

# 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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Title page silhouette of Hölderlin dates from around 1790.

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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.

Hölderlin's great masterwork from 1800-1801 describes the situation of mankind after the departure of the gods and identifies three main subjects in his writings: the disappearance of the gods worshipped in Antiquity, the role of Germany as a successor and inheritor of the cultural traditions of ancient Greece, and the mission of the poet in modern times now that the gods have left. The first poem begins in the present at close of business on a weekday evening. As in so many poems of the Romantic period, the splendid figure of Night appears and draws our attention skywards.

2.

Wunderbar ist die Gunst der Hoherhabnen und niemand  
Weiß, von wannen und was einem geschiehet von ihr.  
So bewegt sie die Welt und die hoffende Seele der Menschen,  
Selbst kein Weiser versteht, was sie bereitet, denn so  
Will es der oberste Gott, der sehr dich liebet, und darum  
Ist noch lieber, wie sie, dir der besonnene Tag.  
Aber zuweilen liebt auch klares Auge den Schatten  
Und versuchet zu Lust, eh es die Not ist, den Schlaf,  
Oder es blickt auch gern ein treuer Mann in die Nacht hin,  
Ja, es ziemet sich, ihr Kränze zu weihn und Gesang,  
Weil den Irrenden sie geheiligt ist und den Toten,  
Selber aber besteht, ewig, in freiestem Geist.  
Aber sie muß uns auch, dass in der zaudernden Weile,  
Dass im Finstern für uns einiges Haltbare sei,  
Uns die Vergessenheit und das Heiligtrunkene gönnen,  
Gönnen das strömende Wort, das, wie die Liebenden, sei,  
Schlummerlos, und vollern Pokal und kühneres Leben,  
Heilig Gedächtnis auch, wachend zu bleiben bei Nacht.

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 all 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.

Only the brave can look directly into the magical darkness of Night, which moves the world and minds of humans, excites poets to new speech, enlivens the past, and awakens us all to bolder life. As a meta-text: eighteenth-century rationalism yields to an exploration of the subconscious.

## 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.

The fact that human progress is erratic and doesn't follow a straight line is determined by human freedom. The poem's imagery is taken from Heraclitus, and it is amongst the most popular of Hölderlin's poems. Orcus refers to Hades, the Underworld.

## 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.

This moving and indeed most famous of Hölderlin's poems was published in 1805, shortly before the onset of his own mental destruction. In the first strophe a painterly vision of summer is interrupted by a blank line half-way through the poem. From the severing space emerges the lamenting subject, while the voiceless imagery in the first strophe turns acoustic in the second. As it turned out, the poem was written nearly halfway through his life.

## Patmos

*– for the Earl of Homburg*

The god  
Is near, and hard to grasp.  
But where there is danger,  
A rescuing agency 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 farthest mountains–  
Then give us clear 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 plaintive  
Brooks of my native country  
Were glowing in the twilight  
As I walked. I didn't recognize  
The terrain, but then suddenly  
In fresh splendor, mysterious  
In the golden haze, quickly arisen  
In the steps of the sun,  
Fragrant with a thousand peaks,

## 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 falls deep into the stream,  
And a noble pair of oak and silver  
Poplars look down from above.

I remember it 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.

Probably written in 1803 after Hölderlin's return from Bordeaux, the scene of this poem. He chooses the name Bellarmin for that of any close friend, as in his novel *Hyperion*. Sailors set forth upon the ocean like the heroes of Greece, leaving poets behind to select and recount their adventures, which grants them a kind of permanence. The relationship of poets to the creation of memory (remembrance) is the theme of the next poem in this collection, *Mnemosyne*.