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Clutching the Other Through One's Own Finger:
Hölderlin, Marx, and the Aesthetic Prefiguration of 'Pure Subjectivity'

Abstract:

This paper approaches Friedrich Hölderlin's *Hyperion* as the story of a modern consciousness desperate for unity with the objective world, from which it feels fundamentally severed. I propose that the novel's repeated, formal failure to dialectically overcome the subject-object split within an aesthetic register prefigures what I will call Karl Marx's concept of 'pure subjectivity,' or the stripping of humanity of its objective component under capitalism, elucidated in Notebook V of the *Grundrisse*.[1] To do this, I will read Hyperion's recursive oscillations between ecstatic, premature unity and paralyzing diremption as textual traces of a historical contradiction that Hölderlin registers affectively but cannot diagnose. I trace Hyperion's alienated longing across three domains: (1) self-estrangement and its counterpart, estrangement from the other, (2) estrangement from nature, and (3) temporal estrangement. Hölderlin's *Urtheil und Seyn* provides the philosophical problem *Hyperion* wrestles with, wherein the primordial unity of Being (Seyn) is lost in the fundamental "I am I" assertion of self-consciousness. Hölderlin's novel echoes an epochal slippage of objective unity and seeks to rebuild it from within the lonely borders of the self after retreating from an ultimately conservative and impotent quest to revive an ancient social form. Scholars such as Dieter Henrich have taken Hölderlin's philosophical writing seriously, yet often situate it in relation to the German Idealist writings of Hölderlin's peers. Others, such as Loralea Michaelis, understand Hölderlin's subject within a larger disappointment about the limits of modernity post-revolution, yet emphasize his retreat from politics into mysticism. Less work has been done to locate Hölderlin's form of retreat within the limits of the economic moment into which he is writing: one of rising regional mercantilism and local state-enforced corporatism, developments that, for Marx, already contain the logic of nineteenth-century capitalism. Hyperion's spiritual pain of delineation does not offer a coherent politics, nor does it have the vocabulary to assert the rise of a new form of social organization's reorganization of the subject. However, despite this hermeneutic injustice, to borrow Miranda Fricker's term, *Hyperion* enacts the existential cost of a coming world whose logic would, in Marx's hands, find a more systematic articulation. In 1844, Marx argued that abolishing private property would resolve "the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species."[2] Methodologically, this paper combines close literary reading with a historically localized logical structure of subjectivity. What emerges is not a seamless synthesis nor simple socio-economic anticipation, but a symptomatic reading that links *Hyperion*'s tragedy with that of capital's violent ontological achievement: a subject left clutching the world in the form of its own alienated fingers.

[1] Marx, The Grundrisse, p. 496 "In bourgeois society, the worker e.g. stands there purely without objectivity, subjectively."
[2] 1844 Manuscripts, pg. 43

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Intro:

> Es ist, als sähe ich, aber dann erschreck ich wieder, als wär es meine eigne Gestalt, was ich gesehn, es ist, als fühlte ich ihn, den Geist der Welt, aber ich erwache und meine, ich habe meine eignen Finger gehalten.[3]
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> It is as if I saw, but then again I take fright, as if it were my own image I'd seen, it's as if I felt him, the spirit of the world, like the warm hand of a friend, but I awake and think it's my own fingers I've been holding.[4]

The moment is emblematic; just as Hyperion feels he has grasped the World Spirit, the absolute he seeks collapses into a reflexive circle: first as his own image, then as his own corporeality. This misrecognition, at once emotionally resonant and philosophically rich, contains the central tension of Hölderlin's only novel, *Hyperion*. I read *Hyperion* as the story of a consciousness desperate for unity with an objective world from which it feels fundamentally severed. Through a series of mostly unanswered letters, the novel's protagonist chronicles a restless oscillation between an ecstatic merging (with the other, with nature, and with the past) and the paralysing isolation of a modernizing world. The novel's prose oscillates incessantly between poles of unity and diremption (Entzweiung), never achieving sublation (Aufheben). As Dieter Henrich has shown, Hölderlin's fragment *Urtheil und Seyn* posits a primordial unity of Being that is lost in the very act of self-consciousness, the "I am I" that rends the subject from itself. *Hyperion*'s structure is one of recursive longing, marked by moments of premature elation that register each isolating defeat as devastating as the last.

In what follows, I read these formal and affective patterns as symptomatic traces of a historical contradiction that Hölderlin's text registers intuitively but cannot yet diagnose. I

[3] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, Letter 3, p. 16
[4] Hölderlin, *Hyperion,* Letter 3, English edition p. 11

propose that the novel's persistent, formal failure to dialectically overcome the subject-object split in its aesthetic register prefigures what I call Marx's concept of 'pure subjectivity,' that is, the stripping of humanity of its objective component under capitalism, as elucidated in Notebook V of the *Grundrisse*.[5] By 'pure subjectivity,' I refer to capital's reduction of the worker to a purely subjective capacity, abstracted from any concrete embodiment in land, community, or their own labor, and whose life is henceforth mediated by the abstract equivalence of exchange value. In reading *Hyperion* through this lens, I do not mean to suggest an explicit teleological relation between Hölderlin's moment and that of commercial capitalism but rather to draw out a logic of estrangement that arises with mercantilism and corresponds with epistemic shifts that manifest in later economic developments. The influence of Hölderlin's intermediate economic moment on his poetic rendering of the split subject in *Hyperion* might be understood through Miranda Fricker's framework of "hermeneutical injustice," which names a lack of precise language to account for the violence of given social structures at a specific historical moment.

