

REASON AND ENERGY

Studies in German Literature

Michael Hamburger

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GERMAN LITERATURE



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MICHAEL HAMBURGER

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MICHAEL HAMBURGER

*REASON
AND
ENERGY*

*Studies in
German Literature*

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“Without Contraries is no progression.
Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and
Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary
to Human existence.”

William Blake

“An absolute urge towards perfection
and completeness is a kind of disease,
as soon as it adopts a destructive and
hostile attitude towards the imperfect,
the incomplete.”

Novalis

PREFACE

Most of the studies presented here evolved out of shorter essays, or only out of translations, undertaken long before there was any question of publishing them in book form; and even when I came to envisage such a book, I was guided more by the nature of my first interest in each writer's work than by the wish to expound a coherent thesis. The title of this book indicates one of several themes that recur throughout the different studies; but it is a theme discovered in retrospect, rather than a thesis driven towards a foregone conclusion.

In the case of writers not widely known in England, a good deal of general information has been provided. All prose quotations are given in English translation, all verse quotations in both languages, except for a few recalcitrant poems quoted in the introductory chapter to Part II.

Parts of these studies - or earlier versions of such parts - have appeared in the following periodicals: *Encounter*, *German Life and Letters*, *The New Statesman and Nation*, *Partisan Review* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. My grateful acknowledgements are due to the editors of these periodicals. The introductory chapter to Part II incorporates parts of a public lecture, *Expressionism in German poetry*, delivered at University College, London, on February 24th 1955.

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I should like to express my gratitude to Dr. H. G. Adler, Dr. Beda Allemann, Frau Eva Cassirer, Professor L. W. Forster, Professor Roy Pascal, Mrs. Ruth Speirs, Dr. E. L. Stahl and Dr. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson for giving me valuable help in the form of criticisms, corrections and suggestions.

M.H.

I

HÖLDERLIN



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I

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THE gnomic grandeur of Hölderlin's late poetry, his prophetic and visionary hymns, is of a kind that must strike an unprepared reader as not only strange and perplexing, but as anachronistic. These hymns have no parallel in any modern literature, either of Hölderlin's time or later. Yet, unique and esoteric as they are, the hymns become clearer in the light of Hölderlin's earlier work and even of general trends perceptible in the German literature of Hölderlin's time. Before venturing on an interpretation of one of the hymns—an interpretation that should shed a little light on all of them—I shall sketch in a few of the features that relate the whole of Hölderlin's work to its historical setting. Such background features, it goes without saying, can no more explain its unique qualities than the climate and soil of its setting explain the shape, colour or scent of a plant; their only function here is to make Hölderlin's late poetry more accessible to readers who might otherwise be repelled by its oddity. It is well known that these hymns are the work of a poet who had suffered at least one serious mental breakdown and was about to succumb to incurable madness; but the fact is irrelevant. The hymns show no slackening of intellectual control; what makes them difficult throughout, ambiguous and obscure in parts, is the heightened concentration of all the poet's faculties on a single task. They are incoherent only where they are fragmentary; and, unlike the poems of Hölderlin's madness proper, they are never inane.

Hölderlin's mature poetry was the product of so intense a

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development, compressed into a period of time so incredibly short, that one could easily be misled into treating it as a single poetic sequence, rather than a series of poetic sequences whose only unity is that of growth. The whole body of his mature work can be divided into three principal phases: the idealistic, the tragic and the prophetic. These phases, as one would expect, are not wholly distinct; but they are sufficiently so to provide rough boundary lines that help one to find one's way. But since growth is a cyclic process, it is important to treat these phases as concentric circles; few poets have been as conscious as Hölderlin that the "course of life" is circular, its end linked to its beginning. A few of the poems that Hölderlin wrote in his late adolescence, such as the powerful *Die Bücher der Zeiten*,¹ are closer to his tragic and prophetic phases than to the idealistic phase that followed these early attempts.

Hölderlin's idealistic phase was coeval with the "classical" phase of the German literary Renaissance, which was instituted by Goethe and Schiller as a deliberate campaign against forces which they themselves had once invoked. It was the eruption of these forces, the chthonic powers, in the seventeen-seventies that made modern German literature different from any other. After releasing the chthonic powers in *Werther* and in his early dithyrambic verse, Goethe spent the rest of his life in the strenuous and multiple endeavour to put them back in their place. In the seventeen-nineties, after his own period of *Sturm und Drang*, Schiller applied his very different gifts to the same task; and Hölderlin, who began as Schiller's disciple and protégé, dedicated his early poetry to the same didactic, enlightening and educational function, that of a secular priest who expounds not scripture, but philosophy. But, from the start, Hölderlin had grave doubts about this function. Schiller found it difficult enough to cope with the philosophy of Kant; but Hölderlin had to come to terms with the teaching of Kant's successors, especially with that of Fichte, whose lectures he attended in 1794 and 1795. Hölderlin's novel *Hyperion* shows how deeply and dangerously Fichte's ideas affected him.

