

## **Baudrillard and Hölderlin and the Poetic Resolution of the World.**

By Gerry Coulter

*We have no footing anywhere,  
No rest, we topple,  
Fall and suffer  
Blindly from hour  
To hour like water  
Pitched from fall  
To fall, year in,  
Year out, headlong,  
Downward for years to the vague abyss  
(Hölderlin, *Hyperion's Song*, 1990:20).<sup>1</sup>*

We are merely epigones. ... The highest level of intensity lies behind us. The lowest level of passion and intellectual illumination lies ahead of us (Baudrillard, 1990b:150).

### **I. Introduction**

Across a wide array of disciplines becoming post-disciplines young scholars today are struggling to find a use for the writings of Jean Baudrillard. Looking at Baudrillard in relation to Hölderlin helps us to deepen our understanding of the role of the poetic in his writing. Absence and reversibility come to the fore here alongside a fatal optimism that finds joy in writing (which for Baudrillard is often an attempt to resolve the world poetically). No matter how angry or disappointed, “the wise in the end often bow to the beautiful” (Hölderlin, *Socrates and Alcibiades*, 1994:49).

For Baudrillard “theory could even be poetry” (1990:24), and he needed the poetic to live and write. During his lifetime Baudrillard had watched the world drift into delirium and it opened him to a delirious point of view – one without homage to any principle of truth or causality (2000:68). He understood that poems, fables, stories, parables, and fiction are as “real” as anything else in this world. They permitted him to grant to events both a poetic singularity and an analysis which was at home in radical uncertainty (2000:68).

Baudrillard resisted the easy solution and his poetic sensibility led him to challenge his readers to probe the course of events and their possible meanings more deeply. Complex events like September 11, 2001 are strangely affirming of this kind of view of the world [he pointed to the poetic notion that the twin towers committed suicide in response to the attacks of the suicide planes (2003:43)]. This is difficult poetry but its author was convinced that he lived in a time when “everything in the moral, political and philosophical spheres is heading towards the lowest common denominator” (1998b:103). Perhaps the resonance of consternation they evoked was just loud enough to penetrate through the deafening cacophony of banal explanations of the event.

As an entry point into an assessment of Hölderlin and Baudrillard it is worthwhile to begin when Baudrillard first worked seriously with Hölderlin’s work. France has long been home to German translators of the highest rank. Why was Baudrillard (then a young high-school German teacher), hired to translate Hölderlin? Aside from the fact that he was an expert in German and understood the nuances of the language fluently, what was it about Baudrillard that qualified him to translate a poet of such notoriety? We can only probe the answer in retrospect but whomever hired Baudrillard may have glimpsed within him someone who, like Hölderlin, had an ear for the “background noise of the universe” (Baudrillard, 1996:2) and could hear the “silent laughter of flowers, grass, plants and forest” (2002:1). These sounds, so clear to Hölderlin’s ear, were heard by almost no one in modernity.

The first point of intersection between Hölderlin and Baudrillard then is a poetic sensibility. I begin with an assessment of this sensibility and other points of convergence between he and Hölderlin (Section II). Next I turn to the place of fiction (one of poetry’s synonyms) in Baudrillard’s thought (Section III), before identifying his fatal [tragic] optimism against human efforts to replace older views of transcendence with efforts to perfect this world (Section IV). Section V examines Hölderlin’s most significant influence on Baudrillard – the idea of reversibility [where danger grows, so does that which saves]. Section VI brings the Hölderlin – Baudrillard relationship up to date in the deserts of post-modernity.

## II. A Poetic Resolution of the World

Human, too human, the mania which insists there is only the One, one country, one truth and one way (Hölderlin, *The Root of All Evil*, 1994:53).

For reality asks nothing other than to submit itself to hypotheses. And it confirms them all. That, indeed, is its true ruse and vengeance (1996:99).

Queen Truth, may you not thrust my thinking up against a coarse lie (Hölderlin, *Of Truth*, 1994:633).

Baudrillard is a striking example of system failure – a system’s failure to fully integrate each individual despite the ruthless and comprehensive regimes of education and socialization compulsory for each person. Hölderlin was an interesting example of system failure in his own time. Baudrillard is a strong example of the kind of thinker who understands the irony of community, and that the biggest battle any of us face is against the collective. This perspective imbues Baudrillard with a deep suspicion of the real. In a time in which truth “no longer affords a solution” (a similarity between Hölderlin’s and Baudrillard’s time), “perhaps” says Baudrillard, “we can aim at a poetic resolution of the world” (2000:68).

