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An Idea in Combat with Itself: Benjamin, Hölderlin, and "Temporal Plasticity"

Among the claims Walter Benjamin proposes in a dense essay from late 1914 or early 1915 entitled "Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin" ("Two Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin"), one appears to leave even its proponent at a loss. Benjamin asserts that "the poetized" ("das Gedichtete") of a late poem by Hölderlin is characterized by "temporal plasticity" ("zeitliche Plastik" [120]), which suggests that time does not flow like a river but, rather, stands still like a work of plastic art such as a statue, mosaic, or temple.[1] The introduction to the essay is devoted to explaining what Benjamin means by "the poetized." Whatever else may be said about the poetized, one thing is certain: it is opposed to psychologism. Just as Hermann Cohen and Edmund Husserl develop their programs for "pure knowledge" (Cohen, *Logik*) and "pure phenomenology" (Husserl) by attacking any form of empirical research that impinges on the domains of logic and epistemology, Benjamin circumscribes a field of "pure aesthetics" ("Two Poems" 105) by making the analysis of artworks incompatible with inquiries into the empirical conditions of artists and their audiences. In the case of lyric poetry, "aesthetic commentary" (105) seeks to identify the basic task that the poem under investigation is meant to fulfill, regardless of what the poet wished to say or the audience may have felt. The identification of this task yields the poetized, which can then be considered the a priori of the poem. Unlike New Criticism, which also dispenses with psychological considerations, the program Benjamin develops in "Two Poems" is less concerned with grasping the verbal artifact by means of close reading than with approaching the methodological ideal of the "pure poetized" (108), which would itself be a poem—or life itself.

No similarly brief thesis can be formulated to explain some of the other terms Benjamin develops for his analysis of Hölderlin's late ode "Blödigkeit" ("Infirmity" or "Timidity," with a hint of "Stupidity") in relation to one of its earlier versions, "Dichtermut" ("Poetic Courage"). Most puzzling of all is probably "temporal plasticity." Nevertheless, this term describes the culmination of the program for "pure aesthetics," since it completes the critique of psychologism by striking at its underlying concept of experience, which represents time as a unidimensional, irreversible flow. The plasticity of time means that it is multidimensional, static, and formable—hence reversible. Reversible time is inconceivable from the perspective of lived experience, as Benjamin emphasizes. Only a thoroughly contemplative consciousness, which approximates the perspective of a god, can apply *plastic* to time; otherwise, for empirical consciousness, it appears to flow.

This much is clear: the idea of temporal plasticity opposes what Heidegger would later call "the vulgar concept of time" (420). Far less clear is the source of this idea. Nowhere in the poems discussed by Benjamin does *plastic* appear. In his analysis of the spatial character of "Blödigkeit," he emphasizes one of its words: *gelegen* ("opportune," derived from *legen*, "to place"), which allows him to describe the spatiality of the corresponding poetized in terms of *Gelegenheit* ("opportunity"). When every place is opportune, space no longer appears empty. The sight of empty space is generated by the as-

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sumption that space is only a means for attaining subjectively determined ends—for getting somewhere. Benjamin's exposition of opportune space draws on a rich complex of words derived from *legen* and *Lage* ("situation"). By contrast, his subsequent discussion of temporality takes its point of departure from a phrase in "Blödigkeit" that scarcely has anything to do with plasticity: *der denkende Tag* ("the thinking day"). The difficulty is compounded by the fact that this phrase almost begs for a discussion of the philosophical context of Hölderlin's work. At the heart of *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant denies the possibility of "intellectual intuition" (145). Post-Kantian thought begins by affirming that a certain mode of intuition, in which the self "sees" itself, without actually perceiving anything, creates what it sees and should therefore be called intellectual as opposed to merely receptive. Insofar as *day* is a trope for appearances and *thinking* a synonym for *intellect*, Hölderlin's poem can be understood in part as a testament to the post-Kantian project: the thinking day is the moment of sheer lucidity in which intuition is intellectual, every phenomenon revealing itself as the noumenon it is. By discussing the thinking day without any reference to the debates about intellectual intuition, Benjamin not only refrains from making this claim, he implicitly repudiates the philological-historical methodology on which it is based.