Just because German classicism was so much of a hothouse

¹) *Works* (Grosse Stuttgarter Ausgabe) I (i), 69-74.

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growth, carefully and lovingly fostered in the shelter of little Weimar in defiance of the tempests raging outside, Goethe could not afford to be generous to younger writers, like Hölderlin and Kleist, whom he could not fit into his civilizing scheme. Just because his own balance was so precarious, Goethe grew intolerant of all that was morbid, one-sided or self-destructive. Hence his horror of the tragic in later life, the incongruous redemption of his Faust in Part II, his fear of music. (The "spirit of music", which Nietzsche was to relate to tragedy, became a powerful influence on the Romantics; because Goethe was so susceptible to its vague incitements, but felt it to be an anti-classical force, he made a point of learning to use his eyes, of studying concrete phenomena and counting out hexameters on his mistress' back.¹ Yet Goethe's all-embracing philosophy, his morphological view of nature, history and art, resembled the thought of Hölderlin and Novalis in being syncretic; it could only attain the cohesion of a system by continually breaking down the barriers of orthodoxy, both theological and scientific, by resolving long-accepted antinomies and by applying an almost mystical vision to the most diverse empirical disciplines. This achievement, made possible only by his genius and by that wisdom to which Mr. T. S. Eliot has lately paid tribute,² is unprecedented and inimitable; and so, in its different way, is Hölderlin's, though Hölderlin begged in vain to be admitted to the shelter of Weimar or Jena, struggled heroically with all the daemons of the age and transcended tragedy by approving his own destruction.

The transition from Hölderlin's idealistic phase to the tragic was gradual. Many of his early odes in classical metres - those written before 1799 - uphold the ideals of Hölderlin's youth against experiences and forces that threaten them. Thus in his ode *Der Mensch*,³ of 1798, his idealistic vision of man conflicts with a tragic one. Man is the most highly gifted and blessed of all living creatures. Like the rest of creation, he is the child of Earth, the material principle, and of Helios, the spiritual; but,

¹) See Goethe's *Römische Elegien*.

²) In *Goethe as the Sage*. Hamburg, 1955.

³) *Works* (Grosse Stuttgarter Ausgabe) I (i), 263. English rendering in my *Hölderlin: Poems*, 1952, P. 97.

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unlike his fellow creatures, he has an irresistible urge to better himself, to explore, to advance, to idealize, "to sacrifice a certain present for something uncertain, different, better and still better", as Hölderlin explained in another context.¹ The tension of the poem arises from Hölderlin's dual view of the human condition. Considered idealistically, Man's urge to improve himself accounts for human progress, in which Hölderlin the philosopher continued to believe long after Hölderlin the poet had begun to contradict him; considered tragically, it is the *hubris* that estranges men from Nature, offends the gods and involves the offender in endless conflict and suffering. Hölderlin does his best to reconcile the two views, by that progression through contraries so characteristic of his poetry; but *Der Mensch* is one of the few poems of this period in which his tragic vision predominates.

Hölderlin's dualism - the dualism of a poet whose whole work, at the time, was directed towards pantheistic communion with "all that lives", whose principal doctrine was the *ἐν καὶ πᾶν*, One and All, of antiquity - would be difficult to understand but for his prose works of that period, *Hyperion*, the letters and the philosophical fragments. As we can see in *Hyperion*, with its cycles of exaltation and dejection, Hölderlin's desire to be at one with the cosmos continually came up against his philosophical awareness of complete isolation from the rest of the created world. This awareness, confirmed by the solipsistic idealism of Fichte and its development by Hölderlin's own friends, Hegel and Schelling, accounts for those moments in *Hyperion* that shock the reader by their unexpected cynicism, by their nihilistic despair. *Hyperion*, in fact, is pervaded by the same dualism.

"Man is a god when he dreams, a beggar when he reflects" ² *Hyperion* writes. Dreaming here means the state of mind that permits communion with Nature; reflection, the self-consciousness that cuts off the individual from the rest of creation. It is the alternation of these states of mind, with infinite variations and a gradual progression towards synthesis, that gives *Hyperion*

¹ Letter to his half-brother, June, 1799. *Works* (G.S.A.) VI (i) 327. English version of a longer extract from this letter cited in Introduction to *Hölderlin: Poems*, 36-37.

² *Works* (Zinkernagel) II, 14.

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its peculiar structure, an almost musical structure that suggests sonata form. The two themes are elaborated in another passage: "There is an oblivion of all existence, a silencing of all individual being, in which it seems as if we had found all things.

