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Textual Understanding and Historical Experience

On Peter Szondi

Wilhelm Fink

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Peter Szondi, 1971
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CHRISTOPH KÖNIG

Philological Understanding.

Ethics, Method and Style in the Work of Peter Szondi

Peter Szondi had a habit of writing down especially striking passages taken from his readings; among them were these words by Schiller in a letter to Goethe: “unfortunately, we can know only that which we break apart.”¹ Schiller’s “scheiden,” rendered here as “break apart,” is the root of the word “unterscheiden,” “to differentiate.” Hence Hölderlin’s words which serve as the epigraph to his *Hölderlin Studies*: “*What is differentiated is / good*” (“*Unterschiedenes ist / gut*”) was important to Szondi,² because differentiating represented the potential for understanding his objects. At the same time, he chose objects which themselves practice differentiation, or which get at the meaning of differentiation, as Schiller and Hölderlin did. Szondi’s power of differentiation was applied first and foremost to literary genres, and to the differentiating relationships of genres to one another. Therefore, I will speak less of Szondi’s belonging to a specific (Jewish) language culture than of his use of language as measured by the genre he made his own, the scholarly essay. (Szondi’s “language culture” should then be understood as individual, and as a

¹ This essay originated as a lecture given at the conference “Meine Sprache ist Deutsch,” Deutsche Sprachkultur von Juden und die Geisteswissenschaften 1870-1970.” (“My Language Is German: Jewish German Language Culture and the Humanities 1870-1970”). In this essay I extend certain thoughts from my book: Christoph König, *Eingführungen. Peter Szondi und die Literatur* (Marbach: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 2005). The book includes an additional chapter and a timeline by Andreas Ijensschmid. The translation of this essay is by Stephen Haswell Todd (SHT). The notes (mostly handwritten) are among Szondi’s papers in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach. Here and in the following, references are given, when possible, to the editions in his personal library, catalogs of which are likewise in the archive. Here: Schiller to Goethe, August 23, 1794, likely cited from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, *Briefwechsel zwischen Schiller und Goethe in den Jahren 1794 bis 1805*, vol. 1, ed. by Philipp Stein (Leipzig: Reclam, 1944), 23. English translation: SHT. Cf. *Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe 1794-1805*, transl. by Liselotte Dieckmann (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 4.

² Peter Szondi, “Hölderlin-Studien. Mit einem Traktat über philologische Erkenntnis,” in: *Schriften I*, ed. by Jean Bollack et al. With a postface by Christoph König (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2011), 261-412, 263.

genre-critical handling of the German language.³) This genre differentiates itself both from the literary essay and from the scientific treatise.⁴ The extent to which it differs from them constitutes Szondi's particularity or, to be more emphatic, his subjectivity. Szondi's decision (another German word, "Entscheidung," that is derived from "scheiden") to dedicate himself to this genre is framed by the institutional opposition of literature and science that he was faced with in his lifetime. Indeed, Szondi's decision to adopt the form of the scholarly essay in the first place and to further develop it is tied to Jewish historical experience. His idea of "exactitude" was altered under the influence of his friend Paul Celan. By this, I don't mean a manner of speaking particular to Jewish intellectuals⁵ but rather the *ethics* of the scholarly essay. Szondi connects the "exactitude" of his thought to a particular kind of humanity and rationality that asserts itself in the scholarly essay. Szondi's efforts to bring his insights to fruition in the genre, and the ethics that can be discerned in the polemics of his essays are made possible by and rest upon a literarily defined subjectivity. The polemic that Szondi excels in is the reverse side of his scholarship—and it is directed at those who would obscure the scholarly force of his claims.

Subjectivity

A person's subjectivity constitutes itself in taking up the position that leads to differentiation. I will juxtapose Peter Szondi the scholarly essayist with his Jewish historical experience to describe the positions that Szondi took up. The question is, do these positions cohere with each other? There are two points to be made. First, the choice of the essay as form is a precarious one from the point of view of the German conception of scholarship; and the scholarly essay as Szondi practiced it hardly improves the situation. Thus, Szondi differentiates himself. Secondly, Szondi's historical experience entails a position taken. This

was given expression by Jean Bollack in his graveside eulogy for Szondi, who had taken his life on October 18, 1971:

The fate that claimed so many [i.e., the murder of European Jews] was spared him. Did it truly spare him—him, whom a miraculous protection served to further separate from his fellows and to make the inheritor of a double injustice: persecution and privilege [in the form of rescue from the camp]. The Bergen-Belsen camp held him for only a few weeks, but it forced him to live through the unspeakable terror, which is beyond all expression, in another way. He was fifteen years old.⁶

