

# *Hölderlin as Reader of Poetry: Notes on the “Wechsel der Töne”\**

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## ABSTRACT

Hölderlin’s fragmentary and enigmatic remarks on the ‘Variation of Tones’ in poetry (‘Wechsel der Töne’) which outline a systematic genre poetics have often been understood as the underlying principle that informed his own poetic production. This paper proposes to conceive of the ‘Variation of Tones’ not as a comprehensive poetics at the basis of Hölderlin’s oeuvre but instead as an instance of his practice of reading. With its particular attention to moments of transition between genres within the poetic text, the ‘Variation of Tones’ emerges as a tool for reading literature defined by genre hybridity. At the same time, it sheds light on Hölderlin’s relational conception of genre poetics which recasts literary genre as a temporary constellation of ‘generic tones’.

## KEYWORDS

Friedrich Hölderlin, Variation of Tones, Genre Poetics, Genre Hybridity, Reading Practices

Hölderlin’s call for a modern mechanics of poetry has puzzled his readers to this day. In his introduction to the “Remarks on Oedipus”, published in 1804, Hölderlin urged his fellow poets to “elevate poetry today to the *mechane* of the ancients”,<sup>1</sup> “in order to secure for today’s poets a civil existence”<sup>2</sup> – a stipulation which was formulated in stark opposition to the prevalent aesthetics of genius and self-expression which had been established by the early 1800s.<sup>3</sup> The literary scholar Peter Szondi has minutely reconstructed Hölderlin’s particular position within the

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<sup>1</sup> F. Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. T. Pfau, State University of New York Press, Albany (NY) 1988, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Cf. R. Nägele, ‘1808 – Poetic Revolution’, in D.E. Wellbery *et al.* (eds.), *A New History of German Literature*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA)/London 2004, pp. 511-516.

then contemporary transformation of a normative poetics into a speculative one, which occurred throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> In his so-called ‘Theory of the Variation of Tones’ (*Lehre vom Wechsel der Töne*), Hölderlin recast traditional genre poetics by arranging the genres of lyric, epic, and tragic poetry – or rather: their respective ‘tones’ – in a number of coordinated sequences, thus deducing the genres from specific tone formations.

Hölderlin’s fragmentary sketches of the ‘Variation of Tones’ have often been understood as one instance of his mechanics of poetry and of the “lawful calculation”<sup>5</sup> at the basis of his own poetic production.<sup>6</sup> As such, the tone sequences have been recognised as the principle informing Hölderlin’s lyric poetry from the mid-1790s up until the late hymns,<sup>7</sup> the later versions of his *Hyperion* novel<sup>8</sup> as well as the different stages of development of Hölderlin’s manuscripts<sup>9</sup> and the cyclical arrangement of his poems for publication.<sup>10</sup> Referring to cosmological models adopted by Johann Gottfried Herder, Hölderlin scholar Ulrich Gaier has called the ‘Variation of Tones’ a “Schöpfungshieroglyphe”<sup>11</sup> (a ‘hieroglyph of creation’) – a designation which suggests that the ‘Variation of Tones’ contains the secret key to the many mysteries of Hölderlin’s hermetic writings. In the same vein, the *Hölderlin-Gesellschaft* in Tübingen has provided a “Lehrgang”, an introduction to Hölderlin’s poetics according to the tone sequences, which includes guided exercises in the implementation of Hölderlin’s system of poetic tones.<sup>12</sup> It is not least the indistinctness of Hölderlin’s notion of tone and the apparent speculativeness of

<sup>4</sup> Cf. P. Szondi, *Poetik und Geschichtsphilosophie II. Von der normativen zur spekulativen Gattungspoetik. Schellings Gattungspoetik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1974, pp. 152-183.

<sup>5</sup> Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, cit., p. 101.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. L.J. Ryan, *Hölderlins Lehre vom Wechsel der Töne*, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1960; U. Gaier, *Der gesetzliche Kalkül. Hölderlins Dichtungslehre*, Niemeyer, Tübingen 1962.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. U. Gaier, *Hölderlin. Eine Einführung*, Francke, Tübingen 1993, p. 244.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Gaier, *Hölderlin. Eine Einführung*, cit., pp. 266-272.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. G. Martens, ‘Hölderlins Poetik der Polyphonie. Ein Versuch, das Hymnenfragment “Die Nympe”/“Mnemosyne” aus den Handschriften zu deuten’, in V. Lawitschka (ed.), *Hölderlin: Sprache und Raum*, Edition Isele, Eggingen 2008, pp. 9-45.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. U. Gaier et al., *Hölderlin Texturen 4: “Wo sind jetzt Dichter?” Homburg, Stuttgart 1897–1800*, Hölderlin-Gesellschaft/Deutsche Schiller-Gesellschaft, Tübingen/Marbach 2002, pp. 315-320.

<sup>11</sup> Gaier, *Hölderlin. Eine Einführung*, cit., p. 245.

