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Hölderlin’s idea of ‘Bildungstrieb’: A model from yesteryear?

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ABSTRACT
The term Bildungstrieb, which was used toward the end of the eighteenth century by thinkers like Johann Gottfried Herder, Immanuel Kant, or Friedrich Schiller, but which is obsolete in today’s vernacular, was of great importance for Friedrich Hölderlin. In this article, I explore the historical roots of this concept in the biology of the time, which was then still searching for the right concepts to describe the organic. Bildungstrieb is found in Kant’s teleology in the Critique of Judgment, where Kant with the help of this concept works out the specificity of organic life as well as its vicinity and difference to the teleology of human acts and action. Kant himself refers to the Göttingen anatomist, zoologist, and anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, in whose writings Kant found the term which he reinterpreted for his own purposes. Friedrich Schiller adopts the word Bildungstrieb in his work On the Esthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters, reinterpreting it from the point of view of the history of ideas. It is Friedrich Hölderlin, finally, who in his Essay The Perspective from which We Have to Look at Antiquity, and in related texts, gives the Bildungstrieb an important role. The Bildungstrieb needs to be awakened, if art is going to draw in an original way from an undeformed source. During work on the tragedy The Death of Empedocles, the poet further developed the concept of Bildungstrieb to include the idea of an opposition between what he calls the ‘aorgic’ and the ‘organic’, which mutually condition, complete, and penetrate one another, in a manner similar to Nietzsche’s even more powerful formulation of the Janus-faced artistic impulse, as embodied in the opposition of the Dionysian and the Apollonian.

The raw, untrained, and childlike as the substance of the Bildungstrieb

We dream of education, piety, pp and have none whatsoever; it is appropriated—we dream of originality and autonomy; we believe to be saying all kinds of new things and, still, all this is reaction, as it were, a mild revenge against the slavery with which we have behaved toward antiquity. (Hölderlin, 1799/1988, p. 39)

It is Friedrich Hölderlin, the poet, who is writing these words, and who is seeking his understanding of himself as an artist with regard to Bildung, which is for him like a heavy burden, even a kind of bondage. He speaks of a Bildung—a term that has different layers of meaning, such as education, cultivation, formation—which isn’t one. Bildung isn’t, because we are only dreaming of Bildung.

Hölderlin sees himself as part of a tradition which draws its educational canon from the riches of Antiquity, and enriches to the same degree as it chains human beings to a bygone age and takes the life out of the present. It is good to obtain education and culture, to preserve the acquired educational heritage; but this takes place, Hölderlin complained, at the cost of truly new creation.
Hölderlin’s complaints about the shackles of education (Bildung) in his fragmentary essay: ‘The Perspective from which We Have to Look at Antiquity’ (Hölderlin, 1799/1988, pp. 39–44) sound almost like a mockery, when one considers that Hölderlin was among the privileged few of his time who early on attended the traditional grammar school, and then had his studies at the program of theology in Tübingen subsidized, including a two-year program of studies in philosophy, followed by the study of theology. Hölderlin continually tried to console his half-brother Karl Gok, because of the fact that the latter had to work as a town clerk and acquire on the side and by his own efforts the training which Hölderlin was able to obtain through university study.

The problem Hölderlin is confronting, however, lies deeper. He is calling into question a very specific qualitative aspect of education. The problem articulated here by the poet relates to the search for his artistic self-image, and his own artistic path. But this is not just the problem of a particular artist or band of artists. It is a much more universal problem which is being addressed here. On the one hand, it is easy to reach a consensus regarding the conviction that acquiring education is a significant cultural achievement. And only through conscious awareness of cultural achievements is it possible to preserve cultural heritage and further advance cultural tradition.

On the other hand, Hölderlin points out that an education which is focused on preservation of this heritage is condemned to servitude to that which already exists, to what went before, is admired and celebrated. This servitude establishes itself together with the judgement of the great worth of that heritage, which proceeds from our admiration and appreciation for it. The cultural achievements of the past are presented therewith as a standard and model. It is the standard-setting magnitude and significance of cultural heritage which communicate themselves to later generations and invite them to continue on this path. This, however, is precisely what paralyzes one, and condemns one to imitation, and this is what Hölderlin rebels against.

Many other artists have resisted the shackles of tradition. It is the very specificum of art to want to be new and do otherwise than one’s predecessors. This is why there have always been paradigm shifts on the threshold to a new era, and not just in the modern era.

Hölderlin has a recipe for his new orientation, one that is astonishing when one considers that only a few years before he was advocating for a metaphysics in which not the good and not truth, but beauty represents the highest principle. He sees now, namely, that a drive for formation (Bildungstrieb) is active in human beings, which, as he writes:

is bent on forming the unformed, to perfect the primordial-natural so that man, who is born for art, will naturally take to what is raw, uneducated, childlike rather than to a formed material where there has already been pre-formed [what] one wishes to form. (Hölderlin, 1799/1988, p. 39)

The creative, formative power is not sought in beauty or truth, but in what is culturally as yet unformed, in what is original and primitive or undeveloped.