A similar lack of conceptual vocabulary also seems to surface secondary scholarship on Hölderlin and political modernity, which has tended to move along two axes. The first, represented here by Loralea Michaelis, emphasizes the modern disappointment of a failed revolutionary moment, broadly understood. The second, represented by Henrich, emphasizes Hölderlin's key role in the development of German Idealist thought, from which much moral and political philosophy springs. Less work has been done to locate Hölderlin's philosophy and *Hyperion*'s form of retreat, from politics and the material world at large, within the limits of the economic moment into which he is writing: one of regionally rising mercantilism and local state-enforced corporatism. These developments, for Marx, already contain the germ of

[5] Marx, The Grundrisse, p. 496 "In bourgeois society, the worker e.g. stands there purely without objectivity, subjectively."

nineteenth-century capitalism's logic and weigh on the phenomenology of its subjects. Marx in *Capital Volume I*, for example, marks rentier capital and merchant capital as "derivative forms" of modern capital, despite their earlier appearance in history.[6] I hope that by drawing out the term 'pure subjectivity' from Marx's notebooks, we discover a conceptual tool to connect the economic mode with a historically-specific mode of phenomenological experience, as expressed through Hölderlin's aesthetic means.

This paper aims to deepen the existing scholarship by showing how Hölderlin's historical situation between two economic modes registers in the pendular prose of *Hyperion* and in their ultimate resolution into an alienated and abstract form of unity. To do this, I trace Hyperion's estranged longing across three domains: (1) self-estrangement and its counterpart, estrangement from the other, (2) estrangement from nature, which for Hölderlin is spiritually laden, and (3) temporal estrangement. Methodologically, this paper combines close literary reading with an analysis of the logical structure of a historically localized subjectivity. What emerges is not a seamless synthesis nor a simple socioeconomic anticipation, but a symptomatic reading that links *Hyperion*'s tragedy with that of capital's violent ontological achievement: a subject left clutching the world in the form of its own alienated fingers.

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I: Estrangement from Self

[6] Marx, *Capital Volume I*, p. 267 The unmediated M-M' formula of usurer's capital, for example, is incompatible with the nature of money from Marx's standpoint and thus inexplicable from the standpoint of commodity exchange (C-M-C). In this way, usurer's capital is rendered logically downstream of M-C-M' (the modern capitalist form of exchange). I invoke this point not only to justify the relevance of Hyperion to Marx's later political-economic analysis, but also to demonstrate the logical formality of historical causality in Marx's work, often misinterpreted as a simpler teleology.

Hölderlin's *Urtheil und Seyn* posits a primordial unity, rent from itself via the act of judgment (Urtheil). In this fragment, Hölderlin establishes Being (Seyn) as the juncture "where subject and object are absolutely, not merely partially unified," such that any division would alter the essence of that which is divided.[7] Identity, as distinct from Being, is represented as an opposing of the self to the self. Hölderlin invokes the Fichtian expression of identity, "I am I," as an example of original, theoretical judgment, which breaks absolute unity into parts. In the assertion, "I am I," Hölderlin remarks that the subject (I) and the object (I) are not unified in the sense of absolute Being, as their division from one another still leaves the other intact. However, in order to assert "I am I," an act of self-consciousness, Hölderlin offers that one must, in the first place, rend oneself from oneself, in order to then recognize the two selves as the subject (I) in the first place, and the object (I) in the second. This act of theoretical judgment does not merely describe identity but figures the very structure of consciousness as a subject positioned against an object, including itself as object. For Hölderlin, the primordial unity of Seyn is lost in the earliest moments of conceptual delineation, relation, and mediation. The "I," upon saying, "I am I" is already an alienated being. In this way, Hölderlin naturalizes alienation as the structure of self-consciousness itself and achieves unity or absolute Being as a retrospective outcome of division, rather than a primarily accessible original state.

The spoken word, and even the word unspoken, as concept, has a primary function of delineation. Syntax, at its most basic formulation, demands the opposition of subject and object. Language, as derived from the self-conscious mind, severs in order to retroactively express a relation. Speech, can thus be understood for Hölderlin as a symbol of the severing function of self-conscious that rends the "I" from unified Being. Across *Hyperion,* Hölderlin demonstrates a romantic fixation on the quality of silence, even when the adjective contradicts the scene it

