Wallace Stevens: Toward a Supreme Fiction

Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) was an American modernist poet. Born in Reading, Pennsylvania, and educated at Harvard and the New York Law School, he worked as an executive for The Hartford Insurance Company in Connecticut. The photograph by Sylvia Salmi was taken in the 1940s, at which time he was vice-president of the company. In his free time Stevens wrote poems, publishing his first book *Harmonium* in 1923. Throughout his life he considered poetry as the "supreme fiction," something that could replace religion in human life, and provide us with a more complete understanding than that provided by science or philosophy. In 1942 he published a set of poems entitled *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,* to illustrate the nature and power of poetry.

The Romantic Revolution

In the late 18th and early 19th Century, artists and writers insisted that art should stress individual creativity rather than formal learning, and that the emotional response to the world was more important that the rational. Not everyone appreciated the new poetry. In 1820, the satirist Thomas Love Peacock described *The Four Ages of Poetry:* the iron age of wherein rude bards celebrated the exploits of their chieftains, the golden age of Homer, the silver age of civilized verse lasting from Virgil to Dryden, and the current brass age wherein poets described their feelings. His invective was venomous: he described the characteristics of romantic poetry as

> harmony, which is language on the rack of Procrustes; sentiment, which is canting egotism in the mask of refined feeling; passion, which is the commotion of a weak and selfish mind; pathos, which is the whining of an unmanly

> spirit; and sublimity, which is the inflation of an empty head.

Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote a response to Peacock in 1821, but he died in 1822, and *A Defense of Poetry* was not published until 1840. Shelley distinguished two kinds of mental action: reason (Greek *logizein*, logic, analysis) and imagination (Greek *poiein*, poetry, synthesis).

> Reason is the enumeration of qualities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those qualities, both separately and as a whole. Reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things. Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.

He proposed that it is through the imagination that we obtain new knowledge:

> The functions of the poetical faculty are twofold: by one it creates new materials of knowledge, and power, and pleasure; by the other it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good.

And at the end of his essay, he claimed

> Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

The word hierophant, used initially in the context of the Eleusinian Mysteries, comes from the Greek *hieros* (sacred, holy) and *phainein* (show, reveal).

Shelley embodied these ideas in his 1819 *Ode to the West Wind* (full text available). This poem describes the west wind of autumn that blows the leaves from the trees and heralds the coming winter. It ends

> Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
> What if my leaves are falling like its own!
> The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

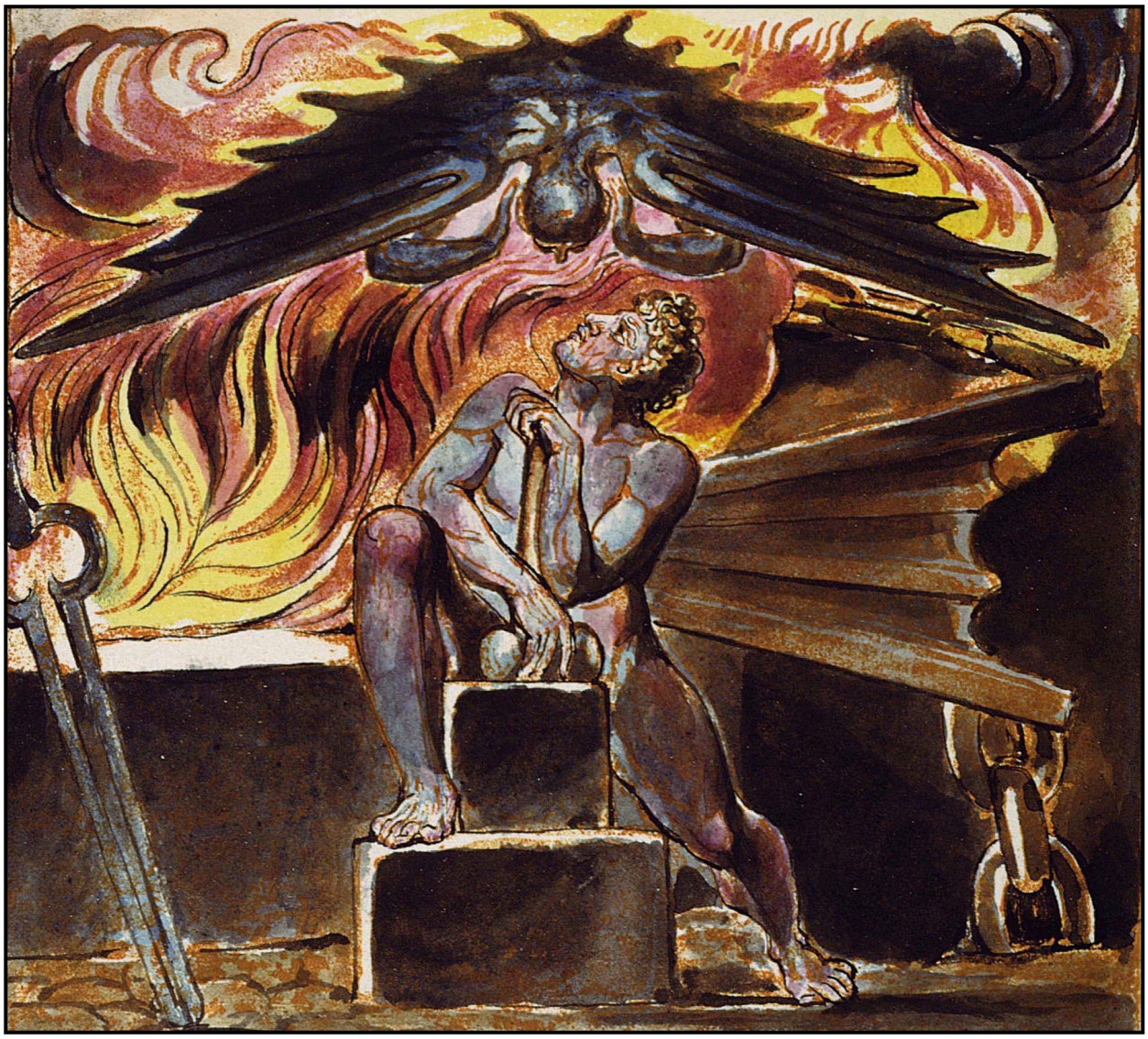
Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Shelley was not alone in considering poetry as a great system for creating knowledge and understanding. In his prophetic books, William Blake described Los as the personification of the creative imagination, in despair at the state of the world following the Industrial Revolution. In the 1820 book *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, Los is driven by his demonic Spectre to destroy the present state of England (personified by the Giant Albion), and reforge a new world. The following is Blake's representation of Los from page 6 of *Jerusalem:*



Los proclaims

> I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Man's
> I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create
> (Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1820, p 10)

Modern Ideas of Poetry

Shelley and the Romantic poets were soon criticized for being too idealistic, too removed from the real world, and too emotional. The following quotation is from a critique of

Shelley by George Santayana (1863-1952), a poet and philosopher who taught at Harvard when Wallace Stevens was an undergraduate there. Stevens and Santayana became friends, exchanged poems and stayed in contact long after Stevens graduated (Mariani, 2016, pp 21-23). Santayana claimed that Shelley

> could never put together any just idea of the world: he merely collected images and emotions, and out of them made worlds of his own. His poetry accordingly does not well express history, nor human character, nor the constitution of nature. What he unrolls before us instead is, in a sense, fantastic; it is a series of landscapes, passions, and cataclysms such as never were on earth, and never will be. (Santayana, 1913, pp 181-2)

After Romanticism, the Realists had their day. And as the 20th Century began, Modernism came to the fore. Modernists poets tended toward the everyday rather than the fantastic, irony rather than idealism, objectivity rather than passion, and innovation rather than derivation. In his 1942 poem *Of Modern Poetry*, Stevens remarked

> It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
> It has to face the men of the time and to meet
> The women of the time. It has to think about war
> And it has to find what will suffice. It has
> To construct a new stage.

Despite being critical of Shelley's poetry, Santayana nevertheless largely agreed with his idea that poetry creates our understanding of the world. He described the "great function of poetry:"

> to repair to the material of experience, seizing hold of the reality of sensation and fancy beneath the surface of conventional ideas, and then out of that living but

> indefinite material to build new structures, richer, finer, fitter to the primary tendencies of our nature, truer to the ultimate possibilities of the soul. (Santayana, 1900, p 271).

Santayana realized that the creative imagination works in science as well as poetry:

> Science and common sense are themselves in their way poets of no mean order, since they take the material of experience and make out of it a clear, symmetrical, and beautiful world (Santayana, 1900, p 271).

He also proposed that poetry and religion were closely related:

> Poetry raised to its highest power is then identical with religion grasped in its inmost truth; at their point of union both reach their utmost purity and beneficence, for then poetry loses its frivolity and ceases to demoralize, while religion surrenders its illusions and ceases to deceive. (Santayana, 1900, p 290).

These last two quotations recall Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry*:

> Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred

These ideas were not accepted by all modernist poets. W. H. Auden (1907-1973) had much more restrained views on the function of poetry:

> For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
> In the valley of its making where executives
> Would never want to tamper, flows on south
> From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
> Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,

A way of happening, a mouth.
(Auden, *In Memory of W. B. Yeats,* 1940)

Wallace Stevens, however, thought about poetry in much the same way as Shelley and Santayana (Italia, 1993). In his essay *The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet* in his 1951 collection *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens quotes Shelley extensively:

> He speaks of poetry as created by "that imperial faculty whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man." He says that a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. It is "indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge . . . the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds . . . it arrests the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life." In spite of the absence of a definition and m spite of the impressions and approximations we are never at a loss to recognize poetry. As a consequence it is easy for us to propose a center of poetry, a vis or *noeud vital,* to which, in the absence of a definition, all the variations of definition*s* are peripheral. (Stevens, 1951, pp 44-45).

Stevens' conception of the poet was very similar to Shelley's:

> what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it. (Stevens, 1951, p 31)

Stevens used the term "fiction" to describe the creative process of poetry. "Fiction" comes from the Latin *fictus* the past participle of *fingere* meaning to shape, form, devise, feign; "poetry" comes from the Greek *poeisis* meaning a fabrication or creation, which is itself derived from *poiein,* to make or compose.

Stevens' proposal of poetry as the process primarily

responsible for our understanding of the world is similar in may ways to the Martin Heidegger's ideas about Hölderlin's poetry, though neither writer could have been aware of the other:

> The poet names the gods and names all things with respect to what they are. This The poet names the gods and names all things with respect to what they are. This naming does not merely come about when something already previously known is furnished with a name; rather, by speaking the essential word, the poet's naming first nominates the beings as what they are. Thus they become known as beings. Poetry is the founding of being in the word. (Heidegger, 1941, p 58)

What we can express in words we can hope to understand. Poetry is unlike other modes of expression used in religion, law, or science. Poetry is particularly and vividly close to experience, and because of its attention to sound and metaphor it makes that experience memorable. In his essay *On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth*, Hans-Georg Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, points out that poetry brings experience "near" to us:

> A genuine poem …allows us to experience "nearness" in such a way that this nearness is held in and through the linguistic form of the poem. What is the nearness that is held there? Whenever we have to hold something, it is because it is transient and threatens to escape our grasp. In fact our fundamental experience as beings subject to time is that all things escape us, that all the events of our lives fade more and more, so that at best they glow with an almost unreal shimmer in the most distant recollection. But the poem does not fade, for the poetic word brings the transience of time to a standstill. (Gadamer, 1986, p 114)

Gadamer realizes, however, that poetry is but one of many linguistic modes used to gain understanding of the world:

> Language gives all of us our access to a world in which certain special forms of human experience arise: the religious tidings that proclaim salvation, the legal judgment that tells us what is right and what is wrong in our society, the poetic word that by being there bears witness to our own being. (Gadamer, 1986, p 115)

Supreme Fictions

Stevens first used the term “supreme fiction” in his 1923 poem *A High-Toned Christian Woman* (Brazeal, 2007). The main them of the poem (full text available) is that human creativity knows no hierarchy: poetry is as valuable as religion, jazz improvisations as important as choral hymns, and bawdy merriment as meaningful as moral laws. The poem begins

> Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
> Take the moral law and make a nave of it
> And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
> The conscience is converted into palms,
> Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.
> We agree in principle. That’s clear. But take
> The opposing law and make a peristyle,
> And from the peristyle project a masque
> Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,
> Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
> Is equally converted into palms,
> Squiggling like saxophones.

