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Fate and the Fateless in Benjamin's *Fate and Character*

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Benjamin's citation of a single word, 'Schicksallos' (fateless) from Hölderlin's early poem *Hyperion's Schicksalslied* (1799, *Hyperion's Song of Fate*), signals an important turn in his thinking of fate, but one which might be missed without closer attention to its source. It arrives after Benjamin's dislocation of fate and character from their erroneous attributions to the religious and ethical spheres caused by fate's association with guilt but not – strikingly – innocence. The absence of innocence from the sphere of fate prompts Benjamin to turn to the 'Greek classical development of the thought of fate' and to voice a question that 'strikes even deeper': 'whether fate has any relation to happiness? Or to state it even more starkly: Is happiness a 'constitutive' category of fate?' (Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 174; *Selected Writings: Volume I*, 203). Benjamin will argue it is not and in support of his case against the conceptual alignment of fate and happiness appeals to Hölderlin's concept of the 'fateless': 'Not for nothing does Hölderlin call the blissful Gods "fateless"' (Benjamin, 174; 203). At first glance it might seem that with this citation, Benjamin describes happiness as freedom from fate: the Gods are blissful because they are fateless. Yet Benjamin's evocation of Hölderlin's framing of the 'fateless' in the poem *Hyperion's Schicksalslied* and later in the 'Notes on the Antigone' points to an ambivalent and more far-reaching concept that weaves together fate, the fateless, and suffering.

Hyperion's Schicksalslied is indeed structured according to a contrast between divine fateless bliss and human fateful misery. Its three stanzas perform this contrast beginning with the blessed genii walking above in the light wafted by radiant breezes. This condition is described in the second stanza as 'fateless': 'Schicksallos, wie der schlafende/Säugling, athmen die Himmlischen' [Fateless, like the sleeping infant, breathe the heavenly ones] (Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments*, 120-121). Their spirits are ever in flower and their eyes contemplate still eternal clarity. This image of fateless bliss is broken

in the third stanza by one of the mortals falling through the years, hour by hour, like a torrent hurtling from ledge to ledge downwards into the unknown. This 'fate,' although never named as such, is said by Hölderlin to be 'given to us' and the extreme contrast with the serenity of the fateless seems entirely beyond question. And yet after only a few stanzas Hölderlin effects a complete dialectical reversal.

Benjamin's citation of *Hyperions Schicksalslied* might easily be mistaken as understanding the bliss of the Gods to consist in their fatelessness. But only a careless reader of *Hyperion* would miss the care with which Hölderlin framed the inclusion of the poem in his broader narrative of revolutionary disillusion. The modern Greek revolutionary hero Hyperion describes the poem to his correspondent Bellarmin as a 'song of fate' that he 'once in his more ignorant and happier youth' had 'repeated' after his first teacher Adamas (Hölderlin, *Hyperion, Empedocles*, 2008, 157). Since that time he had found and would soon lose two further teachers, Alabanda and Diotima, who took him far beyond the youthful opposition of fated and fateless. The 'Song of Fate' evokes a youthful and later abandoned understanding of fate and fatelessness in which the separation of the 'divine bliss' of the fateless from the sufferings of fated mortals was about to be undone, even reversed. Benjamin's 'not for nothing' is an ironic if not sardonic reference to Hölderlin's later view that fatelessness was at once the greatest blessing and the greatest misfortune of both Gods and mortals.

With the departure of his second teacher, the conspirator Adamas, and the news of the death of his third teacher and lover Diotima, Hyperion rethinks the nexus of fate and the fateless in an extraordinary paragraph. Writing once more to Bellarmin, Hyperion claims: 'For the best. I am at peace, for I will not have it better than the Gods. Must not everything suffer. And the better it is, the deeper. Does not holy nature suffer? O my divinity, that you can mourn and yet be so blessed – that I was then not able to grasp. But the bliss that does not suffer is sleep, and without death there is no life.' (Hölderlin, 164) In a powerful reversal, the fateless suffer more than the fated. Hyperion in the last pages of the novel confesses 'I have never so completely experienced that old, steadfast word of fate (*Schicksalswort*): that a new bliss arises in the heart when it endures and survives the midnight of grief and, like the nightingale's song in the darkness, first in deepest suffering divinely the world's song of life

sounds to us. '(Hölderlin, 172) To overcome fate through suffering and arrive at its highest point in the state of fatelessness is also to arrive at an affirmation of life beyond fate.