There is a silencing, an oblivion of all existence, in which it seems as if we had lost all things, a night of the soul, in which not the faintest gleam of a star, not even the glow of rotten wood can reach us."¹

The difference between these states of mind is that between being and existence. The positive state is that in which we forget ourselves because we feel at one with the world; the negative state is that in which we forget the world and are conscious only of ourselves. When Hyperion is plunged into this negative state of mind, what had been "all" before suddenly turns into nothing; he becomes like one of those persons whom he pities for being "in the grip of that Nothing which rules over us, who are thoroughly conscious that we are born for Nothing, that we love a Nothing, believe in a Nothing, work ourselves to the bone for Nothing, until we gradually dissolve into Nothing . . ."²

It is clear enough from these extracts that Hölderlin's pantheistic faith had a reverse side of unmitigated pessimism. This dichotomy goes back to Rousseau's doctrine that what is natural is good, all evil due to the corrupting influence of civilization. The German adaptation of this doctrine was to identify evil with consciousness itself, to deify Energy and discredit Intellect. Schiller had contributed to this adaptation by his distinction between "naive" and "sentimental" literature, for the "naive" embraced all that is natural and spontaneous, the "sentimental" all that is the result of reflection. Kleist was to make the antithesis even more extreme; and it has been developed by German writers ever since.³

Hölderlin's work entered its tragic phase when he could no longer accept any of the philosophical explanations of evil current in his time. Though he was reluctant to revert to any doctrine that reminded him of his theological studies, his view

¹) *ibid.*, 57.

²) *ibid.*, 61.

³) See P. 141; and compare Thomas Mann's antithesis between "intellect" and "life" (*Geist and Leben*). D. H. Lawrence presents an English parallel.

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of the human condition - even in the comparatively early poem *Der Mensch* - does presuppose something not unlike original sin. There is an obvious connection between the knowledge of good and evil in *Genesis* and the fore-knowledge of death that distinguishes Hölderlin's Man from his fellow creatures. Hölderlin's pantheism, in essence, was the aspiration to return to the state that preceded the Fall of Man. Now this pantheism was gradually modified by Hölderlin's recognition that evil is inherent in Nature and in Man; and that there is a gulf between the human and the divine, a gulf which men ignore at their peril.

In his letters of this transitional period, Hölderlin still clung to the philosophic humanism of his youth. As late as 1799 he assured his half-brother of the "salutary effect of philosophic and political literature on the education of our country". Because the Germans, by nature, are "*glebae addicti* and in one way or another, literally or metaphorically, most of them are bound to their little plots"; because they lack "elasticity" and breadth, "Kant is the Moses of our nation, who leads them out of their Egyptian inertia into the free and open desert of his speculations, and who brings down the rigorous law from the holy mountain."¹ Yet in the course of the same month Hölderlin confessed to his mother that all his philosophical studies - undertaken against his inclinations out of the fear that his poetry would be condemned as "empty" - left him not only unsatisfied, but restless and unpleasantly excited: and that he always longed to return to his "dear occupation", poetry, much as "a conscripted Swiss shepherd longs for his valley and his flock."² In truth, the matter was not as simple as that. Hölderlin remained a truly philosophical poet; but the philosophy to which he felt drawn as a poet was not that of contemporary Germany, but that of pre-Socratic Greece; a philosophy close to religious experience and to myth: a philosophy of nature unencumbered with modern subjectivity. It was not only because of his legendary suicide that Hölderlin made Empedocles the protagonist of an unfinished tragedy.

Hölderlin's last attempt to become a *praeceptor Germaniae* in the humanistic tradition of Goethe and Schiller was his plan to

¹) *Works* (G. S. A.) VI, 303-4.

²) *ibid.*, 311.

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edit a journal, *Iduna*, in 1799. Its purpose, as he defined it in a letter to a publisher interested in the scheme, was as follows: "The unification and reconciliation of the sciences with life, of art and good taste with genius, of the heart with the head, of the real with the ideal, of the civilized (in the widest sense of the word) with nature - this will be the general character, the spirit of the journal."¹ In a later letter to Schelling, whom he asked for a contribution, Hölderlin very aptly described it as a "humanistic journal", but was careful to distinguish his own humanism from the "so-called humanism" of others.²

The failure of this project, and Schiller's failure to find Hölderlin a congenial post as an alternative to the project, which he advised Hölderlin to abandon, was a decisive turning-point. It meant that Hölderlin must give up hope, once and for all, of having any influence on the public of his time; and, since it deprived him of his last possibility of economic independence, it meant that he was faced once more with the drudgery and humiliation of being a private tutor, just when he was ready to write his greatest poetry and when his nerves could no longer bear the strain of petty frustrations and irritations. To read his subsequent letters is a harrowing experience. Even before his enforced separation from Susette Gontard he had felt that his fate would be a tragic one; but he had resisted this feeling. While he was at Homburg, where he would have remained if the journal had materialized, he was still able to communicate with Susette and to meet her, though only rarely and furtively. Now he was to lose his last support against the sense of personal tragedy. As he had foretold in 1798, all that remained was his art and the quite impersonal faith that sustained his art; he had come to the end of that respite for which he begged the Fates in 1798:

Nur Einen Sommer gönnt, ihr Gewaltigen!
Und einen Herbst zu reifem Gesange mir,
Dass williger mein Herz, vom süßen
Spiele gesättiget, dann mir sterbe.

¹) *ibid.*, 335.

²) *ibid.*, 346.

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Die Seele, der im Leben ihr göttlich Recht
Nicht ward, sie ruht auch drunten im Orkus nicht;
Doch ist mir einst das Heil'ge, das am
Herzen mir liegt, das Gedicht gelungen,

Willkommen dann, o Stille der Schattenwelt!
Zufrieden bin ich, wenn auch mein Saitenspiel
Mich nicht hinabgeleitet; Einmal
Lebt' ich, wie Götter, und mehr bedarfs nicht.

Only one summer grant me, O mighty ones,
And but one autumn leave me for mellow song,
So that my heart with its sweet playing
Sated more willingly then may perish.

The soul to which in life its appointed rights
Were not vouchsafed, in Orcus too finds no rest;
Yet should what I deem holy, cherish
More than all else, should my verse grow perfect,

Most welcome then, O stillness of shades below!
Content I shall be, though music of my strings
Do not escort me down; for *once* I
Lived as the gods live, and that suffices.

What Hölderlin did not know when he wrote this poem is that long after his heart had indeed died, as he says, his "mellow song" would continue; that the music of his strings *would* escort him down. And, whereas in 1798 he spoke of being denied the "divine" rights that were due to him, later he was to regard the death of his heart as a just punishment. The question as to the immediate cause of his mental breakdown in 1802 seems almost pointless when one reads the terrible letters of the two preceding years. By 1800 Hölderlin had given himself up. In thanking his sister for writing to remind him of their family bond, he tells her that "this sustains my heart, which in the end too often loses its voice in a loneliness all too complete and withdraws from our very selves."¹ If these words seem strange, so is the state of mind which they convey. Hölderlin's feelings were withdrawing from his own self and from all those who had once been close to

¹) *ibid.*, 402-3.

him. The poetry of his tragic and prophetic phases became more and more impersonal, till they were more like oracles than the utterances of a man; and he came to accept his own self-estrangement as a punishment for overreaching himself, for having lived once as the gods live. This is what he implies in one of his last intelligible letters, written after his return from Bordeaux, when he tells his friend that "as one relates of heroes, I can well say that Apollo has struck me."¹ Hölderlin was probably thinking of the mythical poet Linos, who was killed by Apollo - or, according to a different legend, brained with his own lyre by Hercules - for the sin of presumption, of *hubris*. The exact nature of the sin that Hölderlin imputed to himself is specified in his *Empedocles* fragments and in several of the late hymns.

Hölderlin's plans for an *Empedocles* tragedy go back to his Frankfort period, to 1797. Earlier still, he had intended to write a *Death of Socrates*; significantly, his subject had been closer to modern times and to his own philosophical pre-occupations in his idealistic phase. Socrates - very much like Hyperion - would have been represented as a kind of martyr to the materialism, narrow-mindedness and corruption of his age, the victim of a reactionary ruling class and a hypocritical priesthood. Even when *Empedocles* took the place of Socrates, much of this conception survived. Hölderlin's successive drafts, from the *Empedokles auf dem Aetna* of 1798 to the two versions of *Der Tod des Empedokles*, written in the following year, show how he gradually abandoned this modern conception of the hero as martyr. In the last version of all, *Empedocles* is no longer hounded to his death by the Archon, the Chief Priest and an irresponsible mob, but, from the start, looks upon his death as the necessary expiation of his own guilt. Hölderlin has substituted a truly tragic conception, derived from his insights into Greek tragedy and from his own immediate experience.

While he was at work on *Empedocles*, Hölderlin wrote down his reflections on the differences between epic, lyric and tragic poetry. A lyric poem, he says, is "the continuous metaphor of a feeling". A tragic poem, on the other hand, the "metaphor of an intellectual point of view"; and this intellectual point of view

¹) *ibid.*, 432.

