

**POETRY AS EUCHARIST:
SUBLATING SPIRITUAL ALIENATION IN
HÖLDERLIN'S "BROD UND WEIN"**

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T. E. Hulme, in his essay "Romanticism and Classicism," famously defines Romanticism as "spilt religion," or the overflow of human religiosity into categories not meant to contain it.¹ He renders Romantic spirituality as an oblique and uncanny resurgence of deity worship over and against the ideological drive of rationalism, which, rather than eradicating religion, merely repressed it; and in this way, Hulme makes of Romanticism something almost traumatic.² Spilt religion becomes the doom of the agnostic, who, unable to fully assimilate the existence of the divine into her selfhood, reenacts spirituality through naturalism and humanism—deprived of her God, she worships herself.³

Hulme's surface claim—that the humans of literary Romanticism reach vainly for the clouds while the humans of literary Classicism tread appropriately on the ground—may thus be more nuanced by his underlying claim—that the traumatized relationship between the Romantic and her religiosity shaped the Romantic lyric.⁴ Thomas Pfau, in his book *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790-1840*, treats this speculated relationship between Romanticism and trauma more fully. He presents trauma as one of three essential "moods" shaping Romantic poetry, a sort of "psycho-historic

¹ T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism," in *T. E. Hulme: Selected Writings*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (Carcenet/Routledge, 2004), 115.

² T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism," 114-115.

³ Hulme, 114-115.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 113-116.

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climate” giving birth to conscious thought and literary discourse.⁵ Contrary to more general connotations of the word, which refer to changing emotional states, “mood” here denotes a matrix of holistic experience anterior to conscious thought determined by the historical-situatedness of one’s being-in-the-world.⁶ Pfau suggests that because mood, as the unknown shaper of thought, “sediments” itself into discrete discourse formations, analyzing the formal characteristics of a given literary period could yield a greater insight into the very historical reality—at the time entirely opaque—from which its authors read and wrote.⁷

Within the context of such a mood theory, “trauma” (taken in the Freudian sense) describes the unique relationship that arises between history, consciousness, and text when “a past so catastrophic at the time of its original occurrence...preclude[s] its conscious assimilation by the subject.”⁸ Because mood, as anterior to consciousness, also gives form to consciousness, the topography of poetic voice develops as a response to—and a protection from—*Gedächtnisspuren*, or memory traces, of a past trauma.⁹ Pfau understands the conscious self to be “belated,” capable only of recalling object-structures distilled from an inaccessible history,¹⁰ and he argues that disturbances in the poetic voice embody an innate dissonance that cannot be known as propositional content but can be “awakened” in aesthetic form.¹¹ He therefore views lyric disturbances as constitutive of Romanticism’s engagement with the traumatized reality of modernity.

⁵ Thomas Pfau, *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790-1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 6.

⁶ Pfau, *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790-1840*, 6-11.

⁷ Pfau, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 202-203.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

In this essay, I will explore the intersection of Hulme's concept of an essentially traumatized Romantic religiosity and Pfau's work with lyric structures and mood theory in order to articulate the effects of historical trauma on the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin. Specifically, I argue that Hölderlin's elegy "Brod und Wein" reflects a lyric embodiment of Hölderlin's belatedness to the *spiritual* trauma of modernity—when the subject becomes alienated from the now seemingly-antiquated religious traditions that once facilitated her individual experience of the divine presence. Hölderlin reconstitutes the substance of organized religion in an aesthetic medium in order to affect feelings of transcendence no longer directly accessible through outside religious practice. He conceives of poetry not as a means for enacting "spilt religion" but as a way to virtually access the divine while simultaneously calling attention to its absence.

In making this argument, I will focus primarily on the way in which Hölderlin isolates and reincorporates elements of Christianity and Greek paganism within "Brod und Wein" to create a new mythology. In this mythos, Hölderlin positions the poet as priest in an intermediate epoch between the past, when the gods and humanity lived together in bliss, and the future, when the absconded divinities will come again. Formally, he uses binary structures to establish states of alienation between present and past, divine and profane—and yet, the voice of "Brod und Wein" admits a certain tonal ambivalence, allowing its binary figures to kaleidoscope into each other, transgress their intrinsic separation, and ultimately become the grounds of a kind of syncretic unity. Therefore, in the first section, I will analyze the binary structures underlying the poem's narrative, typified by the moon as "Schattenbild unserer Erde."¹² In the second section, I will analyze lyric syncretisms, such as the figures of Father Æther and his Son. Finally,

¹² Friedrich Hölderlin, "Brod und Wein," in *Hölderlin: Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Friedrich Beissner (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1955), 94-99, l. 14.

