

# Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin



Selected and translated by James Mitchell

POEMS OF FRIEDRICH HÖLDERLIN

ITHURIEL'S SPEAR



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The Fire of the Gods Drives Us to Set Forth  
by Day and by Night.



Selected and translated by James Mitchell

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## Bread and Wine

— *to Heinze*

1.

Round about the city rests. The illuminated streets grow  
Quiet, and coaches rush along, adorned with torches.  
Men go home to rest, filled with the day's pleasures;  
Busy minds weigh up profit and loss contentedly  
At home. The busy marketplace comes to rest,  
Vacant now of flowers and grapes and crafts.  
But the music of strings sounds in distant gardens:  
Perhaps lovers play there, or a lonely man thinks  
About distant friends, and about his own youth.  
Rushing fountains flow by fragrant flower beds,  
Bells ring softly in the twilight air, and a watchman  
Calls out the hour, mindful of the time.  
Now a breeze rises and touches the crest of the grove —  
Look how the moon, like the shadow of our earth,  
Also rises stealthily! Phantastical night comes,  
Full of stars, unconcerned probably about us —  
Astonishing night shines, a stranger among humans,  
Sadly over the mountain tops, in splendor.

2.

The kindness of exalted Night is wonderful, and no one  
Knows where she comes from, or what will emerge from her.  
Thus she moves the world, and the hopeful minds of humans:  
Not even a sage knows what she's up to.  
The highest god, who loves you very much, wants it so;  
Therefore you prefer reasonable day to the night.  
But occasionally a clear eye loves the shadows as well,  
And tries to sleep just for pleasure, before it's necessary,  
Or a brave person likes to gaze directly into the Night:  
Surely it's right to dedicate wreaths and songs to her  
Since she is holy to those who are lost or dead, although  
She herself exists totally free in spirit, forever.  
But she must grant us oblivion and holy drunkenness,  
That in the hesitating interval, in the darkness,  
There'll be something for us to hold onto.  
She must grant us flowing words, sleepless  
As lovers are, and a fuller cup, and bolder life, and  
Holy remembrance as well, to stay wakeful at night.

3.

We, masters and apprentices both, hide our hearts  
In vain, and repress our enthusiasm for no reason.  
For who could stop it, or forbid us our pleasure?  
The fire of the gods drives us to set forth by day  
And by night. So come, let us look at what is apparent,  
And seek what is ours, as distant as it may be!  
One thing is certain: a standard always exists, at noon  
Or at midnight, common to all of us. But also  
To each of us something personal is granted;  
Everyone goes and comes where he can.  
Thus playful madness may mock mockery itself,  
Seizing singers suddenly in the holy night.  
Then let's be off to the Isthmus! There, where  
The open sea roars at Parnassus, and the snow  
Shines around the Delphian cliffs,  
There in the land of Olympus, on Cithaeron's peak,  
Under the pines, amid vineyards, from which  
Thebes and Ismenos roar in the land of Cadmus.  
The approaching god comes from there, and points back to it.

4.

Holy Greece! Home of all the gods — so it's true,  
What once we heard when we were young?  
A festival hall, whose floor is the ocean, whose tables  
Are the mountains — anciently built for a single purpose.  
But where are the thrones? Where the temples, the songs,  
The vases full of nectar for the pleasure of the gods?  
Where are the oracles that shine for miles and miles?  
Delphi sleeps, and where does great Fate resound?  
Where does Fate suddenly break forth, full of omnipresent  
Joy, thundering out of clear air over our eyes?  
Father Aether! It called and flew from tongue to tongue  
A thousand times, and nobody had to endure life alone.  
Shared, such fortune is a joy; exchanged with strangers,  
It becomes jubilant. Sleeping, the power of the word grows:  
Father! Joyful! The ancient sign resounds, as far it reaches,  
Inherited from the elders, striking, creating.  
Thus the gods enter; thus the season of the gods falls  
From the shadows down to men, shaking the depths.

5.

At first the gods come unperceived. Children try to get  
Near them. But their glory dazzles and blinds and  
Awakens fear. A demi-god scarcely knows the people  
By name, who now approach him with gifts. But their  
Courage is great. Their joy fills his heart, and he hardly  
Knows what to do with the offerings. He busies himself  
And becomes wasteful, and unholy things almost become holy,  
Which he touches with a blessing hand, foolishly and kindly.  
The gods tolerate it as long as they can, and then in truth  
They appear themselves. And people become accustomed  
To this fortune, to the daytime, and to the sight of the manifest  
Ones, the faces of those formerly called the "One and All,"  
Deeply making every silent breast content, and first and alone  
Filling every desire. It's the way people are. When something  
Good appears, and even when it's a god that provides them  
With gifts, they don't see or recognize it. First they have  
To get used to it; then they call it their closest possession.  
And only then will words of praise arise, like flowers.

6.

And now they prepare in earnest to honor the holy gods.

Everything must really and truly proclaim their praise.

Nothing displeasing to the high ones may come to light.

Idle endeavors aren't proper for the Aether.

Therefore, to stand worthily in the presence of the gods,

Nations rise in splendid order and beautiful

Temples and cities are built, strong and noble, which rise

Above the banks of the waters — but where are they?

Where are the famous, flourishing cities, crowning the festival?

Thebes and Athens are fading. Don't the weapons clash

At Olympus, or golden chariots at the games? Are there

No longer wreaths to decorate the ships of Corinth?

Why are the ancient holy theaters silent?

What happened to the joyful ceremonial dancing?

Why doesn't a god place his sign on a human forehead,

Leaving his mark on the person he has struck?

Or, as gods used to, come comfortingly, and assume human

Shape, then complete and close the festival of the gods?

7.

But friend, we come too late. It's true that the gods live,  
But up over our heads, up in a different world.  
They function endlessly up there, and seem to care little  
If we live or die, so much do they avoid us.  
A weak vessel cannot hold them forever; humans can  
Endure the fullness of the gods only at times. Therefore  
Life itself becomes a dream about them. But perplexity  
And sleep assist us: distress and night-time strengthen,  
Until enough heroes have grown in the bronze cradle,  
With hearts as strong as the gods', as it used to be.  
Thundering they arise. Meanwhile I often think it is  
Better to stay asleep, than to exist without companions,  
Just waiting it out, not knowing what to do or say  
In the meantime. What use are poets in times of need?  
But you'll say they're like holy priests of the wine god,  
Moving from land to land in the holy night.

8.

Some time ago — to us it seems like a long time —

All those who made our lives happy climbed upwards.

The Father turned his face away from people,

And sorrow came rightly upon the earth.

Finally a quiet genius appeared, comforting in a god-like

Way, who announced the end of the day, and disappeared.

The choir of gods left some gifts behind, as a sign

Of their presence and eventual return, which we

May appreciate in our human fashion, as we used to.

That which is superior had grown too great for pleasure

With spirit among men. And to this day no one's strong enough

For the highest joys, although some gratitude survives quietly.

Bread is the fruit of the earth, yet it's blessed also by light.

The pleasure of wine comes from the thundering god.

We remember the gods thereby, those who were once

With us, and who'll return when the time is right

Thus poets sing of the wine god in earnest, and their

Ringings praises of the old one aren't devised in vain.

9.

Yes, they say rightly that he reconciles day with night,  
And leads the stars of heaven up and down forever —  
Joyful always, like the boughs of evergreen pine  
That he loves, and the wreath he chose of ivy  
Since it endures, and brings a trace of the fugitive god  
Down to the darkness of those who must live in their  
absence.  
What the sons of the ancients foretold of God's children:  
Look, it's us, the fruit of Hesperia!  
Through humans it is wonderfully and exactly fulfilled;  
Let those believe who've examined the matter. But so much  
Goes on, yet nothing succeeds: we are like heartless shadows  
Until our Father Aether recognizes us and belongs to us all  
Meanwhile the Son, the Syrian, comes down among  
The shadows, as torchbearer of the Highest.  
Holy sages observe it; a smile shines out from  
The imprisoned soul; their eyes thaw in the light.  
Titans dream more softly, asleep in the arms of the earth—  
Even jealous Cerberus drinks and falls asleep.

## To the Fates

Grant me just one summer, powerful ones,  
And just one autumn for ripe songs,  
That my heart, filled with that sweet  
Music, may more willingly die within me.

The soul, denied its divine heritage in life,  
Won't find rest down in Hades either.  
But if what is holy to me, the poem  
That rests in my heart, succeeds —

Then welcome, silent world of shadows!  
I'll be content, even though it's not my own lyre  
That leads me downwards. Once I'll have  
Lived like the gods, and more isn't necessary.

## As on a Holiday

As on a holiday, when a farmer  
Goes out to look at his fields, in the morning,  
After cool lightning has fallen through the hot night,  
And thunder still echoes in the distance,  
And the stream returns to its banks,  
And the earth becomes green and fresh,  
And drops of joyful rain from heaven rest  
Upon the vines, and the trees in the grove  
Stand shining in the quiet sun —

Thus poets stand in favorable weather:  
Those whom no master, but rather Nature,  
Mighty and beautiful in its divinity, wonderfully  
And universally present, educates with gentle embrace.  
And when Nature appears to sleep at some seasons,  
Either in the sky or among plants or nations,  
So the aspect of poets is also mournful.  
They seem to be alone, but their foreknowledge continues.  
For Nature itself is prescient, as it rests.

Now it is day! I waited to see it come,  
And what I saw — my words bespeak holiness!  
For Nature, who is older than time,  
Standing above the gods of the Occident and Orient,  
Has awakened to the sounds of arms.  
All-creating Nature feels the enthusiasm anew,  
From Aether down to the abyss,  
As when she was born of holy Chaos,  
According to the established law.

And as fire shines in a man's eye  
When he plans something great,  
So a fire is kindled again in the minds  
Of poets, by the signs and deeds of the world.  
What happened before, scarcely sensed,  
Becomes apparent now for the first time.  
And those who plowed our fields  
In the form of smiling laborers  
Are now recognized as the all-living  
Forces of the gods.

Would you question them? Their spirit moves in song,  
Grown from the sun of day and the warm earth,  
And from storms, those of the air, and others  
Originating farther within the depths of time,  
More perceptible and meaningful to us,  
Drifting between heaven and earth, and among nations.  
They are thoughts of the common spirit,  
Quietly ending in the mind of the poet,

Which, long familiar with the infinite,  
Is struck quickly, and shakes with the memory.  
Set on fire by the holy radiance,  
It creates a song — the fruit born of love,  
The work of gods and man,  
Bearing witness to both.  
Thus lightning fell on Semele's house,  
As poets relate, since she wanted to see  
A god in person. Struck by the god,  
She gave birth to holy Bacchus,  
The fruit of the storm.

Thus the sons of earth now drink in  
The fire of heaven without danger.  
And it is our duty, poets, to stand  
Bare-headed under the storms of God,  
Grasping with our own hand  
The Father's beam itself,  
And to offer the gift of heaven,  
Wrapped in song, to the people.  
If our hearts are pure, like children,  
And our hands are guiltless,

The Father's pure radiance won't sear;  
And the deeply shaken heart, sharing  
The suffering of the stronger god,  
Will endure the raging storms when he approaches.

But alas, if from -----  
-----

Alas!  
And if I now say -----

I had come to see the gods,  
They themselves cast me down to the living,  
Me, the false priest, down to darkness,  
That I sing a song of warning to those able to learn.

There - - -

## To the Sun God

Where are you? Drunk, my mind becomes  
Twilight after all your ecstasy. For I just saw  
How the enrapturing young god,  
Tired from his journey,

Bathed his youthful hair in the golden clouds.  
And now my eyes follow after him,  
But he is gone away to reverent  
Nations which still honor him.

I love the earth, which mourns with me.  
Like children when they are upset, our grief  
Changes to sleep. And as rustling winds  
Whisper over harp strings

Until the fingers of a master entice  
A prettier music, thus mist and dreams  
Play around us, until the beloved returns,  
And charges us with life and spirit.

## Hyperion's Song of Destiny

Holy spirits, you walk up there  
in the light, on soft earth.  
Shining god-like breezes  
touch upon you gently,  
as a woman's fingers  
play music on holy strings.

Like sleeping infants the gods  
breathe without any plan;  
the spirit flourishes continually  
in them, chastely kept,  
as in a small bud,  
and their holy eyes  
look out in still  
eternal clearness.

A place to rest  
isn't given to us.  
Suffering humans  
decline and blindly fall  
from one hour to the next,  
like water thrown  
from cliff to cliff,  
year after year, down  
into the Unknown.

When I was a boy...

When I was a boy  
a god would often rescue me  
from the shouting and violence of humans.  
Then, safe and well, I would play  
with the meadow flowers,  
and heaven's breezes  
would play with me.

And as you delight the heart  
of plants, stretching their tender  
arms toward you,  
Father Helios,  
so you delighted my heart,  
and I was your beloved,  
holy Luna, just like Endymion!

All you faithful  
friendly gods!  
I wish you knew  
how my soul loved you!

Naturally I couldn't call you  
by name then, nor did you use  
mine, as humans do, as if  
they really knew each other.

But I was better acquainted with you  
than I ever was with humans.  
I knew the stillness of the Aether:  
I never understood the words of men.

The euphony of the rustling  
meadow was my education;  
among flowers I learned to love.

I grew up  
in the arms of the gods.

## Human Applause

Isn't my heart holy, more full of life's beauty,  
since I fell in love? Why did you like me more  
when I was prouder and wilder, more full  
of words, yet emptier?

Well, the crowd likes whatever sells in the  
marketplace; and no one but a slave  
appreciates violent men. Only those who  
are themselves godlike believe in the gods.

