



Article

“And the Script Sounds”: Literary Hermeneutics and Imaginary Listening

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Abstract: Friedrich Hölderlin’s late hymns *Patmos* (first version) and *Mnemosyne* (early draft) create an intriguing tension between the “solid letter” that must be deciphered faithfully and the evocation of a “sounding script” that, together with an equally enigmatic “echo”, refuses direct hermeneutic understanding. At the point where the reader’s interpretive desire threatens to fail, musical settings like Peter Ruzicka’s *MNEMOSYNE: Remembrance and Forgetting* can be listened to as an attempt to actualize what Hölderlin’s original writing must leave unrealizable: the presence of real sound. In this audio-hermeneutic transfer, the act of listening opens up possibilities of the audible that are promised by the literary text without being actualized. The present essay interrogates this intermedial translatability between letter and sound by isolating a few selected passages from the facsimile reproduction of Hölderlin’s palimpsestic manuscript of multiple revisions, as provided by the *Frankfurter Ausgabe*. Mindful of the discontinuities and gaps in the original poems, my own analysis foregrounds its own fragmentary mode of reading Hölderlin’s poetry and listening to Ruzicka’s music.

Keywords: auditory imagination; literary hermeneutics; sound; Friedrich Hölderlin; *Patmos*; *Mnemosyne*; Peter Ruzicka; *MNEMOSYNE: Remembrance and Forgetting*

1. Introduction

Hölderlin’s poetry is haunted by the question of how the evanescence of sound can be captured in metaphoric language. While the young poet excelled in flute playing, during the final years in his Tübingen tower, he engaged frequently in manic-obsessive, freely improvisatory piano playing. But beyond these personal indulgences, Hölderlin understood his poetic writing as an activity that often sought to reveal the hidden sonic possibilities within the visual actuality of the real (see Kreutzer 1994; Borio and Polledri 2019a). Hölderlin’s art seeks to respond to an all-pervasive soundscape that encompasses gods, humans, and nature, whose auditory self-articulations must be transposed—however incompletely—into verbal language by the poet’s imagination.

What happens to the reading process when it is called upon to join the intermedial transfer, within the text, from the visual readability of the written letter to the imaginary perception of possible sounds? Trained traditionally on the inexhaustible significance of writing, how can the hermeneutic desire seek to understand the textually elusive and problematic representability of sound? Faced with such questions, the practitioners of hermeneutics must turn their mode of attention from the actual reading of written letters to the imaginary listening for sonic possibilities. Given the sounds’ fleeting emergence and disappearance in time, their potential meaningfulness is even more uncertain, indeterminate, and open-ended than written letters seem to signify.

Beyond the immediate, bodily-affective power of acoustic sensations, a poetic text may often seek to reveal the potential meanings of sounds through verbal metaphors or analytic concepts. But even the most closely-knit network of verbal signifiers proves rather threadbare: given its representational tears and holes, even the most specific text can never



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fully capture the overwhelming flood of possible sounds (see also Cox 2018). Fleeting and elusive, any imaginable sounds' apparently well-defined contours dissolve rapidly, and the envisioned representation of sonic sensations by textual letters becomes a most uncertain act.

In particular, Hölderlin's late poetry, by virtue of its fragmentary discontinuity and cryptic allusiveness, plunges its readers into an abysmal space of never-ending interpretability. Filled with cascading images, it is also, and essentially so, an unfathomable depth of the sonic, replete with sounds and echoes whose potential audibility can be evoked but not fully spelled out by the written letter. I am not arguing that Hölderlin's poetry is ultimately indecipherable, even if we are only faced with the most fragile sketches and drafts. On the contrary, this kind of poetry actively encourages the hermeneutic imagination to face its own interpretive uncertainties as a stimulus for exploring ever new potentialities of meaning in the poetic texts. I will analyze this process by focusing on two of Hölderlin's late hymns, "Patmos" and "Mnemosyne".¹ The intermedial transfer from the letter's visibility to the potential audibility of sound emerges in especially palpable clarity when we read the versions of both poems in the precise facsimile reproduction and its transcription in the *Frankfurter Ausgabe* of the *Homburger Folioheft*, probably compiled between 1802 and 1807 (Hölderlin 1986, pp. 307/19–28; 307/91–92).²

2. Hölderlin's Autograph

Looking at the autograph, one is immediately struck by the late Hölderlin's characteristic handwriting, which poses several problems for the reader. The flowing but decisive lines of the cursive script have a highly expressive, elegantly sensuous presence but are exceedingly difficult to decipher. Multiple corrections, revisions, and additions were often forcefully squeezed between the lines and on the margins. Traces of the writing on the following pages sometimes shine through the paper, which is marked by typical stains of a time-worn manuscript. In its visual density, the autograph almost takes on a kind of aesthetic autonomy, which asserts itself at the expense of its signifying function. At least for readers not intimately familiar with Hölderlin's handwriting, only the manuscript's painstaking transcriptions on the verso pages of the edition make the successive layers of the writing process readable. After immersing oneself in the manuscript for a few minutes, the pages begin to flicker optically, and the script begins to develop an optical dynamic of its own. The sensuous power of the autograph precedes the deciphering of the writing and its hermeneutic exegesis.