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I will conclude with a few thoughts on the relationship between the formal characteristics of “Brod und Wein” and Hölderlin’s views on spirituality and poetry. Because poetic language allows for a syncretic sublation of binary alienation, it is capable of embodying and articulating the modern subject’s traumatic separation from her historical religious nature while also providing a vehicle for the affective reunification of the divine presence and the self. Just as, internal to the poem, the bread and wine function as sacraments for “weak vessels” which signify and perpetuate the divine presence on earth from the present to the eschaton, external to the poem, poetic language *is* the bread and wine, signifying a form of religious existence lost to the modern subject while also perpetuating religiosity through aesthetic affect until whenever (if ever) the modern subject is reconciled to her innate spirituality.¹³

“Schattenbild unserer erde”: Binary, Liminality, and Alienation

“Brod und Wein” is, primarily, a mythical narrative poem. Traceable throughout the narrative, however, is a complex of undergirding binaries onto which Hölderlin’s mythos is mapped. The poem opens with a quiet overture to the sleeping earth: the day is done, the markets are empty, the workingmen are heading home, and “all around, the city rests.”¹⁴ From the very beginning, Hölderlin situates his world in twilight, established along both a temporal (the hour passing, day giving way to night) and a photic axis (shadows; the light of the

¹³ Hölderlin, “Brod und Wein,” ll. 109-144. From this point onward, “Brod und Wein” will be cited by line number rather than by page number. English translations follow Stephen Fennell, “Friedrich Hölderlin, ‘Brod und Wein,’” in *Landmarks in German Poetry*, ed. Peter Hutchinson (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000), 97-120.

¹⁴ Hölderlin, 1-6.

sun giving way to the light of the moon).¹⁵ In so doing, he introduces two binary oppositions, which I will call *past vs. future* and *day vs. night*. The liminality of the speaker will prove to be an essential feature of Hölderlin's elegy—situated in the in-between and the passing-to-and-fro, the speaker must arbitrate between two opposing realities, in turns either becoming or fading away, and the perpetual tug-of-war alienates the speaker from his or her present, embodied context, which never fully crystalizes. Notice, therefore, that though “the city rests,” “the fountains,/ springing constantly fresh, rustle the fragrant beds,” and “now too, a soft wind rises, riffling the wood's highest branches.”¹⁶ The city, forever settling, never quite settles.

This latent agitation serves as a harbinger for the coming moon, which dawns at the end of the first stanza:

Sieh! und das Schattenbild unserer Erde, der Mond
Kommet geheim nun auch; die Schwärmerische,
die Nacht kommt,
Voll mit Sternen und wohl wenig bekümmert um uns,
Glänzt die Erstaunende dort, die Fremdlingin unter
den Menschen
Über Gebirgshöhn traurig und prächtig herauf.

Look! and mysterious, the shadow-world of our
Earth, the moon,
Rises with it; and Night, the fanciful dreamer, rises,
Full of stars: little concerned, so it would seem, about
us.
There, the amazing, she gleams, stranger to all our
people,
Moving splendid and sad over the mountain peaks.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶ Ibid., 1-13.

¹⁷ Hölderlin, 14-18.

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The impact of the moon's arrival shatters the poem into new binaries. First, the rising of the moon at night is a moon-dawn reminiscent of an inverse sunrise, and so the moon becomes an anti-sun, shining its light on an anti-day: *moon vs. sun*. This anti-day is "Night, the fanciful dreamer," which, in contrast to the bustling productivity the workingmen have just left behind, is the domain of music, of lovers and lone troubadours: *capitalist labor vs. artistic labor*.¹⁸ But not only is the moon an anti-sun, ushering in an anti-day, but it is an anti-earth, a "stranger to all our people" hanging round and beautiful over the mountain peaks—the very emblem of *heavens vs. earth*.¹⁹