His memory of the camp, and the salvation which came to him as guilt (as Gershom Scholem indicates), found expression in the rigorous rationality according to which he arranged his life. Exactitude was his measure of all things. It became his dwelling. For Szondi, exactitude meant the constant splitting in two of what appeared self-evident. He defended it vehemently. It was in this form of exactitude that he understood himself as Jewish. In 1966, he related the following joke to Ernst Bloch: "You surely know the story of the shipwrecked Jew who built two synagogues on his desert island, because he refused to set foot in one of them." Szondi's position *vis-à-vis* Jewishness, or the popular idea of Jewishness, was furthered under the pressure of Paul Celan who, in the midst of the Goll affair in the early 1960s, demanded that Szondi not limit himself to a philological dialectic (on the question: who was first?). Instead, Celan suggested, he should formulate his individuality as a poetic statement. Methodologically speaking, Celan demanded of Szondi the transition from a philosophy of history to a critical hermeneutic; and in 1970, Szondi would dedicate his treatise "Schliermacher's Hermeneutics Today" to Celan.⁸ The central figure in the letters Celan wrote to Szondi was of the Jew conceived of as a "name,"⁹ as an individual designation and—*contra* the language of the murderers—as "a human form."¹⁰ Already in 1947, in his first term paper at university on the French Resistance writer Vercors—whose

3 Harald Weinrich, "Mit Sprachnormen leben," in: *Wegs der Sprachkultur* (Stuttgart: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1985), 11–18, 17; and Angelika Linke, *Sprachkultur im Bürgertum. Zur Mentalitätsgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 1996). For the adjudication of both positions see Stephan Braese, *Eine europäische Sprache* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010), 11ff.

4 Heinz Schaffter, "Essay," in: Klaus Weimar et al. (eds.), *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft*, vol. 1 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), 522–525.

5 See Wilfried Barner and Christoph König (eds.), *Jüdische Intellektuelle und die Philologen in Deutschland, 1871–1933* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2001).

6 Jean Bollack, unpublished typescript, 5 sheets, Szondi archive (see n. 1).

7 Szondi to Ernst Bloch, March 21, 1966; typescript, Szondi archive (see n. 1).

8 Peter Szondi, "Schliermacher's Hermeneutics Today," in: *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, transl. by Harvey Mendelsohn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 95–113.

9 Celan to Peter Szondi, August 11, 1961, in: *Paul Celan, Peter Szondi. Briefwechsel. Mit Briefen von Gisèle Celan-Lestrange an Peter Szondi und Auszügen aus dem Briefwechsel zwischen Peter Szondi und Jean und Margarete Bollack*, ed. by Christoph König (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2005), 39ff.

10 Ibid., 40.

work sounds out the possibilities of Jewish life after the concentration camps, against the backdrop of an unemitting French patriotism—Szondi took a stance against Vercors' patriotism in the name of a humanity to which Germans too should have a claim.¹¹ In his *Celan Studies*, Szondi begins to flesh out Celan's poetic re-making of the German language, after its corruption under National Socialism, as a combination of the affirmation of particularity and of de-nationalization.¹²

With the figure of splitting or opposition ("Entzweiung"), came a freedom and sovereignty for Szondi in relation to the university that was previously unheard of—more so for a Jewish scholar in postwar Germany. The history of German philology between 1871 and 1933 reveals that many Jewish scholars, institutionally weakened by academic anti-Semitism, retreated before the paradoxes of their discipline rather than exploit them to progressive ends. This was significantly different from the situation in the natural sciences, where the marginalization of Jewish researchers actually favored innovation.¹³ Szondi nevertheless made use of his subjectivity in precise reference to philological contradictions. This is reflected in his scholarly style and his use of the scholarly essay which bear greater testimony to Szondi's Jewish experience than any "Jewish language culture."

Outside the Institution

I would like to lay out a brief biographical sketch, at the center of which I place Szondi's position outside the university. Today, Peter Szondi is a leading figure in literary studies. He was born in Budapest in 1929, the son of the psychiatrist Leopold Szondi, the founder of

so-called "destiny-analysis" ("Schicksalsanalyse"). The family barely escaped the National Socialists' extermination of Hungarian Jews. His father, his mother, Lili, his sister, Vera, and Peter himself were among the group of 1,684 Hungarian Jews whose freedom was purchased by Rudolf Kaszner.¹⁴ Going from Budapest via the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen, where the group was forced to wait in uncertainty for six months, the Szondis finally reached safety in Switzerland in December 1944. It was there, at the cantonal school in Trogen, that Peter Szondi "perfected his knowledge of German" (as he put it on his first Curriculum vitae¹⁵) and graduated in 1948. Finding in it a philosophical and literary conceptuality lacking in Hungarian, he and Ivan Nagel, his good friend from Budapest with whom he was reunited in Zurich in 1948, began to write to each other in German when Nagel departed for study in Heidelberg in 1951. German became the language of reflection and, rationally being the basis of everything, the language of life and of scholarly work for Szondi. French would come later as a language of friendship and offered a different freedom of discourse.¹⁶ Thus in the postwar era we can distinguish various functions within what Stephan Braese terms Jewish multilingualism.¹⁷ Through 1954, Szondi studied at the University of Zurich, where his teachers were Emil Staiger; the Oxford Christian Romanist, Theophil Spoerri; Max Wehrli; the anti-Nazi philosopher, Hans Barth; and Paul Hindemith. Three books made a lasting impression on him: Theodor Adorno's *Philosophy of New Music*, Georg Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, and Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. The philosophy of Martin Heidegger, which Staiger had disseminated in Zurich, struck him as inhumane in its conception of Being, and he firmly rejected it. His dissertation under Staiger, *The Theory of Modern Drama*, made him famous. By 2011, it was in its twenty-seventh paperback printing.¹⁸ Szondi received his habilitation from the Free University of Berlin in 1961 with his book, *An Essay on the Tragic*, with Walther Killy and Wilhelm Emrich as his readers.

