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Between Fate and Skill. Translating Hölderlin's Term "Geschik"

ABSTRACT. In this essay I revisit a vexed question, namely how to translate the term "Geschik" in Hölderlin's theoretical writings. There are two places where its interpretation is contentious: in a passage from the *Anmerkungen zur Antigönä*, and in the first letter to Böhlendorff. In his writings he frequently uses the term to mean "fate", but this is not an invariable rule. Depending upon the context, other interpretations (for instance "skill") cannot always be excluded. It is also clear that Hölderlin enjoys playing on the etymological and phonetic relations between this and cognate expressions.

In the translation and interpretation of Hölderlin's theoretical reflections, perhaps no term has given rise to more controversy than "Geschick" (in his orthography "Geschik")¹. As far as the poetry is concerned its primary meaning seems almost always to be "fate" or "destiny", translated as "sorte" or "destino" in the first volume of Reitani's Italian Hölderlin-edition². But even in the case of the poetry there is at least one exception, and one must also bear in mind the resonances of "Geschik" with such cognate terms as "(un)geschikt", "schiklich", and "geschiklich"³. For the element of

¹ For comments and suggestions, I am grateful to Howard Gaskill and to the anonymous reviewers. Hölderlin editions will be cited in accordance with the abbreviations given in the bibliography below. Any websites mentioned there were accessed on 9 October 2020.

² Tutte le liriche. Edizione tradotta e commentata e revisione del testo critico tedesco a cura di Luigi Reitani. Milano 2001, 2004² (*TL*). See e.g. 255, v. 9; 585, v. 3; 943, v. 62; 975, vv. 58, 61 & 82; 1111, v. [48]; 1171, v. 1; 1199, v. 85; the exception is at 1073, v. 115. See further: *Prose, teatro e lettere*. A cura di Luigi Reitani. Milano 2019 (*PTL*); and for other translations (and abbreviations) see again the bibliography.

³ See note 5 below. Adelung's contemporary dictionary records the following meanings

word-play – so prominent in relation to those terms in the poetic work – might on occasion extend to the works in prose. The publication of Reitani’s second volume, containing translations of the theoretical essays and letters, provides an occasion to revisit this vexed issue.

The term occurs relatively frequently in Hölderlin’s works, in both poems and prose writings⁴. As already noted, Hölderlin enjoys playing on etymological or phonetic connections between “Geschick” (or indeed “Schicksaal”) and such terms as “geschiklich”; and translators have responded in various ways to such resonances and ambiguities⁵. In the poetry there seems to be

for “Das Geschick”: «1. Der Zustand einer Sache, da sie zu einer gewissen Veränderung geschickt, d. i. fähig und tüchtig ist; [...] 2. Die natürliche Fähigkeit lebendiger Geschöpfe, nach welcher sie zu gewissen Veränderungen geschickt, d. i. fähig und tüchtig sind [...]. In engerer Bedeutung, das Vermögen, eine Sache mit Leichtigkeit zu vollbringen. [...] 3. Die Anordnung der menschlichen Begebenheiten in der Welt, so fern sie von einem höhern Wesen herrühren, und nicht in unserm freyen Willen gegründet sind, das Schicksal, die Schickung [...]». See also note 31 below.

⁴ In the case of the poetry, there are at least thirteen instances (more if different versions of the same poem are taken into account), almost all from 1800 onwards. In the case of the theoretical essays, note in particular the several occurrences in the essay on Religion (*MA* II: 51-57) discussed further below.

⁵ See e.g. *Am Quell der Donau* (*MA* I: 353, vv. 102-103): «Schicksaalssöhne»/«den Ungeschikteren», and cf. «figli del destino»/«[p]iù inetti» (*TL*: 1133), «offspring of destiny»/«less adept» (*SP*: 121), but note «sons of fate»/«less fated, less skilled» (*HF*: 59). For «geschik» and «schiklich[]» see the last stanza of *Blödigkeit* (*MA* I: 444, vv. 21, 24), with the commentaries of Reitani in *TL*: 1482-1483 and Schmidt in *KA* I: 831, and also Ulrich Gaier: Hölderlin. Eine Einführung. Tübingen; Basel 1993: 370-371. For «[d]as Schikliche» see *Der Ister* (*MA* I: 475, v. 10), and contrast «ciò che è destinato» (*TL*: 1217) with «what is fitting» (*PF*: 581); see also «[a]dequacy to fate» (*HF*: 111), and Sieburth’s note on the «semantic cluster» of related expressions (*HF*: 267), and cf. Felix Christen: Das Jetzt der Lektüre. Zur Edition und Deutung von Friedrich Hölderlins *Ister*-Entwürfen. Frankfurt/M.; Basel 2013: 203-204 («auch auf die Fügung der Worte und Verse beziehbar»). As regards the term “geschiklich” see the first stanza of *Thränen*: «o ihr geschiklichen» (*MA* I: 441, v. 2), which Groddeck sees as unambiguously meaning “skilled” («geschickt, kunstfertig») in accordance with the dictionary definitions, although to my knowledge all translators here give it the sense of “fateful” or “fated”. See Wolfram Groddeck: Über das “Wortlose” in Hölderlins Ode *Thränen*. In: «Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft

only one place where it unequivocally means something other than "fate". This is in a passage on p. 76 of the *Homburger Folioheft* containing the words: «daß sie lernen der Hände Geschik» (*MA I*: 424, v. 2). Reitani translates «[...] l'abilità delle mani» (*TL*: 1073); although, as if to underscore the difficulty treated here, Jaccottet's edition nonetheless offers «[...] le destin des mains» (*PJ*: 933)⁶. The latter interpretation has also been defended by Lawrence Ryan, in a critique of Szondi's account of the letter to Böhlendorff of 4 December 1801⁷. For the term occurs in that first Böhlendorff-letter, where it has been the subject of strikingly differing interpretations. It also occurs (twice) in the third section of the *Anmerkungen zur Antigonä* (1804).

