



University of Dundee

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Woodward, Ashley

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Postmodern Hölderlin

Ashley Woodward*

ABSTRACT

Jean-François Lyotard, the principal philosopher of the postmodern, referred to Hölderlin at some key points in the elaboration of this idea. These references centre on Hölderlin's 'Notes on the *Oedipus*'. While brief, they index a number of key points which it is my aim in this paper to elaborate. Lyotard's references to Hölderlin index a crisis – that of the postmodern – and aid him in articulating this crisis, in relation to the ancient and the modern, through two separate but connected modalities: history understood as narrative, and aesthetics. Beyond Lyotard's own elaborations of Hölderlin, I will argue that Lyotard's distinction between modern and postmodern aesthetics allows us to see, not only the influence of Hölderlin on the postmodern, but dimensions of the postmodern aesthetic already at play in his poetry. This is evident through the unconventional aspects of his use of language, the joy in invention which Lyotard suggests places an accent on the postmodern, in contrast to the nostalgia of the modern. In these ways, I will suggest that Hölderlin can be read as a touchstone not only of the modern but of the postmodern, one of the integral notions of 20th century aesthetics.

KEYWORDS

Friedrich Hölderlin, the postmodern, Jean-François Lyotard, Tragedy, Aesthetics

1. Hölderlin in the Postmodern

Jean-François Lyotard's best-known statement of the idea of the postmodern is of course *The Postmodern Condition*¹, which makes no mention of Hölderlin. However, the German poet is referenced in various of Lyotard's writings after that celebrated text, in which he attempts to further elaborate what the idea might mean². These references are relatively brief, and centre on a single text, *Anmerkungen zum Oedipus*³. However, they occur at critical junctures,

* University of Dundee, a.z.woodward@dundee.ac.uk

¹ Lyotard (1984).

² The main such texts I will consider here are *Something Like: "Communication ... without Communication"* and *"Time Today"* (in Lyotard 1991); *Peregrinations* (Lyotard 1988); and *Argumentation and Presentation: The Foundation Crisis* (Lyotard 2013).

³ Various translated as "Notes on the Oedipus", "Remarks on Oedipus", etc.

and an examination of how Lyotard engages Hölderlin in fact supplies a much deeper understanding of his idea of the postmodern condition than the lip-service quotation of the phrase “incredulity toward metanarratives”⁴ that is typical of many accounts. There are two main points which Lyotard uses references to Hölderlin to support, both of which elaborate the idea of postmodernity as a *crisis*: a crisis of narrative history, and an aesthetic crisis. In this first section of the essay, I will elaborate each of these two points, before turning, in the second section, to an examination of elements of the postmodern aesthetic in Hölderlin’s writings.

Lyotard invokes Hölderlin’s writings on tragedy to elaborate how a crisis in history appears in terms of different ways of organising time through narrative. Hölderlin himself points to a difference between *mythical* time and *modern* time, where the modern is a crisis of the mythical, or ancient way of organising time. His writings on tragedy indicate how the tragic narrative allows a structure and meaning to be given to history, and helps to negotiate times of crisis and transition between epochs⁵. Lyotard’s use of Hölderlin is rather free, however, and I will forego a discussion of the latter’s texts in favour of a focus on how the former uses them to support his own ideas.

Lyotard distinguishes between myth, modern metanarratives, and the ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ characteristic of the postmodern. For him, myth is an attempt to understand and control time by giving it a structure, a determined sequence, which is known in advance and can be revealed by a divine agent, such as an oracle. This is the idea of destiny. Myth has the specific structure of an end and a beginning which rhyme with each other, such that the ultimate destination is a return to origins, and time is not linear, but circular: “Myth allows a sequence of events to be placed in a constant framework in which the beginning and the end of a story form a sort of rhythm or rhyme, as Hölderlin put it.” (Lyotard 1991, p. 67) Myth thus has the same basic narrative structure as ancient tragedy: “Although given out at the time of Oedipus’ birth, Apollo’s oracle none the less prescribes in advance the destiny of the hero up until his death”⁶.

