

CHAPTER 31

MOURNING
MODERNITY:
CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY,
ROMANTIC THEORY,
AND ELEGIAC FORM

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Backward now my soul shall not escape
To you, the vanished, whom I love too much.
To look upon your beautiful brows, as though
They were unchanged, I am afraid, for deadly
And scarcely permitted it is to awaken the dead

(Hölderlin 1980, 'Germania')

'The return of those who have died—or better, the desirability of such a return—is always a complicated, ticklish matter. Ultimately, to put it plainly, it does not exist, this desirability. It is a miscalculation; by the light of cold day, it is as impossible as the thing itself, which would be immediately evident if nature rescinded that impossibility even once; and what we call mourning is perhaps not so much the pain of the impossibility of ever seeing the dead return to life, as the pain of not being able to wish it.'

(Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*)

ONE way to approach the relation between aesthetic/literary theory and the elegy is to inquire into the genre's noticeable contraction (after 1700) to a form increasingly defined by a thematic of loss. We know, after all, that the classical elegy—its tenuous

etymological connection to mourning (Gk. *elegos*) notwithstanding—was written in a variety of modes and on a broad range of topics. It may derive from the Armenian *elegn* (a flute), an etymology echoed by Euripides' disjunctive characterization of the elegy as unsuitable for accompaniment by a lyre (*alyros elegos*). According to another, more dubious etymological hypothesis, the term may have originated in the Thracian–Phrygian ritual cry of lament (*ololyē*), as Alexandrine grammarians supposed when tracing the form to 'crying woe! woe!' (*è è legein*). Perhaps because of its almost constitutive uncertainty regarding its own origins, the elegy of the seventh century BCE (Kallinos of Ephesos, Tyrtaios, Archilochos of Paros, et al.) already presents itself as a literary mode without any firm ties to religious cults and rituals (Killy 13, 197–8) and, consequently, taking up a considerable variety of themes (fatherland, war, politics, the power of *eros*, etc.). Following its temporary disappearance from the cultural record around 400 BCE, the elegy's revival during the time of Augustus shows it to be preponderantly concerned with erotic motifs, in the work of C. Gallus, A. Tibullus, S. Propertius, and, most famously, Ovid (*Amores*). By contrast, with few notable exceptions, such as Goethe's *Roman Elegies* (1788–90), the modern elegy is overwhelmingly focused on death, loss, or indeed on a seemingly all-pervading melancholia of being. To some extent, the shift of emphasis from a mode of lyric expression to a genre with a fixed inventory of *topoi* may be the result of 'the metrical difficulty of adapting the classical quantitative meters to modern accentual verse' (Ziolkowski 1980: 60). As Ziolkowski comments on the amorphous state of the elegy around 1790, 'for all the popularity of the genre, the elegy had no fixed criteria, of either form or subject matter. An "elegy" could be a poem in cross-rhyming alexandrines, in an elegiac stanza resembling Gray's famous model, in an allegedly "Catullan" strophe of lines unequal in length, or—most recently—in elegiac distichs. As for subject matter, it could be a threnetic lament, an animal epicedium, a love poem, or a melancholy meditation' (p. 66).

Yet to explain how this diffuse scenario could have been so suddenly transformed by the appearance of Schiller's great 'Elegie' (1795; eventually titled *Der Spaziergang*), his essay on *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, Goethe's *Roman Elegies* (all published in 1795) and, soon thereafter, the great elegies of Hölderlin requires a more complex hermeneutic framework. What accounts for the elegy's newly-found, sustained propensity to meditate on loss as a general, indeed seemingly universal and irremediable condition of modern existence? With its earlier conception as a 'mode' applied to an apparently occasional theme or topic fading, we find ourselves in need of a broader frame of reference than is furnished by literary history and prosodic technique alone. That this shift around 1790 should have coincided with the rise of modern aesthetic theory as formulated by Kant, Schiller, Hölderlin, Novalis, and others is no accident. Yet to fully understand the correlation between the elegy's consolidation as a type of sustained meditation either circumscribed by the specific psychology of mourning or a more abstracted condition of melancholia and the rise of modern aesthetic (and literary) theory also posits a methodological challenge. For this correlation implicitly cautions us against the obviously circular attempt to define the relation between elegiac form and literary theory merely in terms controlled by

the latter. Rather, we must look for a problematic integral to both discourses; the following essay locates that problematic in modernity's dramatically altered experience and conception of time. While the centrality of time to modern theory is hardly in doubt, an acutely temporal dimension also shapes elegiac form and its broader aesthetic significance, in particular at the turn from Classicism to Romanticism. While not disputing the value of formal readings of the elegy—attentive to matters of prosody, tone, and the genre's often self-conscious operation within a poetics of influence—this essay thus pursues a quite different objective. Arguing that an elegiac dimension begins to pervade art, literature, and theory, it views the elegiac as *the* defining characteristic of aesthetic production in Modernity. That these modes of symbolic and discursive production should, by the end of the eighteenth century, appear so acutely self-conscious and, at times, positively denatured fundamentally reflects *modernity's* peculiar novelty as the first so-called *epoch*, premised in turn on a fundamentally altered, linear and *secular* conception of time.