## Once gods walked...

Once gods walked among humans,  
The splendid Muses and youthful Apollo  
Inspired and healed us, just like you.  
And you are to me as if one of the Holy Ones  
Had sent me forth into life, and the image  
Of my beloved would go with me,  
And wherever I stayed and whatever I learned,  
I would learn and gain it from her,  
With a love that lasts until death.

Then let us live, you with whom I suffer  
And inwardly strive towards better times  
In faith and loyalty. For we are the ones.  
And if people should remember us both  
In years to come, when Spirit again prevails,  
They'd say that these lonely ones lovingly  
Created a secret world, known to the gods alone.  
The earth will take back those concerned  
With impermanent things: others climb higher  
To ethereal Light who've been faithful  
To the love inside themselves, and to the spirit  
Of the gods. Thus they master Fate  
In patience, hope and quietness.

## The Course of Life

You too wanted better things, but love  
forces all of us down. Sorrow bends us more  
forcefully, but the arc doesn't return to its  
point of origin without a reason.

Upwards or downwards! In holy Night,  
where mute Nature plans the coming days,  
doesn't there reign in the most twisted Orcus  
something straight and direct?

This I have learned. Never to my knowledge  
did you, all-preserving gods, like mortal  
masters, lead me providentially  
along a straight path.

The gods say that man should test  
everything, and that strongly nourished  
he be thankful for everything, and understand  
the freedom to set forth wherever he will.

## At the Middle of Life

The earth hangs down  
to the lake, full of yellow  
pears and wild roses.  
Lovely swans, drunk with  
kisses you dip your heads  
into the holy, sobering waters.

But when winter comes,  
where will I find  
the flowers, the sunshine,  
the shadows of the earth?  
The walls stand  
speechless and cold,  
the weathervanes  
rattle in the wind.

# Homecoming

— to my *Kinsfolk*

1.

It is still bright night in the Alps, and a cloud,  
    Authoring joyfulness, covers the yawning valley.  
Playful mountain breezes rush and toss about, and a ray  
    Of light shines abruptly through the firs and disappears.  
Chaos, quivering with joy, hurries slowly to do battle.  
    Young in form, yet strong, it celebrates a loving quarrel  
Among the cliffs. It ferments and shakes within its eternal  
    Limits, for the morning accelerates in ecstatic dance.  
The year advances more rapidly out there, and the holy hours,  
    The days, are more boldly ordered and mixed.  
A storm bird marks the time, and stays high in the air  
    Between the mountains, announcing the day.  
Now the little village awakens down below. Fearless,  
    Familiar with the heights, it peers up beyond the treetops.  
It senses the growth, for the ancient streams fall like lightning,  
    And the ground yields fine mists under the crashing waters.  
Echo resounds, and the vast workplace flexes its arm,  
    Sending forth its gifts, by day and by night.

2.

Peaks of silver shine silently above,  
And the sparkling snow is full of roses.  
Still higher above the light lives the god, pure  
And holy, pleased with the divine play of light beams.  
He lives there quietly and alone: his face is bright.  
At home in the ether he seems ready to grant life  
And create joy for us. Gradually and sparingly,  
Remembering the necessity for moderation and the needs  
Of the living, he sends true happiness to the cities  
And houses, and mild rains to open the countryside,  
And soft breezes and gentle seasons of spring.  
With a gentle hand he cheers the saddened,  
Renews the seasons, the creative one, refreshes  
And touches the quiet hearts of the elderly.  
Down into the deep his influence extends:  
It reveals and illumines, just as he pleases.  
And now life begins again. Gracefulness  
Flourishes as it did before, and the Spirit  
Is present and approaches, and a joyful  
Disposition fills its wings.

3.

I had much to say to him, for whatever poets think  
Or sing about is addressed mainly to him and his angels.  
I asked him for much, out of love to the Fatherland,  
So the Spirit wouldn't suddenly fall upon us unbidden.  
I prayed much for you too, my landspeople, who have cares  
Inside the Fatherland: to whom holy gratitude, smiling, brings  
Back the exiles. At the same time the lake rocked my boat,  
And the steersman sat quietly and approved our journey.  
Far on the lake's surface joyous waves surged under the sails,  
And now the city rises brightly in the early morning,  
And our boat came well-guided from the shaded Alps  
To rest in the harbor. Here the shore is warm  
And the open valleys are friendly, brightened by  
Beautiful pathways, flourishing and shining toward me.  
Gardens lie round about, bright buds open, the song of birds  
Welcomes the wanderer. Everything seems familiar;  
Even people passing by greet each other as if they were  
Friends, and every face appears like kin.

4.

But of course, this is the land of your birth, the soil  
Of your own country: what you seek is close by and  
Rises to meet you. The traveller stands before you,  
O happy Lindau, surrounded by waves, like a son  
At your door affectionately singing your praises.

This is a welcoming gate to the nation, inviting you  
To travel forth into the distance, a place of promises  
And miracles, where the Rhine, like a mythological  
Animal, breaks its way downwards into the plains,  
And the jubilant valley leads through the bright  
Mountains toward Como, or off toward the open sea

In the direction of the sun. But the sacred  
Gateway prompts me to go on home instead,  
Where the busy highways are familiar to me,  
To visit the countryside and beautiful valleys  
Of the Neckar, and the forests, where godlike green  
Oak and beech trees and silent birches gather, and  
A friendly spot in the mountains still holds me captive.

5.

Dear friends are there to welcome me.

O voice of the city, voice of my mother!  
You touch and awaken what I learned long ago.

But it's really them: sun and joy shine for you,  
My dear ones, almost brighter than ever in your eyes.

Yes, it's still the same. It thrives and ripens,  
For nothing that lives and loves relinquishes loyalty.

Best of all, this treasure, which rests under the arch  
Of holy peace, is reserved for young and old alike.

I speak foolishly. It's pure joy. But tomorrow  
And after, when we go out and view the living fields,

When the trees are blossoming on Spring holidays,  
I'll speak and share my hopes with you, dear friends.

I've heard much about our great Father, but I've said  
Nothing. He renews the passing time above in the heights,

And he reigns over mountains. He'll soon bestow heavenly  
Gifts and call for brighter song and send many good spirits.

Come, you preservers! Angels of the year! And you,

6.

Angels of the house, come! May the power of Heaven spread  
Through all the veins of life, ennobling and invigorating  
And dispensing joy! So that joyful angels attend upon  
Human goodness every hour of the day, and that  
Such joy as I experience now, when loved ones  
Are properly reunited, be suitably sanctified.  
When we bless the meal, upon whom shall I call,  
And when we rest after the day's activity, tell me,  
How will I offer thanks? Should I call the Highest by name?  
A god doesn't like what is inappropriate. Maybe our joy  
Isn't big enough to grasp him. We must often remain silent,  
A sacred language is missing — hearts are beating and yet  
Speech can't emerge? But the sound of string music  
Resonates hour by hour, and perhaps that pleases  
The approaching gods. Begin the music, and the worries  
Almost vanish which would have affected our joy.  
Willingly or not, poets must often concern themselves  
With such things, but not with others.

## Celebration of Peace

*Please read these pages only if you're feeling kind. Then they won't seem unintelligible, and will certainly prove less offensive. But to those who find my language too unconventional, I confess I can't help it. On a beautiful day almost any kind of song can be listened to, and Nature, where it comes from, will receive it back. The author intends to lay before the public a whole collection of similar pieces, and this is just a sample.*

The holy, familiar hall, built long ago,  
Is aired, and filled with heavenly,  
Softly echoing, quietly modulating music.  
A cloud of joy sends fragrance  
Over the green carpets. Shining in the  
Distance, a splendid row of gold-wreathed  
Cups stands, well-ordered, full of ripe fruits.  
Tables stand at the sides, rising above  
The leveled ground. For now in the evening  
Loving guests have gathered, coming from far.

And with half-shut eye I think I can see  
The prince of the festival himself,  
Smiling from the day's earnest work.  
Though you like to deny your foreign origin,  
And even when you lower your eye, tired  
From the long crusade—forgotten, lightly shadowed—  
And you assume the appearance of an acquaintance,  
Still you're recognized by everyone; your superiority  
Alone almost forces one to his knees.

Being nothing in your presence, I know  
You are not mortal. A wise person can  
Explain a lot, but where a god appears,  
There is different clarity.

He isn't of the present, yet doesn't come unannounced;  
And one who feared neither flood nor flame  
Doesn't surprise us without a reason, now that all is quiet,  
And dominion is invisible among spirits and humans.  
That is, right now the work become audible,  
Long in preparation, from morning to evening,  
For the thunderer's echo, the thousand-year storm,  
Roars immeasurably down towards rest, resounding  
In the depths, while peaceful sounds rise above it.  
But you, days of innocence, become dear to us:  
Today you bring the festival, beloved ones!  
And the spirit flourishes in the evening stillness,  
And I must counsel you, friends, to prepare the wreaths  
And the food, since now we're like eternal youths,  
Even if our hair were silver grey.

There are many I should like to invite, but you,  
Who were devoted to mankind in a friendly, yet  
Earnest way — who liked to stay at the well  
Under Syrian palms, near the city... the fields  
Of grain rustled in the wind, the coolness drifted  
Down from the shaded holy mountain,  
And the loyal clouds, your friends,  
Cast their shadows around you,  
So that your holy, daring radiance shone gently  
Through the wilderness upon men, o Youth!  
But then a deadly fate enshadowed you  
More darkly, terribly and definitively  
In the middle of your words. Thus everything  
From heaven passes quickly, but not in vain.

For a god, knowing always the proper measure,  
Touches sparingly and just for a moment the homes  
Of men — unexpectedly, and no one knows when.  
But then something boisterous may pass,  
And wildness may come to the holy place from afar.  
Grasping about roughly, it touches upon madness,  
And fills some intention thereby.  
But gratitude doesn't follow the gift  
From the gods immediately:  
It has to be deeply studied first.  
For if the giver hadn't been cautious,  
From the blessing of the hearth both  
Floor and ceiling would have gone up in flames.

We've received much from the gods.  
Fire was handed to us, and the ocean's  
Flood and shore. Much more,  
For alien powers have become familiar  
To us in a human way. The stars  
Over your head can teach you things,  
Although you can't equal them.  
Yet of the all-living ones — from whom  
Issue much pleasure and song —  
One is a calmly powerful son.  
Knowing his father, we recognize him,  
Now that the high Spirit of the World  
Has descended to mankind  
To keep the holidays.

He had long become too great to be  
The Lord of Time, and his territory  
Extended far... when would it  
Have exhausted him? But a god  
May once choose mundane life also,  
Like mortals, and share their fate.

One law of fate requires that people  
Should know each other, so that when  
Silence returns, there will also be a language.  
Where the spirit is at work, we are present too,  
And talk about what is best. To me, the best  
Is when the picture is done, and the artist  
Finishes and steps transfigured from his workplace,  
The quiet God of Time, and only the reconciling  
Law of love extends from here to heaven.

Man has learned much since morning,  
For we are a conversation, and we can listen  
To one another. Soon we'll be song  
And the picture of time, which the great spirit unfolds,  
Lies as a sign before us, indicating that a covenant  
Between himself and others, himself and other powers  
exists.

Not he alone, but also the unconceived and eternal ones  
Are recognizable in the picture,  
Just as our mother, the earth, recognizes herself,  
And light and air, through the plant kingdom.  
But the all-gathering day of the festival  
Is the ultimate sign of love, the witness  
Of your existence, o holy powers.

The gods aren't revealed in miracles now,  
Nor do they remain unseen as during a storm;  
Now they are met together as guests,  
A holy number, holy in every way,  
And present in choruses of song.  
And the person they love most,  
Their favorite, is here.  
Thus I've summoned you to the banquet  
Now prepared, you, the unforgettable one,  
To the evening of time, o Youth,  
To be the Prince of the Festival.  
And our race will not sleep  
Until all the promised, immortal gods  
Are here in our halls  
To speak of their heaven.

Lightly breathing winds  
Proclaim your arrival;  
Valley mists announce you all,  
And the earth, still sounding from the storm.  
Hope colors the cheeks;  
Mother and child  
Sit before the house door,  
Looking upon the peace.  
Few seem to die:  
A premonition, sent from the golden light,  
Holds the soul back;  
A promise retains the eldest.

Now all labors,  
The seasoning of life,  
Are prepared and completed above.  
Everything pleases,  
Simple things the most.  
The long-awaited  
Golden fruit  
Has fallen from the ancient tree  
After terrible storms,  
But then is guarded, like a treasured possession,  
By holy Fate with gentle weapons:  
This has the shape of the gods.

Like a lioness, Mother,  
Nature, you lament,  
Since you lost your children.  
Your enemy, all-loving one,  
Has stolen them from you,  
Since you adopted him almost  
To be your own son, placing  
Gods in the company of satyrs.  
Thus you've created much  
And buried much,  
Because that which you brought  
To light too soon, all-powerful one,  
Now hates you.  
But this too you recognize and accept;  
For whatever arouses fear prefers  
To rest insensate below  
Until its time has come.

## Patmos

— *for the Earl of Homburg*

The god  
Is near, and hard to grasp.  
But where there is danger,  
A rescuing element grows as well.  
Eagles live in the darkness,  
And the sons of the Alps  
Cross over the abyss without fear  
On lightly-built bridges.  
Therefore, since the summits  
Of Time are heaped about,  
And dear friends live near,  
Growing weak on the separate mountains —  
Then give us calm waters;  
Give us wings, and loyal minds  
To cross over and return.