But in addition to the poetry, theoretical texts, and letters, we should not forget Hölderlin's own translations. In his version of Pindar's *First Pythian Ode* (1800) he renders $\mu\alpha\chi\alpha\nu\alpha\iota$ – meaning, in that context, the means or resources of human achievement – as «Geschike»: «Denn von den Göttern die Ge-/schike alle den sterblichen Tugenden,/Und Weise und mit Händen gewal-/tige und sprachereiche geboren sind» (*MA II*: 203, vv. 76-79)⁸. Note

und Geistesgeschichte» 80.2006, 624-39 (632-33); and contrast *TL*: 289, *PF*: 253, *OE*: 171, and *PJ*: 786 (Rovini). Note also Constantine's «visited with fire» (*SP*: 75), and see Schmidt in *KA I*: 820 («geschicklichen» = «von einem Geschick betroffen»). In the case of «das große Geschik» in *Brod und Wein* (*MA I*: 376, v. 62), Groddeck discerns two meanings: «das "Schicksal" als das von oben "Geschickte", aber auch als "das Schickliche" und in diesem Moment Richtige»; see Wolfram Groddeck: Hölderlins Elegie *Brod und Wein* oder *Die Nacht*. Frankfurt/M.; Basel 2012: 103.

⁶ The translation is attributed collectively to the «Revue de Poésies»; but contrast «let them learn skill of hand» (*HF*: 241). For another place where translators are not unanimous, see *Dichterberuf* (*MA I*: 329, v. 9) and contrast *PF*: 233 and *OE*: 103 («skill»), with *SP*: 62 («fate»), *PJ* (Rovini): 779 («sort»), and *TL*: 255 («sorte»).

⁷ See Peter Szondi: Überwindung des Klassizismus. Der Brief an Böhlendorff vom 4. Dezember 1801. In Szondi: Schriften I. Hrsg. v. Jean Bollack et al. Frankfurt/M. 1978: 345-66; and Lawrence Ryan: «Vaterländisch und natürlich, eigentlich originell». Hölderlins Briefe an Böhlendorff. In: «Hölderlin-Jahrbuch» 34.2004-2005: 246-76.

⁸ Hölderlin's later version of these lines (1805?) has instead «all Gewerß» (*MA II*: 390, v. 80). In both cases, the interlinear translation of the (essentially identical) Greek originals made by the editors of *FHA* reads: «Von Göttern nämlich die-Mittel [$\mu\alpha\chi\alpha\nu\alpha\iota$] alle zu-

that the same Greek word – albeit in its singular form and Attic orthography – occupies a prominent position in the first paragraph of his *Anmerkungen zum Oedipus* (1804), which proposes that modern poetry be raised «zur μηχανη der Alten» (*MA II*: 309). Further on in that Pindar translation «Geschik» is used in the sense of “fortune” or “destiny”, illustrating Hölderlin’s willingness to use the term in two senses within a relatively short compass⁹. But that first occurrence removes any doubt that “Geschik” in Hölderlin can mean something comparable to the Greek *mēkhanē*. Furthermore, as Beißner has suggested, a further such example may be found in v. 194 of his translation of the *Third Pythian*¹⁰.

Accordingly, the use of “Geschik” to mean “fate” or “destiny” may indeed predominate in Hölderlin’s usage; but the alternative meaning of “ability”, “skill” or poetic “means” cannot always be excluded. Furthermore, the choice of a term which – unlike “das Schiksaal” – can have such disparate meanings might on occasion be deliberate.

sterblichen Tugenden [...]» (*FHA 15*: 196, 370); cf. the reference to «[das] Mittel» in the second paragraph of the *Anmerkungen zum Oedipus* (*MA II*: 309).

⁹ See *MA II*: 204, v. 127: «Ein Geschik [αἴσων] den Städten und Königen»; see also (in the *Third Pythian*) «ein Theil des guten Geschiks [μοῖρ'εὐδαμονίας]» (*MA II*: 216, v. 150), and see the following note.

¹⁰ See *StA 5*: 424 *ad* P 3, v. 110: «μαχανά wird auch P 8, 47 und 107 mit *Kunst* übersetzt, P 3, 194 und P 1, 76 f. aber mit *Geschik*». In the case of v. 194 Hölderlin’s intention is slightly obscured by the syntax of his word-for-word translation, but «dem Geschik» seems to correspond to Pindar’s *μαχανά*. – I note that Courtine (*FP*: 369, n. 6) refers to v. 448 of the *Oedipus* translation (*MA II*: 266), which raises interesting questions of its own. In that case «Geschik» translates τύχη, that is to say “destiny” or (good or bad) “fortune”. But the fortune in question relates to Oedipus’ famous ability to solve riddles, so that the double meaning of “Geschik” does unexpected justice to the Sophoclean irony. The emendation τέχνη was in fact proposed by the scholar Richard Bentley (1662-1742), but it was not published until 1816 and is not generally adopted; see, most recently, Sophocles: *Oedipus the King*. Ed. by P. J. Finglass. Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries, 57. Cambridge 2018: 311 *ad* v. 442, and 633. The assonance of τέχνη with τύχη remains; and note the translation of the former as «skill» (Finglass: 291 *ad* v. 380) or «Kunst» (*MA II*: 264, v. 384).