The idea of a ‘Bildungstrieb’—which means something like ‘creative’ or ‘formative impulse’—brings into focus an original creative power of human beings which has its source in human nature and drives us to be culturally formative. The broader context of Hölderlin’s short theoretical essay ‘The Perspective from which We Have to Look at Antiquity’ makes it clear that an even greater value is to be attributed to the cultural heritage of antiquity because of the fact that craftsmen and artists of antiquity produced their work on the basis of a natural creative impulse (Bildungstrieb) and thanks to an original force, while a person of a later era, by which Hölderlin means, above all, an artist or craftsman of the late eighteenth century, although he has a multitude of possibilities to receive the cultural heritage of antiquity and educate himself on the basis of that heritage, is lacking in his exchange with that heritage the immediacy of an inner man need, that expresses itself creatively through that heritage. Thus, Hölderlin makes clear in his understanding of himself that an immediacy must be established, if artistic production, which he is concerned with here, is to be genuine and vital.

The one ‘who is born for art, will naturally take to what is raw, uneducated, childlike rather than to a formed material where there has already been pre-formed [what] one wishes to form’ (Hölderlin, 1799/1988, p. 39). This attitude of the artist to her material reminds one notably of the movements
in art at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, when art of the so-called primitives, the
indigenous peoples from Africa, Oceana, or other regions became a point of orientation for Gauguin,
Picasso, Braque, and many others. It reminds us furthermore of movements like that of the Fauves,
that is, ‘die Wilden,’ or ‘die Neuen Wilden,’ of Art Brut and similar movements. This attitude calls to mind,
in addition, Nietzsche and both types of artistic drives mentioned by him, insofar as he contrasts the
measured form of the Apollonian with the Dionysian principle which dissolves all formal relationships
(cf. on this point Waibel, 2011, pp. 43–60). Even if Hölderlin did not wish to go so far, his ideas did appear
to move in this direction.

The surprising reference to the ‘raw, uneducated, childlike’ can be according to Hölderlin united with
the goal of producing beauty with art. Hölderlin writes to his brother Karl Gok on 4 June 1799 about
the formative impulse (Bildungstrieb), which is also utilized by the artist:

Thus the greatest and the smallest, the best and the worst in human beings emerges from one root, and on the
whole everything is good and each fulfils in his own way, the one more beautifully, the other more savagely, his
destiny as a human being, namely his destiny to reproduce and multiply the life of nature, to accelerate, divide,
mix, separate, bind. (Hölderlin, 1799, in Hölderlin, 1992, p. 769; Trans. M.E. Zovko)

Whatever is raw, uneducated, or childlike in its beginning, can, according to the reciprocal determina-
tion presented here, produce the exact opposite and unfold to a full flower, which springs from nature.
Hölderlin therefore continues in his letter to Karl Gok: ‘You see, dear, that I have posited the paradox
that the drive for art and education, with all its modifications and deviant variants, is a peculiar service
that humans provide to nature’ (Hölderlin, 1799, in Hölderlin, 1992, pp. 769–770; Trans. M.E. Zovko).

To Schelling also Hölderlin mentions in a letter from July 1799, that ‘poetry, insofar as it is living art
… emerges simultaneously from genius, experience and reflection.’ Hölderlin continues,

This led me to reflect about education and the drive to education in general, about its cause and determination,
to the extent that it is idealistic and actively forming, and again to the extent that it works from [the point of] the
ideal with a consciousness of its cause and of its own essence, and insofar as it works instinctively, yet according
to its material as a drive of art and education. (Hölderlin, 1799, in Hölderlin, 1988, p. 145)

Art, education, and the drive for art and education form for Hölderlin a close community, that is
able—one moment driven by the senses and therefore by instinct, as is attributed to genius, and one
moment just as much with clear consciousness and reflective thought—to create a kind of art which
is able to do justice to the highest standards, and which is new and original, because it has something
specific and essential to say and in fact does not repeat what was dictated by the educational canon.

**Blumenbach and Kant on Bildungstrieb (‘formative impulse’)**

At this point, we should pause and ask how Hölderlin arrived at his concept of a ‘formative impulse,’
which, as I suggested earlier, reveals even a certain relationship to Nietzsche’s ‘drive for art’ as embodied
in the Dionysian and the Apollinian. The term ‘formative impulse’ (Bildungstrieb) is quite widely used at
the end of the eighteenth century. One finds it in Schiller or Herder, occasionally in Kant and in many
others. Amongst the most important sources are the writings of the Göttingen Anatomist, Zoologist, and
Anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach. According to Kant’s view, Blumenbach opposed his own
theory of epigenesis to the doctrine of preformation. These were two concurrent doctrines that at that
time attempted to explain the biology of organic life. Blumenbach’s treatise *On the Formative Impulse
and the Task of Procreation (Über den Bildungstrieb und das Zeugungsgeschäfte*, Nachdruck Göttingen
1971), a treatise which was highly recognized and reprinted many times, was published in 1781.

