of the true, the movement causing error to blossom into truth. When, in the elegy *Bread and Wine*, Hölderlin speaks of poets who, in the time of distress, go from country to country like the priests of Bacchus, this movement, this perpetual passage is the misfortune of wandering, the disquietude of a time without repose, but it is also the fecund migration, the movement that mediates. This wandering makes of rivers a language and of language the dwelling *par excellence*, the power whereby day abides and is our abode.

Hölderlin lives doubly in distress. His time is the empty time when what he has to live is the double absence of the gods, who are no longer *and* who are not yet. Hölderlin is this *and* which indicates the double absence, separation at its most tragic instant, but thereby he is also the *and* which unites and joins, the pure word wherein the emptiness of the past, the emptiness of the future become real presence, the 'now' of

breaking day, the irruption of the Sacred. At that instant, distress changes into superabundance, and misfortune is no longer solitude's poverty, but the fact that the poet is all unto himself excessive richness, the wealth of the All which he must bear all alone, since he belongs to the empty present of distress. His solitude is the understanding into which he enters with the future; it is the prophetic isolation which announces time, which makes time,

too bright, too dazzling this good fortune comes
and men avoid it

And that is why the days which are 'plenitude of happiness' are also 'plenitude of suffering'.

In the last hymns, those at least which we can regard as the latest in Hölderlin's *oeuvre*, he alludes more and more frequently to the weight he has to bear, the 'heavy burden of logs' which is daylight, the burden of day breaking. And it is always against a background of extraordinary pain that the certainty of dawn is expressed – such is the rigorous regard for poetry which makes it his duty to lose himself in the daylight in order to present the day.

Why this destiny? Why does he have to lose himself? We must say this once again: it is not excess that the gods punish in the man who becomes the mediator; it is not punishment for an offence that sanctions his ruin, but the poet must be ruined in order that in and through him the measureless excess of the divine might become measure, common measure; this destruction, moreover, this effacement at the heart of language is what makes language speak, and causes it to be the sign *par excellence*. 'That which is without language, in him becomes language; that which is general and remains in the form of the unconscious, in him takes the form of the conscious and concrete, but that which is translated into words is for him what cannot possibly be said' (*Empedocles*).

Hölderlin knows this: he himself must become a mute sign, the silence which the truth of language demands in order to attest that what speaks nevertheless does not speak but remains the truth of silence. From the heart of madness, such is 'the last word' which he makes us hear still:

A sign, that is what we are, deprived of meaning,
deprived of pain, and we have almost
lost the power of speech in a foreign land.

Such is the last word, to which we may relate no other utterance save this one, voiced in a hymn composed a little earlier:

And suddenly, she comes, she swoops upon us,
the Stranger,
the Awakener
the voice that forms men.

During his madness, some writers remembered he was still alive and came to see him.⁹ Bettina speaks of a madness 'so great, so gentle'; she says to Sinclair, Hölderlin's most faithful friend: 'It is a revelation and my thought is inundated with light. One would think that language, dragging everything with it in a rapid fall, had inundated the senses and, when the cascade drained off, the senses were weakened and the faculties devastated.' – 'That is it, exactly,' said Sinclair. 'To listen to him makes one think of the wind's vehemence, he seems possessed of deep knowledge, then everything disappears for him into darkness, he sinks down.' These accounts are fine and significant, but perhaps one should prefer the simplest words, those of the carpenter Zimmer, at whose home Hölderlin lived from the time of these reports until the end. 'To tell the truth, he is no longer mad at all, not what you'd call mad' (conversation between Zimmer and G. Kühne, 1836). 'He sleeps well, except during the hottest seasons: then, all night he goes up and down the stairs. He doesn't hurt anyone. He serves himself, dresses and goes to bed without any help. He can also think, speak, play music and do everything he used to do. If he has gone crazy, it is from being so learned. All his thoughts have stopped at a point which he keeps turning around and around. It makes you think of a flight of pigeons wheeling round a weather vane on the roof. He can't stand being in the house, he goes into the garden. He bumps into the wall, gathers flowers and herbs, he makes bouquets then throws them away. All day he talks out loud, asking himself questions and answering them, and his answers are hardly ever positive. There is a strong spirit of negation in him. Tired from walking, he retires in his room and declaims at the open window, out into the void. He doesn't know how to unburden himself of his great knowledge. Or else, for hours at his piano' (the Princess von Hombourg had given him a piano from which he had cut certain of the strings), 'ceaselessly, as if he wanted to drag out every last shred of his knowledge, always the same monotonous melody. Then I have to go work with all my might with my plane so I don't go off my head. Often, on the other hand, he plays very well. But what bothers us is the clicking of his fingernails which are too long. The honorifics?' (Hölderlin assigned ceremonial titles to himself and to others.) 'That's his way of keeping people at a distance, for no one should misunderstand, he is after all a free man, and no one should step on his toes.'