[7] Hölderlin, *Urtheil und Seyn*, p. 1

describes, such as the "silent thundercloud"[8] or the "silent breeze."[9] Silence often stands in for an unattainable ideal in *Hyperion*. It is attributed to each object of longing to which Hyperion, the narrator, temporarily attaches himself; "the silent earth,"[10] the "silent temple pillar" of a bygone era,[11] the "silent fullness" of the stars,[12] "the silent gods,"[13] Adamas, Alabanda,[14] and most strikingly, Diotima, who, "only when she sang did one truly know this lovingly silent being who was so loath to speak."[15] Diotima's exalted silence returns throughout the novel, often with admiration and occasionally, with a kind of upward-gazing frustration at the unattainable. "We spoke very little together," Hyperion writes, "You're ashamed of your language. You'd like to become pure tone and blend with the other in one celestial song."[16] We do not know if Diotima experiences this shame herself or if it is a projection, but it echoes Hölderlin's longing for a pure Being, unbroken by the assertion of the "I," a Being unbroken by the cleaver of language which Hölderlin nevertheless wields. In the following section, I will suggest that language alone cannot account for this fundamental experience of alienation.

The theme of Diotima's pure, unknowable silence reappears in Hölderlin's poetry, further elevating her as Platonic myth, wise prophetic outsider, and the embodiment of love. In "Diotima," the poem, Hölderlin writes, "You are silent and suffer, and they do not understand you, You holy life! … But time hastens. My mortal song still sees – The day, Diotima! That calls your name next to the gods…"[17] "Silence" and "song," read in tandem with Hölderlin's

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[8] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 90
[9] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 21
[10] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 105
[11] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 110
[12] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 127
[13] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 127
[14] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 28, 27
[15] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 48 Just before this, Diotima's face contradictingly "unfolded before the breezes of heaven, became *pure speech and soul*… airy majesty.."but Hölderlin suffuses her exalted being with silence repeatedly across the entirety of the text (p. 47).
[16] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 46
[17] Hölderlin, *Diotima*. The Formatting is quite different in the original, lending a different rhythm.

philosophical fragment seem to gesture toward absolute Being, in an attempt to transcend their estranged formulation as spoken or written word. With the invocation of "silence" and "song," Hölderlin shifts emphasis to the pure sonorous material that carries conceptual articulation. Sound and its unified opposite, silence, then, take on a being that stretches beyond the discordant act of meaning formulation. It is worth noting that the lyrical poet's late writings, produced in a state of increasingly fractured subjectivity, took on an even more overt musical quality. If Hölderlin's early and middle-period writings were characterized by an obsessively iterative subjectivity, rendered through a collage-like style, his later work can be distinguished by its spontaneous, yet increasingly 'objective,' formal rhythmic style, often signed with pseudonyms. This further points to the subject-object split as an abiding theme of Hölderlin's work, not just *Hyperion* itself and possibly a personal vexation that extended across his lifetime.

Hyperion primarily relates to others as mirrors throughout the novel. For example, upon introducing Adamas, he asks, "And I, was I not the echo of his quiet inspiration? Did the melodies of his being not reverberate in me?"[18] In the sentences surrounding this quotation, Hyperion leaps to relate Adamas to the divine and to the peace of nature, which he so desperately seeks. Hyperion's relational style seems to embody an extreme unity of opposites that ultimately collapses every object of his desire ontologically. "We can imagine nothing excellent without its malformed opposite," one of his early letters reads.[19] Hyperion as a character cannot seem to hold both sides of the dialectic at once, evacuating the gray of the nuanced theoretical relation, and resulting in a torturous and cyclical crisis of meaning.

The tragic figure's efforts to merge with Adamas, Diotima, Alabanda, the past, nature, spirit, and the war effort all end in an unbearable isolated longing, spurring the cycle of sought

[18] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 12
[19] Hyperion p. 11

unification over again. M. B. Benn notes that Hölderlin's personal connection to Greek Mythology pushes his view of history in a cyclical direction, away from a Christian view of linear history.[20] Hölderlin writes, through Hyperion:

> Who can withstand it, who is not floored by the terrible glory of antiquity, like young woods flattened by a hurricane, when it seizes him as I was seized, and when, like me, he lacks the element in which to gain a firming sense of self?[21]

In this quotation, Adamas, Hyperion, the imagined past, and the sublime force of nature all blur. Hyperion seems to bandage his alienation with false unity by projecting his experience and desires onto the other. Beyond the German nationality of their addressee, Hyperion's letters reveal almost nothing about Bellarmin, whose presence in the novel functions mostly as a vehicle for the externalization of self. Hyperion repeatedly finds himself whole *through* the other, only to be fractured again, left yearning in ultimate abandon. In this way, Hölderlin's text not only thematizes but *performs* the rift between the subject and the object through its stylistic and structural instability.

The crisis of subjectivity, so acutely felt and formalized by Hölderlin in *Hyperion*, finds a systematic and material basis in the capitalist mode of production as theorized by Marx. A mode of circulation founded on quantitative equivalence (M-C-M') economically renders all qualities exchangeable, in turn impacting their qualitative relations.[22] Bourgeois consciousness has a tendency to hollow out, abstract, and equivocate. The social systems that structure the material life of a subject at a given moment in history necessarily impact the subject's mode of relating.