In the doctrine of preformation, it was assumed that the reproduction of organic life followed literally
by means of a new unfolding or evolution (understood not in our modern sense) of an original blue-
print within the nascent organism, which in turn owed its existence to a divine creation. The theory of
epigenesis opposed the hypothesis of a divine blueprint and the unfolding of already completely given
capacities. With this hypothesis one postulated a drive for formation which was continually effective
in various stages and which was inherent in organic life and manifested itself in different functions.
Kant defends Blumenbach’s theory of epigenesis in his Teleology in the *Critique of Judgment*.¹ In § 81, one reads:

No one has done more for the proof of this theory of epigenesis as well as the establishment of the proper principles of its application, partly by limiting an excessively presumptuous use of it, than Privy Councilor Blumenbach. He begins all physical explanation of these formations with organized matter. For he rightly declares it to be contrary to reason that raw matter should originally have formed itself in accordance with mechanical laws, that life should have arisen from the nature of the lifeless, and that matter should have been able to assemble itself into the form of a self-preserving purposiveness by itself; at the same time, however, he leaves natural mechanism an indeterminable but at the same time also unmistakable role under this inscrutable principle of an original organization, on account of which he calls the faculty in the matter in an organized body (in distinction from the merely mechanical formative power that is present in all matter) a formative drive (standing, as it were, under the guidance and direction of that former principle). (Kant, 1790/2009, p. 424 [292 f.])

Kant is agreed with Blumenbach’s theory of the drive for formation (*Bildungstrieb*), insofar as gives priority to purposive organization over natural mechanism. Taking Blumenbach’s position as a point of departure, he opposes the doctrine of preformation and similar ideas which see living nature as unfolding mechanically according to a predetermined inner plan, as the doctrine of preformation claims. Kant remarks in addition, that it is senseless, if one thinks ‘that life should have arisen from the nature of the lifeless, and that matter should have been able to assemble itself into the form of a self-preserving purposiveness by itself.’ There must be something, which organizes the purposive form of living creatures on all levels, which differs, again in Kant’s words, from the ‘merely mechanical power of formation.’ Kant opposes thus a concept of life, according to which this is explicated through a merely causal mechanism. The doctrine of preformation makes contra-intuitive assumptions which are not acceptable for Kant, whereas the doctrine of epigenesis seems plausible to him.² In this context, one reads what Kant says concerning the objective purposiveness of organized nature.

In § 64 of the *Critique of Judgment* Kant differentiates the particular character of living beings, which he in this respect characterizes as natural purposes, according to three aspects. The first is production according to the species, that is, according to the specific form of the procreation of living beings. The second is the growth of the individual, which must not be confused with merely mechanical and quantitative increase of the size. It uses materials, raw materials, nutrients from nature, following thereby an inner blueprint, accordingly, ‘in the separation and new composition of this raw material there is to be found an originality of capacity for separation and formation in this sort of natural being that remains infinitely remote from all art’ (Kant, 1790/2009, p. 371 [243]).

The third aspect which Kant emphasizes is the self-help of nature in the case of injuries, where the lack of a member of the organism is sometimes made up for through helpful cultivation and growth of another member, even if nature sometimes arrives at ‘failed’ repair measures like deformations or unwanted growths. Every tumor is an attempt at self-healing, which overcompensates for some lack by some excess. To illustrate this point, Kant brought together succinctly and systematically the numerous empirical case examples and observations which can be read in detail in Blumenbach’s work.

Kant emphasizes in the *Critique of Judgment* that the organizing principle of living beings cannot be specified. It remains, as is noted in § 81, undetermined. An extramundane cause is impossible for Kant, but natural mechanism is also not sufficient to determine the specific form of becoming in nature. It is clear that living beings are organized according to a specific form, which Kant calls objective purposiveness. This is defined in the following manner:

> a thing exists as a natural end if it is cause and effect of itself (although in a twofold sense); for in this there lies a causality the likes of which cannot be connected with the mere concept of a nature without ascribing an end to it, but which in that case also can be conceived without contradiction but cannot be comprehended. (Kant, 1790/2009, p. 370 f. [243])

The formulation according to which a thing is both a cause and an effect of itself anticipates to a certain extent what today, since the works of Humberto Maturana und Francisco Varela, is discussed under the concept of *autopoesis*, as simultaneously self-regulating and self-producing (cf. Maturana & Varela, 1980, 1987).
Along with the question of how the particular form of causation native to living beings must be judged, another determining factor arises, which more closely characterizes their inner organization. Kant writes thus:

Now for a thing as a natural end it is requisite, first, that its parts (as far as their existence and their form are concerned) are possible only through their relation to the whole. For the thing itself is an end, and is thus comprehended under a concept or an idea that must determine a priori everything that is to be contained in it. (Kant, 1790/2009, p. 373 [244 f.])

This consideration draws a parallel already claimed by Aristotle between the purposeful production of reason, which brings forth artifacts and works of craftsmanship, and the generation of nature, which brings forth natural products, as if it were reason. Productive reason has a concept of what it produces. This concept refers to the whole, with reference to which the parts are produced. Organic nature permits us to draw an analogy in this respect between productive reason and the generation of natural things, even if Kant repeatedly and forcefully emphasizes that we can never know the concept of the purpose of the whole and the individual purposes of nature. Therefore, the principle of objective purposiveness never leads to knowledge, but always only allows an assessment of nature from the perspective of the human capacity to think.