<sup>12</sup> The “Lehrgang” is currently no longer available online on the website of the Hölderlin-Gesellschaft but it has been documented by Ulrich Gaier: Cf. U. Gaier, ‘Aufmerksamkeitsebenen: Hintergrundstudien zum Lehrgang’, in Id., *Hölderlin-Studien*, eds. S. Doering, V. Lawitschka, Edition Isele/Hölderlin-Gesellschaft, Eggingen/Tübingen 2014, pp. 211-264.

his sketches that have encouraged extensive and potentially arbitrary applications of the ‘Variation of Tones’ to all parts and periods of his oeuvre. Consequently, the validity of the ‘Variation of Tones’ as an authorial poetics (‘Autorpoetik’) which might present an answer to the many questions raised by Hölderlin’s enigmatic texts has been questioned as well. Notably, Lawrence Ryan, the author of a groundbreaking study on the ‘Variation of Tones’, has expressed his doubts as to whether the tonal systematics could be fruitfully applied to Hölderlin’s later poems composed after 1801<sup>13</sup> – a reservation voiced by a number of scholars.<sup>14</sup> The following deliberations therefore propose to understand the ‘Variation of Tones’ not so much as a comprehensive poetics holding the secret key to Hölderlin’s poetic production but rather as a manifestation of his own practice of reading. The sketches reveal an intrinsically processual conception of the poetic text which focuses in particular on moments of transition and translation and which searches for ways of describing these moments. Accordingly, the tonal ‘mechanics’ is not primarily conceived as a framework for poetic creation – what it presents, in fact, is a tool for reading modern literature, or more precisely: a kind of literature defined by genre hybridity, be it of ancient or modern origin. Perceiving the notes on the ‘Variation of Tones’ as a practice of reading means abstaining from breaking it down into a positive and enclosed system and instead drawing attention to the discrepancies between Hölderlin’s many formulations and reformulations of the tone sequences<sup>15</sup> – it means recognising the ‘Variation of Tones’ as a temporary formation within a fundamentally experimental mode of thinking and writing.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Ryan, cit., p. 161.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. for instance G. Kurz, *Mittelbarkeit und Vereinigung. Zum Verhältnis von Poesie, Reflexion und Revolution bei Hölderlin*, J.B. Metzler, Stuttgart 1975, p. 116; S. Gesse, ‘*Genera mixta*’. *Studien zur Poetik der Gattungsmischung zwischen Aufklärung und Klassik-Romantik*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 1997, p. 221; C. Hamlin, ‘The Philosophy of Poetic Form: Hölderlin’s Theory of Poetry and the Classical German Elegy’, in A. Fioretos (ed.), *The Solid Letter: Readings of Friedrich Hölderlin*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999, pp. 291-319, at p. 304; R. Nägele, *Hölderlins Kritik der poetischen Vernunft*, Engeler, Basel/Weil am Rhein/Wien 2005, pp. 38f.

<sup>15</sup> Historical practices of reading and writing in modern philology have drawn increasing attention in recent studies in historical praxeology. Cf. E. Décultot (ed.), *Lesen, Kopieren, Schreiben. Lese- und Exzerpierenkunst in der europäischen Literatur des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Ripperger & Kremers, Berlin 2014, as well as S. Martus, C. Spoerhase, *Die Quellen der Praxis. Probleme einer historischen Praxeologie der Philologie*, in “*Zeitschrift für Germanistik*”, 2 (2013), pp. 221-225. While these investigations, drawing on impulses from *science studies*, focus on reading and writing practices in the emerging humanities, the present contribution centres on a practice of reading within a poetological and aesthetic context.

## 1. The ‘Variation of Tones’: Context and Genesis

One difficulty with the reconstruction of the ‘Variation of Tones’ as the key to Hölderlin’s poetics stems from the fact that his ‘theory’ was never formulated in a coherent or definitive manner. It is merely conveyed in the form of several sketches, tables and accompanying notes which at times complement one another but also diverge in certain points, thus revealing the semantic fluidity of Hölderlin’s notion of tone and attesting to the constant re-modifications of Hölderlin’s practice of reading. As Michael Franz has pointed out, none of Hölderlin’s poetological manuscripts were meant to be published, although a publication project presumably inspired his first mention of the ‘Variation of Tones’.<sup>16</sup> Hölderlin initially spoke of the ‘Variation of Tones’ in the context of his plans for a literary journal called “Iduna”. As he informed his friend Christian Ludwig Neuffer in a letter from June 4, 1799, the journal was supposed to gather poetic and poetological texts that would address the ‘specific art-character’ of ancient and modern poets, as well as pieces of literary criticism and reflections on general problems of poetics and aesthetics, thus opening up the arcane mechanics of poetry to a general public.<sup>17</sup>

The first and only time that Hölderlin explicitly used the expression “Wechsel der Töne” is in a note to the essay fragment “The Perspective from Which We Have to Look at Antiquity” (“Der Gesichtspunkt aus dem wir das Altertum anzusehen haben”), which was written as part of the *Iduna* project presumably in the spring of 1799.<sup>18</sup> The note relates the ‘Variation of Tones’ to a planned series of ‘Letters on Homer’ which, judging from the remaining sketches, were meant to discuss the Homeric representation of Achilles in the *Iliad*. The idea of ‘tone’ as a mode of representation proper to certain anthropological types or characters, suggested by this early mention of the ‘Variation of Tones’, is further corroborated by two essay fragments written in the second half of 1799 – “A Word on the *Iliad*” (“Ein Wort über die *Iliade*”) and “On the Different

<sup>16</sup> Cf. M. Franz, ‘Theoretische Schriften’, in J. Kreuzer (ed.), *Hölderlin-Handbuch. Leben – Werke – Wirkung*, J.B. Metzler, Stuttgart 2020, pp. 243-263, at p. 243.

<sup>17</sup> For Hölderlin’s letter to Neuffer cf. F. Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke. Große Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, eds. Friedrich Beißner, Adolf Beck, Ute Oelmann, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1943-1985, vol. 6.1, pp. 323f.; the historical context of Hölderlin’s *Iduna* project has been reconstructed by Ulrich Gaier: cf. Gaier *et al.*, cit., pp. 137f. For Hölderlin’s conception of a poetic mechanics as the key to a modern ‘poetic public sphere’ see R. Nägele, *Hermetik und Öffentlichkeit. Zu einigen historischen Voraussetzungen der Moderne bei Hölderlin*, in “Hölderlin-Jahrbuch”, 19, 20 (1975-1977), pp. 358-386.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Franz, cit., p. 259.