The three italicized concepts point to a fundamentally altered conception of human time that first emerges in the late Middle Ages and is greatly accelerated by the scientific and epistemological developments, as well as by the transformation of political thought in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The story of that transformation has been told from a variety of disciplinary viewpoints (if also with sharply divergent emphasis). We know it as Schiller's 'wound upon modern humanity' inflicted by 'culture' (2004: 39), Hegel's unhappy consciousness propelled into self-awareness by the 'self-movement of the concept' (*Selbstbewegung des Begriffs*, 1977: 119), Weber's 'disenchantment' (*Entzauberung der Welt*, 1996: 17), Polanyi's 'Great Transformation,' Heidegger's 'loss of the gods' (*Entgötterung* 1977: 116), Arendt's displacement of 'action' by 'behavior' (1998: 41), and Foucault's emergent regime of systemic disciplinary and discursive formations; alternatively, the shift has also been conceptualized, by Hans Blumenberg, as modernity's 'second overcoming of Gnosticism' (1983: 126) and, most recently by Anthony Giddens, Louis Dupré, Marcel Gauchet, and Charles Taylor as so variously inflected narratives of a secularization and 'great disembedding' (Taylor 2007: 146) paradoxically ushered in by post-Scholastic Christianity's and, eventually, by Protestantism's insistence on a human-engineered, individualistic salvation. Characteristic of modernity, then, is that it assigns itself unique status as an 'epoch,' thereby instituting a programmatic 'break' with all preceding historical phases. These phases or earlier 'epochs,' of course, are themselves being designated for the first time by a modernity whose legitimacy is in large measure staked on their 'overcoming.' This paradigmatic shift from a closed and timeless cosmology towards an essentially self-created notion of the world also explains the rapid ascendancy of the idea of method, which in turn anchors new modes of social self-description and political self-legitimation, even as the process of scientific and intellectual emancipation from ancient cosmologies continues to be experienced as a decidedly ambivalent phenomenon.

As conceived in the 'enchanted' world of ancient myth (Egyptian, Greek, and early Roman), time was cyclical, recurrent, and inherently rhythmic (Cassirer 1955: 2.104–18; Gehlen 2004: 251–75), something memorably captured in the elegiac opening description of Johan Huizinga's *Waning of the Middle Ages* (1919). With greater emphasis on

critical method, Erich Auerbach extends Huizinga's vivid portrayal of late medieval time as sharply accented and internally differentiated, with quotidian life repeatedly punctured by moments of heightened spiritual significance. Thus he notes how the established, typological reading of 'an occurrence like the sacrifice of Isaac' (viz. as prefiguring the sacrifice of Christ) conceives a relation 'between two events...linked neither temporally nor causally—a connection which it is impossible to establish by reason in the horizontal dimension'. Their simultaneity is not defined temporally but, in fact, 'can be established only if both occurrences are vertically linked to Divine Providence... [Thus] the here and now is no longer a mere link in an earthly chain of events, it is *simultaneously* something which has always been, and will be fulfilled in the future' (Auerbach 2003: 64). Benedict Anderson reaffirms Auerbach's sense that such a conception of time cradled by eternity, divine providence, and hence a simultaneity that has nothing to do with mere 'coincidence' or 'chance' is deeply alien to us today. Beginning in the seventeenth century, and particularly in Hobbes (Pocock 1971, pp. 148–201), the modern 'idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time' (Anderson 1993: 26) gradually displaces the older model. For Anthony Giddens, this shift coincides with 'the separation of time from space' and the consequent emergence of a 'radical historicity' that 'depends upon modes of 'insert' into time and space unavailable to previous civilizations' (1990: 20).

Speaking of the 'complex' experience of time that prevailed for the first thousand years of Christianity, Charles Taylor notes that aside from the 'secular time of ordinary "temporal" existence, in which things happen one after another in an even rhythm, there was... Platonic eternity,' as well as the 'eternity of God, where he stands contemporary with the whole flow of history'. Finally, there was 'a higher time of original founding events, which we can periodically re-approach at certain high moments,' i.e. in religious ritual (Taylor 2007: 96). As J. G. A. Pocock has persuasively argued, it is in Hobbes that this model of time as a strictly transcendent and self-sufficient framework begins to break down; modern thought initially faces the theoretical challenge of defining the apparent coexistence of two models of time, a monotheistic concept of time intelligible only in relation to 'divine actions and utterances' and 'a rich texture of the acts, words and thoughts of personal and social beings' for which empirically 'observable continuities, recurrences, and occurrences' could no longer be axiomatically thought 'vertically' but, instead, had to be 'recast... in terms of process, change and discontinuity' (1971: 151–2).

Here, then, lie the origins of Walter Benjamin's much-quoted characterization of modern time as 'homogeneous [and] empty' (1968: 264). Benjamin faults nineteenth-century Historicism for ignoring the distinction between historical and Messianic time and contenting itself with a flat-line notion of history as nothing more than 'a causal connection between various moments'. Yet to string up 'a sequence of events like the beads of a rosary' fails to recognize how that which converts a mere fact into an explanatory cause cannot itself be historical. Facts only become 'historical posthumously' (p. 263). For Benjamin, Historicist knowledge is *de facto* impossible unless supplemented by a complex, speculative, and eschatological (as opposed to a strictly chronometric) conception of time, which alone (given the right 'constellation' of

inquiry) may reveal how the void of our present 'is shot through with chips of Messianic time (p. 263). In their gnomic rejection of Historicism, however, Benjamin's *Theses on the Concept of History* implicitly concede Modernity's dominant conception of time as chronometric, homogeneous, and inexorably forward-moving. Indeed, nineteenth-century historicism is merely the most conspicuous instance of modernity's acquiescence in the downward transposition of time from a dynamic trajectory punctuated by epiphanic intensities into a mere unit of measurement. Thus modernity's method-based 'world-picture' (to recall Heidegger's apt phrase) as it emerges from the canonical writings of Bacon, Descartes, and Leibniz for the most part understands time as merely 'lapsing' and incessantly receding into a 'past' now conceived as history—a vast inventory of essentially equivalent or, rather, indifferent and disaggregated, nominal 'facts' awaiting their opportunistic retrieval as evidence in some explanatory scheme or other as conceived by an equally indeterminate present. Inasmuch as it only ever 'lapses,' the figuration of time as inherently *historical* also carries with it a strong, if often unacknowledged implication of loss.

