

## BRUNO C. DUARTE

### Apocryphal Politics — Hölderlin's Communism of Spirits

#### I.

For a brief period of time, the fragment *Communism of Spirits* was attributed to the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, but soon after judged to be inauthentic and removed from his Collected Works. The editor Friedrich Beißner performed a remarkable stunt by at once showing and obliterating a text which he was seemingly the last one to publish in Germany in the context of a critical edition.

*Communism of Spirits* is structured as an essentially descriptive narrative flow. It addresses the question of the search for a community by discussing the unification of religion and science as an appeal to action, and unravels into a diagrammatic representation of world history, from Antiquity to the modern age.

At first glance, and despite its fragmentary course, there seems to be nothing particular about this text. Its structure conforms to most conventions of space and time in dramatic action. Four characters are seen conversing at sunset by an illuminated chapel, overlooking a landscape. They discuss the fate of Christianity in its relation to scientific knowledge, the ways in which one is to be brought to bear on the other and made to return to their original unity. Concrete imagery is invoked to depict an idealized and projected oneness of faith and wisdom: the monastic orders of the Middle-Ages are to be followed by a “new academy” that has yet to be created. At this point, the first segment breaks off. It is resumed shortly after in a long paragraph wherein the original setting is described from afar in greater detail: the chapel by the river Neckar and the nature surrounding it are now both the background and the core

of the conversation. As the evening falls, one of the figures is infused with the feeling of the dimming light of melancholy as it turns into an allegory of the abyss which separates the obscurity of the present from the remembered greatness of ancient times.

Gradually the text gives in to an elegiac tone, while its main character is portrayed as eminently tragic: unable to undo his fate or repair his loss, he is said to stand “before history like a criminal.” But as the script becomes more and more dense, the romantically charged overtones start to dissolve into something entirely different, all sense of bitterness and mourning is put aside, and the whole text takes an unexpected turn. The speaker is elated at the sight of the chapel, which he beholds as the godly strength of an ancient spirit that was able to summon and bring forth human action all around it. The course of universal history leaves behind it a trail of deception and irreversible destruction, but again the elocution becomes forceful and unyielding: it is not about clinging on to the burden of the distant past as the inert matter we are forced to contemplate, which is a given and therefore represents death, but rather a question of perceiving form as “the element of the human spirit in which freedom acts as law and reason becomes present.”

Matter is conceived of as inanimate history, incapable of action as such, while form is defined as a thrust of “energy and consequence” leading up to “the element of the human spirit” and thus to a concept of community. Therein lies the point of reference which would enable us to grasp the center or the middle point from which the churches and religious societies of former times were raised, and respond, not with emulation but with the reshaping of that same center in our own terms. The physical creations of the “pious, powerful spirit” of the past ages are imprinted into the metaphor of sculpture, which in turn unveils the dynamics of the text itself: “everything” was built and founded “as if from one cast.” Before the spirit, however, stands the letter.

## II.

*Communism of Spirits* was published in 1926 by the germanist Franz Zinkernagel in the journal *Neue Schweizer Rundschau* under the heading “New Hölderlin findings,” and later included in his own edition of Hölderlin’s Works. The text reappeared in volume 4 of the canonical Hölderlin-Edition known as the *Große Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, in a separate section entitled *Zweifelhaftes*, dubious or apocryphal texts (StA 4/1: 306-309). Noting that this particular text was found among a set of papers and documents in the estate of Hölderlin’s early biographer Christoph Theodor Schwab, whom he suspected as the presumed author of the essay, Friedrich Beißner, the editor, writes the following: “The outer layout of the manuscript—starting with the placing of the title—excludes Hölderlin’s authorship, not to mention the stylistic improbability.” (StA 4/1: 427; 4/2, 804-805)

Beißner’s commentary is an interesting miniature of paradox: he includes the text in his critical edition of Hölderlin’s works only to immediately dismiss its authenticity. In just a few pages, the text goes from dubious to spurious. His reasoning seems at best perfunctory, at worst downright amiss. The text couldn’t be Hölderlin’s, he states, on account of what one would be tempted to see as two different instances of aesthetic judgment, namely spatial and temporal composition: neither the drawing of the page (the outward semblance of the manuscript, as it were: the German *Handschrift* translates both as manuscript and handwriting) nor the pacing and tempo (the coordinates of style), point to Hölderlin.