Forms of Poetic Composition” (“Über die verschiedenen Arten, zu dichten”) – which indicate a connection between a ‘natural character’, epitomised by Achilles, and its poetic representation through a naïve or natural tone.<sup>19</sup>

A later stage of the formulation of the ‘Variation of Tones’ is recorded in the *Stuttgarter Foliobuch* and was probably drafted in the first half of the year 1800. It replaces the understanding of tone as a character type or mode of character representation with the idea of an emotive or cognitive capacity. The fragment begins with the words “The sentiment in the poem speaks idealistically ...” (“Die Empfindung spricht im Gedicht idealisch ...”) and assumes three basic poetic genres – the naïve, the idealistic and the energetic poem – which are in turn related to three psychological faculties – passion, sentiment, and fantasy –, thus associating the notion of tone with the psychology of faculties that was widely discussed in eighteenth-century anthropology.<sup>20</sup> Passion, sentiment, and fantasy are arranged in sequences subsumed under the categories ‘basic tone’, ‘language’ and ‘effect’. These categories suggest a conceptual proximity between this stage of the formulation of the ‘Variation of Tones’ and Hölderlin’s famous essay fragment “On the Mode of Operation of the Poetic Spirit” (“Über die Verfahrensweise des poetischen Geistes”/“Wenn der Dichter einmal des Geistes mächtig ist”) in which Hölderlin worked out three modes of relating a poem’s ‘matter’ (“Stoff”) to its ‘spirit’ (“Geist”).<sup>21</sup> Lawrence Ryan and others have elucidated the close connection between the two texts, showing in particular that the idea of the poem as a process of transition – a ‘metaphor’ in the literal sense –, systematised in the tone tables of the ‘Variation of Tones’, is developed in the essay “On the Mode of Operation of the Poetic Spirit”.<sup>22</sup> This conception of the poem as a ‘metaphor’, in the ancient Greek sense of ‘transport’, resurfaces in a later set of sketches of the ‘Variation of Tones’ which presumably dates from the

<sup>19</sup> Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, cit., p. 42f.: “Thus from this point, there follows the calmer moderation which is so proper to the natural tone, which shows the characters within their boundaries and gently subdivides them into various shades. The artist is not moderate in the poetic form because he considers this procedure the only poetic one [...]; he had to choose a fixed point of view, and that is now the individual, the character of his hero, as he has gained a determinate personal existence, a reality by means of nature and education”.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Gaier, *Hölderlin. Eine Einführung*, cit., pp. 261-264.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, cit., p. 64.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Ryan, cit., pp. 36-48; Gaier, *Hölderlin. Eine Einführung*, cit., pp. 235-246; M. Hiller, “*Harmonisch entgegengesetzt*”. *Darstellung und Darstellbarkeit in Hölderlins Poetik um 1800*, Niemeyer, Tübingen 2008, pp. 171-207.

second half of 1800. It consists of a series of consecutive tables of poetic tones accompanied by a written commentary of several pages. The beginning of the commentary reads:

The lyric, in appearance idealistic poem, is naïve in its significance. It is a continuous metaphor of a feeling.

The epic, in appearance naïve poem, is heroic in its significance. It is a metaphor of great aspirations.

The tragic, in appearance heroic poem, is idealistic in its significance. It is the metaphor of an intellectual intuition.<sup>23</sup>

The commentary thus distinguishes – in line with the then contemporary genre poetics – between three poetic genres: lyric, epic and tragic poetry. These genres – or more precisely: the respective poems belonging to any one of the three genres – emerge through different combinations of three tones: the idealistic, the naïve, and the heroic (or energetic) tone. Unlike prevailing models of genre poetics, Hölderlin's draft thus does not define the genres by way of their form or their subject matter but through constellations of, or rather, through movements between tones, thus re-envisioning genre poetics within a relational framework. Accordingly, the lyric poem emerges from the relation of the naïve to the idealistic tone, the epic poem from the relation of the heroic to the naïve tone, and the tragic poem from the relation of the idealistic to the tragic tone. These tendencies between tones are registered with the categories of "significance" ("Bedeutung") and "appearance" ("Schein"), which Hölderlin also calls "basic tone" ("Grundton") and "art character" ("Kunstcharakter") in the course of his commentary. The beginning of the commentary describes a first set of tone tables consisting of four progressions which each detail the tone sequence of a genre (with two progressions for the tragic poem).

<sup>23</sup> Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, cit., p. 83.

L.		T.		N.	
naiv	Idealisch	idealisch	Heroisch	heroisch	Naiv
heroisch	Naiv	naiv	Idealisch	idealisch	Heroisch
{ idealisch	Heroisch }	{ heroisch	Naiv }	{ naiv	Idealisch }
heroisch	Idealisch	naiv	Heroisch	idealisch	Naiv
idealisch	Naiv	heroisch	Idealisch	naiv	Heroisch
naiv	Heroisch	idealisch	Naiv	heroisch	Idealisch
heroisch	Idealisch.	naiv	Heroisch.	idealisch	Naiv.
			Ajax		
			oder umgekehrt.		
		heroisch	Idealisch		
		idealisch	Naiv		
		{ naiv	Heroisch }		
		heroisch	Naiv		
		idealisch	Heroisch		
		naiv	Idealisch		
		heroisch	Naiv.		
			Antigonä		

Figure 1. Images from F. Hölderlin, *Theoretische Schriften*, ed. by J. Kreuzer, Felix Meiner, Hamburg 1998, pp. 66-67.<sup>24</sup>

It follows from these progressions that the ‘Variation of Tones’ implies not only a relational understanding of genre, based on the constellation of tones, but also a processual conception according to which the double tones traverse a tabulated cycle of seven stages which constitute the “continuous metaphor”. Hölderlin scholar Rainer Nägele has consequently compared these tables to structuralist accounts of language which distinguish between a paradigmatic and a syntagmatic axis, with the paradigm representing a relation produced by substitution and the syntagma a relation produced by positioning.<sup>25</sup> Poetic genre emerges from these tables as a synchronic relation between tones which passes through a diachronic sequence unfolding in time.<sup>26</sup> This sequential dimension of the ‘Variation of Tones’ is further detailed in a second set of tables which show that the seven-stage course of a poem pertaining to a certain genre is not necessarily bound to a particular constellation as its point of departure.

