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Friedrich Hölderlin – Lightning Conductor of the Divine*

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Es wird nur Eine Schönheit seyn; und Menschheit und Natur wird sich vereinen in Eine allumfassende Gottheit.¹

INTRODUCTION

A brief consideration of Hölderlin, Shelley and Empedocles as fellow visionaries and proclaimers of Divine Nature.

My seemingly dramatic title, which was based on my innate feeling for Hölderlin's poetry and on my own experience as a poet, was further endorsed when I recently read *Dichterberuf* ('Vocation of the Poet'), in which Hölderlin writes of the phenomenon of poets being shot through by a bolt or flash of the creative Divine so that their very being shakes; of their being, in fact, a lightning conductor of the Divine:

*Und dennoch, o ihr Himmlichen all, und all
Ihr Quellen und ihr Ufer und Hain' und Höhn,
Wo wunderbar zuerst, als du die
Loken ergriffen, und unvergeßlich*

*Der unverhoffte Genius über uns
Der schöpferische, göttliche kam, daß stumm
Der Sinn uns ward und, wie vom
Strale gerührt, das Gebein erbebte*

* This is a version of a lecture presented to the Temenos Academy on 14 November 2007.

1. 'There will be only One Beauty; and Mankind and Nature will unite in One all-embracing Divinity' (*Hyperion*, Zweiter Band, Erstes Buch). All translations from the German are my own.

And yet oh you Divine Ones all, and all
 You Springs and you Banks and Groves and Mountains
 Where wonderful at first as you
 Seized our locks, and unforgettably

The unexpected Genius over us
 The creative, divine, came, so that the
 Mind became silent to us and, as struck
 By lightning, our frames shook

This is completely understandable and I feel is an experience shared by Shelley and Empedocles. Divine Nature, which I shall refer to often, is to be understood as described in the above excerpt and obviously not as a beautiful backdrop to the life of superior Man, to be objectively admired (or not) or written about in what is termed 'nature poetry'. Nature, in the sense in which Hölderlin uses the term, is the Divine force emanating from the sky and the sea, the trees and the birds and animals. She is a powerful mystery who reveals herself to seers who, as Hölderlin writes, remain *wachend bei Nacht* 'watching by night'. If I were asked for a few words to describe Hölderlin's work I would say piety, beauty, rhythm, vision, truth and oneness with nature.

The powerful beauty of the German language was awoken in me, when I was young, by Bach's *Matthäuspassion*. For many years I spent every Good Friday at the Festival Hall immersed in that profoundly moving work and can still hear the Evangelist, his voice at one with the music and the sublime language of the Lutheran Bible. I enrolled for an intensive course at the Goethe Institut in Exhibition Road and then went to Nürnberg and taught in a Steiner Schule and was soon practising Eurythmy to the solemnly intoned words *Alle Gestalten sind ähnlich, und keine gleicht der andern* of Goethe's *Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen*.² On being accepted at University College, London, having given 'the beauty of the language' as my reason for wanting to study German, I discovered to my amazed delight the eighteenth-century poet, Friedrich Hölderlin. Until then I had only vaguely heard of him; but he came to me now as a close friend who had always

2. 'All forms are similar, and not one resembles the other' (*Elegien*, Zweites Buch: *Goethes Werke: Hamburger Ausgabe in vierzehn Bänden*, ed. Erich Trunz (8th printing: Hamburg, 1966), I.99).

been there, but just hidden in the shadows, and with what joyful recognition!

One of the first English books to be published on the poet was Ronald Peacock's *Hölderlin*, which opens with the declaration:

Amongst German poets Hölderlin is the one whose name can be uttered only in the tone of veneration, for in none was there to such a degree radiant purity.

He continues,

... his work is inseparable from himself in a quite unusual measure.
It is unsullied, immaculate.

And concludes:

He is innocent, like the nature to which his first reverence is paid.³

A copy of the Methuen reprint of his book, issued after an interval of nearly forty years, was given to me by Professor Peacock when, liking my ideas and my enthusiasm for Hölderlin, he offered me my first job on the academic ladder, as he called it, teaching Science-German in his Department at Bedford College. The inscription reads—'With best wishes for your Hölderlin project'. It is still in progress!

My first volumes of Hölderlin's work are covered with neat pencilled exclamation marks, squiggles and exclamations: *Yes! Yes!, c.f. my dream/poem etc.* It was the delicate simplicity of his language embodying Truth I found so recognizable, as in these few lines from *Der Tod des Empedokles* ('The Death of Empedokles', II iv):⁴

*Es kommt und geht die Freude, doch gehört
Sie Sterblichen nicht eigen, und der Geist
Eilt ungefragt auf seinem Pfade weiter.*

3. Ronald Peacock, *Hölderlin* (London, 1938), p. 1.

4. I have adopted the practice of M.B. Benn and of my former tutor, Robin Harrison, of using 'Empedocles' to refer to the historical and mythical Empedocles and 'Empedokles' to refer to the hero of Hölderlin's play. See Harrison's *Hölderlin and Greek Literature* (Oxford, 1975).

*Ach! können wir denn sagen, daß du da
Gewesen?*

It comes and goes, Joy, but
Does not belong to mortals, and the Spirit
Hurries unquestioned along its path.
Oh! can we then say, that you were
Ever there?

And it was his epistolary novel *Hyperion* that entranced me—and I use ‘entranced’ in its original meaning. His language is like a magic spell. He seems to tune into the language of the trees and the wind, the stars and the sky, which were to him living deities, bringing their timeless rhythms into his poetry. He breaks the bonds of Time with his other-worldly music. It is not surprising that he became fascinated by the figure of Empedocles who, as he writes, ‘tired of hour-counting’, chose to re-unite himself with timeless Nature, who had revealed herself to him in all her unified and wondrous beauty, by casting himself into Mount Etna. A strange story, yes. But when one has been in close communion with Nature and is continually jerked back into the time-bound world full of rhythmless, unsympathetic people, when one, like the young Hyperion, is ‘so laughably accompanied by the raucous shrillness of the world in [his] heart’s dearest melodies’; then it is not such an odd thing to wish to reunite oneself with the one sympathetic confidante one has and to attempt to cross the apparent boundary between one another. My Shelley edition has similar enthusiastic markings. He too entered into the life of Nature. His ‘thinking organs’ (*πράπιδες*), as the historical Empedocles calls those faculties that reach out beyond the known world, could enter into the being of things. Hölderlin, Shelley, Empedocles—all call for a respect for Nature for all have entered into her world and seen, like Blake, not ‘a green thing that stands in the way’ but a living God.