Thus I spoke, when faster  
Than I could imagine a spirit  
Led me forth from my own home  
To a place I thought I'd never go.  
The shaded forests and yearning  
Brooks of my native country  
Were glowing in the twilight.  
I couldn't recognize the lands  
I passed through, but then suddenly  
In fresh splendor, mysterious  
In the golden haze, quickly emerging  
In the steps of the sun,  
Fragrant with a thousand peaks,  
Asia rose before me.

Dazzled I searched for something  
Familiar, since the broad streets  
Were unknown to me: where the gold-bejeweled  
Patoklos comes rushing down from Tmolus,  
Where Taurus and Messogis stand,  
And the gardens are full of flowers,  
Like a quiet fire. Up above  
In the light the silver snow  
Thrives, and ivy grows from ancient  
Times on the inaccessible walls,  
Like a witness to immortal life,  
While the solemn god-built palaces  
Are borne by living columns  
Of cypress and laurel.

But around Asia's gates  
Unshaded sea-paths rush  
About the unpredictable sea,  
Though sailors know where  
The islands are. When I heard  
That one of these close by  
Was Patmos, I wanted very much  
To put in there, to enter  
The dark sea-cave. For unlike  
Cyprus, rich with springs,  
Or any of the others, Patmos  
Isn't splendidly situated,

But it's nevertheless hospitable  
In a more modest home. And if  
A stranger should come to her,  
Shipwrecked or homesick  
Or grieving for a departed friend,  
She'll gladly listen, and her  
Offspring as well, the voices  
In the hot grove, so that where sands blow

And heat cracks the tops of the fields,  
They hear him, these voices,  
And echo the man's grief.  
Thus she once looked after  
The prophet that was loved by God,  
Who in his holy youth

Had walked together inseparably  
With the Son of the Highest,  
Because the Storm-Bearer loved  
The simplicity of his disciple.  
Thus that attentive man observed  
The countenance of the god directly,  
There at the mystery of the wine,  
Where they sat together at the hour  
Of the banquet, when the Lord with  
His great spirit quietly foresaw his  
Own death, and forespoke it and also  
His final act of love, for he always  
Had words of kindness to speak,  
Even then in his prescience,  
To soften the raging of the world.  
For all is good. Then he died. Much  
Could be said about it. At the end  
His friends recognized how joyous  
He appeared, and how victorious.

And yet the men grieved, now that evening  
Had come, and were taken by surprise,  
Since they were full of great intentions,  
And loved living in the light,  
And didn't want to leave the countenance  
Of the Lord, which had become their home.  
It penetrated them like fire into hot iron,  
And the one they love walked beside them  
Like a shadow. Therefore he sent

The Spirit upon them, and the house  
Shook and God's thunder rolled  
Over their expectant heads, while  
They were gathered with heavy hearts,  
Like heroes under sentence of death,

When he again appeared to them  
At his departure. For now  
The majestic day of the sun  
Was extinguished, as he cast  
The shining scepter from himself,  
Suffering like a god, but knowing  
He would come again at the right time.  
It would have been wrong  
To cut off disloyally his work  
With humans, since now it pleased  
Him to live on in loving night,  
And keep his innocent eyes  
Fixed upon depths of wisdom.  
Living images flourish deep  
In the mountains as well,

Yet it is fearful how God randomly  
Scatters the living, and how very far.  
And how fearsome it was to leave  
The sight of dear friends and walk off  
Alone far over the mountains, where  
The divine spirit was twice  
Recognized, in unity.  
It hadn't been prophesied to them:  
In fact it seized them right by the hair  
Just at the moment when the fugitive  
God looked back, and they called out to him  
To stop, and they reached their hands to  
One another as if bound by a golden rope,  
And called it bad —

But when he dies — he whom beauty  
Loved most of all, so that a miracle  
Surrounded him, and he became  
Chosen by the gods—  
And when those who lived together  
Thereafter in his memory, became  
Perplexed and no longer understood  
One another; and when floods carry off  
The sand and willows and temples,  
And when the fame of the demi-god  
And his disciples is blown away  
And even the Highest turns aside his  
Countenance, so that nothing  
Immortal can be seen either  
In heaven or upon the green earth —  
What does all this mean?

It is the action of the winnower,  
When he shovels the wheat  
And casts it up into the clear air  
And swings it across the threshing floor.  
The chaff falls to his feet, but  
The grain emerges finally.  
It's not bad if some of it gets lost,  
Or if the sounds of his living speech  
Fade away. For the work  
Of the gods resembles our own:  
The Highest doesn't want it  
Accomplished all at once.  
As mineshafts yield iron,  
And Etna its glowing resins,  
Similarly I'd have sufficient richness  
To shape a picture of him and see  
What the Christ was like.

But if somebody spurred himself on  
Along the road and, speaking sadly,  
Fell upon me and surprised me, so that  
Like a servant I'd make an image of the god —  
Once I saw the lords  
Of heaven visibly angered, not  
That I wanted to become something different,  
But that I wanted to learn something more.  
The lords are kind, but while they reign  
They hate falsehood most, when humans become  
Inhuman. For not they, but undying Fate  
It is that rules, and their activity  
Spins itself out and quickly reaches an end.  
When the heavenly procession proceeds higher  
Then the joyful Son of the Highest  
Is called like the sun by the strong,

As a watchword, like a staff of song  
That points downwards,  
For nothing is ordinary.  
It awakens the dead,  
Who aren't yet corrupted.  
And many are waiting whose eyes are  
Still too shy to see the light directly.  
They wouldn't do well in the sharp  
Radiance: a golden bridle  
Holds back their courage.  
But when quiet radiance falls  
From the holy scripture, with  
The world forgotten and their eyes  
Wide open, then they may enjoy that grace,  
And study the light in stillness.

And if the gods love me,  
As I now believe,  
Then how much more  
Do they love yourself.

For I know that the will  
Of the eternal Father  
Concerns you greatly.  
Under a thundering sky  
His sign is silent.  
And there is one who stands  
Beneath it all his life.  
For Christ still lives.  
But the heroes, all his sons  
Have come, and the holy scriptures  
Concerning him,  
While earth's deeds clarify  
The lightning, like a footrace  
That can't be stopped.  
But he is there too,  
Aware of his own works  
From the very beginning.  
For far too long  
The honor of the gods  
Has been invisible.  
They practically have to  
Guide our fingers as we write,  
And with embarrassment the energy  
Is torn from our hearts.  
For every heavenly being  
Expects a sacrifice,  
And when this is neglected,  
Nothing good can come of it.  
Without awareness we've worshipped  
Our Mother the Earth, and the Light  
Of the Sun as well, but what our Father  
Who reigns over everything wants most  
Is that the established word be  
Carefully attended, and that  
Which endures be interpreted well.  
German song must accord with this.

## The Neckar

My heart awakened to life in your valleys,  
Your waves played around me.  
And all of the fair hills that know you,  
Wayfarer, are known to me as well.

On those peaks the winds from the sky  
Relieved me from pains of bondage,  
And silver-blue waves shone forth from the valley,  
Like the joy of life pouring out from a chalice.

Mountain springs hurried down to you,  
My heart with them, and you took us along  
To the quietly splendid Rhine, down  
To its cities and pleasant islands.

The world seems to me yet beautiful, and my eyes  
Search out with desire the charms of the earth,  
To golden Paktolos, to Smyrna's shores,  
To Ilion's woods. How I'd like to

Go ashore at Sunium, and ask for the silent road  
To your pillars, Olympia! Before age  
And storm winds bury you as well  
In the ruins of Athens' temples,

Along with the statues of its gods. For you  
Have long stood alone, pride of a world  
That no longer exists. And the beautiful  
Islands of Ionia, where sea air

Cools the hot shores and rushes through the woods  
Of laurel, when the sun warms the grapevines,  
And, oh, where golden autumn changes  
The sighs of the poor people into songs,

When the pomegranate ripens, when the orange trees  
Nod in a green night, and the gum trees drip  
Resin, and drums and cymbals resound  
To labyrinthine dances.

Perhaps someday my guardian deity will bring me  
To these islands, but even then my thoughts  
Would remain loyal to the Neckar  
With its lovely meadows and pastoral shores.

## Remembrance

The northeast blows,  
my favorite among winds,  
since it promises fiery spirit  
and a good voyage to mariners.  
But go now, and greet  
the lovely Garonne,  
and the gardens of Bordeaux,  
where the path runs  
beside the steep bank,  
and the brook runs into the deep stream,  
and a noble pair of oak and silver  
poplars look down from above.

I remember well  
how the crowns of the elm trees  
lean over the mill,  
and a fig tree grows in the courtyard.  
On holidays dark-skinned women  
walk upon the soft earth,  
and in March,  
when night and day are equal:  
cradling breezes waft  
across the gentle pathways,  
heavy with golden dreams.

But someone hand me  
the fragrant cup,  
full of dark light,  
that I may rest.  
It would be sweet  
to sleep among the shadows.

It isn't good  
to stay mindless  
with human thoughts.  
On the other hand, conversation  
is also good: to speak  
the thoughts of the heart,  
and to hear much of days of love,  
and of deeds that occur.

But where are our friends —  
Bellarmin and his companion?  
Many are afraid to go to the source,  
since treasure is first found in the sea.  
Like painters, they gather up earth's beauty,  
and they don't scorn winged war,  
or to live alone for years  
beneath the bare mast —  
where the city's festivities  
don't flash through the night, or  
the sound of strings and native dancing.

But now the men  
have left for India...  
from the windy peaks  
and vine-covered hills  
where the Dardogne  
comes down with the great  
Garonne; wide as an ocean  
the river flows outward.  
But the sea takes  
and gives memory,  
and love fixes the eye diligently,  
and poets establish  
that which endures.

# Mnemosyne

— *Third version*

The fruits are ripe, dipped in fire,  
Cooked and sampled on earth. And there's a law,  
That things crawl off in the manner of snakes,  
Prophetically, dreaming on the hills of heaven.  
And there is much that needs to be retained,  
Like a load of wood on the shoulders.  
But the pathways are dangerous.  
The captured elements and ancient laws of earth  
Run astray like horses. There is a constant yearning  
For all that is unconfined. But much needs  
To be retained. And loyalty is required.  
Yet we mustn't look forwards or backwards.  
We should let ourselves be cradled  
As if on a boat rocking on a lake.

But what about things that we love?  
We see sun shining on the ground, and the dry dust,  
And at home the forests deep with shadows,  
And smoke flowering from the rooftops,  
Peacefully, near the ancient crowning towers.  
These signs of daily life are good,  
Even when by contrast something divine  
Has injured the soul.  
For snow sparkles on an alpine meadow,  
Half-covered with green, signifying generosity  
Of spirit in all situations, like flowers in May —  
A wanderer walks up above on a high trail  
And speaks irritably to a friend about a cross  
He sees in the distance, set for someone  
Who died on the path... what does it mean?

My Achilles  
Died near a fig tree,  
And Ajax lies in the caves of the sea  
Near the streams of Skamandros —  
Great Ajax died abroad  
Following Salamis' inflexible customs,  
A rushing sound at his temples —  
But Patroclus died in the King's armor.  
Many others died as well.  
But Eleutherai, the city  
Of Mnemosyne, once stood upon  
Mount Kithaeron. Evening  
Loosened her hair, after the god  
Had removed his coat.  
For the gods are displeased  
If a person doesn't compose  
And spare himself.  
But one has to do it,  
And grief is soon gone.

## Out for a Walk

The margins of the forest are beautiful,  
as if painted onto the green slopes.  
I walk around, and sweet peace  
rewards me for the thorns  
in my heart, when the mind has grown  
dark, for right from the start  
art and thinking have cost it pain.  
There are lovely pictures in the valley,  
for example the gardens and trees,  
and the narrow footbridge, and the brook,  
hardly visible. How beautifully  
the landscape shines, cheerfully distant,  
like a splendid picture, where I come  
to visit when the weather is mild.  
A kindly divinity leads us on at first  
with blue, then prepares clouds,  
shaped like gray domes, with  
searing lightning and rolling thunder,  
then comes the loveliness of the fields,  
and beauty wells forth from  
the source of the primal image.

## Looking Out

The open day is bright with pictures for everyone,  
when green fields appear on the distant plain,  
before the light of evening yields to twilight,  
and reflections of light alleviate the noise of the day.  
The inner being of the world often appears clouded  
and hidden, and people's minds are full of doubts  
and irritation, but splendid nature cheers up their days,  
and doubt's dark questions stay distant.

With submission,  
Scardanelli

24 March, 1671

## For Zimmer

The lines of life are various,  
Like roads, and the borders of mountains.  
What we are here, a god can complete there,  
With harmonies, undying reward, and peace.

## About these translations...

In 1978 these translations appeared as a very small-press publication entitled **The Fire of the Gods Drives Us to Set Forth by Day and by Night**, published by Hoddypoll Press, San Francisco, California. These pages present a somewhat revised and expanded version of the original work.

Since Friedrich Hölderlin was one of the last visionary poets in European literature to have thematicized ecstatic religious experience, and also the loss thereof, convincingly, I have selected mostly those poems which seemed to me most representative of his visionary force at its greatest intensity, and which deal explicitly with man's relationship to the gods. Thus most of his best-known poems appear here. A somewhat more comprehensive selection of translations can be found in **Friedrich Hölderlin: Selected Poems**, translated by David Constantine, Bloodaxe Books, 1990 and 1996. Very useful also is **Hymns and Fragments by Friedrich Hölderlin**, translated and introduced by Richard Sieburth, Princeton University Press, 1984, which includes many fragments and drafts, as well the major hymns.