Conversely, as Kant explains, it is required, that its parts be combined into a whole by being reciprocally the cause and effect of their form. For in this way alone is it possible in turn for the idea of the whole conversely (reciprocally) to determine the form and combination of all parts: not as a cause—for then it would be a product of art—but as a ground for the cognition of the systematic unity of the form and the combination of all of the manifold that is contained in the given material for someone who judges it. (Kant, 1790/2009, p. 373 [245])

The difference between products of nature and art lies in the fact that artworks have a reasonable cause outside of themselves, whereas products of nature do not have access to such an exteriority of their causality. Because the ground of generation according to Kant cannot be specified, he limits himself to the ‘ground for the cognition of the systematic unity of the form and the combination of all of the manifold’ as ‘being reciprocally the cause and effect of their form.’

Kant points out repeatedly that we can neither name nor cognize the principle of organization. He denies therefore that purposiveness is an objective principle of knowledge. It is consequently not a category. But we also cannot do without this principle of the mere judgement of the nature, because we would then level the specific difference which belongs to nature in its organized creatures. Much can be explained by mechanical causality in nature, today more so than in Kant’s time. There will never be a Newton, ‘who could make comprehensible even the generation of a blade of grass according to natural laws that no intention has ordered’ (Kant, 1790/2009, p. 400 [271]). One can still agree with Kant insofar as his main argument is concerned. Nowadays, it is possible to completely list the genetic code of the grass blade. This means that the science of biology and therewith natural mechanism have much more to say about biological life than was conceivable for Kant. Nevertheless, the genetic code can be no complete answer to what the blade of grass is in its essence and why it is precisely a blade of grass and not any other creature that may exist. It is not without reason therefore that the theory of autopoiesis was developed, in order to do justice to the different nature of organic versus inorganic nature in the natural sciences.3

‘This principle, or its definition,’ as Kant declares, states that ‘[a]n organized product of nature is that in which everything is an end and reciprocally a means as well. Nothing in it is in vain, purposeless, or to be ascribed to a blind mechanism of nature.’ (Kant, 1790/2009, p. 376 [247 f.])

As I understand it, today’s biology, human genetics, and cognitive science know, it is true, much more in greater detail about organic creatures than was imaginable in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. In principle, however, it seems to me that Kant’s teleological approach is still valid. The fact that Kant was satisfied with specifying a heuristic principle of purposiveness of nature, whereas Schelling or Blumenbach (as Richards, 2000, convincingly showed) assumed a special form of natural causality, says a lot for Kant’s epistemic caution. The nipsis formativus, the final cause of the organization of nature

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3 This principle, or its definition, as Kant declares, states that ‘an organized product of nature is that in which everything is an end and reciprocally a means as well. Nothing in it is in vain, purposeless, or to be ascribed to a blind mechanism of nature.’ (Kant, 1790/2009, p. 376 [247 f.])
could only be observed in its effect; the specific form of the generation could, however, not be more closely determined. This is true not only for Kant, but also for Schelling and Blumenbach.

**The ‘formative impulse’ (Bildungstrieb)—A culturally critical interpretation of a biological principle**

What does Blumenbach’s principle of the Bildungstrieb, which is apparently to be understood as purely biological, a principle philosophically explicated in Kant’s Teleology, have to do with Hölderlin’s ‘culturally critical’ idea of the Bildungstrieb?

For Hölderlin, and not just for Hölderlin, this ‘organological’ model has an exceptional meaning. His entire poetology in the period from around 1800 cannot be understood without it and without some components from Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*. What Kant himself, probably due to age, could no longer achieve, is attained by his younger successors. They apply the organological model of nature to which human beings as natural creatures belong, to the culturally formative power of human beings. Hölderlin does nothing else, no more and no less, in his treatise. Kant emphasizes, it is true, that the *nisus form-ativus*, that is, Blumenbach’s *Bildungstrieb*, is capable of formation, of self-organization, which, may, in fact, not be appropriately designated as analogon of craftsmanship, that is, of technical craftsmanship. Therewith one would mistakenly ascribe to nature, insofar as it organizes itself, a purposely creative, i.e. quasi-reasonable authority outside itself, whereas it actually carries the principle of self-organization in itself. It would be better therefore to speak of an ‘analog of life’ (Kant, 1790/2009, p. 374 [246]). The self-organization of life is, according to Kant, in truth neither comparable by means of a precisely conceived analogy to the art which is produced through human reason, nor with any other form of causality attributable to human beings. In this respect, Kant may be said to be perfectly correct, since nature brought itself into being with all its possibilities. Science’s reconstructions always chase after these possibilities, for its work always is and remains a ‘re-construction.’

Nevertheless, it is a fact that the intellectual accomplishments of human culture rely on the internal principles of organization which nature offers as its immanent possibilities. The products of human creativity arise in the final analysis from an original ground that is impenetrable to the intellect. Seen thus, organized nature is not only to be regarded in a certain respect as an analogon of human craftsmanship and technology, but the human arts like literature, music and painting reveal themselves in their creative potential as an analogon of self-organizing nature. Kant provided the occasion for this manner of seeing artistic creation by his determination of artistic genius as the ‘talent (natural gift) that gives the rule to art’ (Kant, 1790/2009, p. 307 [186]). Kant, however, did not hereby consider the *Bildungstrieb*, i.e. the formative impulse.