In a long-ago letter to Howard Gaskill, now a Professor of German, I discuss some of Hölderlin’s late poems and show how he is trying to bring together the timeless essence of the time-bound past—Greek and Christian—into one holy and united Song of Praise. In his late poem *Die Titanen* (‘The Titans’) Hölderlin implies that it is *Gesang*, which can be understood as hymnic, harmonious unity, which frees

the spirit from the prison of Time and mortality and, like the song of the birds and the humming of the bees, returns it 'Back to the burning fountain whence it came' (to quote Shelley), back to its source which is both *der Gott in uns*—the God in us—and *der Geist der Welt*—the Spirit of the World—thereby closing the circle in a continuous round of praise of creation for the Creator and the Creator for creation. And this is what, as Hölderlin says in the now famous penultimate letter of *Hyperion*, the Germans do not do. And their failure to connect with their source has brought about complete fragmentation,⁵ so that Germany looks like

... ein Schlachtfeld, wo Hände und Arme und alle Glieder zerstükkelt
untereinanderliegen, indessen das vergoßne Lebensblut im Sande
zerrinnt....

... a battlefield, where hands and arms and all the limbs lie about in pieces whilst the spilt blood runs away into the sand⁶

For Hölderlin, men have failed, as yet, to 'help Heaven' (*helfen/Dem Himmel*), because they are too bound by Time and mortality. That the birds and the bees help Heaven is understood by Hölderlin. In *Die Titanen*, he writes:

*Mich aber umsummet
Die Bien und wo der Akersmann
Die Furchen machet singen gegen
Dem Lichte die Vögel. Manche helfen
Dem Himmel. Diese siehet
Der Dichter.*

But around me hums
The bee and where the ploughman
Makes his furrow the birds
Sing towards the light. Many help

5. In an interview given last year from Highgrove on Easter Day, marking the sixtieth anniversary of *Gardener's Question Time*, Prince Charles expressed similar sentiments: we 'zone everything', he said, and there is 'no integration'.

6. *Hyperion*, Zweiter Band, Zweites Buch.

Heaven. This the poet
Sees.

Die Titanen, like much of Hölderlin's late work, is considered difficult and is the subject of much scholarship. After reading the poem I dreamt the meaning of it, seeing a divine connection—the lightning of the Gods being 'harmlessly channelled through the poet, the *Blitzleiter*, back to its source thereby closing the circle'. I still have the fading file paper with the detailed vision. When I told my supervisor about it he said it was amazing and tallied with modern scholarship; but it was not acceptable as I had not read any of the criticism and it was a dream, not scholarship.

That language distinguishes Man from the rest of the animals is a commonplace. But its corollary is not so common: it is Song that distinguishes Nature from Man—Song in the sense of a Hymn of the Universe. Hölderlin in his poetry is working towards the freeing of man from the bonds of speech, which is time-bound, into the timeless *Gesang* of Nature, which is a Hymn of Praise for the Divine.

*

In Eurythmy, vowels and consonants are expressed by gesture, movement and colour. One preparatory exercise is 'the spear-thrower'—a leaning back with a javelin, tuning into the rhythm of the universe and gathering energy before speaking, and then sending the words out along the flow. And this to me is what Hölderlin is doing—tuning into original universal rhythm. In Theodor Storm's beautiful novella *Immensee*, Reinhard and Elisabeth have just sung the folk song *Ich stand auf hohen Bergen* and as they finish, the same song comes floating up to them sung by a shepherd in the valley. And Reinhard says:

*Hört ihr es wohl? So geht's von Mund zu Mund . . . Das sind Urtöne;
sie schlafen in Waldesgründen.*

You hear that? Thus it passes from mouth to mouth . . . Those are original tones, they sleep in the depths of the forest.⁷

7. Theodor Storm, *Immensee und andere Novellen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1983), p. 32.

I have just re-read *Hyperion*. And what remains is the song or *Urtöne*. It is like an elemental piece of music—an Aeolian harp on which the Divine Spirit of Nature plays. The μουσική of the Greeks must have been like this:⁸ not chanting, not song, but an elemental and rhythmical music, speaking directly to the soul.⁹

In his brief introduction to *Hyperion*, a novel or prose-poem on the life of a young Greek brought up in Germany who returns to Greece with the Shelleyan desire to help another Athens to arise, Hölderlin writes:

He who merely smells my plant, knows it not, and he who picks it, merely to learn from it, does not know it either.

He had to wait for a hundred years for an empathetic scholar, Norbert von Hellingrath, to understand his work in the way he wished.

One must go beyond the writing in order to appreciate it—back, on the wings of the melody, back on the rhythm that has carried it to the poet, to the inspirational source that Shelley is talking about in his *Defence of Poetry* of 1821.

Hölderlin is not just a poet. He is a visionary. He gave his whole being to Nature and the, to him, living Gods; and they, like lightning searching for a conductor to connect it with the earth, pulsed through him, changing his vision and his very speech.

*

The landscape of Swabia, Hölderlin's birthplace, must in the eighteenth century have been of a harmonious beauty difficult for us to visualize even with the help of contemporary paintings and engravings. But we can get a sense of it in Hölderlin's late poem *Der Nekar* ('The Neckar'), dedicated to the river which flowed through all his life:

In your valleys my heart awoke to life
In me, your waves played about me,

8. See Thrasybulos Georgiades, *Musik und Rhythmus bei den Griechen – Zum Ursprung der abendländischen Musik* (Hamburg, 1958).

9. I wrote this before hearing Dr Rowan Williams talking about Herbert and Vaughan (in a lecture published elsewhere in this issue) and saying that it is the music that is left with one after reading, say, *The World*.

And all the gracious hills that know you
Wanderer, none is foreign to me.

On their summits Heaven's air freed
Me often from the pains of bondage; and from the valley
Like life from the cup of joy
Glanced the blueish silver wave.

