

The Periodic Appeal of Friedrich Hölderlin

by

Kelsey L. Bennett

I first encountered the works of the romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) at St. John's College here in Santa Fe, when the tutor Frank Hunt was offering a preceptorial on the poet. We read poems with titles such as "Diotima" (many of these), "At the Source of the Danube," "The Fettered River," "Homecoming"; we pondered the similarities between poetic metaphor and wordless music, man's nearness to and separation from God, the significance of the poet's profound Hellenism.... These topics were inviting, as was the thought of a poet who made it his habit to cross the Alps on foot in the middle of winter. But more arresting than anything else was Hölderlin's ability to locate and write about an unnamable source (or *Quelle*) which, for him, so memorably emanates from the places in which some of Europe's great rivers first arise. Since that time, these qualities, particularly notions of 'home' and 'source,' have compelled a return to his works. If only, he once lamented, "if only one weren't so periodical!" Periodicity always suggests a return—but to what? What is the nature of this place?

The elegy "Homecoming," dedicated to his relatives, was written in 1801 when Hölderlin was thirty one, about a year before an accumulation of circumstances culminated in his breakdown and estrangement from his family [here in Michael Hamburger's translation¹]:

There in the Alps a gleaming night still delays and, composing

Portents of gladness, the cloud covers a valley agape.

This way, that way roars and rushes the breeze of the mountains,

Teasing, sheer through the firs falls a bright beam, and is lost.

¹ Hölderlin, Friedrich. *Selected Poems and Fragments*. Trans. and intro. Michael Hamburger. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Slowly it hurries and wars, this Chaos trembling with pleasure,
 Young in appearance, but strong, celebrates here amid rocks
 Loving discord, and seethes, shakes in its bounds that are timeless,
 For more bacchantically now morning approaches within.

The lines, full with contradictions, beautifully animate the experience of return, the ways in which things long familiar take on another aspect, as here in the phrase “gleaming night,” the way the valley is doubly concealed in darkness and in cloud until the “bright beam” appears, and disappears once again. The arrival, for the poet, is a celebration of “loving discord” filled with haste (recognition) and slowness (reluctance, perhaps); “Chaos” itself is subject to fatalistic “bounds” that define it.

The poet’s thoughts continue their ascent to the whitened peaks and surpass them: “Even higher, beyond the light, does the pure, never clouded / God have his dwelling, whom beams, holy, make glad with their play.” The God, from “beyond the light” acts upon “us mortals grown sad,” as he brings forth the rivers from within the furthest reaches of the mountains, he “works on the lowest depths to open them up and to brighten / All” and “beauty abounds, as before, and spirit is present, returned now, / And a joyful zest urges furling wings to unfold.” We find that the poet is returning by boat and observing the opening morning from the waters below. As the village emerges from the morning shadows, the opening confusion seems to dispel with it. Now, he comments, “All seems familiar.....And no wonder! Your native country and soil you are walking, / What you seek, it is near, now comes to meet you halfway.” The nearness here speaks on several levels. As he moves across Lake Constance, he approaches the political boundary of his homeland and at the same time, and more importantly, draws near to the sources of rivers such as the Rhine and the Danube. To his German readers, Lindau serves as “not the least of our land’s many hospitable doors, / Urging men to go out allured by the promise of distance.” This is the typical

understanding of a frontier, the portal through which the young adventurer passes to move on to “Go where the wonders are.” The poet, however, turns from these indeterminate “wonders” and addresses the portal from the other side: “you door that are hallowed, me much more strongly you urge to / Make for home where I know blossoming pathways and lanes,” where he hears once more the voice of his mother, about which he exclaims, “How to your sound respond things that I learned long ago! / Yet they are still themselves!” The nearness here encompasses the past and the present moments of awareness. Somehow this relatively familiar experience is necessary for the poet to approach the thing that he seeks above all else (it is reminiscent of the distinction Kant makes between the beautiful and the sublime), that is, a nearness to the God he names who dwells “beyond the light,” in silence and alone.

Now, even as the poem carefully creates a topography of desire for return and nearness, he brings us to the moment that surpasses all sense of place. To measure distance to and from a ubiquitous presence becomes meaningless; this last silent expanse the poet generates proximity through the necessary act of naming. He asks,

When we bless the meal, whose name may I speak, and when late we
 Rest from the life of each day, tell me, to whom give my thanks?
 Him, the most High, should I name then? A god does not love what’s unseemly,
 Him to embrace and to hold our joy is too small.
 Silence often behoves us: deficient in names that are holy,
 Hearts may beat high, while the lips hesitate, wary of speech?