Unlike mythical time, modern temporality and history not only can never recur (*pace* Nietzsche) but can only ever be experienced as 'passing' into the past or as the anxious projection of an uncertain future. Such a conception of 'lost time' becomes a central, and deeply vexing, premise for aesthetic and literary production beginning with early Romanticism. It drives the archeological ethos of Wordsworth's 'Spots of Time' no less than that of Blake's early prophetic books, agitating with iconoclastic fervor and prophetic urgency for the recovery of spiritual time from a blandly commercialized and imperial nation (Albion) that has succumbed to the 'bad infinity' (as Hegel was to call it) of undifferentiated, 'progressive,' and secular time. Though profoundly complicated by the very different, post-human(istic) models of temporality set forth by Darwin and Nietzsche, the Romantics' project of reconstructing a more complex, dynamic, and potentially eschatological model of time can be found to culminate in the great novelistic and philosophical projects of European Modernism, such as in Thomas Mann's rich and persistent meditations on time in *The Magic Mountain* (1924), Husserl's 1905/6 *Lectures on Inner Time Consciousness* (pub. 1928) and Proust's eponymous *magnum opus* on lost time (1913–27). The latter's concept of 'involuntary memory' constitutes a specifically modernist attempt at transcending the prevailing concept of time as a monochrome forward-moving vector implicitly rendering equivalent and so threatening to denature all human experience. Thus the facts 'recalled by voluntary memory, the memory of the intellect . . . preserve nothing of the past itself.' Instead, 'the past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the *sensation* which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die' (Proust 2003: 59–60; emphasis added). However obliquely, Proustian 'sensation' echoes a central tenet of Christian theology; being radically contingent, it recalls the notion of 'grace,' just as its unsought-for plenitude appears to mark the manifestation of Messianic time or 'revelation' within an otherwise undifferentiated model of time as the sheer succession of equivalent units of (secular) experience.

Still, by its very serendipity, Proust's *mémoire involontaire* only reaffirms how time in modernity is ordinarily never actually experienced as 'unfolding' or 'revealing' itself *in* and *as* the present. If Proust and other modernists still cling to the possibility of an aesthetic epiphany momentarily (if only belatedly) rupturing a flat-line model of time as pure *durée* or linear extension, the latter model is positively embraced by the existentialist stance of Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1928). For Heidegger, modernity's prevailing notion that life 'consists of a succession of experiences "in time"' effectively forecloses on any analysis of *Dasein*. Still, even the 'vulgar interpretation of the "connectedness of life" does not think of a framework spanned "outside" of Da-sein . . . but *correctly* looks for it in Da-sein itself' (1996: 343; emphasis added). As the telling qualification ('correctly') makes clear, Heidegger's analyses of Da-sein are meant to be carried out free of any transcendent presuppositions or expectations. Instead, his argument is firmly anchored in an intellectual tradition spanning from Nietzsche's 'God is dead' to Webers 'disenchantment' (*Entzauberung*) and, especially, Simmel's analysis of the 'metaphysics of death'. Thus Da-sein 'does not first fill up an objectively present path or stretch "of life" through the phases of its momentary realities, but stretches *itself* along in such a way that its own being is constituted beforehand as this *stretching along* [*Erstreckung*]' As mere extension, that is, human secular time is by definition circumscribed by the contingent endpoints of birth and death: 'Factual Da-sein exists as born, and, born, it is already dying in the sense of being-toward-death [*Sein zum Tode*]' (Heidegger 1996: 343).

Heidegger's bleak framing of human existence within a temporality utterly emptied of all dynamism, meaning, or internal differentiation also shapes our conception of history (*Geschichte*) and of historical knowledge (*Historie*): 'How history can become a possible *object* for historiography can be gathered only from the kind of being of what is historical, from historicity [*Geschichtlichkeit*] and its rootedness in temporality' (p. 344). Decisive for our purposes is Heidegger's contention that the being of Da-sein 'is not "temporal," because it "is in history," but because, on the contrary, it exists and can exist historically only because it is temporal in the ground of its being' (p. 345). However cogent, such an outlook is also flawed in that it posits (without taking into account countervailing arguments or indeed the possibility of its own falsification) a model of time devoid of all transcendent points of reference or forms of expectancy; for Heidegger, temporality means *eo ipso* to be committed to a strictly formal, linear model of time as incessant 'vanishing' (as Hegel's *Phenomenology* and *Logic* define it), a quintessentially modern position that, as we shall see, is also elegiac to its very core.

Already the etymology of *modernus* (first attested around 500 CE) reveals the word as denoting less a particular span of time than a fundamentally changed perspective on temporality itself. Derived from *modo* (Lat., only, merely, just), a word that also means 'lately' and carries a strong association with the present, *modernus* is, as Hans Robert Jauss notes, 'the only term among closely related concepts of time to designate exclusively the historical "now" of the present' (1979: 16). What defines the modern is less the idea of novelty and the 'new' than of a present defined in sharp contradistinction to what is ancient and of timeless validity. Gradually establishing

itself in contradistinction to *antiquitas*, the ‘modern’ rejected the notion of the distant past as a reservoir of exemplary meanings: ‘The experience of time of the *moderni* during the twelfth century is not cyclical but typological. It reflects a specifically Christian conception of history: “Typology grafts things separated by time onto a new hermeneutic matrix, namely, the sublation of the old into the new. What is new raises the old; the old lives on in the new, is redeemed by the new, becomes the foundation for the new”’ (F. Ohly, qtd. in Jauss 1979: 20 n. 24). An analogous history characterizes the increasingly prominent role of the words ‘secular’ and ‘epoch’ in the early modern era, though there is no time to trace it here. In each case, a concept seemingly designating a particular span of recent time actually carries with it an entirely new outlook on temporality, namely, as a linear progression or sequence that no longer allows for the recurrence or recuperation of the past, let alone for a return to it; most crucially, though, a strictly chronological model of time has effectively been evacuated of ‘meaning’ in the strong sense of the plenitude of the kind defined by Greek and Hellenistic philosophy as *parousia* (fulfillment, presence). Reflecting the fundamentally altered status of time as a strictly formal, linear, and monochrome progression, concepts such as ‘modern,’ ‘secular,’ and ‘epoch’ effectively institute estrangement and loss as the destabilizing, affective signature of human experience since the late Middle Ages.