<sup>24</sup> I would like to thank Felix Meiner publishing for their permission to reproduce the figures from Hölderlin’s text.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. R. Nägele, ‘Ancient Sports and Modern Transports: Hölderlin’s Tragic Bodies’, in Fioretos, cit., pp. 247-267.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Nägele, ‘1808 – Poetic Revolution’, cit., p. 513.

	id.	na.	her.	id./	naiv	her.	id.
	naiv	her.	id.	na./	her.	id.	na.
{	her.	id.	n.	h./	id.	n.	her.
	id.	n.	he.	id./	n.	h.	id.
	na.	her.	id.	n./	her.	id.	n.
	her.	id.	n.	h./	id.	n.	h.
	id.	n.	h.	id./	n.	h.	id.
	her.	id.	na.	h./	id.	n.	h.
	id.	n.	h.	id./	na.	h.	id.
{	n.	h.	id.	n./	h.	id.	n.
	h.	id.	n.	h./	id.	n.	h.
	id.	n.	h.	id./	n.	h.	id.
	n.	h.	id.	n./	h.	id.	n.
	h.	id.	n.	h./	id.	n.	h.
	n.	h.	id.	n.	h.	id.	n.
	h.	id.	n.	h.	id.	n.	h.
	id.	na.	h.	id.	n.	h.	id.
	n.	h.	id.	n.	h.	id.	n.
	h.	id.	n.	h.	id.	n.	h.
	i.	n.	h.	id.	n.	h.	id.
	n.	h.	id.	n.	h.	id.	n.
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	hinh	inhi	nhin	hinh	inhi	nhin	hinh.
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	hinhinh	inhinhi	nhinhin	hinhinh	inhinhi	nhinhi	hinh.

Figure 2. Image from F. Hölderlin, *Theoretische Schriften*, ed. by J. Kreuzer, Felix Meiner, Hamburg 1998, p. 67.

While the tone sequence remains identical, the progression can start – and consequently: end – with any of the three tones, thus constituting three sub-styles within one and the same genre. Hölderlin explains this differentiation within his processual genre system in the commentary, beginning with the lyric poem.

In its *basic mood*, the lyric poem is the *more sensuous* [...]; precisely for that reason does it not strive in the outer appearance for reality, serenity and gracefulness; it evades the sensuous connection and presentation so much (because the pure basic tone inclines precisely toward it) that it is rather miraculous and supernatural in its formations and assembly of these, and the heroic energetic dissonances wherein it neither loses [!] its reality, its life, as in the idealistic image, nor its tendency toward ennoblement as in the immediate expression, these energetic dissonances that unite ennoblement and life are the resolution of the contradiction at which it [the lyric poem] arrives when, on the one hand, it can and will not fall into the sensuous, nor, on the other hand, deny its basic tone, the intimate life. However, if its basic tone is more heroic, richer in content, as for instance in a Pindaric hymn to the fencer Diagoras, if it therefore has to lose less inwardness, then it starts out naïve; if it is



more idealistic, more akin to the art-character, to the improper tone, if it has less life to lose, then it starts out heroic; if it is most inward, having content to lose, yet even more, ennoblement, purity of content, then it starts out idealistic.<sup>27</sup>

This passage of the commentary presupposes the first set of tone tables and their initial explication (“The lyric, in appearance idealistic poem, is naïve in its significance ...”) but it makes two important modifications. Because the lyric poem is “*more sensuous*” – or naïve – in its “*basic mood*” (“Grundstimmung”), it tends toward the idealistic tone: “it evades the sensuous connection and presentation so much (because the pure basic tone inclines precisely toward it) that it is rather miraculous and supernatural in its formations and assembly of these”. Here, Hölderlin introduces a third tone – “the heroic energetic dissonances” – which serves to resolve the contradiction that transpires due to the constitutive opposition between the naïve and the idealistic tone: “these energetic dissonances that unite ennoblement and life are the resolution of the contradiction at which it [the lyric poem] arrives when, on the one hand, it can and will not fall into the sensuous, nor, on the other hand, deny its basic tone, the intimate life”. This introduction of a third tone into the schema resolving the opposition between the other two tones can be regarded as one important modification of the initial formulation of the ‘Variation of Tones’ in this fragment; the other significant change consists in the specification that the lyric poem can depart from this first characteristic tone progression which assumes the naïve tone as its “basic tone”, the idealistic as its “art-character” and the heroic as the third tone. Hölderlin cites Pindar’s seventh Olympic Ode dedicated to the fencer Diagoras as one example of a lyric poem that begins its progression with the heroic tone as its “basic tone” and the naïve as its “art-character”, adding moreover that a sequence starting with the idealistic as the “basic tone” and the heroic as the “art-character” might describe the progression of a lyric poem just as well. Hölderlin tabulates these different tone sequences of the lyric, the epic and the tragic poem in the second set of charts, integrating them into yet another set of seven stages. While it might follow from these charts that the tone sequences characteristic of each genre become to a certain extent interchangeable, some interpreters, among them Ulrich Gaier and Lawrence Ryan, have argued that they in fact allow us to distinguish between different sub-styles within one and the same genre.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, the model would serve to differentiate