The springs of the mountains hurried down to you,
With them also my heart and you took us with you
To the calmly noble Rhine, down to his
Towns and gay islands.

Still seems the world lovely to me, and my eye runs from me
Longingly after the charms of the earth,
To golden Pactolus, to Smyrna's
Shore, to Ilion's wood. Also often

I would like to land near Sunium, ask the silent
Path of your pillars, Olympion!
Before tempest and age
Down into the ruins of the temples of Athens

And their statues of Gods bury you as well,
For long now you have stood lonely, O Pride of the World
That is no more. And O you beautiful
Islands of Ionia where the sea's breeze

Cools the hot shores and through the laurel wood
Rustles, when the sun warms the vine,
Ah, where a golden Autumn changes
The sighs of a poor folk into songs,

When his pomegranate tree ripens, when through the green night
The orange shines, and the mastic tree
Runs with resin and kettle drum and cymbal
Sound to the labyrinthian dance,

To you, you islands, perhaps to you will my
 Guardian God bring me; but even there will
 My Neckar never leave my faithful mind with his
 Lovely meadows and willows on his banks.

Nürtingen on the Neckar, where Hölderlin lived from the age of four, was an important wine-producing area—his half-brother, Karl Gock, was the local *Weingraf*. Vineyards and wheat fields, orchards and gentle meadows and hills embracing *Dörfer* and *Städtchen* surrounded Hölderlin with their beauty from birth. *Brod und Wein*, a now much discussed poem, particularly with regard to the question of whether Hölderlin was a Christian, to me reflects not just the sacrament of the Church but the natural sacrament of Mother Nature with her gifts of bread and wine. But over this Divine, gift-bringing landscape breathed a strict pietistic, messianic religion. Hölderlin's mother came from a long line of priests, as did his father, and Hölderlin was sent to the Tübinger Stift, a Protestant seminary regarded as one of the great centres of religious and classical scholarship, to prepare him for a life preaching the Word of God. He did of course do this, but not within the confines of the Lutheran church, and not the word of one God only. His church was primarily the church of *Mutter Erde* and *Vater Aether*, and his Gods were all the prophets including the youngest, Christ, all of whom he saw as messengers of the Divine.

Hölderlin's divergence from his expected path has a parallel in Shelley's life. But, more interestingly, it is the two poets' experience of Timelessness, and of literally going beyond themselves and becoming the Divine Vision, that links them in spirit with each other and with the poet-philosopher, Empedocles. As Jeremy Naydler points out, Plato held that

True knowledge is knowledge by participation. So to know the Form of the Good one must know it through a participation in its essence, a knowing that, as Plato describes it, is tantamount to a visionary and ecstatic experience.¹⁰

¹⁰ 'Plato, Shamanism and Ancient Egypt', *Temenos Academy Review* 9 (2006) 67-92: p. 86.

This is what Hölderlin, Shelley and Empedocles are all writing about—and this is what the majority of critics do not seem to understand, often calling the visionary experience ‘symbolism’ or ‘metaphor’. Shelley has for a moment become the skylark, as Hölderlin became the river or wood or mountain. They see ‘thro’, not with’, the eye. And they see with Love.

It is interesting to compare these two accounts of ‘thinking organs’:

There was among them a man of exceptional knowledge
who indeed obtained the greatest wealth in his thinking organs,
master of all kinds of particularly wise deeds;
for whenever he reached out with all his thinking organs
he easily saw each of all things which are
in ten or twenty lifetimes.¹¹

And in the moonless nights, when the dun ocean
Heaved underneath wide heaven, star-impearled,
Starting from dreams . . .
Communed with the immeasurable world;
And felt his life beyond his limbs dilated,
Till his mind grew like that it contemplated.¹²

Empedocles, a follower of the Pythagorean School, expresses, like Shelley and Hölderlin, a deep and reverential understanding of Nature. In *On Nature* and *Purifications*, thought to be parts of one poem, he writes:

All were tame and gentle to men,
both beasts and birds, and loving thoughts blazed on.¹³

Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, writes of Empedocles’ teaching:

For, as everyone intuitively suspects, there exists a natural and common justice and injustice, even if there is no mutual community

11. Empedocles, Fragment 6/129, translated in Brad Inwood, *The Poem of Empedocles* (Toronto, 2001), p. 205.

12. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Marenghi* xxiii.

13. Fragment 123/30: Inwood, op. cit., p. 259.

or agreement . . . and as Empedocles says on the topic of not killing animals—for this is not just for some and unjust for others:

*But what is lawful for all extends continuously
through the wide-ruling aither and through the boundless gleam.*¹⁴

This is precisely the view of Shelley, expressed in his poetry and in *A Vindication of Natural Diet*, which so shocked the sensibilities of his English readers. He is addressing, he writes, ‘the ardent devotee of truth and virtue’. In *Queen Mab* we read:

Throughout this varied and eternal world
Soul is the only element: the block
That for uncounted ages has remained
The moveless pillar of a mountain’s weight
Is active, living spirit. Every grain
Is sentient both in unity and part,
And the minutest atom comprehends
A world of loves and hatreds . . .¹⁵

Shelley’s belief, or indeed experience, shared with Empedocles and Hölderlin, of a spirit or soul in everything is poignantly expressed in his poem *The Woodman and the Nightingale*, in which the birds and trees and sea and universe and ‘every sphere’ are ‘awed into delight’ by the nightingale’s melody—everything, that is, but the rough woodman:

And so this man returned with axe and saw
At evening close from killing the tall treen,
The soul of whom by Nature’s gentle law

Was each a wood-nymph, and kept ever green
The pavement and the roof of the wild copse,
Chequering the sunlight of the blue serene

With jaggèd leaves—

14. Cited ibid., p. 138. 15. *Queen Mab* iv.

Shelley's vision and hope of a new reverence for and union with Nature, found in so much of his work, echoes the teachings of Empedocles. Later in *Queen Mab* he writes:

How sweet a scene will earth become!
Of purest spirits a pure dwelling-place,
Symphonious with the planetary spheres;
When man, with changeless Nature coalescing,
Will undertake regeneration's work . . .¹⁶