The rise of aesthetics and of literary theory in the eighteenth century is just one discursive entailment of this transformation. The tension between *antiquitas* and *modernitas* had, of course, been central to the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* galvanizing French absolutist culture starting in 1687. Yet what drove the *Querelle* was less a tension between two conceptions of aesthetic and political culture than a fundamental ‘conflict between the exemplarity of antiquity and the progressive vision of a modernity that had now reached maturity.’ To embrace the latter point of view was to have made the ‘shift from a normative to a historical conception of antiquity’ (Jauss 1979: 72, 79); it also meant reorienting ancient aesthetic models towards the modern paradigm of a vernacular, national culture. A perfect and momentous instance of this shift is offered by Gray’s ‘Elegy written in an English Country Churchyard’ (1751), a text playing a pivotal role in the emergence of ‘canonicity as cultural capital and of “literature” as the discursive category devised to accommodate vernacular works in the schools’ (Guillory 1993: 86–7). Crucial in Gray’s poem is the cultural function of modern, vernacular English itself, which now absorbs (in typological fashion) ancient meanings in the form of literary commonplaces or *topoi* reconstituted in the national language, thereby creating a kind of ‘vernacular Latin’ (p. 124). Ultimately geared towards a mobile and hence inherently modern, ‘middling-class’ readership, Gray’s ‘Elegy’ shows the birth-pains of modern vernacular culture as it lays claim to an aesthetic dignity of its own. By implication, such writing also affirms a modern paradigm of culture premised, not on the return *to* but on the emancipation *from* the past. Written right at the middle of the eighteenth century, the *Elegy* aptly captures a tension within its model of ‘polite speech’ as the practice of extended (Anglicized) citation. Gray’s commonplace idiom expands the scope of elegiac writing from commemorating or mourning a particular

individual to the melancholic recognition of idealities and potentialities betrayed by modernity's conception of historical time as uniformly progressive. Thus the poem's famous reference to 'mute, inglorious Miltons' notably identifies not an individual or ideal entity that actually existed; rather, it imagines a life that should have been but was preemptively snuffed out by the socio-economic and class-specific divisions of a mundane historical reality. As we shall see, it is this mourning of ideality (rather than empirical existence)—the loss, not of what *was*, but of what *should* have been—that forges an enduring link between elegiac form and aesthetic (and literary) theory after 1750.

In Germany above all, the rise of modern aesthetics and literary theory correlates with a sustained reevaluation of antiquity: ancient Greek culture is stripped of its *normative* authority and converted into a rich inventory of facts and artifacts urgently calling for *historical* comprehension. As evidenced by the critical response to the pivotal oeuvre of Johann J. Winckelmann (1717–68), the shift from a normative to a historical outlook on antiquity necessarily coincides with the defeat of an *imitative* by an *expressivist* aesthetic, though Winckelmann himself appears to have been only partly aware of its deeper significance. At the heart of his project lies a paradox: on the one hand, classical (Hellenic) art is to be imitated, since 'our only path to greatness, indeed, to possible inimitability, is to imitate the ancients' (*der einzige Weg für uns, groß, ja, wenn es möglich ist, unnachahmlich zu werden, ist die Nachahmung der Alten* 1995: 14; trans. mine). Yet at the same time Winckelmann insists that what makes antiquity so deserving of imitation, the source of its exemplarity, are its unique and hence irreproducible geographical, social, and climatic circumstances.

For Winckelmann, 'the imitation of what is beautiful in nature may take one of two paths. Either it aims at a single proposition or it gathers traits from various singularities and merges them into one [representation]. To pursue the former is to make a copy [*Kopie*] . . . whereas the latter marks the path to universal beauty and to ideal images [*idealische Bilder*], and this was the path taken by the Greeks.' Yet where the Greeks were able to fashion beautiful images and sculptures by 'daily observation of natural beauty,' the modern era, according to Winckelmann, seems to be inherently denatured. The nature experienced by the ancient Greeks 'no longer presents itself to us with any regularity, and rarely in such a manner as is desired by the artist' (pp. 23–4). Winckelmann's writings thus bequeathed his successors a paradox that was to become the point of departure for the major aesthetic, philological, and historicist arguments of F. A. Wolf, J. G. Herder, F. Schlegel, and F. Schiller. For to say that Greek antiquity ought to be imitated is to make a *normative* claim, while pronouncing the art of ancient Greece as *sui generis* and thus ultimately inimitable is to make a *historical* claim. The first implies a cyclical or recursive model of time and, on that premise, envisions our recuperating and repossessing the past in question; by contrast, the second claim rests on a strictly disjunctive model of time as mere succession, thereby decisively foreclosing on the possibility of any such return. While Winckelmann's foundational role for modern aesthetics as 'a medium for expressing the social and political significance of all art' (Ferris 2000: 19) is

undeniable, he ultimately did not fully grasp, let alone find ways to resolve, this contradiction. Making a different case, David Ferris has recently offered a somewhat counter-intuitive reading of Winckelmann's oeuvre that pays scrupulous attention to the latter's stress on the 'inimitability' [*Unnachahmlichkeit*] of classical art while largely downplaying the central aesthetic imperative of 'imitation' itself.

Modern aesthetic (and literary) theory consolidates itself in the second half of the eighteenth century in response to the above, central tension at the heart of Winckelmann's axiom of imitation of the ancients. It is also in this particular context that the conjunction between literary theory and the elegy emerges most fully. The *locus classicus* here is Schiller's *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795), arguably the first text in which the elegy assumes a critical role for modern aesthetics. It would be a mistake, however, to connect elegiac form merely to the second term in Schiller's eponymous distinction. While Schiller connects the elegiac with the sentimental, the meaning of the sentimental tends to feed off the seemingly opposed idea of the naïve, thus presenting us with a modern, dialectical argument rather than a static, dualist conception. Indeed, Schiller himself notes that 'both ways of feeling . . . are related to one another as the first and third categories. For the latter always arises by the fact that the first is combined with its exact opposite. The opposite of the naïve feeling is namely the reflecting intellect and the sentimental mood is the result of striving, *even under the conditions of reflection*, to restore the naïve feelings in terms of the content' (1993: 233 n.). Schiller's idea of 'the "naïve" presupposes its opposite, the sentimental . . . indeed only arises when it encounters its opposite, the artificial, and prevails over it' (Szondi 1980: 167; trans. mine), an argument also echoed by Jauss, who views Schiller's notion of the sentimental as 'almost indistinguishable' from the Jena Romantics' 'art of the infinite' (Jauss 1979: 103–4; trans. mine). Clearly opposed to Winckelmann's aesthetics from the outset, Schiller insists that when art singles out nature for imitative purposes, it does so not in the spirit of outright replication or repossession:

It is not these objects, it is an idea portrayed by them that we cherish in them. We treasure the silent creativity of life in them, the fact that they act serenely on their own, being there according to their own laws; we cherish that inner necessity, that eternal oneness with themselves. They are what we were; they are what we *should become* once more. We were nature like them, and our culture should lead us along the path of reason and freedom back to nature. Thus they depict at once our lost childhood. (1993: 181–2).