Friedrich Schiller expresses a completely different point of view in his work *On the Esthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters* which appeared in 1795 in the *Horae*. Schiller differentiates according to the two sources of the capacity for knowledge postulated by Kant: the formal impulse, which is directed toward reason, and the material impulse, which is directed toward the sensual. A third impulse, the playful impulse, needs to be cultivated in order to compensate for the human tendency to one-sidedness, which causes us either to be too attached to the senses or to only obey reason. The impulse to play is not actually a third fundamental drive, as Schiller emphasizes, but comes into existence through the interplay of the formal and material impulse, whereby all the powers of human beings are brought into a harmonious coexistence. Art, in particular, is predestined to establish this harmony, as Schiller points out in his complex theoretical sketch of an esthetic condition (cf. further on this point, Waibel, 2013). In the context of the theory of impulse which is only roughly sketched here, there appears in Schiller sometimes a ‘divine’ formative impulse, which is above all accessible to the artist. Thus Schiller writes in the 9th of his *Letters on the Esthetic Education of Man*:

But the minds set on fire by this ideal have not all received an equal share of calm from the creative genius—that great and patient temper which is required to impress the ideal on the dumb marble, or to spread it over a page of cold, sober letters, and then entrust it to the faithful hands of time. This divine instinct, and creative force [Bildungstrieb], much too ardent to follow this peaceful … [procession], often throws itself immediately on the
present, on active life, and strives to transform the shapeless matter of the moral world. The misfortune of his brothers, of the whole species, appeals loudly to the heart of the man of feeling; their abasement appeals still louder; enthusiasm is inflamed, and in souls endowed with energy the burning desire aspires impatiently to action and facts. But has this innovator examined himself to see if these disorders of the moral world wound his reason, or if they do not rather wound his self-love? (Schiller, 1795, p. 334ff.; Trans. in Eliot, 1910, 232ff.)

The context makes it clear that the formative impulse, ‘[t]his divine instinct, and creative force’, is manifestly the material impulse of the poet, which drives him to artistic expression and can hardly be restrained by form and morality. This formative impulse is ‘too ardent’, without peace and oversight; it sees ‘misfortune,’ ‘shapeless matter,’ ‘abasement’ without being able to direct these disorders in the world into the right paths.

That Schiller intends to make a clear difference between the playful impulse, the central principle of his esthetic education, and the Bildungstrieb, a form of expression belonging to the artist, is shown by a consideration from the second to last, i.e. the 26th Letter:

The instinct of play likes appearance, and directly it is awakened it is followed by the formal imitative instinct [Bildungstrieb] which treats appearance as an independent thing. Directly man has come to distinguish the appearance from the reality, the form from the body, he can separate, in fact he has already done so. Thus the faculty of the art of imitation is given with the faculty of form in general. The inclination that draws us to it reposes entirely on the attraction that mere appearance has for men. (Schiller, 1795, p. 400ff.; Trans. in Eliot, 1910, p. 285)

The esthetic Bildungstrieb is primarily a sensually determined and material imitative impulse, with which, however, the formative capacity is already given. This creative impulse lays the groundwork for the playful impulse which needs to be acquired, as the 27th Letter reveals:

In the midst of the formidable realm of forces, and of the sacred empire of laws, the aesthetic impulse of form [Bildungstrieb] creates by degrees a third and a joyous realm, that of play and of the appearance, where she emancipates man from fetters, in all his relations, and from all that is named constraint, whether physical or moral. (Schiller, 1795, p. 410; Trans. in Eliot, 1910, p. 293)

The mature artist, who masters himself, attains finally the playful impulse and therewith the highest maturity of culture which it is possible to achieve according to Schiller. Schiller speaks of a ‘formidable realm of forces’ and means therewith the surge of emotions and the passions of the human soul. The esthetic formative impulse (Bildungstrieb) is forced to incorporate these and shape them according to reason. Schiller, who desires to see all the powers, the sensual and not only the reasonable, developed, ultimately remains more obligated to reason, which has the last word in human culture.

Now if one reads Hölderlin’s text on The Perspective from which We Have to Look at Antiquity before the backdrop of the aforementioned theoretical considerations of Kant and Schiller, it is possible to show that Hölderlin basies his own reflections on the position of both authors. Whether he studied Blumenbach’s writings himself, cannot be shown (cf. also Enke, 1998). We know with certainty that he studied Kant’s Critique of Judgment with particular interest, not only, as one might expect, its esthetic part, but also its teleological part (cf. in this regard, in particular Waibel, 2014, pp. 409–433). Schiller’s project of esthetic education was also well known to him. In fact, Hölderlin intended to compose his own ‘New Letters on the Esthetic Education of Man’ (cf. Hölderlin, 1796, in Hölderlin, 1992, p. 615; Trans. M.E. Zovko). Like Hölderlin, Schiller worked on concepts according to which the whole human being and not just the reasoning, moral human being had to be cultivated. Whereas, however, Schiller speaks of the ‘formidable realm of forces’ and thereby means the realm of emotions which are not compatible with reason, Hölderlin is more open and more objective as regards the broad spectrum of feelings and emotions, presumably because he was a reader of Spinoza’s Ethics with its doctrine of emotions and its anticipation of a psychoanalytical approach to emotions.