The next two stanzas expand the zones these binaries loosely demarcate into mythic proportions. Here, the poet speaker wrestles with his or her relationship to the goddess Night and to the High God, Father Æther. Which is to say, the temporal and photic setting of the poem's narrative takes on theological relevance—for the rest of the poem, the speaker stands firmly in the domain of Night and only ventures beyond it through memory or future projection. The Night is "die Hoherhabene," the "Sublime One" or "the Raised-on-High," underscoring her distance from the earth and its inhabitants; she gives gifts, but she is unpredictable ("Even the wisest has no cognizance of her works"), and though she is worshipped, "her self-spirit exists fully, eternally free."²⁰ Night contrasts with the High God, to whom belong "thought-filled daylight," "clear eyes," and "faithful men" as well as the "holy inebriation," "free-flowing word," and "brimming cups" that Night must concede to grant.²¹

The appearance of these two opposing figures inaugurates two more binaries which will be, arguably, the most im-

¹⁸ Ibid., 6-9. Note that the title "die Schwärmerische" invokes the complex resonances of *Schwärmerie*.

¹⁹ Ibid., 17-18.

²⁰ Ibid., 19-22

²¹ Ibid., 22-36.

portant for the poem as it progresses: *asleep vs. awake* and *divine presence vs. divine absence*. Hölderlin suggests that the speaker-poet's alienation from his or her present context arose concomitant with the deprivation of the present of its moral weight and spiritual significance. He characterizes the speaker as a roamer awake in the Night, and a fitful dreamer. For although the speaker remembers the stories of the past, when the gods descended to earth and the divine presence indwelled humanity, he or she remembers them in questions, relentless *wos* that underscore the speaker's alienation from the sunny past even as it, narrated, begins to dawn:

Also ist wahr, was einst wir in der Jugend gehört?
Festlicher Saal! der Boden ist Meer! und Tische die Berge
Wahrlich zu einzigem Brauche vor Alters gebaut!
Aber die Thronen, wo? die Tempel, und wo die Gefäße,
Wo mit Nektar gefüllt, Göttern zu Lust der Gesang?
Wo, wo leuchten sie denn, die fernhintertreffenden Sprüche?
Delphi schlummert und wo tönet das große Geschick?
Wo ist das schnelle? wo brichts, allgegenwärtigen Glücks voll
Donnernd aus heiterer Luft über die Augen herein?

Is it then true, what they told us once in our youth?
Festal hall, whose floor is the sea and whose tables mountains,
Truly constructed for one use only in far-gone days!
But the thrones, where are they, the temples, and where are the vessels,
Where the delight of gods, brimming with nectar, the song?
Where do the oracles gleam, striking far into the distance?

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Delphi slumbers; where does the weighty destiny
sound?
Where is the Swiftest? Where, filled with
omnipresence of fortune,
Thundering, does it break in, out of clear air, on our
eyes?²²

The speaker, has, tragically, “come too late;” he or she repeats stories as if they were memories, fixated on conscious-constructs and haunted by the traces of a time when the divine presence was traumatically ripped away from him or her.²³ Now, the speaker lives amidst “weak vessels,” unfit to receive the gods as they once did, and although echoes of the gods’ blessed day linger, all but Night have absconded—Night who, sublime, unknowable, and utterly foreign, forever reminds the speaker of his or her alienation from the divine presence rather than stands in for it.²⁴ “Meanwhile it seems to me often,” the speaker laments,

Besser zu schlafen, wie so ohne Genossen zu sein,
So zu harren und was zu tun indes und zu sagen,
Weiß ich nicht und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?

...better to sleep than as now to be so companionless,
waiting like this; and what’s to do and to say in the
meantime
I do not know, and what poets are for when times are
hard.²⁵

²² Hölderlin, 55-64.

²³ Ibid., 109.

²⁴ Ibid., 113.

²⁵ Ibid., 119-122.

**“Der oberste gott”:
Religious Syncretism and Poetic Voice**

Having thus identified in the binary *understructure* of Hölderlin’s narration the poet-speaker’s traumatic alienation from the divine presence that once informed humanity’s spirituality, subjectivity, and significance, this essay will now turn its attention to the narrative’s *overstructure*, or the poetic language that gives Hölderlin’s mythos a form and a voice in which to be embodied. For despite the acute binariness of the speaker’s alienated reality, his or her poetic voice curiously fails to distinguish between certain otherwise-demarcated dualities. Rather, the lyric of “Brod und Wein” is characteristically ambiguous and ambivalent—seemingly-opposed categories shift and blur into each other, leading to various forms of figured syncretism. Two such instances will be explored here.