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"can be none other than the awareness of being at one with all that lives."¹ To this definition one should add a considerably later one, part of Hölderlin's commentary on his translation of *Oedipus Rex*, published in 1804: "The representation of the tragic is mainly based on this: that what is monstrous and terrible in the coupling of god and man, in the total fusion of the power of Nature with the inmost depth of the man, so that they are one at the moment of wrath, should be made intelligible by showing how this total fusion into one is purified (purged) by their total separation."² This statement is almost as cryptic and mysterious as the poems that Hölderlin wrote in his last, oracular phase; for that very reason, it is highly relevant not only to the last *Empedocles* fragment, but to many of his odes, elegies and hymns. Hölderlin himself recognized such a genre as the "tragic ode"; and much of his later poetry, according to his own definitions, is not lyrical at all, but tragic, precisely because it hinges on the mystery to which this statement points.

Empedocles is in conflict with the rulers and priesthood of Agrigentum because he has received the direct inspiration of the mystic and visionary; because he has been aware of "being at one with all that lives" and experienced a "total fusion" with the divine. This privilege might have been forgiven him if he had not also tried to convey this inspiration to the community at large, thus traducing them from established religion and morality, as well as being guilty of profaning a mystery. In the early versions, Hölderlin's sympathy with the protagonist blurs the tragic issue; for it causes him to put too much stress on the external conflict and to weigh the scales too heavily in *Empedocles'* favour, at the expense of the Archon and the Chief Priest. In the last, but more fragmentary, version, he allows the Priest to utter the crucial accusation, which *Empedocles* himself admits and confirms:

Verderblicher denn Schwerd und Feuer ist
Der Menscheng Geist, der götterähnliche,

¹ *Works* (Zinkernagel) II, 386-371. See also Meta Corssen's excellent applications of these definitions to Hölderlin's poetic practice in *Hölderlin-Jahrbuch* (Tübingen) for 1948/9 and 1951.

² *Works* (G. S. A.) V, 201.

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Wenn er nicht schweigen kann, und sein Geheimniss
Unaufgedeckt bewahren. Bleibt er still
In seiner Tiefe ruhn, und giebt, was noth ist,
Wohlthätig ist er dann; ein fressend Feuer,
Wenn er aus seiner Fessel bricht.
Hinweg mit ihm, der seine Seele blos
Und ihre Götter giebt, verwegen
Unauszusprechendes aussprechen will
Und sein gefährlich Gut, als wär es Wasser,
Verschüttet und vergeudet; schlimmer ist's,
Wie Mord, und du, du redest für diesen?

More ruinous than sword or fire
Is human spirit, else akin to gods,
If it cannot keep silent and preserve
Its mystery unexposed. If calmly it reposes
In its own depth, gives only what is needed,
Then it is wholesome; a devouring fire
When from its fetters it breaks loose.
Away with him who lays bare his soul
And his soul's gods, recklessly seeks
To utter the unutterable word,
Squanders and spills, as though it were but water
His dangerous wealth. That sin is worse than murder;
And yet *you* plead for him?¹

It is worth noting briefly that this tragic crux resembles that of another modern tragedy, *Samson Agonistes*, the work of another poet who took Greek tragedy seriously and tried to adapt it to a different religious function. Milton's Samson refers to his tragic offence as follows:

But I Gods counsel have not kept, his holy secret
Presumptuously have published, impiously,
Weakly at least, and shamefully.

The analogy is important because it was through his experience of the tragic that Hölderlin gradually found his way back to Christianity, though to a Christianity that remained heterodox. The idealism and the unqualified pantheism of his youth had

¹) *Works* (Zinkernagel) III, 117.

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been beyond good and evil; but now his profound reflections on the nature of tragedy taught him that the desire to "be at one with all that lives" was a Titanic urge, rebellious, chaotic and destructive. As Dr. Arthur Häny has already demonstrated in convincing detail,¹ after *Empedocles* the Titanic nature of the desire for "boundless", unlimited being became increasingly clear to Hölderlin, and allusions to the Titan myth itself assumed a new significance in his works. I shall have more to say of it in connection with the hymns. At this point I should like to note that already in *Hyperion* there are important allusions to the Titans; but, as Dr. Häny observes, Hölderlin is still inclined to see the Titanic urge as something wholly positive, in the manner of Goethe's *Prometheus* and the *Sturm und Drang* in general.

In the preceding version of *Empedocles*, the protagonist had chosen to die mainly because he was the "vessel" of divine Nature, and such vessels must be broken before they can be profaned by being put to a merely human use.² In the last version Empedocles accuses himself of having presumptuously risen above his own nature and profaned divine mysteries. His blasphemy, which he repeats ironically to his disciple Pausanias, was nothing less than the nihilistic scepticism already present in *Hyperion* as the reverse side of the pantheistic urge. It is the Fichtean solipsism that transforms a holy cosmos into the meaningless creation of the individual mind, All into Nothing:

Was wäre denn der Himmel und das Meer
Und Inseln und Gestirn' und was vor Augen
Den Menschen alles liegt, was wär' es auch,
Diss todte Saitenspiel, gäb ich ihm Ton
Und Sprach' und Seele nicht? was sind
Die Götter und ihr Geist, wenn ich sie nicht
Verkündige. Nun! Sage, wer bin ich?