¹¹ Peter Szondi, "Vercors. Quartarbeit 1947," typescript, 27 sheets, Szondi archive (n. 2).

¹² Cf. Braese, *Eine europäische Sprache*, 16–20, on the function of German as a lingua franca for Jews before, and later against, the nationalization or ethnicization of German; see also Christoph König, "Celan's frühes Sprachparis. Über die Gedichte 'Auf Reisen' und 'Zwölf Jahre,'" in: *Euphorion* 103.1 (2009), 63–81.

¹³ See my investigation of inhibited innovation in the work of Ludwig Geiger: Christoph König, "Aufklärungskulturschichte. Bemerkungen zu Judentum, Philologie und Goethe bei Ludwig Geiger," in: Stephen Dowden and Melke Werner (eds.), *German Literature, Jewish Critics. The Brandeis Symposium* (New York: Camden House, 2002), 59–76; see also Jean Bollack's study of the pupils of Wilhelm Witz: "Juden in der klassischen Philologie vor 1933," in: Bärner and König (eds.), *Jüdische Intellektuelle*, 165–185; Shulamit Volkov, "Soziale Ursachen des Erfolgs in der Wissenschaft. Juden im Kaiserreich," *Historische Zeitschrift* 245 (1987), 315–342.

¹⁴ Cf. Alexandra-Eileen Wenck, *Zwischen Menschenhandel und 'Endlösung'. Das Konzentrationslager Bergen-Belsen* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2000), 272–337.

¹⁵ Typescript, Szondi archive (see n. 1).

¹⁶ Cf. Celan and Szondi, *Briefwechsel*, 249 ff., for the correspondence of Jean and Mayotte Bollack with Szondi.

¹⁷ Cf. Braese, *Eine europäische Sprache*, 14ff.

¹⁸ Peter Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2011). English translation: *The Theory of Modern Drama. A Critical Edition*, transl. by Michael Hays (University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

Despite quickly finding a post at the Free University of Berlin in 1965, where he founded the Institute for General and Comparative Literature (which would later be named after him), the prospect of a career there failed to capture Szondi's ambition. His intellectual center, and the focal point of his research, lay outside the university. This is clear from his correspondence with friends Paul Celan, Jean and Mayotte Bollack, Theodor Adorno, and Gershom Scholem. Szondi was hesitant at first to embrace the institution of scholarship, having consciously chosen an "outside" and made it a part of his person. The model for this process is literature, which demonstrates the way in which a person "finds his form"—having its roots in Kierkegaard and in Rudolf Kassner's physiognomy—which may have come to Szondi from his teacher Theophil Spoerri, who in 1938 had published a book entitled *Man Becomes Form* (*Die Formwerdung des Menschen*).¹⁹

Szondi's process of self-forming acts upon his own Jewishness as well. His "outside" is outside of Judaism, too. There can be no question of dependency or an unequivocal "home" there. Szondi's isolation was palpable to all who encountered him. He objectivized and reformulated his own Jewish belonging, shaping it through a self-opposed rationality that makes human existence possible. While the experience of exclusion certainly predisposed him to self-objectivation, Szondi subjected his belonging to a process of analysis that was peculiarly his own. When, in 1970, efforts were made to draw him to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Szondi laid out his refusal of Jewish belonging as his spiritual home in a letter to Scholem.²⁰ In a letter the previous year he had referred to himself as a "self-displaced person."²¹ It is certainly possible to see this as an explicit statement of Szondi's own Jewishness—though he understood himself not, in light of his linguistic decisions, as a Hungarian Jew or, likewise, a Jewish scholar. His decisions, each with respect to a historical situation, are bound up with systems of knowledge and scholarship even, and especially when, they turn against the university. His experience of exclusion was not only due to Jewishness. Szondi had, early on, experienced the rejection which befalls "those whom fate favors the best."²² He was on familiar terms, his whole life long, with death—so much so that death, his neighbor in

life, was able to overcome his will. It was, as far as this could be stated a possibility, a closeness with death beyond the camps.

The all-encompassing process of self-formation in an "outside" was expressed in Szondi's aristocratic reserve and his discretion, for which he was well-known among his friends and students. He approached the university from the standpoint of an artistic-literary life. In 1964, when Walther Killy tried to lure him to Göttingen with the offer of a full professorship, Szondi wrote to him:

You know quite well that I intend to do without a chair in German literature, as for several reasons, some of which may be imaginary, I am not prepared to take on such [institutional] duties. ... You know that, even if it damns me—and this has caused you and your wife plenty of irritation in minor matters—I am convinced of nothing so much as of the fact that nothing in this world befits me.²³

"This world" is likely meant to be ambiguous. Szondi could with regard to antisemitism be referring to the world of the university, or to the wider world and life as a whole. When he joined the university after all, he took its principles exceedingly seriously (he had, as it were, signed a contract), and defended it against its own representatives. His more experienced colleagues tried to persuade him that any additional institutional engagement was a form of constraint (or of foolishness)²⁴—though they respected his weapon of choice in the struggle, the scholarly essay. Of course, the price Szondi paid for recognition, of himself and of his unusual style of research, was that he could never speak of his Jewishness in the university. It was common knowledge—Bernhard Böschstein wrote to Szondi on May 2, 1959: "Yes, a Jewish lecturer is a welcome sight at our university, a service to the guiding principles on which it was founded."²⁵ But, to this day, his former colleagues emphasize the strict silence Szondi kept in front of Germans with respect to his Jewishness, and see in it his accomplishment.²⁶ It was trag-

¹⁹ Theophil Spoerri, *Die Formwerdung des Menschen. Die Deutung des dichterischen Kunstwerks als Schlüssel zur menschlichen Wirklichkeit* (Berlin: Furche, 1938).

