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Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843): Über Achill (1799)

In 1799, Hölderlin published the second volume of his best-known work, *Hyperion*. Though chiefly remembered for his poetry, Hölderlin here created a novel at once reflective of his time and innovative in its poetic concepts. On the surface it is an epistolary novel, a genre which took Germany by storm with Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*. Its hero, Hyperion, is a young revolutionary Greek who has just returned from exile in Germany. He sends letters to his closest friend Bellarmin and his lover Diotima, reflecting on his observations in exile and in contemporary Greece and their effects on his political philosophy and aesthetics. Unlike the rumbustious, conversational flow of letters typical of the English counterparts with their extravert and frequently humorous filtering, their socialite chatter and implicit multiperspectivism, only a small number of Hyperion's letters receive a response (mostly from Diotima). This turns the novel into a rather introspective strand of a "Bildungsroman", in which Hyperion's development, especially in aesthetic and philosophical terms, is propelled forward by his own internal conflicts and reflections. Amongst the unpublished fragments of Hölderlin's estate, there were a number which clearly relate to *Hyperion*. The following two, probably from the same year, resemble in style and content the letters addressed to Bellarmin. Whether they were meant to be included or, more likely, formed part of Hölderlin's own deliberations over his approach to classical literature, remains less clear. The literary student and critic always shies away from equating the writer with his heroes. In this case, however, there is a fundamental synergy between the youthful, idealist Hyperion and the poet in his quest for an adequate human-literary solution to the confrontation between a fractured world and the poet's power to transform this world through visionary synthesis. Both fragments praise the apparent hero of Homer's Iliad:

Über Achill (1)

Mich freut es, daß du von Achill sprichst. Er ist mein Liebling unter den Helden, so stark und zart, die gelungenste, und vergänglichste Blüthe der Heroenwelt, "so für kurze Zeit geboren" nach Homer, eben weil er so schön ist. Ich möchte auch fast denken, der alte Poët lass' ihn nur darum so wenig in Handlung erscheinen, und lasse die andern lärmen, indeß sein Held im Zelte sitzt, um ihn so wenig, wie möglich unter dem Getümmel vor Troja zu profaniren. Von Ulyß konnte er Sachen genug beschreiben. Dieser ist ein Sak voll Scheidemünze, wo man lange zu zählen hat, mit dem Gold ist man viel bälde fertig.

Über Achill (2)

Am meisten aber lieb' ich und bewundere den Dichter aller Dichter um des Achilles willen. Es ist einzig, mit welcher Liebe und welchem Geiste er diesen Charakter durchschaut und gehalten und gehoben hat. Nimm die alten Herrn Agamemnon und Ulysses und Nestor mit ihrer Weisheit und Thorheit, nimm den Lärmer Diomed, den blindtobenden Ajax, und halte sie gegen den genialischen, allgewaltigen, melancholischzärtlichen Göttersohn, den Achill, gegen dieses *enfant gaté* der Natur, und wie der Dichter ihn, den Jüngling voll Löwenkraft und Geist und Anmuth, in die Mitte gestellt hat zwischen Altklugheit und Rohheit und du wirst ein Wunder der Kunst in Achilles Charakter finden. Im schönsten Kontraste stehet der Jüngling mit Hector, dem edeln treuen frommen Manne, der so ganz aus Pflicht und feinem Gewissen Held ist, da der andre alles aus reicher schöner Natur ist. Sie sind sich eben so entgegengesetzt, als sie verwandt sind, und eben dadurch wird es um so tragischer, wenn

Achill am Ende als Todtfeind des Hector auftritt. Der freundliche Patroklos gesellt sich lieblich zu Achill und schickt sich so recht zu dem Trozigen. Man siehet auch wohl, wie hoch Homer den Helden seines Herzens achtete. Man hat sich oft gewundert, warum Homer, der doch den Zorn des Achill besingen wolle, ihn fast gar nicht erscheinen lasse. Er wollte den Götterjüngling nicht profanieren in dem Getümmel vor Troja.