Poetic resolution becomes for him a strategy of resistance to systematization while leaving open the possibility of thought. This includes, for example, asking us to think about what we are pursuing in our concern for security in an era of both state-sponsored and freelance terrorism:

...what kind of state would be capable of dissuading and annihilating all terrorism in the bud...? It would have to arm itself with such terrorism and generalize terror on every level. If this is the price of security, is everybody deep down dreaming of this? (1990c:22).

This passage is an example of Baudrillard’s poetic approach which is close to what we often refer to as poetic justice – the reversible. It forces us to look beyond current fears to the implications of our thoughts and actions – for ourselves. In a world which disappointed him at every turn this was the most generous gift Baudrillard could offer in return.

Against a world that consistently disappointed him and denied sustained pleasure Hölderlin sought poetic resolution. The ancient Gods had departed from the minds of his contemporaries, presence was lost, and the only thing appearing to him in plenty was absence. The absence of the world was reinforced in the detail of his fragmentary writing – a characteristic shared by Baudrillard’s writing. In the writings of both men it is the real which is absent, and both are joyous absentees from the “real” world. Writing became a vehicle for achieving escape velocity from a world of absence. Both men also understood that it is subtraction which is the most powerful force – “power emerges from absence” (1997:9). This was more common knowledge in Hölderlin’s time but is now mostly forgotten in our time of proliferation.

Baudrillard’s writing takes on the poetic quality of “slimming things down and reducing stocks” – “to escape fullness you have to create voids between spaces so that there can be collisions and short-circuits” (1993:38). Baudrillard understood, along with Kenneth White (whom he credits for the idea), that poetry today exists everywhere but in poetry. The challenge is to find poetic power – the poetic function in its primal state” (*Ibid.*) elsewhere – such as in theoretical writing.<sup>2</sup> If writing is to aim at a total resolution of the world then why should this not be a poetic resolution? (1996:100) It is for this reason that the kinds of writing which are obsessed with meaning (ideological and moral), are so unconcerned with the act of writing which, for Baudrillard, involves “the poetic, ironic, allusive force of language, ...the juggling with meaning” (*Ibid.*:103). Baudrillard believes that art ought to be concerned with illusion – otherwise all it does is mirror the world around it and therefore serves no purpose. As an art, writing then is concerned with the “poetic transfiguration of the world” (1997:140). This could be quite playful as in his poetic “fate-based unrealist analysis” of the death of Diana:

On the one hand, if we assess all that would have had not to have happened for the event not to take place, then quite clearly it could not but occur. There would have to have been no Pont de l’Alma, and hence no Battle of the Alma. There would have had to have been no Mercedes, and hence no German car company whose founder had a daughter called Mercedes. No Dodi and no Ritz, nor all the wealth of the Arab princes and the historical rivalry with the British. The British Empire itself would have had to have been wiped from history. So everything combines, *a contrario and in absentia*, to demonstrate the urgent necessity of this death. The

event therefore, is itself unreal, since it is made up of all that should not have taken place for it not to occur. And, as a result, thanks to all those negative probabilities, it produces an incalculable effect. (Baudrillard, 2001:136-37).

This passage demonstrates Baudrillard's more playful understanding of his art – the art of writing (which is at the core of the art of theory), to “confront objects with the absurdity of their function, in a poetic unreality” (1997b:13). This includes a certain poetic confrontation with the art of writing theory itself as in this exquisite passage on human experience:

Everyday experience falls like snow. Immaterial, crystalline and microscopic, it enshrouds all the features of the landscape. It absorbs sounds, the resonance of thoughts and events; the wind sweeps across it sometimes with unexpected violence and it gives off an inner light, a malign fluorescence which bathes all forms in crepuscular indistinctness. Watching time snow down, ideas snow down, watching the silence of some aurora borealis light up, giving in to the vertigo of enshrouding and whiteness (1990:59).

Or this poetic passage written on the journey home in his *America*:

At 30,000 feet and 600 miles per hour, I have beneath me the ice-flows of Greenland, the *Indes Galantes* in my earphones, Catherine Deneuve on the screen, and an old man asleep on my lap. ‘Yes, I feel all the violence of love...’ sings the sublime voice, from one time zone to the next. The people in the plane are asleep. Speed knows nothing of the violence of love. Between one night and the next, the one we came from and the one we shall land in, there will have been only four hours of daylight. But the sublime voice, the voice of insomnia travels even more quickly. It moves through the freezing, trans-oceanic atmosphere, runs along the long lashes of the actress, along the horizon, violet where the sun is rising, as we fly along in our warm coffin of a jet, and finally fades away somewhere off the coast of Iceland (1988:24).

