

*This is an excerpt from Richard Eldridge's essay, "Rotating the Axis of Our Investigation, Wittgenstein's investigations and Hölderlin's poetology". The full essay appears in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, eds. Gibson and Huemer, (Routledge, 2004), pp. 211-227.*

IV

"The path of life," then "does not lead back into the origin."¹ Instead, the best that we can achieve, in life and in art, is

an ordered modulation of acts in which each of the tendencies of life [especially love-fusion vs. selfhood-independence] is momentarily released. ...Art, like the consummate life, will but repeat harmoniously the processes of the actual, and deliver its oppositions from their conflict through completeness and order.²

Hölderlin develops his famous Wechseltonlehre—his doctrine of the modulation or exchange of poetic moods—precisely in order to characterize how order or modulated succession may be achieved in a poem in repetition of "the processes of the actual" in life. Order or modulated succession in poetry and in life then stands in place of impossible master theoretical knowledge of the place of finite subjecthood in relation to absolute being as a process through which the composition and composure of the self may be achieved. As James H. Donelan usefully characterizes this move,

self-positing through opposition to the material [as in Fichte's effort to know the ground of finite subjecthood in absolute Being/subject activity] has given way in poetry and music to self-positing through opposition in the material [as the finite subject moves coherently

through opposed moments of attention and mood]. [In this way there is] a material existence for self-positing activity.³

Finite subjecthood maintains its existence in and through successive acts of attention and interfused moods, and it maintains its existence well when these acts and moods are ordered, modulated, in their succession of one another.

Donelan argues cogently that Hölderlin developed his Wechseltonlehre under the inspiration of the theory of harmonic modulation in musical composition, as expounded in Christian Gottfried Körner's 1795 essay "Über Charakterdarstellung in der Musik," published in Schiller's journal Die Horen.⁴ In the essay fragment "Wechsel der Töne" ["The Modulation of Tones"] Hölderlin offers a specific theory of the proper developments or actions of epic poetry, lyric poetry, and tragic poetry as they should move from their various beginnings into opposites and finally into resolutions. The complexes of subject matter, diction, and mood through which poems properly move are analogized to key centers, and they are characterized by Hölderlin in terms such as "naïve, heroic, idealistic, naïve-heroic, ideal-heroic," etc.⁵

Of more interest, however, for Hölderlin's understanding of the life of a finite subject and of its possibilities of development is his longer essay "On the Operations of the Poetic Spirit" ["Verfahrungsweise des poetischen Geistes"] (1800?).⁶ In this essay, Hölderlin develops his theory of modulation specifically as an account of the processes of the actual through which finite subjecthood exists and through which its composure may be achieved, when modulation is smooth and natural.

The essay begins with a series of reminders of things of which the poet must be aware. Chief among these is the thought that "a conflict is necessary between [1] the most original postulate of the spirit which aims at [the] communality and unified simultaneity of all parts, and [2] the other postulate which commands the spirit to move beyond itself and reproduce itself" (62) as apperceptively unified, independent selfhood, sustaining itself across opposed acts of attention. This conflict can in turn be understood as resulting from the

demands that the work have both spiritual content or a presentation of “the interrelation of all parts” of nature and spiritual form or an “alternation of parts” as they are variously attended to by a finite subject (62). This conflict can be partially, but only partially, resolved in that across successive acts of attention “harmonious alternation” can “replace as much as was lost of the original relation and unity of the parts” (63) in absolute being, from which finite subjecthood has emerged. Such harmonious alternations can “satisfy the demands of the spirit” (63) to some degree, even though the opposition of “spiritual tranquil content” (the wholeness of nature) and “spiritual alternating form” (a finite subject with its specific acts of successive attention) remains “irreconcilable” (64). “Material identical striving” (or a self-identical, specific finite subjectivity) and “material alternation” (or the actual scenes, events, or thoughts that successively occupy attention) also irreconcilable, but when there is harmonious alternation of subject-matter, mood, and tone, then each “renders tangible” (64) the other.