<sup>27</sup> Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, cit., p. 83.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Ryan, cit., p. 61; Gaier, *Der gesetzliche Kalkül. Hölderlins Dichtungslehre*, cit., p. 149.

between a lyric poem of the idealistic kind, a lyric poem of the naïve kind and a lyric poem of the heroic kind. Hölderlin applies the same differentiation to the epic poem in the subsequent part of his commentary.<sup>29</sup> In its final section, which addresses the tragic poem, the commentary departs from the structure of the previous parts in order to embark on a digression about the significance of intellectual intuition for the tragic poem, a digression which not only refers back to the beginning of the commentary<sup>30</sup> but also suggests conceptual affinities between the ‘Variation of Tones’ and other theoretical treatises relating to questions of tragic representation or epistemology going back as far as the early fragment on “Judgment and Being”.<sup>31</sup> The commentary breaks off in the middle of Hölderlin’s extensive remarks on the tragic poem.

This final formulation of the ‘Variation of Tones’, which explains literary genre formation through systematic sequences of the three poetic tones (naïve, idealistic and heroic) is the most developed elaboration of Hölderlin’s poetological theory of tones. It absorbs ideas from the previous versions, such as the representation of a natural character through a naïve tone in the epic poem, which was the subject of the fragment “On the Different Forms of Poetic Composition”, and it retains the basic setup of a mediation between a “basic tone” and its poetic appearance in “language”, which was laid out in the draft beginning with the words “The sentiment in the poem speaks idealistically”. Still, this last existing design of the ‘Variation of Tones’ leaves much room for speculation: What do the tones refer to exactly? And what would an implementation of the charts look like?

## 2. Eighteenth-century Aesthetics and Poetics of Tone

The notion of tone is ambiguous not only in Hölderlin’s writings; it is characterised by a particular semantic fluidity in the broader context of eighteenth-century aesthetics and poetics as well.<sup>32</sup> *Grimms Wörterbuch*, the comprehensive nineteenth-century German-language dictionary, dedicates a lengthy entry to the term which registers its many different meanings. These comprise auditory phenomena ranging from undifferentiated noises (“Geräusch”)

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, cit., p. 84.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, cit., p. 83: “The tragic, in appearance heroic poem, is idealistic in its significance. It is the metaphor of an intellectual intuition”.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Franz, cit., pp. 248f.

<sup>32</sup> Gerhard Kurz offers an overview of the notion of tone in eighteenth-century aesthetics, citing writers like Herder, Sulzer, or Klopstock. Cf. Kurz, cit., pp. 112f.

to musical sounds (“Klang”), including phonology (“Sprachton”), as well as visual phenomena such as the shade of colour (“Farbton”). According to the *Wörterbuch*, tone used to denote any manner or way of doing something, a use which has narrowed down since the Middle Ages to certain modes of expression, particularly in written language, and to patterns of behaviour or to certain dispositions of mind or atmosphere (“Gemütsstimmung”).<sup>33</sup> Lastly, the term can be applied to describe a quality of relation, more precisely, a state of tension (e.g., ‘toned muscles’) – a meaning of tone which can be traced back to the Latin root *tonus*, as distinct from its other etymological root: the Latin word *sonus*.<sup>34</sup> Most of these denotations – and more – have been traced in Hölderlin’s usage.

The most prominent sense of the word in Hölderlin’s writings may be its musical meaning.<sup>35</sup> Ulrich Gaier has convincingly demonstrated the influence that Hölderlin’s encounter with the writer and scholar Johann Jakob Wilhelm Heinse in 1796 had on his elaboration of the ‘Variation of Tones’.<sup>36</sup> In his novel *Hildegard von Hohenthal* (1795-1796), Heinse had developed a theory of musical tone relations and intervals which is likely to have shaped Hölderlin’s idea of double tones and their sequential modulation. Uta Degner has recently argued for an intermedial understanding of tone, highlighting its visual dimension as a shade of colour which was pervasive for instance in the aesthetic reflections of Hölderlin’s contemporary Johann Georg Sulzer.<sup>37</sup> The anthropological sense of ‘tone’ as a means to distinguishing between certain character types and their poetic representation is found in the context of Hölderlin’s early sketches for the *Iduna* project.<sup>38</sup> Ulrich Gaier has consequently sought to apply the three tones to the later version of Hölderlin’s *Hyperion* novel, relating them to the characters Hype-

<sup>33</sup> Cf. J. Grimm, W. Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*, URL = <https://woerterbuchnetz.de/?sigle=DWB#1>: “ton ist im sprachgebrauch des späteren mittelalters oft ganz allgemein ‚die art und weise überhaupt‘, doch hat sich diese verwendung in späterer zeit nur ganz vereinzelt und kaum merklich fortgesetzt”.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> The musical dimension of Hölderlin’s poetological theory is the subject of an edited volume recently published by Gianmario Borio and Elena Polledri: cf. G. Borio, E. Polledri (eds.), “Wechsel der Töne”. *Musikalische Elemente in Friedrich Hölderlins Dichtung und ihre Rezeption bei den Komponisten*, Winter, Heidelberg 2019.

<sup>36</sup> U. Gaier, *Neubegründung der Lyrik auf Heinses Musiktheorie*, in “Hölderlin-Jahrbuch”, 31 (1998-1999), pp. 129-138.

<sup>37</sup> U. Degner, *Bilder im Wechsel der Töne. Hölderlins Elegien und “Nachtgesänge”*, Winter, Heidelberg 2008, pp. 47-54.