As already noted, in addition to the use of "Geschik" in the first letter to Böhlendorff, there are two occurrences in the *Anmerkungen zur Antigonä*. I shall refer to these as "A1" and "A2" respectively¹¹. In the case of all three occurrences there are some striking divergences among translators, which I set out in the following table¹²:

Translator of letter/ <i>Anmerkungen</i>	Böhlendorff-letter	A1	A2
Constantine (<i>SP</i>)	—	fate	skill
Louth/Adler (<i>AL</i>)	craft	fate	skill
Pfau	destiny	skill	skill
Courtine (<i>FP</i>)	dextérité	destin	adresse
Naville/Fédier (<i>PJ</i>)	destin	savoir correspondre	savoir-faire
Ruschi	—	destino	destino
Lavagetto/ Bozzetti, Gut-Bozzetti & Reitani (<i>PTL</i>)	destino	destinazione	destino

The relevant passage in the *Anmerkungen zur Antigonä* is the following (where both here and below my emphases are in bold, Hölderlin's in italics):

ihre [i.e. die griechischen Vorstellungen – Ch. L.] Haupttendenz ist, **sich fassen zu können**, weil darin ihre Schwäche lag, da hingegen die Haupttendenz in den Vorstellungsarten unserer Zeit ist, etwas treffen zu können, **Geschik zu haben**, da **das Schiksaallose, das δυσμογον**, unsere Schwäche ist. Deswegen hat der Grieche **auch mehr Geschik und Athletentugend**, und muß diß, so paradox uns die Helden der Iliade erscheinen mögen, als eigentlichen *Vorzug* und als ernstliche Tugend haben. Bei uns ist diß mehr **der Schiklichkeit** subordinirt.

In its first occurrence (A1) it seems clear that «Geschik» must mean

¹¹ They are both found towards the end of the second paragraph of section 3 of those *Anmerkungen*: see *MA* II: 374 (*AL*: 330; *PTL*: 779); and for the Böhlendorff-letter see *MA* II: 912-13 (*AL*: 207; *PTL*: 1216).

¹² In my own recent translation, I opted respectively for «fate» (A1) and «dexterity» (A2). See Charles Lewis: *The Law of Poetry. Studies in Hölderlin's Poetics*. Cambridge 2019: 180. Like Courtine's «adresse», this was intended to convey skill of a peculiarly corporeal kind (see below).

“fate”, since it is contrasted with an absence of fate or «das Schicksaallose»¹³. It is true that the latter term receives a puzzling additional gloss, by way of the Greek adjective *dusmoros* (meaning “unhappy” or “ill-fated”). However, that can be seen as a veiled reference to the Sophocles play mentioned in the immediately following paragraph. For there Hölderlin offers *Oedipus at Colonus* as a precursor of a modern or “Hesperian” tragedy, and (as Billings has observed) the term *dusmoros* is particularly prominent in that play¹⁴. It seems that «das Schicksaallose» must be contrasted with a different, peculiarly Greek kind of misfortune, one that belongs to the younger Oedipus (and the later Antigone). That would be the fateful encounter described at the beginning of the third section of each of set of *Anmerkungen*, involving the transgressive union with a divine power and described respectively in terms of «[der] Zorn» and «die [...] Begeisterung» (*MA* II: 315, 373). In the case of A2, on the other hand, «Geschik» is compared with «d[ie] Schiklichkeit» – that is to say with decorum and propriety, or at least a skilfulness dominated by those characteristics. And «Geschik» is connected, furthermore, to something that Hölderlin calls «Athletentugend», that is to say a virtue or ability of a peculiarly corporeal kind.

The immediate context of occurrences A1 and A2 is therefore different, and we are entitled to construe «Geschik» differently in the two cases. It is true that we would then be confronted with a pun, or at least a play on words. But this becomes less surprising if one considers the so-called *Nachtgesänge* dating from the same period. As already noted, plays on “geschikt” and “schiklich” can be found in the last stanza of *Blödigkeit* (*MA* I: 444)¹⁵.

¹³ In translating «Geschik» as «skill» in both A1 and A2, Pfau is something of an outlier, although he would apparently be followed by Billings. See Joshua Billings: *The Genealogy of Tragedy. Greek Tragedy and German Philosophy*. Princeton NJ; Oxford 2014: 217-218.

¹⁴ See Billings (cit. note 13): 218, n. 46. One can imagine that such an explanation of fatelessness as a particular kind of ill fortune was particularly important for the author of Hyperion’s «Schicksaalslied», which – in a plainly different sense – attributed such a condition to a suckling infant and the gods (*MA* I: 744-745).

¹⁵ Cf. Reitani’s translation of the former as both «abili» and «mandati» (*TL*: 295 & 1482, n. 21), and see note 5 above. Another possible instance in the *Nachtgesänge* is the occurrence

And while such a technique may seem more appropriate in a poetic – as opposed to theoretical – work, it is in this period that Hölderlin is moving towards the kind of synthesis of poetic and theoretical expression that is found in his commentaries to the Pindar fragments¹⁶.