⁴ Lyotard (1984), p. xxiv.

⁵ In particular *The declining fatherland...*, *Notes on the Oedipus* and *Notes on the Antigone*, all in Hölderlin (2009).

⁶ Lyotard (1991), pp. 67-68.

Liotard then describes the modern as an alteration of the ancient structure of narrative, at once “[v]ery different, and yet very close” to it: “Modernity is not, I think, a historical period, but a way of shaping a sequence of moments in such a way that it accepts a high rate of contingency”⁷. Modern narrative loses the sense of destiny and the rhyming of end and beginning characteristic of mythic narrative. Yet what it retains is the very idea of narrative structure as a way of giving order and meaning to history. The future is no longer predetermined at the origin by a divine agency; the future is open and contingent, but it can be focused on a goal, which gives direction to human life, and meaning to history. This is precisely what Lyotard indicates with his famous idea of the “metanarrative” as characteristic of modernity. Examples of this metanarrative are

the progressive emancipation of reason and freedom, the progressive or catastrophic emancipation of labour (source of alienated value in capitalism), the enrichment of all humanity through the progress of capitalist technoscience, and even – if we include Christianity itself in modernity (in opposition to the classicism of antiquity) – the salvation of creatures through the conversion of souls to the Christian narrative of martyred love⁸.

The modern introduces a deep crisis insofar as it involves the silencing of the voice of the gods or of God, and the loss of destiny. If meaning is to be given to history, it must now be given immanently, in the world, by human beings themselves. This is the “flight of the gods” that Hölderlin alludes to, and Heidegger thematized in his reading of the poet. Yet narrative meaning is still possible.

With the postmodern, the crisis of the modern is deepened, as we become “incredulous” to such metanarratives. To characterise this loss of meaning through temporal structure, Lyotard seizes on the moment of *caesura* as Hölderlin describes it, and turns it into something that will no longer be overcome through the continuation of the drama and the structure of the whole containing it (the rhythm of the parts that it divides) as it is for Hölderlin. Lyotard sees in this moment the breakdown of narrative that he believes constitutive of postmodernity. Lyotard quotes Hölderlin:

At such a moment [the decline of tragedy, the moment of Oedipus], man forgets both himself and the God, and, undoubtedly in pious wisdom, he turns away like a betrayer – At the extreme limit of distress, ... man forgets himself because he is

⁷ Lyotard (1991), p. 68.

⁸ Lyotard (1992), p. 29.

entirely in the moment; [he forgets] the God because he is nothing but time, and both are unfaithful, time because at that moment it spins on itself and beginning and end no longer let themselves be rhymed in it at all⁹.

At this moment of the mutual turning away from each other of God and Man, narrative time entirely breaks down; there is nothing but the moment, in which time “spins on itself.” Lyotard further explains this as the loss of *destiny* imposed by the ancient, tragic narrative structure; it is the breakdown of dramatic story in which something is at stake and something happens:

The real tragedy is not *Oedipus Tyrannos* (the plot, the murder, the misunderstanding) but *Oedipus at Colonus*, in other words when fate is accomplished and nothing more happens to the hero, nothing is destined for him anymore. The loss of all destiny is the essential feature of the drama and in this “nothing happens” also lies the essential feature of our problematic¹⁰.

“Our problematic”, here, is that of postmodernity. As is well-known, the metanarrative of which Lyotard most keenly felt the loss was Marxism, and he presents postmodernity as an age in which a “tragic politics” is no longer possible. While we have already noted the differences between ancient tragedy and modern metanarratives, on this point Lyotard seems to emphasises the continuities between them, in order to present the postmodern breakdown of metanarratives as a failure of narrative in general, of any manner of organising historical time in a totalising way. He explains that modernity maintained something of tragedy insofar as “the modern metaphysics [...] makes or made political life in Western countries a sort of tragedy, a battle, a fight between the false subject, capital, and the real one, the proletariat”¹¹. The crisis of postmodernity is then the “end of history”; it is a deeper crisis than that of modernity, since all metanarrative structure fails.