First, like any good mythologist, Hölderlin populates his elegy with a pantheon of divinities, two of which—Night and Father Æther—have already been introduced. In the beginning, these gods are explicitly identified with the gods of Greek paganism. For example, in connection with the gods the speaker references Ancient Greek geography, mentioning “Thebes,” “Delphi,” and the “Olympian lands.”²⁶ Father Æther is identified with the heavens and with thunder, typical attributes of Zeus, and in other places with wine and drunken revelry, characteristics of the god Dionysus.²⁷ These and other strains of Greek religion run counter to the explicitly-Christian imagery that enters towards the poem’s end. In Stanza IX, the speaker envisions a kind of Parousia, when the Son, elsewhere referred to as “a quiet genius, heavenly/ comforter, who proclaimed the end of days and was gone,” will restore the divine presence to humanity.²⁸ Moreover, the Son leaves the bread

²⁶ Hölderlin, 51-62.

²⁷ See, for example, Hölderlin, 138.

²⁸ Ibid., 125-139; 155-160.

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and wine “as a sign they had been here, once, and again would/ come”—a clear allusion to the Christian Eucharist.²⁹

Critically, however, the elements of these two religions—the religion of Western antiquity and the religion of Western modernity—are not clearly distinguished from each other, but are rather kneaded together in Hölderlin’s lyric voice. At times, the gods are referred to with titles reminiscent of both traditions, such as “God in the Highest.”³⁰ Other times, one character is described using figural language oscillating between two identities, as if stuck in superposition. Father Æther, for example, is in one stanza referred to as “thundering,” referencing Zeus and his lightning-bolts, and in another stanza as “the god slow of thunder,” referencing the Christian God who is “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”³¹ The Son, too, appears as a Christ figure, the Son of the High God, and a Dionysian figure, giver of bread and wine.³² In both of these examples, Hölderlin brings to bear the power and flexibility of figural language to give form to a dynamically-shifting mythology. He breaks down two giants of Western religiosity into their essential elements and then reconstitutes those elements in poetic form, thereby creating an entirely new, syncretic spirituality subsuming both of them.

A similar effect is at play in Hölderlin’s use of verb tense. Though at first glance *past vs. present* seems an inviolable dichotomy in the understructure of “Brod und Wein,” emphasizing the insuperable alienation of the speaker in his or her twilight present from the beatitude of the divine past, in the poetic overstructure, there are instances throughout the elegy when time and tense desynchronize, as if the lyric voice has lost track of what it is speaking about. Perhaps the most noticeable of such instances would be in Stanzas V-VI. Here,

²⁹ Ibid., 125-142.

³⁰ Hölderlin., 23.

³¹ Jonah 4:2.

³² Hölderlin, 125-142; 153-160.

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the poet-speaker recounts the story of the gods' arrival in present tense:

Unempfunden kommen sie erst, es streben entgegen
Ihnen die Kinder, zu hell kommet, zu blendend das
Glück,
und es scheut sie der Mensch, kaum weiß zu sagen ein
Halbgott
Wer mit Namen sie sind, die mit den Gaben ihn
nahn....

Unperceived they are, as they first come; eagerly
children
Jostle to meet them; yet too bright, too dazzling the
joy
And men shun them; hardly even a demi-god knows
How he shall tell by name those that approach him
with gifts.³³

Notice, also, that the stanza ends with three repetitions of *nun*—the immediacy of the divine presence as imagined/remembered takes command of the lyric voice, demanding a very present-tense narration for this strictly past event. But midway through Stanza VI, the present-ness of the speaker's present-tense breaks down concomitant with the collapse of his or her vision of posterity before the harshness of present absence and alienation.

The dramatic breakdown is signaled by the disjuncture of an interjecting hyphen:

Fest und Edel, sie gehn über Gestaden empor—
Aber wo sind sie? wo blühn die Bekannten, die Kro-
nen des Festes?