Given the circumstance that Hölderlin's poems have remained all but unknown in the United States, it seemed useful to provide translations that indicate what the poems mean, rather than to attempt a display of their rhyme, verse form, metric schemes and highly idiosyncratic syntax. Thus these translations were conceived in reaction to the only translations of Hölderlin originally available to me in 1978, namely **Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments**, by Michael Hamburger, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London: 1966, which was the basis for a subsequent Penguin paperback, and then another further Penguin edition in 1998. I felt then as now that Mr. Hamburger's valiant attempt to reproduce something of the original forms of the poems could only lead to a diminished comprehension of their factual meaning.

I suppose also that “literalness” — by which I mean economy, simplicity of expression, and common vocabulary — carries and sustains aesthetic value for me, whereas antiquated German verse forms and rhetoric, often imitative of Greek models, decidedly do not. So I have not restrained myself from occasionally changing apostrophic sentences into declarative ones, or from translating certain words and phrases from the standard vocabulary of Romantic sentimentalism, such as “soul” or “heavenly,” as “mind” or “of the gods,” where it seemed contextually appropriate.

The result is to some extent a modernization of the original text, and I hope that anyone who comes upon Hölderlin here for the first time will remember that he was a poet of considerable formal complexity, often attempting to Germanize Hellenic forms, and bound as well of course to the language and vocabulary of his times. That he could also break out of these forms and other contemporary poetic practices into amazingly modern modes of expression may not, I am afraid, be as well understood from my translations.

The texts for these translations are taken from the critical edition of Friedrich Beissner, **Friederich Hölderlin: Sämtliche Werke**, Stuttgart: 1943-1961.

I owe special thanks to two friends in Germany I have known since student days in Munich: Dr. Bernd W. Seiler, Professor of German Language and Literature at the University of Bielefeld, for his skillful assistance and encouragement, and Dr. Helmut Sies, Professor of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at the University of Düsseldorf, and President of the Academy of Arts and Sciences in North-Rhine Westphalia, for his no less constant and heartfelt support of this project.

I dedicate these pages to the memory of Kenneth Rexroth, a poet of San Francisco, whose translations of Chinese poems into ordinary English first showed me that older texts of poetry from quite foreign cultures and languages could be successfully realized in this way.

*“In the fine spring rain it is impossible to see very far,  
and the mist rising from the water has hidden the hills.”*

## Notes to the Poems

BREAD AND WINE – p. 7. Hölderlin's great masterwork was written in 1800-1801. It describes the situation of mankind after the departure of the gods. The seventh strophe is addressed to his friend, Wilhem Heinze, to whom the poem is dedicated. In the ninth strophe, "the Syrian" signifies Christ.

TO THE FATES – p. 16. First published in 1799. The poet's own descent to Hades took place five-six years later, from which of course he never emerged.

AS ON A HOLIDAY – p. 17. This fragmentary yet beautifully written poem shows the poet as a heroic seer and perhaps a shamanic intermediary, a kind of spiritual lightning rod placed between the worlds of higher beings and humans, an obviously dangerous, yet exalted occupation.

TO THE SUN GOD – p. 20. According to Greek legend, the Sun God Apollo stays during the dark hours with the Hyperboreans, a happy people resident at the end of the world who still honor him. The poem seems homoerotic, which would probably have pleased Apollo. That Hölderlin was not unclear on the concept is shown in his short poem below, which may or may not end with a bad pun:

### SOCRATES AND ALCIBIADES

“Why do you, holy Socrates, worship  
this beautiful youth instead of higher things?  
Why does your eye look lovingly upon him,  
as if he were a god?”

Who thinks deepest, loves what is most full of life.  
A person who looks into the world knows  
all about youth, and those who are wise  
often choose what is beautiful in the end.

HYPERION'S SONG OF DESTINY – p. 21. This poem appeared 1799 in the second volume of Hölderlin's novel, *Hyperion*. The third strophe is a good example of the visual shape of a poem matching its content: the stair-case effect demonstrates man's descent to the Unknown.

WHEN I WAS A BOY – p. 22. This poem was written in 1797-98.

HUMAN APPLAUSE – p. 23. If you're going to hang with the gods, just say no to capitalism and the military.

ONCE GODS WALKED... – p. 24. This fragment from an unfinished elegy combines two themes characteristic of Hölderlin: the spiritualized, golden-age Utopia he associates with the Greek gods, and his hopelessly over-idealized projection of spiritual competence onto a female acquaintance, often named Diotima, derived apparently from Socrates' speech in Plato's *Symposium*. In this case the real-life inspiratrix is Susette Gontard.

THE COURSE OF LIFE – p. 25. The fact that human progress is erratic is a determinant of human freedom. Which is not to say that our progress is erratic because we are free. The poem's imagery is taken from Heraclitus.

AT THE MIDDLE OF LIFE – p. 26. Written in 1803, not long before the onset of his insanity, and certainly his most famous poem. As in so many other of his poems, Hölderlin seems to foresee his own destruction.

HOMECOMING – p. 27. Written after Hölderlin's return from Switzerland in the spring of 1801, it describes his return to family and friends in Swabia after descending from the mountains and crossing Lake Constance by boat to Lindau. The Alpine mountain landscapes are transformed into stunning venues of mythmaking.

CELEBRATION OF PEACE – p. 33. Inspired by the Peace of Luneville, 1801. The Prince of the Festival is probably Christ, who is definitely referred to in the fourth strophe.

PATMOS – p. 39. Patmos is the island where St. John lived and wrote the Apocalypse. The poem was written before February 1803 and dedicated to the Landgraf von Homburg, the ruler of a small German state

near Frankfurt. The Landgraf was known as a Bible student, and is addressed in the second-last strophe. In the third strophe: Tmolus, Taurus and Messogis are mountains, and Pactolus (Paktolos) is a river famous in legend for its gold ore.

The poem views the Christian gospel with Hellenic eyes. The “mystery of the wine” links the Last Supper with Dionysus, and the written Gospels were created as a human response to the impossibility of merging with godhead, of being a god oneself. Thus the Evangelists are viewed as classical poets: they are the intermediaries and seers left to recount the deeds of the gods in texts that endure.

THE NECKAR – p. 46. Hölderlin’s Europe-consciousness was essentially bi-polar in nature, swinging like a pendulum between Germany and the Greece of his imagination, with occasional forays into the Alps along the way to witness the titanic forces of “Nature” at work. Germany meant for him primarily Swabia, roughly the modern state of Baden-Wuerttemberg, and of course the Neckar runs through it.

REMEMBRANCE – p. 48. May have been written in 1803, after Hölderlin’s return from Bordeaux. He chooses the name Bellarmin for that of any close friend, as in the novel *Hyperion*. Like the heroes of Greece, sailors set forth upon the ocean, leaving poets behind to recount their adventures.

MNEMOSYNE – p. 50. The poem demonstrates the semantic complexity often characteristic of Hölderlin’s late writing, and his ability to develop thoughts in a succession of metaphors and images. This process of metaphorical thinking in poetic narrative surfaced many decades later in the writing of Rainer Maria Rilke.

The question Hölderlin presents here is whether and how it is possible to retain historical memory of past events, exemplified by the deaths of the Greek heroes. Mnemosyne is the goddess of memory. She slept with Zeus and gave birth to the nine Muses, whose activities are also by nature historicizing.

Hesiod writes of Mnemosyne:

*Them [the Muses] in Pieria did Mnemosyne, who reigns over the hills of Eleuther, bear of union with the father, the son of Kronos [Zeus], a forgetting of ills and a rest from sorrow. For nine nights did wise Zeus lie with her, entering her holy bed remote from the immortals. And when a year was passed and the seasons came round as the months from sorrow. For nine nights did wise Zeus lie with her, entering her holy bed remote from the immortals. And when a year was passed and the seasons came round as the months waned, and many days were accomplished, she bare nine daughters, all of one mind, whose hearts are set upon song and their spirit free from care, a little way from the topmost peak of snowy Olympus. [Theogony 53-63.]*

*And again, he [Zeus] loved Mnemosyne with the beautiful hair: and of her the nine gold-crowned Muses were born. [Theogony 915-917.]*

Pindar also writes about Mnemosyne:

*If success crowns a man's venture, sweeter then than honey the libations he pours into the Mousai's [Muses'] stream. But lacking the songs to praise them, the mightiest feats of valour can but find a sorry grave a deep darkness. But for fine deeds a mirror to establish, one way alone we know if Mnamosyna's [Memory's] shining diadem will grant recompense for their labours, in the glory of music on the tongues of men. [Pindar Nemean 7 ant1.]*

In the poem's first strophe, the "fruits" are simply the deeds or events of history. Their memory disappears from us the same way that snakes crawl away into cracks in the floor, or between rocks. We need to remember things, but our memory is often faulty and can lead us astray like horses on crooked paths. Also there exists a tendency and a willingness to let things slide into oblivion. We should stay nestled in the present and not run away to the past or the future.

But what about the experiences of daily life, the common things we treasure, even after we make contact with something that transcends earthly life? It is like a cross planted in an alpine meadow, an act of generosity and a reminder, permitting wayfarers to speculate from a distance about what happened there.

The last strophe places us in the mythic environment of Greece. The heroes at Troy died in various ways, and we owe our knowledge of them to the circumstance that Zeus slept with Mnemosyne on Mt. Kithaeron—“loosening her hair” is a sexual metaphor in older literatures.

Thus historical memory itself is ordained by the gods. When friends or heroes die, we need to pull ourselves together and conquer sorrow by creating a record of what happened.

OUT FOR A WALK – p. 52, and LOOKING OUT – p. 53. During the long years of his insanity, Hölderlin was occasionally able to focus his attention long enough to write some presentable poetry, much of which resulted apparently from walks he was taken on through the countryside around Tübingen.

In some of these poems, Nature reveals itself in the form of pictures. As he walks outdoors, what he sees is not Nature itself, but rather images of Nature. If you visit the “Hölderlin Tower” on the bank of the Neckar River in Tübingen today, you can stand in the small apartment where he was kept for over 35 years, and it is not hard to imagine how looking out through the windows across the surrounding countryside might also have eventually seemed to him like looking at pictures hanging on the wall.

FOR ZIMMER – p. 54. Ernst Zimmer, a cabinet-maker with whom Hölderlin stayed during the period of his mental estrangement from 1807-1843. This short verse can serve as a final signature poem for Hölderlin’s life and writings.

## Persons and Places in Greek Mythology

**AETHER.** Radiant light, or fiery air. The upper stratum of bright air where the gods live. Aether generated life on earth.

**BACCHUS.** Dionysus, the god of wine, and of ecstasy.

**CADMUS.** Founded Thebes, a principal ancient Greek city.

**CERBERUS.** A dog which guarded the entrance to Hades, letting pass anyone who entered, but devouring anyone attempting to leave.

**CHAOS.** Means literally "gaping void." From Chaos arose Earth, Tartarus, Love, Darkness, and Night (Hesiod).

**CITHAERON, OR KITHAERON.** Mountain in ancient Greece, home of Mnemosyne.

**CORINTH.** Greek province.

**DELPHI.** Dedicated to Apollo, famed for its oracle.

**DEMI-GOD.** A minor deity, or a hero elevated to the status of a deity.

**ECHO.** A garrulous nymph. After a dismally unsuccessful love affair with Narcissus, she vanished, leaving behind only her voice, which is still heard in some places, reiterating words spoken by others.

**ELEUTHERAI.** A city on Mt. Cithaeron.

**ENDYMION.** A handsome young shepherd loved by Luna, the moon goddess. When Zeus found out, he offered him the choice of death or perpetual sleep combined with perpetual youth. Having opted for the latter, Endymion continues to sleep in his cave, visited occasionally by Luna.

**FATE.** The general scheme behind the world at large; the necessity which underlies all activities of gods and humans.

**HELIOS.** The sun moves daily across the sky in a chariot, bringing light to gods and humans.

HESPERIA. Italy.

HYPERION. He and Theia were Titans who produced the light-gods: Helios (the sun), Selene (Luna, the moon), and Eos (the dawn).

ILION. Ilium, or Troy.

IONIA. Ancient Greek name for the central part of the west coast of Asia Minor and the Aegean Islands.

ISMENOSA. River in Boeothia, near Thebes.

ISTHMUS. The isthmus of Corinth, a central Greek province, site of the Isthmian games.

LUNA. Selene, the moon goddess.

OLYMPUS. Mountainous residence of the Greek gods of the heavens; site of the Olympian games.

ORCUS. Hades, the Underworld.

PAKTOLOS. Pactolus, a river in Lydia.

PARNASSUS. Mountain in Greece, one peak of which was sacred to Apollo, the other to the Muses. Delphi is nearby.

SEMELE. She was the daughter of Cadmus. Zeus appeared to her in human format as her lover, and she subsequently gave birth to Bacchus. Hera (Zeus' wife) became jealous and deceitfully urged Semele to request Zeus to assume his divine appearance. He did so, and Semele was roasted to ashes.

SKAMANDROS. Skamander, a river in Troy.

SMYRNA. City in Western Turkey, now Izmir.

THEBE. A nymph, loved by Asopos, a Boethian river-god.

TITANS. Very ancient generation of Greek god-prototypes, the children of Uranos (Heaven) and Gaia (Earth).



POEMS OF FRIEDRICH HÖLDERLIN

ITHURIEL'S SPEAR



# Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin

The Fire of the Gods Drives Us to Set Forth  
by Day and by Night.



Selected and translated by James Mitchell

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# Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin

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## Bread and Wine

— *to Heinze*

1.