This is then the first point on which Lyotard takes inspiration from Hölderlin: the idea of narrative as giving meaning to history, and its crisis. The second point is even more intriguing: it gives postmodernity a dimension not explored in *The Postmodern Condition*, that of an *aesthetic* crisis. This concerns modes of presencing or disclosure which govern the contemporary conditions of knowledge and art, and it connects Hölderlin with Lyotard’s own postmodern philosophy of art. Lyotard addresses this in several essays in the context of discussing Heideggerian ontology and its connections with art and

⁹ Lyotard (1988), pp. 2-3, quoting Hölderlin’s *Notes on the Oedipus*.

¹⁰ Lyotard (1991), p. 114.

¹¹ Lyotard (1995), p. 395.

technology. There is a key phrase he cites from Hölderlin in these contexts which is in fact the one omitted from the passage from the notes on *Oedipus* cited above: “At the outer limits of distress, there remains nothing more than the conditions of time or space”¹². This phrase of Hölderlin’s is the one Lyotard most often repeats, and it indexes several important and under-appreciated aspects of his understanding of postmodernity: the aesthetic dimension of the crisis of postmodernity, the connections between technoscience and art, and his attempt to reconfigure these connections in a way which differs from Heidegger’s. These ideas are most fully developed in Lyotard’s essay *Argumentation and Presentation: The Foundation Crisis*, but are also indicated more briefly in several other places. Let us follow the main points of his engagement with Hölderlin in this context.

Lyotard links the crisis of postmodernity with the “crisis of foundations” in the sciences, which he insists has an important aesthetic dimension¹³. Taking a Kantian inspiration typical of his later work, he understands this crisis in terms of a disconnection between the faculties of the understanding and the sensibility: for Kant, knowledge is only possible when sensible intuitions can be linked with categories of the understanding, and the crisis Lyotard speaks of attests to a separation of the sensible and the intelligible. In short, with the rise of modern technosciences, the capacities of the understanding have cast doubt on the reliability and necessity of the sensible, and have begun to “legislate” reality independently of sensory experience.

According to Lyotard, this is precisely Heidegger’s theme of the “forgetting of Being” in technoscientific, calculative thinking. Heidegger’s meditation contrasts two forms of ontological presencing or disclosure: that which is supposedly authentic and originary, associated with the ancient Greeks and with poetry, and that of modern rational technoscience, which is the apogee of the metaphysical obscuring of the ontological difference and the casting of Being into oblivion. And Lyotard – who is of course far from being alone in this – sees Heidegger’s meditation on this crisis as hinged on a *nostalgia* for the originary mode of presencing, and a desire to see

¹² Lyotard (1988), p. 42, citing Hölderlin (1965), p. 65.

¹³ This “crisis of foundations” refers collectively to several crises which became evident in the early twentieth century. Lyotard specifies crises in “the foundations of geometry (Bernard Riemann, David Hilbert, L. E. J. Brouwer), [...] the foundations of arithmetic and mathematics in general (Bertrand Russell, Edmund Husserl, Nicolas Bourbaki), and [...] the foundations of mechanics and theoretical physics (Albert Einstein, Henri Bergson, Werner Heisenberg)” (Lyotard 2013, p. 118).

it return. This nostalgia for originary presencing is what seems to attract him to Hölderlin, whose poetry he interpreted in terms of his own philosophical preoccupations, such that the “flight of the gods” is associated with the forgetting of Being, and a meditative wait for their return¹⁴. This theme of nostalgia for a supposed origin is anathema to Lyotard; it appears to him as an attempt to solve the crisis of modernity by a return of the ancient narrative form of myth: “[T]he late Heidegger’s sibylline writing, is well made for speaking the expected arrival of a “last god”. It is still prophesying, just as it is said that the pre-Socratics prophesied in their time”¹⁵. And in *Libidinal Economy*, Lyotard strikingly quips: “Nothing has withdrawn, we have not “forgotten” anything; the ancient Greeks, Heraclitus [...] are no more originary than Janis Joplin”¹⁶.