Like "Patmos", "Mnemosyne", with its evocation of the Greek goddess of memory, is a confusingly multi-layered palimpsest. As Michael Knaupp, the editor of the critical *Münchener Ausgabe*, has shown (Knaupp 1996), for this poem, we have neither a definitive manuscript version nor a print edition authorized by the poet. Knaupp meticulously reconstructs the most important steps of Hölderlin's drafts and reviews some of the controversial attempts by critical editions (Friedrich Beißner, Dietrich Uffhausen, Flemming Roland-Jensen, D. E. Sattler, and, last but not least, his own) to constitute a readable text. Knaupp rightly concludes his survey with the admonition to base any interpretation of texts like "Mnemosyne" on a careful study of the autographs and its various editions. It is only here that the restless dynamics and the inconclusive writing process of many of Hölderlin's poems attain visible presence.

3. Reading Selectively and Out of Context

Referring to another Hölderlin poem, "Das nächste Beste" (The Next Best) also from the *Homburger Folioheft* (Hölderlin 1986, pp. 307/73–74), Martin Heidegger proposes not to read the words heaped upon one another in the manuscript merely as variants, but to consider them in their togetherness (Heidegger 2000, p. 199). I am reversing this synoptic principle, deriving from the palimpsestic process structure of "Patmos" and "Mnemosyne" the justification to concentrate selectively on a few, densely meaningful segments. A discontinuous montage-text like "Mnemosyne" in particular allows us to quote individual

passages of excessive density out of its fragile and fluid context in order to integrate them into ever-new horizons of interpretation. Admittedly, this move violates the hermeneutic demand for reading textual details in their original place within the whole. But this principle derives from the traditional ideal of an organic, self-integrating work of art aimed for by classical–romantic aesthetics. “Mnemosyne” breaks with this principle since the manuscript here lacks an overall continuity of meaning. Rather, it is precisely the individual citations’ severed isolation that may reveal new possibilities of significance beyond their uncertain function with the original.³

In order to convey the gaps, allusiveness, and open questions of Hölderlin’s plunging into sonic poetics, my essay itself departs from the conventions of linear scholarly writing in favor of a fragmentary, even aphoristic style. The goal is not to mimic Hölderlin’s style, which of course would be rather preposterous, but to resonate with his poetic writing without capturing or inhabiting it through naive identification. Open in its questions and tentative in its answers, my essay does not claim to analyze the poems in strictly philological terms. It trusts the possibly deceptive but also promising act of skating on the thin ice of conjectures, even if this means that we depart from the seemingly secure paths of theory, strict methodologies, and irrefutable evidence.

4. Solid Letter and Song

Hölderlin’s “Patmos” (first version, 1802/03) paves the way for this transition from textual hermeneutics to the musical imagination⁴

Wir haben gedienet der Mutter Erd
Und haben jüngst dem Tagesgotte gedient
Unwissend, der Vater aber liebt
Der über alle(n)m waltet
Am meisten, daß gepflegt werde
Der veste Buchstab und Bestehendes wohl
Gedeutet. Dem folgt deutscher Gesang. (Hölderlin 1986, p. 307/28, l. 5–11)⁵

We have served the Mother Earth
And have most recently served the God of the Day
Unknowingly, but the Father loves
He who reigns over everything
Most of all, that one cultivate
The solid letter and interpret well
Everything that exists. This German song follows.⁶

What is this “veste Buchstab”? Its solidity seems to be guaranteed by the visual materiality of a script that, however, is not directly named. It may be a hand-written manuscript, or a printed book, especially Holy Scripture (see Warminski 1976, pp. 479–85; Nägele 1982, pp. 563–65). But on closer examination, the solid letter is less materially firm than it appears. In the immediate context of the surrounding verses, it seems to be a metaphoric reference to everything that exists—earth, the cosmos, the human and divine spheres. Because the mortals appear unaware of their duty to serve nature, they need to be reminded that God the Father loves their devoted, perhaps even devout, care for cosmic nature in a manner that proceeds like the meticulous deciphering of the solid letters of a book.