Stevens is indulging is word games: “nave” leads to “knave,” “palm” recalls “psalm,” and the “supreme fiction” brings to mind the “supreme being” who created everything, the creator free of any church, the godhead of Deists and Revolutionaries.

Stevens had given up his belief in the Christian God but still felt the need for something to believe in. That it might be possible to believe in a fiction was suggested in his 1942

poem *Asides on an Oboe* (full text available) which begins

> The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
> Of final belief. So, say that final belief
> Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

Two ideas – the concept of a supreme fiction by which the poetic imagination could create and understand a world, and the need of human beings to believe in something – ran through all of Steven's thought and poetry. In the *Adagia* (an unpublished collection of aphorisms), he claimed

> The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly (Stevens, 1997, p 903)

Unfortunately, although the word "fiction" means an imaginative creation, it also carries the connotation that it is untrue. In this regard, Stevens' statements become contradictory since we cannot believe in something that we know to be untrue (Brazeal, 2007). Stevens is using William James' idea of the will to believe. But, as Brazeal points out, it was not James's view that we could just believe in anything. Rather we could believe in what we thought was true even though we had not yet fully proven it.

Stevens discussed the problems about believing in a fiction in a 1942 letter to Henry Church about *Notes to a Supreme Fiction*:

> One evening, a week or so ago, a student at Trinity College came to the office and walked home with me. We talked about this book. I said that I thought that we had reached a point at which we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction The student said that that was an impossibility. that there is as no such thing as believing in something that one knew was no true. It is obvious, however, that we are doing that all the time.

> There are things with respect to which we willingly suspend disbelief, if there is instinctive in us a will to believe, or if there is a will to believe, whether or not it is instinctive, it seems to me that we can suspend disbelief with reference to a fiction as easily as we can suspend it with reference to anything else. There are fictions that arc extensions of reality. There are plenty of people who believe in Heaven as definitely as your New England ancestors and my Dutch ancestors believed in it. But Heaven is an extension of reality (Stevens & Stevens, 1996, p 430)

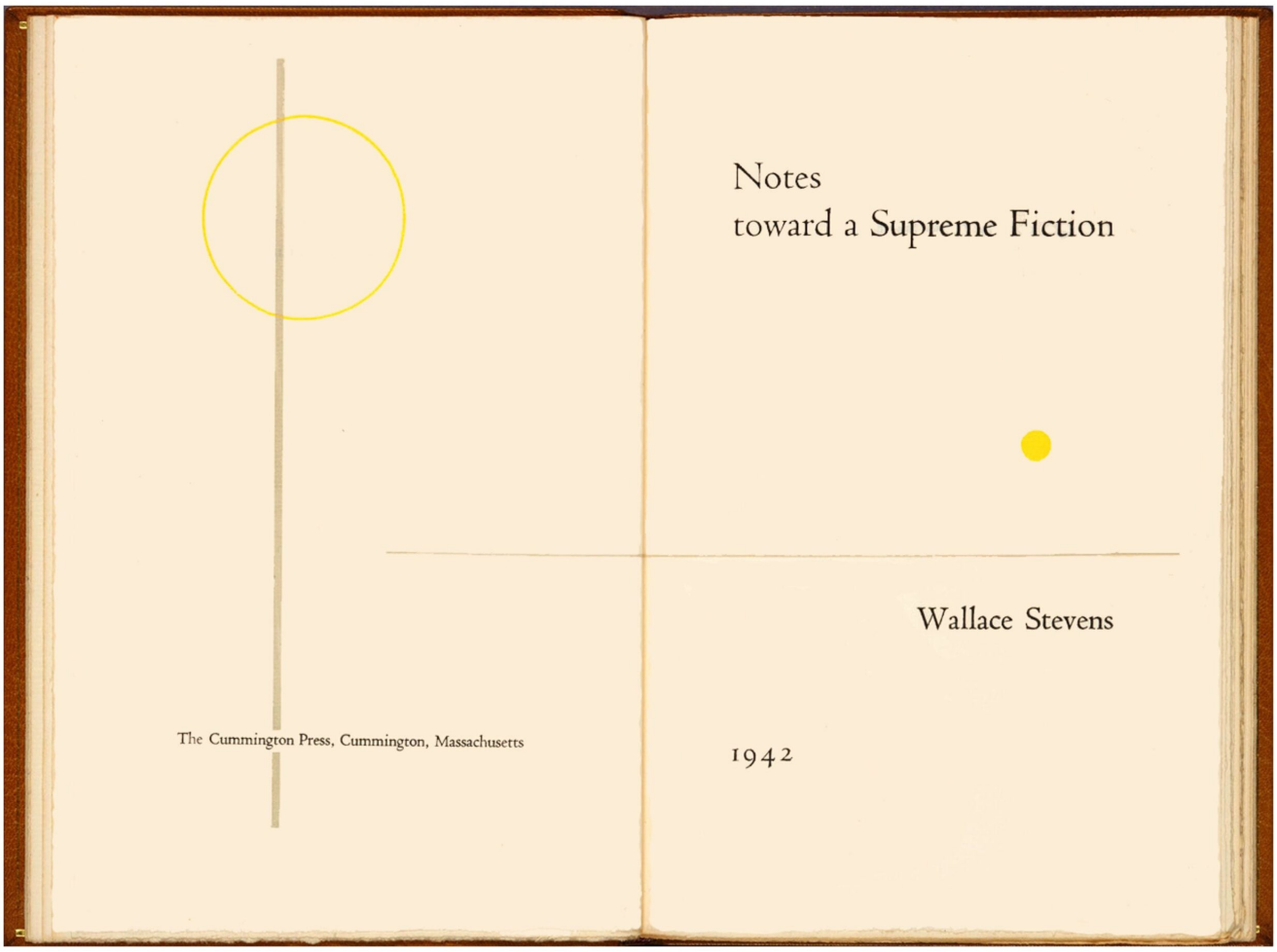
Some resolution of these contradictions may be found in the way we consider fiction. Any worthwhile work of fiction must be "true to life." If it has no relevance to real life, it is not worth reading. This is likely the meaning of Stevens' fiction – something created by the human imagination that represents what could or does happen in real life as accurately and completely (as "truly") as it can. Michael Frayn has discussed some of the complex relations between truth and fiction (2006).

Notes toward a Supreme Fiction

In 1942 Stevens published *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* with Cummington Press, a fine press founded by Harry Duncan in 1939 in Cummington, Massachusetts. 273 copies of the 45-page book were hand-printed, 80 of which were signed by Stevens. A second edition of 330 copies was published in 1943. The book was dedicated to Henry Church, a patron of the arts, whose fortune derived from his father's patent for baking soda (with the brand name *Arm and Hammer*). The design for the book's title page was by Alessandro Giampietro. Stevens told Henry Church in a 1942 letter

> that the straight lines in the designs of the book represent direction and that the circles mean comprehension. (Stevens

& Stevens, 1996, p 418)



The poem (full text available) consists of a prologue of 8 lines, three sections containing ten poems, each composed of 7 unrhymed tercets (21 lines), and an epilogue in the same form as the preceding poems. The printing was set up so that the title, dedication (to Henry Church), prologue, section titles and the poems were each printed on a separate page.

The title informs us that this is not the definitive description of the supreme fiction. The poetry provides notes – either in the sense of early observations or in the sense of musical notes that can form an overarching harmony. Furthermore, it is "a" supreme fiction – the creation of Stevens rather than of the ultimate creation of everything.

The prologue is addressed to something not clearly identified,

probably the creative imagination with which the poet interacts to bring forth understanding – the “vivid transparence” that leads to “peace.” Older poets would have called it their “muse.”

> And for what, except for you, do I feel love?
> Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man
> Close to me, hidden in me day and night?
> In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
> Equal in living changingness to the light
> In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
> For a moment in the central of our being,
> The vivid transparence that you bring is peace.

The three sections of the book are entitled

> It must be abstract
> It must change
> It must give pleasure

These titles denote the essential characteristics of any worthwhile fiction.

A detailed commentary is beyond the scope of this essay, which will limit itself to a few of the poems. Many scholars have provided more extensive analyses: Kermode (1960, pp 111-119), Sukenik (1967, pp 136-163), Vendler (1969, pp 168-205), Bloom (1977, pp 167-218), Cook (2007, pp 214-236), Bates (2007).

The first poem in the first section (It must be abstract) is addressed to an “ephebe,” the name for a young man in training in Ancient Athens.

> Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
> Of this invention, this invented world,
> The inconceivable idea of the sun.
>
> You must become an ignorant man again
> And see the sun again with an ignorant eye

And see it clearly in the idea of it.

The poet urges to ephebe not to accept what he has been taught – not to believe in the gods – but to make his own understanding of the world

The death of one god is the death of all.
Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named.
There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

Umber is an earth-brown pigment, but the word derives from the Latin *ombra*, shadow, and suggests the shades of the dead. The epithet "gold flourisher" describe the sun's essential characteristics: the sun as an abstraction.

The final poem in the first section considers the idea of what man must become. The poet envisions a man in clothes too big for his body seeing the world clearly without regard to what religion requires or what humanity desires

Cloudless the morning. It is he. The man
In that old coat, those sagging pantaloons,

It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
The final elegance, not to console
Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound.

The 5th poem of the second section (It must change) describes a deserted plantation on a tropical island – likely in the Florida Keys, which Stevens visited many times in 1920s and

1930s.

> On a blue island in a sky-wide water
> The wild orange trees continued to bloom and to bear,
> Long after the planter’s death. A few limes remained,
>
> Where his house had fallen, three scraggy trees weighted
> With garbled green. These were the planter’s turquoise
> And his orange blotches, these were his zero green,
>
> A green baked greener in the greenest sun.
> These were his beaches, his sea-myrtles in
> White sand, his patter of the long sea-slushes.

Before the recurrent hurricanes had ruined the plantations, the Florida Keys were famous for the limes used to make Key lime pie. Stevens’ poem about the planter illustrates how our conception of the world must take into account its transience. And find this beautiful. The poem’s third verse is remarkable for its portrayal of the sound of the waves upon the beach.

This poem concludes with a eulogy to the planter. Because he is no more, the eulogy is expressed in negative terms:

> An unaffected man in a negative light
> Could not have borne his labor nor have died
> Sighing that he should leave the banjo’s twang.

Vendler (1969, p 170) transcribes the verse without the negatives:

> He lived in a positive light, a man deeply affected by his islands, and therefore he could bear his labor, and could die, in spite of exile and desire, sighing that he should have to leave even so simple and small a pleasure as his banjo’s twang.

The 6th poem of the second section deals with birds:

> Bethou me, said sparrow, to the crackled blade,
> And you, and you, bethou me as you blow,
> When in my coppice you behold me be.
>
> Ah, ke! The bloody wren, the felon jay,
> Ke-ke, the jug throated robin pouring out,
> Bethou, bethou, bethou me in my glade.
>
> There was such idiot minstrelsy in rain,
> So many clappers going without bells,
> That these bethous compose a heavenly gong.
>
> One voice repeating, one tireless chorister,
> The phrases of a single phrase, ke-ke,
> A single text, granite monotony

Stevens was a connoisseur of birds and could whistle a multiplicity of birdsongs (Cook, 2007, p 224). The following are some typical songs of the birds mentioned in the first two verses

Sparrow:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/sparrow.mp3

Wren:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/wren.mp3

Bluejay:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/bluejay.mp3

Robin:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/robin.mp3

As the poem provides its brilliant rendition of the different birds, it makes passing references to other birds that have found their way into poems. “Coppice” is a reference to Hardy’s *The Darkling Thrush*; “pouring forth” and “glade” are quoted from Keat’s *Ode to a Nightingale*.

> Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
> To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
> While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
> In such an ecstasy!

Stevens cannot resist the wordplay between the “jug-jug” sound of the robin and “pouring out” from a jug.

However, Stevens notes that most birdsong is monotonous. Because it does not change it is not like the supreme fictions of a poet. Stevens criticizes the tendency of the Romantic poets to liken themselves to birds or to other natural phenomena. The “bethous” that he monotonously repeats are a reference to Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind*.

> Be thou, Spirit fierce,
> My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Stevens’ poem concludes

> These are of minstrels lacking minstrelsy,
> Of an earth in which the first leaf is the tale
> Of leaves, in which the sparrow is a bird
>
> Of stone, that never changes. Bethou him, you
> And you, bethou him and bethou. It is
> A sound like any other. It will end.

The birdsongs are not supreme fictions because they never change.

In the 8th poem of the second section (It must change) Stevens imagines how Shelley's Ozymandias, who thought he could impose his order on the world, could have been seduced by the beautiful Nanzia Nuncio so that the constant order that the king of kings desired could give way to changing fictions:

> I am the woman stripped more nakedly
> Than nakedness, standing before an inflexible
> Order, saying I am the contemplated spouse.
>
> Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me
> In its own only precious ornament.
> Set on me the spirit's diamond coronal.
>
> Clothe me entire in the final filament,
> So that I tremble with such love so known
> And myself am precious for your perfecting.
>
> Then Ozymandias said the spouse, the bride
> Is never naked. A fictive covering
> Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.

In the 7th poem of the third section (It must give pleasure), Stevens contrasts politics, the imposing or order on the world, to poetry, the discovery of order in the world. And finds pleasure in the changing order of the seasons (Lensing, 2007):

> But to impose is not
> To discover. To discover an order as of
> A season, to discover summer and know it,
>
> To discover winter and know it well, to find
> Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
> Out of nothing to have come on major weather,
>
> It is possible, possible, possible.

The final poem of the third section is a paean to the world we live on, affectionately referred to as the "fat girl," the earth in all its plenitude and beauty, and "my green, my fluent mundo." A world that we can only understand through feeling and through fiction:

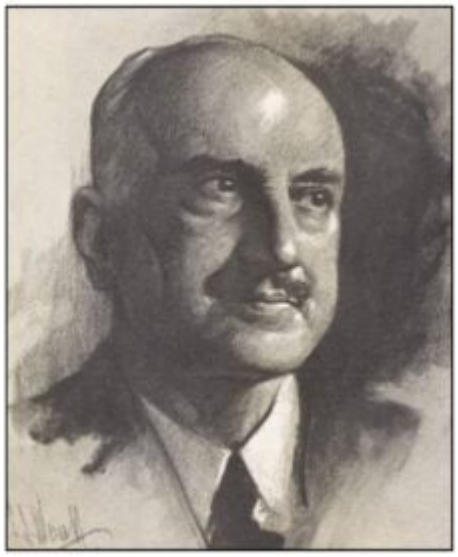
> That's it: the more than rational distortion,
> The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.
>
> They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
> We shall return at twilight from the lecture
> Pleased that the irrational is rational,
>
> Until flicked by feeling, in a gildered street,
> I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
> You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.

Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction concludes with an epilogue in which Stevens compares the poet to the soldier. Stevens may have thought this necessary in a poem written during war. However, the epilogue really does not work. Poets lay down their lines but not their lives for what they believe in. Stevens claims that poetry can give meaning to the soldier's sacrifice. But as James Merrill pointed out in his 1985 poem *Page from the Koran*:

> How gladly with proper words," said Wallace Stevens
> "The solider dies." Or kills.

Death Comes for Philosopher and for poet

George Santayana resigned from Harvard University in 1911 and spent the rest of his life in Europe. He was financially supported by a small inheritance from his mother and by the royalties from his books, among which was the best-selling novel *The Last Puritan* (1935). His portrait by Samuel Johnson Woolf graced the cover of Tim magazine in 1936.



At the beginning of World War II, the philosopher was living in Rome. It soon became difficult to transfer money from his American publishers to Italy. In 1941, rather than undergo the stress of travelling during wartime, the 77-year-old obtained lodgings with the Sisters of the Little Company of Mary, who ran the small Calvary Hospital next door to the ancient Basilica Santo Stefano Rotondo. Since the sisters also managed a hospital in Chicago, Santayana's publishers could pay the sisters in Chicago for his upkeep in Rome (McCormick, 1987, p 420). Santayana continued to live with the sisters after the war. Despite being a confirmed atheist, he enjoyed the liturgy, austerity and tranquility of his Catholic surroundings. Robert Lowell later commented that Santayana believed that "There is no God and Mary is His mother" (in the poem *For George Santayana (1863-1952)* in *Life Studies, 1959).* Nevertheless, Santayana maintained his scepticism to the end and insisted on being buried in non-consecrated ground.

In the summer of 1952, Wallace Stevens wrote a poem about the old philosopher. Santayana died from stomach cancer before the poem was published later that year. As well as describing his situation in Rome, Stevens' poem makes multiple allusions to Santayana's 1923 *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (Griswold works through these references on his website). The poem (full text available) begins

On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street
Become the figures of heaven, the majestic movement
Of men growing small in the distances of space,
Singing, with smaller and still smaller sound,
Unintelligible absolution and an end –

The threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome
Beyond, the two alike in the make of the mind.
It is as if in a human dignity
Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which
Men are part both in the inch and in the mile.

How easily the blown banners change to wings…
Things dark on the horizons of perception
Become accompaniments of fortune, but
Of the fortune of the spirit, beyond the eye,
Not of its sphere, and yet not far beyond,

The human end in the spirit's greatest reach,
The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme
Of the unknown. The newsboys' muttering
Becomes another murmuring; the smell
Of medicine, a fragrantness not to be spoiled…

The bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns,
The candle as it evades the sight, these are
The sources of happiness in the shape of Rome,
A shape within the ancient circles of shapes,
And these beneath the shadow of a shape

In a confusion on bed and books, a portent
On the chair, a moving transparence on the nuns,
A light on the candle tearing against the wick
To join a hovering excellence, to escape
From fire and be part only of that which

Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.

The “more merciful Rome” of the second stanza is heaven and the parallel lines becoming one represent death as a transition to eternity.

The poem ends:

> It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,
> With every visible thing enlarged and yet
> No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns,
> The immensest theatre, and pillared porch,
> The book and candle in your ambered room,
>
> Total grandeur of a total edifice,
> Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
> For himself. He stops upon this threshold,
> As if the design of all his words takes form
> And frame from thinking and is realized.

The “inquisitor of structures” may refer to Santayana’s likening architecture to poetry:

> Every human architect must do likewise with his edifice; he must mould his bricks or hew his stones into symmetrical solids and lay them over one another in regular strata, like a poet’s lines. (Santayana, 1900, p 261)

Griswold suggests that the final lines relate to Santayana’s

> The ultimate reaches of doubt and renunciation open out for it, by an easy transition, into fields of endless variety and peace, as if through the gorges of death it had passed into a paradise where all things are crystallised into the image of themselves, and have lost their urgency and their venom. (Santayana, 1923, p 76

The following is Steven’s recitation of the poem

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/To-An-Old-Philosopher-In-Rome.mp3

Wallace Stevens himself developed stomach cancer less than 3 years after Santayana (Mariani, 2016, pp 394-402). The cancer was inoperable and a gastroenterostomy was performed at St Francis Catholic Hospital in Hartford. During his recuperation Stevens met the hospital's chaplain Father Arthur Hanley and talked to him about poetry and religion. Stevens was discharged but re-admitted a few months later. During this second and final hospitalization he agreed to be baptized by Father Hanley (Hanley 1977). Stevens had been brought up as a Lutheran as an adult he had questioned the need for any organized religion. Although Stevens was prone to irony, it appears that his final conversion was sincere. Perhaps he took to heart the words of his friend Santayana:

> Scepticism is the chastity of the intellect, and it is shameful to surrender it too soon or to the first comer: there is nobility in preserving it coolly and proudly through a long youth, until at last, in the ripeness of instinct and discretion, it can be safely exchanged for fidelity and happiness. (Santayana, 1923, pp 69-70)

The Internal Paramour

One of Stevens' last poems *Final Soliloquy of the Internal Paramour* was published in the *Hudson Review* in 1951:

> Light the first light of evening, as in a room
> In which we rest and, for small reason, think
> The world imagined is the ultimate good.

This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous.
It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing:

Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.
We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous.

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
We say God and the imagination are one…
How high that highest candle lights the dark.

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.

The following is Stevens' recitation of the poem

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Final-Soliloquy-Of-The-Interior-Paramour.mp3

Stevens does not directly identify his internal mistress. She shares qualities with the idea of the self that, like a shawl, we wrap tightly about us. This formulation is related to Santayana's description of the self:

> If I exist, I am a living creature to whom ideas are incidents, like aeroplanes in the sky; they pass over, more or less followed by the eye, more or less listened to, recognised, or remembered; but the self slumbers and breathes below, a mysterious natural organism, full of dark yet definite potentialities; so that different events will awake it to quite disproportionate activities. The self is a fountain of joy, folly, and sorrow, a waxing and waning, stupid and dreaming creature, in the midst of a vast natural world, of which it catches but a few transient and odd perspectives. (Santayana, 1923, p 146).

However, the mistress is also the creative imagination that proposes our understanding of the world: "an order, a whole, a knowledge." The creation of this supreme fiction may be like God speaking the words "Let there be light!" The crucial comment, "We say, God and the imagination are one …" refers to

one of Stevens' *Adagia*:

> Proposita:
> 1. God and the imagination are one.
> 2. The thing imagined is the imaginer.
> The second equals the thing imagined and the imaginer are one.
> Hence, I suppose, the Imaginer is God. (Stevens, 1997, p 914)

The poem harks back to the prologue of *Notes to a Supreme Fiction,* which described the poetic process as a meeting between the poet and his creative self:

> In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
> Equal in living changingness to the light
> In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
> For a moment in the central of our being

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Friedrich Hölderlin: Little Knowledge but Joy Enough

Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) was one of Germany's greatest lyric poets. He was exquisitely sensitive to the beauties of the natural world, and thoroughly enamoured to the glories of Ancient Greece. His verses are strikingly beautiful in their sound, and have been set to music by many composers. As a young man he was very productive, writing poems and the epistolary novel *Hyperion* (1799). He also made important new translations of Sophocles' *Oedipus* and *Antigone*. However, in 1806 he lapsed into madness. From 1807 until his death, he lived alone in a room overlooking the Neckar River in Tübingen. He mumbled to himself in many languages, and occasionally wrote brief fragments of verse for visitors, signing them with various pseudonyms and fictitious dates. This posting considers some of his poetry.The text of the poems can been enlarged by clicking on them to get a separate window.