Compare Empedokles' '*Heiligtum* speech', given to the people of Agrigentum before finally leaving them for the slopes of Mount Etna. I quote a few lines:

and lift, as ones newborn,
Your eyes to divine Nature!
 . . .
Then from the bliss of beautiful dawn
The earth's green glows anew
And Mountain and Sea and Clouds and Stars,
The noble Powers, like Brother-heroes,
Come before your eyes.¹⁷

Hölderlin obviously felt great empathy with the historical and mythical Empedocles and wrote three versions of his tragedy *Der Tod des Empedokles* which deals with Empedocles' last day on earth. All versions were unfinished, and opinion is divided on the reason for this. I would say that the ultimate reunion with Nature which Empedocles was determined upon was too powerful to represent in a play and also that Hölderlin saw too close a parallel with his own fate of being reviled by the country he loved and had hoped to influence for the betterment of mankind. In his *Grund zum Empedokles* ('Argument for Empedocles') Hölderlin describes the character of his hero which could be a portrait of Shelley and of Hölderlin himself:

Nature . . . appeared with all her melodies in the spirit and the

16. *Queen Mab* vi. 17. *Der Tod des Empedokles* II iv.

mouth of this man and so intimately and warm and personal as if his heart were hers, and the Spirit of the Elements lived in human form amongst the mortals.

Empedocles, Hölderlin and Shelley see, through Love,¹⁸ Mother Nature in all her immense and timeless beauty, and all hope for a reconciliation of all beings. In the penultimate scene of Hölderlin's play, from which the above excerpt is taken, Empedokles describes the joining of hands of all peoples which will result from Man's having the courage to be wise, break out of the shackles of 'old Custom' and 'bloody Faith',¹⁹ and thereby gain the gift of seeing, and therefore revering, Nature in all her powerful and divine Beauty.

The concept of love in understanding brings me back to Hellingrath and the reception of Hölderlin's work. I would like to quote the editor who completed the first collected edition of Hölderlin's work—tragically unfinished by the original editor, Norbert von Hellingrath, who, while working on it, was killed at the age of twenty-eight in the First World War:

Unbelievable as it may sound to later generations, the majority of the . . . poems and fragments of Hölderlin's late work came to light then—a century after their composition—in the middle of the tumult of war . . .

. . . Until then they had lain—a preserved treasure—in the dust of public libraries, with no one aware of them, only occasionally found out by intrusive, inquisitive people and, with a shaking of heads, ogled and fingered as curiosities and abortive attempts.

To Hellingrath it was granted to extract them from the confused manuscripts . . . into clarity and order.

In the field of modern *Wissenschaft* Hellingrath's is unique evidence that love in understanding can be more objective, more stringent even, in any case more fruitful and more revealing than

18. Cf. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*: 'The great secret of mortals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own.' See also his translation of Plato's *Symposium* concerning the Beauty of the God of Love.

19. Idem, *Feelings of a Republican on the Fall of Bonaparte*: 'I know/Too late, since thou and France are in the dust,/That Virtue owns a more eternal foe/Than Force or Fraud: old Custom, legal Crime,/And bloody Faith the foulest birth of Time.'

the confidence of prudently distanced, dry or clever scholarship.²⁰

In one of the two lectures printed in the above mentioned book, Hellingrath writes of Hölderlin's complete trust, familiarity and oneness with his Gods and of the resulting failure of people to understand his visionary poetry reflecting this:

Hölderlin never flatly told of this heaven, wrote down a divine comedy, but the world of the Gods is always around him, where a word indicates, there it is permanent and ordered around us, as though it bore the belief of a people; for these words speak with brotherly trust of the wonderful world as of something presupposed, obvious, known from time immemorial: where this child-like, heart-felt, unbroken belief speaks of it, the Gods are really there

....

He who thus lives amongst Gods, his speech will no longer be understood by people; for the first time in Germany poetic language ventured forth, undissembled, nurtured in native air . . . but the Germans did not print it, did not read the great hymns, merely called them 'signs of madness' . . .²¹

Hölderlin's work, then, is an elemental song—a celebration of his union with and love of Nature, of the Good and the True and the Beautiful. And if he offers an apology to the reader for unconventional writing, as in *Hyperion* and in the preface to *Friedensfeier* ('Celebration of Peace'), it is because he is so misunderstood. But, he says, 'I cannot write otherwise. One day almost every form of song will be heard and Nature from whence it came will take it back again to herself.'

BIOGRAPHY

The secure unity and wholeness of Hölderlin's early years amongst his Gods of Nature gradually at first, and then all too quickly, becomes more and more fragmented and shot through with deeply disturbing

20. Ludwig von Pigenot, in the introduction to Norbert von Hellingrath, *Hölderlin: Zwei Vorträge* (Munich, 1921), pp. 9–11.

21. From lecture notes not prepared for publication but published by Pigenot in memory of Hellingrath: *ibid.*, pp. 61, 62.

events which eventually and inevitably lead to his *Umnachtung* (Benightment).

Johann Christoph Friedrich Hölderlin was born in 1770, the same year as Beethoven and Wordsworth and his close friend Hegel, in Lauffen am Neckar in the house attached to the monastery where his father was overseer. The family moved when he was four years old to Nürtingen at the foot of the Swabian alps, again on the Neckar, where his mother lived until her death—this was for Hölderlin his home. His father died when he was two and his mother remarried a Herr Gock who became *Bürgermeister*. But as, after another five years, she was again a widow, Hölderlin, as he grew up, felt, as well as a great bond of love with his mother, a great responsibility as gradually the rift of understanding between them became ever wider; his mother's was essentially a simple, *bürgerlich* outlook and her son was becoming strange to her. Her fervent wish was for Hölderlin to marry and live a quiet life as a priest, preaching the word of God as indeed his fellow ordinand, Ludwig Neuffer, did, demanding, like a Jane Austen cleric, a good cellar and a groaning table! At eighteen, Hölderlin was at the Tübinger Stift where he continued his youthful friendship with the five years younger Schelling and met a new friend, Hegel. The three, together with Magenau and Neuffer, formed a private club in which they discussed set topics and read each other their poetry. All the ordinands were under the powerful influence of Schiller. For Hölderlin, who, in his early poetry, imitated his work, Schiller was a hero and mentor but was soon to have an ambivalently damaging effect on his life.