Heidegger strategically quotes Hölderlin at key points in his best-known essays on technology and art. In *The Question Concerning Technology*, after describing the ontological dangers of the essence of technology as *Ge-Stell*, he invokes the lines from *Patmos*: “But where danger is, grows / The saving power also”¹⁷. Since they occur in the context of discussing Heidegger, we can, with some justification I think, understand Lyotard’s seizing on the above-mentioned phrase from Hölderlin’s *Notes on the Oedipus* as a riposte to Heidegger’s canonical articulations of the relations between technoscience and art. In short, while Heidegger seems to see in technoscience only a danger, and, at best, an ontological filiation with art (via the Greek meaning of *technē*) which might lead to a return of a more originary *poiēsis*, Lyotard sees in the new sciences and technologies *new* possibilities for art and aesthetics, which he wishes to affirm. Hölderlin provides Lyotard with a passage to this affirmation in a phrase which he sees as evoking the Kantian aesthetic of the sublime. How so?

In the Kantian aesthetic of the beautiful, the possibility of aesthetic experience hinges on a “free” presentation of forms by the imagination, not determined in advance by concepts of the understanding. According to Lyotard, it is this free givenness of intuitive forms, prior to and independent of the understanding, that comes under threat with technoscientific rationality, because the latter conceptually calculates everything in advance¹⁸. So in effect, Lyotard

¹⁴ See for example Heidegger (2000).

¹⁵ Lyotard (1997), p. 23.

¹⁶ Lyotard (1993), p. 257.

¹⁷ Heidegger (1977), p. 28.

¹⁸ See in particular the essay *Something Like: “Communication ... without Communi-*

sees the domination of sensibility by rationality – the Heideggerian oblivion of Being in modern metaphysics – as posing a threat to aesthetic experience, and to the poetic mode of presencing, insofar as we stay with a certain functioning of the faculties that Kant has analysed with the beautiful. However – and here is where Lyotard evokes Hölderlin – matters seem to stand somewhat differently with the sublime. This is because the sublime accords with a *formlessness*, a breakdown of the capacity of the imagination to provide forms for the givens of sensation. The sublime feeling is evoked by sensations too vast or overwhelming to be contained by imaginative forms and to constitute intuitions, and which can only be matched by Ideas of reason. And for Kant, of course, the most basic forms are those of time and space. So when Hölderlin writes that “At the outer limits of distress, there remains nothing more than the conditions of time or space,” Lyotard freely interprets this to index an aesthetic crisis: the conditions of time and space are exposed and put out of play; they are no longer filled with sensory givenness and categorised by concepts, such that a holistic experience can be synthetically produced. A fracturing of experience is thus characteristic of the crisis that constitutes postmodernity.

Lyotard links this with the aesthetic of the sublime, which is itself a kind of crisis of the harmonious relation of the faculties. What this means is that the dominance of rationality does not destroy all aesthetic feeling, but rather, a different aesthetic comes to take the place of the beautiful. Lyotard links this sublime aesthetic with both the avant-garde arts of the 20th century, and with the capacities of “new technologies” to produce new kinds of aesthetic experiences. He sees the avant-gardes as exploring this crisis of the conditions of time and space in their experiments in multiple directions, but particularly in the movements of minimalism and abstraction, which have impoverished traditional *forms*, but in so doing have produced new and rich modes of aesthetic experience. In exploring the limits of form to the point of formlessness, the avant-gardes, according to Lyotard, have embraced a sublime aesthetic and run a parallel course to the “crisis of foundations” in the sciences. After citing the Hölderlin phrase on the conditions of space or time in his book *Peregrinations*, Lyotard writes:

That is the basic condition for an aesthetics of the sublime: time and space are approached in terms not of givens but of thoughts [...] This is the retreat of Being, Heidegger would have said, but in opposition to the Heideggerian idea of a decline,

cation” in Lyotard (1991).