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[20] Benn, p. 515
[21] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 16, regarding Adamas
[22] Marx, *Capital Volume I,* p. 423: "...the correctness of the law of Hegel discovered in his Logic, that at a certain point merely quantitative differences pass over by a dialectical inversion into qualitative distinctions." p. 424, Footnote 5: "by the simply quantitative addition of CH2 to the molecular formula, a qualitatively different body is each time formed."

Despite the fact that labor is never mentioned in *Hyperion*,[23] the "dot-like isolation" (Punktualität)[24] to which the novel so achingly returns, subtly situates it in an era of profound economic transformation; an era which, in turn, transformed the subject itself.[25] It is characteristic of bourgeois writing to omit that "human beings become individuals only through the process of history."[26] With the new modes of production and reproduction, "not only do the objective conditions change, but the producers change too."[27] Via his idealist philosophical abstraction and his romantic poetic register, Hölderlin conjures the discordant spirit of his times.

Ideas never arise in a vacuum. When Hölderlin was writing *Hyperion*, approximately between 1792 and 1799, he was living in Tübingen, a university town in Württemberg, located in southwest Germany. At the time, 'Germany' referred not to a unified state, but to a loose federation of political entities sharing language and culture. The region was undergoing a gradual, uneven transition from the Old Regime toward an industrializing state.[28] As economic historians, Richard H. Tilly and Michael Kopsidis put it, "a strong east-west gradient marked the destiny of industrial activity during the early modern period – long before industrialization started."[29] The Age of Mercantilism or Cameralism in Germany is conventionally dated from 1648 onward in the German Reich (Austria, Prussia, Saxony, Wurttemberg), and it differed from French and British mercantilism in its strong emphasis on the state and its bureaucracy as the primary means of regulating economic life, though it shared a nationalist emphasis on maximizing exports and achieving political supremacy through wealth accumulation.[30] The rise

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[23] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 12. There is, however a line that reads, "How feeble is even the most honest human industry compared to the sheer power of unbroken inspiration."
[24] Marx, The Grundrisse, p. 485
[25] I say "despite," but it may be more accurate to read the lack of labor in the novel as a symptom of capital itself (a socio-economic system which takes both labor and private property for granted).
[26] Marx, *The Grundrisse,* p. 496
[27] Marx, *The Grundrisse*, p. 494
[28] Tilly, Richard H. and Kopsidis, Michael p. 11
[29] Tilly, Richard H. and Kopsidis, Michael p. 20 (even on a neoclassical model)
[30] Tilly, Richard H. and Kopsidis, Michael p. 25

of this transitionary economic mode spanned from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries and carried with it an epistemology that insisted on exchange as the source of profit, shifting emphasis from use value to market value.[31] Relative to cities deeply integrated with the Atlantic trade hub, like Hamburg, Tübingen remained a part of 'old Europe's interior economy. Nevertheless, in the wake of what historians have called 'Swabian Venality' and the mounting threat of the French Revolution, Duke Charles Eugene accelerated the sale of state offices, transforming them effectively into private property to manage the duchy's economic crisis in the 1790s.[32]

Hölderlin himself was largely insulated from merchant capital, as his single-mother household subsisted on money from church assets and modest inheritances. Yet he intimately witnessed wealth disparity in his position as a Hofsmeister (tutor) for wealthy families, beginning in 1793 with a recommendation from Schiller. *Hyperion*'s author was situated between two worlds. The figure of Diotima's in *Hyperion* and Hölderlin's poems is widely understood to correlate with his lover, Susette Gontard, the wife of J.F. Gontard, a wealthy banker for whom Hölderlin worked. The banker's household, with its dependence on interest-bearing capital and its entanglement in state finance, offered Hölderlin a direct view of the rentier economy that Marx would later theorize, even if the poet lacked the vocabulary to name it as such. This is the material context in which Hölderlin's 1790's epistolary novel arises, as well as his philosophical contributions. Henrich remarks that, "in the few years between 1790 and 1798, all the insights were developed that provided the groundwork" for Hölderlin's later philosophical systems.[33] While Hölderlin cannot be understood as a critic of capital in economic terms, he argues against

[31] Hunt and Lautzenheiser, 2011, p. 23-4
[32] Ogilvie, State Corporatism, 1997
[33] Henrich Dieter, p. 73

the corresponding rationalizing and utilitarian spirit of his age, as well as the social fragmentation it produced.[34]

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II: Estrangement from Nature

Hölderlin's philosophy distinguishes between the object of knowledge and Being, which precedes self-conscious division.[35] Henrich remarks that contra Fichte, Hölderlin wanted "to make an assertion about the original unity of man."[36] He registers this move as requiring a combination of Schiller's theory of Kant's ethics and Plato's theory of forms. The project bumps up against formal limits in both "Urtheil und Seyn" and *Hyperion*, partially because language is at once already reflective and divisive. We have established this as the ontological achor of Diotima's revered silence. Henrich attributes the point proliferated by Sinclair (contra-Fichte) that the presupposition of a whole cannot be reached via positing, and thus that the whole can not appropriately be called an "I," as intellectually dependent on Hölderlin.[37] Hölderlin's peace or "Friede," is one that we have torn ourselves loose form in order to reach. It "is irretrievably lost. Yet we would not even seek after it if that infinite unification, that being in the only sense of the word, were not present to us. It is present – as beauty."[38] This is the role aesthetics played for Hölderlin. As a poet, he saw himself as a mediator between this godly unity and a tragically self-conscious humanity. Henrich frames *Hyperion'*s development as leading from a lost peace, marked by moments of intimacy and estrangement, towards the beauty of nature which