A key aspect of the enigmatic quality of Baudrillard's writing is to be found in its poetic nature – he was a theorist who did not sacrifice the art of writing to the concepts he wrote about – if he did he would have produced merely sociology and therein reduced poetic enigmas to meaning. Poetry is a synonym for fiction and the fabulous. “Theory is”, after all, “never so fine as when it takes the form of a fiction or a fable” (2006:11). The closing down of systemic meaning opens new poetic ones (2005:71). The expression of the

poetic depends on language and the role of language (recalling Lacan) “is to stand in for meaning” which is eternally absent (1990b:6).

In Hölderlin’s time it was still possible to look to the past, to the stars, and to natural elements for meaning in an uncertain world while retaining hope in the future.

Baudrillard does not have such luxuries in his time and he wonders if we really want to have to choose between meaning and non-meaning today. He says the point is that we do not want this choice because while meaning’s absence is intolerable “it would be just as intolerable to see the world assume a definitive meaning” (2001:128). This would be the end of thought, poetry and writing. Such is the goal of every techno-science of our time which will ultimately challenge the human to the core:

If we discover that not everything can be cloned, simulated, programmed, genetically and neurologically managed, then whatever survives could be truly called “human”: some inalienable and indestructible human quality could finally be identified. Of course, there is always the risk, in this experimental adventure, that nothing will pass the test – that the human will be permanently eradicated (2000:15-16).

If Baudrillard preferred fiction to science it may well have been because fiction holds a greater power in the mind of one whose hopes are fatal.

Night does not fall, objects secrete it at the end of day when, in their tiredness, they exile themselves into their silence (Baudrillard, 1990b:149).

### **III. Fiction – and the Extermination of Value**

“Only the vertiginous seduction of a dying system remains (Baudrillard, 1994:153).

One of the challenges faced by those inclined toward poetic resolution is to allow the poetic aspect of things to flow through him or her, just as it is the task of the painter to find the light given off by objects from within. For Baudrillard, the poetic sensibility also defines itself in an awareness of contradiction and reversibility – “when things contradict their very reality – this too is poetic” (1996:59). The poetic is central to that which remains fundamentally radical in Baudrillard: “I really don’t think of myself as a philosopher, my impulse comes from a radical temperament which has more in common

with poetry than philosophy” (1993:131). From the standpoint of writing and theory Baudrillard’s absolute radicality resides in his poetic approach to the world, which is deeply steeped in fable and fiction. Often he used a fable to illustrate a point. I wonder if he ever did so more poetically than in his use of “Death in Samarkand” to illustrate the distractions that can be caused by even a single sign:

Consider the story of the soldier who meets Death at a crossing of the marketplace, and he believes he saw him make a menacing gesture in his direction. He rushes to the king’s palace and asks the king for his best horse in order that he might flee during the night far from Death, as far as Samarkand. Upon which the king summons Death to the palace and reproaches him for having frightened one of his best servants. ‘I didn’t mean to frighten him. It was just that I was surprised to see this soldier here, when we had a *rendez-vous* tomorrow in Samarkand’ (1990d:72).

That one (or an entire society?) would run towards one’s fate by attempting to avoid it is the kind of poetic irony that informs so much of Baudrillard’s thinking. We find references to Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees* in at least nine of Baudrillard’s books (1983; 1990c; 1993b; 1993c; 1995; 1998; 2001b; 2001c; 2005b). This fable is brought forward into our own time [Mandeville wrote it in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century] as a poetic way of understanding that corruption is vital to a society’s success – “the splendor of a society depends on its vices” (1993b:102). Baudrillard also draws on the fable of *The Sorcerers Apprentice* (1997b:24); Guido Ceronetti’s *Incest Fable* (1993b and 2001:93); and several fables from Borges: *The Mirror People* (1996:148); *The Lottery in Babylon* (1990d:150; 1996:91; 2001:93); and *The Map and the Territory* (1994:1; 1996:47; 2000:63). Such fables become poetic mirrors for Baudrillard about his own time. In the case of Borges’ *The Map and the Territory* he says we need to turn this fable upside down for our own time:

We live as if inside Borges’s fable of the map and the territory; in this story nothing is left but pieces of the map scattered throughout the empty space of the territory. ...Today there is nothing left but a map (the virtual abstraction of the territory), and on this map some fragments of the real are still floating and drifting (2000:63).