Any poem will be composed of either a) sequences of events, perspectives, and realities, b) sequences of desires, representations, thoughts, and passions, or c) sequences of fictions and possibilities, and in each case the sequence can be treated either objectively (as a matter of things that happen independently of any subject’s attention) or subjectively (as sequences of a subject’s acts of attention) (64). The harmonious development of a sequence requires, however, that it have an “authentic cause” (64) which serves as the “foundation of the poem” (65) in forming or controlling “transition between the expression, that which is presented, the sensuous subject matter, that which is actually pronounced in the poem, and ...the spirit, the idealistic treatment” (65) or the moods, attitudes, thoughts, and feelings of the self responding to the sensuous subject matter. “Between the expression (the presentation) and the free idealistic treatment, there lies the foundation and significance of the poem” (66). A successful poem, that is to say, presents sensuous subject matter (sequences of events, thoughts, or possibilities) as infused with appropriately responsive thoughts, feelings, moods, and attitudes on the part of a responding, composing subject, and vice versa. When an authentic cause or foundation

controls the transitions within a poem, then “does the poet provide the idealistic [the finite, striving, self-opposed, self-identical human subject] with a beginning, a direction, a significance” (10). The poet’s modulated attention, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and moods model or show, that is to say, how any human subject might appropriately respond to this sensuous subject matter. “At this point the spirit, which appeared as finite by virtue of the [subject/object] opposition [and the opposition of itself to itself in successive acts of attention], is tangible in its infinity” (69). Through modulated transitions the poet as finite human subject can feel himself to be --although independent and apart from absolute Being as such-- also harmoniously related to it, to share an underlying life with things. Through identification with and even participation in the poet’s subjectivity (especially in lyric), readers too can balance a felt sense of independent selfhood with a sense of belonging to a whole in love.

But this felt sense of independence and connection remains aesthetic and not an object of theoretical knowledge. The poetic self cannot “become its own object” (71). Were it to undertake to do so—to reflect directly on itself rather than via attention to sensuous subject matter—then it would find only “a dead and deadly unity,” “an infinite stagnation,” a vengeful, world-denying, empty ego.

Nor does this felt sense of independence and belonging altogether resolve contradictions that attach inherently to the life of any finite subject. The poetic and human subject remains always entangled in a triangular relation among the sensuous subject matter cognized or attended to, the actual content of the cognition (the subject’s thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and moods), and the self-opposing, self-identical I that is doing the cognizing (71). The subject

has to remain inevitably in contradiction with himself, within the necessary conflict (1) of the striving for pure selfhood and identity, (2) of the striving for significance [Bedeutetheit] and differentiation, (3) of the striving for harmony.... (74)

Nonetheless, if the human subject is neither “too selfless, that is, devoted to ...object[s] in a too self-forgetful manner, ...nor too selfish, that is, hovering between its inner foundation and its object in a too undecided, empty, and

indetermined manner” (78), then it can manage—to an extent, and for a time, within certain scenes and moments of relationship—to be more or less ‘at home’ with itself, with empirical objects, and with other human subjects, all somehow within a whole whose essence we cannot know.

V

In the Preface to Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein comments on the structure of his writing. He felt, he tells us, compelled “to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction” and compelled not by mere idiosyncrasy or personal compulsion but by “the very nature of the investigation” (p. ix.) There is no single originating insight or intellectual intuition in virtue of which the place of the finite subject in the world can be conclusively established. Instead there are sequences of thoughts about subjectivity and conceptual consciousness, themselves prompted by phenomena of human life and language as, one might say, their ‘authentic causes.’ The criss-cross travel through thoughts about the human—a progress, not an exposition of a theory—remains controlled, however, by the “natural inclination” of “my thoughts” (p. ix). Despite their lack of control by any guiding insight that governs their place in a systematic exposition, these thoughts are here portrayed by Wittgenstein as falling into chains of natural inclination, transition, or modulation one into another.

Everywhere the course of thoughts remains surrounded by awareness of the materiality of human being in the world, an awareness announced first in §1 in the thought that the shopkeeper “acts” with words, as he identifies and distributes apples, and then deepened in §2 as we are introduced to the builder and his assistant who call for and pass blocks, pillars, slabs, and beams. It is pronounced that there is, to adapt Donelan’s phrase, here “a material existence for self-positing activity,” for subjects doing things with words in the form of calls and responses.

Despite the emphasis on the material existence of human subjects with one another in their doings, it is also repeatedly emphasized that we are unlike

other animals: sapient, not merely sentient.⁷ Other animals “simply do not talk” (§25). It is undeniable, primitive, that we have a life of thought with other human subjects:

What gives us so much as the idea that living beings, things, can feel?

Is it that my education has led me to it by drawing my attention to feelings in myself, and now I transfer the idea to objects outside myself? That I can recognize that there is something there (in me) which I can call “pain” without getting into conflict with the way other people use this word? --I do not transfer my idea to stones, plants, etc. (§283)

We see the life of other subjects as subjects immediately in their bearing and action.

The human body is the best picture of the human soul (p. 178e).

My attitude toward him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul” (p. 178e).