There is another important difference between the contexts of A1 and A2, corresponding to the distinction drawn there between «[die] Schwäche», on the one hand, and «die Haupttendenz» or «[der] Vorzug» on the other. And it is that contrast that provides the clearest link with the first Böhlendorff-letter. For that letter expounds the paradox that the excellence of a culture lies ultimately not in its original endowment, or in what (for the Greeks) is described as «das Feuer vom Himmel» or «d[as] heilige[] Pathos»:

Es klingt paradox. Aber [...] das eigentliche nationale wird im Fortschritt der Bildung immer der geringere **Vorzug** werden. Deßwegen sind die Griechen des heiligen Pathos weniger Meister, weil es ihnen angeboren war, hingegen sind sie **vorzüglich** in Darstellungsgaabe, **von Homer an**, weil dieser außerordentliche Mensch seelenvoll genug war, um die abendländische *Junonische Nüchternheit* für sein Apollonsreich zu erbeuten, und so wahrhaft das fremde sich anzueignen. (MA II: 912)

The same “paradox” is expounded in the passage cited above from the *Anmerkungen*, albeit with a different emphasis. As befits a discussion of tragedy, Hölderlin begins by stressing the element of “weakness” rather than of “advantage” or “excellence”¹⁷. But to the «Fortschritt der Bildung» of the

of “geschicklich” (in the form «ihr geschicklichen») in the first stanza of *Tränen*, to which Groddeck and Schmidt have given diametrically opposed interpretations: «geschickt, kunstfertig» versus «von einem Geschick betroffen» (see again note 5). At KA I: 820 Schmidt himself draws a parallel with the *Anmerkungen*, and confirms that he would construe «Geschick» in A2 in the sense of «Schicksal».

¹⁶ MA II: 379-385. Note that the question of ambiguity is in effect the subject of the seventh of those commentaries (MA II: 382-383); see Lewis (cit. note 12): 139-143.

¹⁷ The Böhlendorff-letter nonetheless records (as we have just seen) that «die Griechen [sind] des heiligen Pathos weniger Meister, weil es ihnen angeboren war», and also that Greek tragic heroes (unlike modern ones) «in Flammen verzehrt die Flamme büßen, die [sie] nicht zu bändigen vermochten» (MA II: 913).

Böhlendorff-letter there corresponds the «Haupttendenz» of the *Anmerkungen*; and to the achievement «sich fassen» of the *Anmerkungen*, there corresponds the «Darstellungsgaabe» and «Nüchternheit» mentioned in that letter. As far as the element of “weakness” is concerned, in the *Anmerkungen* it is related to the Greeks’ previously limited ability «sich fassen zu können», for «darin ihre Schwäche lag»¹⁸. Our native weakness as moderns, on the other hand, lies in «das Schiksaallose»; and our «Haupttendenz» in the ability «etwas treffen zu können», for which Hölderlin gives as an equivalent «Geschik zu haben».

It is worth pausing over the expression «etwas treffen zu können». The connection with “Geschik” in the sense of “fate” is confirmed by the *Antigone* translation at *MA* II: 335, v. 482: «auf solch Schiksaal zu treffen [μῦθον τυχεῖν]», which is used by Antigone to refer to the prospect of her untimely death. But not all fates are the unhappy ones frequently connoted by the Greek *moros*, and «Geschik» in A1 does not refer to a tragic destiny. It is rather «das Schiksaallose» that would correspond to misfortune in a modern tragedy, while «Geschik» in A1 can still be translated as “fate”. The reason for the differing emphases in the Böhlendorff-letter and the *Anmerkungen* is also clear. In the words of an earlier letter to Mehmel, the point of tragedy is that it is a demonstration «*per contrarium*». Rather than achieving a mastery of a more “Hesperian” sobriety, Greek tragic heroes fall victim in the end to their fiery Apollonian endowment: «Der Gott und Mensch scheint Eins, darauf ein Schiksaal, das alle Demuth und allen Stolz des Menschen erregt» (*MA* II: 851). But if our own original endowment is different from that of the Greeks, our element of tragic vulnerability will also be different.

It is striking, therefore, that in the second half of the passage above from the *Anmerkungen* he turns to the element of “advantage” rather than “weakness”, using (and indeed emphasizing) the term “Vorzug” that had also been

¹⁸ Note the use of the past tense: a deficit in the ability «sich fassen zu können» was the Greeks’ original point of weakness, but as a result of the «Fortschritt der Bildung» mentioned in the Böhlendorff-letter such an ability became a point of strength. However, that strength is not exemplified by the tragic hero, who (as a result of extraordinary circumstances) falls victim in the end to the element of «Pathos».

used in the Böhlendorff-letter: «Deswegen hat der Grieche auch mehr Geschik und Athletentugend, und muß diß [...] als eigentlichen *Vorzug* und als ernstliche Tugend haben». And – again as in the letter – he now refers to Homer or «die Helden der Iliade» rather than to the heroes of tragedy, distinguishing their kind of «Geschik» from our own «Schiklichkeit». It seems that «Geschik» now refers to a species of corporeal skill or virtue. It is true that such a “skill” is closer to the tragic sense of “Geschik” than is a typically modern skilfulness, for it was developed in opposition to the Greeks’ original endowment. That indeed is why it is more corporeal or “athletic”. And the fate of the tragic hero has a similarly “plastic” or corporeal dimension, albeit one with less positive connotations than in the case of the epic¹⁹. In any event, I do not think that Hölderlin has been negligent in employing an ambiguous term to convey successively different meanings. It is more likely that he has chosen his words carefully, and that what might appear to be an inadvertent pun has a serious intent.