Der Idealische durfte nicht alltäglich erscheinen. Und er kont' ihn wirklich nicht herrlicher und zärtlicher besingen, als dadurch, daß er ihn zurüktreten läßt (weil sich der Jüngling in seiner genialischen Natur vom rangstolzen Agamemnon, als ein Unendlicher unendlich belaidiget fühlt) so daß jeder Verlust der Griechen, von dem Tag an wo man den Einzigsten im Heere vermißt, an seine Überlegenheit über die ganze prächtige Menge der Herren und Diener mahnt, und die seltenen Momente, wo der Dichter ihn vor uns erscheinen läßt, durch seine Abwesenheit nur desto mehr ins Licht gesetzt werden. Diese sind dann auch mit wunderbarer Kraft gezeichnet und der Jüngling tritt wechselweise, klagend und rächend, unaussprechlich rührend, und dann wieder furchtbar so lange nacheinander auf, bis am Ende, nachdem sein Leiden und sein Grimm aufs höchste gestiegen sind, nach fürchterlichem Ausbruch das Gewitter austobt, und der Göttersohn, kurz vor seinem Tode, den er vorausweiß, sich mit allem, so gar mit dem alten Vater Priamus aussöhnt. Diese letzte Scene ist himmlisch nach allem, was vorhergegangen war.

[On Achilles (1)]

I am delighted that you spoke of Achilles. He is my favourite amongst the heroes, so strong and tender, the most accomplished and most ephemeral bloom on the pantheon of heroes, "born to live but briefly" according to Homer, precisely because he is so beautiful. I would almost like to think that the old poet shows him so rarely in action, letting the others make much noise, while his hero sits in the tent, to trivialise him as little as possible amongst the tumult outside Troy. Of Ulysses he had many things to tell. He is a purse of change, which takes long to count, gold coins take much less time.

On Achilles (2)

Yet most of all I love and admire the poet of poets for his Achilles' sake. It is unique with how much affection and spirit he has elucidated, developed and raised this character. Take the old gentlemen Agamemnon and Ulysses and Nestor with their wisdom and foolishness, take the loud Diomedes, the blind-raging Ajax, and compare them to the brilliant, all-powerful, melancholy-tender son of gods, Achilles, to this *enfant gaté* [spoilt child] of nature, and how the poet has placed him, the youth full of animal strength and spirit and grace, amidst ancient wisdom and coarseness, and you will find an artistic marvel in Achilles' character. The youth is in the most beautiful contrast with Hector, the noble, loyal, pious man, who is a hero entirely out of duty and refined conscience, as is the other through an ample, beautiful nature. They are as much opposed to each other as they are alike, and precisely as a result of this it is all the more tragic when in the end Achilles appears as Hector's deadly foe. The friendly Patroclus pleasingly joins Achilles, so well befitting the defiant hero. One also sees how highly Homer regards his heart's hero. One has often wondered why Homer, who, after all, wanted to celebrate Achilles' anger, has him hardly appear at all. He did not want to trivialise the divine youth amongst the tumult outside Troy. The ideal was not to appear as something ordinary. He really could not celebrate him more magnificently and tenderly than by letting him withdraw (because the youth in his genius nature, as a creature of infinity, feels infinitely insulted by the rank-conscious Agamemnon) so that each Greek defeat, from the day the army misses the great hero, recalls his superiority

over the entire splendid throng of masters and servants, and the rare moments, in which the poet lets him appear before us, attract all the more attention because of his absence. Accordingly, these are drawn with marvellous force and the youth alternately appears lamenting and avenging, unspeakably touching, and then again terrifying until in the end, when his suffering and his fury have reached their pinnacle, when after a terrible eruption thunder breaks loose, and the son of gods, just before his death, which he anticipates, finds reconciliation with all, even with the old father Priam. This last scene is heavenly after all that preceded it.]

The writer's sympathy for Achilles is plain, unreserved. Today, it may even strike us as naïve. It is not only feminist writers such as Christa Wolf who have since cast quite a different light on Achilles, depicting him as a psychopath, the archetype of a stunted, brutalised male, psychotic and lawless in his anger. Even more conventional and popular adaptations of the Iliad no longer deny the destructive impact of this powerful narrative of Western civilisation, emphasizing Achilles' unruly outsiderdom, his repressed sexuality, in short, his deeply flawed character. Yet it should not strike us as strange that a sensitive man such as Hölderlin can speak of this ancient hero in such exhilarating terms. First and foremost it is not Achilles the writer celebrates, but his creator, Homer. For the poet Hölderlin, as well as for his *alter ego*, the hero of *Hyperion*, the poetic creation of Achilles seems to offer an aesthetic model which allows him to reflect on his own poetic aspirations.