I would argue that this retreat takes a path that allows the artist to search for other forms by means of new technologies, if they are taken as *Technai*¹⁹.

Here then we see Lyotard's riposte to Heidegger, by way of Hölderlin, and through a link with Kant. In sum, Lyotard's argument is that the aesthetic crisis of postmodernity does not demand a return of the old, but an exploration of the new. And while the twentieth century avant-gardes and art made with new technologies seem a long way from Hölderlin, Lyotard sees in the later an announcement of the crisis which opens on to the experimentation with the sublime (i.e. formless) aesthetic that such arts perform.

2. *The Postmodern in Hölderlin*

Lyotard's invocations of Hölderlin that we have so far examined indicate the former's rather free and strategic use of the later to elaborate his reflections on the postmodern. But can we not perhaps see glimmerings of the postmodern aesthetic already in Hölderlin himself? An argument developed by Judith Norman (2009) points the way to such a possibility. Norman argues that, according to Lyotard's criteria, there are "postmodern" elements in some of the works of the early German romantics. She focuses on Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel, but the trajectory of her thought suggests how we might also see such elements in Hölderlin.

Norman asks, what is the role of art in early German romanticism, such that it provides something essential that cannot be reduced to or substituted by philosophy? According to her, "there is an irreducible element of the sensuous [...] that gets lost if the romantics are treated simply as philosophers"²⁰. Norman locates what the romantics strive for in art as the sublime, even if it is not always named as such. Novalis calls the sublime the "presentation of the unpresentable," and in short, "the unpresentable" can be understood as the Absolute, the unconditioned ground and unity of all conditioned things, which, in distinction to German Idealism, the romantics believe is beyond conceptual grasp. Norman notes that it is possible to indicate this unpresentable Absolute philosophically, in a way which is akin to a kind of negative theology – an intellectual indication, in discourse, that there is something beyond it. This can even be the case when art is philosophically indicated as what

¹⁹ Lyotard (1988), pp. 42-43.

²⁰ Norman (2009), p. 61.

can present the unrepresentable Absolute (as is the case, for example, with Hölderlin's friend Schelling in his *System of Transcendental Idealism*). Yet the romantics do something more: they attempt to present the unrepresentable itself by creating artistic works.

Norman has recourse to Lyotard in order to explain how the unrepresentable in the romantics may be thought as something other than simply a negative theology. Lyotard draws a distinction between two modalities of the sublime, the *modern* and the *postmodern*:

the modern aesthetic is an aesthetic of the sublime, but it is nostalgic; it allows the unrepresentable to be invoked only as absent content, while form, thanks to its recognisable consistency, continues to offer the reader or spectator material for consolation and pleasure. [...] The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations – not to take pleasure in them but to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable²¹.

For Norman, then, works that exhibit the modern aesthetic can be understood as simply *illustrating* or providing an *example* of a notion that can be expressed in philosophical discourse: the negative theological notion that the Absolute is an unrepresentable absence. Lyotard's idea of the postmodern sublime, however, seems to capture what it is the romantics attempt to do: to present the unrepresentable *in* the work of art. She explains that “we can easily see Lyotard's distinction (between modernism and postmodernism) as an analytical rather than historical one”²², and she argues that we can identify aspects of both the modern and the postmodern in the works of the romantic writers. In the case of Novalis, for example, she suggests that his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* is a classical locus of the modern sublime, with its focus on absence and nostalgia (consider the famous “blue flower”). The novel is relatively conventional in its linguistic form, and alludes to absence through the transparent indication of concepts. In some other romantic works, however, such as Novalis' *Monologue*, or Schlegel's novel *Lucinde*, there is a self-reflective focus on language as the condition of representation, and a play with the medium akin to the formal innovations and experiments of the avant-gardes that Lyotard associates with the postmodern sublime²³.

²¹ Lyotard (1992), pp. 23-24.