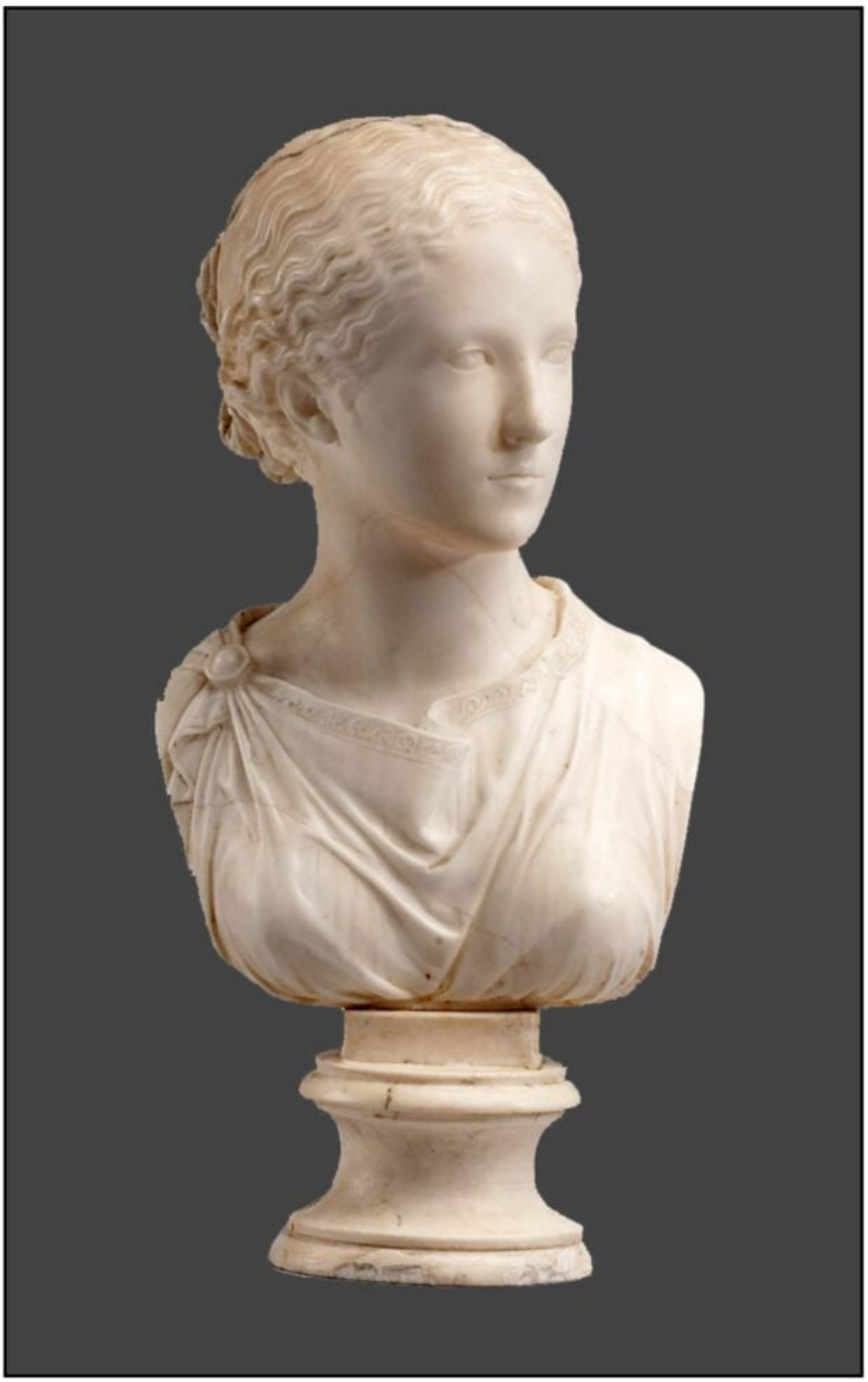
Life

Friedrich Hölderlin was born in 1770 in Lauffen am Neckar a village just south of Heilbronn in the Duchy of Württemberg. (That year also marked the birth of Wordsworth, Beethoven, and Hegel). His father died in 1772 and his mother married Johann Gok and moved to Nürtingen. Hölderlin attended school at the monastery of Denkendorf, and then began studies for the clergy at the monastery of Maulbronn. Founded as a Cistercian monastery in 1147, Maulbronn had become a Lutheran institution after the Reformation. In 1788 Hölderlin began to study

theology at the *Tübinger Stift* (seminary). Among his fellow-students in Tübingen were the philosophers Georg Hegel and Friedrich Schelling. Hölderlin and most of the Tübingen students were more fascinated by the ideals of the French Revolution (1789) than by the logic of theology. These were revolutionary times: what might be yet possible was replacing what always had been.

The pastel portrait (illustrated above) by Franz Carl Hiemer dates from 1792, when Hölderlin was in his final days as a student. It is the very picture of a young romantic poet: sensuously beautiful, clear-eyed and idealistic. Who could not fall in love with him?

Having decided against a career in the church, Hölderlin found employment as a tutor in the houses of the bourgeoisie. Though he was not a good teacher, these positions allowed him time to write poetry. When serving as tutor in the Gontard household in Frankfurt from 1796 to 1798, Hölderlin fell passionately in love with Susette Gontard (1769-1802), the wife of his employer. Susette returned Hölderlin’s affections. The illustration below shows a small alabaster bust of Susette by Landolin Ohmacht from around 1795.



Dismissed from his position, Hölderlin moved to Homberg, where he attempted to edit a new journal. He continued to write to Susette, and occasionally arranged secret meetings with her. She became immortalized as Diotima, the great love of the hero in Hölderlin’s novel *Hyperion* which was published in two parts in 1797 and 1799.

In January, 1802, Hölderlin accepted a position as tutor in the household of a German consul in Bordeaux, France.

Penniless, he traveled to Bordeaux on foot, a distance of over 1000 km. The position did not work out, and he traveled back to Tübingen in May. We do not know what happened to him on the journey. He may have been robbed; he was clearly exhausted by his travel, and he was close to starvation. When he arrived in Stuttgart in June, a friend described him as "an emaciated man, pale as death, long-haired and bearded, wild-looking, habited like a beggar" (Zweig, 1939/2017, p 356). At this time, he was informed that Susette had died. She had contracted German measles from her children Though the children recovered easily, Susette who probably had some underlying lung disorder, perhaps tuberculosis, did not. Hölderlin was devastated.

Despite his despair, Hölderlin was able to complete his translations of Sophocles' *Oedipus* and *Antigone.* However, when they were published in 1804, these translations were derided as monstrous, and considered the work of a lunatic. For example, in the opening scene of Antigone, the verb *kalchainein* (from *kalche,* the purple limpet), which means "to become dark red," is metaphorically used to describe disturbed thoughts. Hölderlin, directly translated the Greek *dēloīs gār ti kalchaínousa' éposas* as *du scheinst ein rotes Wort zu färben* ("you seem to dye your words red") rather than decorously translating it as "you appear to be troubled." His choice of words is strange and exciting (de Campos, 2007; Carson, 2008). Hölderlin's radical translations have prevailed. Carl Orff used them for his operas *Antigonae* (1949) and *Oedipus der Tyrann* (1959), and Bertolt Brecht adapted them for his 1948 play *Antigone*.

Hölderlin's grief after the death of Susette was overwhelming, and he began his descent into madness. Isaac von Sinclair, a close friend, arranged an undemanding position for him as court librarian in Homberg in 1804. However, in 1805, von Sinclair, who was a fervent supporter of the ideals of the French Revolution, was accused of treason against the Elector

of Württemberg, arrested and brought to trial in Stuttgart. Hölderlin was initially considered a co-conspirator, but was soon deemed too mad to stand trial. Ultimately, von Sinclair was found not guilty. The mad Hölderlin left Homberg to return home. However, his mother could not take care of him and in 1806, the poet was admitted to the University Hospital in Tübingen where he was treated by Professor Johann von Autenreith.

In 1807 he was discharged as incurably insane into the care of a carpenter Ernst Zimmer, who took in student boarders. For the next 36 years (one half of his lifetime) Hölderlin lived in the first-floor room in a tower overlooking the Neckar River. His upkeep was supported by a small annuity from the state of Württemberg. The tower had at one time been part of the city's medieval fortifications but was then merged into the houses on Bursagasse. The following illustration shows the tower as viewed from the Neckar River:

In the 1820s, Hölderlin was visited by a young poet, Wilhelm

Waiblinger (1804-1830), who describes his experience visit in his 1830 memoir *Friedrich Hölderlin's Life, Poetry and Madness:*

> One ponders, wondering whether or not to knock, and feels a sense of uneasiness. After finally knocking, a loud and forceful "Come in!" can be heard. Opening the door, one finds a haggard figure standing in the middle of the room, who bows as deeply as possible and will not stop bestowing compliments, and whose mannerisms would be very graceful were there not something convulsive about them. One admires the profile, the high forehead heavy with thought, the friendly, lovable eyes, extinguished but not soulless; one sees the devastating traces of the mental illness in the cheeks, the mouth, the nose, above the eyes where an oppressive and painful wrinkle has been etched. With regret and sadness, one observes the convulsive movement which sometimes spreads throughout the entire face, forcing his shoulders to jerk and his fingers to twitch. He wears a simple jacket and likes to keep his hands in his pockets. One says a few introductory words which are then received with the most courteous obeisance and a deluge of nonsensical words which confuse the visiting stranger. Gracious as he was and, for the sake of appearance, still is, H. now feels obliged to say something friendly to the guest, to ask him a question. One comprehends a few words of his question, but most of these could not possibly be answered. Nor does Hölderlin in the least expect to be answered. On the contrary, he becomes extremely perplexed if the visitor attempts to follow up a train of thought.

Hölderlin was also visited by other students and tourists. When given paper, Hölderlin would write fragments of verses and give them to his visitors. He would sign these with various pseudonyms, one of the most popular being "Scardanelli." Some of them would be dated with fictitious dates. On most days Hölderlin would go for walks in the city,

but he would not recognize or interact with anyone. He had been given a piano, and would often improvise music for prolonged periods.

We do not know the nature of Hölderlin's madness William Dilthey (1910) attributed his symptoms to spiritual weariness: "that form of dispersion of spirit produced from enormous exhaustion." He likened Hölderlin to Robert Schumann. For both, creativity came at too great a cost: they flew too close to the sun. Some writers have concluded that Hölderlin was schizophrenic (Blanchot, 1951; Jakobsen et al, 1980). Others have refrained from any definite diagnosis (Agamben, 2023; Robles, 2020). Horowski (2017) has proposed that his symptoms might have been due to mercury intoxication since von Autenreith treated him with very high does of calomel. However, Hölderlin's symptoms clearly preceded his treatment in Tübingen. The illustration shows an etching of Hölderlin based on a sketch by J. G. Schreiner in 1826.

Alcaic Verses

Hölderlin's German odes were composed using Alcaic verses, traditionally believed to have been invented by the Greek lyric poet Alcaeus around 600 BC (Warren, 1996). Stress in Ancient Greek is mainly related to the duration of the vowel sound, whereas stress in both German and English is more complex and can be affected by the duration, pitch and intensity of the syllable, as well as by semantics. Nevertheless, the Alcaic verse form works well in both German and English.

Alcaic verses consist of four lines. The first two lines contain 11 syllables, the third 9 syllables and the fourth 10 syllables. The stress pattern was complicated, and could be varied slightly. In the following diagram the stressed syllables are denoted by **/** and the unstressed by **–**. Syllables denoted by **x** could be either stressed or unstressed.

x / – / x / – – / – /
x / – / x / – – / – /
x / – / x / – / /
/ – – / – – / – / /

To illustrate this form, we can look at the brief poem *Ehmals und Jetzt*, shown below with a translation by Michael Hamburger which uses the same alcaic form:

Ehmals und Jetzt

In jüngern Tagen war ich des Morgens froh,
Des Abends weint' ich; jetzt, da ich älter bin,
Beginn' ich zweifelnd meinen Tag, doch
Heilig und heiter ist mir sein Ende.

Then and Now

In younger days each morning I rose with joy
To weep at nightfall; now in my later years,
Though doubting I begin my day, yet
Always its end is serene and holy.

The following shows the stress pattern in the German verse :

– / – / – / – – / – /
In jüngern Tagen war ich des Morgens froh,

– / – / – / – – / – /
Des Abends weint' ich; jetzt, da ich älter bin,

– / – / – / – / /
Beginn' ich zweifelnd meinen Tag, doch

/ – – / – – / – / /
Heilig und heiter ist mir sein Ende.