The encounter with 1770s Greece, under Turkish occupation, is a sobering, even cathartic one for Hyperion. In using this figure, Hölderlin negotiates idealised visions of antiquity and a deep discontent with contemporary realities, spiritual and political. Hyperion's Greece evokes that idealism in every stretch of its landscape, or rather beckons Hyperion to project it into that landscape. The remnants and imagery of that Greek civilisation painfully emphasize its loss, its disappearance. The Greeks Hyperion meets aspire as little to that ancient wholeness and ideal as do the "all-calculating barbarians", as he calls his German countrymen. It is, after all, the despair over his countrymen and the absence of an idealist spirituality in Germany which causes him to seek solace in Greece. The French revolution in 1796 had initially promised hope, especially hope of an Athenian-style democracy, but like Goethe and Schiller, Hölderlin soon became disillusioned with Robespierre's terror and Napoleon's imperial aspirations. In *Hyperion* there is more than an inkling of Hölderlin's realist acceptance of compromised idealism. Many critics have questioned whether the hero's defiant hope and declared belief in the ever-renewing energy of life are entirely believable. This is where Achilles, the poetic creation, serves as a key.

Psychologically, Achilles represents the intuitive, instinctual man. Unlike Hyperion, he does not suffer from a fractured nature, the crippling effect of reflection, abstraction, and more specifically, doubt. Achilles is the man of action, not a man stifled by a questioning mind. He is also, for Hyperion, the avenger of childhood, a man whose passion and destructiveness is fed by the memory of a lost, even damaged childhood (cf. the poem "Achill", 1798). Achilles also represents the defender of Hyperion's honour, the honour of his vision of a reinstated totality of existence. Politically, Achilles represents the maverick statesman. He is not involved in political intrigues, he knows no pragmatism or opportunism in his politics. He is powerful, but does not seek power or land; he does not acknowledge any overlord. Achilles' political behaviour is led by loyalty to his men and the land he has left. His motivation is always personal, led by an uncompromising but nevertheless naive sense of justice.

Hölderlin, a declared democrat, surviving under the protection of the Hessian landgrave Friedrich V., watched with anger and despair how the German princes calculated their allegiances, none willing to embrace the revolutionary movement or modernise their reactionary legislation. 1799 saw Napoleon's adoption of the title of first consul, which

Hölderlin immediately viewed as the first step to dictatorship. For Hyperion, for the writer of these fragments, Achilles is ultimately the victim of power politics into which the other heroes, weak and calculating such as Agamemnon, draw him – this much any reading of the Iliad confirms.

The strongly emotive element in Hölderlin's liking for Achilles undoubtedly grows out of this psychological and political function. For the Iliad Achilles indeed has something akin to the *deus ex machina*, that unforeseen, *arational* power which breaks into the normal course of events and accelerates the catastrophe. Here, nature, Achilles' all-driving holy anger, punishes false, man-made convention. Achilles, after all, triggers the collapse of Troy's *ancien regime*. Even Hector's moral integrity has to bow to these forces of unfragmented nature. Achilles is for Hölderlin the embodiment of the poetic voice amongst the reactionary forces, but also among the indifferent, apathetic Germans who deny the call of poetry for obedience and petty-mindedness. Homer "designs" the Iliad and its hero in such a way that he remains unaffected by the petty humanity around him. Achilles is the untainted spokesman of poetic creation. This poetic voice is also one of political opposition, of social criticism. After all, Hyperion begins his letters lambasting the Germans for their utilitarianism, their cowardice. To Hölderlin Achilles is, in a sense, the perfect antidote to German alienation and inhumane rationality.