²⁰ Cf. Szondi to Gershom Scholem, February 26, 1970, in: *Briefe*, ed. by Christoph König and Thomas Sparr (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1994), 301–305.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 267.

²² Cf. Bollack as in n. 1 and n. 6.

²³ Szondi to Walther Killy, May 17, 1964, in: Szondi archive (see n. 1).

²⁴ Cf. Gert Mattenklott, "Der seines Lebens Faden hält. Disziplinäre Utopie: Über den Philologen Peter Szondi aus Anlaß der Veröffentlichung seiner Briefe," in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 19, 1994.

²⁵ Bernhard Böschstein to Peter Szondi, February 5, 1959; copy of typescript, in: Szondi archive (see n. 1).

²⁶ I have in mind Eberhard Lämmert and Gert Mattenklott's interventions at the event *Remembering Peter Szondi* (May 14 2009), in the Berlin offices of Suhrkamp editions. In his study "Self-Displaced Person": Peter Szondi's problematic Jewishness," in: *Akzente* 56 (2009), 130–147, Andreas Isenschmid amply documents the

ic, in the Szondiian sense, that what was demanded of him coincided with what he was driven to by his demon.

The Literary Self

Szondi departs from a subjectivity grounded in literature. As an epigraph for a selection of Paul Valéry's reflections translated and published by Szondi and friends in 1959 under the title *Weahervanes* (*Windstriebe*), he chose the aphorism: "Syntax is a faculty of the mind" ("La syntaxe est une faculté de l'âme").²⁷ This thought goes to the heart of Szondi's own person. Valéry's idea is that the mind can express itself in poetry because the strictures of syntax are inherent in it. In other words, the conditions created in the artistic "world" by means of syntax could reflect conditions already prevailing in the mind. These are not arbitrary conditions. Szondi, with Valéry, emphasizes *syntax* and the order of words in a sentence, above all the relation of subject and object, which turns it into a question of knowledge. Thus he creates a parallel between Valéry and his own idea of knowledge, and by creating such conditions within himself, is able to recognize literary utterances and literary works like those of Valéry. Nothing creates those conditions better than literature. Szondi sharpened his senses through the contemplation of himself in the (literary) object. Gert Matrenklott is correct when speaking of Szondi's "energies compressed by forms" ("formgestauten Energien").²⁸ In effect, Szondi reveals himself in the object without speaking explicitly of himself.

When, in his reading, Szondi came across a passage that "struck" him—in the dual sense of the word, of both injuring him and being applicable to him—he wrote it down on the first sheet of paper that was at hand. Dozens of these sheets were found and preserved after his death. The quotes often trace a reflexive movement, and are often drawn from French literature. They are part of Szondi's life. The aphorisms have to do with life as a secondary phenomenon, with the (one-

personal meaning of Szondi's Jewishness; however, Iseuschmid attributes to Szondi a homesickness that fails to do justice to Szondi's deep-seated inner dialectical form.

27 Szondi archive (see n. 1). The aphorism is to be found in Paul Valéry, *Œuvres*, vol. 2, ed. by Jean Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 687ff. Szondi translates "Syntax is a faculty of the mind" in: Paul Valéry, *Windstriebe. Aufzeichnungen und Aphorismen*, transl. by Bernhard Böschstein, Hans Straub and Peter Szondi (Wiesbaden: Insel-Verlag, 1959), 124.

28 Matrenklott, *Remembering Peter Szondi* (see n. 26).

sided, quasi-artistic) insight glimpsed by a narrowed gaze, with death, with idleness, with memory, with jokes.

On the connection between art and life:

[...] Mais voici l'immense difficulté. Elle est de combiner ce son juste de l'âme avec l'artifice de l'art. Il faut énormément d'art pour être véritablement soi-même et simple. Mais l'art tout seul ne saurait suffire. (Valéry, quoted by Jules Supervielle)²⁹

On tradition and epigonal life:

Eine herrliche Erscheinung ist wenn die römische Kraft mit der hellenischen Kunst bis zur Verschmelzung Eins wird. So bildete Propertius eine große Natur durch die gelehrteste Kunst; der Strom inniger Liebe quoll mächtig aus seiner treuen Brust. Er darf uns über den Verlust hellenischer Elegiker trösten, wie Lucretius über den des Empedokles. (Schlegel, *Gespräch über die Poesie*)

[It is a splendid phenomenon when Roman vigor and Greek art become one to the point of coalescence. Thus Propertius created a great universe by means of the most learned art; the stream of fervent love flowed powerfully from his sincere heart. He can console us for the loss of the Greek elegiac poets, as Lucretius does for the loss of Empedocles. (Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry*)³⁰

On happiness in life, and on beauty:

La beauté n'est que la promesse du bonheur. (Stendhal, *De l'amour*)³¹

29 In this and the following quotes (nn. 30-35), the citations given in the text are Szondi's, reproduced verbatim. Full citations are given in the notes. Here: Paul Valéry to André Caselli, August 24, 1928, in: André Caselli, *Les Fleurs de la solitude. Poèmes précédés d'une lettre de Paul Valéry* (Paris: Denöel, 1937), cited in: Jules Supervielle, *En songeant à un art poétique*, in: *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, ed. by Michel Collot (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 559-567, 560.