‘I believe that he is not an automaton’, just like that, so far makes no sense” (p. 178e).

It is for us unavoidable, immediate, that we share with other subjects a life as self-conscious subjects, able to talk, to follow rules, and to think. This life of subjects with one another happens in and through material practices; we should not be ‘taken in’ by a picture of human conceptual consciousness according to which “the world is dark. But one day man opens his seeing eye, and there is light” (p. 184e). Coming to thought and finite subjectivity is more a matter of halting emergence in and through material practice with others than that picture suggests. Within material practice with others, we are present to ourselves and to one another as subjects.

Yet this presence is also mysterious to us. We want to know, theoretically, how and why we are minded as we are as finite subjects. It feels to us as though we were, somehow, cast out into finite subjectivity from original immersion in nature, and we want to know how this is so. We ask ourselves questions such as, “What makes this utterance into an utterance about him [a person whom I see “vividly before me”]? (p. 177e). Where does my-our thought, my-our conceptually structured awareness come from? Is it a matter of my having images or dispositions in mind or mechanisms at work within me? No; these routes of explanation are one and all nonsense. What accompanies images or dispositions or what comes about via a mechanism fails to ‘match up’ with how criteria of correctness control the application of a word. Yet we continue to want an explanation.

We should like to hypostatize feelings where there are none.
They serve to explain our thoughts to us.

‘Here explanation of our thinking demands a feeling!’ It is as if our conviction were simply consequent upon this requirement (§598).

In the grip of this desire for an explanation, we do “predicate of the thing what lies in the method of representing it. Impressed by the possibility of a comparison, we think we are perceiving a state of affairs of the highest generality” (§104). Yet we remain present to ourselves and to one another as subjects only within ordinary material practices of language use and thought rather than constituted as self-sufficient observer-conceptualizers apart from them. Always “the deep aspect of this matter readily eludes us” (§387).

Instead, then, of discovering once and for all who or what we are as thinking, concept-mongering subjects apart from material practices, the only thing we can do is live out our conflicting tendencies within ordinary, material, linguistic-conceptual practice, as we variously assert our selfhood in partial independence of it (we can invent new terms, modify conceptual schemes, and

take to myth and metaphor) and accept, acknowledge, and even love the ordinary as the only possible vehicle of the life of a finite subject.

We can set up “objects of comparison which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities” (§130). For example, “a cry is not a description. But there are transitions [Übergänge]. And the words ‘I am afraid’ may approximate more, or less, to being a cry. They may come quite close to this and also be far removed from it” (p. 189e). In seeking to find “my way about” (§122), “finding and inventing intermediate cases” (§122) that modulate into one another will be important, always, rather than ‘determining’ the nature of our being in the world once and for all, as somehow a function of either ‘soul substance’ or ‘bodily substance’ (the brain) that we can observe theoretically from without, so as to track the emergence of subjectivity.

What is one to make of this ‘philosophy’ of the human subject, a philosophy that—like Hölderlin’s ‘philosophy,’ poetology, and poetry—insists everywhere on the impossibility of theoretical explanation of subjectivity and on the importance of transitions, modulations, of thought, attention, attitude, mood, and feeling, with other beings, as crucial to the life of any finite subject? Answers that we give to this question will depend on what we hope for from philosophy—‘anthropologico-poetic’ ‘elucidation’ or theoretical explanation. If we cannot quite give up wishes for theory and for absolute mastery of and within our practices, it is, perhaps, nonetheless the course of wisdom to recognize these wishes as wishes, within the texture of our ongoing lives as finite subjects with others within nature, and then to try to live with these wishes gracefully, within genuine modulations between selfhood-independence and love-attunement. Or so, at any rate, both Hölderlin and Wittgenstein undertake to teach themselves, and us, in and through their exploratory writing about the human.

¹ Friedrich Hölderlin, "Judgment and Being," in Essays and Letters on Theory, ed. and trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 134.

² Ibid.

³ James H. Donelan, "Hölderlin's Poetic Self-Consciousness," Philosophy and Literature 26, 1 (April 2002), p. 140.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 136 ff.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 138-9; see also Hölderlin, "On the Difference of Poetic Modes," in Essays and Letters on Theory, pp. 82-88, where Hölderlin presents a large table (p. 87) of successions of basic tones, languages or dictions, and effects for each of naïve poetry, energetic poetry, and idealistic poetry.

⁶ All references to this essay will be to the version of it in Essays and Letters on Theory, pp. 62-82, and will be given by page number in the text.

⁷ See Robert Brandom's discussion of sapience vs. sentience in his Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 4-8.