This use of classical stories, revisiting the landscapes and characters of antiquity, distinguishes Hölderlin from many of his contemporaries, be they labelled "Romantic" or "Classical". All too aware of the impossibility of telling a story as Homer once did, Hölderlin's fragments direct the reader, including himself, towards the poetic sentiments these classical figures and narratives evoke. The writer of these fragments, as much as Hyperion, is a modern creature. Like Walter Benjamin's strolling 20th century city-dweller ("Flaneur"), he recognizes and uncovers in the encounter with Achilles and Greek civilisation that which modern man has lost. In a sense, it is for the modern reader to discover the implicit wholeness of Homer's story-telling, which in turn produces this "ample" hero. What strikes the writer first is Achilles' complete integrity as a character. His actions are unmediated, i.e. he does not subject them to analysis. His independence or autonomy may lead to tragedy, but it is never compromised by calculation. Achilles is led by distinct, undiluted emotions and passions which are neither borrowed nor affected. Achilles' actions are not reasonable. Hölderlin does not condone Achilles' violence, yet that unreasonable wholeness of Achilles is in his view that which creates and allows for the beauty and authenticity of the character. We are convinced and impressed by this character precisely because he stands outside the argumentative bickering of the other protagonists, and to the extent that he is the gods' favourite, remains relatively unaffected by their machinations. Achilles is one of the least articulate of the warriors. His rhetoric is no match for the relentlessly verbose orator Nestor or even the ever-scheming Agamemnon. On the one hand, Achilles' motivation is so elemental that it requires no verbalisation, on the other, Achilles has respect for that which defies articulation. His wrath over Patroklos' death reflects that same elemental intuitiveness as does his generous treatment of Priam who seeks the return of his son Hector's body. However, it would be simplistic to interpret the veneration of this archetypal action hero as an unqualified attack on reason and rhetoric. In many ways a cerebral wordsmith, Hölderlin demands that the modern eye, the modern mind allows for the creation of such a character of "wholeness", of unfractured humanity. *Hyperion* makes it quite clear that this wholeness must inform aesthetic composition as much as political organisation.

What Achilles does for the politics of the Trojan war and the hearts of the participants and readers alike, Homer does for poetic contrivance. It is not the dictum that "actions speak

louder than words” which informs Homer’s writing. If this were the case, Achilles’ rare appearances would become insignificant amongst the relentless slaughter of the epic. Hölderlin correctly points out that Achilles is all the more potent a narratorial force because of his relative absence. Though he does not “physically” appear in most of the Iliad’s songs, he is everpresent. Be it that he is mentioned by other warriors or cited as the ultimate standard in man-to-man combat such as when Agamemnon dissuades his brother Menelaos from challenging Hector (Song VII), he very quickly emerges as the force on which the resolution of the conflict depends. More than that, his elemental behaviour bundles the diffuse strands, the loitering subplots, repetitive addresses and roll-calls and not least the divine arguments which otherwise would end in stalemate. For Hölderlin, Homer’s crafty use of Achilles does not only bring to an end a serious political struggle, but transports the reader away from the trivialities and falseness which underlie and inform this struggle. The creation and tragedy of Achilles reinstates a noble perspective, which puts the fragmenting power of manipulative reason in its place. Achilles’ poetic “success”, his narratorial effectiveness and his pre-modern integrity are to Hölderlin didactic reminders of a lost harmony. It is the vision of this lost harmony, resonating in the experience of “beauty” and “nature” as we follow Homer’s narrative, which Hölderlin wants to incorporate in his own poetics. He also wants it regain a place in public discourse, feeding into the social and political realities of the time.

Of course, the passages on Achilles, as much as the whole of *Hyperion*, are not least intellectual reflections which underlie much of Hölderlin’s writings. On the one hand they tell the story of a man struggling to find and recreate that lost harmony, not just in literary, but even in political and social terms. On the other they formulate an unresolved argument about writing itself. Is writing an idealist act which seeks to create a space or even a blueprint of man in harmony with himself and nature or is it an ultimately lyrical account of the inevitable loss of innocence, a more pragmatic reminder of a state which we need to aspire to but is impossible to achieve?

Fragment reproduced from: Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke*, Große Stuttgarter Ausgabe, Band 4.1, ed. by Friedrich Beißner and Adolf Beck, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer/Cotta: 1943-1985, pp. 224-225. Translated by Sascha Harris.

Further reading: Johann Kreuzer: *Hölderlin-Handbuch, Leben-Werk-Wirkung*. Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 2002. David Constantine: *Friedrich Hölderlin*. München: Beck, 1992. Robin Burnett Harrison: *Hölderlin and Greek Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.