The following is a musical setting of the ode by Josef Matthias Hauer (1883-1959), sung by tenor Holger Falk accompanied by Steffen Schleiermacher on piano.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/hauer-ehmals-und-jetzt.mp3

To the Fates

Greek mythology postulated that human life was controlled by three sisters known as the Fates (*Moirai* in Greek; *Parcae* in Latin): Clotho, the spinner, spun the thread from her distaff onto a spindle; Lachesis, the allotter, measured out the destined amount life; and Atropos, the inflexible, cut the thread and ended the life. The following shows an image of the Fates in a tapestry created in 1983 by Patricia Taylor from a 1948 drawing by Henry Moore:

This is Hölderlin’s ode *To the Fates.* The translation is by Elizabeth Henderson

An die Parzen

Nur Einen Sommer gönnt, ihr Gewaltigen!
Und einen Herbst zu reifem Gesange mir,
Daß williger mein Herz, vom süßen
Spiele gesättiget, dann mir sterbe.

Die Seele, der im Leben ihr göttlich Recht
Nicht ward, sie ruht auch drunten im Orkus nicht;
Doch ist mir einst das Heil’ge, das am
Herzen mir liegt, das Gedicht, gelungen,

Willkommen dann, O Stille der Schattenwelt!
Zufrieden bin ich, wenn auch mein Saitenspiel
Mich nicht hinabgeleitet; einmal
Lebt ich, wie Götter, und mehr bedarfs nicht.

To the Fates

One summer only, powerful fates, accord
Me, and one autumn only of ripened song,
That, sated by sweet play, my heart then
May less unwillingly face its dying.

The soul deprived on earth of its right to know
Divine fulfilment, cannot in Orcus rest;
Yet let but once my heart's desire,
Let but my poem succeed, the sacred,

Then welcome, silent calm of the world of shades!
I am content to go, even though my harp
Cannot conduct me down; I lived that
Once as the gods do, and more I need not.

As the years pass, it would be a blessing to remember that once one had lived as the gods even if only for a short time.

One could not ask for more.

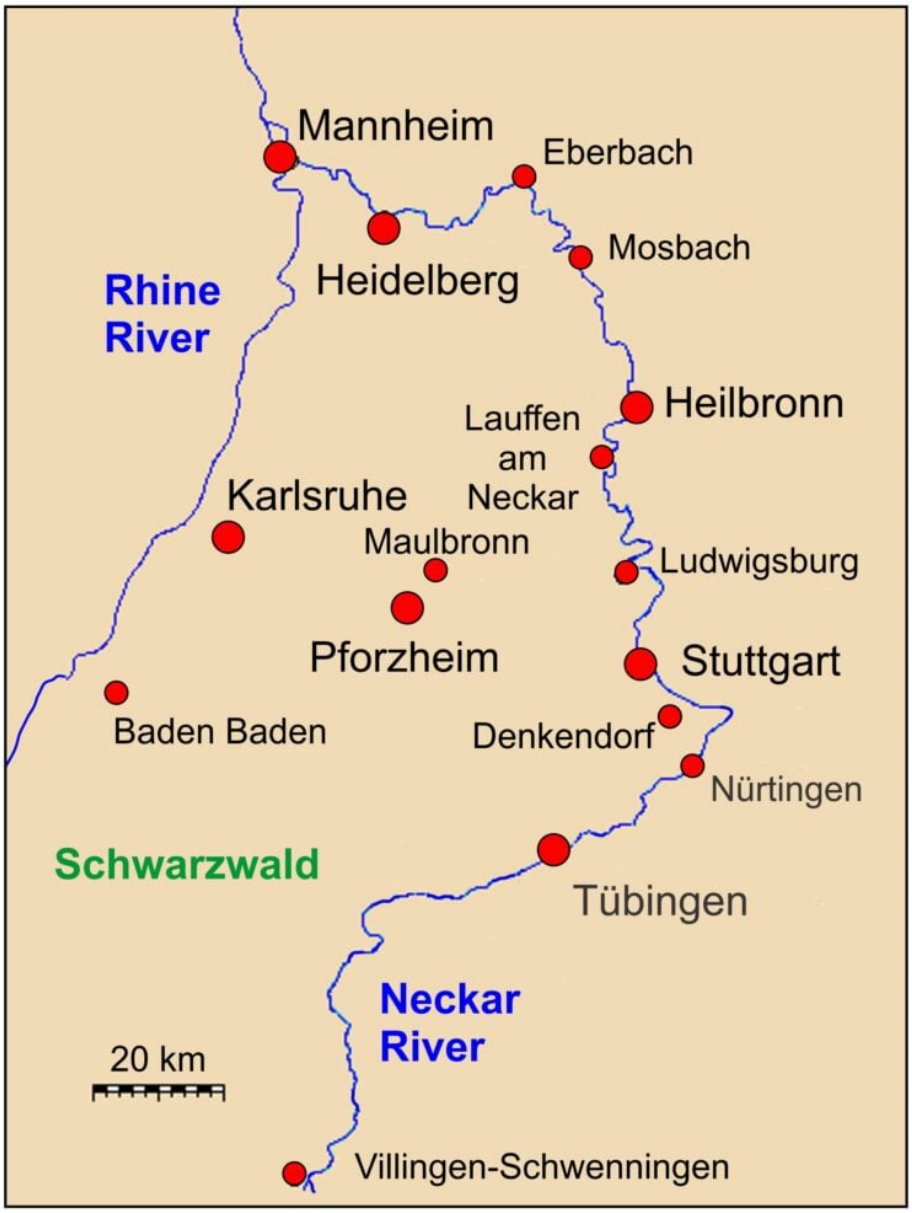
The following is a recitation of the poem by Matthias Wiemann and a musical setting by Paul Hindemith (1895-1963), sung by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau with Aribert Reimann accompanying him on piano.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/An-die-Parzen-matthias-wiemann.mp3

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Hindemith-An-die-Parzen-Fischer-Dieskau.mp3

The Neckar

Hölderlin was born on the banks of the Neckar River. As shown in the map, this river arises in the Black Forest and flows down to join the Rhine River. Many stretches of the river are freely navigable.



The first half of Hölderlin's poem describes how the river brought him joy and peace. The second half tells how the beauties of the river inspire him to consider what it might be like to visit the wonders of Ancient Greece: Pactolus, a river in Ionia described by Sophocles as a "golden stream;" Smyrna the great coastal city of Western Ionia, now known as Izmir; Ilion, the ancient name for Troy; Sunium on the southernmost point of the Attic peninsula, with its temple of Poseidon; and Olympia, the site of the Olympic Games.

At the time that Hölderlin was writing his poem, it was impossible to visit Greece since it was part of the Ottoman

Empire. He could only visit in his imagination. Greece attained independence in 1832, but by then Hölderlin was mad.

Below is the text of the poem with a German translation by James Mitchell, followed by a recitation by Burno Ganz The translation follows the meaning but not the alcaic form of the German poem.

Der Neckar

In deinen Tälern wachte mein Herz mir auf
Zum Leben, deine Wellen umspielten mich,
Und all der holden Hügel, die dich
Wanderer! kennen, ist keiner fremd mir.

Auf ihren Gipfeln löste des Himmels Luft
Mir oft der Knechtschaft Schmerzen; und aus dem Tal,
Wie Leben aus dem Freudebecher,
Glänzte die bläuliche Silberwelle.

Der Berge Quellen eilten hinab zu dir,
Mit ihnen auch mein Herz und du nahmst uns mit,
Zum stillerhabnen Rhein, zu seinen
Städten hinunter und lustgen Inseln.

Noch dünkt die Welt mir schön, und das Aug entflieht
Verlangend nach den Reizen der Erde mir,
Zum goldenen Paktol, zu Smyrnas
Ufer, zu Ilions Wald. Auch möcht ich

Bei Sunium oft landen, den stummen Pfad
Nach deinen Säulen fragen, Olympion!
Noch eh der Sturmwind und das Alter
Hin in den Schutt der Athenertempel

Und ihrer Gottesbilder auch dich begräbt,
Denn lang schon einsam stehst du, o Stolz der Welt,
Die nicht mehr ist. Und o ihr schönen
Inseln Ioniens! wo die Meerluft

Die heißen Ufer kühlt und den Lorbeerwald
Durchsäuselt, wenn die Sonne den Weinstock wärmt,
Ach! wo ein goldner Herbst dem armen
Volk in Gesänge die Seufzer wandelt,

Wenn sein Granatbaum reift, wenn aus grüner Nacht
Die Pomeranze blinkt, und der Mastixbaum
Von Harze träuft und Pauk und Cymbel
Zum labyrinthischen Tanze klingen.

Zu euch, ihr Inseln! bringt mich vielleicht, zu euch
Mein Schutzgott einst; doch weicht mir aus treuem Sinn
Auch da mein Neckar nicht mit seinen
Lieblichen Wiesen und Uferweiden.

The Neckar

My heart awakened to life in your valleys,
Your waves played around me.
And all of the fair hills that know you,
Wayfarer, are known to me as well.

On those peaks the winds from the sky
Relieved me from pains of bondage,
And silver-blue waves shone forth from the valley,
Like the joy of life pouring out from a chalice.

Mountain springs hurried down to you,
My heart with them, and you took us along
To the quietly splendid Rhine, down
To its cities and pleasant islands.

The world seems to me yet beautiful, and my eyes
Break out with desire to the charms of the earth,
To golden Pactolus, to Smyrna's shores,
To Ilion's woods. How I'd like to

Go ashore at Sunium, and ask for the silent path
To your pillars, Olympia! Before age
And stormy winds bury you as well
In the ruins of Athens' temples,

Along with the statues of its gods. For you
Have long stood alone, pride of a world
That no longer exists. And the beautiful
Islands of Ionia, where sea air

Cools the hot shores and rushes through the woods
Of laurel, when the sun warms the grapevines,
And, oh, where golden autumn changes
The sighs of the poor people into songs,

When the pomegranate ripens, when the orange trees
Nod in a green night, and the gum trees drip
Resin, and drums and cymbals resound
To labyrinthine dances.

Perhaps someday my guardian deity will bring me
To these islands, but even then my thoughts
Will remain loyal to the Neckar
With its lovely meadows and pastoral shores.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Der-Neckar-Bruno-Ganz.mp3

Josef Matthias Hauer composed a set of brief piano pieces based upon lines from Hölderlin's poems (Barwinek, 2023). The

following are two of these pieces deriving from the poem *Der Neckar*, played by Anna Petrova-Foster:

> *Deine Wellen umspielten mich*
> Your waves played about me

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Hauer-deine-Wellen.mp3

> *wo die Meerluft*
> *die heißen Ufer kühlt und den Lorbeerwald durchsäuselt*
> where the sea breeze
> cools the hot shores and rustles through the laurel forest

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Hauer-wo-die-Meerluft.mp3

Hyperion

Hölderlin published his novel *Hyperion, oder der Eremit in Griechenland* in two parts in 1797 and 1799. It consists of a series of letters between Hyperion, a young Greek, to his German friend Bellarmin, with some occasional letters between Hyperion and his beloved Diotima. Epistolary novels were very popular in the 18th Century: Rousseau's *Julia, ou la nouvelle New Héloise* (1761), Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (1774) all used the format. Those were the days when those who were literate wrote letters.

Hyperion is short on plot and long in thought. The novel presents a general theory of beauty as the guiding light for harmonious society and of union with nature as the goal of the

individual person. Hyperion participates in an insurrection against the Ottoman rule with the rebel Alabanda (modeled on Isaac von Sinclair). Later he almost dies fighting with the Russians against the Turks in the great sea battle of Chesma in 1771. Although the Russians were victorious, the Greeks remained subjugated. Hyperion's great love Diotima, modeled on Susette Gontard, dies soon afterwards. Hyperion finally retires to live as a hermit in unspoiled nature. His concluding comment is one of reconciliation (Unger, 1984, p 36):

> *Wie der Zwist der Liebenden, sind die Dissonanzen der Welt. Versohnung ist mitten im Streit und alles Getrennte findet sich wieder. Es scheiden und kehren im Herzen die Adern und einiges, ewiges, gliihendes Leben is Alles*
>
> [The dissonances of the world are like the quarrel of lovers. Reconciliation is in the midst of strife, and all things divided find each other again. The veins depart from and return to the heart, and a unified, eternal, glowing life is All.]

Hyperion's *Schicksalslied* occurs after the battle of Chesma (Unger, 1984, p 36). It begins in awe of the gods and ends in despair.

