



HYPÉRION

INTERVIEW WITH MARIE-JOSÉ MALIS

You said recently that you'd moved from the desire to show a work in order to make the words of a poet heard to the desire to ask questions on a theatre stage through the use of a work. Is that the case with Hölderlin's *Hyperion*?

Marie-José Malis: When I first started working as a director, I paid more attention to the text than to anything else. Then I started thinking about the stage itself, and the representation, as the place where questioning would take place. I became more reflexive: the nature of my medium, what theatre can do today, became obsessions. At the same time I kept saying that I wasn't interested in a theatre that would be critical anymore, that I wanted it to explore what was possible instead. What I find interesting is to bring back the idea that we're at the theatre and that when theatre happens, it immediately reconfigures what we thought was impossible. I chose Kleist, Pasolini, Pirandello, because I see them as trailblazers, as thinkers of the escape from the old world. Hölderlin, to me, is like a matrix—intellectual, philosophical, and poetic—to which I come back time and again. Sometimes, his thought darkens, because the times, as well as his sadness and taste for failure, prevent us from hearing him, and sometimes it brightens and seems to me to point in an entirely new direction in the world. I had to direct this *Hyperion* I've been coming back to for years. It is at the confluence of two of my main concerns: it is at once pure language and pure debate with the times, from which it tries to wrest the conviction that some new possibility will be given to us.

This isn't a dramatic text, so it had to be adapted.

The show will be a condensation, a precipitate. Like Grüber, I'll keep the declarative parts of the novel, and will not really use its descriptions and philosophical meditations. My goal is to highlight what in the text echoes in our present, helps us understand our time. Hölderlin was speaking to his own time, which was very similar to ours. He talks about its terrible spiritual climate and names it, and it is extraordinary. At the same time, he remains faithful to a splendid ideal, that of 1789, of a new life. At first I thought about using additional texts, by Robespierre, Rousseau, etc., but we quickly realised with the actors that it wasn't necessary. The questions the text asks touch us as if they'd been meant for us. When Grüber directed *Hyperion* in Germany, he did it for the Germans. It was the 1970s, and it was their history. I believe that there can be a "French *Hyperion*." After all, Hölderlin was witness to the French Revolution, and his novel shows us what our country used to be, and what it's become.

Hölderlin's writing is often considered to be musical, and you are known for the attention you pay to enunciation on the stage. What will your work on language be like here?

This is always a complex question! Speech at the theatre has always been different from speech in our daily life. One needs, at the theatre, to shake off the old world and its norms. Actors should forget their reflexes, the associations that come naturally to them, and instead help us hear something new through the text. And not just something minor, but a vital upheaval. The actors have to struggle against many dead things: the habits of everyday life, and the habits of the theatre (its mannerisms, its fake spontaneity, etc.). My job is to make sure the actors mean what they say. To mean what you say isn't just to think about it, it means understanding that what you say has consequences for your life. It takes time; this time is my one weapon against pre-made speech. That of life and that of the theatre, which claim to be lively and committed but are actually lazy and collaborate with the dead world. When actors work that way, they are moved by what the text reveals to them. And when on stage, they are moved because this going deeper into the consequences of a text happens in front of people, and for them. The place of representation becomes the source of emotion. This is the incredible gift of theatre: through the actor, what we thought was definite and unmoving suddenly starts moving again, and we're made to sense new ways of understanding, of feeling, of desiring the world and the life that we want. Hölderlin's text is made for that. It breaks away with old methods, and through its powerful vision and its music, it invents new lines. It's a thinking text, and thinking is coming up with a new language for a new life. And that is pure emotion, pure brotherhood.

The novel alternates between a permanent hymn to youth, to political engagement (in this particular case that of the Greeks against the Turks occupying their country at the end of the 18th century), and a great sense of melancholy, almost of despair, when faced with the realities of failure.