So far, Hölderlin follows the ancient topos of the world as God’s book, which must be read faithfully according to His will. But as always, Hölderlin gives tradition an unexpected twist. For the leap from the literal deciphering of the solid letters of a particular book to the infinite task of hermeneutically preserving the infinite meanings hidden in the world is a most daring one. It may reveal sudden insights but, considering the possibly elusive nature of God’s intentions, can also get lost in the abyss of something unfathomable, even unsayable. Just because the Father “loves” the good interpretation of his creation, there is

no guarantee that the mortals, with their limited horizon of hermeneutic insights, may live up to this enormous, and likely overwhelming, task. Thus, God is less the “transcendental signified” (to borrow Jacques Derrida’s famous term) holding together the infinite play of interpretive signification, than an absolute authority figure demanding a universal reading process that is as infinite as it is potentially dissolute.

In this situation, at the very end of the hymn, Hölderlin offers a surprising alternative to the hermeneutic reading of the world as a written script. He stages a sudden media transfer: “Dem folgt deutscher Gesang”. As if following in the footsteps of the ancient Orpheus and his lyre-playing, the poet must turn the “solid letters” of poetic script into a metaphoric song, emerging from but exceeding the limits of language, not least the poet’s native tongue.

5. Sounding Script

It is this crucial and highly problematic transfer from the visual presence of the hermeneutically decipherable, a solid letter to the question of how this medium may represent the utter elusiveness of sonic sensations, that is interrogated in the early version of Hölderlin’s “Mnemosyne”. The poem begins, on one level:

(E) Ein Zeichen sind wir, deutungslos
Schmerzlos sind wir und haben fast
Die Sprache in der Fremde verloren. (Hölderlin 1986, p. 307/91: 4–7)

A sign we are, without interpretation
Painless are we and have almost lost
The language in foreign lands.

This often-cited passage focuses on the reduction of the humans from autonomous subjects to abstract signs that have lost their meanings and their ability to feel bodily-affective pain. Self-alienated, they have almost, although not entirely, lost their language as if in foreign lands or even exile.

But as the autograph indicates, the line “(E) Ein Zeichen sind wir, deutungslos” is surrounded, on an earlier text layer, by the words: “aber es haben/[...] Zu singen” (Hölderlin 1986, p. 307/91: 3–5; But they have/[...] To sing). Further down, it seems that what is singing here are “Blumen auch Wasser” (flowers, also water), which try to sense whether the God is near (Hölderlin 1986, p. 307/91: 9–12). Thus, nature, in a way typical of Romanticism, is able to sing its songs at a time when the humans have almost lost their verbal language. From the start, then, the poem reflects on the contrast between linguistic signs deprived of their original meaningfulness and self-sufficient sonority.

After a convoluted evocation, through three stages of revision, of a violent strife among the heavenly bodies, raging nature, and the “Geist” finding a new homestead on earth, the latest draft continues with the lines

und die Schrift tönt E(ch)s möchten aber
und
[...]
Und es tönet das Blatt. (Hölderlin 1986, p. 307/91: 30–33)

and the script sounds but some would like
and
[...]
And the leaf sounds.

Blatt can of course refer to the leaf of a plant, especially since further down, there is a reference to oak trees blowing in the wind. But because of the reduplication of the verb “tönen”, one can assume that the *Blatt* here is a leaf in a book, or a single sheet of paper, part of the previously mentioned sonic *Schrift*.

But what are this script and its leaf, and what sounds do their letters emit? As Arne Melberg has argued, the poem shifts its attention from the subject-oriented “wir” who have almost lost their language to the objectifying “Blatt”. But it seems mistaken to conclude, as Melberg proposes, that the language lost to the humans now sounds from from this leaf (Melberg 1999, p. 352). What the humans lack is *their* language, their own oral speech or written word. But unlike the “solid letter” in “Patmos” that is clearly to be read dutifully by the humans, the elusive script/leaf in “Mnemosyne” seems to have no primarily textual or even visual presence addressed to a particular readership or audience. Instead, its central feature is that of a self-sufficient, autonomous medium that seems to emit unspecified sounds for its own sake. The sheer materiality of its acoustic property effaces its potential meaning. For this reason it is not spelled out anywhere in the poem, which centers on the uncertain task of commemorating dispersed images (but no sonic traces) of the fate of Ajax and Patroklos, the fallen heroes of Greek mythology and the city of Eleutherä, which the poet associates with the goddess Mnemosyne (Hölderlin 1986, p. 307/92: 32–34).