Round about the city rests. The illuminated streets grow  
Quiet, and coaches rush along, adorned with torches.  
Men go home to rest, filled with the day's pleasures;  
Busy minds weigh up profit and loss contentedly  
At home. The busy marketplace comes to rest,  
Vacant now of flowers and grapes and crafts.  
But the music of strings sounds in distant gardens:  
Perhaps lovers play there, or a lonely man thinks  
About distant friends, and about his own youth.  
Rushing fountains flow by fragrant flower beds,  
Bells ring softly in the twilight air, and a watchman  
Calls out the hour, mindful of the time.  
Now a breeze rises and touches the crest of the grove —  
Look how the moon, like the shadow of our earth,  
Also rises stealthily! Phantastical night comes,  
Full of stars, unconcerned probably about us —  
Astonishing night shines, a stranger among humans,  
Sadly over the mountain tops, in splendor.

2.

The kindness of exalted Night is wonderful, and no one  
Knows where she comes from, or what will emerge from her.  
Thus she moves the world, and the hopeful minds of humans:  
Not even a sage knows what she's up to.  
The highest god, who loves you very much, wants it so;  
Therefore you prefer reasonable day to the night.  
But occasionally a clear eye loves the shadows as well,  
And tries to sleep just for pleasure, before it's necessary,  
Or a brave person likes to gaze directly into the Night:  
Surely it's right to dedicate wreaths and songs to her  
Since she is holy to those who are lost or dead, although  
She herself exists totally free in spirit, forever.  
But she must grant us oblivion and holy drunkenness,  
That in the hesitating interval, in the darkness,  
There'll be something for us to hold onto.  
She must grant us flowing words, sleepless  
As lovers are, and a fuller cup, and bolder life, and  
Holy remembrance as well, to stay wakeful at night.

3.

We, masters and apprentices both, hide our hearts  
In vain, and repress our enthusiasm for no reason.  
For who could stop it, or forbid us our pleasure?  
The fire of the gods drives us to set forth by day  
And by night. So come, let us look at what is apparent,  
And seek what is ours, as distant as it may be!  
One thing is certain: a standard always exists, at noon  
Or at midnight, common to all of us. But also  
To each of us something personal is granted;  
Everyone goes and comes where he can.  
Thus playful madness may mock mockery itself,  
Seizing singers suddenly in the holy night.  
Then let's be off to the Isthmus! There, where  
The open sea roars at Parnassus, and the snow  
Shines around the Delphian cliffs,  
There in the land of Olympus, on Cithaeron's peak,  
Under the pines, amid vineyards, from which  
Thebes and Ismenos roar in the land of Cadmus.  
The approaching god comes from there, and points back to it.

4.

Holy Greece! Home of all the gods — so it's true,  
What once we heard when we were young?  
A festival hall, whose floor is the ocean, whose tables  
Are the mountains — anciently built for a single purpose.  
But where are the thrones? Where the temples, the songs,  
The vases full of nectar for the pleasure of the gods?  
Where are the oracles that shine for miles and miles?  
Delphi sleeps, and where does great Fate resound?  
Where does Fate suddenly break forth, full of omnipresent  
Joy, thundering out of clear air over our eyes?  
Father Aether! It called and flew from tongue to tongue  
A thousand times, and nobody had to endure life alone.  
Shared, such fortune is a joy; exchanged with strangers,  
It becomes jubilant. Sleeping, the power of the word grows:  
Father! Joyful! The ancient sign resounds, as far it reaches,  
Inherited from the elders, striking, creating.  
Thus the gods enter; thus the season of the gods falls  
From the shadows down to men, shaking the depths.

5.

At first the gods come unperceived. Children try to get  
Near them. But their glory dazzles and blinds and  
Awakens fear. A demi-god scarcely knows the people  
By name, who now approach him with gifts. But their  
Courage is great. Their joy fills his heart, and he hardly  
Knows what to do with the offerings. He busies himself  
And becomes wasteful, and unholy things almost become holy,  
Which he touches with a blessing hand, foolishly and kindly.  
The gods tolerate it as long as they can, and then in truth  
They appear themselves. And people become accustomed  
To this fortune, to the daytime, and to the sight of the manifest  
Ones, the faces of those formerly called the "One and All,"  
Deeply making every silent breast content, and first and alone  
Filling every desire. It's the way people are. When something  
Good appears, and even when it's a god that provides them  
With gifts, they don't see or recognize it. First they have  
To get used to it; then they call it their closest possession.  
And only then will words of praise arise, like flowers.

6.

And now they prepare in earnest to honor the holy gods.

Everything must really and truly proclaim their praise.

Nothing displeasing to the high ones may come to light.

Idle endeavors aren't proper for the Aether.

Therefore, to stand worthily in the presence of the gods,

Nations rise in splendid order and beautiful

Temples and cities are built, strong and noble, which rise

Above the banks of the waters — but where are they?

Where are the famous, flourishing cities, crowning the festival?

Thebes and Athens are fading. Don't the weapons clash

At Olympus, or golden chariots at the games? Are there

No longer wreaths to decorate the ships of Corinth?

Why are the ancient holy theaters silent?

What happened to the joyful ceremonial dancing?

Why doesn't a god place his sign on a human forehead,

Leaving his mark on the person he has struck?

Or, as gods used to, come comfortingly, and assume human

Shape, then complete and close the festival of the gods?

7.

But friend, we come too late. It's true that the gods live,  
But up over our heads, up in a different world.  
They function endlessly up there, and seem to care little  
If we live or die, so much do they avoid us.  
A weak vessel cannot hold them forever; humans can  
Endure the fullness of the gods only at times. Therefore  
Life itself becomes a dream about them. But perplexity  
And sleep assist us: distress and night-time strengthen,  
Until enough heroes have grown in the bronze cradle,  
With hearts as strong as the gods', as it used to be.  
Thundering they arise. Meanwhile I often think it is  
Better to stay asleep, than to exist without companions,  
Just waiting it out, not knowing what to do or say  
In the meantime. What use are poets in times of need?  
But you'll say they're like holy priests of the wine god,  
Moving from land to land in the holy night.

8.

Some time ago — to us it seems like a long time —

All those who made our lives happy climbed upwards.

The Father turned his face away from people,

And sorrow came rightly upon the earth.

Finally a quiet genius appeared, comforting in a god-like

Way, who announced the end of the day, and disappeared.

The choir of gods left some gifts behind, as a sign

Of their presence and eventual return, which we

May appreciate in our human fashion, as we used to.

That which is superior had grown too great for pleasure

With spirit among men. And to this day no one's strong enough

For the highest joys, although some gratitude survives quietly.

Bread is the fruit of the earth, yet it's blessed also by light.

The pleasure of wine comes from the thundering god.

We remember the gods thereby, those who were once

With us, and who'll return when the time is right

Thus poets sing of the wine god in earnest, and their

Ringings praises of the old one aren't devised in vain.

9.

Yes, they say rightly that he reconciles day with night,  
And leads the stars of heaven up and down forever —  
Joyful always, like the boughs of evergreen pines  
That he loves, and the wreath he chose of ivy  
Since it endures, and brings a trace of the fugitive gods  
Down to the darkness of those who must live in their  
absence.  
What the sons of the ancients foretold of God's children:  
Look, it's us, the fruit of Hesperia!  
Through humans it is wonderfully and exactly fulfilled;  
Let those believe who've examined the matter. But so much  
Goes on, yet nothing succeeds: we are like heartless shadows  
Until our Father Aether recognizes us and belongs to us all  
Meanwhile the Son, the Syrian, comes down among  
The shadows, as torchbearer of the Highest.  
Holy sages observe it; a smile shines out from  
The imprisoned soul; their eyes thaw in the light.  
Titans dream more softly, asleep in the arms of the earth—  
Even jealous Cerberus drinks and falls asleep.

## To the Fates

Grant me just one summer, powerful ones,  
And just one autumn for ripe songs,  
That my heart, filled with that sweet  
Music, may more willingly die within me.

The soul, denied its divine heritage in life,  
Won't find rest down in Hades either.  
But if what is holy to me, the poem  
That rests in my heart, succeeds —

Then welcome, silent world of shadows!  
I'll be content, even though it's not my own lyre  
That leads me downwards. Once I'll have  
Lived like the gods, and more isn't necessary.

## As on a Holiday

As on a holiday, when a farmer  
Goes out to look at his fields, in the morning,  
After cool lightning has fallen through the hot night,  
And thunder still echoes in the distance,  
And the stream returns to its banks,  
And the earth becomes green and fresh,  
And drops of joyful rain from heaven rest  
Upon the vines, and the trees in the grove  
Stand shining in the quiet sun —

Thus poets stand in favorable weather:  
Those whom no master, but rather Nature,  
Mighty and beautiful in its divinity, wonderfully  
And universally present, educates with gentle embrace.  
And when Nature appears to sleep at some seasons,  
Either in the sky or among plants or nations,  
So the aspect of poets is also mournful.  
They seem to be alone, but their foreknowledge continues.  
For Nature itself is prescient, as it rests.

Now it is day! I waited to see it come,  
And what I saw — my words bespeak holiness!  
For Nature, who is older than time,  
Standing above the gods of the Occident and Orient,  
Has awakened to the sounds of arms.  
All-creating Nature feels the enthusiasm anew,  
From Aether down to the abyss,  
As when she was born of holy Chaos,  
According to the established law.

And as fire shines in a man's eye  
When he plans something great,  
So a fire is kindled again in the minds  
Of poets, by the signs and deeds of the world.  
What happened before, scarcely sensed,  
Becomes apparent now for the first time.  
And those who plowed our fields  
In the form of smiling laborers  
Are now recognized as the all-living  
Forces of the gods.

Would you question them? Their spirit moves in song,  
Grown from the sun of day and the warm earth,  
And from storms, those of the air, and others  
Originating farther within the depths of time,  
More perceptible and meaningful to us,  
Drifting between heaven and earth, and among nations.  
They are thoughts of the common spirit,  
Quietly ending in the mind of the poet,

Which, long familiar with the infinite,  
Is struck quickly, and shakes with the memory.  
Set on fire by the holy radiance,  
It creates a song — the fruit born of love,  
The work of gods and man,  
Bearing witness to both.  
Thus lightning fell on Semele's house,  
As poets relate, since she wanted to see  
A god in person. Struck by the god,  
She gave birth to holy Bacchus,  
The fruit of the storm.

Thus the sons of earth now drink in  
The fire of heaven without danger.  
And it is our duty, poets, to stand  
Bare-headed under the storms of God,  
Grasping with our own hand  
The Father's beam itself,  
And to offer the gift of heaven,  
Wrapped in song, to the people.  
If our hearts are pure, like children,  
And our hands are guiltless,

The Father's pure radiance won't sear;  
And the deeply shaken heart, sharing  
The suffering of the stronger god,  
Will endure the raging storms when he approaches.

But alas, if from -----  
-----

Alas!  
And if I now say -----

I had come to see the gods,  
They themselves cast me down to the living,  
Me, the false priest, down to darkness,  
That I sing a song of warning to those able to learn.

There - - -

## To the Sun God

Where are you? Drunk, my mind becomes  
Twilight after all your ecstasy. For I just saw  
How the enrapturing young god,  
Tired from his journey,

Bathed his youthful hair in the golden clouds.  
And now my eyes follow after him,  
But he is gone away to reverent  
Nations which still honor him.

I love the earth, which mourns with me.  
Like children when they are upset, our grief  
Changes to sleep. And as rustling winds  
Whisper over harp strings

Until the fingers of a master entice  
A prettier music, thus mist and dreams  
Play around us, until the beloved returns,  
And charges us with life and spirit.

## Hyperion's Song of Destiny

Holy spirits, you walk up there  
in the light, on soft earth.  
Shining god-like breezes  
touch upon you gently,  
as a woman's fingers  
play music on holy strings.

Like sleeping infants the gods  
breathe without any plan;  
the spirit flourishes continually  
in them, chastely kept,  
as in a small bud,  
and their holy eyes  
look out in still  
eternal clearness.

A place to rest  
isn't given to us.  
Suffering humans  
decline and blindly fall  
from one hour to the next,  
like water thrown  
from cliff to cliff,  
year after year, down  
into the Unknown.

When I was a boy...

When I was a boy  
a god would often rescue me  
from the shouting and violence of humans.  
Then, safe and well, I would play  
with the meadow flowers,  
and heaven's breezes  
would play with me.

And as you delight the heart  
of plants, stretching their tender  
arms toward you,  
Father Helios,  
so you delighted my heart,  
and I was your beloved,  
holy Luna, just like Endymion!

All you faithful  
friendly gods!  
I wish you knew  
how my soul loved you!

Naturally I couldn't call you  
by name then, nor did you use  
mine, as humans do, as if  
they really knew each other.

But I was better acquainted with you  
than I ever was with humans.  
I knew the stillness of the Aether:  
I never understood the words of men.

The euphony of the rustling  
meadow was my education;  
among flowers I learned to love.

I grew up  
in the arms of the gods.

## Human Applause

Isn't my heart holy, more full of life's beauty,  
since I fell in love? Why did you like me more  
when I was prouder and wilder, more full  
of words, yet emptier?

Well, the crowd likes whatever sells in the  
marketplace; and no one but a slave  
appreciates violent men. Only those who  
are themselves godlike believe in the gods.

## Once gods walked...

Once gods walked among humans,  
The splendid Muses and youthful Apollo  
Inspired and healed us, just like you.  
And you are to me as if one of the Holy Ones  
Had sent me forth into life, and the image  
Of my beloved would go with me,  
And wherever I stayed and whatever I learned,  
I would learn and gain it from her,  
With a love that lasts until death.

Then let us live, you with whom I suffer  
And inwardly strive towards better times  
In faith and loyalty. For we are the ones.  
And if people should remember us both  
In years to come, when Spirit again prevails,  
They'd say that these lonely ones lovingly  
Created a secret world, known to the gods alone.  
The earth will take back those concerned  
With impermanent things: others climb higher  
To ethereal Light who've been faithful  
To the love inside themselves, and to the spirit  
Of the gods. Thus they master Fate  
In patience, hope and quietness.