30 Szondi archive (see n. 1). Szondi likely cites Friedrich Schlegel, *Gespräch über die Poesie*, in: *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel-Ausgabe*, vol. 2, ed. by Hans Eichner (Munich: Schöningh, 1967), 284-351, 295 (Szondi library, no. 403). English translation: *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, transl. by Ernst Behler and Roman Struc (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1968), 65.

31 Frédéric de Stendhal, *De l'amour*, ed. by Arthur Schlurig (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1920), 54.

On the absurdity of a life devoted to art:

En somme, tout ce qui vaut dans la vie est essentiellement bref. [...] C'est professionnel. Vous savez bien que je travaille dans l'absurde. (Valéry, *L'Idée fixe*)³²

On the productivity of an "unnatural" life, intense to the point of idiosyncy—and the form of knowledge it requires:

ein Schwachsinniger ist nicht eben der schlechteste Beobachter: die fixe Idee kann den Spürsinn bis zu einem hohen Grade entwickeln. Wer durch Neugier zum Beobachter wird, sieht viel: der Beobachter, den ein wissenschaftliches Interesse treibt, wird Achtungswertes leisten; wenn der Kummer beobachtet, entdeckt er manches, was andere nicht sehen: am meisten aber sieht vielleicht ein schwachsinniger Beobachter. Er beobachtet schärfer (wie die Sinne gewisser Tiere schärfer sind als die der Menschen), und er hat mehr Ausdauer. Nur müssen seine Beobachtungen (das versteht sich von selbst) immer erst verifiziert werden. (Kierkegaard, *Stadien auf dem Lebensweg*)

[but [an idiot] is not the poorest observer if his fixed idea becomes an instinct for discovery. An inquisitively interested observer sees a great deal, a scientifically interested observer is worthy of respect, a concerned interested observer sees what others do not see, but an idiotic observer perhaps sees the most of all; his observations are sharper and more persevering, just as certain animals have sharper senses than do human beings. But of course, his observations must be verified. (Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*)³³

On loneliness and nearness to death, of this life; Flaubert, twice over:

[...] Mais tout cela n'est pas [fait] pour nous. Nous sommes faits pour le sentir, pour le dire et non pour l'avoir. (Flaubert, *Correspondances*, parlant des églises italiennes) / II (Frédéric Moreau) rêvait à toutes les paroles qu'on lui avait dites, au timbre de sa voix, à la lumière des ses

³² Szondi Archive (see n. 1). Szondi likely cites Paul Valéry, "L'Idée fixe," in: *Œuvres*, 210-211 (Szondi library, no. 872).

³³ Szondi cites Søren Kierkegaard, *Stadien auf dem Lebensweg*, in: *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4, transl. by Christoph Schrempf (Jena: Diederichs, 1914), 253-254. English version: *Stages on Life's Way*, ed. and transl. by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 281.

yeux,—et, / se considérant comme un homme mort, il ne faisait plus rien, absolument. (Flaubert, *L'éducation sentimentale*)³⁴

In self-defense, Szondi invented his own aphorisms, such as this one on jokes:

Heidegger ist der Erfinder des Wortspiels, bei dem man nicht lachen darf.

[Heidegger is the inventor of puns at which one is not allowed to laugh.]³⁵

Szondi placed his "point of existence" (a term he adopted from Valéry)³⁶ outside himself and sought correspondences in the aesthetic object. From this point, he gave shape to his life, which could be no "natural" one—as if he decided on it in the way that Flaubert had "decided" to have a nervous breakdown in Pont l'Évêque, an incident Sartre places at the center of his massive study, *The Idiot of the Family*. Living thus, Szondi neglected much (he never specialized in any of his authors, as Böschstein did in Hölderlin or Ulrich Fülleborn in Rilke). "Reflection is the flip side of blindness,"³⁷ he wrote, happily aware of the joke he was making.

Hermeneutics and the Scholarly Essay

Rather than hide his inner thoughts, Szondi shapes an objectivity which is his self, confident that, in doing so, he will be able to see better. But what kind of scholarly validity can be ascribed to the observations of such a created self? Insofar as the self finds its expression in the form of the (personal) essay, the question can just as well apply to the difference between the personal and the scholarly essay. Heinz Schlaffer, in the *Dictionary of German Literary Studies (Reallexikon der*

³⁴ Szondi cites Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance janvier 1830 à avril 1851*, ed. by Jean Brunreau (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 227 (Szondi library, no. 674); and Id., *L'éducation sentimentale. Histoire d'un jeune homme*, in: *Œuvre complète* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 122 (Szondi library, no. 673). Szondi inserted the linebreak preceding "se considérant" himself, likely to bring out the continuity between a life in literature (that is, in words) and a death-like state.