All of this suggests that Benjamin proposes the idea of temporal plasticity *only* in opposition to the "vulgar concept of time." But this view is mistaken, for the idea responds to basic tendencies of two contemporaneous—and conflicting—movements in philosophy. The conflict revolves around the value of science. On the one side is Henri Bergson's vitalism, which denies that science grants access to reality. On the other side is the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism, which unambiguously affirms the "fact of science" (Cohen, *Ethik* 65). Initiated by Cohen and advanced by Ernst Cassirer, under whom Benjamin briefly studied, the Marburg school developed a set of methodological principles that much of Benjamin's early work engages. Of particular importance for "Two Poems" is Cassirer's *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* (*Substance and Function*). Benjamin's essay could even be entitled "Substance Poem and Function Poem," since the poetized of "Dichtermut" appears to be made up of discrete substances, whereas the poetized of "Blödigkeit" is shown to consist in infinite functions. A major aim of the Marburg school lies in abolishing space and time as independent elements of knowledge. To the extent that space and time appear as data of consciousness, they are elements not of knowledge but of mythology. Undoing their apparent independence can be accomplished by making them into functions of each other. Seen from this perspective, the direction of Benjamin's analysis, far from being hopelessly opaque, is readily apparent. In the poetized of "Blödigkeit," the later poem, as opposed to "Dichtermut," space and time are neither immediate data nor independent elements; each permeates the other. In other words, space is temporalized, and time spatialized. The temporalization of space finds expression in *Gelegenheit*, which designates a temporal mode (opportunity) by means of a spatial term ("placedness"). There is no similarly apt word in the poem, however, for the spatialization of time. So Benjamin inserts one of his own. The plastic character of time distances it from lived experience. For the proponents of the Marburg school, the distance between time and lived experience is characteristic of pure knowledge, and its creation stems from the infinite progress of science. Nothing in Benjamin's essay suggests, though, that he shares this conception of science as the progressive agent of transcendence.

And this omission brings us to the opposing perspective from which "temporal plasticity" can be elucidated, for it is also a translation of what Bergson calls *la durée*. The anti-Kantian program is set in Bergson's dissertation, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*. (*An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*). In the first part of the first *Critique*, Kant discusses space and time in similar terms. Bergson denies the validity of this discussion. Time is utterly unlike space; it is malleable, elastic if not

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exactly plastic, for, depending on a range of factors, duration can be longer or shorter. The fact, however, that we speak of duration as longer or shorter shows the poverty of our language when it comes to capturing time as it is really lived: "homogeneous time . . . is an idol of language" (Bergson, *Matière* 232). For Benjamin, the poetized of Hölderlin's late poetry is fully emancipated from this idol: "Entirely in opposition to 'fleeting time,' to the 'transient ones,'" Benjamin writes, quoting phrases from earlier poems, "that which persists, duration in the form of time and human beings [*das Beharrende, die Dauer in der Gestalt der Zeit und der Menschen*] has been developed in the new version of these lines" ("Two Poems" 119). Far from arguing for the nonspatial character of duration, Benjamin goes in the opposite direction and presents it as the very shaping of time.

Here, then, is the difficulty. The Marburg school and Bergsonian vitalism are irreconcilable. Cohen and Cassirer see in the systematic work of science a way out of time as it is generally conceived; Bergson looks at the immediate data of consciousness for a way into time as it is actually lived. If these two lines of argument meet at any point, it is only in the conviction that lived experience as it is reflected in empirical consciousness involves a certain time mythology or time idolatry. The task Benjamin's essay seeks to identify by analyzing one of Hölderlin's late poems consists in breaking free of time mythology and time idolatry alike; but the exposition of this task revolves around an idea that is not so much polemical as self-polemical: in combat with itself.

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Note

1. All translations are my own.

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The Poetry of the Future

C'est, en quelque sorte, parce qu'il y a le poème que le futur est possible.

—Maurice Blanchot, *La part du feu*

Did poetry have a future in the nineteenth century? This question was asked, directly and indirectly, with surprising frequency across nineteenth-century Western literary languages, as if its persistent iteration was, somehow, an effect of the question itself. In Walt Whitman's little-known essay "The Poetry of the Future," as in Arthur Rimbaud's celebrated "Voyant" letter to Paul Demeny, a future poetry is greeted as an original poetry, one that breaks cleanly with precedent. For both authors, however, breaking with the past entails imitating it, which suggests that—a conundrum familiar to readers of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe—poetry's future looks much like its past, the way forward indistinguishable from the way back.

This notion that the poetry of the future hinges on the possibility of differentiating original from imitation may have received its most intense nineteenth-century consideration in the single paragraph Karl Marx devoted to this topic in his *Eighteenth Brumaire* (*Der achtzehnte Brumaire*):

> The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only

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