Schicksalslied

Ihr wandelt droben im Licht
Auf weichem Boden, selige Genien!
Glänzende Götterlüfte
Rühren euch leicht,
Wie die Finger der Künstlerin
Heilige Saiten.

Schicksallos, wie der schlafende
Säugling, atmen die Himmlischen;
Keusch bewahrt
In bescheidener Knospe,
Blühet ewig
Ihnen der Geist,
Und die seligen Augen
Blicken in stiller
Ewiger Klarheit.

Doch uns ist gegeben,
Auf keiner Stätte zu ruhn,
Es schwinden, es fallen
Die leidenden Menschen
Blindlings von einer
Stunde zur andern,
Wie Wasser von Klippe
Zu Klippe geworfen,
Jahr lang ins Ungewisse hinab.

Song of Destiny

You wander above in the light
on soft ground, blessed spirits!
Blazing, divine breezes
brush by you as lightly
as the fingers of the harpist
on her holy strings.

Fateless, like sleeping
infants, breathe the gods,
chastely protected
in modest buds,
blooming eternally
in spirit,
and their holy eyes
gaze in silent,
and eternal clarity.

Yet we are is granted
no place to rest;
we suffering humans
fall and vanish -
blind from one
hour to another,
like water thrown down
from rock to rock,
for years into the abyss.

Brahms' Opus 54 (1871) provides a choral setting of this song. The following are two extracts as performed by the Runfunkchor Berlin conducted by Gijs Leenars with the Deutsche Symphonie Orchester: settings of the first and last verses:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/schicksalslied-I.mp3

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/schicksalslied-II.mp3

Brahms added a beautiful adagio at the end of the song. Though criticized for trying to attenuate Hyperion's despair, this movement fits the novel, which ends with a sense of reconciliation.

Fragments from the Tower

Most of the slivers of poetry that have been preserved from Hölderlin's time in the tower have little meaning. Occasionally there are flashes that recall the aphorism of the younger poet:

> *Und wenig Wissen, aber der Freude viel*
> *Ist Sterblichen gegeben*
>
> And little knowledge, but joy enough
> Is given to mortals.
> *Stuttgart Hölderlin Ausgabe* 2.323
> translated by Chernoff & Hoover

And some of the poetry from that time is genuinely beautiful. Much of it is in the form of simple rhymed verse, unlike the unrhymed hymns and odes of earlier days. One of his last poems, entitled *Aussicht* (Perspective), likens human life to the necessary passage of the seasons, a theme that recurs in much of Hölderlin's poetry. Like much of his late work it is signed "Scardanelli" and dated to the preceding century:

> Wenn in die Ferne geht der Menschen wohnend Leben,
> Wo in die Ferne sich erglänzt die Zeit der Reben,
> Ist auch dabei des Sommers leer Gefilde,
> Der Wald erscheint mit seinem dunklen Bilde.
>
> Daß die Natur ergänzt das Bild der Zeiten,
> Daß die verweilt, sie schnell vorübergleiten,
> Ist aus Vollkommenheit, des Himmels Höhe glänzet
> Den Menschen dann, wie Bäume Blüt umkränzet.

24 Mai 1748 Mit Untertänigkeit

Scardanelli.

When the life that men live in passes faraway,
Into that future season when the vines gleam,
And the harvested fields lie empty,
Then emerges the dark shadow of the forest.

Nature completes her picture of the seasons,
And lingers while they quickly glide away,
Out of perfection, and the high heavens then shine
On men as if garlanding the trees with blossoms.

24 May 1748 Your humble servant

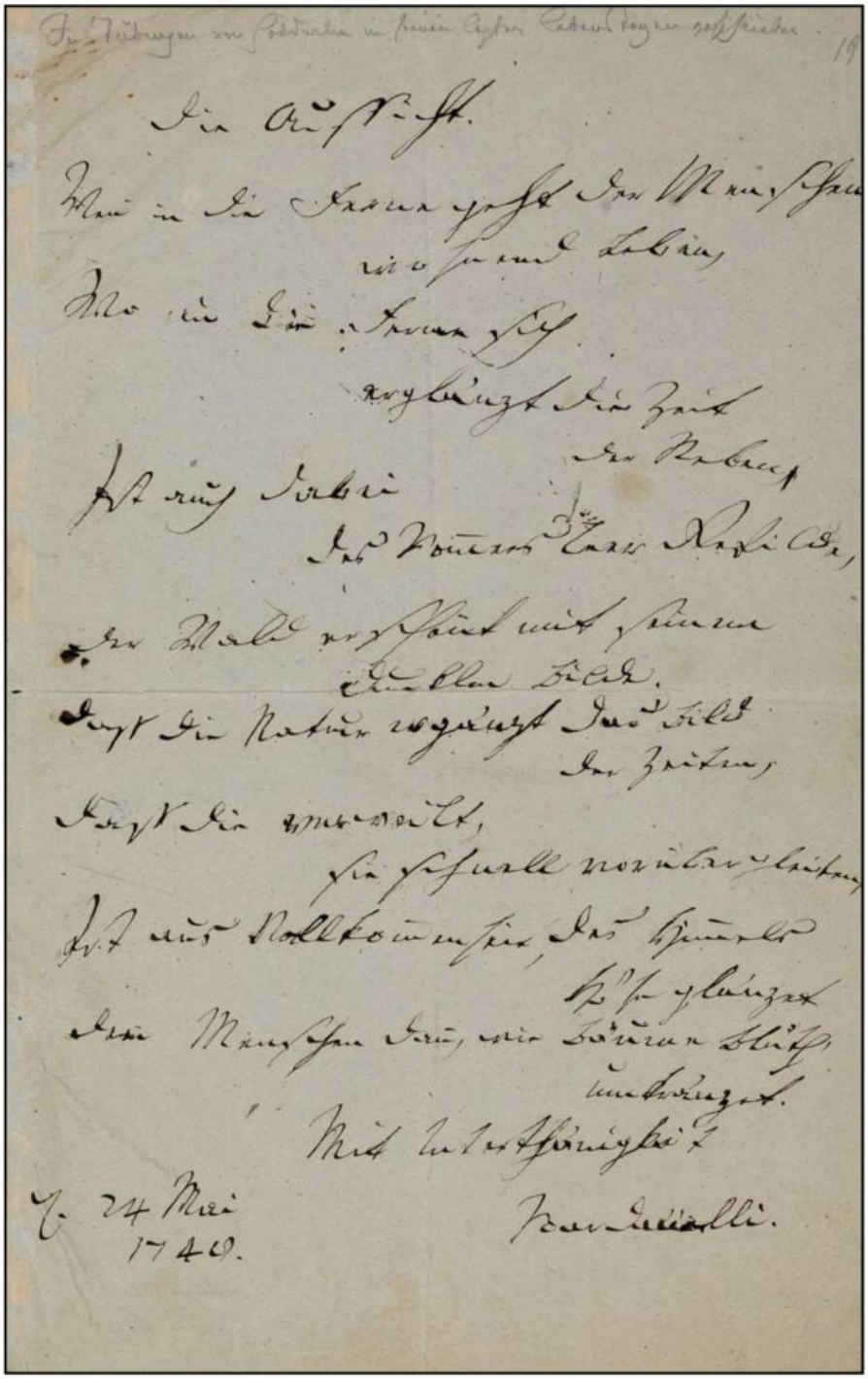
Scardanellli

The above translation is mine. There are few other translations available, but see Agamben (2023, p 289), and Aleksi Barrière for versions in both French and English.

The following is a recitation of the poem by Hanns Zischler:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/aussicht-hanns-zischlers.mp3

And a photograph of the actual manuscript of the poem:



Agamben (2023, pp 295-329) considers the various meanings of the phrase *wohnend Leben* (dwelling life) in the first line of the poem. He relates it to the idea of Christ's incarnation from *John* 1:14:

> And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us …

We live in life for a brief time. Perhaps we come from elsewhere, and return there when we die. Agamben also

considers the word “habit,” which comes from the word “inhabit,” which is close to “dwell” in its meaning. In German, the word *gewohnt* means “usual” or “habitual.” In a life of habit, one is affected by the world but does not try to change it. Such was Hölderlin’s time in the tower.

Stefan Zweig on Hölderlin’s Poetry

Hölderlin created some of our most exalted descriptions of nature and of the gods. His poetry is beautiful to read and to listen to. However, it often lacks the specificity of normal human experience. Hölderlin preferred the eternal to the everyday. His poetry may help us to understand the infinite, but provides little insight into our own finite lives. Stefan Zweig (1939, p 342) noted

> Of the “four elements” known to the Greeks – fire, water, air, and earth – Hölderlin’s poetry has but three. There is lacking to it earth, the dark and clinging element, connective and formative, the emblem of plasticity and hardness. His verse is made of fire, the symbol of the ascent heavenward; it is light as air, perpetually athrill like the rustling breeze; it is transparent as water. In it scintillate the colours of the rainbow; it is ever in motion, rising and falling, the unceasing respiration of the creative mind. His poems have no anchorage in experience; they have no ties with the fertile earth; they are homeless and restless, scurrying clouds, sometimes tinged with the red dawn of enthusiasm and sometimes darkened with the shadow of melancholy, sometimes gathering into dense masses from which flash the lightnings and thunders of prophecy. Always they climb towards the zenith, towards the ethereal regions far from solid ground, beyond the immediate range of the senses.

Heidegger and Hölderlin

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) was a German philosopher who contributed significantly to the existentialist movement. In *Being and Time* (1927), he focused on what it means to "be." This question cannot be solved analytically but requires creative intuition. Thus, Heidegger was led to the idea that poetry determines the world through the words we use to describe it. The word "poetry" derives from the Greek *poiesis* making.

In his essay *Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry* (1941), Heidegger discussed the meaning of the concluding lines to Hölderlin's poem *Andenken* (Remembrance) which dealt with his visit to Bordeaux. The last sentence of the poem reads

> *Es nehmet aber*
> *Und giebt Gedächtniss die See,*
> *Und die Lieb' auch heftet fleissig die Augen,*
> *Was bliebet aber, stiften die Dichter*.
>
> [But it is the sea
> That takes and gives remembrance
> And love no less keeps eyes attentively fixed,
> But what is lasting the poets provide.
> translated by Hamburger, 1998]

Another translation of the last line is "But what remains is founded by the poets." Heidegger's interpretation follows:

> This line throws light on our question of the essence of poetry. Poetry is a founding by the word and in the word. What is established in this way? What remains. But how can what remains be founded? Is it not that which has always already been present? No! Precisely what remains must be secured against being carried away; the simple must be wrested from the complex, measure must be opposed to excess. What supports and dominates beings as a whole must come into the open. Being must be disclosed, so that beings may

> appear. . . .
>
> The poet names the gods and names all things with respect to what they are. This naming does not merely come about when something already previously known is furnished with a name; rather, by speaking the essential word, the poet’s naming first nominates the beings as what they are. Thus they become known as beings. Poetry is the founding of being in the word. What endures is never drawn from the transient. What is simple can never be directly derived from the complex. Measure does not lie in excess. We never find the ground in the abyss. Being is never a being. But because being and the essence of things can never be calculated and derived from what is present at hand, they must be freely created, posited, and bestowed. Such free bestowal is a founding.
>
> But when the gods are originally named and the essence of things comes to expression so that the things first shine forth, when this occurs, man’s existence is brought into a firm relation and placed on a ground. The poet’s saying is not only foundation in the sense of a free bestowal, but also in the sense of the firm grounding of human existence on its ground. If we comprehend this essence of poetry, that it is the founding of being in the word, then we can divine something of the truth of that verse which Hölderlin spoke long after he had been taken away into the protection of the night of madness. Heidegger (1941, pp 58-59)

As the Nazis came to power in Germany, Heidegger became an enthusiastic supporter. A major problem in evaluating his philosophy is to determine whether it can be considered independently of his politics. Did his philosophy make him more susceptible to fascism? When one poetically creates an idea of a perfect society, one must be careful to consider the means used to bring it into being.