This troubling paradox, shared by many romantic poets, is a necessary condition to the nearness the poet seeks. Travel alone is not enough, willingness or temperament is not enough: the experience of silence peculiar to poetry is the thing that makes the poetry possible. About this moment in the poem Heidegger says, “Silence—does this merely mean: to say nothing, to remain speechless? Or

can only he who has something to say be truly silent? ...he who would be capable of letting the unsaid appear in his speech...would, precisely though this alone, be capable of silence in the highest degree" ("The Poem" 216).² Just as Semele could not look straight upon her god without immolation, to avoid this fate, the poet's path home must be indirect, must make use of language and the act of naming to speak the unnamable.

The wisdom of this poem finds its source in the idea that while certain places are more hospitable than others to the development of creativity, the work itself must be the home, full with the contradictions of familiarity constantly shifting into the unfamiliar and back again. And it was well for Hölderlin to come to this conclusion at a time when increasing misfortune would soon impress itself upon his life and work. Before this, however, as Michael Hamburger succinctly presents in the introduction to his translations, the poet's future was promising. Despite the fact that he lost both his father and stepfather when he was a boy and remained financially tied to his mother for much of his life, he was acquainted with some of the most influential intellectual lights of the time. Among them were Hegel and Schelling, whom he met in Tübingen during his time at the Theological Seminary. Though he passed his examinations, he resisted repeated pressure from his family to become a Lutheran minister. The alternative was, in Hamburger's words, "the humble drudgery, but relative independence, of a private tutor," and Schiller himself arranged for Hölderlin's position with the children of the well-connected Charlotte von Kalb. While under her employment, Hölderlin was able to work on his novel, *Hyperion*, as well as travel to Jena to listen to Fichte's lectures and meet Goethe at Weimar.

When he was twenty five, Hölderlin found appointment with another wealthy family in Frankfurt. There he entered into a life-altering affair with the mother of his pupils, Susette, and

² Heidegger, Martin. *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*. Trans. Keith Hoeller. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000.

she appeared transformed into Diotima in his poetry. Unlike the only woman whom Socrates revered as a teacher, she who revealed love's great and cosmic order as he recounts it in the *Symposium*, Hölderlin's Diotima reveals a tenuous presence. In the poems, her fragility is often likened to a blossom in winter, with the attendant feelings of solitude, suffering, and misplacement in the world: "You noble being, silently earthward gaze / At brightest noon, for it's in vain that / Here in the sunlight you seek your kindred." The relationship was ended forcibly, along with his position, in 1798, and the poet was soon confronted with his own failure, in spite of his connections, to achieve widespread success through his work, and his own isolation increased. And yet the Diotima poems mirror how, into the new century, Hölderlin would continue his preoccupation with these questions but transpose them into another key entirely. Some of the most powerful instances appear in his poetic meditations on the sources among Europe's great rivers.

In the hymn "Der Rhein," from its genesis the great river is itself subject to forces alien to its nature. From within the Alpine heights "where, determined in secret / Much even now reaches men," the poet hears "A destiny."³ The destiny concerns the river and its Promethian struggles: "There in the coldest chasm / I heard the youth implore / Release." From the beginning, the "freeborn Rhine"

parted and longed to roam, and impatiently

His regal soul drove him on towards Asia.

Yet in the face of fate

Imprudent it is to wish.

³ Anachronistic though it may be, since the advent of CERN, I cannot help thinking about how these ideas have carried over into the present. How are we to take it that modern physicists have penetrated and established their laboratories, sublime in scope, in such close proximity to the places for which the romantic poets held the highest metaphysical regard?

The “crooked banks” that are “greedily entwining” move the river’s course, instead, to the northwest. However shaped it is to human purposes once it parts from its source, is diverted and channeled to found and maintain cities, even so the poem insists that the river preserves its original character throughout. And from these tensions, some violence necessarily accompanies its compelled course, for “like lightening he [the Rhine] / Must rend the earth.” Similarly, in the lines concluding “Der Ister,” the Greek name for the Danube, Hölderlin writes, “But the rock needs incisions, / And the earth needs furrows, / Would be desolate else, unabiding; / Yet what that one does, the river, / Nobody knows.” The Danube, of course, unlike its north-wending counterpart, succeeds in its eastern course toward “mother Asia” until it disperses itself in the Black Sea. In both cases, not only does the land affect the river, but also the river provides the land with a character, perhaps it is not too much to say that it provides it with a soul. The earth is not significant merely as a smooth surface, featureless—it needs to be split, cracked, and rent for any growth to be possible (in this vein one is reminded of a letter Keats would soon write to his siblings in which he asks, “Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul?”). Which leads the reader to the parallels between the phenomena in the poem and the purpose of the poet. “Der Rhein” eventually concludes with the idea that the poets are needed precisely to make people aware of these correspondences, indeed the forces themselves require their voices, for “The most Blessed in themselves feel nothing / Another must, I suppose, / Vicariously feel in the name of the gods, / And him they need.” But the ability to do so demands extreme acts of defiance as well: an aspirant, the poem announces, must bury in the rubble of his house both his father and his child. The image provides a dark counterpart to Wordsworth’s aphorism, to be sure, and shadows forth what was to come.