What were the heavens, then, and what the ocean,
Islands and firmament of stars and all that lies
Before our human eyes, what were it all,
This dead stringed instrument, did I not lend

¹) Hölderlins *Titanenmythos*. Zürich, 1948.

²) *Works* (Zinkernagel) III, 93; and *Hölderlin: Poems*, 41-42, where an English rendering of Empedocles' speech is provided.

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It sound and speech and soul? What are the gods,
Their spirit, if I did not proclaim them?
Now tell me: who am I?¹

This kind of hubris comes easily to a thinker who tries to reconcile natural religion with the extreme forms of modern idealistic philosophy. (Walt Whitman, in all seriousness, asks the same question: "... (for without me what were all? what were God?) ..."). As far as Empedocles is concerned, the speech is justified because it conveys that death of the heart which is his punishment for overreaching himself. Empedocles has to expiate his "total fusion" with the divine and with Nature by suffering his "total separation" from both. As he laments elsewhere, he is utterly lonely, "exiled from Nature", cut off from the gods,² as a result of drawing too close to them.

The death of the heart, both in *Empedocles* and in Hölderlin's more personal odes and elegies, has a particular significance. Pantheism is a religion of the heart,³ as distinct from a religion of the *logos*; the human heart is that "vessel" into which the gods pour the divine frenzy that moves the poet and seer to celebrate them. Even in his late poems, right up to *Patmos* - in which he came as near as was possible for him to a religion of the *logos* - Hölderlin continued to expound the doctrine that the gods need men in order to realize their being; and the particular service that men render the gods is to "feel" for them:

... Denn weil
Die Seeligsten nichts fühlen von selbst,
Muss wohl, wenn solches zu sagen
Erlaubt ist, in der Götter Nahmen
Theilnehmend fühlen ein Andrer,
Den brauchen sie.⁴

... For because
The most Blessed by themselves feel nothing,

¹ *Works* (Zinkernagel) III, 130.

² *Ibid.*, 123; and *Hölderlin: Poems*, 47-48.

³ Cf. the chapter on Hölderlin in Hermann Boeschstein: *Deutsche Gefühlskultur*. Berne, 1954, 189-220.

⁴ *Der Rhein* (1801). *Works* (G. S. A.) II (i), 145.

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Another, if to say such a thing
Is permitted, must, I suppose,
In the gods' name, sympathetically feel;
They need him.

It is this anthropomorphic, or at least anthropocentric, conception of the divine that links Hölderlin to Novalis, Rilke and the existentialism of Heidegger;¹ its corollary is the religious function of the poet and seer, who becomes no mere guardian of the word, but the indispensable mediator between gods and men, literally creating the world anew so that the divine may realize itself in the human, just as the human realizes itself in the divine. But since the feeling heart of men is the means by which this necessary interchange takes place, it follows that when the poet's or seer's heart becomes incapable of feeling, he is not only cut off personally from communion with the divine, but rendered incapable of fulfilling his religious duty towards the gods. This gives a terrible and cruel twist to his punishment by the death of the heart; for the punishment in turn implicates him in an offence no less serious than his original *hubris*. Hölderlin did his utmost to break out of this vicious circle; though he almost collapsed under the burden of his dual guilt, he succeeded in resolving the dilemma. The way in which he did so was to interpret his punishment as a sacrifice; and to gradually modify his anthropocentric conception of the divine, together with his view of the poet's function. This modification is already implied in the passage quoted above, by the doubt he expresses as to whether his anthropomorphic attribution is permissible. In many of his later poems two fundamentally different religious conceptions run parallel: an anthropocentric one, according to which the gods are transient and mutable, because they are partly dependent on the capacity of their worshippers to "endure" the searing intensity of divine revelation; and a theocentric one of the *logos*. For above the hierarchy of transient gods, demigods and heroes, Hölderlin recognized the immutable divine Spirit, the "God of gods".²

¹ See Martin Heidegger: *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*. Frankfurt am Main, 1951.

² "Der Götter Gott". In *Versöhnender . . . Works* (G. S.A.) II (i), 132.

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The transition from Hölderlin's tragic phase to the prophetic, again, is not one that can be neatly dated. *Wie wenn am Feiertage* . . ., the earliest of his hymns and the only one in which he attempted to reproduce the strict Pindaric structure, was written as early as 1799; but it remained unfinished, not so much, perhaps, because of the difficult form - Hölderlin had already mastered forms quite as refractory - as because Hölderlin was still overwhelmed by his personal affliction, and knew that Pindar's public ode form could not be adapted for the expression of a private grief. Where the public theme breaks off, Hölderlin's prose draft continues with an agonized confession of his own guilt. This passage not only clashes violently with the oracular character of the foregoing strophes, but seems to contradict what they say about the poet's religious function.