6. Echo

Shortly after evoking the sounding script and leaf, the earliest draft of the poem continues:

Nicht vermögen
[...]
Die Himmlischen alles. Nemlich es reichen
Die Sterblichen eh' an den Abgrund. Also wendet es sich
Mit diesen. Lang ist die Zeit
[]
Die Zeit, e(r)s ereignet sich aber
Das Wahre. (Hölderlin 1986, p. 307/91, l. 35–41)⁷

Not everything
The Heavenly are capable of. Because the mortals
Sooner reach the abyss. Thus it turns
With these. Long is the time
[]
The time, but what happens is
The True.

Even the heavenly forces are not all-powerful, presumably because the mortals approach an existential abyss, but why that is so remains unexplained. What is *it* that turns or reverses itself together with the movement of the mortals towards the abyss? Is *it* their newly-gained existential purpose, or conversely, their doom? The earlier draft does not answer these questions. But Hölderlin emended the vague reference, which now reads “Also wendet es sich, **das Echo**/Mit diesen”. “Thus it turns, **the echo**,/With these”. This addition significantly shifts the human predicament itself to a different level. Now, together with the sounding script, human existence, its abysmal movement, is accompanied by a sonic reverberation. But what is this echo? Like the sounds of the script, it is also an acoustic event, but not one originating on its own. An echo is a passive reverberation, a delayed reversal of an initial sound from another source. An echo always refers beyond itself; it re-territorializes the original sonority. Is this origin the sounding script that, responding to the humans’ approach towards the abyss, causes the echo, which then, in its reversal, might redirect the script’s sounds into the abysmal void of human existence? This question ultimately cannot be answered, not least because the various textual stages of the poem do not establish enough continuity to link the script or the leaf directly to the echo.

Whatever its source, the echo’s resounding, of course, unfolds in time. Perhaps for this reason, the poem goes on evoking the length of time, a length that appears exceedingly long, especially when considering the precarious situation of the mortals close to the abyss.

But this time is not merely chronological, but kairoitic, a time of fulfilled revelation, for within this time, “das Wahre” occurs. What is this True? As something that does not seem to reveal itself directly, at least not as a visual presence, it may be produced by the sounds of the script and their echo. But that too, is only a speculation. For “das Wahre” is not “die Wahrheit” (the Truth), it is not a particular concept tied to an explicit message. Rather, it is an *Ereignis*, an occurrence within time itself. Paradoxically, “sich ereignen” may refer either to a sudden and unexpected manifestation of the True as a singular event or, on the contrary, to its slow unfolding as a process.

As an effect possibly produced by the echo and originally even by the sounding script, the True is announced as an auditory expectation. Without script and echo the True would be inaudible, but does this mean that the True also opens itself to the hermeneutic desire for decipherable meanings?

7. Filling in the Gaps, Completing the Text?

The question that arises here is how the reader should respond to Hölderlin’s radical assemblages of allusive fragments and discontinuous juxtapositions. As proclaimed by “Patmos”, the ethos of a faithful exegesis, fixated upon the apparent solidity of the written letter, may likely fail here. But perhaps Walter Benjamin may help us here. Focusing on the Romantic work of art, he defines the critically interpretive procedure not as a merely explanatory commentary, but as a genuinely creative activity in its own right. Critique (*Kritik*) for him is an experimental interrogation of the artwork, a process initiating the work’s self-reflection (Benjamin 1974, p. 65). This interpretive activation of a self-recognition lying dormant in the artwork is not only able to explain certain textual passages from within these passages’ own horizon. Rather, the interpretation can translate the artwork’s immanent lacks, leaps, and gaps, its seemingly illogical inconsistencies, into something approximating an overall unity, coherence, and completeness. This process, according to Benjamin’s speculative metaphysics of aesthetic autonomy, may actually “dissolve”—transport and integrate—the individual artwork into the absolute ideality of art on the whole (Benjamin 1974, p. 78).

Even though Hölderlin does not really belong to the Romantic movement of his time, Benjamin’s theory might be useful in addressing the hermeneutic questions his texts pose. Indeed, such interpretive completions have been attempted by scholars engaging with the passages of “Mnemosyne” cited here.