³⁵ Peter Szondi, "Mit einer schwarzen Galle," typescript, 2 sheets. Szondi archive (see n. 1).

³⁶ König, *Eingführungen*, 9.

³⁷ Szondi to Ivan Nagel, November 14, 1954, in: *Briefe*, 51.

deutschen Literaturwissenschaft), defines the essay as a "prose form in which an author reflects upon and communicates his experiences in a free, uncomplicated style."³⁸ This is Szondi's point of departure as well. The ingredients that constitute his *scholarly* essays and define their particularity can again be linked to Schläffer's definition, even as they diverge from it. Among these ingredients are the "material," the "necessary," and the "particular." Szondi worked out these characteristics in a variety of domains.

First, he deploys Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, with its grammatical-material aspect, against the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer.³⁹ The "material" is usually a crucial citation, which Szondi explores as if it were a fragment and from which he elaborates his presentation. In the utterances of his literary object, he finds an essence that dramatizes the situation. Szondi employs, first and foremost, the lecture course, which dwells on the rhythm of (material) text and commentary. All his lectures were painstakingly worked out. Their place within his oeuvre is a central one,⁴⁰ not only because they often represent the first draft of his essays, formal lectures, and radio addresses, but because they enabled him to place the university in the service of literary production. The *reflexive demand* which Szondi would unfold in his lecture courses from cleverly chosen fragments communicated itself to students who could barely follow his arguments.

Secondly, looking back to Romantic aesthetic theory, Szondi takes objects that have been split in two and re-joins them together in a *necessary* way. He performs this in his first scholarly essay, in 1952,⁴¹ on the role of despair in Friedrich Schlegel's theory of comedy. An integral part of comedy is a division that brings about reflection. The goal of the comic remains, however, the reunification of the divided, and only when division is cast as temporary can we escape despair. This is all meant very personally. Szondi later applies the thought of a division resolved in the act of reflection to the necessity inscribed in the work, according to which the work develops itself. Borrowing a formula of Adorno's, he speaks of the "Logik des Produziertseins" ("logic of hav-

ing-been-produced").⁴² The particular way in which reflection seeks to avoid the "despair" of dissociation constitutes the individuality of a work.

Thirdly, it is in logic or in necessity that the individuality of the work—in other words, the work as *particular subject*—is said to assert itself. The framework is taken from Adorno's critical theory, based on Marx. Szondi revered Adorno as his true teacher.⁴³ He applies Adorno's dialectics of the subject to the work and to genre history. If the process of splitting-in-two gives rise to a desired drawing-together ("Engführung," "stretto"), how can we avoid yet another form of coercion? How can the dream of the individual, the "a priori of the individual" (as Szondi cites Hölderlin⁴⁴), be realized? Szondi gives two answers. On the one hand, he emphasizes the individual poem. In resolving itself from preliminary versions into a final form, it gives clear expression to the "differentiated" subject. That is the theme of the *Hölderlin Studies* (1967). Adorno, for his part, dedicated his essay on Hölderlin, "Parataxis," to Szondi—with reason, since he understands "parataxis" as the unbinding of the word, as an individual, from the hierarchy of thought and of prejudgment.⁴⁵ And then again, in the case of genre history, Szondi gave precedence to the poem over all other modern genres.

Szondi knows how to hold the various domains apart, and to refer them to each other. His whole body of work draws support from the fact that he does this deliberately. The material, the necessary, and the particular stand in a precise relation to Schläffer's definition of the essay as soon as one adds the adjective "scholarly." By inserting the adjective, we may test what else may then have to be altered: The essay is a "prose form in which an author [in a scholarly manner] reflects upon and

38 Schläffer, "Essay," 522.

39 See Szondi, "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics Today."

40 Peter Szondi, *Studienausgabe der Vorlesungen*, ed. by Jean Bollack (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1973-1975).

41 Peter Szondi, "Friedrich Schlegel and Romantic Irony, with Some Remarks on Tieck's Comedies," in: *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*.

42 "The ability to see works of art from the inside, in their logic as artifacts, things that have been produced [in der Logik ihres Produziertseins]—a union of action and reflection that neither hides behind naïveté nor hastily dissolves its concrete characteristics in a general concept—is probably the only form in which aesthetics is still possible." (Theodor Wieselgrund Adorno, "Valéry's Deviations," in: *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, transl. by Sherry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 138. See also Peter Szondi, "On Textual Understanding," in: *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, 22.

43 See the correspondence in Szondi, *Briefe*. Denis Thouard, *L'héméneutique critique. Bollack, Szondi, Celan* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2012), penetratingly illuminates Szondi's concept of critique.

44 Friedrich Hölderlin, *Gedichte nach 1800. Große Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, vol. 2, ed. by Friedrich Beißner (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1951), 339.