Hölderlin and Nazi Propaganda

In Hölderlin's time, the Holy Roman Empire no longer existed. Germany was a ragtag conglomeration of kingdoms, duchies, bishoprics and city-states. In many of his poems, Hölderlin yearned for a unified Germany, a country that could carry on the ideas of both ancient Greece and revolutionary France. His patriotism was both fervent and critical: he was upset by the petty bourgeois squabbling of his countrymen. The following is the beginning of his *Gesang des Deutschens* (Song to the Germans) with a translation form Sharon Krebs:

O heilig Herz der Völker, o Vaterland!
Allduldend, gleich der schweigenden Mutter Erd,
Und allverkannt, wenn schon aus deiner
Tiefe die Fremden ihr Bestes haben!

Sie ernten den Gedanken, den Geist von dir,
Sie pflücken gern die Traube, doch höhnen sie
Dich, ungestalte Rebe! daß du
Schwankend den Boden und wild umirrest.

Du Land des hohen ernsteren Genius!
Du Land der Liebe! bin ich der deine schon,
Oft zürnt ich weinend, daß du immer
Blöde die eigene Seele leugnest.

Oh holy heart of the nations, oh fatherland!
Forbearing all, like the silent Mother Earth,
And utterly misjudged, even though strangers have
Exploited you, taking the best from your depths.

From you they harvest the thought, the spirit,
They gladly pick the grape cluster, but they scoff
At you, ill-formed vine, that you
Straggle about on the ground, swaying and wild.

You land of lofty, more solemn genius!
You land of love! although I am already yours,
Often I raged, weeping, that you always
Witlessly deny your own soul.

The following is the last verse from Hölderlin's *Der Tod fürs Vaterland* (Death for the Fatherland). It embodies the poet's dedication to his idealized country:

Und Siegesboten kommen herab: Die Schlacht
Ist unser! Lebe droben, o Vaterland,
Und zähle nicht die Toten! Dir ist,
Liebes! nicht Einer zu viel gefallen.

The Nikes of Victory descend; the battle
Is ours! Live on up there, O Fatherland,
And do not count the dead! For you,
My Beloved, not one man too many has fallen

The last three lines of this verse were engraved on the wall of the Langemarck-Halle, a memorial to the German soldiers who had died in World War I, included in the buildings for the 1936 Olympic Games.

During World War II, the Nazi government arranged for 100,000

copies of a special field edition of Hölderlin's poetry to be printed and sent to soldiers at the front (Unger, 1988, pp 130-131; Savage, 2008; pp 6-7; Corngold & Waite, 2009). The poetry increased the morale of the soldiers and provided them with an excuse to die for their country.

How could Hölderlin's poetry be dragooned into military service? As Savage (2008, p 6) asks

> How then did the Nazis transform this scarcely militaristic poet, who never took up arms for his country, and spent the last four decades of his life in a state of spiritual benightedness, into a paragon of Prussian masculinity and patriotic self-sacrifice?

Hölderlin was not a proto-fascist. His poetry was popular not because it urged his readers toward the goals of the Nazis, but because it provided a respite from the suffering of the war:

> He offered an inner sanctuary to which his readers could retreat to lick their wounds when confronted with the material deprivation, physical danger, and increasingly evident lack od freedom of everyday life under the Third Reich. (Savage, 2008, p 7).

Constantine (1988) remarked

> There can be no doubt that Hölderlin was a patriot, but his patriotism was humane and not in the least militaristic. It included also—which is often overlooked—the wish first to *achieve* a homeland it would be a joy and a privilege to live in, one in which the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity would have been realized. (pp 221-222)

Hölderlin did not really care for politics. He could describe his poetic ideals but he was unable to state how they should be attained. Constantine (1988) remarks that the general tendency of German writers to be concerned with the spiritual

rather than the political has been catastrophic:

> The disparagement of politics by Germany's artists and intellectuals left that sphere free for the men of blood and iron to run riot in. (p 222)

Paul Celan

Paul Celan (1920-1970) was born in Czernowitz, Romania, into a German-speaking Jewish family. His parents died in German concentration camps, and he was forced to work in a labor camp. After the war he made his way to Paris, where he lived until his suicide in 1970.

He wrote poetry in German, his mother tongue, despite the fact that the language had come to embody the evil and the suffering of Nazism. He fractured and distorted the language so that he could find the truth behind the words. Celan visited Tübingen in January (Jänner in dialect), 1961, and felt a great sympathy for Hölderlin, who also wrote in fragments and could not make himself understood. The result was the poem entitled *Tübingen, Jänner, 1961*

The poem is cryptic, and understanding may be helped by some notes from Joris (Celan, 2020, pp 469-471), and from Felstiner (1995, pp 172-174):

The first lines refer to the Hölderlin's hymn *Der Rhein,* which states that the sons of God are the blindest of us all. Seeking to understand heaven may make one unaware of the real world. The poem then directly quotes (though in fractured form) that the source of purity is a mystery. Both Hölderlin and Celan relate the German word *rein* (pure) with the name of the river.

The next lines describe the tower in which Hölderlin spent the last half of his life: reflected in the Neckar River and

circled by gulls.

Then we are introduced the carpenter Ernst Zimmer who was responsible for his basic care and who listened to his words.

The final verse likens Hölderlin to a patriarch or prophet with a beard that glowed. This may be a reference to the story that the face of Moses shone brightly when he came down from Sinai

> And it came to pass, when Moses came down from mount Sinai with the two tables of testimony in Moses' hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with him.
> And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him.
> (*Exodus* 34:29-30)

Although Moses was able to communicate the will of God to his people, the people of the present world cannot understand the words of their prophets or poets. We only hear and incoherent babbling. *Pallaksch* is a nonsense word that Hölderlin used to mean "yes" or "no," or simply uttered as an exclamation.

The following is Celan's poem together with a translation by Pierre Joris and a reading by Bruno Ganz:

Tübingen, Jänner 1961

Zur Blindheit über-
redete Augen.
Ihre – "ein
Rätsel ist Rein –
entsprungenes" –, ihre
Erinnerung an
schwimmende Hölderlintürme, möwen-
umschwirrt.

Besuche ertrunkener Schreiner bei
diesen
tauchenden Worten:

Käme,
käme ein Mensch,
käme ein Mensch zur Welt, heute, mit
dem Lichtbart der
Patriarchen: er dürfte,
spräch er von dieser
Zeit, er
dürfte
nur lallen und lallen,
immer-, immer-
zuzu.

("Pallaksch. Pallaksch.")

Tübingen, January, 1961

Eyes con-
vinced to go blind.
Their – "a
riddle is pure
source" –. Their
remembrance of
swimming Hölderlin-towers, gull-
circled.

Visits of drowned carpenters by
these
diving words:

If,
if a man,
if a man was born, today, with
the lightbeard of
the patriarchs: he could,
speaking of these
days, he
could
but babble and babble,
all-all, way-ways
agagain.

("Pallaksch. Pallaksch.")

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Tubingen-Janner-Ganz.mp3

Farewell

And so we take our leave of Hölderlin, a poet who described the indescribable to a people who failed to understand him. He was one of the main exemplars of the romantic tradition (de Man, 2012), a movement that considered subjectivity as paramount. He combined the new ideas about nature that began with Rousseau with the ideals of beauty that came from Ancient Greece. The French Revolution led not to a society of Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité, but to the Terror of Robespierre and the wars of Napoleon. Hölderlin's dream that melding the beauty of

Greece to the revolution of France might bring forth a new and harmonious German society came to naught. Madness overtook his person; and a century later madness overtook Germany in the form of fascism. Yet the original dream was vivid and powerful, and it remains so.

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Kitsch

The term “kitsch” came into being in Germany toward the end of the nineteenth century (Dorfles, 1969; Calinescu, 1987; Riout, 2004). The etiology of the word is unknown. One possible source is the verb *kitschen* meaning “to collect rubbish” (Rugg, 2002); another is *verkitschen*, “to make cheaply” (Dutton, 1998). Words used to describe kitsch – “tacky,” “tawdry,” “garish,” “chintzy,” “schmaltzy” and “cheesy” – suggest cheapness, ostentation, triteness and sentimentality. Garden gnomes are a classic example.

Kitsch is bad art. However, the judgment of whether something is kitsch or not is highly subjective. Everyone has a personal idea of what is beautiful. In the words of David Hume

> Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others. (Hume, 1757, section 7).

Nevertheless, Hume goes on to state that most people would agree to some general principles of beauty:

> It appears then, that, amidst all the variety and caprice of taste, there are certain general principles of approbation

> or blame, whose influence a careful eye may trace in all operations of the mind. Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease (section 12).

Experience and education allow one to understand and apply these principles. Thus we develop good taste. Kitsch is the art of bad taste.

The Rise of Kitsch

Kitsch is a phenomenon of the modern age. There has always been bad art, but this never became popular or widespread. In the past, bad art did not sell. Much of kitsch's success in modern times derives from a commercial system that encourages its production and consumption. Kitsch is the art of the consumer society.

A major factor leading to kitsch was thus the rise of the bourgeoisie (Moles, 1971; Calinescu, 1987). In the nineteenth century the middle class expanded greatly. The upper middle class wanted to buy things of beauty, but they had not the education to do so with good taste. The lower middle class became able to purchase things beyond the bare necessities, but they were unable to pay for original art and settled for imitations. Industry quickly provided these and consumer kitsch was born.

The industrial revolution gave workers leisure time. So as not to be bored during this free time, people sought activities that were pleasing without requiring effort: entertainment rather than true art. Pleasurable relaxation was the goal of most of society; kitsch was the easiest means to this end. Abraham Moles (1971) considered kitsch to be *l'art de bonheur* the "art of happiness."

One might therefore consider kitsch as the art of the people. The following is from Abraham Moles (1971, p. 28, the French is elegant and my translation necessarily inexact:

> Le Kitsch est à ce titre essentiellement démocratique : il est l'art acceptable, ce qui ne choque pas notre esprit par une transcendence hors de la vie quotidienne, par un effort qui nous dépasse – surtout s'il doit nous faire dépasser nous-même. Le Kitsch est à la mesure de l'homme, quand l'art en est la démesure, le Kitsch dilue l'originalité à un degré suffisant pour la faire accepter par tous. [Kitsch is in this way essentially democratic: it is acceptable art, art which does not shock us to transcend everyday life, or require any extraordinary effort – especially any surpassing of our present selves. Kitsch stays within our easy reach, whereas art exceeds our grasp; kitsch dilutes originality enough to make it accessible to all.]

However, we cannot lay all the blame on the middle class. Aristocrats have often succumbed to ostentatious displays of wealth that would be generally considered kitsch. The "rich kitsch" of fake ruins and ceiling putti is every bit as bad as the poor kitsch of garden gnomes and fuzzy dice. Furthermore, the merchant class has sometimes displayed excellent taste. Patrons of fine art have come from wealthy members of the middle class as much as from the aristocracy.

Dwight Macdonald considered kitsch as essentially the same as the "mass culture" used to exploit the masses. He distinguished it from folk art which is created spontaneously by the people, and from high culture which is created for the elite:

> Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying. The Lords of kitsch, in short, exploit the cultural needs of the masses in order to make a profit and/or to maintain their class rule – in Communist countries, only the second purpose obtains. (Macdonald, 1953, p. 2-3)

Macdonald painted a pessimistic picture of our artistic future:

> The Lords of kitsch sell culture to the masses. It is a debased, trivial culture that voids both the deep realities (sex, death, failure, tragedy) and also the simple, spontaneous pleasures, since the realities would be too real and the pleasures too lively to induce what Mr. Seldes calls 'the mood of consent': i.e., a narcotised acceptance of Mass Culture and of the commodities it sells as a substitute for the unsettling and unpredictable (hence unsalable) joy, tragedy, wit, change, originality and beauty of real life. The masses, debauched by several generations of this sort of thing, in turn come to demand trivial and comfortable cultural products. (Macdonald, 1953, p. 16, the reference to Seldes is to his 1950 book *The Great Audience*.)