Similar to Blake's 'organiz'd innocence,' Schiller's naïve constitutes a particular stance vis-à-vis the world, one in which 'nature' tropes a specific kind of desire—namely, for the subject's coincidence with or reincarnation of the past.

Yet for Schiller, herein also a sharp critic of Rousseau, childhood must not be reduced to a trope of nostalgia. Rather, as Wordsworth was to note in the 'Immortality Ode,' the child, while being 'the father of the man,' occupies a unique and irretrievable stage in a genetic and implacably forward-moving temporal progression. Hence, the naïve, properly speaking, constitutes an aporetic desire—a 'longing' (*Sehnsucht*) for a past plenitude that ultimately proves not only unattainable but not

even desirable (cf. epigraphs). For its fulfillment, were it possible, would positively overthrow all temporal and rational order, thereby effectively subjecting the desiring subject to a regressive denaturing. As a trope *sensu strictu*, the naïve instead can only expose the impossibility of a return and our terminal confinement within an inexorably forward-moving idea of time. What we cherish about childhood, Schiller notes, is simply its 'boundless *determinability*. . . . In the child are exhibited the *potential* and the *calling*, in us their *fulfillment*, and the latter always remains infinitely behind that potential and calling' (Schiller 1993: 182).

In so crystallizing the modern, rational and enlightened subject's belated and denatured, strictly 'historical' reality, the child, nature, the naïve thus can only trope an ideal vanishing point relative to which all quotidian life unfolds as the indefinite mourning of lost potentialities. Thus Schiller astutely characterizes the naïve as 'childlikeness' [*Kindlichkeit*], a trope strongly suggestive of our fundamentally estranged, strictly *mimetic* relationship to childhood rather than implying our actual coincidence with it. Indeed, we only find such 'childlikeness where it is no longer expected, and precisely for that reason it cannot be attributed to actual childhood in the strictest sense' (Schiller 1993: 184). As a trope mediating our longing for 'completeness . . . and happiness' (p. 192), the naïve must not be construed as a *historical* category, as had still been the case with the 'ancient' in the *Querelle* a century before; neither is it an *origin* in any ontological sense. Instead, the naïve is but the first of several tropes by means of which Schiller seeks to articulate modernity's irredeemably *temporal* constitution relative to which all talk of historical 'stages' or ontological 'beginnings' is merely a derivative.

Consequently, 'the naïveté of surprise can only occur in a human being and only insofar as the human being at that moment no longer is part of nature in its purity and innocence. It presupposes a will that is not in accord with what nature does on its own' (Schiller 1993: 185). In true dialectic form (strongly reminiscent of Blake's contraries, 'innocence and experience') the naïve thus functions as a retroactive category effectively spawned by its supposedly belated other—the sentimental: 'Just as nature eventually begins to disappear from human life as an *experience*. . . we see it ascend in the world of poets as an *idea* and *object*.' That is, we 'revere nature to a higher degree . . . because nature has disappeared from our humanity'. In the aggregate, modern social systems are thus defined by their 'unnaturalness' ([*Naturwidrigkeit*]: 194), and Schiller's notion of the sentimental tropes the way in which this denaturing, this loss of balance and proportion within the very idea of the human registers as a 'change in the manner of feeling' and as persistently conflicted or 'mixed' affective disposition or 'mood'. Thus poets 'will either *be* nature or *seek* the lost nature,' which is to say, they 'will be either *naïve* or *sentimental*' (p. 196). The affective signature of Schiller's modernity is thus one of loss and of 'longing' for the recovery of what is lost, albeit with the understanding that such is only possible at the level of the simulacrum, art, illusion, or (in Schiller's parlance) the 'ideal'. Inasmuch as 'our feeling for nature is like the sick person's feeling for health' (p. 195), the rise of aesthetics and of comprehensive theories of 'culture' must be understood as a symptom of an all-pervading malaise and loss for which art offers itself as a self-conscious supplement.

Unlike Winckelmann, Schiller locates the significance of all art, not in imitation but in the ‘elevation of actuality to the ideal or, what comes to the same, the portrayal of the ideal’ (1993: 201). For the sentimental poet in particular, all art is the result of a sustained reflection concerning the impact of an object on the poet, and ‘only on the basis of that reflection is the emotion founded, into which [the poet] is transported’ (p. 204). Anticipating a very similar dynamic (‘spontaneous overflow . . . recollected in tranquility’) so central to Wordsworth’s ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), Schiller’s characterization of the sentimental poet rests on the premise that aesthetic production no longer has a material or mimetic relationship to the real. Rather, modern thought can make contact with it only by acknowledging its decisive estrangement from any primal ‘source’—a predicament compensated for by art’s melancholic self-recognition as the constitutively belated and supplemental order oscillating between ‘the ideal’ (*das Idealische*) in Schiller and Hölderlin and outright ‘semblance’ (*Schein*) in Hegel and Adorno. As the latter puts it, ‘because meaning . . . remains bound up with semblance, all art is endowed with sadness; art grieves all the more, the more completely its successful unification suggests meaning. Melancholy is the shadow of what in all form is heterogeneous, which form strives to banish: mere existence. . . . In the utopia of its form, art bends under the burdensome weight of the empirical world from which, as art, it steps away’ (Adorno 1997, p. 105). Hence for the modern, reflective poet, the aesthetic process is inherently agonistic, imbued with the growing sense that meaning can only ever be the supplement for a plenitude never actually experienced and certainly impossible to recover in the present:

The object here is related to an idea, and his poetic power rests solely upon this relation. The sentimental poet thus always has to deal with two conflicting images and feelings, with the actual world as a limit and with his idea as something infinite. The mixed feeling aroused by him will always testify to this twofold source. . . . Consequently, a difference in the treatment is possible [depending on] whether he dwells more on the actual or on the ideal—whether he wants to develop the actual world as an object of aversion or the ideal as an object of an affection. His presentation will accordingly be either *satirical* or *elegiacal*. (Schiller 2004: 204–5)

Key here is Schiller’s emphasis on ‘presentation’ (*Darstellung*); for the elegiac here is recognized as the aesthetic consequence of modernity’s constitutively and terminally estranged purchase on a world that has morphed from a stable cosmos into a theoretical problem. Schiller’s invocation of ‘beauty’ as the virtual realm capable of reconciling ‘two opposite conditions of perceiving and thinking’ (p. 88) must be approached with caution. Far from some kind of illusory structure offering transport by way of nostalgic, magical, or quasi-narcotic means, beauty must incorporate into its structure of ‘presentation’ the very conflict by which it was called forth and to which its form offers an intricately wrought and markedly self-conscious response. As such, all manifestations of beauty in modernity are necessarily ‘sentimental’ and, as Schiller notes, elegiac in nature well beyond the eponymous genre: ‘We are not only touched in an elegiac manner by the elegy that is explicitly so called. Even the

dramatic and epic poets can move us in an elegiac fashion. In the *Messiade* [by Klopstock], in Thomson's *Seasons*, in *Paradise Lost*, in *Jerusalem Saved* . . . it is more or less the same' (1993: 211 n.).

It is hard to overstate the significance and impact of Schiller's conception of the elegiac as the formal-aesthetic and philosophical signature of modernity on literary theory and philosophical aesthetics, such as we find it in Hölderlin, Hegel, Jacob Burckhardt, Nietzsche, and even in certain recurrent figurations of Romantic Historicism of the last three decades. Arguably, it is in Schiller's lyric oeuvre as much as his late aesthetic writings that the most forceful articulations of an inherently elegiac modernity can be found. Opening with the acknowledgment that 'Even the beautiful must perish' (*Auch das Schöne muß sterben!*), his late elegy, 'Nänie' (1800), emphatically dismisses any utopian function that his earlier *Letters* might yet have assigned to the idea of beauty. Instead, the poem identifies beauty itself as subject to the ravages of human time and, in so doing, defines lyric speech as 'a medium for reflection' (*Reflexionsmedium*), as Walter Benjamin was to call it, for working through an inherently aporetic situation. Lyric speech and aesthetic form more generally can never remedy or compensate for the material and temporal fact of death; rather, they may restage the event of loss and the irreversibility of modern, linear time within the virtual medium of song. Recalling Thetis' lament for her son Achilles, the lyric identifies aesthetic form and the medium of expressive, elegiac song (*Klagelied*) as the only effective, because intrinsically structured, response to the transient and precarious status of beauty:

Siehe! Da weinen die Götter, es weinen die Göttinnen alle,
 Daß das Schöne vergeht, daß das Vollkommene stirbt.
 Auch ein Klaglied zu sein im Mund der Geliebten, ist herrlich,
 Denn das Gemeine geht klanglos zum Orkus hinab.

See how they weep, the Immortals and goddesses all,
 Knowing the beautiful must fade and die what is perfect.
 Even to be a song of lament on the lips of the beloved is glory;
 For know, 'tis the lot of the common to descend to Hades unsung.

Echoing the closing stanza of his 1788 hymn 'Die Götter Griechenlands' ('The Gods of Greece'), Schiller again hints at the hyper-reflexive nature of poetry that knows of its own supplemental character. In an early essay, Paul de Man would thus characterize the Romantic image as 'essentially a kinetic process . . . [whose] way of being is determined by the manner in which it originates' (1984: 3). Speaking of Hölderlin, who radicalizes Schiller's insight, de Man thus stresses how by its very nature, all origination or absolute 'beginning implies a negation of permanence'. Hence, in seeking to simulate the mute permanence of natural entities, poetic images paradoxically strive at once 'to become entirely literal' and in the very process 'lead to a transcendental concept of the Idea'. That is, they performatively reconstitute the mute and ineffable fertility of organic life as the 'natural emanation of a transcendental principle, as an epiphany'. Inasmuch as 'the existence of the poetic image is itself a sign of divine absence' (pp. 4–6), we can also see why a poetry so precariously

reflexive and mindful of its own intrinsic temporality would from here on prove unable to succeed without a complementary theoretical framework. De Man's hyper-reflexive methodology is the apt complement of modern aesthetics as a unique hybridization of expressive and reflexive values, a mode of symbolic practice revealing the isolated subject's permanently unstable and opaque location within a present dissociated from all primal or eschatological points of reference. Recoiling from what Hegel had branded the 'bad infinity' of pure subjectivism, lyric poetry after 1800 is almost constitutively elegiac. Even where it is formally presented as an ode (e.g. Wordsworth's great Ode or Keats's 'To Autumn'), that is, the phonetic, metaphoric, and syntactic textures of the modern lyric insistently point to expressive signification as an inherently problematic ideal. Specifically for writers like Hölderlin, Keats, Heine, Eichendorff, and Baudelaire, poetry confronts us with modernity as a constitutively 'allegorical' mode of being. Permanently estranged from its expressive resources and faced with this negative knowledge, the modern lyric thus shows a marked tendency towards the kind of reflexive or meta-lingual quality that would eventually shape the methodologies of Russian Formalism, as well as the Prague and French schools of structuralism (Jakobson, Riffaterre, Mukarovsky). If the structural amalgamation of poetry and critique was at first exuberantly stated in Frederick Schlegel's *Athenaeum Fragments* (1798, #216), it would soon take on a more mixed valence, oscillating between the utopian and the mournful, as in the countless manifestos, prefaces, and advertisements situating works as disparate as Blake's early prophecies, Joanna Baillie's plays, Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*; and, where theoretical reflection is not outright concurrent with literary production, it is just as emphatically proffered after the fact as a supplement indispensable to an understanding of poetry already written, such as Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* (1820), and, most magisterially, in Hegel's *Aesthetics* (1822/3).