Despite its ultimately subjective nature, Beißner’s verdict is meant as final and presents itself as utterly unflinching in refuting Hölderlin as the author of the text. And yet he did publish it, knowing that, despite the assertiveness of his denial, the mere sighting of the text was bound to leave room for reasonable doubt. Such an admission of self-contradiction is somewhat surprising, given that Beißner belonged to a line of conservative scholarship

which expounded an authoritative, if not authoritarian practice of philology, ruling out what he didn't see fit to be preserved from the author's working drafts, while actively manipulating the manuscripts with the aim of shaping them into a fixed, unmovable canon. In the same way that the editor had the last word in defining the limits of what is corrupted and what is credible in a text, in a verse or in a line, he also held absolute power in attributing or denying authorship to a given text as a whole. Thus, there is a puzzling side to Beißner's position, for he was certainly aware of the conflicting forces at work between his choice to show *Communism of Spirits* as a secluded, yet tangible part of Hölderlin's "complete" works, and his categoric appraisal of it as a forgery. His correction—as if saying that the text didn't actually belong where he himself had placed it—was perhaps part of a defensive move, but nonetheless honest enough not to suppress or ignore the text altogether. The fact is that after Beißner and the Stuttgart edition, the text is absent from the main critical editions of Hölderlin's works—as if it didn't exist. Oddly enough, it has simply disappeared into thin air. Even the Frankfurt Edition, which revolutionized philological and editorial practices by reproducing facsimiles of Hölderlin's manuscripts, has strangely remained silent on this piece of writing. Incidentally, the same holds true of Hölderlin scholarship in general. Among the countless studies devoted to Hölderlin's relation to the French Revolution and its repercussions on the political landscape of Württemberg and Germany in general, only a handful have shown an actual interest in this text.

Individual analyses of *Communism of Spirits* have attempted to contextualize the fragment by relating it to several recurring motifs and influences in Hölderlin's life and thought. His letter to his sister from November 1790, where he mentions his "walk with Hegel [...] to the Wurmlingen chapel" (MA II, 462) has served as the most plausible framework for the dating of the text. The "new academy" clearly stems from Klopstock's *Gelehrtenrepublik*, or republic of letters, which in turn could easily be related to authors such as Herder or Lessing. Some scholars have insisted on the principles of pantheism and the reading of Spinoza as central to the construction of

the text, while others have seen echoes in it of Paul's second Epistle to the Corinthians or the Gospel of John, amongst a bundle of other references (Vaysse 1994: 129-132, Carosso 1995: 33-37). Thematically, a brief look into some of the text's main concepts is propitious to reveal a wide range of affinities. The novel *Hyperion* speaks namely of "the element of spirits" (MA I, 637: *das Element der Geister*) and the notion of a spirit common to all or a common spirit will appear in several poems, like *Der Archipelagus* (MA I, 302, v. 240: *Ein Geist allen gemein*) and *Der Einzige* (MA I, 469, v. 93: *Gemeingeist*), as well as in several passages of the correspondence. Such analogies, however, speak as much in favor of Hölderlin's authorship as they would of Hegel's, if one considers how deeply intertwined and even largely interchangeable their convictions and terminology were at that time. Manifestly, the concept of spirit has played its role in the conception and gestation of German Idealism, until it was eventually exhausted by virtue of its many transformations. Similarly, the articulation of spirit and community, coupled with the wished-for encounter of philosophy and religion, seems to imply either a utopian, romanticized yearning for revolution or an organic ideal of restoration, and sounds almost archaic in view of today's perception of political thinking. The word "communism," however, stands in the way of such judgment, lurking from within while remaining alien to the text's mode of being.