<sup>38</sup> Monika Sproll has recently presented an extensive study of the notion of ‘character’ and the ‘characteristic’ in eighteenth-century philosophy and aesthetics which dedicates an entire chapter to Hölderlin’s notion of ‘character’. Cf. M. Sproll, *Das “Charakteristische”. Studien zu “Charakter“-Konzepten und zur Ästhetik des “Charakteristischen” von Leibniz bis Hölderlin*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2020, pp. 278-342.

tion (heroic/tragic), Diotima (lyric/idealistic) and Alabanda (epic/naïve) and their respective development throughout the narrative.<sup>39</sup> Both Ulrich Gaier and Uta Degner have, moreover, pointed out the significance of the idea of a state of tension, expressed in the Latin *tonus*, which seems crucial to Hölderlin's relational model of the 'Variation of Tones'.<sup>40</sup> As another source, Ulrich Gaier has identified neoplatonic ontology and its distinction between three different states of being, which Hölderlin presumably became aware of in his study of the writings of Proclus and Marsilio Ficino and their adaptation through Herder.<sup>41</sup>

This cursory overview of the scholarly discussion around Hölderlin's notion of tone may suffice to show that the additional contextualisation does not help to resolve the polysemy of the term in his texts. It is helpful, however, in order to highlight the range of meanings which are likely to have informed the different formulations of the 'Variation of Tones' at one point or another. The striking polysemy of the term may complicate an interpretation of the 'Variation of Tones' as a normative poetics guiding Hölderlin's own creation – but it presents no obstacle for an understanding of the 'Variation of Tones' as an elaboration of Hölderlin's practice of reading.

### 3. *The 'Variation of Tones' as a Practice of Reading*

The very fact that Hölderlin first mentioned the 'Variation of Tones' in the context of his 'Letters on Homer' strongly suggests that the tone models were initially developed out of his experience of reading literature and that they were meant to describe and to communicate this experience, more particularly, the encounter with texts – be they of ancient or modern provenance – that combine different genres or 'generic tones'. References to his readings occur repeatedly in Hölderlin's notes: He alludes to Pindar's Seventh Olympic Ode in his commentary on possible tone sequences for the lyric poem; in his remarks on the epic poem, he cites Homer's *Iliad* as one example.<sup>42</sup> Most strikingly perhaps, Hölderlin designs two different tone progressions for the tragic poem in one version of his charts, which seem to be

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Gaier, *Hölderlin. Eine Einführung*, cit., p. 271.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Gaier, *Neubegründung der Lyrik auf Heinses Musiktheorie*, cit., p. 137; Degner, cit., p. 53.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Gaier, *Hölderlin. Eine Einführung*, cit., p. 259.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, cit., pp. 83f.

based on Sophocles's tragedies *Ajax* and *Antigone*.<sup>43</sup> The tone tables and their explications can hence be understood as a testament to Hölderlin's own way of reading literature – a reading practice which perceives the literary text as unfolding in time and which is especially attuned to processes of transition within this text-as-process.

It is this attention to operations of linguistic transfer that connects Hölderlin's practice of reading to his work as a translator. As a matter of fact, the readings that fostered his development of the 'Variation of Tones' largely consisted of texts by authors that Hölderlin translated into German (e.g. Pindar, Homer, Sophocles).<sup>44</sup> Both activities – reading literature shaped by genre hybridity as well as translating texts from one language into another – are motivated by an interest in the 'metaphor' in its literal sense; more precisely, they aim at making the dynamics of transport in and through language intelligible. At the most basic level, the practices of reading and translating rely on operations of transfer – between different languages or between different tones within one and the same language. Hölderlin's practice and theory of translation have been the subject of extensive study in recent years; in this context, Ulrich Gaier has pointed out the proximity between the theory of the 'Variation of Tones' and Hölderlin's reflections on translation.<sup>45</sup> In their focus on moments of transition, reading and translating emerge as two distinct, yet connected sets of practices.<sup>46</sup>

While the 'Variation of Tones' emerges as an expression of Hölderlin's own reading practice, there are other annotations implying that it may, at times, have served as a principle guiding his

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Hölderlin, *Theoretische Schriften*, cit., p. 66.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. B. Böschstein, 'Übersetzungen', in J. Kreuzer (ed.), *Hölderlin-Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, cit., pp. 284-301.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. U. Gaier, *Übertragen. Zu Hölderlins Sprachphilosophie*, in "Hölderlin-Jahrbuch", 29 (1994-1995), pp. 22-46. For a comprehensive overview of Hölderlin's work as a translator cf. B. Böschstein, *Göttliche Instanz und indische Antwort in Hölderlins drei Übersetzungsmodellen. Pindar: Hymnen – Sophokles – Pindar: Fragmente*, in "Hölderlin-Jahrbuch", 29 (1994-1995), pp. 47-63; C. Louth, *Hölderlin and the Dynamics of Translation*, Legenda, Oxford 1998; S. Bernofsky, *Foreign Words: Translator-Authors in the Age of Goethe*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit (MI) 2005; B. Previšić, *Die Übersetzung von Rhythmus: Hölderlins Transitprogramm hin zu einer „belebenden Kunst“*, in "Transit: A Journal of Travel, Migration, and Multiculturalism in the German-speaking World", 2, 1 (2006), URL = <https://transit.berkeley.edu/2006/previsic/>. Elena Polledri has focused in particular on the correlation between theories and practices of translation in the context of German literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century: cf. E. Polledri, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers in der Goethezeit. Deutsche Übersetzungen italienischer Klassiker von Tasso bis Dante*, Narr, Tübingen 2010.