As Violetta Waibel proposes in her nuanced reading, although the mortals, as signs without interpretation and almost deprived of their language, approach the abyss, the echo announces a reversal of this movement. Waibel deciphers the echo’s meaning as the reverberation of the sounding script: “Die Schrift, die tönt, die als Echo widerhallt, ist die Schrift, die Dichtung, der Gesang” (Waibel 2020b, p. 153; the script that sounds, that resounds as echo, is the script, the poetry, the song), which poets like Hölderlin produce in order to initiate a mediation between the gods and the mortals: “Die Sprachlosigkeit ist nicht auf Dauer gestellt, es gibt Umstände, die die Schrift zum Tönen bringen” (Waibel 2020b, p. 153; the speechlessness is not permanent, there are circumstances that make the script sound). Here, Waibel follows the seemingly clear logic of Hölderlin’s syntax across the different textual layers, a syntax that follows the causal chain of “Nemlich”—“Also”—“aber” (Because—Thus—But). This causal logic, however, is as suggestive as it is deceptive because, even if the echo can tenuously be traced back to the originally sounding script, and even if both can be heard as announcing a future manifestation of the True, the striking gaps and ambiguities in Hölderlin’s chain of images cannot simply be equated with the poetic *Gesang*, which, unlike the script and its echo, is always a carefully worked-out strategy whose functions and purposes Hölderlin clearly spells out in many of his other works.⁸

Even more problematic is Anke Bennholdt-Thomsen’s interpretation. Downplaying other auditory references in earlier stages of the text, she claims: “Hölderlin reduziert also offensichtlich bei der Entstehung des Gedichts die unmittelbaren akustischen Signale zugunsten der visuellen. Wenn er darüber hinaus in der Zeichen-Strophe von der ‘Schrift’

sagt, dass sie ‘tönt’, reklamiert er die Fähigkeit der Augen, diese zu lesen” (2020, p. 91; thus, during the conception of the poem, Hölderlin obviously reduces the immediate acoustic signals, in favor the visual ones. If, furthermore, in the strophe about the signs he says of the ‘script’ that it ‘sounds’, he reclaims the ability of the eyes to read it). Here, Bennholdt-Thomsen translates the obviously sonic self-articulation of the script and the echo into a mainly visual presence. Similarly, she reduces the “Echo”, although an acoustic resonance between earth and sky/heaven, to a phenomenon comparable, in a visual way, to the mirroring of rivers, claiming that generally, the echo in Hölderlin’s poetry is not necessarily limited to a sonic meaning (Bennholdt-Thomsen 2020, p. 91). But this equation of sound and eye (instead of the ear) implies an intermedial leap that disregards the material boundaries between hearing and seeing, between listening and reading. Whatever it is that the script and the echo signify is primarily and irreducibly audible, although in ways that a reliance on the visible readability of the writing cannot decipher.⁹

Interpretive attempts like these show that the (partial) “completion” of a literary text through a critique of its internal dynamics, as proposed by Benjamin, may be able to initiate its latent self-reflection. But this endeavor threatens to fail if the text itself seems to do everything to prevent the very readability that would be the necessary prerequisite for this kind of critique. On the preceding page of the *Homburger Folioheft*, Hölderlin composed a new stanza, beginning with “Reif sind, in Feuer getaucht, gekochet” (Ripe are, dipped in fire, cooked) (1986, p. 307/90: 35). Since this stanza does not contain any explicitly audible references, I just want to note here that scholars have not been in agreement whether these verses are meant as a substitution for the earlier first stanza of “Mnemosyne”, which contains all the passages I have cited, or whether it constitutes (part of) a new, independent poem.¹⁰

Even if we side with the scholars who support the substitution thesis, this does not mean that we need to abandon the earlier drafts, arguing that they have been superseded by new verses and are thus not worthy of further reflection. For this would assume that Hölderlin’s writing process has an immanent telos, a dynamics that automatically relegates deleted or replaced passages to the dustbin of outdated try-outs. But, as the facsimile edition of the *Homburger Folioheft* makes amply clear, even though Hölderlin continually revised his texts, the earlier versions retain their own significance, however incomprehensible they may be; they shine through, or indeed echo in, the multi-layered complexity of the palimpsestic autograph. As such, they continue to deserve our critical attention precisely as effaced but ultimately ineradicable textual fragments.

8. Enigmatic Text, Enigmatic Music

Thus, Hölderlin’s poem certainly poses formidable hermeneutic “problems”, but in a highly meaningful and promising way. Extrapolating his aesthetic theory from the high modernist and avant-garde art, Theodor W. Adorno has argued that all artworks are intrinsically enigmatic: “That artworks say something and in the same breath conceal it expresses this enigmaticalness from the perspective of language” (Adorno 1997, p. 120). Simultaneously revealing and concealing itself, the artwork itself destabilizes any understanding in the traditionally hermeneutic sense of deciphering its intentions, possible meanings, and truth claims: “Understanding is itself a problematic category in the face of art’s enigmaticalness” (Adorno 1997, p. 121).