Although it can be the highest intensity of fate, fatelessness can also be found before the advent of fate, in the infant of the *Schicksalslied* or more tellingly in the last pages of *Hyperion* in the unreflective life of the contemporary Germans among whom Hyperion finds himself exiled. The freedom from fate in the fateless can also be its forgetting, lost in the concerns of everyday life of the industrious Germans or it can be the breaking with fate that is divine freedom. In the 'Notes on the Antigone' Holderlin describes 'the dominant tendency in the modes of representation of our time is to be able to achieve something, to have skill (*Geschick*), since the fateless (*das Schicksallose*), the *δυσμορον* is our weakness. '(Holderlin, 918) To have skill, *Geschick*, without *Schicksal* is the lower degree of fatelessness, while to transcend fate in the fateless as an intimation of freedom is the highest. Both involve misfortune or ill-fatedness in the joining of the fateless (*Schicksallose*) with the 'ill-fated' or *δυσμορον*: as the suffering of the failed revolutionary Hyperion shows, suffering attends both lower and higher degrees of fatelessness.

From the standpoint of the lesser fatelessness, fate is something to be first achieved and then transcended in freedom. But through this process – which is the narrative of Hyperion – suffering even at the moment of bliss is ineluctable, for as Benjamin insists not only is there is no direct link between fate and happiness, there is also no point in the movement between fate and te fatelessness that can be said to be innocent. Benjamin's basic premises in 'Fate and Character' are consistent with Hölderlin's thought of fate, fatelessness, and happiness: 'Happiness and bliss are therefore no more part of the sphere of fate than is innocence. '(Benjamin, *Selected Writings volume I*, 203). But there are further interpretative consequences that can be drawn. Hölderlin's discussion of fate and fatelessness is not only singularly free of any reference to innocence, but also to guilt. And it is from this perspective that Benjamin is able to discern the gravity of the 'error' in associating the concept of fate with guilt. This error associated with a Christian interpretation of the Greek concept of fate for Benjamin not only misunderstands the concept of fate but also abandons the possibility of any liberation from it.

Benjamin radically separates his view of fate and fatelessness from any equation of ill-fatedness (*δυσμορον*) and guilt. The latter, or 'demonic fate',

consists for Benjamin in the illegitimate drawing together of guilt and misfortune under the concept of law. But 'such an order whose sole intrinsic concepts are guilt and misfortune' leaves 'no conceivable path of liberation' (Benjamin, 203). The succeeding discussion at the mid-point of 'Fate and Character' must be understood as a description of the consequences of a juridical misunderstanding of fate '—misfortune and guilt alone carry weight, a balance on which bliss and innocence are found too light and float upward.' (Benjamin, 203) Benjamin works through the implications of the introduction of guilt into the movement of fate and fatelessness in order to point beyond them. Propositions such as 'Fate is the guilt context of the living' are outcomes of a mistaken elision of fate and guilt and not part of Benjamin's attempt to recover through Hölderlin an ancient concept of fate free of any sense of fated guilt.

What then is the path of liberation that is closed by the introduction of guilt into the concept of fate? Hölderlin's exclamation 'Bester' — 'For the best' before stating that even or especially the Gods must suffer offers a clue. Liberation is not redemption or expiation from 'the endless pagan chain of guilt and atonement' but rather, as with Hyperion, the realization that it is possible to suffer as greatly if not more than the Gods, with the consequence that 'in tragedy pagan man becomes aware that he is better than his god, but the realization robs him of speech, remains unspoken. Without declaring itself, it seeks secretly to gather its violence (*Gewalt*)' (Benjamin, 175; 203). The fateless become part of a strategic disposition that moves between fate and fatelessness; moving between the two means the 'subject of fate is indeterminable' (Benjamin 175;204) in what Benjamin calls the 'natural condition of the living'— surviving within and against 'the guilt context of the living—' where fate is inseparable from the fateless and in which the human 'was never wholly immersed...but only invisible in his best part.' (Benjamin,175; 204) This 'invisible' and 'best' part corresponds to the 'secret gathering of *Gewalt*' in the survival of suffering and serves to situate fate within Holderlin's movement from a fateless indifference prior to fate, through the order of fate and its misfortune to a fateless transcendence in freedom.

This view of fate beyond the juridical context of guilt and innocence has radical implications for the character of the 'indeterminable subject of fate'. Perhaps

just how radical becomes apparent if we look forward to Benjamin's critique of the timidity of Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* in the fragment 'Capitalism as Religion'. The *Übermensch s amor fati* or its love of fate shies away from Hyperion's final position which is not to love fate but to exceed in suffering even the fatelessness of the Gods. In 'Capitalism as Religion' the 'passage of the human through the house of despair' (Benjamin, 289) does not arrive at the fateless since it remains mired in guilt. Even 'the breaking open of the heavens by an intensified humanity' remains for Benjamin, insofar as it 'was and is characterized (even for Nietzsche himself) by guilt' (289) a failure to attain Hölderlin's insight into the surpassing of fate in fatelessness. In the view of fate shared by Hölderlin and Benjamin, there is no guilt in suffering an ill fate and liberation from it is thus not a redemption or an expiation of guilt, but a passage through fate and the fateless to *life*, or an intensity of suffering that is also bliss.

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