<sup>46</sup> The question of how and to what effect (social) practices are interconnected has been a matter of interest in recent practice theory. Cf. A. Reckwitz, *Grundelemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken. Eine sozialtheoretische Perspektive*, in "Zeitschrift für Soziologie", 32/4 (2003), pp. 282-301, at p. 295.

poetic production as well. The text fragment “The sentiment in the poem speaks idealistically ...” ends with the note: “Style of the song Diotima”.<sup>47</sup> It has not been settled whether Hölderlin referred here to any of the existing versions of his ode to Diotima, which he revised several times between 1796 and 1798, or to a text which has been lost or was never written. It may also be surmised that this note indicates Hölderlin’s application of the ‘Variation of Tones’ as a tool for reading his own texts. Besides this note, his use of the tone sequences as a principle of poetic composition is conveyed in a fragmentary plan for a poem entitled “Ovid’s Return to Rome” (“Ovids Rückkehr nach Rom”) which begins with the sequence “id. n. her. id. n. h. id”.<sup>48</sup> (the first tone progression of the lyric poem). Apart from these jottings, however, there is little to suggest that Hölderlin’s texts can be decoded by means of the ‘Variation of Tones’. While his sketches do not add up to a systematic poetics, their lack of consistency does not diminish their value for our understanding of Hölderlin’s poetology – on the contrary, the sketches afford us a glimpse into his perception of the literary text as a motion between different generic markers, a conception of literature shaped by a particular susceptibility for moments of transition. It remains a matter of speculation whether Hölderlin had originally intended to develop the ‘Variation of Tones’ into a propaedeutic for aesthetic experience as part of his *Iduna* project. What is left of the ‘Variation of Tones’, however, does suggest an invitation to follow the movements of a literary text as closely as possible and to make this reading experience communicable.<sup>49</sup>

#### 4. *Tone Progressions and the Philosophy of History*

It has been a matter of debate to what extent Hölderlin’s processual conception of literature as expressed in the ‘Variation of Tones’ was in line with the then contemporary philosophy of history. Peter Szondi has argued that the philosophy of history was in fact implied in Hölderlin’s sketches, contending that ‘while the tones are in and of themselves historically neutral, their combination is immersed

<sup>47</sup> Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, cit., p. 87.

<sup>48</sup> Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke*, cit., vol. 2.1, p. 320.

<sup>49</sup> Cyrus Hamlin has stressed the hermeneutic function of the ‘Variation of Tones’. Cf. Hamlin, cit., p. 311: “In this sense, the primary function of the tonal modulation is hermeneutical, imposing upon the reader an obligation to participate in the full cognitive complexity of the poem as performance, like a symphony of reflective thought”.

in the philosophy of history'.<sup>50</sup> Szondi's argument principally rests on Hölderlin's letter to his friend Casimir Ulrich Böhlendorff from December 4, 1801, in which he distinguished between the poetry of the ancients and that of the moderns, or rather, between their respective 'tones', namely "the fire from heaven" and the "sacred pathos" on the side of the ancients and the "clarity of presentation" and "*Junonian sobriety*" proper to the moderns.<sup>51</sup> Hölderlin explained in his letter that the modern poets need not give up their own qualities – or tones – in order to emulate the ancients but that they should instead adopt the poetic stance of the ancients in order to bring their own poetic potential to full fruition.<sup>52</sup> Szondi accordingly reconstructs a structural analogy between the argument of the Böhlendorff letter, which he sees as informed by the contemporary philosophy of history, and the 'Variation of Tones', where the initial opposition between two tones is resolved in the sequence through the recourse to a third tone. It is this third tone in particular – Hölderlin also calls it the "spirit of the poem"<sup>53</sup> – which allows Szondi to construe the 'Variation of Tones' as a poetological realisation of the philosophy of history.

That which adds the third tone to the two tones – basic mood and art-character – (the idealistic tone in the epic, the naïve tone in the tragedy, and the heroic tone in the lyric poem) is called the spirit of the poem. It is this third [element] which shows, even more distinctly than the other two elements which constitute the artwork in Hölderlin's poetics, the secret identity of the theories of the variation of tones and of the difference of poetic modes with the later conception based on the philosophy of history, communicated in the letter to Böhlendorff, and which thus reveals the poetic modes [genres] as historically contingent, and Hölderlin's genre poetics as philosophy of history.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup> My own translation, E.R. Cf. P. Szondi, 'Gattungspoetik und Geschichtsphilosophie. Mit einem Exkurs über Schiller, Schlegel und Hölderlin', in Id., *Hölderlin-Studien. Mit einem Traktat über philologische Erkenntnis*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1970, pp. 119-169, at p. 122: "so sind die drei Töne der Hölderlinschen Poetik als solche historisch neutral, Geschichtsphilosophie aber in ihre Kombinatorik eingesenkt".

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, cit., p. 149.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, cit., p. 150.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, cit., p. 84: "If that which unites and negotiates the basic tone and the art-character of a poem is the spirit of the poem, if that one has to be sustained the most, and if in the epic poem the spirit is the idealistic, then the epic poem has to remain mostly with the latter".

<sup>54</sup> My own translation, E.R. Cf. Szondi, 'Gattungspoetik und Geschichtsphilosophie. Mit einem Exkurs über Schiller, Schlegel und Hölderlin', cit., p. 133: "Was den beiden Tönen von Grundstimmung und Kunstcharakter den dritten hinzufügt (beim Epos den idealischen, bei der Tragödie den naiven, beim lyrischen Gedicht den heroischen), wird der Geist des Gedichts genannt. Deutlicher noch als die beiden anderen Momente, die in Hölderlins Poetik das Kunstwerk konstituieren, zeigt dieses dritte die geheime Identität der Lehren vom Wechsel der Töne und vom Unterschied der Dichtarten mit der späteren, im Brief an Böhlendorff mitgeteilten geschichtsphilosophischen Konzeption und erweist solcherart die Dichtarten als geschichtlich bedingte, Hölderlins Gattungspoetik als Geschichtsphilosophie".

