

IAN COOPER

Law, Tragedy, Spirit: Hölderlin Contra Agamben

This article takes references to Friedrich Hölderlin in the work of Giorgio Agamben as a basis for proposing a broader view of their philosophical relationship, particularly in respect of the themes treated by Agamben in *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Hölderlin is a frequent but elusive and ambiguous point of reference in Agamben's work, and the essay begins by examining Agamben's invocation, in *Homo Sacer*, of Hölderlin's translation of, and commentary on, a Pindaric fragment (›Das Höchste‹) in the context of the ›inclusive exclusion‹ and the dynamics of so-called ›bare life‹. This establishes Hölderlin's suggestive place in Agamben's account of law. In a further reference to Hölderlin (this time to his commentaries on Greek tragedy), Agamben implies Hölderlin's significance for his understanding of poetry (as put forward in *The End of the Poem*). Furthermore, here Agamben suggests that the Hölderlinian concept of caesura bears on his own thought, and thereby connects Hölderlin to the terms of the political theology, derived from Paul, developed in *The Time that Remains*.

The thrust of the essay consists in an interrogation of Agamben's concepts of ›remnant‹ and ›divided division‹, which underlie his messianic political theology. Hölderlin, it is argued, is important for the conceptual structure developed by Agamben in his reading of Paul, and also offers a decisive alternative to the assumptions of Agamben's project. Questions of law and representation – central themes of *The Time that Remains* – are treated in Hölderlin's essay *Über Religion* (On Religion), which also links these to the violence which Agamben says law inevitably generates. Yet, the article argues, *Über Religion* suggests a clear difference from Agamben's political theology, and so a problem for any attempt to co-opt him for the broader terms of Agamben's philosophy. Where Hölderlin develops a view of law and representation as opening to a sphere of determinate, relational existence in which law and representation are not dispensed with but rather articulate – in their fulfilment and limit – an experience of freedom in love, Agamben takes the messianic division of representation and law to signal a potential overcoming of relation (and so freedom from the sovereign ban explored in *Homo Sacer*). Hölderlin, it is argued, is both closer to the complexity of Pauline messianic vocation in its relation to law than Agamben, and a powerful corrective to the paradoxes of Agamben's political theology, defined by the minimal conditions of relation which it needs to admit in order to proceed beyond relation. This is discussed with reference to Agamben's notion of vocation as a revocation or ›nullifying‹ of determinacy, and the Christological implications of Hölderlin's analysis of law and desire as it develops from the essay *Urtheil und Seyn* (Judgement and Being). Dieter Henrich's analyses of Hölderlin's thought are employed here.

In its final section, the essay returns to that area of Hölderlin's work mentioned by Agamben in his account of poetry – the theory of tragic drama. Antigone can at first sight be seen as exemplifying some of Agamben's claims about the ›production‹ of bare life: the play demonstrates how what Hölderlin calls the ›lawful calculus‹ of tragedy turns its heroes over to lawlessness while keeping them subject to law – placing them outside the polis but maintaining them in a coercive relation to it. At the same time, Hölderlin's conception of tragic caesura introduces the idea of a remnant to representation which brings it close to *The Time that Remains*. However, the Hölderlinian tragic remnant is explicitly named as Spirit, in which representation is not abolished but transfigured, or brought closer to what the essay on religion termed the (spiritual) perfection of law. While Agamben seems to find in Hölderlin a confirmation of that ›messianic‹ time in which law and relations are rendered inoperative and a utopian potential emerges, Hölderlin's conception of the tragic in fact proposes a reconstitution of law and relational existence under the aegis of (Pauline) love. The essay concludes that Hölderlin thereby offers a powerful (and more properly tragic) alternative to Agamben's political messianism and its disdain for determinacy.

References

- Adler, Jeremy, Philosophical Archaeology: Hölderlin's »Pindar Fragments«. A Translation with an Interpretation, *Comparative Criticism* 6 (1984), 23–46.
- Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, transl. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford 1998 (HS).
- , *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, transl. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford 1999 (Agamben 1999a).
- , *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, transl. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford 1999 (Agamben 1999b).
- , *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, transl. Patricia Dailey, Stanford 2005 (TR).
- Badiou, Alain, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, transl. Ray Brassier, Stanford 2003.
- Borislavov, Rad, Agamben, Ontology, and Constituent Power, *Debatte* 13 (2005), 173–184.
- Constantine, David, *Hölderlin's Sophocles: Oedipus and Antigone*, Tarsset 2001.
- Cooper, Ian, *The Near and Distant God: Poetry, Idealism and Religious Thought from Hölderlin to Eliot*, Oxford 2008.
- Finkelde, Dominik, *Politische Eschatologie nach Paulus: Badiou, Agamben, Žižek, Santner*, Vienna 2007.
- Frey, Christiane, κλησις/Beruf: Luther, Weber, Agamben, *New German Critique* 105 (2008), 35–56.
- Hamacher, Werner, Parusie, Mauern: Mittelbarkeit und Zeitlichkeit, später Hölderlin, *Hölderlin-Jahrbuch* 34 (2004/05), 93–142.
- Henrich, Dieter, *Der Grund im Bewußtsein: Untersuchungen zu Hölderlins Denken (1794–1795)*, Stuttgart 1992.
- , *The Course of Remembrance and Other Essays on Hölderlin*, Stanford 1997.
- Hölderlin, Friedrich, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, ed. and transl. Thomas Pfau, Albany 1988.

- , *Sämtliche Werke: Große Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, ed. Friedrich Beißner/Adolf Beck, 8 vols, Stuttgart 1943–85 (*GStA*).
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe, The Caesura of the Speculative, in: *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk, Cambridge, MA 1989, 208–235.
- Lévinas, Emmanuel, *On Escape*, transl. Bettina Bergo, Stanford 2003.
- McLoughlin, Daniel Paul, The Politics of Caesura: Giorgio Agamben on Language and the Law, *Law and Critique* 20 (2009), 163–176.
- Nägele, Rainer, *Text, Geschichte und Subjektivität in Hölderlins Dichtung: ›Unesbarer Schrift gleich‹*, Stuttgart 1984.
- Pan, David, Against Biopolitics: Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt, and Giorgio Agamben on Political Sovereignty and Symbolic Order, *German Quarterly* 82 (2009), 42–62.
- Ross, Nathan, The Mythic Grounding of Practical Philosophy in Hölderlin's *On Religion*, *Idealistic Studies* 37 (2007), 15–28.
- Santner, Eric L., *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*, Chicago/London 2006.
- Schmitt, Carl, *Das Nomos von der Erde*, Berlin 1974.
- Steiner, George, *Antigones*, Oxford 1984.
- Tang, Chenxi, The Tragedy of Popular Sovereignty: Hölderlin's *Der Tod des Empedokles*, *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 81 (2007), 346–368.
- Weineck, Silke-Maria, The Abyss Above: Philosophy, Tragedy, and Madness in Hölderlin's Encounter with Sophocles, *Seminar* 36 (2000), 161–181.
- Žižek, Slavoj, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, Cambridge 2003.
- Žižek, Slavoj/John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, Cambridge 2009.

Full-length article in: JLT 6/1 (2012), 195–212.

How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Ian Cooper, Law, Tragedy, Spirit: Hölderlin Contra Agamben.

In: JLTonline (20.02.2012)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-002101

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-002101>