The messianic pietism of the Swabian mystic Alfred Bengel (a copy of his mystical comment on the New Testament was among the books found in Hölderlin's library),²² Homer, Sophocles and, above all, Plato formed the spiritual basis of Hölderlin's life in the Stift. Later, at the beginnings of his breakdown, it was being read to from Homer by a young classics scholar that calmed him down. (The Bible, however, had 'a very bad effect' on him.) But it was because of his own innate knowledge of Nature that he could follow Plato in the *Timaeus* 'into the depths of the deeps, in the most distant ends of the world of the Spirit,

22. This included Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, through which, it is interesting to note, Hölderlin became acquainted with the theories of Giordano Bruno.

where the Soul of the World sends out its life into the thousand pulses of Nature'; and in the *Symposium* to Socrates who 'with his divine wisdom' taught him what Love was. As an ordinand he was already writing the first draft of *Hyperion* where Melite is the priestess of Love—the future Diotima who would appear three years later in 1796 as Susette Gontard. And already he was challenging the Christian dogma of one God. After writing in *Hyperion* in the Third Letter:

Oh you to whom I called, as though you were beyond the stars, whom I called Creator of Heaven and Earth, friendly idol of my childhood, you will not be angry that I forgot you! Why is the world not needy enough to seek another as well?

he adds the apologetic footnote:

It is probably not necessary to note, that such remarks as mere phenomena of the human psyche should by rights scandalize no one.

This is the Second Letter of the novel:

Hyperion to Bellarmin

I have nothing of which I may say it is my own.

Distant and dead are my loved ones, and through no voice do I learn anything more of them.

My affairs on earth are finished. I went full of will to work, have bled for it and made the world not a penny richer.

Without renown and lonely I turn back and wander through my native land which lies like a garden of the dead far around, and perhaps there awaits for me the knife of the hunter who keeps us Greeks, as the animals of the forest, for his sport.

But you still shine, Sun of Heaven! You still become green, Holy Earth! The rivers still rush into the sea, and shady trees rustle in the midday. The rapturous Song of Spring sings my mortal thoughts to

sleep. The fullness of the all-living world nourishes and satisfies with drunkenness my starving being.

Oh blessed Nature! I know not what happens to me when I lift my eyes before your beauty, but all the delight of Heaven is in the tears that I shed before you, the lover before the beloved.

My whole being becomes quiet and hearkens when the tender wave of the air plays about my breast. Lost in the wide blue I often look upwards into the Aether, and down into the Holy Sea, and it is to me as though the pain of loneliness dissolved into the life of the Divine.

To be One with All, that is the life of the Divine, that is the Heaven of man.

To be One with All that lives, in blessed self-forgetfulness to return to the All of Nature, that is the peak of thoughts and joy, that is the Holy Mountain-top, the place of eternal rest where the midday loses its oppressiveness and the thunder its voice and the turbulent sea resembles a cornfield.

To be One with All that lives! With this utterance Virtue puts aside its wrathful armour, the Spirit of Man his sceptre, and all thoughts vanish before the vision of the Eternally-One World, as the rules of the striving artist before his *Urania*; and brazen Fate renounces dominion, and from the covenant of beings death vanishes, and indivisibility and eternal youth beautify and fill the world with bliss.

On these heights I often stand, my Bellarmin! But a moment's reflection casts me down. I consider and find myself as before, alone, with all the pains of mortality, and my heart's sanctuary, the Eternally-One World is gone; Nature closes her arms, and I stand like a stranger before her, and understand her not.

Oh! had I never gone into your schools.²³ Knowledge, which I

²³. This is a direct reference to the effect of Fichte's teaching on Hölderlin. Following his notes on this exclamatory sentence, Friedrich Beissner cites, from the metrical draft of *Hyperion*, the phrase *Tyrannisch gegen die Natur* ('tyrannical towards Nature') with

pursued down into the depths, from which, youthfully foolish, I expected confirmation of my pure joy, that has destroyed everything for me.

I have become through you so absolutely reasonable, have thoroughly learnt to distinguish myself from that which surrounds me, am now solitary in the beautiful world, am so rejected from the Garden of Nature, where I grew and blossomed, and wither in the midday sun.

Oh, a God is man when he dreams, a beggar when he reflects, and when enthusiasm has gone, he stands there like a naughty son, who has been thrown out of the house by his father, looking at the miserable pennies which compassion has given him for the way.

*

His friends at the seminary described Hölderlin as melancholic, moody, gentle; but his bearing, according to one of his first biographers, Schwab, was ‘as though Apollo strode through the Great Hall’.²⁴ Although, at the wish of his mother, Hölderlin stayed at the Tübinger Stift for five years, he rebelled against the spiritual narrowness of orthodox theology, calling the theologians there the *Todtengräber in Tübingen* ('gravediggers in Tübingen'), whilst Hegel called them *mechanische Köpfe* ('mechanical heads'). The young Hölderlin was like a volcano tired of its imprisonment in the earth. Not until the freeing influence of Susette Gontard, to whom he confessed he had given up philosophy, does Hölderlin write of his early days in *Da ich ein Knabe war* ('When I was a boy'):

When I was a boy
A God rescued me often
From the clamour and whips of men

the comment, ‘This is Fichte’s teaching, in which the ego posits itself and those Things outside itself, particularly Nature, are defined as non-ego.’ At first Hölderlin writes enthusiastically about Fichte’s lectures but with the realization of the philosopher’s diametrically opposed view of Nature comes Hölderlin’s flight from Jena and the *Luftgeister mit metaphysischen Flügeln*.

²⁴ Cited by Ulrich Hässermann, *Hölderlin* (Hamburg, 1961), p. 50: ‘Sein Aufreten war – nach der Überlieferung durch Schwab – „als schritte Apollo durch den Saal“’.

Then, secure and good, I played
With the flowers of the grove
And the breezes of Heaven
Played with me.

And as you delight
The heart of the plants
When they stretch towards you
Their tender arms,

So have you delighted my heart
Father Helios! and like Endymion
I was your belovèd
Holy Luna!

Oh all you faithful
Friendly Gods
If only you knew
How my soul loved you.

True, I had not yet called
You by name, nor you
Named me, as men name each other
As though they knew one another.