Peter Szondi thus builds his argument on a structural analogy between Hölderlin's opposition of ancient and modern poetry and its resolution in the Böhlendorff letter and the triadic structure at the basis of the 'Variation of Tones'. In order to substantiate his claim, he draws on another fragment by Hölderlin from the context of the 'Variation of Tones' which reads:

The tragic poet is well advised to study the lyric [poet], the lyric the epic [poet], the epic the tragic [poet]. For in the tragic lies the perfection [Vollendung] of the epic, in the lyric the perfection of the tragic, in the epic the perfection of the lyric. For if the perfection of all is the mixed expression of all, [it follows that] in each of them, it is one of the three sides which stands out most.<sup>55</sup>

It is in the idea of "perfection" ("Vollendung") of one genre through the other that Szondi recognises a logic of progression common to both the 'Variation of Tones' and the philosophy of history:

It thus seems obvious to recognise in this perfection not only the spirit, that is, the resolution of the opposition between proper and improper tone in the individual poem, but the next stage in a process which corresponds in Hegel's philosophy of history, and already in his *Science of Logic*, to that [process] conceived by Hölderlin in his writings from the Homburg period: one [element] reaches perfection, becoming itself entirely by transcending itself, turning into a third [element] through the mediation with its other.<sup>56</sup>

What supports the affinity between the progressive perfection of tones and Hegel's philosophy of history, Szondi continues to specify, is, surprisingly, its irresolvable entanglement with cyclical structures – for the progressive arrangement of the three tones is embedded in a cyclical framework. This paradoxical integration of cyclical and progressive movements in Hölderlin's 'Variation of Tones' in no way dissociates it from the contemporary philosophy of history but, on the contrary, confirms its intrinsic connection.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> My own translation, E.R. Cf. Hölderlin, *Theoretische Schriften*, cit., p. 68: "Der tragische Dichter thut wohl, den lyrischen, der lyrische den epischen, der epische den tragischen zu studieren. Denn im tragischen liegt die Vollendung des epischen, im lyrischen die Vollendung des tragischen, im epischen die Vollendung des lyrischen. Denn wenn schon die Vollendung von allen ein vermischter Ausdruck von allen ist, so ist doch eine der drei Seiten in jedem die hervorstechendste".

<sup>56</sup> My own translation, E.R. Cf. Szondi, 'Gattungspoetik und Geschichtsphilosophie. Mit einem Exkurs über Schiller, Schlegel und Hölderlin', cit., p. 144: "[S]o liegt es nahe, in dieser Vollendung nicht bloß den Geist, d.h. die Auflösung des Gegensatzes von eigentlichem und uneigentlichem Ton im einzelnen Gedicht zu sehen, sondern die nächste Stufe in einem Prozeß, der in Hegels Geschichtsphilosophie, wie auch schon in seiner Logik, dem in Hölderlins Homburger Schriften konzipierten entspricht: eines vollendet sich, wird ganz es selbst, indem es über sich hinausgeht und mit seinem anderen zu einem dritten sich vermittelt".

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Szondi, 'Gattungspoetik und Geschichtsphilosophie. Mit einem Exkurs über Schiller, Schlegel und Hölderlin', cit., pp. 144-146.



It is noteworthy that Hölderlin's model of tone movements does not steer in any definite direction: while contemporary classicist accounts saw tragedy as the end point of the evolution of poetic genres, the Romantics declared the epic – or rather, the novel – to be the ultimate tendency of a triadic model of literary history.<sup>58</sup> No such tendency can be conclusively identified in Hölderlin's design, which presents its elements as homologous without attributing a higher value to any one of the three tones. If anything, tragedy might constitute the vanishing point of the 'Variation of Tones', as the commentary on the tragic poem seems to absorb all other genres, leading into a discussion of fundamental problems of aesthetic representation common to all genres.<sup>59</sup> In the end, Szondi's efforts to reconstruct the points of contact between Hölderlin's poetics and Hegel's philosophy of history may serve to underline the imponderabilities of his poetry's relation to history. In its proto-structuralist design, the 'Variation of Tones' at first sight seems far removed from any historicising approach to literature, and yet it may be precisely its increased awareness of processes of transition which makes the 'Variation of Tones' particularly apt for the description of historical change. In this sense, it could be said to prefigure the disintegration of history into mere succession, which Rainer Nägele has identified as an underlying principle at work in Hölderlin's late hymns.<sup>60</sup>

The lasting fascination that the 'Variation of Tones' has had for Hölderlin's interpreters may originate not least in these many imponderabilities: as a genre poetics, the 'Variation of Tones' vacillates between an essentialist and a relational understanding of literary genre – as a model of literary history, it embeds literature's own processuality within a proto-structuralist framework, thus manifesting a tension inherent in the then contemporary philosophy of history. By reducing poetry's motion to calculable formulas, the apparently mechanical design of the 'Variation of Tones' went against the grain of the late eighteenth-century poetics of genius. Understood as a practice of reading, it portends not so much a theory of poetic production as it highlights a certain 'mechanics of perception' with regards to poetry. This 'mechanics' emerges through a routinised sensitivity to fissures or transitions between different genres within the poetic text. In its mechanical design, the 'Variation of Tones'

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Szondi, *Poetik und Geschichtsphilosophie II. Von der normativen zur spekulativen Gattungspoetik. Schellings Gattungspoetik*, cit., p. 135.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, cit., pp. 84-86, as well as Gesse, cit., pp. 226-229.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. R. Nägele, *Text, Geschichte und Subjektivität in Hölderlins Dichtung. "Uneßbarer Schrift gleich"*, J.B. Metzler, Stuttgart 1985, p. 103.

gives us a sense of Hölderlin's way of reading poetry and inspires us, at the same time, to reflect on our own practices of reading literature shaped by genre hybridity.

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