45 See Theodor Wieselgrund Adorno, "Parataxis: On Hölderlin's Late Poetry," in: *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2 (1992).

communicates his experiences in a free, uncomplicated style." If one aims for scholarly rigor, if one must reflect upon one's experience *in the object*, and provide this objective reflection with a claim to the truth, then the style cannot be "free," but must be bound ("gebunden"), that is, material and necessary, or better still, possessed of a necessity within the material (of citation). In philology, a "science by necessity and coercion" ("Zwangswissenschaft," according to Bollack⁴⁶), the rigorous shaping of the subject takes on a large role in a process of reflection that is "saturated with experience."⁴⁷ This shaping makes possible the objective necessity that is unfolded in the scholarly essay, without ever letting on that behind the mediation of the object, a personal matter is at issue. It goes unsaid that both Szondi's point of departure and theme is himself. The precondition of his essays lies uniquely in the artistic form he gave to his experience. The essays, though they do not speak of the subjectivity of the interpreter, nonetheless point to him indirectly. Szondi renders invalid the diagnosis Schläffer makes, namely that "[t]he essay has never found a place of its own in German culture: the dual ideal of strict scientific rigor and autonomous art stood in its way."⁴⁸ Szondi overcomes this cultural-historical dualism in his own person.

Thus, Szondi's choice of hermeneutics as a method is not arbitrary, and the dedication to Paul Celan of his great methodological statement on Schleiermacher can be accounted for.⁴⁹ The critical hermeneutics founded by Schlegel and Schleiermacher and taken up again by Szondi should not be mistaken for Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, which did lasting damage to the reputation of hermeneutics.⁵⁰ Hermeneutics is, first and foremost, a transcendental-philosophical reflection. It seeks to describe the conditions of the possibility of philological practice. Insofar as it takes its departure from practice, it is not guided by that experience to which it turns in reflection, reflexively verifying the understanding. In this sense, hermeneutics is a theory of philological practice. Szondi's decision to ground himself in a formed subjectivity represents a new path toward a foundation for hermeneutics. Compared with Schlegel, for instance, this path is totally original, as Schlegel aimed to prove the validity of his readings by way of a "cyclicalization"

("Cyklisation")⁵¹ that is adapted for art and in the end leads to art. Szondi's scholarly essay turns out to be determined by hermeneutical principles translated into style. The principles in question show up in the reflection on the practice of understanding. First and foremost, the principle of necessity and the principle of subjectivity belong among the principles of that apperception (Kant), which become clear when one examines the presuppositions of the reading. Szondi often returned to Schleiermacher's words:

Two opposed maxims with regard to understanding. 1) I understand everything until I come to a contradiction or a piece of nonsense. 2) I understand nothing that I cannot intuit and construe as necessary. Understanding in accordance with the second maxim is an endless task.⁵²

Szondi's preference, like Schleiermacher's, is for the second maxim; that is, the principle of a necessity constructed within the work itself. From this necessity follows the assumption of a subjectivity which, through conscious intervention in the countless linguistic and ideological possibilities, creates that necessity. As soon as the interpreter can

51 Friedrich Schlegel: "Only a cyclical kind of reading deserves the name *Studium*" ["Studium verdient nur das Lesen genannt zu werden, was cyclisch ist"], from: "Zur Philologie II," in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, vol. 16, 67 (translation SHT); see also Christoph König, "Grenzen der Zyklikation. Friedrich Schlegels Hermeneutik und ihre Folgen," in: Ulrich Breuer, Remigius Bunia and Armin Elinghagen (eds.), *Friedrich Schlegel und die Philologie* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2013), 15-34.

52 English Translation: SHT. Schleiermacher's original reads: "Zwei entgegengesetzte Maximen beim Verstehen. 1.) Ich verstehe alles bis ich auf einen Widerspruch oder Nonsens stoße. 2.) Ich verstehe nichts was ich nicht als notwendig einsehe und konstruieren kann. Das Verstehen nach der letzten Maxime ist eine unendliche Aufgabe." Schleiermacher's more known words in regard to this question are: "Das Ziel der Hermeneutik ist das Verstehen im höchsten Sinne. Niedrige Maxime: man hat alles verstanden, was man, ohne auf Widerspruch zu stoßen, wirklich aufgefasst hat. Höhere Maxime: Man hat nur verstanden, was man in allen Beziehungen und in seinem Zusammenhänge nachkonstruiert hat.—Dazu gehört auch, den Schriftsteller besser zu verstehen, als er sich selbst." For both questions, see Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Zur Hermeneutik. 1805 und 1809/10*, in: *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, part 2, vol. 4, ed. by Wolfgang Irmund (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 6. Cf. Andrew Bowie's translation: "The goal of hermeneutics is understanding in the highest sense. Lower maxim: one has understood everything that one has really grasped without encountering contradiction. Higher maxim: One has only understood what one has reconstructed in all its relationships and in its context.—To this also belongs understanding the writer better than he understands himself." See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. by Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 228. Szondi cites the passage in: Szondi, *Studienausgabe* vol. 5, 406; *ibid.*, 164; and Peter Szondi, *Schriften II*, ed. by Jean Bollack et al. (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2011), vol. 2, 113.

46 Bollack, "Juden in der Klassischen Philologie vor 1933," 181.

47 Schläffer's definition of the essay (see n. 4).

48 Schläffer "Essay," 524-525.

49 Szondi, "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics Today," 95.

50 Christoph König, "Hans-Georg Gadamer will Rilke von einem Komma her kurren," in: *Geschichte der Germanistik* 41/42 (2012), 46-52.

locate this necessity within his own practice of reading (and this is the task of Szondi's style), he can do without legitimization through personal experience.⁵³ The style of the scholarly essay attests to one's closeness to the object, without having to give a name to the underlying methodology of experience or to the subject of experience.