What then are the arguments for a univocal reading of «Geschik»? As far as the passage from the *Anmerkungen* is concerned, Ryan offers little more than dogmatic assertion:

Das Wort “Geschick” und seine Derivate – auch wenn hier von «Geschik und Athletentugend» der Griechen und der modernen «Schiklichkeit» oder an einer anderen Stelle von «der Hände Geschik» [...] die Rede ist – sind bei Hölderlin durchgehend von der Grundbedeutung von “Geschick” als “Schicksal” bestimmt. (cit. note 7: 263, n. 7)

¹⁹ Recall again the words «sich fassen zu können». Towards the end of immediately following paragraph (*MA* II: 374) we find the expression «griechisch faßlich, in athletischem und plastischem Geiste» – confirming that the Greek ability to “grasp oneself” has a corporeal and athletic dimension. However, Hölderlin has now returned to the topic of the tragic «word» and the representation of death in tragedy, so that for instance in a more “Hesperian” tragedy (comparable to *Oedipus at Colonus*) «das Wort [...] tödtet, nicht griechisch faßlich [...]». It seems that the initial vulnerability of the Greek tragic hero consists not so much in the aspect of suffering or death, as in the original excessive unity of human and divine; and “fassen” connotes, conversely, the element of comprehension or containment of such excess in tragic representation (cf. the first paragraph of section 3, at *MA* II: 373, and see Reitani’s commentary at *PTL*: 1517, n. 69).

This is a generalization that we have already had reason to doubt. But Ryan's primary purpose is the interpretation of the Böhlendorff-letter, and it is to that question that I now turn.

The first point to note is that the letter does not refer to any distinction between a Greek "Geschik" and a modern "Schiklichkeit", of the kind found in the *Anmerkungen*. And similarly, the letter to Mehmel is content to use the latter term in relation to the Greeks («eine heilige Schiklichkeit»)²⁰. Such an express contrast seems to be a later development belonging to the period of the *Anmerkungen*. It may also be noted that the term "Schiksaal" occurs no less than three times in the Böhlendorff-letter – raising the question why, in one place only, Hölderlin prefers the term "Geschik".

The next point is that the reference to "Geschik" in the Böhlendorff-letter occurs in a passage that draws certain conclusions from the immediately preceding discussion of the difference between ancient Greek and modern cultures. That is say, it draws conclusions specifically for poetic practice. Thus, after the paragraph cited above, the letter continues:

Bei uns ists umgekehrt. Deßwegen ists auch so gefährlich sich die Kunstregeln einzig und allein von griechischer Vortreflichkeit zu abstrahiren. Ich habe lange daran laborirt und weiß nun daß außer dem, was bei den Griechen und uns das höchste seyn muß, nemlich **dem lebendigen Verhältniß und Geschik**, wir nicht wohl etwas *gleich* mit ihnen haben dürfen. (MA II: 912-913)

Here Hölderlin refers to a long-standing study of aesthetic rules («die Kunstregeln»). And he is making a new or additional point («ists **auch** so gefährlich»), albeit one that finds its ultimate foundation in the more general reflections that precede. At least at first sight, the conclusion that we can have little that is "equal" or "in common" with the Greeks seems to relate specifically to that question of «Kunstregeln». And if we can none the less can have something in common with them in the matter of artistic technique, that would seem to correspond to the exception which he immediately goes on to note: «außer [...] dem lebendigen Verhältniß und Geschik».

²⁰ MA II: 851; the identification of Mehmel as recipient now suggests a dating around the end of November 1800 (see *PTL*: 1685-1686; *AL*: 183, 366).

It is that immediate context that lends initial plausibility to Szondi's interpretation of «Geschik» as artistic skill or technique (cit. note 7: 363-366). It is true that he must then also provide an explanation of the associated phrase «lebendige[s] Verhältniß». But in that respect, the connection he makes with the letter to Neuffer of 12 November 1798 also has a degree of plausibility. There Hölderlin dwells on his perceived poetic weaknesses, with a view to achieving «[d]as Lebendige in der Poësie» (MA II: 710). But that life or liveliness – evoked frequently in this letter to Neuffer – is not to be sought in a transcendence of the everyday, in the enthusiasm of poetic pathos or unworldly philosophical abstraction. It is sought rather in the integration of «mannigfaltig geordneten Tönen», including the tone corresponding to «das Gemeine und Gewöhnliche im wirklichen Leben» (MA II: 711). As Szondi points out, that letter is in effect an initial sketch of Hölderlin's doctrine of the *Wechsel der Töne*, that is to say the poetics of the first Homburg period.

Those who prefer an alternative interpretation of the expression «lebendige[s] Verhältniß und Geschik» have also differed between themselves when it comes to the details. Schmidt seems to interpret the expression as a whole rather than its individual components, relating it to the prior discussion of the difference between modernity and antiquity:

Der Zielpunkt dieser Darlegungen ist aber keineswegs der ausschließliche «freie Gebrauch des Eigenen» [MA II: 913], vielmehr der freie Gebrauch des Eigenen in harmonischer Verbindung mit der entgegengesetzten Sphäre, der unser Bildungstrieb zustrebt. Das Ziel ist ein "klassischer" Ausgleich von «Nüchternheit» und Begeisterung («Pathos», «Feuer vom Himmel») [MA II: 912] – dieser Ausgleich entspricht dem, «was bei den Griechen und uns das höchste sein muß, nämlich dem lebendigen Verhältnis und Geschick». (KA III: 910)

For Schmidt, therefore, to obtain «das höchste» both we and the Greeks must find a "classical" balance between the elements of "Pathos" and "Nüchternheit". It is less clear whether he would assign one element to each component (e.g. "Pathos" = "Geschik")²¹. But where Schmidt sees two balancing components, Ryan finds only one:

²¹ In what is perhaps a version of Schmidt's interpretation, Gonther und Reinecke have

Das «lebendige Verhältniß und Geschik» ist die schicksalhaft bestimmende Einbeziehung in eine “höhere Sphäre”, sei es in Form des heiligen Pathos, das aus dem unmittelbaren Verwobensein in den ursprünglichen “feurigen” Grund hervorgeht [= Greek – Ch. L.], sei es in Form der sich zur Teilnahme an einer erweiterten Einigkeit erhebenden Begeisterung [= modern – Ch. L.]. (cit. note 7: 264)

Unlike Schmidt, therefore, Ryan explains the formula solely in terms of participation in a sphere variously characterised as “Pathos” or “Begeisterung”. It is odd, therefore, that he insists that such – respectively Greek and Hesperian – characteristics enjoy «keine Gleichheit» (*ibid.*) or are (citing the earlier case of *Hyperion*) «keineswegs [...] gleichzusetzen» (255). On his own account, therefore, it is difficult to see how this can be what we might have in common with the Greeks («gleich mit ihnen»), and so fall within the exception allowed by the Böhlendorff-letter.

Reitani admits that the passage is susceptible to different interpretations, but notes Hölderlin’s frequent usage of “Geschik” to unequivocally mean “destino” (*PTL*: 1700-1701, n. 8). He accordingly explains the two components of Hölderlin’s formula in terms of the biological dimensions of “life” and “death”: «l’esistenza biologica dell’uomo, ovvero [la] vita (la relazione vivente) e [la] morte (il destino)». These, and only these, are what we have in common with the Greeks, so that we share only «lo scopo supremo di rappresentare appunto la vita e la morte» (*ibid.*). However, on that account it may be difficult to explain how Greek art could have any special significance

recently interpreted «Geschik» as skill in articulating the relation between the two elements: «das “Geschik” dabei, das “Verhältniß” von ursprünglich Eigenem und dem anzueignenden Fremden in der Kunst “lebendig” zu gestalten». See Uwe Gonther und Andreas Reinecke: Veränderungen in Hölderlins Sprache vor und nach dem Bordeaux-Aufenthalt am Beispiel der beiden Briefe an seinen Freund Casimir Ulrich Böhlendorff. In: «Hölderlin-Jahrbuch» 41.2018-2019: 122-146 (126). For Castellari, on the other hand, «Geschik» denotes the arc of development common to Greek and modern cultures («un eguale percorso, un “destino” comune nel corso della *Bildung* di ciascuna delle due culture/arti»); see Marco Castellari: «Es klingt paradox». Hölderlin, Böhlendorff e il teatro moderno. «Studia theodisca – Hölderliniana» II. 2016: 119-144 (136).

for us, as compared with that of any other human culture – while the letter still insists that «die Griechen [sind uns] unentbehrlich» (*MA II*: 913).

We have seen that other occurrences of “Geschik”, whether before or after the Böhlendorff-letter, do not compel a reading in the sense of “fate”. Not long before that letter, the term had twice been used in his Pindar translations to render the Greek term *mēkhanē* – a term used in the *Anmerkungen zum Oedipus* to signify the highest embodiment of poetic skill. And *mēkhanē* is mentioned in those *Anmerkungen* precisely as something which (despite all cultural differences) we might hope to have in common with the Greeks²². But a degree of uncertainty of course remains, and before concluding the discussion I should mention some further occurrences of the expressions “Geschik” and “lebendiges Verhältniß”.

The plural form «die lebendigen Verhältnisse» is found in the fifth of Hölderlin's nine commentaries to fragments of Pindar, which are roughly contemporary with the *Anmerkungen* to Sophocles. For our present purposes, a parallel reading with the third of those commentaries (*Von der Rube*) yields a particularly interesting result. In the fifth commentary (*Das Höchste*), the living relations in question are said to be “held fast” both by laws and (in a less rigorous fashion) by «art»: «sie **halten** strenger, als die Kunst, **die lebendigen Verhältnisse fest**, in denen, mit der Zeit, ein Volk sich begegnet hat und begegnet» (*MA II*: 382). Those «living relations» evidently correspond to the various forms that can be taken by the destiny of a nation. In *Von der Rube*, «d[ie] Verhältnisse[] der Menschen» are again related to the «[das] Schicksaal eines Vaterlandes», and such modes of national destiny are again said to be “held fast” by laws: «Dann sind die Geseze die Mittel, **jenes Schicksaal [...]** **festzuhalten**» (*MA II*: 380)²³. But although a connection is thereby established between the concepts of “living relation” and “fate”, this is by no means

²² «Es wird gut seyn [...] wenn man die Poësie, auch bei uns, den Unterschied der Zeiten und Verfassungen abgerechnet, zur *μηχανή* der Alten erhebt» (*MA II*: 309).

²³ However, I think that Szondi is right to question any connection between «das höchste» in the Böhlendorff-letter, and the title of the Pindar-commentary *Das Höchste* (cit. note 7: 362-363). Here the letter to Mehmel may be more relevant, where (in relation to Greek art) the expression «das höchste *Karakteristische*» is used to describe both «[d]as Geistigste» and «die *Darstellung* desselben» (*MA II*: 851). But even here it may be difficult to draw any firm conclusions.

conclusive for the interpretation of the term “Geschik” in the Böhlendorff-letter. As we have seen, the letter itself uses the term “Schiksaal”, while avoiding it in the formula under discussion. And while the first component of the formula («lebendige[s] Verhältniß») may well invoke the thought that art – both Greek and modern – must grasp (or “hold fast”) the living forms of its respective “Vaterland”, the second component («Geschik») might relate to the aspect of “art” itself, in the form of poetic “law” or *mēkhanē*.