### III.

With the aim of disavowing any conjecture that would lead to the mere possibility of Hölderlin's authorship, Beißner cites two kinds of irreconcilable differences, namely the "improbability" of style, which counts as the text's rootedness in objective subjectivity, and the layout of the manuscript—that is, the graphic arrangement of the page—as shown, he added, in "the placing of the title." The assumption here is that the title was appended at a later date, presumably by Schwab or by a different author. This sense of the materiality of the text stands in sharp contrast to the phantasmagoric nature of its author, and in point of fact, the same could be said of the term

“communism,” which is both strikingly present and imminently absent from the manuscript page. On the one hand, its existence is crucial for the text as a whole and can easily be deduced from it as the sum of its parts. On the other hand, it represents a historical improbability, to use Beißner’s vocabulary, in that it defies every strictly chronological frame of reference. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that Hölderlin would have coined or used the word “communism” in a text which, in all likelihood, dates from around 1790-1793, especially given the fact that its first registered usage in the modern political sense is generally located in the period between 1840 and 1843. Notwithstanding, the history of its earliest known occurrences is rich in doubts and exceptions, including examples which range from the 12th century onwards, some of which do invite speculation: whereas the term “communiste” appears in several different contexts throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, “communism” is believed to be a neologism engendered by Restif de la Bretonne around 1796-1797, and, even closer to Hölderlin, the word appears to have been used in 1794 by an “Austrian Jacobin” named Andreas Riedel during his captivity in Vienna. (Grandjonec 1983: 143-147) The supposition that Hölderlin might have had access to that very interrogation transcript is recognizably little more than a flight of fancy, but so are many of the theories concerning Hölderlin’s “real-life” connection to the Swabian Republic, to the French Revolution and to revolution in general.

As a title, *Communism of Spirits* is a glaring light that never burns out, a shibboleth able to live by itself, indifferent to narrative or plot. As the fabric of a text, it represents a kind of storytelling which relates both intensely and indistinctly to the many characters and faces of early Communism, ranging from the ancient Greeks to Thomas Münzer, Thomas More, Rousseau or Gracchus Babeuf. It is possible, but no less hazardous, to find in it an underlying discourse which blends a radical pantheism with ideals of egalitarianism and the rejection of private property, leading to a state of communal ownership of goods and means of production. Such principles can be found in Hölderlin’s major works such as the novel *Hyperion* (1797-1799) or the mourning-play *The*

*Death of Empedocles* (1797-1800), which the filmmaker Jean-Marie Straub, the author of two films based on that text, did not hesitate to identify as the “universal communist utopia.” But when taken too literally, they become projections of themselves, and the attempt to locate and materialize the communism of spirits by redirecting it to concrete geographies and names (Spinoza, Brissot, among others) has no other choice but to find itself staring at “a vague sentimental communism” (D’Hondt 1989: 235). The literal staging of Hölderlin’s encounter with Marx by Peter Weiss (*Hölderlin*, 1971) is perhaps the most audacious form of resistance to such self-reflective movements (Savage: 204-208).

Pierre Bertaux, a renowned Hölderlin scholar who spent a large part of his life debating Hölderlin’s identity as a Jacobin and the various stages of his proximity to the events in France around 1789, argues in one of his books that Hölderlin had followed Babeuf’s trial and execution (1797) through the press, thus finding his way to the conception of “agrarian communism” and the “abolition of land property.” In spite of such ambitious claims, Bertaux will dismiss *Communism of Spirits* by declaring that “alone stylistically,” the text “does not sound authentic” (Bertaux 1990: 111, 172)—whereby one is forced to return to Friedrich Beißner.