²² Norman (2009), p. 72.

²³ Norman (2009), pp. 73-75.

Hölderlin, frequently grouped with the romantics, is surely susceptible to a similar analysis. In his metaphysics, as outlined in his fragmentary essays, ultimate knowledge of the absolute cannot be provided by philosophy, but only by an aesthetic “intellectual intuition”²⁴, and thus, by an experience which is *performed* in his poetry. Simplifying greatly, Hölderlin’s metaphysics consists in a triadic structure: 1) the absolute, which is an originary and primal unity, called by various names, including being and life; 2) a separation of this primal unity, which is implied in the actualities of life and existence, as well as in the basic conditions of conceptual thought as judgement²⁵; and 3) a unification of unity and separation (1 and 2) in aesthetic intellectual intuition²⁶. As Andrew Bowie explains this last point, “Hölderlin wishes to make the dividedness of self-consciousness part of its own creative potential, which strives to show in aesthetic production what it would be to overcome the division without regressing into an imaginary unity”²⁷. For Hölderlin as for the romantics Norman analyses, then, there is an unrepresentable which cannot be adequately grasped philosophically, but only aesthetically, which he strives to do in literary work.

Just as Norman suggests that there are moments of both the modern and the postmodern sublime in romantic writers such as Novalis, I suggest that we can see this also in Hölderlin. His novel *Hyperion* would be an exemplary instance of the modern sublime: it takes a form conventional for the time (a series of letters), and we do not have to look far for the themes of absence and nostalgia, which dominate throughout the book. This nostalgia takes the double form of the metaphysical loss of the original unity (the absolute) and of the historical decline of culture in relation to the imagined Golden Age of ancient Greece. For example:

Man cannot deny that once he was happy, like the deer of the forest, and after untold years there still glimmers in us a yearning for the days of the primal world when each roamed the earth like a god [...]”²⁸,

²⁴ “Intellectual intuition” is a direct, immediate knowledge, of which Kant denied the possibility. Its reality is asserted by others, however, such as Fichte, Schelling, and Hölderlin.

²⁵ Following Fichte, Hölderlin understands judgement as implying separation, playing on the commonality of the words *Urteil* (judgement) and *Ur-Teilung* (original division); see Hölderlin (2009), p. 376, note 14.

²⁶ See in particular the essays *Being Judgement Possibility* and *When the poet is at once in command of the spirit ...*, in Hölderlin (2009).

²⁷ Bowie (1990), p. 71.

²⁸ Hölderlin (2019), p. 97.

[In] ancient times [...] there was divine life and man was the central point of nature. [...] Nature was priestess and man her god, and all the life in her and every shape and every sound of hers but a single rapturous echo of the glorious being to whom she belonged²⁹.

On the other hand, we might see in the celebrated strangeness of the late poems, and especially the *Hymns*, forms of literary innovation that we might identify as the postmodern sublime, as putting forward the unrepresentable *in* the presentation itself, rather than simply signifying an absent content. To flesh out this claim, we can point to the specific linguistic devices in Hölderlin's poetry which have already been the subject of much scrutiny.

Perhaps the most famous of these devices is parataxis, as examined by Theodor W. Adorno³⁰. In conscious opposition to Heidegger, Adorno focuses on the objective linguistic form of Hölderlin's poems, which he sees as making "an assassination attempt on the harmonious work"³¹. *Parataxis*, the placing together of phrases without syntactically indicating their relation, strikes Adorno as one of the most characteristic features of Hölderlin's use of language in his late poems. These parataxes are "artificial disturbances that evade the logical hierarchy of a subordinating syntax"³². They constitute a "transformation of language into a serial order whose elements are linked differently than in the judgement"³³. Adorno presents a stanza from the second version of 'Der Einzige' ('The Only One') as exemplary. One element he points to, clearly indicating the paratactic construction, is around the stunted phrase "This time" ("*Dißmal*") in the following lines:

Disappeared from sight, as on a ladder.
This time. Self-willed as a rule, immoderately³⁴

Adorno suggests that this paratactic style gives primacy to form over intellectual content, and that his mature writing in general is so disruptive to the conventions of language that it approaches madness (p. 137). This allows Adorno to see Hölderlin as a precursor to literary modernism. At the same time, however, he notes

²⁹ Hölderlin (2019), p. 72.