Doch weh mir! wenn von
[selbgeschlagener Wunde das Herz mir blutet, und tief-
verloren
der Frieden ist, u. freibescheidenes Genügen,
Und die Unruh, und der Mangel mich treibt zum
Überfluss des Göttertisches, wenn rings um mich]

Weh mir!

[Und sag ich gleich, ich wär genaht, die Himmli(schen zu)
schauen, sie selbst sie werfen mich tief unter die Lebenden
alle, den falschen Priester hinab, dass ich, aus Nächten herauf,
das warnend ängstige Lied den Unerfahrenen singe.¹⁾

But woe is me! when from
[a self-inflicted wound my heart is bleeding, and deeply lost
are peace and the contentment of true modesty,
And when unrest and lack drive me towards
The superfluity of the gods' own table, when round about me]

Woe is me!

[And let me say at once: that I approached to look
upon the heavenly beings, they cast me down themselves,
far down beneath all the living

¹⁾ Ibid., 120; and II (ii) 669-670.

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cast the false priest, so that now from the depth of nights
I should sing for the inexperienced my awed and warning
song.]

This gruesome self-exposure - with its allusion to the Tantalus myth, which identifies Hölderlin's sin with the *hubris* of Empedocles - is certainly out of place in his oracular hymn; but it does not really contradict what he has just said about the poet's function:

Doch uns gebührt es, unter Gottes Gewittern,
Ihr Dichter! mit entblösstem Haupte zu stehen,
Des Vaters Stral, ihn selbst, mit eigner Hand
Zu fassen und dem Volk ins Lied
Gehüllt die himmlische Gaabe zu reichen.
Denn sind nur reinen Herzens,
Wie Kinder, wir, sind schuldlos unsere Hände,
Des Vaters Stral, der reine versengt es nicht . . .

Yet it behoves us, O poets,
To stand bare-headed beneath God's thunderstorms,
To grasp the Father's ray itself
With our own hands and, wrapped in song,
To offer the heavenly gift to the people.
For if only we are like children,
Pure in heart, if our hands are guiltless,

Then the Father's ray, the pure, will not sear it . . .

What Hölderlin is making clear is the difference between the humility of the true priest and the arrogance of the false one; this is also the essential difference between his own idealistic phase and his prophetic one. In his idealistic phase he had been moved by the Titanic urge to violate the divine mysteries, instead of waiting patiently for the moment of revelation. God's lightning had seared his heart precisely because it was impure, filled with Titanic impatience.

This tragic impulse is not confined to heroes, poets and seers; it can affect not only individuals, but whole peoples, as Hölder-

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lin relates in his tragic ode of 1801, the second version of *Stimme des Volkes* (Voice of the People):

Du seiest Gottes Stimme, so glaubt' ich sonst
In heil'ger Jugend; ja, und ich sag' es noch!
Um unsre Weisheit unbekümmert
Rauschen die Ströme doch auch, und dennoch,

Wer liebt sie nicht? und immer bewegen sie
Das Herz mir, hör' ich ferne die Schwindenden,
Die Ahnungsvollen meine Bahn nicht
Aber gewisser ins Meer hin eilen.

Denn selbstvergessen, allzubereit den Wunsch
Der Götter zu erfüllen, ergreift zu gern
Was sterblich ist, wenn offenen Augs auf
Eigenen Pfaden es einmal wandelt,

Ins All zurück die kürzeste Bahn; so stürzt
Der Strom hinab, er suchet die Ruh, es reisst,
Es zieht wider Willen ihn, von
Klippe zu Klippe den Steuerlosen

Das wunderbare Sehnen dem Abgrund zu;
Das Ungebundene reizet, und Völker auch
Ergreift die Todeslust und kühne
Städte, nachdem sie versucht das Beste,

Von Jahr zu Jahr forttreibend das Werk, sie hat
Ein heilig Ende troffen; die Erde grünt
Und stille vor den Sternen liegt, den
Betenden gleich, in den Sand geworfen,

Freiwillig überwunden die lange Kunst
Vor jenen Unnachahmbaren da; er selbst,
Der Mensch, mit eigener Hand zerbrach, die
Hohen zu ehren, sein Werk der Künstler . . .