Interestingly, Adorno singles out music to explain his theory: “Of all the arts, music is the prototypical example of this: It is at once completely enigmatic and totally evident. It cannot be solved, only its form can be deciphered, and precisely this is requisite for the philosophy of art”. (Adorno 1997, p. 122). The most authentic but also deceptive way of responding to this paradox, Adorno continues, is to activate the imagination as a mode of listening to music spiritually without relying on the acoustic realization by a (necessarily imperfect) performance: “Those who can adequately imagine music without hearing it possess that connection with it required for its understanding. Understanding in the highest sense—a solution of the enigma that at the same time maintains the enigma—depends on a

spiritualization of art and artistic experience whose primary medium is the imagination". (Adorno 1997, p. 122).

Of course, Adorno's preference for a silent reading of the musical score over the (necessarily imperfect) performance is problematic, but it does underscore the power of the auditive imagination in responding to the enigmatic nature of the composition. In a similar way, it seems to me, the sonic allusions of "Mnemosyne" resonate with Adorno's musically inflected argument. Perhaps the poem asks for a response that goes beyond the hermeneutics of textual analysis? Perhaps we need to approach the sounding script and self-reversing echo by listening imaginatively to their auditory possibilities simultaneously revealed and concealed by the visual presence of the autograph's fluid, anything but "solid" letters?

9. From Text to Music

Such an imaginary and imaginative listening can be guided, among the many compositions based on Hölderlin's poetry,¹¹ by the chamber cantata *MNEMOSYNE: Erinnerung und Vergessen für Sopran, 18 Streicher und Schlagzeug* (MNEMOSYNE: Remembrance and Forgetting, for soprano, 18 strings, and percussion; 2021), composed by Peter Ruzicka (born 1948).¹² This composition originated in the context of Ruzicka's opera *Hölderlin* (first performance 2008)¹³ and is based on the composer's own combination of verses from various textual layers of Hölderlin's poem.¹⁴ Ruzicka's work is part of a long tradition in contemporary music that, as Gianmario Borio and Elena Polledri have argued critically, selectively breaks isolated words and sentences out of the original context of Hölderlin's poetry in order to reconfigure them for their own musical interests. Such compositions proceed under the influence of editions like the *Frankfurter Ausgabe*, which visually highlights the various drafts of Hölderlin's poetry. Borio and Polledri stress that the poet himself did not privilege the fragment as an aesthetic form but, on the contrary, strove for completion, even if he often failed to accomplish this goal (Borio and Polledri 2019b, pp. 19–22).

But is this fragmentary palimpsest structure really a sign of failure? Whatever it may have meant for the poet himself, it does create its own productive possibilities in the realm of music. Citing bits and pieces out of Hölderlin's original context, modernist and avant-garde compositions are able to explore new meanings through musical transpositions that may go far beyond Hölderlin's own intentions and programs. Nonetheless, in line with her visualist bias, Anke Bennholdt-Thomsen suggests that a poem like "Mnemosyne" may really not have given a directly acoustic inspiration for musicians. At best, she proposes, a composition could offer an alternative medium—music—to the language and visibility of the poem (2020, p. 92). But of course a highly accomplished composition like Ruzicka's contradicts this visualist bias.

Part III of the composition uses this textual compilation from Hölderlin's verses:

Zweifellos
Ist aber Einer. Der
Kann täglich das ändern.
Kaum bedarf es Gesetz,
Wie nemlich es bei Menschen bleiben soll
Und die Schrift tönt
Und es tönet das Blatt.
Viele Männer möchten da sein wahrer Sache.
Eichbäume wehn dann neben den Birnen.
Denn nicht vermögen die Himmlischen alles
Nemlich es reichen die Sterblichen eh'an den
Abgrund. (Ruzicka 2022)¹⁵

But without doubt
Is One. He
Can change it daily.

Barely does it need a law,
 How it shall remains with the humans
 And the script sounds
 And the leaf sounds.
 Many men would be there with something True.
 Oak trees blow then next to the pears.
 For the Heavenly are not capable of everything
 Because the mortals sooner reach the
 abyss.

In Ruzicka's setting, the music vacillates between sharp dissonances and lyrical softness, while the voice of the soprano soloist unfolds in a rather gently flowing *recitativo* style. It lets Hölderlin's words hover above the instrumental accompaniment, but without granting the voice free autonomy from the string ensemble. It is telling that Ruzicka's version refers both to the sounding script and the sounding leaf: his musical setting naturally dramatizes the crucial sonority of Hölderlin's poem. For the verses "Und die Schrift tönt/Und es tönet das Blatt" (And the script sounds/And the leaf sounds), after a brief climax of dissonant harmonies, the instruments noticeably retreat, perhaps in order to let these important words come forth all the more clearly. Thus, the harmonically and rhythmically complex chromaticism of the solo voice underscores the similarly complex implications of Hölderlin's words, but without "explicating" any actual "message" possibly hidden in the script and the echo.