³³ Ibid., 73-76.

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Thebe welkt und Athen; rauschen die Waffen nicht
mehr
In Olympia, nicht die goldnen Wagen des Kampf-
spiels,
Und bekränzen sich denn nimmer die Schiffe
Corinths?
Warum schweigen auch sie, die alten heiligen
Theater?
Warum freut sich denn nicht der geweihte Tanz?
Warum zeichnet, wie sonst, die Stirne des Mannes ein
Gott nicht,
Drückt den Stempel, wie sonst, nicht dem Getroffenen
auf?

Strong and noble, they rise high over coast and cliff –
Yes, but where? And the familiar, flowering crowns of
the feast-day?
Thebes and Athens, both, wilt. Do weapons no more
Ring in Olympia? Nor the golden chariots in combat?
And the Corinthian ships: are they now bare of the
wreath?
Why are even they silent, the ancient holy theatres?
Why can the sacred dance no more stand up and
rejoice?
Why no more does a god set his mark on a man's
forehead,
Print the stamp as before, die-like, on him who is
struck?³⁴

The present of the present intrudes upon the present of
the past like a projector screen swallowing up a burning piece
of film reel, and the sharp turn from declarative to interroga-

³⁴ Hölderlin., 98-106.

tive sentences, adding a sense of panic to the lyric voice, signals the stirrings of memory traces as the speaker nears the event of his or her religious trauma: *nun, nun, nun* gives way to *wo, wo, wo*. Yet as with the High God, Hölderlin's poetic language attempts to absorb the impact of *past vs. present* using the present-tense. The result is another lyric syncretism, albeit a much more fragile one, constantly threatening to burst under the centrifugal force of two irreconcilable temporalities.

“Brod und wein”: The Spiritual Role of the Poet

What then can we say to Hulme's claim that Romanticism is “spilt religion?”³⁵ Certainly the running-together of all manners of liquid in a massive table-top spill seems at first glance a fitting metaphor for Hölderlin's frequent syncretisms—but under the surface (or rather, above and below the surface), the tensions between form and content speak to a deeper-set religious trauma. If the binary understructure of “Brod und Wein” can be understood as a formal awakening of the speaker-poet's alienation from the divine presence within modernity, then it represents the initial residue of a traumatic mood shaping the poet's voice. Lyric shifts and disturbances further indicate an awakened trauma in the poetic overstructure, where the speaker attempts to assimilate disparate religious symbols and imagery into a kind of cohesive whole. Since the speaker, as a modern subject, has been traumatically sundered from his or her spiritual being, he or she is compelled to repeat this sundering in novel ways, breaking with old religious traditions and creating new ones through lyric poetry. And while repeating and recombining the detritus of Western religious history *does* create a kind of cohesively-syncretic mythology, because these efforts, as *conscious* efforts, still come posterior to the speaker's being-in-trauma—because the speaker's efforts are by necessity belated—repetition cannot

³⁵ Hulme, 115.

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restore true unity to the speaker, it can only affect it. The lyric voice's syncretism merely sublates, rather than eradicates, the tension between the poem's underlying dualities. And so one should rather say that, in the case of Hölderlin, Romanticism is not a "spilt religion" but a wounded one.

Nevertheless, Hölderlin offers "Brod und Wein"—and poetry more broadly—as a sacrament for the modern subject in the interim, producing, like the Eucharist's bread and wine, divine presence even as it draws attention to divine absence. The unique shape of religiosity in Romantic poetry bespeaks the struggle of a generation of modern artists to make sense of the traumatic effects of Enlightenment rationalism on Western spirituality. For Hölderlin, at least, the role of the poet is to be a priest of the wine god and the fate of the poet is to wake fitfully in a world fast asleep. "Darum," he writes,

denken wir auch dabei der Himmlischen, die sonst
Da gewesen und die kehren in richtiger Zeit.
Darum singen auch mit Ernst, die Sänger, den Weingott
Und nicht eitel erdacht tönet dem Alten das Lob.

Therefore with these our thoughts turn to the heavenly,
those who
Once were here and in their own due time will return.
Therefore do poets, too, solemnly sing of the wine-god,
And no idly composed praise sounds to the ancient one.³⁶

³⁶ Hölderlin, 149-152.

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