#### IV.

A deep-seated rule of thumb seems to lie behind both Beißner’s decision and its consequences: if a text can’t be ascribed to a given author, if proof of authorship is not found, it will be discarded and simply cease to exist. With the silencing of the text comes its disappearance, leaving all readership out of the picture. It is no one’s text, therefore destined to be read by virtually no one.

In this regard, *Communism of Spirits* is, to all effects and purposes, an apocryphal text. The Greek word *apókruphos* stands for noncanonical, inauthentic, fictitious, false, forged, invented or imagined texts—but it

can also mean something secret, arcane, kept hidden or concealed from sight. Beißner's philological ruling and overruling according to which Hölderlin is not the author of the text rests on that very faculty: sight, the visual perception of the text. His whole commentary is based on a rather enigmatic experience of self-evidence to which the reader has only limited access: the diction and the phrasing—basic elements of style—“exclude” Hölderlin's authorship, he states, and so does “the outer layout of the manuscript.” Hence, the measurement of Hölderlin's authorship is a matter of acoustics and geometry: the style is not his (it doesn't sound like him) and neither is the motion on the page (it doesn't look like his way of writing). Unknowingly, as it seems, Beißner goes against the conventional separation between the literary-temporal and the visual-spatial arts: the same sense of rhythm (the precondition of time) which allows him to distinguish individual style guides his optical examination of the manuscript's exterior topology (one of the dynamic properties of spatial representation). In other words, everything in his blunt rejection of the text is determined by the conflation of reading and viewing—one is sustained by the other in a reciprocal manner.

What did Beißner see? The autograph manuscript of *Communism of Spirits* consists of four pages, plus a separate diagrammatic exposition which Beißner believed to be “a sketch for the continuation of the essay about the Communism of Spirits.” The manuscript shows the title “Communismus der Geister” centered at the top of the page, immediately followed by the names of the four characters (“Eugen und Lothar, Theobald und Oskar”), and, slightly below, by the word “Disposition,” after which the prose text begins. The separate page is headed by that same word, immediately preceding the dictum: “Everything is concentrated on the spiritual for us, we became poor so that we could become rich.” Almost as if planned to serve as an epigraph, this sentence, which was later appropriated by Martin Heidegger in his controversial essay *Die Armut* (Heidegger 1994; Lacoue-Labarthe 2004; Esposito 2010), introduces a brief systematic sketch of the stages of universal history (Ancient World,



Middle Ages, Modern Age), pointing to the transition from monarchy to Republicanism amidst obscure references to “one church with one Pope” and “universal priesthood.”

In many respects, this schematic overview illuminates the half-discursive, half-dialogical text that is *Communism of Spirits*, which explicitly speaks of a time period in the past (the Middle Ages) mediating between the Ancient (“the free ether of Antiquity”) and the Modern (“the night of the present”) and is chiefly concerned with the changes one can adduce in world history by insisting on the notion of spirit as something ductile, that has yet to be molded by action. Such action, however, differs significantly from other writings likely to be invoked as analogous to it. Novalis’ “world history” (*Christianity or Europe*) is hardly akin to the world history referred to in the text, and Schleiermacher’s apology of a “community with other spirits” as the guiding principle of self-determination (*Monologues*) is far from being identical with a “communism” of spirits. Even the “absolute freedom of all spirits” and “the universal freedom and equality of the spirits” expounded in *The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism*—incidentally a text which appears in most editions of Hölderlin’s works, in spite of the philological and philosophical quarrel surrounding it for decades on account of its ultimately unverified authorship—is founded upon key notions which are clearly missing from *Communism of Spirits*, namely Ethics, Physics, the elimination of the State, the coincidence of Philosophy and Aesthetics, or the new mythology of reason (Beiser 1996: 68, 178, 4-5).