## The Course of Life

You too wanted better things, but love  
forces all of us down. Sorrow bends us more  
forcefully, but the arc doesn't return to its  
point of origin without a reason.

Upwards or downwards! In holy Night,  
where mute Nature plans the coming days,  
doesn't there reign in the most twisted Orcus  
something straight and direct?

This I have learned. Never to my knowledge  
did you, all-preserving gods, like mortal  
masters, lead me providentially  
along a straight path.

The gods say that man should test  
everything, and that strongly nourished  
he be thankful for everything, and understand  
the freedom to set forth wherever he will.

## At the Middle of Life

The earth hangs down  
to the lake, full of yellow  
pears and wild roses.  
Lovely swans, drunk with  
kisses you dip your heads  
into the holy, sobering waters.

But when winter comes,  
where will I find  
the flowers, the sunshine,  
the shadows of the earth?  
The walls stand  
speechless and cold,  
the weathervanes  
rattle in the wind.

# Homecoming

— to my *Kinsfolk*

1.

It is still bright night in the Alps, and a cloud,  
    Authoring joyfulness, covers the yawning valley.  
Playful mountain breezes rush and toss about, and a ray  
    Of light shines abruptly through the firs and disappears.  
Chaos, quivering with joy, hurries slowly to do battle.  
    Young in form, yet strong, it celebrates a loving quarrel  
Among the cliffs. It ferments and shakes within its eternal  
    Limits, for the morning accelerates in ecstatic dance.  
The year advances more rapidly out there, and the holy hours,  
    The days, are more boldly ordered and mixed.  
A storm bird marks the time, and stays high in the air  
    Between the mountains, announcing the day.  
Now the little village awakens down below. Fearless,  
    Familiar with the heights, it peers up beyond the treetops.  
It senses the growth, for the ancient streams fall like lightning,  
    And the ground yields fine mists under the crashing waters.  
Echo resounds, and the vast workplace flexes its arm,  
    Sending forth its gifts, by day and by night.

2.

Peaks of silver shine silently above,  
And the sparkling snow is full of roses.  
Still higher above the light lives the god, pure  
And holy, pleased with the divine play of light beams.  
He lives there quietly and alone: his face is bright.  
At home in the ether he seems ready to grant life  
And create joy for us. Gradually and sparingly,  
Remembering the necessity for moderation and the needs  
Of the living, he sends true happiness to the cities  
And houses, and mild rains to open the countryside,  
And soft breezes and gentle seasons of spring.  
With a gentle hand he cheers the saddened,  
Renews the seasons, the creative one, refreshes  
And touches the quiet hearts of the elderly.  
Down into the deep his influence extends:  
It reveals and illumines, just as he pleases.  
And now life begins again. Gracefulness  
Flourishes as it did before, and the Spirit  
Is present and approaches, and a joyful  
Disposition fills its wings.

3.

I had much to say to him, for whatever poets think  
Or sing about is addressed mainly to him and his angels.  
I asked him for much, out of love to the Fatherland,  
So the Spirit wouldn't suddenly fall upon us unbidden.  
I prayed much for you too, my landspeople, who have cares  
Inside the Fatherland: to whom holy gratitude, smiling, brings  
Back the exiles. At the same time the lake rocked my boat,  
And the steersman sat quietly and approved our journey.  
Far on the lake's surface joyous waves surged under the sails,  
And now the city rises brightly in the early morning,  
And our boat came well-guided from the shaded Alps  
To rest in the harbor. Here the shore is warm  
And the open valleys are friendly, brightened by  
Beautiful pathways, flourishing and shining toward me.  
Gardens lie round about, bright buds open, the song of birds  
Welcomes the wanderer. Everything seems familiar;  
Even people passing by greet each other as if they were  
Friends, and every face appears like kin.

4.

But of course, this is the land of your birth, the soil  
Of your own country: what you seek is close by and  
Rises to meet you. The traveller stands before you,  
O happy Lindau, surrounded by waves, like a son  
At your door affectionately singing your praises.

This is a welcoming gate to the nation, inviting you  
To travel forth into the distance, a place of promises  
And miracles, where the Rhine, like a mythological  
Animal, breaks its way downwards into the plains,  
And the jubilant valley leads through the bright  
Mountains toward Como, or off toward the open sea

In the direction of the sun. But the sacred  
Gateway prompts me to go on home instead,  
Where the busy highways are familiar to me,  
To visit the countryside and beautiful valleys  
Of the Neckar, and the forests, where godlike green  
Oak and beech trees and silent birches gather, and  
A friendly spot in the mountains still holds me captive.

5.

Dear friends are there to welcome me.

O voice of the city, voice of my mother!  
You touch and awaken what I learned long ago.

But it's really them: sun and joy shine for you,  
My dear ones, almost brighter than ever in your eyes.

Yes, it's still the same. It thrives and ripens,  
For nothing that lives and loves relinquishes loyalty.

Best of all, this treasure, which rests under the arch  
Of holy peace, is reserved for young and old alike.

I speak foolishly. It's pure joy. But tomorrow  
And after, when we go out and view the living fields,

When the trees are blossoming on Spring holidays,  
I'll speak and share my hopes with you, dear friends.

I've heard much about our great Father, but I've said  
Nothing. He renews the passing time above in the heights,

And he reigns over mountains. He'll soon bestow heavenly  
Gifts and call for brighter song and send many good spirits.

Come, you preservers! Angels of the year! And you,

6.

Angels of the house, come! May the power of Heaven spread  
Through all the veins of life, ennobling and invigorating  
And dispensing joy! So that joyful angels attend upon  
Human goodness every hour of the day, and that  
Such joy as I experience now, when loved ones  
Are properly reunited, be suitably sanctified.  
When we bless the meal, upon whom shall I call,  
And when we rest after the day's activity, tell me,  
How will I offer thanks? Should I call the Highest by name?  
A god doesn't like what is inappropriate. Maybe our joy  
Isn't big enough to grasp him. We must often remain silent,  
A sacred language is missing — hearts are beating and yet  
Speech can't emerge? But the sound of string music  
Resonates hour by hour, and perhaps that pleases  
The approaching gods. Begin the music, and the worries  
Almost vanish which would have affected our joy.  
Willingly or not, poets must often concern themselves  
With such things, but not with others.

## Celebration of Peace

*Please read these pages only if you're feeling kind. Then they won't seem unintelligible, and will certainly prove less offensive. But to those who find my language too unconventional, I confess I can't help it. On a beautiful day almost any kind of song can be listened to, and Nature, where it comes from, will receive it back. The author intends to lay before the public a whole collection of similar pieces, and this is just a sample.*

The holy, familiar hall, built long ago,  
Is aired, and filled with heavenly,  
Softly echoing, quietly modulating music.  
A cloud of joy sends fragrance  
Over the green carpets. Shining in the  
Distance, a splendid row of gold-wreathed  
Cups stands, well-ordered, full of ripe fruits.  
Tables stand at the sides, rising above  
The leveled ground. For now in the evening  
Loving guests have gathered, coming from far.

And with half-shut eye I think I can see  
The prince of the festival himself,  
Smiling from the day's earnest work.  
Though you like to deny your foreign origin,  
And even when you lower your eye, tired  
From the long crusade—forgotten, lightly shadowed—  
And you assume the appearance of an acquaintance,  
Still you're recognized by everyone; your superiority  
Alone almost forces one to his knees.

Being nothing in your presence, I know  
You are not mortal. A wise person can  
Explain a lot, but where a god appears,  
There is different clarity.

He isn't of the present, yet doesn't come unannounced;  
And one who feared neither flood nor flame  
Doesn't surprise us without a reason, now that all is quiet,  
And dominion is invisible among spirits and humans.  
That is, right now the work become audible,  
Long in preparation, from morning to evening,  
For the thunderer's echo, the thousand-year storm,  
Roars immeasurably down towards rest, resounding  
In the depths, while peaceful sounds rise above it.  
But you, days of innocence, become dear to us:  
Today you bring the festival, beloved ones!  
And the spirit flourishes in the evening stillness,  
And I must counsel you, friends, to prepare the wreaths  
And the food, since now we're like eternal youths,  
Even if our hair were silver grey.

There are many I should like to invite, but you,  
Who were devoted to mankind in a friendly, yet  
Earnest way — who liked to stay at the well  
Under Syrian palms, near the city... the fields  
Of grain rustled in the wind, the coolness drifted  
Down from the shaded holy mountain,  
And the loyal clouds, your friends,  
Cast their shadows around you,  
So that your holy, daring radiance shone gently  
Through the wilderness upon men, o Youth!  
But then a deadly fate enshadowed you  
More darkly, terribly and definitively  
In the middle of your words. Thus everything  
From heaven passes quickly, but not in vain.

For a god, knowing always the proper measure,  
Touches sparingly and just for a moment the homes  
Of men — unexpectedly, and no one knows when.  
But then something boisterous may pass,  
And wildness may come to the holy place from afar.  
Grasping about roughly, it touches upon madness,  
And fills some intention thereby.  
But gratitude doesn't follow the gift  
From the gods immediately:  
It has to be deeply studied first.  
For if the giver hadn't been cautious,  
From the blessing of the hearth both  
Floor and ceiling would have gone up in flames.

We've received much from the gods.  
Fire was handed to us, and the ocean's  
Flood and shore. Much more,  
For alien powers have become familiar  
To us in a human way. The stars  
Over your head can teach you things,  
Although you can't equal them.  
Yet of the all-living ones — from whom  
Issue much pleasure and song —  
One is a calmly powerful son.  
Knowing his father, we recognize him,  
Now that the high Spirit of the World  
Has descended to mankind  
To keep the holidays.

He had long become too great to be  
The Lord of Time, and his territory  
Extended far... when would it  
Have exhausted him? But a god  
May once choose mundane life also,  
Like mortals, and share their fate.

One law of fate requires that people  
Should know each other, so that when  
Silence returns, there will also be a language.  
Where the spirit is at work, we are present too,  
And talk about what is best. To me, the best  
Is when the picture is done, and the artist  
Finishes and steps transfigured from his workplace,  
The quiet God of Time, and only the reconciling  
Law of love extends from here to heaven.

Man has learned much since morning,  
For we are a conversation, and we can listen  
To one another. Soon we'll be song  
And the picture of time, which the great spirit unfolds,  
Lies as a sign before us, indicating that a covenant  
Between himself and others, himself and other powers  
exists.

Not he alone, but also the unconceived and eternal ones  
Are recognizable in the picture,  
Just as our mother, the earth, recognizes herself,  
And light and air, through the plant kingdom.  
But the all-gathering day of the festival  
Is the ultimate sign of love, the witness  
Of your existence, o holy powers.

The gods aren't revealed in miracles now,  
Nor do they remain unseen as during a storm;  
Now they are met together as guests,  
A holy number, holy in every way,  
And present in choruses of song.  
And the person they love most,  
Their favorite, is here.  
Thus I've summoned you to the banquet  
Now prepared, you, the unforgettable one,  
To the evening of time, o Youth,  
To be the Prince of the Festival.  
And our race will not sleep  
Until all the promised, immortal gods  
Are here in our halls  
To speak of their heaven.

Lightly breathing winds  
Proclaim your arrival;  
Valley mists announce you all,  
And the earth, still sounding from the storm.  
Hope colors the cheeks;  
Mother and child  
Sit before the house door,  
Looking upon the peace.  
Few seem to die:  
A premonition, sent from the golden light,  
Holds the soul back;  
A promise retains the eldest.

Now all labors,  
The seasoning of life,  
Are prepared and completed above.  
Everything pleases,  
Simple things the most.  
The long-awaited  
Golden fruit  
Has fallen from the ancient tree  
After terrible storms,  
But then is guarded, like a treasured possession,  
By holy Fate with gentle weapons:  
This has the shape of the gods.

Like a lioness, Mother,  
Nature, you lament,  
Since you lost your children.  
Your enemy, all-loving one,  
Has stolen them from you,  
Since you adopted him almost  
To be your own son, placing  
Gods in the company of satyrs.  
Thus you've created much  
And buried much,  
Because that which you brought  
To light too soon, all-powerful one,  
Now hates you.  
But this too you recognize and accept;  
For whatever arouses fear prefers  
To rest insensate below  
Until its time has come.

## Patmos

— *for the Earl of Homburg*

The god  
Is near, and hard to grasp.  
But where there is danger,  
A rescuing element grows as well.  
Eagles live in the darkness,  
And the sons of the Alps  
Cross over the abyss without fear  
On lightly-built bridges.  
Therefore, since the summits  
Of Time are heaped about,  
And dear friends live near,  
Growing weak on the separate mountains —  
Then give us calm waters;  
Give us wings, and loyal minds  
To cross over and return.

Thus I spoke, when faster  
Than I could imagine a spirit  
Led me forth from my own home  
To a place I thought I'd never go.  
The shaded forests and yearning  
Brooks of my native country  
Were glowing in the twilight.  
I couldn't recognize the lands  
I passed through, but then suddenly  
In fresh splendor, mysterious  
In the golden haze, quickly emerging  
In the steps of the sun,  
Fragrant with a thousand peaks,  
Asia rose before me.

Dazzled I searched for something  
Familiar, since the broad streets  
Were unknown to me: where the gold-bejeweled  
Patoklos comes rushing down from Tmolus,  
Where Taurus and Messogis stand,  
And the gardens are full of flowers,  
Like a quiet fire. Up above  
In the light the silver snow  
Thrives, and ivy grows from ancient  
Times on the inaccessible walls,  
Like a witness to immortal life,  
While the solemn god-built palaces  
Are borne by living columns  
Of cypress and laurel.