But I knew you better
Than I had ever known men,
I understood the stillness of the Aether,
The words of men I never understood.

I was brought up by the melody
Of the rustling woods
And to love I learnt
Amongst the flowers.

In the arms of the Gods I grew up.

At the beginning of the French Revolution, Hölderlin is writing,

Freedom must eventually come, and Virtue will better be able to flourish in the holy warming Light of Freedom, than in the ice-cold Zone of Despotism . . . That is the holy goal of my wishes and my occupation, that in our time I awake the seed that will flourish in the future.²⁵

The three friends, Hölderlin, Hegel and Schelling, arrived at the pantheistic formula *Eins und All* ('One and All').²⁶ Their password was *Reich Gottes!* and years later when Hegel and Hölderlin came together they met with their password.

At the storming of the Bastille in 1793 it is said that Hölderlin, Schelling and Hegel erected a Tree of Liberty on the banks of the Rhine and danced round it. They were also under suspicion of having translated the *Marseillaise*. Later at the beginning of his breakdown Hölderlin kept saying '*Ich will kein Jakobiner sein . . .*'. His friend, Sinclair, had been on trial for suspected Jacobin sympathies and then imprisoned in the Solitude, and his friend and first publisher, Stäudlin, had committed suicide in the Rhine because of his despair at the outcome of the Revolution. All this terrible violence and despair was the backdrop to Hölderlin's vision of a New World of Truth and Love and Beauty. And a hundred years later the First World War was to be the tragic background to Hellingrath's discovery and publication of Hölderlin.

In the winter of 1794 Hölderlin, having left the Stift, is a student of philosophy at the University of Jena—earning money as a house tutor to the son of Charlotte von Kalb, a friend of Schiller's. He is fascinated by Fichte's lectures, but eventually repelled, and a frequent guest of his hero, Schiller, who publishes Hölderlin's *Fragment von Hyperion* in his *Thalia*. On his first visit to Schiller there is another person in the room whom he does not recognize as he is completely taken up with Schiller. There is a copy of *Thalia* containing his *Fragment* lying on a table. The stranger silently flicks through it, causing Hölderlin to become *über und über rot*, as he writes—very red. That evening at

25. From a letter to his half-brother Karl Gock, September 1793.

26. ἐν καὶ πᾶν, which appears in the fourth volume of Jacobi, *Briefe*, cited in n. 22 above.

the *Klub der Professoren* he learns that Goethe had been at Schiller's!

In March, Schiller recommends *Hyperion* to the publisher Cotta, who pays Hölderlin 'child's money' for it.

At the end of May 1795, he flees from Jena, making a sudden appearance at home, driven away as he says by 'the airy spirits with metaphysical wings', the oppressive weight of Schiller and Fichte. After being with Schiller, Hölderlin wrote in a letter, the next day he was unable to think or do anything. It is interesting to note here the answer of the Soothsayer to Antony's question of whose fortunes shall rise higher:

Cæsar's.

Therefore, O Antony, stay not by his side:
 Thy demon, that's thy spirit which keeps thee, is
 Noble, courageous, high, unmatchable,
 Where Cæsar's is not; but, near him, thy angel
 Becomes a fear, as being o'erpowered; therefore
 Make space enough between you.²⁷

This is what happened to Hölderlin. Jena and its 'Titans' nearly over-powered his angel and he had to escape.

For Hölderlin, it is the Absolute or the God between I and Thou that is important, and to him the Fichtean Ego—Non-Ego remained on the material plane.²⁸ And when one thinks of one's closest friends or family it often is not what is said but the 'tones' that sing between you that is the reality, the real relationship, which then stretches into the eternal. In a letter to his half-brother in November 1798, Hölderlin writes:

27. *Antony and Cleopatra* II iii.

28. 'The encounter with the Partner gives man the experience of his reality—this is valid for Fichte as for Hölderlin. But the starting points are different. Fichte's sole interest is so directed that man comes about (*sich macht*) through the fulfilment of his field of energy (his particular "sphere"). He posits himself (*setzt sich*) through the establishment of the opposite (*Gegensatz*; Natural Law). Hölderlin's sole interest in the encounter with the fateful *Du* is to participate in the Third Part, the Absolute, that is between me and thee (*zwischen mir und Dir*). Hölderlin's thinking stops abruptly here and passes directly into reverence, whilst Fichte's is methodically directed towards action' (Häussermann, *Hölderlin*; see also n. 23 above). For the God, or Absolute, between us, compare the above quotations and the passage from *Menon's Klagen um Diotima* translated below.

And from time time we must bring the offering to the Divinity that is between you and me.

And later to Böhlendorff he writes:

I need your pure tones. The psyche amongst friends, the formation of thought through conversation and letters is necessary to artists.²⁹

*

When Hölderlin entered the Gontard household in Frankfurt as tutor to their son, Henry, at the beginning of January 1796, he was entering the most important and tragic era of his life. He was to meet the embodiment of all that he believed in, the Melite of the earlier draft of *Hyperion*, the Diotima of Plato's *Symposium*, Gontard's wife, Susette. This was no ordinary love. It was a meeting of two souls who were inextricably bound. When they were forced to part, they lost themselves unto death. As Ronald Peacock points out when discussing Hölderlin's most movingly beautiful elegy, *Menons Klagen um Diotima*:

Lycidas, *Adonais* and *Thyrsis*, to recall famous elegies of English literature, are all, like *Euphrosyme*, laments for the death of a friend, the early death and the blighting of hopes; and their authors, it is true, incorporate in them much of their general philosophy. *Menons Klagen* are a lament for the loss of life itself Milton and Shelley, Arnold and Goethe, bewail personal loss, but not the loss of themselves

Aber das Haus ist öde mir nun, und sie haben mein Auge
 Mir genommen, auch mich hab' ich verloren mit ihr.
 Darum irr' ich umher, und wohl, wie die Schatten, so muß ich
 Leben, und sinnlos dünk' lange das Übrige mir.³⁰

The lines preceding this quotation (translated below) again contain

29. It is interesting to note here Kleist's essay of 1805 *Über die allmähliche Verfestigung der Gedanken beim Reden* ('On the Gradual Completion of Thought through Discourse').