Also, at several junctures, Baudrillard cites Arthur C. Clarke’s parable *The Nine Billion Names of God* (1990c; 1993c; 1996; 1996b; and 1997b) to refer to our current circumstance. In it a community of Tibetan monks have been listing the many names of

God for centuries. Growing tired they call in experts from IBM and the computers finish the job in a month. What the technicians did not know was the prophecy that once the nine billion names of God had been recorded the world would end. As they come down from the mountain the stars in the sky begin to disappear one by one (see Baudrillard, 2000:42). Baudrillard liked to employ such references to poetic outcomes (in our prosaic moment) to point to the absence of fulfillment by techno-science in our time.

Fiction (especially novels) also plays an enormous role in Baudrillard's poetic thinking. He writes of the fiction of Western values with a poetic twist – arguing that it is not the presence of Western values that people outside of the West detest – as much as the West's absence of values (2002b:65). Even the superpower America is reduced to a powerful fiction (1988:95, 1993:132) and he is never more poetic than in his assessment of Disneyland as a “deterrence machine for the rejuvenation of the fiction of reality” (1994:13) and that Disneyland exists to hide the fact that all of “real” America is Disneyland (*Ibid.*:12). *America* is his fiction about a powerful fiction – the land of “just as it is” (1988:28) and “the last remaining primitive society” – “the primitive society of the future” (1988:7). Many Americans, especially the men of the Right, hated Baudrillard's poetic and fictive *America* – with them in mind I prefer to read the book as an unauthorized exposé by a secret traveler in their midst. One wonders if it is the same group who work so hard to protect Americans from Baudrillard who have also played some role, historically, in protecting them from Hölderlin. Like Baudrillard, Hölderlin is not widely known in America (Unger, 1984:iii)

The poetic (poems, fables, fiction, stories, parables) is for Baudrillard part of his deep appreciation of ambivalence and ambiguity (1993c:215) and is important to how he copes with the extermination of value (*Ibid.*:198). We do not discover anything in poetic enjoyment and this is a vital part of what makes the poetic a radical experience (*Ibid.*:208). The poetic involves an “insurrection of a language against its own laws” (*Ibid.*:198) and it allows us to resist the “repressive interiorized space of language” (*Ibid.*:234), providing the basis for the “mutual volitization of the status of the thing and discourse” (*Ibid.*:235). He finds no room for poetry in psychoanalysis, in ideology, nor in

morality – these are “brute forms of writing burdened with the concept” (*Ibid.*:223). Poetry then is the place of the “redistribution of symbolic exchange in the very heart of words” (*Ibid.*:205) and the “site of the extermination of value and the law” (*Ibid.*:195).

Perhaps it is not surprising that the Baudrillard who was yet to write so poetically of the poetic exuded something of these thoughts in his approach to the world which made him an obvious choice to translate Hölderlin. And perhaps it was the deep encounter of the thoughtful young translator with a poet of Hölderlin’s frustrations, insight, and ability to go on, that gave him at least some of his preference for the enchantments of poetry over the disappointments of the real. Hölderlin remained with him until the end, making more frequent appearances in the final decade of Baudrillard’s writing.

#### **IV. After Transcendence**

*Where are the children of happiness now, the believers?  
Home with the distant fathers, their great days forgotten,  
Strolling by Lethe, and longing won’t bring them  
Back into sight, you will never appear  
On any of the thousand paths of the flowering earth  
Like gods, wherever the search goes, and I, whom your language  
Reached and the legend of you, must I grieve and grieve  
And my soul go down to your shades before its time?*  
(Hölderlin, *The Archipelago*, 1990:27).

Baudrillard said of Hölderlin: “No one else ever managed to bring the explosive silence of language to such limits” (2005b:231). Like Hölderlin, Baudrillard remained as suspicious of all efforts to perfect the world as he did of efforts to explain it with certainty. On poetry he said: “the words refer to each other, creating a pure event, in the meantime they have captured a fragment of the world, even if they have no identifiable referent from which a practical instruction can be drawn” [in this he found poetry similar to the fragmentary nature of photography] (2005b:73). Hölderlin’s poetry is not in the business of making the world more certain or more knowable any more than is Baudrillard’s thought:

Here, however, lies the task of philosophical thought: to go to the limit of hypotheses and processes, even if they are catastrophic. The only

justification for thinking and writing is that it accelerates these terminal processes. Here, beyond the discourse of truth, resides the poetic and enigmatic value of thinking. For, facing a world that is unintelligible and enigmatic, our task is clear: we must make that world even more unintelligible, even more enigmatic (2000:83).<sup>3</sup>

While Baudrillard is no Romantic, he does find something of a kindred spirit in Hölderlin, who was also deeply engaged with a painful and seemingly endless frustration with the world (1990d:111). Hölderlin spent his creative vitality trying to put into words that which was nearly indescribable – his words record the sublime frustrations of the poet. Baudrillard is frustrated by his times – by what we gave up in “cancelling our metaphysical contract and making another more perilous one with things” (2001b:36; see also 1983b:149) – and by living in a time in which it is more important to have things in which not to believe, than to believe (surrounded as we are today by fundamentalists such as Bush and bin Laden). What differentiates Baudrillard from Hölderlin is that the latter alerts us constantly to the role of the ancient gods. Nietzsche followed by pointing to the death of god and Baudrillard wrote about the consequences of this death. For Baudrillard (and this is part of his early departure from Marxism)<sup>4</sup>, the death of god is the end of transcendence.

The end of transcendence and responsibility to another world beyond our own meant that transcendence became secular and the effort to make the world transparent and operational replaced it. For Baudrillard, the death of god is the root of the perfect crime – good and evil become split – and our efforts go into making the world better only to see it go from bad to worse (2004:105). One could view Hölderlin’s notion: “Until the absence of God comes to our aid” (cited in Baudrillard 2001:131; 2004:105), as one that Baudrillard would find disagreeable. He does not however, as the attempt to perfect this world [through techno-science] will almost certainly lead to systemic collapse – Baudrillard’s fatal hope – and his fatal optimism in reversibility.

Like Hölderlin Baudrillard was disappointed but no thinker who writes does so without hope. Constantine says what we get from Hölderlin is a “passionate and generous hope” (see Hölderlin, 1990:7). For me, what we get from Baudrillard is a fatal hope – an

optimism about the reversibility of systems. Following the current period of the proliferation of information, security, and technology (the era of the perfect crime), Baudrillard hopes for a collapse. Hölderlin and Baudrillard share a certain poetic disposition and a way of resolving their world into poetic writing – often of a fragmentary nature. Baudrillard, living in extreme times, takes the problematic to a more radical conclusion as we no longer have the same kind of hope in a distant future that Hölderlin did. Such is the uncertainty of our times, which are invested in Baudrillard's fatal hope of systemic collapse.

Baudrillard said that Hölderlin could not be read in a continuous and constructive way – “he lends himself, as an influence, to the writing of fragments” (2004:22). And as he later told an interviewer: “behind all my theoretical and analytical formulations, there are always traces of aphorism, the anecdote and the fragment, one could call that poetry” (1993:166). The poetic for Hölderlin and Baudrillard shares the role of offering a resolution, in writing, of an unsatisfactory, uncertain, and unknowable world. What is vital to the two men is that they were not only writers – but writers who understood that text is as real as anything else. The love of text, its necessity to living and thought, lead both writers to push the limits of language and this is one factor that makes both such a pleasure to read.

The end of transcendence also means that humans must face the complete and utter indifference of the universe to our increasingly meaningless existence. Perhaps we should see Hölderlin's sublime poetry as an attempt to stand against this indifference.

Baudrillard in his time similarly attempts to match the indifference of the universe through the poetic resolution of writing: “indifference is my form of terrorism, in another social context I would be a terrorist, but here we have to stick to talking [writing]” (1993:195). Baudrillard finds his politics (and his politics *is* writing) – in a fatal optimism steeped in the hope of systemic reversion. If we sometimes find Baudrillard difficult, it is important to keep this in mind – he is very unlike most “great” thinkers whom we read as their hopes are mainly channeled towards improving the current system.<sup>5</sup>

## V. Radical Optimism and Reversibility

*Where is Athens now? Oh, grieving god, has your city,  
The one you loved best, that reached from your sacred shores,  
Collapsed under ash entirely and buried even under her graves?  
Or are there remains, might a sailor,  
Passing, remember her name and call her to mind?  
Were there not columns once, risen up, and did not  
The figured gods shine down from the citadel roof?  
And the turbulent voice of the people murmured  
Louder out of the Agora, the streets hurried down  
Through the boisterous gates to your port full of blessings  
(Hölderlin, *The Archipelago*, 1990:23).*

...why not take the view that the fundamental rule is that of evil, and that any happy event throws itself into question? Is it not true optimism to consider the world a fundamentally negative event, with many happy exceptions? By contrast, does not true pessimism consist in viewing the world as fundamentally good, leaving the slightest accident, to make us despair of that vision? Such is the rule of a radical optimism, we must take evil as the basic rule, (Baudrillard, 1997:138).