That's Hölderlin's genius, and what makes him so relevant today. Just like us, he has to live knowing that the Revolution has failed. He has to acknowledge it, and that failure is all-encompassing and terrifying. At the same time, he has to learn from that failure, and find the questions that will show that something is still possible, something that wouldn't disown the beauty glimpsed during the Revolution. It's the opposite of disowning one's opinions, of revisionism. It's a sign of total spiritual courage. I met young people in Cairo who faced a similar spiritual trial: not to doubt the validity

of what happened without denying the terrible and traumatic failure that followed, not becoming cynical and finding a way to remain faithful to one's ideals and to try again and again. We have to remember that Hölderlin lived through that purely reactionary moment when the Revolution as a whole was condemned and disowned because it had failed. Hölderlin's question is how to find again "the youth of the world," at a time when the path of possibilities is being denounced. So he looks for principles that will allow us to make it through the night. If this renewal happened in ancient Greece, then in France, then it could happen again. In Greece, in the French Revolution, Hölderlin looks for timeless principles that will allow this experience to come back, but also for what those past experiences were missing. I don't intend to hide the very modern pessimism of *Hyperion*, which is particularly affecting in today's France, when faced with what the youth of Europe and of the Mediterranean is going through. But I also know that, like Hölderlin, we should keep looking. His method is the right one.

The Nazis made the Werhmacht soldiers carry a booklet containing texts by Hölderlin.

How do you explain this nationalistic reading of *Hyperion*?

Hölderlin dreamt for Germany to be the stage of a revolution that would erase the failure of the French Revolution. It was the opposite of what the Nazis turned Germany into; it was a Germany for everyone, a country where, after France, people would work on a more open vision of politics. The Nazis acted as if Hölderlin had imagined a Germany that would be superior to everyone else, that would be against them. And Heidegger used Hölderlin to legitimise his own nationalism. It's a disgusting reading of Hölderlin's texts. There's no such ambiguity in them.

Is *Hyperion*, whose name is linked to that of the sun in ancient Greece, a hero? Does he know failure?

The exceptional quality of the character, what Hölderlin calls "the divine in man," isn't only Hyperion's. The novel claims that every single one of us carries this same desire for beauty, justice, and brotherly union. Hyperion is a picture of exception, in which we all take part. We can all live like gods on Earth. That's what Hölderlin believes, and that's what I believe. The problem is the political organisation of this aspiration. Hölderlin has a very modern vision, he believes that the State isn't the right way to organise this, that the State that replaces people is like hell. He is just as relevant when he criticises politicians who try to act for the people but without them: at some point Hyperion tries to free Mistra by raising an army of strangers, without the support of the city's inhabitants. He fails. He fails because he can't think beyond these categories: the State, the war of liberation waged by foreign armies in the name of the people... Isn't that relevant? But the novel ends with "More soon"... What comes next is Hölderlin's work as a poet. What's the main takeaway from the novel? That we can't hope for revolution as long as there isn't a poetic conversion of minds and sensibilities. There can be no revolution until we make sure that people love the world in a different way, that they love something else in it. This work falls to the poets and artists, who need to become what Hölderlin calls the "new church." *Hyperion* is a novel of failure because it uses the shortcuts that are political action by the State and the seizing of power by individuals, when what we first need to change is sensibilities. As Pasolini used to say, we need a new beauty to appear to people, a beauty they'll find in what they fear today: poverty, loss, want, etc. It's this new sensibility, this new blossoming of symbols and ideas, of supports to a new love of the real, that must be the foundation of a political revolution.

You often talk of deliberate poverty, especially about your stage designs.

I like my stage designs to have a real prosaic materiality, like those of Anna Viebrock for Christoph Marthaler, for instance. They're a realistic frame for an action that is anything but, which stimulates the audience's imagination. I also want my stage designs to give us the physical impression that we are at the theatre. My stage designs can therefore seem "poor" because they rely on simple principles, because they aren't visually sophisticated, because they are lit in a realistic way.

Do you think that the theatre has cut itself off from thought?

The theatre has long looked for a new vitality in visual arts. I've wanted to show its links to thought, to philosophy, but also that it thinks about itself. Lately, it's been considered suspicious to approach theatre through itself as a discipline. Interdisciplinarity had become trendy, and theatre was no longer considered the place where its own questions had to find answers. But in everything I see, I look for theatre. This is why I love artists that show its crises, because they make its questions apparent again. I may be retrograde, but what I'm most interested in is theatre.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier.