

## Five Hölderlin Translations

**Maxine Chernoff and Paul Hoover**

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*Editors' Note: We consider poet/philosopher Friedrich Hölderlin a patron saint of twentieth-century interdisciplinary transcription. Thus we welcome the release of Maxine Chernoff and Paul Hoover's Selected Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin (Omnidawn Publishing, 2008). We thank Maxine and Paul for providing excerpts from their introduction and from their new translations.*

Even though his poetry was not widely celebrated in his lifetime, and he suffered from mental illness for half of his life, Friedrich Hölderlin, 1770-1843, has come to be considered one of the great poets of European and world literature. Because of his complex syntax and themes, the proto-modernist fragmentation of his late works, and the influence of his thought, Hölderlin now outstrips Goethe and Schiller as the valued poet of his period. A profound influence on Rilke and Heidegger in his mystical concept of the Open (*das Offene*), as well as on Transcendental Idealism and Hegel's philosophy (Hegel was his roommate and Schelling a classmate at a Lutheran seminary), he is the subject of numerous studies including those by Benjamin, Derrida, Blanchot, Adorno, and Lacoue-Labarthe. A Hellenist who addressed the gods and was the first to grieve their departure, he is a major figure of Romanticism and contributed, well in advance of Nietzsche and Heidegger, to the development of Existentialism.

Hölderlin's poetry production includes early and late odes; elegies and hymns; drafts of hymns; the so-called "Last Poems" ("*Späteste Gedichte*"), written 1807-1843; a work of questionable origin, the prose poem "In Lovely Blue"; and other fragments presented by Friedrich Beissner, editor of the definitive Stuttgart Edition of *Sämtliche Werke*, 1951, as "*Pläne und Bruchstücke*" ("Plans and Fragments"). He also wrote a two-volume novel, *Hyperion*; versions of Sophocles, "The Death of Oedipus" and "Antigone," derided by literary society as greatly eccentric and perhaps evidence of insanity; the verse play "Empedocles on Aetna," and eccentric translations of Pindar that attempt to recreate his Greek measures, as well the strict word-for-word meaning. Hölderlin "praised Pindar's hymns as 'das Summum der Dichtkunst', for they contained, he said, the essences of all three genres—the epic, and the dramatic, as well as the lyric" (Constantine 237). Abraham Cowley, who had also controversially translated Pindar, was of the opinion: "If a man should undertake to translate Pindar word for word, it would be thought that one Mad-man had translated another" (Constantine 237). It is for the hymns and drafts of hymns that Hölderlin is most recognized. This is due in part to Richard Sieburth's eye-opening *Hymns and Fragments of Friedrich Hölderlin* (Princeton, 1984), which focused exclusively on those works. Like odes and elegies, the hymn is an extended lyric poem of elevated tone and subject matter, perfectly suited for Hölderlin as a poet of heroic vision. Seeking to trace the gods and their departure, he identified with the rivers of Germany, the Rhine, Danube (also

known as the Donau and Ister), Main, and Neckar; the landscape they so powerfully crossed including, especially, his native Swabia; Germany itself ("Germanien," "An die Deutschen," "Stuttgart"); and ancient Greece ("Griechenland," "Patmos," "Chiron," and "Ganymede"), which he idealized for its cultural genius. As can be seen in "Diotima" and "Bonaparte," the first two poems of this volume, Hölderlin also wrote short poems of great incisiveness, but their focus is also on the ultimate: "Poets are holy glass/ In which life's wine,/ The spirit of heroes, is kept" and "The beautiful sun of your days has gone down now/ And in a colder night, the winds quarrel and rage." The early ode, "Empedocles," ends: "Deep as any hero I'd plunge, too,/ If love didn't keep me here." Hölderlin's signal is always deep and strong; here it is prophetic of his own dissolution. The poet saw in the doomed philosopher what was possible in himself. In "The 'Sacred' Speech of Hölderlin," Blanchot comments, "The poet is the mediator; he connects the near to the far.... [E]ssentially, poetry relates to existence in its totality; wherever poetry asserts itself, existence, considered as the All, also begins to assert itself" (114-115). The domestic in Hölderlin is also the far-reaching.

#### References:

Constantine, David. *Hölderlin*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.

Blanchot, Maurice. "The 'Sacred' Speech of Hölderlin." *The Work of Fire*, translated by Charlotte Mandel. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1949; reprinted by Stanford UP, 1995.

**Evening Fantasy (*Abendphantasie*)**

Outside of his hut, the ploughman sits  
In the shade, his hearth comfortably smoking,  
The evening bells graciously welcome  
A wanderer into the peaceful village.

Now, too, the sailors make for the harbor  
In distant towns, the happy sounds of the markets  
Subside; and a pleasant meal awaits friends  
In the quietest part of the arbor.

But where shall I go? Doesn't a mortal live  
By work and reward; it's a joy to mingle  
Rest and toil; why then must I never find  
Relief from the thorn in my breast?

Spring blossoms up in the evening sky;  
Countless roses bloom, and the golden world  
Shines peacefully; O take me there,  
Purple clouds! Up there at last,

In the light and air, my love and sorrow will melt!—  
As if my foolish request had been answered,  
The spell breaks; it becomes dark and lonely,  
And, as always, I stand alone under the heavens.

Come now, soft slumber! The heart demands too much;  
Endless youth, please cease your glowing,  
You restless ones in dreams!  
In my old age, leave me peaceful and serene.

**The Main** (*Der Main*)

True, on this living earth there are many lands  
I'd like to see, and my heart runs away from me  
Often over the mountains, and my wishes wander  
Over the sea and to the shore, which more

Than the others, I know, has been much praised;  
But in the distance there is no other I could  
Love more than the one where the sons of God  
Are sleeping, melancholy land of the Greeks.

Ah! Just once I'd like to land on Sunium's coast  
And inquire about your columns,  
Olympion! There, before the North Wind  
Buries you in the Athenian temple

And buries also your images of God;  
For a long time you have stood empty, pride  
Of the gone world! – and O your beautiful  
Ionian islands, where breezes

From the sea spread coolness on warm shores,  
When the grapes ripen under the sun's strength,  
Where a golden autumn turns  
The sighing of the poor into songs,

When in distress their lemon grove  
And pomegranate are full of purple fruit  
And sweet wine, and kettledrum and zither  
Are drawn to the labyrinth-dances—

On you perhaps, islands, a homeless singer  
Might someday still prosper; for he has wandered  
From stranger to stranger, and the earth,  
The unbounded, it's sad to say, must serve

Instead of a fatherland his whole life long,  
And when he dies—but never will I forget you,  
As far as I wander, lovely Main! And  
The blessings of your shores.

Friendly to guests, yet proud, you took me up  
And brightened the stranger's eye,  
And taught me quiet, rhyming songs  
And how to live a consonant life.

O peacefully as the stars, you happy ones!  
You move from morning to evening,  
Toward your brother, the Rhine, and then  
With him joyfully down to the ocean.

**It's true every day I follow... (*Wohl geh' ich Täglich...*)**

It's true every day I follow a different path, now  
In green leaves of the forest, now to the spring,  
To the rocks where roses bloom,  
From the hilltop overlooking the land, yet nowhere,

Darling, can I find you in the light  
And in the air all my words disappear,  
So gentle and good, when with you I once...

Yes, you are far from me, saintly face!  
And now your life's harmony is lost  
To me, never to be heard, and O where are you,  
Magic songs, that once soothed

My heart with the peace of heaven.  
How long it has been, how long! The young man  
Has grown old, even the earth that once  
Smiled upon me has completely changed.

Farewell forever. Every day the soul departs  
From you and returns, and the eye  
Cries for you, so that it may gaze more clearly  
Into the distance where you stand hesitating.

**Go down, lovely sun... (*Geh unter, schöne Sonne...*)**

Go down, lovely sun, for how little

They thought of you, nor knew your worth, holy one,

For with ease you rose and traveled

Quietly over people restless in their pain.

To me, light, you rise and set like a friend!

And my eyes recognize you, Master!

For I learned a godly and noble silence

When Diótima healed my senses.

Heavenly messenger, how I listened to you!

You, Diótima, love! How I looked up

With glistening and thankful eyes

At the golden day you showed me.

Once more the streams rushed to life

And on me earth's dark blossoms

Breathed their scent and over the silver clouds

The Upper Air bowed down to bless me.

**Rousseau**

How narrow and confined is our daytime here.

You saw and were and were amazed, and soon it was evening;

Now sleep, where the years

Of the people drag endlessly by.

And some see beyond their own time;

In the open air, a god points their way, but, in yearning,

You stand at the water's edge, an outcast

From your people, and no longer love them.

And each that you name of the new generation,

Those promised to us, who with a friendly hand

Might warm you, drawing near you once,

Could you comprehend their lonesome words?

In the hall there's no response, poor man,

And like the unburied, you roam around,

Restlessly seeking rest, and no one knows

How to show you the right direction.

So be content! The tree outgrows

Its native ground, but his arms like branches

Will slip from around the lovely and youthful

And sadly he'll bow his head.

Life's overflow is the infinite,

Which gathers and glimmers around him—he'll never catch it.

Yet it lives in him, and, present, warming,

And fertile, the fruit contains its surfeit.



You've lived!                      yours too, yours too  
Is made happy by the light of a distant sun,  
The radiance of a better age. The messengers  
Who sought your heart have found it.

You've heard and understood the language of strangers;  
Interpreted their souls! For those who yearn,  
A hint is enough, and ever since the ancients,  
Hints are the words of the gods.

And wonderful, as in the very beginning,  
The mind of man has come to know  
Life's movement in genesis and fulfillment.

In the first sign he sees the final meaning,  
And flies, this bold spirit, as eagles do  
Ahead of thunderstorms, to warn  
Of the gods' approach.