To be sure, *Communism of Spirits* is not impervious to such analogies and affinities. It simply plays a different hand, at a different pace, with different rules. Its political significance does not exhaust itself in carefully weaved mystical inferences or philosophically programmatic premises. Its convictions are not the stuff of free-floating poeticization, its assertiveness never hammered in the guise of a proto-manifesto of sorts.

## V.

What are we to read or to see in the concatenation “communism-of-spirits”? Is it even a word sequence we can acknowledge as meaningful, after the unfolding of communism in the 20th century, which, as is well known, begins in 1848 with the visual intimation of a spectre “haunting Europe,” and has since transformed itself into a caricature collection of evil, decaying or harmless spirits? Is it even possible to ask such redundant questions and actually demand answers from a text so foreign to political discourse as we know it? And is there any pressing need to break it down into notions and ideas that we might hold as relevant only to keep moving in circles in search of its meaning and intent?

If there is a lesson to be learned from this text, it is most certainly not enclosed in a picture of intellectual militancy or in a renewal of the semantics of communism. The implications of its theological-political stance are not something we ought to draw out from its speculative or lyrical texture in order to explain why or if it “speaks to us.” We can read everything we want into it, or wrest what we supposedly need from it, and still it will remain untouched in its core.

In fact, the crux of this text lies not primarily in what it says, in terms of its theoretical contention or its hidden sources, but rather in the way it becomes manifest. By reenacting the ancient historical-philosophical reflection on the concept of form, the text is actively questioning and exposing its own shape for what it is: a nameless text, lacking a signature and unclaimed for, but, for that same reason, able to move according to a diction of its own, and therefore demanding not only to be read, but looked at on the very basis of its materiality. The more it seems to disappear, the more it calls out to the reader, who is no longer drawn to the text by that which it supposedly conveys, but rather prompted to become the viewer of a landscape of concepts which he is not bent to decipher but to reconfigure incessantly. It is not by chance that the two recurring words near the

end of the fragment—form (Form) and matter (Stoff)—find themselves replicated in Hölderlin’s poetics as the reciprocity between the (subjective) self-reproductive force of spirit and the (objective) receptivity of matter. Both realms are political in essence and in effect. In the context of his many speculative attempts at determining the laws of poetic composition, and in the wake of Kant and Fichte, Hölderlin will often speak in a language which is inherently political: when discussing the relationship of the whole to its parts, for instance, he will refer to the “the most original claim of the spirit, which moves towards community and the unified being-at-the-same-time” (MA II: 77).

In *Communism of Spirits*, such longing for community is laid bare in its most raw and immediate state. Just as matter is compressed by form, time sees itself projected into space: “when the sky’s eye is torn from nature and the earth’s vastness stands there like a riddle whose solution lacks words [...] where will you find a community?”

If anything, the disappearing body of the text, that is, the disavowal of its authorship as the foretaste of its elimination from print, intensifies the need for its legibility as a tangible, visual object. Rather than a negative or a marginal feature, its apocryphal nature becomes crucial in turning it into the shaping mold it has come to represent. The technique of casting is now entirely visible: a given material (the human spirit) is made liquid and poured into a mold wherein a particular shape (communism) has previously been drawn or etched as a hollow figure. As the material solidifies, a final shape is extracted from the mold—a shape that can be seen as it is read, but not entirely comprehended or grasped “in its active connection, its inner relation,” to use Marx’s terms by deliberately displacing them. The communism of spirits—or the “commerce” of spirits, as Hölderlin’s friend Isaac von Sinclair wrote in 1792 (Beck 1947: 44)—is the open depiction of a community which is made to be everything and nothing. It means to dispel the “rift” separating the present from the past by sculpting it anew, but is constantly brought to a halt by the nameless face of its author.

Such is the structure of what could be termed apocryphal politics: it erases itself repeatedly in order to redefine its form of action. As a fundamentally unknown and therefore unrecognized surface, *Communism of Spirits* is a voided space waiting to be filled by the very thing it summons without end: not the solution for history or politics, but the form of its riddle.

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