[34] The empiricism of the renaissance gave way to mercantilism as a codified economic theory, due to the new ability to quantify large scale trade with increased accuracy.
[35] Henrich, p. 75
[36] Henrich, p. 77
[37] Henrich, p. 83
[38] Henrich, p. 84

"preserves a reflection of the original unity."[39] Nature as such cannot be "captured in any knowledge" because it is grounded in a Being that precedes the division of Judgment.[40]

What Hyperion experiences as an existential crisis of unavoidable diremption, Marx seems to identify as a concrete socio-economic process. Spirit (Geist) is burdened with matter from the very beginning.[41] Hyperion's diffuse sense of metaphysical loss can be aligned with Marx's process of capitalist estrangement, which forcefully rends the subject from their labor, themselves, their species being, and other human beings.[42] In an 1799 letter to his brother, Hölderlin wrote of the German people: "Artisans you see, but no human beings, thinkers, but no human beings, priests, but no human beings… is that not like a battlefield, where hands and arms and all limbs lie dismembered amongst one another," clearly disturbed by the separation of human functions from their larger Being.[43] While Hölderlin's philosophy seems to treat such separation as fundamental to human experience, his location of this grievance within the German people and his gestures towards Ancient Greece as the hallmark of a different mode of being, indicate some awareness of this idea's sociohistorical specificity. Benn offers that Hölderlin loved human beings not for what they were, but for their promise, grounding his negative attitude towards individuals in a greater love for mankind's united potential.[44] Hölderlin's ideal primordial unity and his ideals for the future seem to correspond in this way.

Marx's theory of capital's alienation of humanity from its species-being (Gattungswesen) is especially relevant to the role nature plays in Hölderlin's work. Via an alienated mode of production, humanity for Marx, loses its ability to view itself as a conscious individual *in*

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[39] Heinrich, p. 84
[40] ibid
[41] Marx, *The German Ideology,* p. 50
[42] Marx, *The 1844 Manuscripts*, Estranged Labour
[43] Hölderlin, Letter to his brother, January 1799, quoted in Martyn Crucefix, "Being In and Above: on Fredrich Hölderlin's Hyperion," Temenos Academy Review No. 20, 2017. Also found in *Hyperion,* trans. India Russell, Melrose Books 2016
[44] Benn, p. 513

relation to other conscious individuals, constituting a kind of objectively grounded universal whole. Marx's writing on so-called primitive accumulation, situates this severance within an initial (and recurrent) process of separation from the land. In all forms of social organization prior to private property, "in which landed property and agriculture form the basis of the economic order, and where the economic is hence the production of use values," rather than exchange value, "the individual relates simply to the objective conditions of labor as being his, *as the inorganic nature of his subjectivity*, in which the latter realizes itself."[45] Here, the human being has a "double existence, both subjectively as he himself, and objectively in these non-organic conditions of his existence."[46] Where, under capitalism, the chief objective condition of labor appears as a *product* of labor, in prior systems, it "is already there as nature; on the one side the living individual, on the other the earth, as the objective condition of his reproduction."[47] In other words, capitalist relations shift the grounding of subjectivity away from its instantiation in the objectivity of the other, towards a self-referencing process of economic exchange, dissolving humanity's original relation to the earth, along with its species-being (Gattungswesen). Being is degraded into having, and henceforth, the subject, "as an individual, relates himself only to himself" via himself.[48] Hölderlin's philosophical longing for a primordial unity, to "be at one with all that lives,"expressed in Hyperion often as a spiritual longing for nature, can thus be situated.[49] In bourgeois society, humanity's "social existence" is robbed from itself, and nature is no longer experienced "as a bond with man."[50] Hyperion's tireless compulsion to merge with the other, with nature, and with the past, can be read as expressing an

[45] Marx, *The Grundrisse,* p. 485 (my italics)
[46] Marx, *The Grundrisse,* p. 491
[47] Marx, *The Grundrisse,* p. 485
[48] Marx, *The Grundrisse,* p. 496, Marx goes on to discuss the guild system on p. 497
[49] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 9
[50] Marx, *The 1844 Manuscripts,* p. 44

unconscious reaction against the nascent capitalist ontology emerging in eighteenth century Germany.

The abstract prior unity that Hyperion mourns aligns with humanity's loss of nature conceived by Marx's as the once "extended body" of the subject.[51] Not only is humanity spiritually severed from so-called nature with the advent of capitalist relations, but capital's global character quickly manifests in Marx's notion that "nature… today no longer exists anywhere."[52] This is equally a materialist claim, as he writes, "The cherry tree, like almost all fruit-trees, was, as is well known, only a few centuries ago transplanted by *commerce* into our zone, and therefore only *by* this definite society in a definite age it has become 'sensuous certainty' for Feuerbach."[53] Hölderlin's romantic veneration of nature as a proto-divine force throughout the novel seems to grasp, intuitively, that the loss of nature marks a devaluation of humanity's spiritual being into what Marx will call 'crude need.' What Hölderlin cannot see from his vantage point, however, is the material specificity of this division.