Hölderlin died on 7 June 1843. Lotte Zimmer recounts his death as follows: he was suffering from a 'catarrh.' In the evening, he played the

piano some more and came to have supper with his hosts. He went to bed but got up again almost immediately and came to tell the young woman he couldn't stay in bed, he was so frightened. He took some more of the medicine the doctor had given him, but the fear only got greater. 'And then if he didn't die, very gently, almost without a struggle.'

(1953)

Note for a New Edition

These pages – reread after more than two decades more or less without recollection by the one who cannot, however, completely forget having written them and who even recognizes them – strangely resist him even as he reads, resisting his desire to modify them. Why? It's not that they are true, or even untrue, and even if they were, that would of course not be the reason for the resistance, nor could it be caused by their constituting a closed discourse upon which judgements of truth or of value would no longer bear. What is the reason, then? I leave the question as it is. I will pose another one. It is based on this word: madness. In general, we ask ourselves, through the intermediary of experienced practitioners, whether a particular individual falls under the sentence which such a word contains. If we must employ it, we restrict it to an interrogative position. Hölderlin was mad, but was he? Or else we hesitate to give it any specialized meaning, not just because of scientific uncertainty, but because we do not wish, by specifying it, to immobilize it in a determined system of knowledge: even schizophrenia, though evoking the extreme forms of madness, the separation which from the start already distances us from ourselves by separating us from all power of identity, still says too much about all this or pretends to say too much. Madness would thus be a word perpetually at odds with itself and interrogative through and through, such that it would put its own possibility into question and thereby the possibility of the language that would include it, and therefore the interrogation as well, inasmuch as it belongs to the play of language. To say: Hölderlin is mad, is to say: is he mad? But, right from there, it is to make madness so utterly foreign to all affirmation that it could never find any language in which to affirm itself without putting this language under the threat of madness: language gone mad simply inasmuch as it is language. Language gone mad would be, in every utterance, not only the possibility causing it to speak at the risk of making it speechless (a risk without which it would not speak), but the limit which every language holds. Never fixed in advance or theoretically determinable, still less such that one could write: 'there is a limit,' and thus outside all 'there is,' this limit can only be drawn by its violation – the transgression of the untransgressible. Drawn by its violation, it is barred by its inscription. This accounts (perhaps) for the surprise and the fright which seize us when we learn – after Hölderlin and after

Nietzsche – that the Greeks recognized in Dionysos the 'mad god': this is an expression which we render more familiar by interpreting it as: the god who would drive you mad, or the madness that makes one divine. But the 'mad god'? How is it possible to receive what comes upon us with the force of such an anomaly? A god, not distant and responsible for some general insanity, but present, presence itself in its revelatory suddenness – the presence of the mad god?