Extending his earlier argument about the Romantic image in what may well be his most celebrated essay, de Man thus reads the early Romanticism of Rousseau, Hölderlin, and Wordsworth as the moment where cultural forms themselves participate in the 'unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny'. Few texts of modern criticism perform (in the best sense) their indebtedness to Romantic poetry more powerfully than de Man's argument about the apparent inversion of the relationship between symbol and allegory; whereas prior to the Romantic authors just mentioned the symbol would have had 'the image . . . coincide with the substance,' by positing 'the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference' (De Man 1983: 206–7). Reflexive of its own precarious mode of origination and, thus, of its insurmountable temporality, allegorical writing incorporates this negative knowledge into its very own structure and form. It now understands and acknowledges itself to be no longer linked to worlds conceived in phenomenal, let alone noumenal terms but, instead, to only ever be able to 'refer to another sign that precedes it' (p. 207). If de Man's oeuvre constitutes the pivot of 'deconstruction' as an intellectual

formation, its underlying perspective is profoundly shaped by Schiller's (and, clearly following him, Hegel's) fundamentally elegiac conception of knowledge as unhappy consciousness, a subjectivity that is little more than flotsam on the indifferent stream of modern temporality and wholly devoid of transcendent expectations or metaphysical guarantees.

Perhaps no oeuvre exhibits such an interweaving of critical reflection and lyric form as acutely as that of Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), and nowhere is the temporal predicament of modernity more acutely wedded to elegiac form than in his major poetry. 'Menon's Lament for Diotima' (a revised version of Hölderlin's 1799 'Elegie') locates its voice in the 'night' of a present occasionally 'pierced' by 'radiant visions' of a harmonious past known to be beyond recovery:

Licht der Liebe! Scheinest du denn auch Todten, du goldnes!
 Bilder aus hellerer Zeit leuchtet ihr mir in die Nacht?

 Wohl gehn Frühlinge fort, ein Jahr verdränget das andre,
 Wechselnd und streitend, so tost droben vorüber die Zeit
 Über sterblichem Haupt . . .

(Hölderlin 1951: 2/i. 76)

Golden light of love, for dead men, for shades, do you shine then?
 Radiant visions recalled, even this night, then, you pierce?

 Springs, it is true, go by, one year still supplanting the other,
 Changing and warring, so Time over us mortal men's heads
 Rushes past up above . . .

(Hölderlin 1966: 235)

The conjunction between 'onrushing time' (*die reißende Zeit* 1951: 2/i. 112) and the 'darkness' (*im Finstern* 1951: 2/i. 91) of a modernity repeatedly troped as 'night' is an enduring motif in Hölderlin's elegies (Nägele 1985: 51–68) that signifies 'the remoteness of the gods and . . . isolation' (Szondi 1986: 28). Contrary to Schiller's idealism, Hölderlin's intricate poetic theory recognizes idealization as but one (*viz.* subjective) ground of aesthetic work and, given its temporally belated status, as incapable of achieving a totality of meaning. That is, for Hölderlin poetic form must objectively embody an intricate reflection of which it is the expressive result and at the heart of which lies the categorical insight that what is 'pure [*das Reine*], apprehended in any particular mood, always conflicts with the organ in which it is conceived' (4/i. 248). Because a 'pure poetic life is no longer to be found' (4/i. 248), only an alternation of tones and constancy of transitions between different expressive registers will suffice (see esp. pp. 250–3). Consequently, Hölderlin's later poetry increasingly approximates the starkly impersonal and markedly gnomic idiom of pre-Socratic philosophical prose. Reflecting the poet's response—in which 'despair unites with enthusiasm' (Szondi 1986: 26) or 'the most extreme negation with the highest affirmation' (Nägele 1985: 52)—to a modernity overwhelmingly shaped by a sense of loss and temporal

estrangement from all sources of authentic meaning and plenitude, the modern lyric's formal operations are shaped by a need for 'openness, a receptivity that disregards the ego' (Szondi 1986: 33). Hölderlin's ambitious poetic theory of 'the alternation of tones' (*Wechsel der Töne*) is the aesthetic consequence of a modernity understood to be no longer containable within a single coherent and unequivocal expressive form. Instead, the modern lyric must formally embody that negative condition by incorporating and 'harmoniously opposing' expressive forms (epic, tragic, lyric) and moods (naïve, heroic, idealizing) each of which once had been, but no longer is, capable of articulating a totality.

In a short essay fragment from 1799, entitled 'The Perspective from which We Have to Look at Antiquity,' Hölderlin adds a crucial dimension to Schiller's position, thus preparing both for Hegel's aesthetic theory and, more obliquely, also for cultural pessimism of the early Nietzsche and modernists like Georg Simmel, Thomas Mann, and T. S. Eliot. As the fragment makes clear, aesthetic form and the poetic word in particular are not merely exhausted by their expressive response to the relentless passage of historical time and the concomitant experience of loss. Rather, all art tends to encrypt such loss in forms whose peculiar fate it is to become calcified over time and so to burden the living culture that had produced them. As other Romantic and modernist theoreticians of the idea of *Bildung*, both before and after, also noted (Herder, Kant, Nietzsche, Simmel, Spengler, and A. Gehlen), Hölderlin observes that is precisely a 'deep sense of mortality, of change, and of a constraining temporality [that] enflames man so that he attempts much' (1987: 4/i. 48); at the same time, 'the general reason for the decline of all peoples' is the fact 'that their originality, their own living nature succumbed to the positive forms, to the luxury which their fathers had produced.' The same is true of the modern era, 'only on a larger scale' (1987: 4/i. 39). As Hölderlin puts it, lyric modernity is driven by the principle of hope—nothing more—'that in the wavering moment, Deep in the dark there shall be something at least that endures' (1966: 245; *daß in der zaudernden Weile, Daß im Finstern für uns einiges Haltbare sei*, 1951: 2/i. 91). Paradoxically, though, it is this very motive for aesthetic production—viz., to salvage meaning from the 'emptiness' of modern and inexorably forward-moving time that Pascal had already found so terrifying—which surreptitiously converts the resulting symbolic forms into alien structures and, eventually, into unwitting catalysts of cultural decline.