That you are God's own voice, so once I believed
In holy youth; and truly I say so still!
For never troubled by our wisdom,
Heedless, the rivers roar on, but who does

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Not love them still? and always they move my heart
When far away I hear how the vanishing,
The darkly knowing not along my
Course but more surely attain the ocean,

For self-oblivious, too well prepared to serve
The wishes of the gods, all too readily
Whatever's mortal — once it travels
Down its own paths with its eyes wide open —

Speeds back into the All by the shortest way;
So does the river plunge, when it seeks repose,
Swept on, allured against its will, from
Boulder to boulder — no rudder steers it —

By that mysterious yearning towards the abyss;
The measureless attracts, and whole peoples too
The lust for death possesses, valiant
Cities, when these have long done their utmost,

From year to year completing their task — these too
A holy end has stricken; the earth grows green
And motionless before the stars, like
Men that are praying, flung down, discarded

On sand, outgrown — and gladly, — there lies long art,
Prostrate before the Matchless; and they themselves,
Mankind, with their own hands have broken,
Artists, their work, for the High Ones' pleasure . . .¹

In the opening lines Hölderlin suggests that there is a difference between his youthful belief in the truth of *vox populi*, *vox dei* and his present, modified acceptance of it; but he does not say in what that difference consists. Coleridge's comment on the same dictum is illuminating: "I never said that the *vox populi* was of course the *vox Dei*. It may be; but it may be, and with equal probability, *a priori*, *vox Diaboli*. That the voice of ten millions of men calling for the same thing, is a spirit, I believe; but whether that be a spirit of Heaven or Hell, I can only know by trying the thing called for by the prescript of reason and God's

¹) *Works* (G. S. A.) II (i), 51-53; English rendering of the whole poem in *H.: Poems*, 231-235.

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will."¹ Hölderlin, by 1801, was well aware of this ethical aspect of the tragic, self-destructive urge; and his awareness of it may well account for the reticent opening lines. If he never explicitly condemns the urge in this poem - except in so far as he disassociates himself from the river's impetuosity - but treats it under the aspect of sacrifice, it is mainly because the function of chronicler, which is Hölderlin's here, demands a perspective different from the prophet's and moralist's; but the tragic mystery remained present in his poetry throughout his prophetic phase. On the one hand, his understanding of tragic *hubris* brought him closer to a Christian view of good and evil; Lucifer is closely related to Prometheus and the Titans. On the other, it caused him to treat even the death of Christ as a tragic sacrifice, in a sense much more Greek than Christian. There is a powerful evocation of evil in *Patmos*, when the disciples, after the death of Christ, appeal to him

Damit er halte, wie an Seilen golden
Gebunden hinfort
Das Böse nennend

Naming evil so that
Henceforth he might hold it
Bound as with ropes of gold,

but "das Böse" here may refer primarily to a specific evil, the dispersion and isolation which the disciples fear; and, in the same poem, Hölderlin makes the mysterious statement "Denn alles ist gut" ("For all things are good"), in a context which suggests that it is intended to sum up Christ's own doctrine.

Hölderlin's great elegies, written between 1799 and 1801, form a transition from the tragic to the prophetic mode. *Menons Klagen um Diotima*, written in 1800, still alternates between the tragic mode and the idealistic; although in the last section Hölderlin turns to the future, his prediction is not prophetic in the larger sense of the hymns. But *Brod und Wein*, begun later in the same year, *Der Archipelagus* and *Heimkunft* complete the transition.

The relation between the different modes is particularly

¹) *Table Talk* (Ashe, 1888), 160.

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striking in another ode of 1801, the second version of *Ermunterung* (Exhortation), with its sudden modulation from personal lament to impersonal prophecy:

Echo des Himmels! heiliges Herz! warum,
Warum verstummst du unter den Lebenden,
Schläfst, freies! von den Götterlosen
Ewig hinab in die Nacht verwiesen?

Wacht denn, wie vormals, nimmer des Aethers Licht?
Und blüht die alte Mutter, die Erde nicht?
Und übt der Geist nicht da und dort, nicht
Lächelnd die Liebe das Recht noch immer?

Nur du nicht mehr! doch mahnen die Himmlichen,
Und stillebildend weht, wie ein kahl Gefild,
Der Othem der Natur dich an, der
Allerseithernde, seelenvolle.

O Hoffnung! bald, bald singen die Haine nicht
Des Lebens Lob allein, denn es ist die Zeit,
Dass aus der Menschen Munde sie, die
Schönere Seele sich neuverkündet,

Dann liebender im Bunde mit Sterblichen
Das Element sich bildet, und dann erst reich,
Bei frommer Kinder Dank, der Erde
Brust, die unendliche, sich entfaltet

Und unsre Tage wieder, wie Blumen, sind,
Wo sie, des Himmels Sonne sich ausgetheilt
Im stillen Wechsel sieht und wieder
Froh in den Frohen das Licht sich findet,

Und er, der sprachlos waltet und unbekannt
Zukünftiges bereitet, der Gott, der Geist
Im Menschenwort, am schönen Tage
Kommenden Jahren, wie einst, sich ausspricht.

Echo of Heaven! heart that is hallowed, why,
Why now so dumb and, silenced by living men,