In Ruzicka's setting, then, the script and the leaf do not sound literally, but the human voice takes over their potentially audible expressivity by proxy, as it were. Contrary to Bennholdt-Thomsen's claim that music might only assert itself against the poem's presumably visual preoccupations, Ruzicka's transfer from poetic word to musical composition does offer one possible way of hearing something that won't directly offer itself when we silently read Hölderlin's verses or even recite them as spoken language.

But why does Ruzicka not include the important verses about the True unfolding in the length of time? Using for one's composition a very selective reconstitution of the original material is of course perfectly legitimate, especially when considering the fragmentary structure of the poem itself. So there must be a reason for leaving out the verses. Perhaps the sensuously audible music cannot approach a metaphysical category like the True, which the poet can only allude to but may not be able to realize through sonic presence? Or does the composition as a whole refer to this ineffable True precisely by not citing the textual passage addressing it? In this case the poetic allusion to the True contributes to the entire composition indirectly, by virtue of its absence, evoking a gap audible at least for those listeners who may remember the original words of Hölderlin. In this sense, even the decision not to compose particular verses casts a retrospective light, or better: a retroaudible echo, on the elusiveness of Hölderlin's notion of the True.

Surprisingly, after Ruzicka's setting of the passage about the abyss approached by the mortals, there follows an extended, orchestral postlude, which sounds intensely like a highly expressive torrent or whirl of pure sounds. Its vast rapidity, dynamic changes and relentlessly motoric energy palpably echo the disorientation and danger affecting the exiled humans dislocated from their homestead. Here, then, the musical tones do not only explicate the possible meanings of certain textual passages; they transpose the visual materiality of Hölderlin's handwriting into the audible intensity of absolute music.

10. Without Conclusion: The Musical Imagination

Can Ruzicka's MNEMOSYNE help us in our hermeneutic endeavors to understand what the sounding script and the reversing echo might signify? Of course, the musical sounds of this contemporary composition are not what Hölderlin might or might not have heard imaginatively when he wrote his verses. Still, in transferring the original poem to music, Ruzicka's piece can be listened to as an attempt to actualize what Hölderlin's original writing must leave unrealizable: the presence of real sound. Immersing themselves

in this musical interpretation of Hölderlin's poem, listeners can activate their auditory imagination. For out of the lack in the midst of Hölderlin's literary (non-)representation of sound, there arises the power of sonic fantasy, which can reverse the intermedial transfer: From Hölderlin's poem to Ruzicka's music, the imagination returns back to the sounding script and echo of the original. In this audio-hermeneutic spiral, the act of listening opens up possibilities of the audible that are promised by the literary text without being realized by it. But of course, this kind of sonic reading must necessarily be speculative in a literal, etymological sense: it is an act of looking at the letters' visual presence in order to venture beyond it into the uncertain and unpredictable realm of the audibly possible.¹⁶