Hölderlin's memory of Athens conjures Herodotus's memory of those who were "great long ago" but who have now "become small" (Herodotus, 1998: Book I, v). We have called this aspect of human passage many things. Some call it poetic justice (such as the fall of great empires into small satellites of new empires); others have referred to it as the turning of the wheel of fortune. "Human happiness never remains long in the same place" (*Ibid.*) For Baudrillard it is part of the most poetic thing we know – that which comes as close to justice as anything we ever experience as humans: reversibility – the poetic reversibility of one thing into another (1993c:220). This includes everything from vast empires of long ago to the death of a friend:

A friend has died. The death of a friend finds its own justification *a posteriori*: it makes the world less liveable, and therefore renders his absence from this world less painful. It alters the world in such a way that he would no longer have his place in it (2002:65).

For Baudrillard reversibility is the fundamental rule (2005:41) but this does not imply a determinism in his thought – indeed, reversibility is an absolute weapon against determinism (1990c:82). Baudrillard notes that the reversibility of things, which is an ironic form today, does not entail an eighteenth-century romantic viewpoint. Rather, it

means that, for us: “a strange game is being played” and we do not know all the rules of this game – in our time, indifference has become a strategic terrain (1993:175).

There is one passage from Hölderlin which appears numerous times in Baudrillard’s writing and it is the passage in which Hölderlin acknowledges the poetry of reversibility: “*Where there is danger some Salvation grows there too*” (Hölderlin, *Patmos*, 1990:39). Baudrillard’s translators often have this as: “But where there is danger, there grows also what saves” (see for example 1996:49 or 1990b:96). In our technological times, which witness an increased effort to bring about perfection (the perfect crime Baudrillard calls it), he says, “the whole system becomes terroristic” (1996:49). He then argues that we ought to turn these lines of Hölderlin around to read: “But where what saves grows, there also grows danger”, which would characterize the much graver threat of disintegration and death represented by our excess of security, prevention, immunity, and the fatal excess of positivity” (1996:49). Once again Hölderlin opens a corridor of poetic resolution for Baudrillard to the suffocating technological tyranny of our time (genetics, cloning, artificial intelligence etc.). It is another opening for Baudrillard’s fatal optimism – his belief that as bad as the present system is in its proliferation – it may well collapse under its own weight. This is the only hope Baudrillard has left. As he puts it in the first volume of *Cool Memories*: [before quoting the above passage from Hölderlin in German], “There is much more to be hoped for in an excess of information or of weapons than in the restriction of information or arms control” (1990b:96). Again, in *The Vital Illusion*, we find Hölderlin’s idea saving Baudrillard from pessimism:

As a metaphor, I would say that at the core of every human being and every thing there is... a fundamentally inaccessible secret. This is the vital illusion of which Nietzsche spoke, the glass wall of truth and illusion. From our rational point of view, this may appear rather desperate and could even justify something like pessimism. But from the point of view of singularity, of alterity, of secret and seduction, it is, on the contrary, our only chance: our last chance. In this sense, the perfect crime is an hypothesis of radiant optimism. Of course, it is a matter of tragic optimism, as it is expressed in the famous line of Hölderlin: ‘But where danger is, grows the saving power also’. It applies today – with the caveat that, as the evil genius of modernity has changed our destiny, Hölderlin’s phrase must be reversed: ‘the more the saving power grows, the greater the danger’. For we are no longer victims of an excess of fate and danger,

of illusion and death. We are victims of an absence of destiny, of a lack of illusion, and consequently of an excess of reality, security, and efficiency (2000:80-81).

Hölderlin provided Baudrillard with the germ of an idea that might be his single greatest thought: reversibility.<sup>6</sup> It is central to what Baudrillard calls “objective irony” – the “strong probability, verging on a certainty, that systems will be undone by their own systematicity” (2000:78). For Baudrillard this applies to both technical and human systems (political, social, economic). The more a system advances toward its perfection, the more they are prone to deconstruct themselves (*Ibid.*).