For Georg Simmel, death—far from constituting a merely arbitrary and sudden 'termination of our being' (*ein Aufhören seines Seins*)—positively activates and circumscribes the developmental potentialities and actual current of human life. Inasmuch as 'death does not merely condition our life in the hour of death but constitutes a formal criterion of life and, as such, colors all of its contents,' the result is a pervasive ambiguity within life itself; for 'just as any automatic or spontaneous move can be interpreted as a drive for life, for "more" life, it can also be seen as an escape from death' (Simmel 2001: 83). Perhaps, Simmel muses, 'the essence of our activity constitutes a mysterious core that we, as so many others, can only grasp by parsing it as we seek to master life and escape death. For every discrete step of life presents itself not only as a temporal approximation of death but as positively and a

priori conditioned by death, which is itself a real and integral feature of life. . . . Life, which we use up as we approach death, is *eo ipso* used up to escape from death' (p. 84). Reflecting his Hegelian debt, Simmel thus comments on 'the deep estrangement or enmity which exists between the life and creative process of the psyche on the one hand, and its contents and products on the other. The vibrating, boundlessly developing, restless life of the creative soul . . . is confronted by its fixed and intellectually unshakeable product, with the uncanny retroactive effect of tying down and even hypostatizing that liveliness; it is often as if the creative movement of the soul were dying from its own product' (1997: 59). What accounts for the deep-seated and indelible elegiac substrate of modern, reflective subjectivity and thus prompts Wordsworth's 'Shades of the prison-house' and Hegel's famous coinage of the 'unhappy consciousness' (not to mention an abundance of similar tropes in Schiller, Hölderlin, and Novalis) is not merely the acknowledged impossibility of a return—*qua* imitation—to the ancients. It is also, and more significantly, a recognition that the organic plenitude and totality attributed to Greek antiquity had, in fact, always been a case of what Freud was to call 'retroactivity' (*Nachträglichkeit*). The true object of modernity's mourning and the source of an elegiac dimension pervading so many of its aesthetic models and cultural pursuits, is the utter impossibility of even wishing to return to a past whose fleeting appeal, in fact, only stems from the estranged and disoriented situation of the modern, strictly temporal subject devoid of transcendent points of reference or normative frameworks.

Ultimately, then, the true object of 'mourning' antiquity is what Alan Liu has called 'the loss of loss,' itself a transposition of an impasse lurking in the very domain of the aesthetic and figurative language so influentially articulated by Paul de Man's critical writings of the 1970s. Liu's recognition of a moment when the New Historicism's 'critical work of mourning [is] able to acknowledge that the poetry itself is a work of mourning' effectively returns us to the elegiac reflexivity of Romanticism's literary projects. Thus Liu observes how the critique of new historicism often takes on a mournful cast, lamenting at 'all we *lose* when we read in this manner,' which Liu takes to mean above all a 'loss of *personal* history'. Yet such a critique ultimately aligns its proponents 'with the New Historicism as critics of the end of history' inasmuch as the critics so concerned share 'an anxiety that may be called the fear of the loss of loss'. That is, beyond Historicism's more vindictive preoccupation with the supposed 'displacement, erasure, suppression, elision, overlooking, overwriting, omission . . .' of history, 'there comes a moment in the New Historicist denunciation when the critic's perception of lost history acknowledges that it has been strangely preempted by the perception of historical loss *in* the poetry itself—a moment, in other words, when the loss of history can no longer be spoken of as itself lost to the poet' (Liu 2005: 154). Beginning with Hölderlin's great elegies and Hegel's *Lectures on Fine Art*, the discursive projects of philosophical aesthetics, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, yet also historicist and philological critique converge, their many differences notwithstanding, at least in this: they all approach language as an etiolated form—'writing'—inexorably exposing the project of expressive self-origination as an illusion. Moreover, and in variously oblique or explicit response to that negative

knowledge, modern critical methodologies tend to frame writing as both, the catalyst and medium of mourning. Writing cannot mimetically reconstitute the object of mourning, for it cannot name, let alone restore, an ideality that was never authentically experienced but only came into focus retroactively. As Rainer Nägele puts it in the context of Hölderlin's elegiac oeuvre, 'the text may indeed be able to remember, but what is remembered is not subject to the text's authority' (1985: 57). As a result, modernity's symbolic forms must themselves ceaselessly acknowledge and objectify the complex processes of self-awareness that had yielded this negative knowledge.

Building on Georg Lukacs's early and poignant characterization of irony as a 'negative mysticism' (1971: 90), the American project of deconstruction in particular had identified irony as the fundamental signature of a modernity that recognizes the impossibility of salvation in its discursive and aesthetic projects. Consequently, to meditate on the relation between 'literary theory' (a project that, following its meteoric rise in the 1960s and 70s, now appears to be in rapid and likely terminal decline) and the modern elegy is to confront a notably abstract and interminable dynamic of mourning that verges on its illimitable Freudian other—melancholy—which in the late Romantic period emerges as the formal and affective signature of lyricism, broadly speaking (Pfauf 2005: 309–471). Cued by the inherent contradictions of Winckelmann's classicism, Romantic and Idealist aesthetic and literary theory confront with increasing clarity the lyric's suspension between mourning and melancholia, between a desire for possessing—if only in the belated expressive ritual of 'mourning'—a once authentic past, and an encroaching recognition that such longing for a return *qua* memory can only unfold in aesthetic forms bound to expose the purely retroactive and illusory hope for a retreat from the flat-line temporal condition of modernity.

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