The 'mad god', come from the Greeks, signals to us, even if we cannot help calming him down into a metaphor, however fearsome a conceptual metaphor it may be, for example, this one: presence is presence only as madness, which leads us to think that presence, the excess which exceeds every present – the withdrawal of the mark which marks the opening – would be the limit that never presents itself, any more than death does. Of course the word 'mad' and the word 'god' do not speak to us in the same way they spoke to the Greeks. But in the difference the same exceptional strangeness is none the less indicated, for the Greeks had no other god able to bear, as if it belonged to his essence, the description 'raving' (*mainomenos*), without on that account being the god of madness. Such is the enigma Dionysos presents to us: an enigma which, again, we translate in vain by speaking of the god of ecstasy, of terror and of savagery. A mad god, as Hölderlin and as Nietzsche always knew and knew unto no longer knowing, still awakens in men of today an unmasterable thought, whether they understand it as the premonition that even divine order is under the threat of a disturbance which is 'outside' it while none the less belonging to it, or whether this thought causes the presence of the god who is only presence, and the radical exteriority which excludes all presence including that of the god, to surge up, through Dionysos, in an incompatible alliance. The mad god: the presence of the outside which has always already suspended, forbidden presence. Let us say: the enigma of the Eternal Return which, born by Nietzsche, was born no less, perhaps, by Hölderlin.

M.B. (1970)

Notes

- 1 In another terminology, it would be called prococious dementia with schizophrenic syndrome. This is not the place to recall the debates about these names and what they represent.
- 2 This point of view is represented, for example, by J. Delay and by H. Ey (under the influence of Jackson). Pierre Janet's attitude is very similar. Psychoanalysis includes other views, however. Jacques Lacan, in his book on paranoia, by no means sees psychosis as deficiency.
- 3 In the dissertation he composed at the end of his studies, the one which gave him the right to the title *Magister*, writing of Pindar, he defines the supreme form of art in this

manner: *die gedrängte Kurze, der kurze gedrungene Styl*, condensed brevity, brief and dense style.

- 4 To his friend Neuffer, who is not only a poet, he writes (July 1797): 'You have another, happy activity on which your feeling of being someone rests, so you are not annihilated as soon as you are not a poet.'
- 5 The danger of passion, he says to his brother (March 1798), lies in its being 'that uncertainty into which the incapacity to adopt a determined behaviour *vis-à-vis* an undetermined object throws us' (the object is unique and yet wants to remain undetermined).
- 6 Translator's note: English prose translations of Hölderlin's verse are by Michael Hamburger, in *Hölderlin, Selected Verse* (London, Anvil Press Poetry, 1986).
- 7 *Dies erfuhr ich*, I have experienced this. (*Lebenslauf (The Course of Life)*, second version.)
- 8 *So, on a Holiday*.
- 9 The documents on Hölderlin's life during the years of his madness are almost all gathered together in the book by E. Trummler, *Der Kranke Hölderlin*. Several of these documents have been reproduced in the fine book wherein Pierre Jean Jouve and Pierre Klossowski have translated some of the *Poems of his Madness*.

Translated by Ann Smock

Artaud (1956)*

At the age of twenty-seven, Artaud sends some poems to a journal. The editor of the journal politely turns them down. Artaud then tries to explain his attachment to these flawed poems: he is suffering from such a dereliction of thought that he cannot simply disregard the forms, however inadequate, which he has wrought from this central non-existence. What is the worth of the resulting poems? An exchange of letters follows, and Jacques Rivière, the journal's editor, suddenly suggests publishing the letters written about these unpublishable poems, some of which will now, however, appear in an illustrative, documentary capacity. Artaud accepts, on condition that the truth should not be disguised. This is the famous correspondence with Jacques Rivière, an event of great significance.

Was Jacques Rivière aware of the anomaly here? Poems which he considered inadequate and unworthy of publication cease to be so when supplemented by the account of the experience of their inadequacy. As if what they lacked, their failing, became plenitude and consummation by virtue of the overt expression of that lack and the exploration of its necessity. Rather than the work itself, what interests Jacques Rivière is clearly the experience of the work, the movement which leads up to it, and the obscure, anonymous trace which, clumsily, it represents. More than that, this failure, which does not in fact attract him as much as it will subsequently attract those who write and who read, becomes the tangible sign of a central event of the mind, on which Artaud's explanations shed a surprising light. We are coming close, therefore, to a phenomenon to which literature and indeed art seem linked: namely, that there is no poem which does not have its own accomplishment as a poem as its implicit or explicit 'subject', and that the work is at times realized, at times sacrificed, for the sake of the very movement from which it comes.

We may recall here Rilke's letter, written some fifteen years earlier:

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