One of Baudrillard’s more poetic examples of this, for technical systems, is the computer virus: “the tiniest one is enough to wreck the credibility of computer systems, which is not without its funny side” (2002b:6). Baudrillard extends this into his understanding of globalization and the New World Order as reversible: “As Hölderlin said: ‘where danger threatens, that which saves us from it also grows’ – the more the hegemony of the global consensus is reinforced, the greater the risk, or chances it will collapse” (1995:86). That for Baudrillard would be the most poetic resolution of all: “all the philosophies of modernity will appear naïve when compared with the natural reversibility of the world” (1996:10).

*Euphrates’ cities and  
Palmyra’s streets and you  
Forests of columns in the level desert  
What are you now?  
(Hölderlin, *Ages of Life*, 1990:55)*

## **VI. Myth versus Sentiment**

*And our grief like the troubles of children turns  
Into sleep and just as the breezes  
Flutter and whisper in the strings until  
More adept fingers coax a better music  
Out of them so mists and dreams play over us.  
(Hölderlin, *To the Sun God*, 1990:18).*

The world’s sovereignty resides in the regulated play of signs and appearances (Baudrillard, 1990c:103). ...If the world is what it is, where

does the illusion of appearances come from? (2006:94) ... Were it not for appearances the world would be a perfect crime (1996:1).

Baudrillard keeps his distance from sentiment and prefers to see “romantics” like Hölderlin as one of the first great manifestations of nihilism (1994:59). Of our own time he says that we are merely neo-romantic (1990c:102). These assumptions lead Baudrillard to proclaim that “Hölderlin” ... “wasn’t a German romantic... he was mythical” (1993:21). In Baudrillard’s view this qualifies Hölderlin as a great artist since art, to be art, must be mythical (2001b:142). The mythic Hölderlin is then not someone Baudrillard follows closely, but someone whose fragments play a role in stimulating Baudrillard’s thinking in another time. Hölderlin is one important influence, who helps Baudrillard to find a way around what comes after Hölderlin, what Baudrillard calls: “the detour that we have all made through ideology, through radical criticism, through Freud and Marx” (1993:54). Hölderlin thus helps Baudrillard to pass to the horizon of disappearance (which lies beyond the horizon of appearances), and beyond the order of cause and affect. At one point Baudrillard finds himself sounding like Hölderlin concerning the forgetting of the gods, a very central and ironic aspect neo-classicism, which lead to the fallout from so called “Enlightenment” rationality: “The gods have been chased away. Their spectres hover about the deserts of postmodernity. If it took place anywhere, surely the perfect crime had its embodiment here” (1997:147).

## **VII. Conclusion**

Where shall we rest? (Hölderlin, *The Eagle*, 1990:63).

Philosophy would like to transform the enigma of the world into a philosophical question, but the enigma leaves no room for any question... the enigma of the world remains total (1996b:20).

Friederich Johann Hölderlin played a significant part in Baudrillard’s strategy of bringing poetic resolution to the unsatisfactory times in which he found himself. He was one of Baudrillard’s inspirations in his struggle against the forces of integral reality (2004:5). In Baudrillard’s view, Hölderlin is closer to Heraclitus than Hegel (with whom, in the 1790s, Hölderlin was personally close), and in his writing Baudrillard felt a radical opposition between a poetic, singular configuration, linked to the metamorphosis of

forms, as against the kind of virtual reality that is prevalent today. In a poetic approach it is the forms which become – language as the passage of forms – a kind of inhabited void (2004:84).

For Baudrillard, it was not so much a question of following Hölderlin (or Nietzsche or anyone else for that matter) closely, as it was an effort wherein such thinkers “have to be anagrammatized in what one does” (2004:6). Hölderlin is one of the artists and writers (and there are several: Artaud, Barthes, Bataille, Benjamin, Borges, Brecht, Calvino, Canetti, Heidegger, Heisenberg, Jarry, Lichtenberg, Marx, McLuhan, Nietzsche, Orwell, and Sartre etc.), with whom Baudrillard intersects and in whom he found theoretical inspiration – what he called “another lineage of thought... which comes into play” (2004:10). Baudrillard called Hölderlin’s poetry one of “perpetual becoming”, the poet one who “becomes the theatre of the metamorphosis of rivers, gods, landscapes”. “It is not he who changes,” says Baudrillard, “but the rivers and gods which metamorphose through him” (2004:83). As such, Baudrillard did not find Hölderlin to be “an identity self” any more than he himself. In any event “identity is a dream pathetic in its absurdity” (1998b:49; 2001:52).