But around Asia's gates  
Unshaded sea-paths rush  
About the unpredictable sea,  
Though sailors know where  
The islands are. When I heard  
That one of these close by  
Was Patmos, I wanted very much  
To put in there, to enter  
The dark sea-cave. For unlike  
Cyprus, rich with springs,  
Or any of the others, Patmos  
Isn't splendidly situated,

But it's nevertheless hospitable  
In a more modest home. And if  
A stranger should come to her,  
Shipwrecked or homesick  
Or grieving for a departed friend,  
She'll gladly listen, and her  
Offspring as well, the voices  
In the hot grove, so that where sands blow

And heat cracks the tops of the fields,  
They hear him, these voices,  
And echo the man's grief.  
Thus she once looked after  
The prophet that was loved by God,  
Who in his holy youth

Had walked together inseparably  
With the Son of the Highest,  
Because the Storm-Bearer loved  
The simplicity of his disciple.  
Thus that attentive man observed  
The countenance of the god directly,  
There at the mystery of the wine,  
Where they sat together at the hour  
Of the banquet, when the Lord with  
His great spirit quietly foresaw his  
Own death, and forespoke it and also  
His final act of love, for he always  
Had words of kindness to speak,  
Even then in his prescience,  
To soften the raging of the world.  
For all is good. Then he died. Much  
Could be said about it. At the end  
His friends recognized how joyous  
He appeared, and how victorious.

And yet the men grieved, now that evening  
Had come, and were taken by surprise,  
Since they were full of great intentions,  
And loved living in the light,  
And didn't want to leave the countenance  
Of the Lord, which had become their home.  
It penetrated them like fire into hot iron,  
And the one they love walked beside them  
Like a shadow. Therefore he sent

The Spirit upon them, and the house  
Shook and God's thunder rolled  
Over their expectant heads, while  
They were gathered with heavy hearts,  
Like heroes under sentence of death,

When he again appeared to them  
At his departure. For now  
The majestic day of the sun  
Was extinguished, as he cast  
The shining scepter from himself,  
Suffering like a god, but knowing  
He would come again at the right time.  
It would have been wrong  
To cut off disloyally his work  
With humans, since now it pleased  
Him to live on in loving night,  
And keep his innocent eyes  
Fixed upon depths of wisdom.  
Living images flourish deep  
In the mountains as well,

Yet it is fearful how God randomly  
Scatters the living, and how very far.  
And how fearsome it was to leave  
The sight of dear friends and walk off  
Alone far over the mountains, where  
The divine spirit was twice  
Recognized, in unity.  
It hadn't been prophesied to them:  
In fact it seized them right by the hair  
Just at the moment when the fugitive  
God looked back, and they called out to him  
To stop, and they reached their hands to  
One another as if bound by a golden rope,  
And called it bad —

But when he dies — he whom beauty  
Loved most of all, so that a miracle  
Surrounded him, and he became  
Chosen by the gods—  
And when those who lived together  
Thereafter in his memory, became  
Perplexed and no longer understood  
One another; and when floods carry off  
The sand and willows and temples,  
And when the fame of the demi-god  
And his disciples is blown away  
And even the Highest turns aside his  
Countenance, so that nothing  
Immortal can be seen either  
In heaven or upon the green earth —  
What does all this mean?

It is the action of the winnower,  
When he shovels the wheat  
And casts it up into the clear air  
And swings it across the threshing floor.  
The chaff falls to his feet, but  
The grain emerges finally.  
It's not bad if some of it gets lost,  
Or if the sounds of his living speech  
Fade away. For the work  
Of the gods resembles our own:  
The Highest doesn't want it  
Accomplished all at once.  
As mineshafts yield iron,  
And Etna its glowing resins,  
Similarly I'd have sufficient richness  
To shape a picture of him and see  
What the Christ was like.

But if somebody spurred himself on  
Along the road and, speaking sadly,  
Fell upon me and surprised me, so that  
Like a servant I'd make an image of the god —  
Once I saw the lords  
Of heaven visibly angered, not  
That I wanted to become something different,  
But that I wanted to learn something more.  
The lords are kind, but while they reign  
They hate falsehood most, when humans become  
Inhuman. For not they, but undying Fate  
It is that rules, and their activity  
Spins itself out and quickly reaches an end.  
When the heavenly procession proceeds higher  
Then the joyful Son of the Highest  
Is called like the sun by the strong,

As a watchword, like a staff of song  
That points downwards,  
For nothing is ordinary.  
It awakens the dead,  
Who aren't yet corrupted.  
And many are waiting whose eyes are  
Still too shy to see the light directly.  
They wouldn't do well in the sharp  
Radiance: a golden bridle  
Holds back their courage.  
But when quiet radiance falls  
From the holy scripture, with  
The world forgotten and their eyes  
Wide open, then they may enjoy that grace,  
And study the light in stillness.

And if the gods love me,  
As I now believe,  
Then how much more  
Do they love yourself.

For I know that the will  
Of the eternal Father  
Concerns you greatly.  
Under a thundering sky  
His sign is silent.  
And there is one who stands  
Beneath it all his life.  
For Christ still lives.  
But the heroes, all his sons  
Have come, and the holy scriptures  
Concerning him,  
While earth's deeds clarify  
The lightning, like a footrace  
That can't be stopped.  
But he is there too,  
Aware of his own works  
From the very beginning.  
For far too long  
The honor of the gods  
Has been invisible.  
They practically have to  
Guide our fingers as we write,  
And with embarrassment the energy  
Is torn from our hearts.  
For every heavenly being  
Expects a sacrifice,  
And when this is neglected,  
Nothing good can come of it.  
Without awareness we've worshipped  
Our Mother the Earth, and the Light  
Of the Sun as well, but what our Father  
Who reigns over everything wants most  
Is that the established word be  
Carefully attended, and that  
Which endures be interpreted well.  
German song must accord with this.

## The Neckar

My heart awakened to life in your valleys,  
Your waves played around me.  
And all of the fair hills that know you,  
Wayfarer, are known to me as well.

On those peaks the winds from the sky  
Relieved me from pains of bondage,  
And silver-blue waves shone forth from the valley,  
Like the joy of life pouring out from a chalice.

Mountain springs hurried down to you,  
My heart with them, and you took us along  
To the quietly splendid Rhine, down  
To its cities and pleasant islands.

The world seems to me yet beautiful, and my eyes  
Search out with desire the charms of the earth,  
To golden Paktolos, to Smyrna's shores,  
To Ilion's woods. How I'd like to

Go ashore at Sunium, and ask for the silent road  
To your pillars, Olympia! Before age  
And storm winds bury you as well  
In the ruins of Athens' temples,

Along with the statues of its gods. For you  
Have long stood alone, pride of a world  
That no longer exists. And the beautiful  
Islands of Ionia, where sea air

Cools the hot shores and rushes through the woods  
Of laurel, when the sun warms the grapevines,  
And, oh, where golden autumn changes  
The sighs of the poor people into songs,

When the pomegranate ripens, when the orange trees  
Nod in a green night, and the gum trees drip  
Resin, and drums and cymbals resound  
To labyrinthine dances.

Perhaps someday my guardian deity will bring me  
To these islands, but even then my thoughts  
Would remain loyal to the Neckar  
With its lovely meadows and pastoral shores.

## Remembrance

The northeast blows,  
my favorite among winds,  
since it promises fiery spirit  
and a good voyage to mariners.  
But go now, and greet  
the lovely Garonne,  
and the gardens of Bordeaux,  
where the path runs  
beside the steep bank,  
and the brook runs into the deep stream,  
and a noble pair of oak and silver  
poplars look down from above.

I remember well  
how the crowns of the elm trees  
lean over the mill,  
and a fig tree grows in the courtyard.  
On holidays dark-skinned women  
walk upon the soft earth,  
and in March,  
when night and day are equal:  
cradling breezes waft  
across the gentle pathways,  
heavy with golden dreams.

But someone hand me  
the fragrant cup,  
full of dark light,  
that I may rest.  
It would be sweet  
to sleep among the shadows.

It isn't good  
to stay mindless  
with human thoughts.  
On the other hand, conversation  
is also good: to speak  
the thoughts of the heart,  
and to hear much of days of love,  
and of deeds that occur.

But where are our friends —  
Bellarmin and his companion?  
Many are afraid to go to the source,  
since treasure is first found in the sea.  
Like painters, they gather up earth's beauty,  
and they don't scorn winged war,  
or to live alone for years  
beneath the bare mast —  
where the city's festivities  
don't flash through the night, or  
the sound of strings and native dancing.

But now the men  
have left for India...  
from the windy peaks  
and vine-covered hills  
where the Dardogne  
comes down with the great  
Garonne; wide as an ocean  
the river flows outward.  
But the sea takes  
and gives memory,  
and love fixes the eye diligently,  
and poets establish  
that which endures.

# Mnemosyne

— *Third version*

The fruits are ripe, dipped in fire,  
Cooked and sampled on earth. And there's a law,  
That things crawl off in the manner of snakes,  
Prophetically, dreaming on the hills of heaven.  
And there is much that needs to be retained,  
Like a load of wood on the shoulders.  
But the pathways are dangerous.  
The captured elements and ancient laws of earth  
Run astray like horses. There is a constant yearning  
For all that is unconfined. But much needs  
To be retained. And loyalty is required.  
Yet we mustn't look forwards or backwards.  
We should let ourselves be cradled  
As if on a boat rocking on a lake.

But what about things that we love?  
We see sun shining on the ground, and the dry dust,  
And at home the forests deep with shadows,  
And smoke flowering from the rooftops,  
Peacefully, near the ancient crowning towers.  
These signs of daily life are good,  
Even when by contrast something divine  
Has injured the soul.  
For snow sparkles on an alpine meadow,  
Half-covered with green, signifying generosity  
Of spirit in all situations, like flowers in May —  
A wanderer walks up above on a high trail  
And speaks irritably to a friend about a cross  
He sees in the distance, set for someone  
Who died on the path... what does it mean?

My Achilles  
Died near a fig tree,  
And Ajax lies in the caves of the sea  
Near the streams of Skamandros —  
Great Ajax died abroad  
Following Salamis' inflexible customs,  
A rushing sound at his temples —  
But Patroclus died in the King's armor.  
Many others died as well.  
But Eleutherai, the city  
Of Mnemosyne, once stood upon  
Mount Kithaeron. Evening  
Loosened her hair, after the god  
Had removed his coat.  
For the gods are displeased  
If a person doesn't compose  
And spare himself.  
But one has to do it,  
And grief is soon gone.

## Out for a Walk

The margins of the forest are beautiful,  
as if painted onto the green slopes.  
I walk around, and sweet peace  
rewards me for the thorns  
in my heart, when the mind has grown  
dark, for right from the start  
art and thinking have cost it pain.  
There are lovely pictures in the valley,  
for example the gardens and trees,  
and the narrow footbridge, and the brook,  
hardly visible. How beautifully  
the landscape shines, cheerfully distant,  
like a splendid picture, where I come  
to visit when the weather is mild.  
A kindly divinity leads us on at first  
with blue, then prepares clouds,  
shaped like gray domes, with  
searing lightning and rolling thunder,  
then comes the loveliness of the fields,  
and beauty wells forth from  
the source of the primal image.

## Looking Out

The open day is bright with pictures for everyone,  
when green fields appear on the distant plain,  
before the light of evening yields to twilight,  
and reflections of light alleviate the noise of the day.  
The inner being of the world often appears clouded  
and hidden, and people's minds are full of doubts  
and irritation, but splendid nature cheers up their days,  
and doubt's dark questions stay distant.

With submission,  
Scardanelli

24 March, 1671

## For Zimmer

The lines of life are various,  
Like roads, and the borders of mountains.  
What we are here, a god can complete there,  
With harmonies, undying reward, and peace.

## About these translations...

In 1978 these translations appeared as a very small-press publication entitled **The Fire of the Gods Drives Us to Set Forth by Day and by Night**, published by Hoddypoll Press, San Francisco, California. These pages present a somewhat revised and expanded version of the original work.

Since Friedrich Hölderlin was one of the last visionary poets in European literature to have thematicized ecstatic religious experience, and also the loss thereof, convincingly, I have selected mostly those poems which seemed to me most representative of his visionary force at its greatest intensity, and which deal explicitly with man's relationship to the gods. Thus most of his best-known poems appear here. A somewhat more comprehensive selection of translations can be found in **Friedrich Hölderlin: Selected Poems**, translated by David Constantine, Bloodaxe Books, 1990 and 1996. Very useful also is **Hymns and Fragments by Friedrich Hölderlin**, translated and introduced by Richard Sieburth, Princeton University Press, 1984, which includes many fragments and drafts, as well the major hymns.

Given the circumstance that Hölderlin's poems have remained all but unknown in the United States, it seemed useful to provide translations that indicate what the poems mean, rather than to attempt a display of their rhyme, verse form, metric schemes and highly idiosyncratic syntax. Thus these translations were conceived in reaction to the only translations of Hölderlin originally available to me in 1978, namely **Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments**, by Michael Hamburger, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London: 1966, which was the basis for a subsequent Penguin paperback, and then another further Penguin edition in 1998. I felt then as now that Mr. Hamburger's valiant attempt to reproduce something of the original forms of the poems could only lead to a diminished comprehension of their factual meaning.

I suppose also that “literalness” — by which I mean economy, simplicity of expression, and common vocabulary — carries and sustains aesthetic value for me, whereas antiquated German verse forms and rhetoric, often imitative of Greek models, decidedly do not. So I have not restrained myself from occasionally changing apostrophic sentences into declarative ones, or from translating certain words and phrases from the standard vocabulary of Romantic sentimentalism, such as “soul” or “heavenly,” as “mind” or “of the gods,” where it seemed contextually appropriate.

