Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin

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

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Ithuriel’s Spear

San Francisco
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.

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.
Wunderbar ist die Gunst der Hocherhabnen 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 geheiliget 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.
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.
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.