30. Peacock, *Hölderlin*, Chapter VII 'Diotima'.

Hölderlin's belief in, and experience of, the God between or amongst us:

But we, peacefully joined, like the loving swans,
 When they rest on the lake, or, rocked by waves
 Look down into the water, where silver clouds mirror themselves,
 And ethereal blue undulates under the travellers in ships,
 So on earth we wandered. And even if the North threatened
 He, the enemy of lovers, tendering laments, and fell
 From the branches the leaves, and flew in the wind the rain
 Quietly we smiled, were aware of our God
 In our trusting conversation; in one soul-song
 Completely at peace with ourselves, childish and joyfully alone.
 But the house is laid waste for me now, and they have taken my eye
 From me, also myself I have lost with her.
 Thus I wander about, and perhaps like the Shades, so must I
 Live, and senseless, long has seemed, the rest to me.

This was written in 1800, two years after their parting.

In September 1798 he leaves the Gontard household after aggressive words with Herr Gontard. Little Henry is heartbroken. Susette and Hölderlin continue to have secret meetings. 'Without you my life fades away and slowly dies,' writes Susette prophetically.

At the time of his dismissal Hölderlin has already begun working on *Empedokles* and is planning a journal, *Iduna*, which could support him rather than the humiliating servant capacity jobs of house tutor. He thinks of going to Jena to try again for a university post in Greek Literature, but Schiller has already advised him against this. At the end of October the second volume of *Hyperion* is published. There is a fleeting meeting with Diotima when he gives her the volume inscribed *Wem sonst als Dir*, accompanied with the complaint,

It is terrible to think that we both with our best strength must perhaps perish because we lack each other.

In 1800 Hölderlin is once again declining his mother's advice to take a church living, still hoping that his journal will materialize and bring an income.

In February there is a last meeting of Hölderlin and Diotima.

In February 1801 the Peace of Lunéville inspires *Friedensfeier*, in which Hölderlin invites all the Gods and prophets to a celebration in the Natural Church of Nature where Time has lost its power. The poem was not discovered or published until 1954. It incorporates his hopes of the bringing together of Christ with the older Gods and Divine Nature at the End of Time—but the expected ‘Prince of the Feast’ for whom the Divine Celebration has been prepared is unnamed and could be Christ or the prophet of the New Religion spoken of in *Hyperion* that will come

... when . . . the last, most beautiful Daughter of Time, the new Church, comes forth out of these stained outmoded forms, when the awakened feeling for the Divine brings back to man his divinity and to his breast beautiful youth . . .

In 1802 *Menons Klagen um Diotima* is published—badly!!

In May Hölderlin writes his last letter to Schiller asking him to help him get a post in Jena as a lecturer in Greek Literature. Schiller does not reply.

In the Summer Cotta is ready to publish his poems (at a price) but first wants a ‘favourite poem’ as advertisement to be published in his *Damenkalender*. Nothing comes of it.

Hölderlin’s health and state of mind are beginning to show signs of breaking. His friend Sinclair tries to do what he can for him and in the Autumn a house tutor post in Bordeaux is arranged at the home of the Hamburg Konsul, Meyer.

On the 4th December Hölderlin writes to Böhlendorff:

I am now full of parting, perhaps for ever. For what have I more dear in the world? But they do not want me. German, however, I will and must remain, even if the heart and living necessity drove me to Otaheiti.

About the 10th December he leaves Nürtingen—on foot—for Bordeaux.

On the 15th December he is held as a foreigner in Strasbourg until the 30th and told not to go through Paris but to register with the police.

At the beginning of January 1803 he makes a difficult journey to Lyon—treacherous cold weather and flooding. On the 28th January he arrives.

In the middle of May he departs. His biographers write that it is not known why. But to me the cause seems clear.

In the middle of June he arrives in Stuttgart—exhausted, wild-eyed, clad like a beggar and, apparently, out of his mind. In the middle of June (the 22nd) Susette dies nursing her children with German measles but also, it is written, of consumption and loneliness. Sinclair writes to Hölderlin in Bordeaux of her death, thinking him still to be there. Hölderlin receives the letter in Stuttgart at the beginning of July. His Elegy *Achill (Achilles)* written in 1798 immediately after the parting from Susette Gontard and before the Bordeaux tutorship, throws light on his state of mind there:

Glorious Son of the Gods! when you had lost the beloved
 You went to the shore of the sea, wept out into the flood,
 Lamenting, desired descent into the holy depth,
 In the stillness, your heart, where, from the noise of the ships
 Far, deep under the waves, in a peaceful grotto the blue
 Thetis lived, who protected you, the Sea-goddess.
 Mother she was to the youth, the powerful Goddess,
 Had once suckled the child, lovingly on the rocky
 Shores of his island, with the forceful song of the waves
 And in the strengthening bath had made him a Hero.
 And the mother perceived the lament of the youth,
 Rose up from the bed of the sea mourning, like clouds,
 Quietened with tender embrace the pains of the loved-one,
 And he heard, how she caressingly promised to help.

Son of the Gods! O were I like you so could I trustingly
 To one of the Gods complain of my secret grief.
 I must not see it, must bear the disgrace as though I had
 Never belonged to you, who yet think of me with tears.
 Good Gods! yet you hear each plea of man,
 Oh, and deeply and purely I loved you Holy Light,
 All my life, you Earth and your Springs and Woods,
 Father Aether, and felt you too yearningly and purely
 This heart—oh soften for me, you good ones, my suffering,
 So that my soul does not become for me silent too soon,
 So that I may live and you, you high Divine powers

Even on the fleeting day, I may thank with pious song
 Thank for previous blessings, for joys of past youth,
 And then take up to you, kindly, the lonely one.

That was 1798. In 1805 Charlotte von Kalb is writing to Jean Paul of Hölderlin:

This man is now raving mad; however his *Geist* has reached a level that only a seer, one indwelt by God, can reach.

CONCLUSION

Hölderlin's fate is the fate of a seer. The tragic figure of Cassandra springs to mind, daughter of Hecuba, seer and prophet but doomed by the slighted Apollo never to be believed but instead to be looked on as insane. Hölderlin, the prophet of the Divine, who in *Hyperion* and *Der Tod des Empedokles* gives so many wise indications of what will happen if we lose our faith in Nature is, apart from a few friends and admirers, ignored, thought of as mad. Schiller had given him up. Goethe had dismissed him. His mother did not understand him. Even amongst his Stift friends, he was, in essence, '*ohne Genossen*'.