Hyperion's longing for an unalienated relation to the natural world is felt in his direct address of the elements throughout the novel. At the beginning of *Hyperion*'s second book, he writes, "I look out upon the sea and ponder my life, its rising and sinking, its bliss and its grief… throwing together discord and harmony in hidden order."[54] The natural body of water reflects Hyperion's oscillating devastation back to him. He sees his own emotional extremes in the "ebbing voice of the surging sea," despite humanity's waning ontological intimacy with the natural world.[55] This longing to see himself in nature, to find an external ground that is at once intuitively linked to his internal life, points to Hölderlin's understanding of the poet as a mediator

[51] Marx, *The Grundrisse,* p. 496. The term "inorganic body" is often substituted for "extended body" and its use is clarified here.
[52] Marx, *The German Ideology*, p. 63
[53] Marx, *The German Ideology*, p. 62
[54] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 41
[55] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 17

between the divine and the human, even as human life descends into a night of godlessness.[56] Hyperion observes how in nature "all things age and renew themselves," and plaintively asks, "Why are we excluded from nature's beautiful cycle? Or does it hold for us too?"[57] This seed of contemplation grows into Hyperion's obsession with cyclical time, later resulting in a war effort in the name of a regressive historical ideal.

> "From the happiness of plants men began and grew up, grew until they ripped; from then on they fermented forth unceasingly, both inwardly and outwardly, till now, the human race, in infinite dissolution, lies there like a chaos and all those who still feel are gripped by dizziness; but beauty takes flight from the life of men, up into the spirit; what was nature becomes the ideal… And it's by this ideal, this rejuvenated godhead, that the few shall know each other and that they are one, for oneness is in them, and from them, these few shall begin the second age of the world–"[58]

This passage reflects Hyperion's nostalgia for a relation to nature as humanity's extended body that Marx shows us dissolves with the capitalist mode of production. The "happiness of plants" from which men grew signifies a mystical, integrated past, when human life moved with nature's reproductive cycles. The present is rendered a dizzying chaos of "infinite dissolution," an ironically apt observation, as it is capitalism's ontological orientation towards infinite accumulation that clashes so violently with a finite earth. But Hyperion's perspective on the problem outlined here is limited. In German Idealist fashion, he reads the symptom, a *materially and economically* alienated species being, as an abstract crisis of time, which might be rectified by a "few" world-historical individuals. Hyperion feverishly reflects, "I often felt as if the things of the earth were purified and fused together in my fire like gold," but before long, "I felt ashamed for existing at all."[59] The individualist abstraction of Hölderlin's age creeps up on Hyperion, revealing how even his most expansive gestures towards unity are ultimately solitary

[56] Phrase borrowed from Rolf Goebel
[57] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 16
[58] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 55
[59] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 56

and premature idealist performances. The structural weight of 'pure subjectivity' essentially collapses Hyperion's intuitive insight into a reactionary politics of return.

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III: Temporal Estrangement

Hölderlin, of course, never made it to Greece, despite his age's idealization of its antiquity. And Hyperion's entanglement in the Greek War of Independence only serves to shatter the ideal. Hyperion's intended resurrection of "a second age of the world" instead exposes the violent futility of attempting to reclaim a historical ideal through force. Benn, despite his veneration of Hölderlin, recognises a contradiction between the democratic ideals of his Empedokles, which reads, "this is no longer the time for kings," and "let each be like all," and their expression in "the aristocratic blank verse of German classical tragedy."[60] Benn argues that this tension is not peculiar to Hölderlin, but characteristic of the French Revolution in general and European thought's response to it. "The ancient pagan republics of Greece and Rome had come to represent the ideal of liberty as opposed to the despotism of Christian kingdoms of modern Europe," Benn writes, noting an absence of an adequate attendance to the then present and shifting factors bearing on liberty.[61] He offers that Hölderlin shared this incapacity to attend to the present, an incapacity that I have elaborated in economically grounded terms. "Hölderlin can be so obsessed with the future or the past that the present ceases to exist for him," Benn writes, adding that medieval and modern history fall into shadow.[62] From a Marxist perspective, it is hard not to associate this gap in attention with the repetition of historical events in the

[60] Benn, p. 507
[61] Benn, p. 507
[62] Benn, p. 509

Eighteenth Brumaire, which Benn invokes to discuss the felt sense of heroism required to carry out a revolution, however unheroic a bourgeois one might ultimately be.