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Notes

- ¹ See also the reading of "Patmos" and "Mnemosyne" in Goebel's (2016), especially pp. 19–20 and 22–23. Whereas that essay explicates key verses in Knaupp's (1992) edition within larger poetic and media contexts, I here explore the merits of a close reading of selected passages based directly on the autograph.
- ² All citations of Hölderlin are to the critical facsimile edition of the *Homburger Folioheft* in the Frankfurter Ausgabe, (Hölderlin 1986), cited by volume number/page number. For the complicated origins, preservation, and facsimile edition of the *Homburger Folioheft*, see the editors' introduction in (Hölderlin 1986, pp. 9–20). A nuanced discussion of whether the *Homburger Folioheft* should be regarded as a relatively unified whole or a loose collection of hymnic poetry and various drafts is given by George (2020, pp. 390–92). For a critique of the many editions of this convolute, see George 2020, pp. 392–401). Philipsen (2020) provides a useful interpretation of "Patmos" and "Mnemosyne" in their place within the corpus of other Gesänge; see pp. 381–83 and 385–87. Facsimile reproductions of the entire *Homburger Folioheft* are available online at: <https://homburgfolio.wlb-stuttgart.de/handschriften>, accessed on 14 August 2024.
- ³ Compare my approach to "Mnemosyne" with Anselm Haverkamp's, which provides a different, fully contextual reading based on the text's presumably coherent structure, even though he, too, (following Adorno) stresses its paratactical logic, which reflects the poem's sense of ancient history and mythos as being ruinous and hence unreadable (Haverkamp 1991, pp. 56–57, 62).
- ⁴ My brief references to "Patmos" are not meant to explore this long poem in its entirety, but are only meant to open up an introductory horizon for my detailed analysis of key passages in "Mnemosyne".
- ⁵ Here, as in all subsequent citations of the Frankfurter Ausgabe's transcription of the *Homburger Folioheft*, bold face indicates the latest manuscript stage, whereas round parentheses () mark deletions. For technical reasons, my citations cannot always reproduce the original edition's intricate usage of different fonts.
- ⁶ All translations from the German are my own. My rather literal versions of Hölderlin seek to follow the intricacies of his style as closely as possible.
- ⁷ The square brackets [] added by the editor of the Frankfurter Ausgabe indicate text or other signs that are indecipherable.
- ⁸ In this sense, it seems to me, "Mnemosyne" complicates Kreutzer's guiding thesis that music, especially the *Gesang* and the *Saitenspiel*, clearly depicts the sounding, but not necessarily the humanly audible, order of the divinely governed cosmos (Kreutzer 1994, p. 85). Despite "Mnemosyne's" references to this cosmic order, here the representational clarity of the sonic is missing—perhaps because this order is actually a disorder caused by the strife among the gods and the human abyss. Nonetheless, Kreutzer's essay is one of the earliest and still useful surveys of the centrality of music in Hölderlin's own poetry.
- ⁹ The excellent essay collection containing Waibel's and Bennholdt-Thomsen's contributions also includes detailed analyses of Hölderlin's "Patmos", as well as important discussions of composers, most notably Hans Zender, who have set the poet's texts to music (Waibel 2020a). These often insightful essays cannot be discussed within the scope of my argument. See also Haverkamp's decoding of the "echo" as describing the relationship between the gods and the mortals: "In der Tat ist das Echo die perfekte (!) Allegorie des göttlichen Anthropomorphismus (des Anthropomorphismus par excellence, dessen Kritik wir bei Kant finden und nach Kant bei Nietzsche und [Paul] de Man)" (Haverkamp 1991, p. 69); Indeed, the echo is the perfect allegory of divine anthropomorphism (the anthropomorphism par excellence, whose critique we find in Kant, and after Kant in Nietzsche and [Paul] de Man). It is this over-confident decoding, bolstered by casual references to great philosophers, that my own reading seeks to oppose.
- ¹⁰ For a discussion of this scholarly controversy, see (Knaupp 1996, pp. 185–88 and George 2020). Knaupp's own reconstruction of "Mnemosyne" incorporates this later stanza (Knaupp 1996, pp. 188–89 and Hölderlin 1986, pp. 437–38).

- 11 Among the considerable list of scholarly work on Hölderlin-inspired music, Borio and Polledri (2019a) and Waibel (2020a) provide an especially useful survey of this tradition, focusing especially on contemporary composers.
- 12 In the program notes for the first performance of this composition, Ruzicka mentions that he lifted selected passages from Hölderlin's "Mnemosyne" that touched him especially, and that he only found interpretive access to the poem through the various revisions reproduced by Sattler's facsimile edition (Ruzicka 2021, p. 6).
- 13 See Fischer's (2011) for a collection of essays on Hölderlin's aesthetic, Ruzicka's opera, and their artistic contexts.
- 14 See also Ingrid Allwardt's remarks on Ruzicka's String Quartet No. 6 *Erinnerung und Vergessen* (2008), which likewise originated from the composer's intense preoccupation with Hölderlin (Allwardt 2020, pp. 187–90). Another musical setting of Hölderlin's poem is by Hans Zender, *Mnemosyne. Hölderlin lesen IV, für Frauenstimme, und Streichquartett* (*Mnemosyne. Reading Hölderlin IV, for Female Voice, and String Quartett*). See the detailed analysis by (Fuhrmann 2020).
- 15 A recording of Part III of Ruzicka's work is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iedvT1aQPjw> (last accessed 14 August 2024).
- 16 This kind of imaginative and imaginary listening for the audibly possible has been theorized in recent philosophically inclined sound studies, especially by advocates of a sonic materialism. Thus, Salomé Voegelin explores the imaginative possibilities of the audible underneath the immediate surfaces of the visual (Voegelin 2014, pp. 1–7 and passim), while Holger Schulze stresses the irreducibly personal, even idiosyncratic process of "sonic fictions" (Schulze 2018, pp. 126, 230, and passim). See also Kramer's (2018), who coined the term "audiable" as a "perceptible potentiality of sound" (p. 31) different from the actual sounds of the audible. The audiable "is made perceptible as such when the channeling of its substance and energy into texts or images is divined or interrupted or reversed" (p. 30).

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