Polemics

I will close with an example of Szondi's polemics. It has all the elements of his interpretations of the scholarly essay (necessity, materiality and particularity), but derives its strength from not striving for the exactitude that the essay strives for; where wrath legitimates itself, without however making explicit that Szondi is speaking of himself. In this example, Szondi intimates that what is at stake is his own experience—but as always, he refuses to say it.

In 1967, the broadcasting agency of (the federal state of) Hessen transmitted a critique of Szondi's entitled "Germans and Jews" ("Deutsche und Juden")⁵⁴ criticizing a speech given at a congress in Brussels by the President of the German Federal Republic at the time, Eugen Gerstenmaier. The theme of the congress was Scholem's question: in what language could Jews and Germans talk to each other today? Szondi contrasts Gerstenmaier's speech with Karl Jaspers' opening statement to the congress. From the following passage, which I quote at length (with interpolated commentary), it becomes clear that Szondi is exploring the linguistic material dialectically:

Jaspers offers one answer in his opening words: "The mass murder of six million Jews, committed in the name of the German Reich..." These words call what occurred by name. [Szondi takes up Celan's name-concept of Jewish belonging: the name as exactitude in the service of the human⁵⁵—CK] Eugen Gerstenmaier takes a different approach. "Let's just hear no more of the whole dirty business, let's just not look any longer into the abyss!"—these thoughts he ascribes to many Germans with

⁵³ Schläpfer, "Essay."

⁵⁴ Szondi sent the manuscript to Scholem in October 1967; see Szondi, *Briefe*, 238–242.

In 1973 it was republished in Peter Szondi, *Über eine 'Freie (d.h. freie) Universität,' Stellungnahmen eines Philologen*, ed. by Jean Bollack (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), 62–67 (this is the source of the quotation that follows). The basis for the critique is the volume by Abraham Melzer (ed.), *Deutsche und Juden. Ein unlösbares Problem; Reden zum jüdischen Weltkongress 1966* (Düsseldorf: Konrad, 1966).

⁵⁵ Cf. Celan to Szondi, August 11, 1961; in: *Paul Celan, Peter Szondi, Briefwechsel*, 39ff.

their "instinctive will to repress." Yet he too can hardly find other words for what occurred [Szondi points to the lack of analytical distinction—CK]: it was for him the "appearance of the truly evil in the history of the Germans." Far be it from him, he assures us, "to obscure, by means of a headlong dive into the waters of metaphysics or theological anthropology, the share of co-responsibility for this catastrophe which falls to the German people." Leaving aside the question as to why metaphysics must necessarily contribute to obscuring something, let us simply point out that there is no need for metaphysics to do the work of obscuring here. [Szondi draws back together what he has separated out—speech and self-reflection—in order to show the opposition—CK] For the fog of obscurity is already present where the mass murder committed in the name of the German Reich answers to the false name of 'catastrophe,' and the responsibility for it merely "falls to" the German people in the form of a "share of co-responsibility." Let us compare this with the words of the philosopher Jaspers, who, with untroubled gaze, perceives that "we ... as citizens were answerable for the acts of the state under which we lived"—a statement no less valid for the present. Gerstenmaier wishes to speak only of a "share of co-responsibility" which "falls to" the German people. Was it then an accident, a perverse fate? [Szondi plays on the relation of the verb "zufallen" (to "fall to" someone) to the German word for "accident": "Zufall"]. Gerstenmaier's choice of words does all it can to confirm this association. This phrase of his was repeated with special delight in the press accounts of the Brussels congress, which took no notice of its monstrous nature. It praises a Germany "which has sworn that the likes of this will never happen to it again." "This Germany," Gerstenmaier adds—oblivious [and now Szondi's experience comes into play—CK] to the effect that the following must have on the survivors of the Third Reich [a radical self-objectivation, insofar as Szondi does not name himself as subject—CK]—"this Germany is ... the greatest and the strongest." [I now cut to the end of the polemic—CK] It is arrogance for a politician, claiming to speak not for his person but for an entire nation, to judge the views and prognoses of individuals [here it is a matter of protecting particularity—CK], and to introduce the philosopher Jaspers—who has spent sixty-four years of his life in Germany—as the "renowned professor from Basel," as if were a foreigner expressing concern here. The intolerance which would denaturalize a free thinker, as it were by the stylistic means of paraphrase, is the reverse side of the false tolerance which knows the Jew only as German, only as "fellow citizen." A "Jewish Problem" arose, as Gerstenmaier would have it, only "once Hitler was at the gates of power. Our Jewish school comrades were quite naturally Germans to us."⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Szondi, *Über eine 'Freie (d.h. freie) Universität,' Stellungnahmen eines Philologen*, 62–67.

Szondi remains faithful to Jews and their historical experience precisely because their particular struggles are being denied. In the end, the ethical exactitude which Szondi demanded makes itself clear both in reference to and originating in his Jewishness: "We might help prepare the way for the language of this future reconciliation, and for the sober resolution—all *quid pro quo* aside—to let people and things retain their names."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Ibid.