As Marx argues in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, revolutions must derive their poetry from the future, not from a distant, constructed past from which they "tear single pages."[63] When history repeats itself, it does so as tragedy or farce; Hyperion's revolutionary endeavor collapses into the former. The failed tragedy of this return is structural. Marx insists that the "sensuous consciousness" of the capitalist subject "is different from that of the Greek, because his sensuous existence is different."[64] The ideals and indeed, the very senses of an epoch cannot be abstracted from their socio-economic foundations. Yet the few political discussions in *Hyperion*, despite the plot's overt political arc, operate in complete abstraction, such as the following conversation between Alabanda and Hyperion:

> 'The state is the coarse husk round life's kernel and nothing more. It's the wall around the garden of human fruits and flowers.'
>
> 'But what help is the wall around the garden when the soul lies parched? Then all that helps is rainfall from heaven.'[65]

Based on this discussion, any state could be at question, be it Ancient Greek or eighteenth-century Wurttemberg. The dismissal of the state's role in cultivating an economic environment that nourishes or strips the soil, based on export policies for example, reveals an idealistic blind spot that leads to abstract gestures at a solution. This leveling effect of abstraction, whether analogously in the form of idealism, or in the form of quantitative abstraction (such as exchange value) has dire political consequences. The Bourgeois notion of "equality," Marx notes, "is nothing but a translation of the German 'Ich=Ich' into the French, ie.,

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[63] Marx, *The 1844 Manuscripts,* p. 44. The tense of "tearing" was adjusted to suit the sentence here.
[64] ibid.
[65] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 27

the political form."[66] Hyperion's entire political project is thus ensnared in the same recursive, idealist loop as his subjectivity. It seeks to found a collective future on an abstracted, fetishized past. From within this closed circuit, no dialectical transcendence is possible. Hyperion's logic is fatally contradictory; "all must be made anew," and yet his method is to retrieve what is irrevocably lost.[67]

This abstracted past takes on a specifically aesthetic form. Hyperion idealizes an Athens where "their art and their religion are the true children of eternal beauty – of perfected nature."[68] This conflation of politics and beauty is troubling, evoking Benjamin's caution in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Though aesthetically derived and conservative, Hyperion's politics might not yet be fascist in the manner Benjamin suggests, but they do result in a withdrawal from the world that can only serve the victors that history sides with. For Hyperion, the state without Athens' supposed "love of beauty…is a shrivelled skeleton without a life."[69] His revolution is less a matter of social reorganization, a fight for the "material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist," and more an attempt to force the world to conform to its distorted retrospective image.[70] At the very least, what results is a politics bound for disappointment.

Loralea Michaelis argues that "Hölderlin's Hyperion illuminates an alternative conception of political action in which the moment of limitation is as crucial" as the moment of its overcoming, insisting on a self-correcting potential to the disappointment the novel results in.[71] She claims it offers a 'third way' between the blind recovery from disappointment and a

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[66] Marx, *The 1844 Manuscripts,* p. 53
Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 97, "All for each and each for all!" Hyperion sings on the precipice of battle.
[67] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 96
[68] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 68
[69] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 68
[70] Illuminations 254
[71] Michaelis, p. 2

complete withdrawal from politics, raising "the possibility that we might be able to reach an understanding of ourselves as actors having a powerful interest in the future which does not require us to forget that we are also subject to frustration and loss.[72] Against this, I would argue that Hyperion remains stuck in a pattern of binary oscillation with no meaningful redemptive outcome. What Michaelis reads as self-correction looks, from a materialist perspective, like capitulation. Hyperion's retreat into the self is not a 'third way,' but the logical endpoint of a reduction to 'pure subjectivity:' a self so deprived of its objective ground (in the other, in nature, in collective labor), and of hope, that it succumbs to a full identification with alienated withdrawal. Ultimately, the self, having failed to transform the world in its ideal image, retreats entirely behind its own walls.

Hyperion becomes the hermit in the novel's final pages, resolving into a state of contemplative exile and resolving a costly political failure into symbolic unity. While the novel's epistolary form technically leaves the order of Hyperion's letters to Bellarmin inconclusive, the last letter reads:

> We are free, we don't anxiously strive to be outwardly equal… deep in our innermost being we are all of us alike. We too, we are not parted, Diotima! and the tears for you haven't grasped it. We are living tones, we are sound together in your harmony, nature! who can split that asunder? who will part lovers? –[73]

This is the sort of conclusion where a material problem claims to be resolved by a cognitive solution. Furthermore, it does so via a striking move of spiritual leveling, which washes material inequality away via an abstract form. Hyperion compartmentalizes the devastation his body actively renders in the form of tears, to proceed under the comfort of an ideal union; a union crafted from diremption at every turn. The ideal is naturalized in capitalist fashion, masking the

[72] Michaelis, p. 558
[73] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 136

pain through an evacuation of possibility, even as nature, as the material extension of humanity, remains severed. “The arteries part and return in the heart and one eternal glowing life is All,” he writes as the last words we encounter, “So I thought. More anon.”[74] This final circulatory metaphor closes the loop of Hyperion’s consciousness. Unity is asserted in thought, yet enacted in solitude. His ‘pure subjectivity’ has cycled through alienation from itself, from nature, from history, and from others, to arrive at an aestheticized unity with itself. The lines plash with wistful resonance for all those who ache for an absolute, though they celebrate too soon. On some level, Hyperion senses this, “So I thought. More anon.” But in a vague promise, he suspends the future. Benn writes, admiringly, that Hölderlin through Hyperion, “seems to comprehend our modern nihilism while pointing beyond it to the true sources of beauty and joy.”[75] But this joy entails denying the stakes of external loss in favor of an inner notion of equality, a solution that abandons the material world.