Hölderlin writes about the Bildungstrieb, that it actually needs to be understood in the manner that we consider everything that emerged from that drive before and around us as having sprung from the communal, primordial ground … that we recognize around us the most essential directions which it took before and with us, also its aberrations, and now, for the same reason which we assume as the vivid and universally equal origin of all formative drives [Bildungstrieb], give ourselves our own direction which is determined by the preceding pure and impure directions … (Hölderlin, 1799/1988, p. 40)
With this understanding of the drive for cultivation, which is the common primordial ground of what is genuinely poetic in all education and cultivation (Bildung), the burdensome greatness of the ancients, that is Hölderlin’s Greeks of Antiquity, can be relativized. For they presumably wrote and created from a natural impulse, at whose origin stood the raw, uncultivated, childlike. Without considering in greater detail Hölderlin’s translations of Sophocles, we may point to the fact that Hölderlin struggled with them in order to clarify their greatness, and also that which is alien for our time, as the remarks with which he equips his translations of Oedipus the King (König Oedipus, Hölderlin’s translation of Sophocles’ Oedipus Thyrranos) and the Antigone show. While great and admired works can provide a standard, they can in no wise serve as a model. One should not attempt to gain a canon from them, but only to divine the directions which were established under other conditions than in the time of Hölderlin. It is necessary, as Hölderlin writes, in order that we may bring to light the specific individuality of the work of art and of culture according to the needs of a particular time, ‘that we recognize around us the most essential directions which it [the Bildungstrieb] took before us and with us, also its aberrations.’ Earlier times, as well as the present, must accordingly be grasped in their own individual directions; the epochal contexts themselves must be understood in keeping with the organological model as a naturally developed whole, to which the artist should respond.

From his letter to his half-brother Karl Gok from 4 June 1799, Hölderlin appears nevertheless as a great pessimist with respect to culture, as far as the judgement of his own time is concerned. This letter, as mentioned above, is thematically very close to the fragmentary text ‘The Perspective from which We Have to Look at Antiquity.’ In his letter, as mentioned above, is thematically very close to the fragmentary text ‘The Perspective from which We Have to Look at Antiquity.’ In his letter, Hölderlin writes:

You will find that now the more human organizations, spirits, which appeared to have most definitively formed nature to humanity, are now everywhere unhappier, precisely because they exist more rarely than in other times and places. The barbarians around us tear apart our best powers, before they can be cultivated and only the firm, deep insight into this fate can save us, and prevent us at least from perishing in an unworthy manner. We have to seek what is excellent, and hold to it as well as we can, to strengthen and heal ourselves in the feeling of it and thereby to gain the strength to recognize what is raw, skewed and misshapen not only in pain but as that which it is, in its character and specific lack. (Hölderlin, 1799, in Hölderlin, 1992, p. 768, Trans. M.E. Zovko; cf. also the transcript of the passage in Friedrich Nietzsche, 1873/1988 KSA 7, p. 680/681)

The artist’s pessimistic picture of his time makes it necessary for him to simultaneously be an educator. The end of the eighteenth century is the period of the great Bildungsromane. In this spirit, Hölderlin wrote his only novel: Hyperion or the Hermit in Greece (which appeared in two volumes, in 1797 and 1799), and also made an attempt at a tragedy, The Death of Empedocles, based on, but also in contrast with, the example of Sophocles. To conclude, I will comment briefly on Hölderlin’s tragedy in order to show how the creative impulse is realized in a specific artwork.

**Bildungstrieb in the tragedy The Death of Empedocles**

The remedy envisaged by Hölderlin is here as in the aforementioned contexts, the attempt to access the primal, raw and unformed, because it promises manifestly to release a force that is no longer possessed by what is formed. This reflects a systematic relationship to the formative impulse [Bildungstrieb] in a purely teleological sense and to its importance for the arts.

Hölderlin’s figure of Empedocles is an artist, a poet, who is in dialog with nature in an extraordinary manner, translating that dialog for human beings into a language through which nature can be understood more generally. He is the vessel for the divine in nature, which through Empedocles becomes visible and audible, and desires to manifest itself through him. Nature closes itself off from Empedocles when he arrogates himself to divinity, a kind of hybris which bears the seed of the tragic idea that causes Hölderlin considerable conceptual difficulties in the course of his drafting of the dramatic figure of Empedocles. Through Empedocles, the ‘aorgic’ in nature speaks. ‘Aorgic’ is, or seems to be, a neologism that Hölderlin coined and that he opposed to the organic; but not in the sense of inorganic. The neologism, if it is one (there is no other document known of the notion), is taken from the Greek, a-orgic, that
is not furious (nicht zornig). Hölderlin uses the aorgic for the wild, the coarse, the culturally unshaped. The furious and the aorgic have thus the same source of impulse but different effects.