Like Hölderlin, Baudrillard required of the world he wrote that it metamorphosed through him – writing as the theatre of becoming. In this Baudrillard understood the power of language as few (Hölderlin among them) have. Things that “become” are rare (2002c:45). Writing for Baudrillard was a precious “singularity”, “a resistance to real time”, “something that does not conform”, “an act of resistance”, the “invention of an antagonistic world” rather than a “defence of a world that might have existed” (1998b:32 ff.). In Baudrillard’s writing a little something of Hölderlin, anagrammatized, continues.

*And always  
There is a longing to dissolve  
(Hölderlin, Mnemosyne, 1990:49)*

...we dream of our disappearance (1987:26). ...There is nothing to say we are not mentally and biologically programmed for an internal disappearance of the same order, as the logical consequences of our power (1997:139).

They may have had a different view of hope but Hölderlin and Baudrillard shared a poetics of absence. It is an absence “which runs beneath the surface of all exchanges” (2001:7) and continually seduces presence (1990d:104). For both it was a deep sensitivity to absence which was so essential to a poetic resolution of the world. Both knew very well from lived experience that theory (as poetry, fiction and fable) precedes the world. “Things appear to us only through the meaning we have given them” (2004:91). For Baudrillard this meant seeking a poetic resolution of the world through the reversible. It kept his wisdom and writing joyful to the end despite everything. It is interesting how significantly Hölderlin is anagrammatized in the writing of a non-romantic who saw himself living in neo-romantic times (1990c:102)

As we struggle to find a use for Baudrillard today we would do well to remember that he wasn't seeking meaning or truth – but a way of living, writing and thinking through poetic resolution. There, beyond discourses of truth, he found his own way to make the world, which came to him as enigmatic and unintelligible – a little more enigmatic, a little more unintelligible. What he left to us was a gift far more precious than truth – he pointed to its absence.

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<sup>1</sup> The translation of the final line is from Michael Hamburger (1994:65).

<sup>2</sup> Or in the arts, which have, arguably, had a greater influence on theory in recent years than have the empirical sciences. See: Gerry Coulter, "A Way of Proceeding: Joseph Beuys, the Epistemological Break, and Radical Thought Today" in *Kritikos: A Journal of Postmodern Cultural Sound, Text, and Image* (May - June, 2008): <http://intertheory.org/gcoulter.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere Baudrillard writes: "The absolute rule is to give back more than you were given. Never less, always more. The absolute rule of thought is to give back the world as it was given to us – unintelligible. And if possible, to render it a little more unintelligible" (*The Perfect Crime*. New York: Verso, 1996:105); and "The world was given to us as something enigmatic and unintelligible, and the task of thought is to make it, if possible, even more enigmatic and unintelligible". (*Impossible Exchange*. London: Sage, 2001:151).

<sup>4</sup> See Gerry Coulter (2009) [forthcoming]. "Jean Baudrillard's Karl Marx – Productivist Ideology, And The Future of the Left" in *Fast Capitalism*. [www.fastcapitalism.com](http://www.fastcapitalism.com) [A shorter version of this paper will also appear in Russian translation in the journal *Khora* in early 2009]: <http://jkhora.narod.ru/redeng.html>. Hölderlin also had his idealist period

during which he had enormous faith in a corresponding movement of nature, freedom, and society. He was very influential on Hegel's later thought (which fed into Marxian dialectics). However for Hölderlin, the game was up when Napoleon failed to deliver (in this he was not unlike Beethoven in his own time or, at to some extent, Baudrillard after 1968). See: Eric L. Santner (1990:xiv).

<sup>5</sup> I think it is fair to offer an exemption to Giorgio Agamben here given his hope for a "politics to come". See Gerry Coulter, "Intersections and Divergences in Contemporary Theory: Baudrillard and Agamben On Politics And the Daunting Questions of Our Time" an Introduction to Giorgio Agamben's "Form of Life" in the *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, Volume 2, Number 2 (July, 2005):  
[http://www.ubishops.ca/BaudrillardStudies/vol2\\_2/agamben.htm](http://www.ubishops.ca/BaudrillardStudies/vol2_2/agamben.htm)

<sup>6</sup> See Gerry Coulter. "Reversibility – Baudrillard's 'One Great Thought'" in *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* (On the Internet), Volume 1, Number 2 (July, 2004):  
[http://www.ubishops.ca/BaudrillardStudies/vol1\\_2/coulter.htm](http://www.ubishops.ca/BaudrillardStudies/vol1_2/coulter.htm)