Heidegger and Hölderlin: The Over-Usage of "Poets in an Impoverished Time"

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It seems that everything there is to say on the topic of Heidegger and Hölderlin—if not too much—has already been said. Heidegger’s philological errors have been thoroughly analyzed, as has the path of his thinking from the encounter with Hölderlin.¹

In 1934/35, Heidegger composed his first *Hölderlin Lecture* as the answer to and justification for an abortive political commitment. The first interpretive option is naturally—if we follow Heidegger’s later self-interpretation—the failure to disclose an error or misdirected commitment in this. Consequently it was also the case that from the perspective of practical philosophy, the relationship between thinking and acting, between interpreting and politics in Heidegger’s encounter with Hölderlin, is treated exhaustively. At least Heidegger himself obviously must have accepted his confrontation with Hölderlin as the version of the way out of the political error that appeared most responsible to him, and indeed he camouflaged it as something wrung from his own cleverness. At the same time, it was to be understood as a clear rejection of the creations of National Socialism.²

If one reads Heidegger’s Hölderlin interpretation in light of the clarification of the facts of the unpleasant political commitment to National Socialism, then the activity which apparently was thought to be only philosophical also reflects political errors and practical misdirections. We cannot settle the question here of the extent to which Heidegger, in his self-interpretation, is playing down an error, or the extent to which he
interpreted differently in conscious distortion of what took place. On the other hand it can be shown that in Heidegger's way out of political activities [Gemächte], and in his way back into the power of poetizing [Dichtens] and thinking, the reason for the political error of misjudgment repeats itself in such a way that the factual decision turns out to be based on principle. Thus what is at issue is not a verdict of guilty, but the question of the extent to which a person can obviate with philosophy a "philosophy" which on the one hand is itself grounded in the tradition, but which on the other hand as "authentic" thinking, essentially avoids its standards. As for Heidegger's "path of thinking with Hölderlin," this path from the philosophical tradition to a new beginning allows essential thinking to be elucidated from the perspective of more practical consequences. At the same time we can find the first beginnings for not going along with Heidegger's advance from philosophy to "thinking" as he understood it.3

1. Poesie and Politics

Otto Pöggeler points out that in his first Hölderlin Lecture, Heidegger wants to move away equally from a determination of the poetic and the political.4 Although Heidegger strictly refuses to rank the poet Hölderlin alongside the philosophers of German Idealism (cf. e.g., Höld. 34/35, p. 6; EH, 85f.), with the explicitly formulated intention of his Hölderlin interpretation he reverts to a manner of questioning that is constitutive for German Idealism.5

In fragmentary reflections referring to Schiller and in dialogue with Hegel (at first by letter, later in person), Hölderlin first sketched out an "ideal for the education of a people" [Ideal der Volkserziehung] through art, which he hoped to satisfy in his poetry. Together with Hegel, Hölderlin wanted to expand Schiller's conception of aesthetic education in the sense of an historical ideal. This ideal extends from a unity of poetry and politics, which Heidegger also made his own. The decisive point is that the education for the coming of the age of reason, where it would be fulfilled through poetry, at the same time extends, indeed must extend, the original sequence of determinations of historical existence; it does not want the "revolution of the spiritual world" as Kant had prepared it—hence Schiller's aporia—to founder on the principle of an apraxis of the Ideal.

Heidegger presupposes precisely this claim in his determination of the poet. First of all, he is a poet in "an impoverished time," i.e., in that situation of "being torn asunder" ["Zerrissenheit"] which Schiller, according to Heidegger's partner in dialogue, Hölderlin, set forth as the symptom of modernity. Here, according to Hölderlin, it does not suffice to place the thought of a more human world in opposition to reality. Rather, everything rests on discovering a possibility for imagining it in history. Heidegger too