The aorgic shapes itself in his craftmanship to artistic and artificial organization. Kant and Hölderlin both know that the genius of the artist is nature, which gives art its rules. Hölderlin, nevertheless, raises this relationship of nature and art in the complex dialectic structure of his poetic thought to a higher power. The artist is in Kant and after Kant understood as a being whose nature prescribes to culture its essential directions. In other words, as Kant puts it in his widely influential statement:

*Genius* is the talent (natural gift) that gives the rule to art. Since talent, as an inborn productive faculty of the artist, itself belongs to nature, this could also expressed thus: *Genius* is the inborn predisposition of the mind (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art. (Kant, 1790/2009, p. 307/174)

Translated into the language of today, the nature of genius derives not least of all from the sources of the famous unconscious, which participates in the creative process in a significant manner and cooperates with it in providing rules. The creative unconscious is a boundary and threshold phenomenon of consciousness, which is active sometimes this side, sometimes that side of consciousness, sometimes closer to chaos, sometimes closer to order. The poet is in keeping with Kant’s and Fichte’s philosophy of the active self-determined free subject. However, its activity is nothing without the gift which it receives and for which it is required to remain in active readiness. For this reason, too, the poet is a vehicle who creates himself, in order to be ready to receive and to pass on the divine gift of nature—in other words, and in a more contemporary dictum, that which proceeds from the powers of the creative unconscious.

This passive activity can be characterized as sometimes more ‘aorgic,’ sometimes more organic. The impulse to create and cultivate, as Hölderlin says in his letter to Karl Gok, is realized ‘by the one more beautifully, by the other more savagely’ (Hölderlin, 1799 in Hölderlin, 1992, p. 769; Trans. M.E. Zovko).

In the theoretical reflection entitled ‘The Basis of Empedocles,’ Hölderlin seeks to clarify the reciprocal relationship of nature and art which he places in the opposition between a ‘more aorgic nature’ and a ‘more organizational, more artistic human being’: ‘The more organizational, more artistic human being is nature’s flowering; the more aorgic nature, when it is felt in its purity by human beings who are organized purely and educated purely in their mode of being, grants them their feeling of perfection’ (Hölderlin, 1799/2008, p. 144).

In addition to the aorgic, a further important role is played by the chaotic, which was not present in Hölderlin’s earlier thought on nature. The chaotic and savage is characteristic of Romantic thought’s idea of one who is creative and draws on the primal source. Hölderlin, nevertheless, with his concept of the ‘aorgic’ did not have in mind the entire inscrutability of the instincts and impulses of nature, which became more and more the subject of the art of the twentieth and twenty-first century.

The invention of the aorgic of unformed, wild nature as the opposite of the organic of human formative activity is announced by Hölderlin in a letter to his former friend from his studies in Tübingen, Christian Neuffer, from 12 November 1798, where he reflects on his and recognizes his own destructibility. In this context he also recognizes that he should pay attention not only to the positive, the harmonious but also to the negative. Therefore he writes:

> Because I am more destructible than some others, I must seek even more to gain an advantage from those things which affect me in a destructive manner […]. I must incorporate them into myself, in order to erect them occasionally […] as shadow to my light, in order to repeat them as subordinate notes, along with which the sound of my soul leaps forth all the livelier. What is pure can only present itself in what is impure, and if you attempt to give what is noble without that which is common, it will appear as the most unnatural, inconsistent thing, precisely because the noble itself, as soon as it is brought to expression, bears the color of destiny under which it came into existence; because beauty, as soon as it presents itself in reality, necessarily takes on a form which is not natural to it from the circumstances from which it proceeds, a form which becomes a natural form only because one accepts the circumstances which gave the form to it (Hölderlin, 1799, in Hölderlin, 1992, 711 f.; Trans. M.E. Zovko).

This letter is an important document when it comes to understanding why Hölderlin’s writing in the years around the turn of the century, that is, from around 1798 to his nervous breakdown in 1806, becomes richer and more vibrant in tone, moods, emotions, and feelings. The holy, pure, noble is supposed to take on the coloring of reality and therefore an undertone of the unholy, impure, and
ignoble. Anyone who is able to discover the high pathos may be somewhat shocked by the new notions expressed by Hölderlin.

Just as there exists a harmonic, idealistic mixture of the individual, subjectively determined ‘organic’ character of art and the more general, unbounded ‘aorgic’ tendencies of nature (Empedocles’ life in harmony with nature), thus there exists also the highest confrontation of both extremes (Empedocles’ death and the reconciliation in the middle of the conflict with nature and his fellow citizens), by which each of the poles takes on characteristics of the other. In ‘Basis of Empedocles,’ this process is summed up as follows:

at which point the organizational that has become aorgic appears to find itself again and to revert to itself by fastening onto the individuality of the aorgic, and the object, the aorgic, appears to find itself when, at the very moment it takes on individuality, the organizational too finds itself at the uttermost extreme of the aorgic, so that in this moment, in this birth of supreme enmity, supreme conciliation appears to be actual. Yet the individuality of this moment is but a product of supreme strife, and its universality is but a product of that supreme strife; (Hölderlin, 1799/2008, p. 145)