*Indessen düinket mir öfters
 Besser zu schlafen, wie so ohne Genossen zu seyn,
 So zu harren, und was zu thun indeß und zu sagen,
 Weiß ich nicht, und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit.*

In the meantime it seems often to me
 Better to sleep, than to be so without like-minded friends,
 So to tarry, and what to do meanwhile and to say,
 I know not, and why poet in indigent times.³¹

A parallel could be seen here with Shelley's *Stanzas Written in Dejection near Naples*; but with Hölderlin the significance of 'sleep' is fundamental to his reason for existence. To 'sleep' would mean a giving up of his vocation of poet, whom he sees as entrusted with the gift

31. *Brod und Wein*, stanza vii.

of *Heilig Gedächtnis* ('holy memory'), and therefore, the task of 'staying awake by night'.

In his last great poems Hölderlin is struggling with the idea that in the time of darkness that has enveloped us since the last of the Gods, Christ, left us, we have had to suffice with the symbols of their presence, *Brod* and *Wein*. And that it is the poet's task, as I said at the beginning of this paper, to remain watching or awake by night—*wachend zu bleiben bei Nacht*, as Hölderlin writes in the second stanza of *Brod und Wein*. He is using the word *wachen*, 'to watch/keep awake', in full awareness of St Matthew's Gospel, in the Greek and as translated by Luther.³² His language now resembles the last quartets of Schubert in its bare and piercing honesty.

Hölderlin's *Umnachtung* or benightedness is not separate but part of his life as a seer. He tried to reconcile his vision with the world around him and could not. He saw, above Time, like all the great mystics, the coming together of all things, a reconciliation of the apparently irreconcilable—Christ with the Ancient Gods, Greece with Germany, Man with Nature and, most importantly, Nature as Divine; and wrote, as in *Friedensfeier*, of the advent of a New Religion or state of Timelessness when the veil of the Word is lifted, death departs and the divine world of *Gesang* is imminent. This divine vision he translated into song, thereby rendering the revelation unharful to man. But he, the conductor of the lightning, was finally struck dumb and remained silent for the last thirty-six years of his life. Like Antigone (one of his last works was a translation of Sophocles' play), he obeyed a law beyond that of mortals, a law not understood by the Creons of this world. For him *dichten*, to write poetry, was synonymous with *danken*, to thank.

His story reads like a myth. Educated from an early age in monastery schools in fairy-tale seclusion in the depths of Swabia by austere pietistic clergy, and then five years' imprisonment in the Tübinger Stift, another ancient unheated building where snow and rain would sometimes settle in the spartan rooms, immersed in the Bible and the Classics—his whole training preparing him, as his mother wished, to be a minister of the Word of God—and then rebellion. His reputed

32. 'Und er kam zu seinen Jüngern vnd fand sie schlaffend und sprach zu Petro. Könnet jr nicht eine Stunde mit mir wachen: Wachet vnd betet das jr nicht in anfechtung falle. Der Geist ist willig Aber das Fleisch ist schwach' (S. Mattheus c xxvi, Luther).

dancing round a *Freiheitsbaum* on the banks of the Rhine with Hegel and Schelling could be seen not only as a celebration of the French Revolution and Freedom but a celebration of his own Revolution and bid for Freedom. Freedom to talk about the Gods that he knew, and knew intimately by instinct and enthusiasm and vision and not by rote. But then, *Wozu dichten in dürftiger Zeit?*

Like all his heroes, Antigone, Oedipus, Empedocles, Achilles, he was not understood, was lonely and isolated in the fragmented and material world of men. In Jena, Fichte, it seemed, was lecturing on man's superiority over Nature; Schiller, his hero, lost interest in him, he and Goethe calling him *ein Poetchen*—the diminutive form of Poet; and then the great Goethe's advice—to restrict himself to *kleine Gedichte!*³³

And if this were not enough, to have to earn his living as a beggar in his own house, the Germany he was trying to revivify—to be a paid servant in the houses of the wealthy, where, as he wrote in a letter to his half-brother, they mainly disported themselves like *Bauern* with *neuer Wein*, peasants with new wine. And still to continue writing with praise and wonder some of the greatest poetry ever written. Then in one of these despised households to meet his Diotima, the Melite of the *Fragment von Hyperion* which Schiller had published in his *Thalia* and which Goethe silently and slightly flicked through while Hölderlin stood speechlessly looking on. To meet his other self, like Plato's two halves of a Whole, to come together like two rivers rushing into one sea and then, two years later, to be forced to part. It is like a fairy tale.

The correspondence between Hölderlin and Susette that has come down to us shows the oneness of vision there was between them. Both were musical, Hölderlin a flautist and Susette a pianist. Their relationship was like a Divine Song—there are so many references in Hölderlin's work to *Töne, Gesang* and *Melodie* regarding his relationship with Susette and with Nature.

Rarely in his days in the *Turm* on the banks of the Neckar in Tübingen with the caring and understanding Master Carpenter Zimmer,

33. It must be remembered, though it does not excuse Goethe's summary dismissal of Hölderlin as a poet, that Goethe and Schiller did not see Hölderlin's late work; and Goethe's comment in a letter of June 1797 to Schiller on Hölderlin's *An den Aether* is quite sensitive: 'One is reminded of those paintings in which all the animals gather round Adam in Paradise.'

who had read and liked *Hyperion*, did he talk of the past. He withdrew completely, addressing those inquisitive, horrible visitors in an old-fashioned polite style and calling himself outlandish names like 'Scardanelli'. His few letters to his mother are in a stilted, childish German. It seemed that the past was past. But Susette was always with him, part of him. Once, apparently, when the name of his 'Diotima' was mentioned to him by a visitor, the now seventy-one-year-old Hölderlin said in simple Swabian dialect, '*Närret isch se worde.*' She became mad.

To me Hölderlin was, like his writing, an instrument. Schelling said that he was *sehr zart gestimmt* ('very delicately strung'). He sang with his whole being, and when the burden of his song became too much to bear, the Gods took pity on him, broke the lyre and led him into the peaceful shadows of night.