The result is to some extent a modernization of the original text, and I hope that anyone who comes upon Hölderlin here for the first time will remember that he was a poet of considerable formal complexity, often attempting to Germanize Hellenic forms, and bound as well of course to the language and vocabulary of his times. That he could also break out of these forms and other contemporary poetic practices into amazingly modern modes of expression may not, I am afraid, be as well understood from my translations.

The texts for these translations are taken from the critical edition of Friedrich Beissner, **Friederich Hölderlin: Sämtliche Werke**, Stuttgart: 1943-1961.

I owe special thanks to two friends in Germany I have known since student days in Munich: Dr. Bernd W. Seiler, Professor of German Language and Literature at the University of Bielefeld, for his skillful assistance and encouragement, and Dr. Helmut Sies, Professor of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at the University of Düsseldorf, and President of the Academy of Arts and Sciences in North-Rhine Westphalia, for his no less constant and heartfelt support of this project.

I dedicate these pages to the memory of Kenneth Rexroth, a poet of San Francisco, whose translations of Chinese poems into ordinary English first showed me that older texts of poetry from quite foreign cultures and languages could be successfully realized in this way.

*“In the fine spring rain it is impossible to see very far,  
and the mist rising from the water has hidden the hills.”*

## Notes to the Poems

BREAD AND WINE – p. 7. Hölderlin's great masterwork was written in 1800-1801. It describes the situation of mankind after the departure of the gods. The seventh strophe is addressed to his friend, Wilhem Heinze, to whom the poem is dedicated. In the ninth strophe, "the Syrian" signifies Christ.

TO THE FATES – p. 16. First published in 1799. The poet's own descent to Hades took place five-six years later, from which of course he never emerged.

AS ON A HOLIDAY – p. 17. This fragmentary yet beautifully written poem shows the poet as a heroic seer and perhaps a shamanic intermediary, a kind of spiritual lightning rod placed between the worlds of higher beings and humans, an obviously dangerous, yet exalted occupation.

TO THE SUN GOD – p. 20. According to Greek legend, the Sun God Apollo stays during the dark hours with the Hyperboreans, a happy people resident at the end of the world who still honor him. The poem seems homoerotic, which would probably have pleased Apollo. That Hölderlin was not unclear on the concept is shown in his short poem below, which may or may not end with a bad pun:

### SOCRATES AND ALCIBIADES

“Why do you, holy Socrates, worship  
this beautiful youth instead of higher things?  
Why does your eye look lovingly upon him,  
as if he were a god?”

Who thinks deepest, loves what is most full of life.  
A person who looks into the world knows  
all about youth, and those who are wise  
often choose what is beautiful in the end.

HYPERION'S SONG OF DESTINY – p. 21. This poem appeared 1799 in the second volume of Hölderlin's novel, *Hyperion*. The third strophe is a good example of the visual shape of a poem matching its content: the stair-case effect demonstrates man's descent to the Unknown.

WHEN I WAS A BOY – p. 22. This poem was written in 1797-98.

HUMAN APPLAUSE – p. 23. If you're going to hang with the gods, just say no to capitalism and the military.

ONCE GODS WALKED... – p. 24. This fragment from an unfinished elegy combines two themes characteristic of Hölderlin: the spiritualized, golden-age Utopia he associates with the Greek gods, and his hopelessly over-idealized projection of spiritual competence onto a female acquaintance, often named Diotima, derived apparently from Socrates' speech in Plato's *Symposium*. In this case the real-life inspiratrix is Susette Gontard.

THE COURSE OF LIFE – p. 25. The fact that human progress is erratic is a determinant of human freedom. Which is not to say that our progress is erratic because we are free. The poem's imagery is taken from Heraclitus.

AT THE MIDDLE OF LIFE – p. 26. Written in 1803, not long before the onset of his insanity, and certainly his most famous poem. As in so many other of his poems, Hölderlin seems to foresee his own destruction.

HOMECOMING – p. 27. Written after Hölderlin's return from Switzerland in the spring of 1801, it describes his return to family and friends in Swabia after descending from the mountains and crossing Lake Constance by boat to Lindau. The Alpine mountain landscapes are transformed into stunning venues of mythmaking.

CELEBRATION OF PEACE – p. 33. Inspired by the Peace of Luneville, 1801. The Prince of the Festival is probably Christ, who is definitely referred to in the fourth strophe.

PATMOS – p. 39. Patmos is the island where St. John lived and wrote the Apocalypse. The poem was written before February 1803 and dedicated to the Landgraf von Homburg, the ruler of a small German state

near Frankfurt. The Landgraf was known as a Bible student, and is addressed in the second-last strophe. In the third strophe: Tmolus, Taurus and Messogis are mountains, and Pactolus (Paktolos) is a river famous in legend for its gold ore.

The poem views the Christian gospel with Hellenic eyes. The “mystery of the wine” links the Last Supper with Dionysus, and the written Gospels were created as a human response to the impossibility of merging with godhead, of being a god oneself. Thus the Evangelists are viewed as classical poets: they are the intermediaries and seers left to recount the deeds of the gods in texts that endure.

THE NECKAR – p. 46. Hölderlin’s Europe-consciousness was essentially bi-polar in nature, swinging like a pendulum between Germany and the Greece of his imagination, with occasional forays into the Alps along the way to witness the titanic forces of “Nature” at work. Germany meant for him primarily Swabia, roughly the modern state of Baden-Wuerttemberg, and of course the Neckar runs through it.

REMEMBRANCE – p. 48. May have been written in 1803, after Hölderlin’s return from Bordeaux. He chooses the name Bellarmin for that of any close friend, as in the novel *Hyperion*. Like the heroes of Greece, sailors set forth upon the ocean, leaving poets behind to recount their adventures.

MNEMOSYNE – p. 50. The poem demonstrates the semantic complexity often characteristic of Hölderlin’s late writing, and his ability to develop thoughts in a succession of metaphors and images. This process of metaphorical thinking in poetic narrative surfaced many decades later in the writing of Rainer Maria Rilke.

The question Hölderlin presents here is whether and how it is possible to retain historical memory of past events, exemplified by the deaths of the Greek heroes. Mnemosyne is the goddess of memory. She slept with Zeus and gave birth to the nine Muses, whose activities are also by nature historicizing.

Hesiod writes of Mnemosyne:

*Them [the Muses] in Pieria did Mnemosyne, who reigns over the hills of Eleuther, bear of union with the father, the son of Kronos [Zeus], a forgetting of ills and a rest from sorrow. For nine nights did wise Zeus lie with her, entering her holy bed remote from the immortals. And when a year was passed and the seasons came round as the months from sorrow. For nine nights did wise Zeus lie with her, entering her holy bed remote from the immortals. And when a year was passed and the seasons came round as the months waned, and many days were accomplished, she bare nine daughters, all of one mind, whose hearts are set upon song and their spirit free from care, a little way from the topmost peak of snowy Olympus. [Theogony 53-63.]*

*And again, he [Zeus] loved Mnemosyne with the beautiful hair: and of her the nine gold-crowned Muses were born. [Theogony 915-917.]*

Pindar also writes about Mnemosyne:

*If success crowns a man's venture, sweeter then than honey the libations he pours into the Mousai's [Muses'] stream. But lacking the songs to praise them, the mightiest feats of valour can but find a sorry grave a deep darkness. But for fine deeds a mirror to establish, one way alone we know if Mnamosyna's [Memory's] shining diadem will grant recompense for their labours, in the glory of music on the tongues of men. [Pindar Nemean 7 ant1.]*

In the poem's first strophe, the "fruits" are simply the deeds or events of history. Their memory disappears from us the same way that snakes crawl away into cracks in the floor, or between rocks. We need to remember things, but our memory is often faulty and can lead us astray like horses on crooked paths. Also there exists a tendency and a willingness to let things slide into oblivion. We should stay nestled in the present and not run away to the past or the future.

But what about the experiences of daily life, the common things we treasure, even after we make contact with something that transcends earthly life? It is like a cross planted in an alpine meadow, an act of generosity and a reminder, permitting wayfarers to speculate from a distance about what happened there.

The last strophe places us in the mythic environment of Greece. The heroes at Troy died in various ways, and we owe our knowledge of them to the circumstance that Zeus slept with Mnemosyne on Mt. Kithaeron—“loosening her hair” is a sexual metaphor in older literatures.

Thus historical memory itself is ordained by the gods. When friends or heroes die, we need to pull ourselves together and conquer sorrow by creating a record of what happened.

OUT FOR A WALK – p. 52, and LOOKING OUT – p. 53. During the long years of his insanity, Hölderlin was occasionally able to focus his attention long enough to write some presentable poetry, much of which resulted apparently from walks he was taken on through the countryside around Tübingen.

In some of these poems, Nature reveals itself in the form of pictures. As he walks outdoors, what he sees is not Nature itself, but rather images of Nature. If you visit the “Hölderlin Tower” on the bank of the Neckar River in Tübingen today, you can stand in the small apartment where he was kept for over 35 years, and it is not hard to imagine how looking out through the windows across the surrounding countryside might also have eventually seemed to him like looking at pictures hanging on the wall.

FOR ZIMMER – p. 54. Ernst Zimmer, a cabinet-maker with whom Hölderlin stayed during the period of his mental estrangement from 1807-1843. This short verse can serve as a final signature poem for Hölderlin’s life and writings.

## Persons and Places in Greek Mythology

**AETHER.** Radiant light, or fiery air. The upper stratum of bright air where the gods live. Aether generated life on earth.

**BACCHUS.** Dionysus, the god of wine, and of ecstasy.

**CADMUS.** Founded Thebes, a principal ancient Greek city.

**CERBERUS.** A dog which guarded the entrance to Hades, letting pass anyone who entered, but devouring anyone attempting to leave.

**CHAOS.** Means literally "gaping void." From Chaos arose Earth, Tartarus, Love, Darkness, and Night (Hesiod).

**CITHAERON, OR KITHAERON.** Mountain in ancient Greece, home of Mnemosyne.

**CORINTH.** Greek province.

**DELPHI.** Dedicated to Apollo, famed for its oracle.

**DEMI-GOD.** A minor deity, or a hero elevated to the status of a deity.

**ECHO.** A garrulous nymph. After a dismally unsuccessful love affair with Narcissus, she vanished, leaving behind only her voice, which is still heard in some places, reiterating words spoken by others.

**ELEUTHERAI.** A city on Mt. Cithaeron.

**ENDYMION.** A handsome young shepherd loved by Luna, the moon goddess. When Zeus found out, he offered him the choice of death or perpetual sleep combined with perpetual youth. Having opted for the latter, Endymion continues to sleep in his cave, visited occasionally by Luna.

**FATE.** The general scheme behind the world at large; the necessity which underlies all activities of gods and humans.

**HELIOS.** The sun moves daily across the sky in a chariot, bringing light to gods and humans.

HESPERIA. Italy.

HYPERION. He and Theia were Titans who produced the light-gods: Helios (the sun), Selene (Luna, the moon), and Eos (the dawn).

ILION. Ilium, or Troy.

IONIA. Ancient Greek name for the central part of the west coast of Asia Minor and the Aegean Islands.

ISMENOSA. River in Boeothia, near Thebes.

ISTHMUS. The isthmus of Corinth, a central Greek province, site of the Isthmian games.

LUNA. Selene, the moon goddess.

OLYMPUS. Mountainous residence of the Greek gods of the heavens; site of the Olympian games.

ORCUS. Hades, the Underworld.

PAKTOLOS. Pactolus, a river in Lydia.

PARNASSUS. Mountain in Greece, one peak of which was sacred to Apollo, the other to the Muses. Delphi is nearby.

SEMELE. She was the daughter of Cadmus. Zeus appeared to her in human format as her lover, and she subsequently gave birth to Bacchus. Hera (Zeus' wife) became jealous and deceitfully urged Semele to request Zeus to assume his divine appearance. He did so, and Semele was roasted to ashes.

SKAMANDROS. Skamander, a river in Troy.

SMYRNA. City in Western Turkey, now Izmir.

THEBE. A nymph, loved by Asopos, a Boethian river-god.

TITANS. Very ancient generation of Greek god-prototypes, the children of Uranos (Heaven) and Gaia (Earth).



**FRIEDRICH HÖLDERLIN** was born on March 20, 1770, in Lauffen on the Neckar, a village in the southwestern part of Germany, in an area called Swabia. After the death of his father, his mother remarried in 1774, and the family moved to Nürtingen. He attended Lutheran grammar schools and studied in the Theological Seminary in Tübingen from 1788 to 1793, where he became friends with fellow students Hegel and Schelling. After leaving Tübingen, Hölderlin worked as a tutor in various private homes in Germany and Switzerland. In 1802 he became a private tutor in Bordeaux, but returned to Swabia a few months later in a schizophrenic state. He improved to the extent that he could continue his literary activities intermittently until 1806. After treatment in a clinic in Tübingen he was given to the custody of a carpenter's family named Zimmer, with whom he remained 36 years until his death in 1843.

Most of Hölderlin's poetry was published in various German periodicals and almanacs, so to speak in the small press publications of his day. His novel **Hyperion** was published in two parts, in 1797 and 1799. He wrote three uncompleted versions of a drama relating the Empedocles legend, and published translations of Greek drama and poetry, with some critical essays. Gaining little popularity as a writer, he did not live to see an edition of his collected poems. His work passed into obscurity, until its gradual rediscovery in the early decades of the 20th century.

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