³⁰ See *Parataxis: On Hölderlin's Late Poetry* in Adorno (1991).

³¹ Adorno (1991), p. 139.

³² Adorno (1991), p. 131.

³³ *Ibidem*. Regarding the significance of this for the capacity of language to "present the unrepresentable", see the comments on judgement in Note 10 above.

³⁴ Translation as quoted in Adorno (1991), p. 131.

the poet's distance from theology, which shuttles his interpretation towards Lyotard's definition of the postmodern:

The distance from theology is what is eminently modern in him. The idealistic Hölderlin inaugurates the process that leads to Beckett's protocol sentences, empty of meaning. This allows us an incomparably broader understanding of Hölderlin than was formerly possible. (p. 137)

Other scholars have taken up the theme of formal innovation and linguistic invention in Hölderlin in various ways. Jeremy Tambling (2014), for example, focuses on the four themes of parataxis, caesura, translation, and madness. But let us return to Lyotard to note an important clarification regarding what allows us to identify moments of the postmodern aesthetic in Hölderlin's writings.

In her recourse to Lyotard, Norman's focus is a little too much on the *formal*, while in fact Lyotard's own analyses of the sublime emphasise *matter* over form.³⁵ As we have noted above, Lyotard emphasises the 'formless' aspect of the sublime, and with the 20th century avant-gardes, he suggests that the minimisation of form is accompanied by an attraction to the matter of the work. Lyotard specifies that in painting, matter corresponds with colour, and in music, with timbre. And the significance of language, from this perspective, is that Lyotard presents words as the matter of thought:

Perhaps words themselves, in the most secret place of thought, are its matter, its timbre, its nuance, i.e. what it cannot manage to think. Words "say", sound, touch, always "before" thought. And they "say" something other than what thought signifies, and what it wants to signify by putting them into form. Words want nothing. They are the "un-will", the "non-sense" of thought, its mass³⁶.

What this means, then, is that we need not look exclusively for *formally definable* innovations in Hölderlin's poetry in order to see in it something of the postmodern sublime. We can see this sublime in the "grain" of the words themselves, their resistance to acting as transparent signifiers for conceptual meaning. Lyotard here names the "non-sense" that Norman identifies in Schlegel and Novalis as presenting the unrepresentable in language³⁷. And this focus on the matter of words, rather than the form of the poem – a "material", rather than formal, innovation – allows us to see more clearly the

³⁵ See for example the essay *After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics* in Lyotard (1991).

³⁶ Lyotard (1991), p. 142.

³⁷ Norman (2009), pp. 76-77.

dimension of experimentation in Hölderlin's *Hymns* beyond the possible objection that, formally, he is simply following the classical model of Pindar, as has frequently been noted. As David Constantine argues:

In imitating Pindar [...] Hölderlin was continuing a tradition. But it was possible, doing that, to be more or to be less easily assimilated into the vernacular language; and Hölderlin, characteristically, chose to be very unaccommodating. [...] Hölderlin adopted Pindar in a manner calculated to offend German tradition. [...] in the hymns [...] he was not seeking to render Pindar but to express his own very urgent concerns, the way he uses Pindar to that end is radically original. He kept the foreign model's foreignness, which rendered his own poetry strange³⁸.

Hölderlin's *Hymns* do not produce a "consoling" effect, even if they replicate a past model, because this replication introduces a form unfamiliar in his time (as in ours), and because he does so in a way which employs language which is highly obscure and challenging. What is important, ultimately, is that the feeling of the unrepresentable is evoked positively in the work: that is the mark of the postmodern sublime.

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³⁸ Constantine (1988), pp. 237-8.

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