The cost of Hyperion’s failed political project was devastating. The war effort and Hyperion’s zeal for ‘reunification’ with an untenable past tear him from Diotima, the one relationship that offered him a present-tense, living unity. Fleeing “Diotima’s influence,” where “more stability had come to” his “soul,” Hyperion searches backwards for a lost Greece and a lost Greek brotherhood with Alabanda.[76] Once at the warfront, ancient Greece slowly shifts to the periphery of what Hyperion is searching for. In his absence, Diotima feels her serenity slip. She writes, “I often shudder to see the gentle youth who wept at my feet transformed into this warlike being.”[77] With Diotima, Hyperion once felt “as if the old world had died and a new one were beginning with us.”[78] But in the words of Marx, “their momentary unity was only a

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[74] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 137
[75] Benn, p. 512
[76] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 66
[77] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 99
[78] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 64

chimerical illusion," shattered by the pull of Hyperion's alienated subjectivity.[79] In the letters just before he advises Diotima to leave him, Hyperion reflects on the insufficiency of language and admits defeat, saying, "I intend to take service for a while with the Russian fleet; I want nothing more to do with the Greeks… It's grown so very dark around me."[80] Conveniently, in his alienation and disappointment, the beliefs Hyperion once fought for cease any threat to the present political order. His military skills are merely transferable.

Hyperion's retreat into the mind in the book's final pages is not a third way, but a dead end. Hyperion's struggle against 'pure subjectivity' has not transcended the contradictions of his age, but surrendered to them. While the nihilism Benn identifies in Hyperion might extend to a modern reality of developed capitalism, by which all is rendered equally exchangeable, this foresight seems more symptomatic than heroic. We might be reminded of Benjamin's monastic discipline, designed to turn friars away from the world and its affairs.[81] Ironically, in the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx frames the "principle thesis" of capitalist political economy as "self-renunciation, the renunciation of life and all human needs," linking the path of the alienated subject to an inherent asceticism.[82] In a social order that degrades Being into having, "the less you express your own life, the more you have," Marx writes. Hyperion set out from the basis of a longing to be at one with all that lives. He ends, instead, as the ascetic subject capital requires: a self-referencing, solitary individual who feeds on naturalized ideals. Temporal estrangement, here, is the stillness such a subject embodies, no longer actively striving towards a reunification with its species being, but instead towards immediate comfort.

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[79] Marx, *The 1844 Manuscripts,* p. 47
[80] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 102
[81] *Illuminations*, p. 258
[82] Marx, *The 1844 Manuscripts,* 1844, p.51

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Conclusion:

For Marx, communism would be "the *positive* transcendence of *private property* as *human self estrangement* and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man."[83] The historical conditions for revolution are cumulative and cannot be ushered in at will. The generations-long struggle against private property by and for humanity, is the only proposed path toward humanity's reunification with its objective component. This, Marx offered, was the one true resolution to "the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species."[84]

Hölderlin's novel does not point towards this resolution. I have argued that its turn away from material action, towards a capitulating withdrawal into the severed self, is representative of the mode of subjectivity capitalism's development requires. Whether conscious of this development or not, Hölderlin's intuitive poetic fixation with a fractured unity of Being, aligns with the loss of species-being via the institution of capital's 'pure subjectivity,' nascent at the time of *Hyperion*'s writing. Read through this lens, *Hyperion* registers the affective and even existential cost of a coming world with stunning resonance. And yet, given its historical location in the tides of geopolitical change, *Hyperion* cannot overcome its devastation in any substantial sense.

Let us return to where we began, with Hyperion's moment of misrecognition, gripping his own fingers, under the fleeting impression that he held the spirit of the world. This gesture embodies the closed circuit of 'pure subjectivity' that Marx would later theorize; a system of economic organization through which the individual encounters the other (and itself) only by

[83] Marx, *The 1844 Manuscripts,* p. 43
[84] Marx, *The 1844 Manuscripts,* p. 43

way of the alienated "I." Hyperion's concluding vision of an "eternal glowing life" is a solitary substitute for the primordial one; an echo reverberating in the empty hand. Hölderlin's novel senses the slipping away of objective unity of its time and seeks to rebuild it from within the lonely borders of the self. Hyperion's spiritual pain of delineation does not offer a politics, but enacts the existential cost of a coming world whose logic would, in Marx's hands, find its full articulation. The "warm hand of a friend" Hyperion thought he felt remains for him his own detached appendage outstretched for soothing. The task Marx leaves us is to build a world beyond human self estrangement, where that hand can finally find the weighted presence of another's. Hölderlin's novel, written at the threshold of capital's ascetic logic does not have access to such an imagination, but it shows us the limits of continually attempting to grasp unity via self-reference.

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