

Poetics of Memory in Hölderlin and Walter Benjamin

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Eines zu sein mit Allem, was lebt ..., das ist der Gipfel der Gedanken und Freuden ... (Hölderlin, *Hyperion*).

Memory in Hölderlin

Hölderlin's understanding of poetic memory as the ability to perceive order and unity amidst diversity, in ensuring that 'der Weltlauf keine Lücke hat und das Gedächtnis der Himmlischen nicht ausgehet', is analogous to Platonic *anamnesis* of forms. In *Andenken* Hölderlin elucidates the creative process of memory which activates the capacity of attentiveness and cognitive retention and brings forth that which endures: 'Was bleibet aber, stiften die Dichter'.

Concepts of memory in Benjamin

Denn ein erlebtes Ereignis ist endlich, zumindest in der einen Sphäre des Erlebens beschlossen, ein erinnertes schrankenlos, weil nur Schlüssel zu allem was vor ihm und zu allem was nach ihm kam (Benjamin, *Zum Bilde Prousts*).

Benjamin's four interconnected concepts of memory illuminate Hölderlin's poetics of memory: *Gedächtnis* (memory as a capacity to retain knowledge), *Erinnerung* (recollection as an internal process), *Eingedenken* (Benjamin's term for remembrance or commemoration) and *Andenken* (memento). *Gedächtnis* relates to retentive memory or capacity for remembering. *Erinnerung* pertains to transmission of tradition in the sense of bringing into the present. *Eingedenken* is rediscovery of the past. *Andenken* relates to signs or symbols of remembrance or relics of engagement.

'The question of the incompleteness of history' in Benjamin

Wir wissen ja, daß die Vergangenheit kein musealer Kronschatz ist, sondern etwas das immer von Gegenwart betroffen ist (Benjamin, Letter to F.C. Rang).

Benjamin emphasises that the historical past is 'open' in so far as it is continuously reconfigured in the process of recollection. The function of memory is not archaeology but transformation, bringing to the foreground the ethical dimension of memory. Benjamin finds in memory a capacity to invigorate the past, to study past events in an open temporal continuum and to reactivate them.

Philosophical significance of the conceptions of memory in Hölderlin and Benjamin

For Hölderlin and Benjamin memory articulates the elective affinity and continuity of the manifold of events in the re-configuration of the past in the present. Hölderlin's conception of the activation of memory as presenting

unity and continuity among disparate temporal moments can be compared to Kant's transcendental unity of apperception which gives coherence to inchoate perceptions of multitude of phenomena.

Hölderlin's poetic insight regarding the unity with all forms of life and Benjamin's understanding of the possibility of the recalibration of the past, distilled in the midst of discordance surrounded by political and social turbulence of their times, have moral and political resonance in the present. The philosophical significance and practical value of the knowledge of how to be one with all that lives and the search for transformation of the past consist in engendering a common perspective for exploring ways of reconciling conflicts arising from divergence. Benjamin affirms the fortitude of the human capacity for liberating the future from the confinement of the orthodoxy of the present and the past as ossified relics (*Über den Begriff der Geschichte* XVI):

Er bleibt seiner Kräfte Herr: Manns genug, das Kontinuum der Geschichte aufzusprengen.

The work of memory takes place in the sphere of conflict between the recalcitrant propensity of the past as temporally static terminus and the continuously evolving present which seeks to encompass the past not as a self-enclosed terrain but a creation of the dynamic present. In Hölderlin's poetry the concept of memory is imbued with an ethical impetus. *Hyperion* presents moral universalism and pluralism: to strive for consonance with all forms of life in all endeavours of thought and action. Hölderlin affirms,

Versöhnung ist mitten im Streit und alles getrennt findet sich wieder.