At the beginning of 1802, Hölderlin set out for Bordeaux and what would be his last and short-lived tutoring position. His return to Germany included a long journey through France, and

included a stop in Paris, about which little is known. The time spent as an alien in a country enthralled by empire, the continuing difficulties with his work and, finally, the devastating news of Susette's death that summer together altered the poet in such a way that he became estranged from his family and some, though not all, began to suspect the poet of insanity. Finally, Hölderlin had to be moved, against his will, to a mental hospital in Tübingen known for its "treatments" of patients that included a combination of drugs and the use of straitjackets, the silencing Autenrieth mask, and forced cold-water immersion techniques. Unlike others who died of these therapies, Hölderlin survived there for about a year before he was discharged, Hamburger reports, as an "incurable case" and given no more than three years to live. While he was there a local carpenter, Ernst Zimmer, visited the poet and offered to care for him upon his release. Zimmer's generosity proved to be the best option for Hölderlin, who lived with the family in Tübingen for the rest of his life (it is now a picturesque museum, known as the Hölderlinturm, which stands upon the Neckar river). His mother never visited him there and Zimmer was able to procure funds for Hölderlin's modest maintenance with difficulty. Worse yet, the family demanded that Hölderlin's manuscripts containing the poems he was revising be taken from him and sent into their keeping.

From 1807 on, as his biographer David Constantine notes, perhaps the least eventful period in the poet's life is most prolifically documented by visitors more interested in his purported insanity than in his literary achievements.⁴ Much of the poetry from this period through the end of his life in 1843, reflects simplicity and longing for the past, with occasional gleams from earlier insights. The short poem "To Zimmer," for instance, speaks to a certain repose the poet seems to have reached:

The lines of life are various; they diverge and cease

Like footpaths and the mountains' utmost ends.

⁴ Constantine, David. *Hölderlin*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988.

What here we are, elsewhere a God amends

With harmonies, eternal recompense and peace.

The monumental themes Hölderlin engaged in poems such as “Homecoming” are still present, but scaled in miniature. “What here we are” has a pathetic modesty about it, but still it connects, albeit from a distance, to the world-governing harmonies that, the poet hopes, provide recompense beyond the many things withheld from him on earth.

The spiritual and aesthetic tensions between “here” and “elsewhere” inevitably bring me back to the ideas I found when I first turned to the poetry of Hölderlin. In addition to the elusive “Homecoming,” the hymn “As on a holiday...”, for which its first phrase serves as title, again captures this feeling of nearness and separation, and the creative act of naming with exceptional vividness. The poem opens with the experience of a farmer who goes out to observe his land after a deluge to find the river once more returned to its place and new growth beginning to rise. The poet goes on to record what he sees: “the hallowed, my word shall convey, / For she, she herself, who is older than the ages / And higher than the gods of the Orient and Occident, / Nature has now awoken amid the clang of arms” and begets “on holy Chaos” “Delight, the all-creative”; and she (here Nature) “delights in self-renewal.” In harmony with this pantheistic vision, the hymn is filled with the nearness of the gods, the intimation that they, as in the cosmos of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, mingle with the living at their pleasure. Semele appears, and the speaker praises her for her self-sacrificing birth to “The thunder-storm’s fruit, to holy Bacchus.” Upon her ashes, mankind may now partake of these fruits “without danger.” The hymn concludes with an exhortation to poets to realize something similar—they should “stand / Bareheaded beneath God’s thunder-storms, / To grasp the Father’s ray, no less, with our own two hands / And, wrapping in song the heavenly gift, / To offer it to the people.” The confidence of these lines radiate romantic idealism—with the

implied social hierarchy in which the poets are the ones made to stand closest to the gods, the extraordinary purity, recklessness, and visionary capacity that gives them the right to this position, and so on. And yet from here, the poem begins to fragment and the silence again marks its presence on the page, and we are once again back to the uncertainties of “Homecoming” and the paradoxical necessity of silence to this enterprise. Unlike the *Landmann*, who rejoices in the new growth following the storm’s destruction, the poet concludes

That I approached to see the Heavenly,
 And they themselves cast me down, deep down
 Below the living, into the dark cast down
 The false priest that I am, to sing,
 For those who have ears to hear, a warning song.

There

And that is all. The fragmentary nature of the closing could be read easily enough as another variation on romantic themes, or again as a foreshadowing of events in Hölderlin’s life, or as an expression not very far from Milton’s Satan or Goethe’s Faust. It is precisely the allusive richness here, and in the other poems, that invites one’s return. One returns to the compelling presence of another “capable of silence in the highest degree.” It is a homecoming that invites one into the idea of “home” as something related to, but not entirely dependent upon, geography or individual desire. It is the intimation that the creative act of naming is not something one does to “fill” the silent spaces, to force familiarity upon the unfamiliar, but that it complements those moments which open themselves only through silence.