On the other hand, a close connection between “Geschik” (in the sense of “fate”), and the idea of a living “connection” or “relation”, can be found in the Hölderlin’s somewhat earlier essay on Religion (*MA* II: 51-57)²⁴. There the term occurs no less than five times; and the essay also makes repeated use of the notion of “Leben”, as well as of the terms “Verhältniß”, “Beziehung” and “Zusammenhang”²⁵. In the following table, R1, R2 etc. refer to the occurrences of “Geschik” in the order in which they appear in all the various reconstructions of the essay. Once again there is some divergence among translators, but only in their rendering of the last of those occurrences:

Translator	R1, R2, R3, R4	R5
Adler (<i>AL</i>)	fate	fate
Pfau	destiny	destiny
Courtine (<i>FP</i>)	destin	savoir-faire
Naville (<i>PJ</i>)	destin	capacités
Ruschi	destino	attitudine
Bozzetti, Gut-Bozzetti & Reitani (<i>TPL</i>)	destino	competenze

²⁴ As Reitani suggests (*PTL*: 1491-1492) this fragmentary essay may well date from 1799, as opposed to the earlier dating suggested (on questionable grounds) in *FHA* and *MA*. Reitani also gives an alternative ordering of the fragments, although the sequence is unimportant for our present purposes (see also *KA* II: 562-569).

²⁵ Louth observes that those terms are «Schlüssel- und Leitworte» of the essay, and similarly notes the importance there of the «Begriff des Lebens». See Charlie Louth: «jene zarten Verhältnisse». Überlegungen zu Hölderlins Aufsatzbruchstück *Über Religion/Fragment philosophischer Briefe*. In: «Hölderlin-Jahrbuch» 39.2014-2015: 124-138 (133-134); he also suggests a dating of 1799/1800 for the essay (131).

In what follows my emphases are again in bold, Hölderlin's in italics. R1 occurs in the context «in einem mehr als mechanischen **Zusammenhange**, daß ein höheres **Geschik** zwischen ihnen und ihrer Welt sei»; R2 in «warum sie sich den **Zusammenhang** zwischen sich und ihrer Welt gerade *vorstellen*, warum sie sich eine Idee oder ein Bild machen müssen, von ihrem **Geschik**»; the context of R3 is «der Mensch auch in so fern sich über die Noth erhebt, als er sich seines **Geschiks** *erinnern*, als er für sein Leben *dankebar* seyn kann und mag, daß er seinen durchgängigern **Zusammenhang** [...] auch durchgängiger *empfindet*» (all these at *MA* II: 53). And R4 occurs in the context: «jener unendlichere mehr als nothdürftige **Zusammenhang**, jenes höhere **Geschik**» (*MA* II: 54). It is striking that in all these cases "Geschik" is used virtually as a synonym for "Zusammenhang"²⁶. And if in those occurrences «Geschik» corresponds to the relation between human beings and the world with which they interact – referred to elsewhere in the essay as a «Sphäre» – «ein höheres Geschik» corresponds to the particular kind of relation that is the object of religious representation²⁷. Those instances might help us to understand why, two or three years later, the Böhlendorff-letter can mention – as it were in the same breath – «[das] lebendige[] Verhältniß und Geschik». It is true that the earlier essay is devoted to the problem of religion rather than poetic technique; but the essay itself suggests a relation between the two («[s]o wäre alle Religion ihrem Wesen nach poetisch») and refers to the process of honouring a god «in dichterischen Vorstellungen» (*MA* II: 57). In effect, the essay sketches a poetics of religious representation and myth.

²⁶ The essay refers similarly to «[j]ene unendlicheren mehr als nothwendigen **Beziehungen** des Lebens» (*MA* II: 54), and «[j]ene zarteren und unendlichen **Verhältnisse**» (*MA* II: 55), and again repeatedly to various different kinds of «**Verhältnisse**» (*MA* II: 56). Note also that the essay combines the ideas of "life" and "relation" in such formulae as «in einer lebendigeren [...] Beziehung» (*MA* II: 51), and «Zusammenhang des Lebens» or «Beziehungen des Lebens» (*MA* II: 54).

²⁷ «Sphäre» occurs repeatedly in *MA* II: 51-55; the term is also used in the long poetological essay *Wenn der Dichter ...* (*MA* II: 77-100), which the earlier essay foreshadows in several respects.

Hölderlin is certainly employing a concept of “fate” in that essay, although it is not necessarily the one involved in his analysis of tragedy. If, following both Reitani and Louth, we assign the essay to the period around 1799, it would be contemporary with a high-point in his reception of ancient Stoicism (as evidenced in particular by the ode *Dichtermuth* of 1800). The notion of fate is central to the Stoic philosophy; and here one of the key texts for Hölderlin’s reception is the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius²⁸. See especially Book 5.8 of that work, with its advice that «what happens to each individual is somehow arranged to conduce to his destiny [εἰμαρμένην]» and that we should «welcome» everything that arrives since, on the one hand, it is essential to the coherence of the whole, and on the other «[it] is related to you, a thread of destiny spun [συγκλωθόμενον] for you from the first by the most ancient causes» (37-38)²⁹. If *Dichtermuth* (vv. 2, 5) connects the poet’s service to fate («die Parze») with an attitude of welcoming acceptance («es sei alles geseegnet dir»), the essay relates what it calls the “remembrance” of fate to a sentiment of gratitude («als er sich seines Geschicks [R3] *erinnern*, als er für sein Leben *dankbar* seyn kann und mag»). And the idea of human life as part of a web of relations is central to Hölderlin’s account of religion. It is true that the object of religious (or poetic) representation is distinct from the inexorable concatenation of causes that inspires the exercise of Stoic reason. To represent «den innigeren Zusammenhang des Lebens» (*MA* II: 54)