However, I am not sure that we can always fault the taste of the masses. Popular culture can promote kitsch, but it can also make significant artistic contributions. Shakespeare was notoriously beloved of the masses. Furthermore, he gave the penny public what it wanted.

Macdonald considered as kitsch everything produced by the entertainment industry – radio, television, movies, and comics. Much is but not all. Some works in these modern art forms are both beautiful and significant.

Reproduction

A second factor in the development of kitsch was the development of techniques for reproduction. Multiple copies of an image could be cheaply produced and widely marketed (Benjamin, 1936; Dorfles, 1969; Moles, 1971). Reproductions lack the aura (and the value) of the originals. And when used for purposes other than those of the artist, they might be considered kitsch: Renoir images on biscuit tins, Pollock paintings on silken scarves, Rodin sculptures as bookends.

And yet, and yet. Art has always been reproduced. Engravings of pictures and casts of statues allowed the dissemination of artistic creations. How else can art history be taught or learned? Reproduction is not wrong. It is not forgery. However, reproductions may sometimes be disconcertingly different from the original. The deceptive quality of kitsch may lie "in its claim to supply its consumers with essentially the same kinds of beauty as those embodied in unique or rare and inaccessible originals" (Calinescu, 1987, p 252). Yet one can also say this about original artwork, which is an artist's reproduction of an experience, not the experience itself.

Most would agree that plastic replicas of the Eifel Tower are kitsch. They serve no aesthetic purpose. In addition, such objects demonstrate "aesthetic inadequacy" (Calinescu, 1987) – their size and the materials they are made of contradict the aesthetic properties of the original.

However, visual art can be beautiful both in itself and in its contribution to our general set of images. A reproduction refers us to the image rather than to the original. Better a scarf should represent a Pollack painting than a cute kitten. The scarf is not the same as the painting, but it may still be pleasing to the eye and thoughtful to the mind.

What makes something kitsch rather than art?

So perhaps we need some criteria in terms of what is represented rather than with how or why it is reproduced. To say exactly why kitsch is bad can be difficult. Kulka (1996, pp 14-42) proposed that kitsch fulfills three conditions:

1. Kitsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions.

2. The objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable.

3. Kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations

relating to the depicted objects or themes.

The next few paragraphs will consider and qualify these three conditions.

Overcharged Emotions

Kulka's first condition is often considered as "sentimentality." This characteristic of kitsch may have stemmed in part from the Romantic movement in art (Broch, 1969). In the late eighteenth century, art began to consider emotions much more directly than before. People enjoyed having their feelings aroused. Art sought to bring the viewer or the reader to tears. Yet this could easily be overdone, resulting in mawkishness or melodrama. Over the top can be more uncomfortable than uplifting. Tears should not be wasted inappropriately.

Typical examples of kitsch are paintings of the poor designed

to evoke feelings of pity. Pity at someone else's suffering is an important human emotion, but it is meaningless when it does not lead to some action to relieve the suffering. It is difficult to understand why anyone would want to hang paintings of begging children on one's walls even if they are as technically accomplished as those of William-Adolphe Bouguereau, whose *Little Beggar* (*Petite Mendiante*, 1880) is shown on the right. Bouguereau (1825-1905) was a famous academic painter who became quickly and completely forgotten after his death. He has been recently championed by Fred Ross, whose Art Renewal website reacts against the lack of figurative painting in modern art.

Kitsch often exploits pity – sentimental pictures of sad-eyed children are sold in the millions. Pity is a complicated emotion (Kimball, 2004): although it is primarily related to empathy and compassion, pity slides easily into feeling of superiority and contempt. Nothing can be done – the poor have only themselves to blame. The description of Bouguereau's *Petite Mendiante* on the Art Renewal website states "She looks at the viewer with desperation and exhaustion, causing a feeling of sadness in the viewer who knows she cannot be helped." This comforting conclusion is more rationalization than fact: as William Blake (*The Human Abstract* from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, 1795) said

> Pity would be no more
> If we did not make somebody Poor

Distinguishing sentimentality from other emotions may be difficult. In J. D. Salinger's 1959 story *Raise High the Roof Beam Carpenters*, Seymour Glass quotes the Zen scholar R. H. Blyth "We are being sentimental when we give to a thing more tenderness than God gives to it" (p. 78). However, unless we know how God feels about something, this is a difficult criterion to apply. Seymour recognizes that he is being

tendentious, but he is sure that God would not be as enamored as his wife of kittens with “technicolor bootees on their paws.” Yet if we cannot appeal to God or some other absolute principle, how do we decide whether sentiments are high or tacky?

Opera is an art of great emotion. The plots are usually melodramatic, and some people may feel that grand opera borders on the realm of kitsch. The emotions are high and the audience’s involvement enhanced by the music. Yet high sentiment is not sentimentality. Opera opens itself up to meanings as deep as the emotions are high.

Art cannot exist without emotion. Art must move us to feel something about the world or about ourselves. The problem is that emotions can be used inappropriately, either commercially to sell worthless trinkets or politically to unite a population behind a party or its leader.

Kundera discusses political kitsch experience in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (p 251). A senator is moved by seeing children running on the grass.

> Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass. The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch. The brotherhood of man or earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch. … And no one knows this better than politicians. Whenever a camera is in the offing they immediately run to the nearest child, lift it in the air, kiss it on the cheek. Kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements.

It is good to feel deeply even about simple things. It is wrong to indulge in these emotions for their own sake, to be to be carried away by them to foolish ends, or to use them

falsely to gain the sympathy of others. Political advertising loves kitsch for its sentimentality and its immediacy (Lugg, 1999). Kitsch is the fastest way to a voter's heart.

In his 1936 article *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Walter Benjamin expresses his fear about the use of art for political purposes. He chillingly quotes the futurist Marinetti about the aesthetics of war:

> War is beautiful because it establishes man's dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metalization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of the big tanks, the geometrical formation flights, the smoke spirals from burning villages …

This is art used to make the reader follow blindly in the path of fascism. The purpose of political kitsch it to stop critical thought. The viewer or reader succumbs to dangerous emotions and is carried away to inimical ends.

Effortless Appreciation

Kulka's second condition is that kitsch is "immediately identifiable." Greenberg (1939) suggested that all "academic" art – representational art created accorded to accepted conventions – is kitsch. He was reacting against the academic style of the late nineteenth century, the art of painters such as Bouguereau. He preferred modernist abstract art, which does not give its meaning easily. A skeptic might point out that some abstract art has no meaning to give. Indeed, some of the abstract art used to complement the furniture in modern

dwellings is clearly kitsch. It is immediately identifiable as meaningless ornament, chosen on the basis of whether its color complements the sofa.

The art of Odd Nerdrum (1944-) provides an interesting commentary on kitsch and its relation to representation. This Norwegian artist paints figurative rather than abstract art (Nerdrum & Li, 2007). His painting style is based on Rembrandt and Caravaggio. Some of his paintings are directly representational such as the *Self-Portrait with Nosebleed* on the left. The technique is breathtaking. The image is as powerful as it is disoncerting.

Most of his images are surrealist – haunting representations of embodied souls in life or afterlife. The painting below shows a group of five women and one boy lying on the ground. They are almost naked. They are wrapped in what seem to be

burial shrouds. All are singing. Their eyes are closed; the two staffs suggest that perhaps two of them are blind. This dream-like image is difficult to interpret. Are they singing praises before the throne of God, awaiting the resurrection, or lamenting some tragedy?

Nerdrum has experienced great difficulty with art critics, who describe him as out of touch with our time. He was unable to get a university appointment despite his obvious talent. In defiant response he declared himself an “artist of kitsch” and published a manifesto to justify kitsch (Nerdrum, 1990). Although he is a painter who represents human bodies rather than abstract ideas, his work is not kitsch in the way we generally use the term. His claim is a reaction to Greenberg, who really did throw out the baby with the bathwater. Nerdrum’s impressive technique allows him to create images of great intensity. The paintings stay in the mind, slowly divulging deeper and deeper meanings.

Photography poses difficulties for the definition of kitsch, since nothing is as immediately identifiable as a photograph. Kulka tried to address some distinctions between photography and kitsch. Photography is perhaps too real to be kitsch. A photograph of a sunset is not kitsch. It becomes kitsch if the photograph is printed on canvas to look like a painting,

or on a poster with an inspirational quotation. Most photography is not art – it forms a record of something rather than an interpretation. Nevertheless, some photography can be considered art. Then the photograph captures an image in a manner that is meaningfully different from the usual, or preserves a significant moment of existence beyond the present.

Lack of Meaning

Kitsch is minimally meaningful. The image tells us nothing more than what it portrays. There are no levels of interpretation. When there is something more than meets the eye, it is no longer kitsch. Kitsch is always serious; kitsch never makes you laugh. Kitsch is always comfortable; it never unsettles you. Kitsch preserves the status quo; it is the art that is loved by dictators

Common examples of kitsch are the souvenirs that we buy to remind ourselves of an intense experience (Olalquiaga, 1998). The image has significance only for the person who had the experience. For anyone else it is meaningless. A deeply kitsch experience is watching the slide show of someone else's holiday.

Many kitsch images involve nostalgia. They provide false memories of a time that never was, when we lived innocently in cottages with thatched roofs that never leaked and gardens that bloomed forever. Such images are immensely popular. They are the stock art of bed-and-breakfast and retirement homes. One of the most successful artists of recent times was Thomas Kinkade (1958-2012), the "painter of light" who provided reproductions of his paintings through either the internet or franchised dealers (Orlean, 2001). One of his masterpieces is *Nanette's Cottage*:

The painting shows a thatched cottage at evening with all the windows ablaze with light. The chimney is reinforced with an iron ‘N’ for Nanette and a heart shaped stone for love. A small rowboat is tied up in the stream at the edge of the garden, with a teddy bear still sitting on the seat. Upstream beyond the bridge other cottages all have their windows lit in neighborly solidarity with Nanette. Although the profusion of flowers indicates high summer, the home-fires are burning and smoke ascends from all the chimneys. In the further distance, a church steeple rises high enough to touch the sky. Prints of this image can be obtained in various sizes. Special prints can be “highlighted” by artists trained by Kinkade to give them a special depth of color. This adds immensely to their cost. Art for the millions.

Pop and Camp

Any kitsch that aspires to meaning becomes pop art. Warhol’s images of soup cans consider the role of advertising in modern life, and Lichtenstein’s comic-book images comment on our simplification of reality. Pop art is infused with humor whereas kitsch is usually serious.

Another extension of kitsch is camp. The camp sensibility is difficult to pin down (Sontag, 1966). The emotions of camp are always intense and usually unrestrained – the art is usually described as “over the top.” Camp wallows in the exaggerated passions of opera and melodrama. Camp art is often associated with gender ambiguity in all its variety. Camp is simultaneously serious and satirical. Irony is a necessary feature: camp art can be considered at many different levels.

Peter Hujar’s 1974 photograph of the transvestite Candy Darling on her deathbed is one of the great images of high camp. Candy, one of Andy Warhol’s superstars, died of lymphoma. The facial makeup and silken blouse provide an erotic vitality completely at odds with imminent death. If a beautiful lady has to die, she should do so with glamour.

The photograph evokes stock emotions. The death of the maiden

is a story that has been told too many times. What is happening is immediately identifiable. This is a deathbed scene.

Yet this is not kitsch. The image conveys many different levels of meaning. Hripsimé Visser describes Hujar's photographs as "permeated by a realization of the human masquerade" (Stahel & Visser, 1994). Peter Hujar was homosexual and ultimately died of AIDS in 1987. He was well aware of the ambiguities of gender, and death was a common occurrence among his friends during the AIDS epidemic.

Nevertheless, the artist of the image is as much Candy Darling as Peter Hujar. The photograph proclaims a self that was created in defiance of her birth and maintained in the face of her death. One can be whoever one wants to be. Beauty can cheat Death, even if only for a moment. This is both posture and reality, both over the top and down to earth.

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