Through Empedocles, nature attains the ability to be felt and finally the level of speech. The human being who is organized by speech, who is independently active and reflective, however, when he abandons himself to nature, forgets his reflective essence, his individuality and his consciousness and passes over to the greater generality of nature’s incomprehensibility, imperceptibility, unlimitedness (cf. Hölderlin, 1799/2008, pp. 144–145). The aorgic, because it is unbound, elementary nature, becomes in response more organic, the forces of cultivation and creative impulses come to life. Evidently, it is Hölderlin’s intention to show that receptivity for external, unlimited nature will affect the inner subjective nature (of the artist), which also makes distance to oneself possible, and evokes a deeper knowledge of oneself. The aorgic makes Empedocles’ spirit of art furthermore ‘more boldly [inventive] with fewer limitations’ (Hölderlin, 1799/2008, p. 148), for in contrast to the ‘hyperpolitical, extremely litigious, and always calculating’ (Hölderlin, 1799/2008, p. 149) citizens, Empedocles becomes a reformer, who does not stop at a short-sighted and selfish goal, but desires to find a complete whole. Opposed to this is the ‘anarchical self-reliance in which each citizen pursued a cause unique to him, without bothering himself about the particular problems of the others’ (Hölderlin, 1799/2008, p. 149).

But the aorgic also hinders, in the absence of the organic, the complete whole and drives Empedocles to ‘more solitary, prouder and more his own person’ (Hölderlin, 1799/2008, p. 149). Hölderlin calls the attitude which

sets itself in ever-waxing opposition to the unknown, to that which lies beyond the ken of human consciousness and action, all the more so if the original, intense feeling of the people was that they were united with the unknown, that is, if they found themselves driven by a natural instinct” (Hölderlin, 1799/2008, p. 149),

the ‘boldness of a free spirit.’

This ‘free-spirited boldness’ is an extreme of the aorgic, that is now called ‘negative ratiocination concerning the unknown,’ which Empedocles encounters when he attempts ‘to master the unknown [...] to comprehend the nature that overwhelms us, to understand it through and through, becoming conscious of it in the way he was able to be conscious of himself, certain of himself’ (Hölderlin, 1799/2008, p.149).

Concluding remarks

Hölderlin’s idea, in view of the overwhelming wealth of cultural determination to return to the source from which human beings originally derived their creativity, is quite convincing. The art and culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in particular is replete with examples which reflect such an attitude. The techniques by which to make the original creative impulse really alive and active are now far more explicit and developed. It seems to me, however, although we no longer speak of formative impulse (Bildungstrieb), but of creativity, innovation, knowledge creation and similar things, that we share substantially the same problem with Hölderlin. The word ‘Bildungstrieb,’ which is translated here variously as ‘formative impulse,’ ‘creative impulse,’ ‘drive for formation,’ or ‘drive for cultivation.’ belongs, it
is true, to the eighteenth century; the technique which is connected with it, and which was developed in particular by Hölderlin in his conception of artistic practice, is still just as timely today.

Notes

1. R. J. Richards assumes, on the other hand, that there is a misunderstanding between Kant and Blumenbach. In his study (2000, pp. 11–32), he shows in minute detail that Blumenbach in the course of several works and their revised editions, first took as his point of departure the doctrine of preformation and then, probably because of Kant's praise of his work, then turned to a cautious form of epigenesis. Metzger (2002) speaks, it is true, not of a misunderstanding, but nevertheless develops a mixed form of the doctrine of preformation and the doctrine of epigenesis in Blumenbach's theory of the Bildungstrieb in his contributions nisus formativus and Epigenesis of Pure Reason. Cf. also the other essays on the Bildungstrieb in the chapter „Im Urgrund aller Werke und Thaten“ (ibid. pp. 184–229) by U. Gaier (who considers in particular the relationship to Johann Gottfried Herder) and V. L. Waibel.

2. Richards elucidates important differences between the approaches of the two authors in his paper Kant and Blumenbach on the Bildungstrieb (2000). Blumenbach postulated the Bildungstrieb, because he was above all interested in the question of the origin of organic life, even if he could not resolve this question. With regard to the question of origin, Kant says only that he believes that the idea that a transition from anorganic to organic by (through) a causal mechanism is opposed to any assumption that reason can make (widerspricht der Vernunft). According to Richards the Bildungstrieb or purposive in nature has for Kant only heuristic significance and designates therefore no real causality of nature. For Blumenbach, on the other hand, the Bildungstrieb is a causal force of nature.

3. For this reason, Richards (2000), I believe, fails to do justice to Kant's assertion that there can be no Newton, who could conceive the generation of a blade of grass according to natural laws without the role of intention, It is correct that Kant had an idea of science which took account of physics, but not biology as we know it today. Nevertheless, the systematic and theoretical reasons which led Kant to the assumption of a dualism of principles divided between mechanistic causality and finality, which according to him can exist parallel to one another, are today still powerful—subject to new conditions which need to be taken into consideration.


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