²⁸ Hölderlin alludes to the work’s Greek title in an epigram from the same period: Προς εαυτον (*MA* I: 236). He possessed the bilingual Greek and Latin edition edited by Samuel Morus (Leipzig 1775). English citations and related page references below follow Marcus Aurelius: *Meditations*. Trans. by Martin Hammond. London 2006. As regards *Dichtermuth*, see especially the second version of the ode (*MA* I: 284-285) and Schmidt’s commentary in *KA* I: 768-776, and similarly Reitani in *TL*: 1694-1698.

²⁹ See also the German translation (originally 1894): *Selbstbetrachtungen*. Übers. v. Albert Wittstock. Stuttgart 1949: 62-63. Wittstock uses the term under discussion («Was jedem Menschen begegnet, hat das Geschick als ihm dienlich angeordnet») but does not capture the subsequent allusion to Clotho, spinner among the Fates. See also Book 4.34: «Überlaß dich ohne Widerstand dem Geschick [τῇ Κλωθῶϊ] und laß dich von diesem in die Verhältnisse verflechten, in die es ihm beliebt» (53), where Hammond is closer to the original in identifying the Fate by her name: «Gladly surrender yourself to Clotho [...]» (30).

religion must instead have recourse to poetry and myth: only the latter can express «jene[n] unendlichere[n] [...] Zusammenhang, jenes höhere Geschik» (R4).

The above observations apply to the first four occurrences. The context for R5, on the other hand, is somewhat different: «wenn es nicht die Väter einer Familie sind, die das Geschäft und **Geschik** derselben [i.e. d[er] Religionsstifter – Ch. L.] forterbt» (*MA* II: 57). The manuscript breaks off before the sentence can be completed; but it provides further evidence of Hölderlin using “Geschik” probably to mean something closer to “skill” than to “fate” – as at least the non-anglophone translators agree.

The Stoic notion of fate expresses the idea of the cosmos as a well-ordered whole. This is the reason that Marcus Aurelius gives in Book 5.8 for welcoming our individual destinies, however painful the accidents of our lives may be: «We speak of the fitness of these happenings as masons speak of the “fit” of squared stones in walls or pyramids, when they join each other in a defined relation. In the whole of things there is one harmony [...]» (37). Note how the idea of fate is connected with that of a skilful fit of parts to the whole, as if the universe were ordered by a divine craftsman. The ambiguity that we have found in Hölderlin's term “Geschik” is overcome, but only at the price of a particular metaphysics. It is noteworthy that, when Hölderlin revised *Dichtermuth* for the purposes of the later version *Blödigkeit*, the theme of service to «die Parze» (i.e. Clotho) becomes a reference to the woven fabric of poetic truth («Geht auf Wahrem dein Fuß nicht, wie auf Teppichen?»). And the final stanza of *Blödigkeit* of course contains Hölderlin's most striking play on “geschikt” and “schiklich”, ending with a resounding affirmation of poetic craft («schikliche Hände»)³⁰. The date of the Böhlendorff-letter falls between those two versions of the ode. One way of formulating our present problem would be to ask on which side of that transformation its reference to «Geschik» belongs. Does the term refer to the intimate web of life-relations that can be captured in art,

³⁰ See respectively *MA* I: 284, v. 2, and *MA* I: 443-444, vv. 2, 21 & 24, and cf. notes 5 and 15 above.

or to the craft that allows them to be articulated by the poet? Or does it correspond, finally, to the well-ordered character of the art-work itself, in accordance with a further definition that can be found in Grimm: «*die rechte art, wie sich eins zum andern ordnet, das richtige, passende verhältnis*»³¹.

Conclusion

The above discussion has perhaps done more to highlight the difficulties in interpreting Hölderlin's term "Geschik" than in all cases to resolve them. But it may have also demonstrated its centrality to Hölderlin's reflections on the nature of ancient and modern poetic art, and on the relation between the two. It is surely the term's very ambiguity – or polyvalence – that makes it a suitable instrument for those reflections. It is also clear that it is in the latest phase of his poetic thought that this becomes most apparent. Thus it is in works such as the *Nachtgesänge* and the *Anmerkungen zur Antigonä* that the problem of the poet's task is explored in terms that can connote both "fate" and "skill". Here one can cite "geschick", and even "geschiklich", as well as the term "Geschik" itself. While the interpretation of the earlier letter to Böhlendorff cannot yet be regarded as settled, it is striking how the same problem is again articulated in terms of "Geschik", as opposed to the more unequivocal term "Schiksaal" that is also found in the letter. And if translating Hölderlin is no easy task, in undertaking it we have the satisfaction of bringing these fascinating difficulties into sharper relief.

³¹ Deutsches Wörterbuch, *s.n.* Geschick, III.1. (Bd. 5, Sp. 3875). Cf. Adelung, under sense 1: «2) Besonders, das Verhältniß der Theile einer Sache, so wie es der jedesmahligen Absicht gemäß ist, im gemeinen Leben und der vertrauten Sprechart». And see also Ebers' German-English dictionary of 1796, *s.n.* Geschick, 2): «Proportion, Conformity, Relation, Agreeableness, Likeness, Symmetry».

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