Hölderlin and the Consequences

An Essay on the German 'Poet of Poets'

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Rüdiger Görner
Queen Mary University of London Centre for Anglo-German
Cultural Relations
London
UK

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To friends from my time in Tübingen

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About the Author

Rüdiger Görner is Professor of German with Comparative Literature at Queen Mary University of London. He is also a writer and critic, Fellow of the German Academy for Language and Poetry and recipient of the Henning Kaufmann Award for German Language (2012) and the Reimar Lüst Award of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

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"Come! into the Open, Friend!" or: A Word of Introduction for the Anglophone Reader

The name "Friedrich Hölderlin" stands for—difference. In this essayistic study, various perspectives of this very difference will be examined in respect of its poetic and cultural resonances. After all, "Hölderlin" resonates with something unheard-of in the German language, and indeed European poetry around 1800, and it still resonates today. This poet's name has become a synonym for a poetic language constantly in the making. In his œuvre, verses of unparalleled beauty alternate with verbal and grammatical experiments that take the German language, and perhaps poetry as such, to its limit. When reciting this poetry—and this is how Hölderlin envisaged his works to be communicated—one requires a deep breath; for, often enough, it takes one's breath away in astonishment, for instance when realizing the adventurous nature of Hölderlin's syntax and power of verbal images. As we read it, this poetry keeps growing, as it responds, verse by verse, to what the ancient Greek

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conception of *πνεῦμα* entails—at once an organic unfolding of the spirit of nature, divine inspiration coupled with the realization of the potential of language.

This is one side of Hölderlin's poetic legacy. But there is another, and this study will consider both with equal measure. It is the learned poet, acutely aware of what was going on in his time—politically, socially, and intellectually. He observed himself and his own reactions to the fundamental changes that occurred around 1800 without being self-obsessed. To some extent, he found ways to transcend himself through poetry and engage with Antiquity and its curious pointers towards a future world. Hölderlin turned out to be a pre-Socratic poet in modern times, or a pre-modernist as you wish, someone who lived in perpetual anticipation of things to come, which he envisaged as poetic models for a better future.

Hölderlin was, and wanted to be, different in the sense that he saw quite clearly just how unusual, if not anachronistic, his approach to writing poetry and translating from ancient Greek was in his time. He wrote in praise of friendship knowing that loneliness was his lot. Love (for the banker's wife, Susette Gontard, who was also the mother of one of his private tutees,) was his tonic with ultimately poisonous effect. Liberty was the essence of what he took from witnessing the French Revolution from a distance, but confinement was to be his destiny. He yearned for stability but ended up as a perpetual "wanderer" between known and unknown territories. His poetic imagination knew no bounds and his language kept opening new spaces at the risk of breaking up its conventional meaning and means of communication.

He was a poet and took delight in ambiguity and the opaque. He gave expression to the rebellion of his soul and yet marvelled at the ideal of "moderation". His finest play is

the drama of his own life, second only to his translation of *Antigone* by Sophocles, arguably the most stunning rendering of a theatrical text from Greek antiquity in German to date.

Hölderlin's hymns and elegies, odes and poetic fragments, constitute a verbal treasure of unprecedented poetic skill and inspiration, but he also wrote one of the finest novels about a political idealist, whom he called Hyperion, whose (Greek) utopia is left in tatters by the end of this narrative in letter-form.

It is tempting to read at least some of Hölderlin's works biographically; for instance his poem *Half of Life* (*Hälfte des Lebens*) is so widely known partly because it seems to contain a self-fulfilling poetic prophecy, for Hölderlin's own life was cut almost exactly in half. He was 73-years old when he died in 1843, thirty-seven years of which he spent in a perpetual state of delusion or "insanity". "Half of Life" with its two strophes, seven lines each, offers what Hölderlin mastered so well: a chillingly beautiful composition, utterly self-contained, the epitome of an entirely balanced "harmonious dissonance" if ever there was one in the German language.

Even though "England" does not feature prominently in Hölderlin's works there is an impressive line-up of English-language poets who engaged with them in the form of translations and adaptations, ranging from Michel Hamburger to Christopher Middleton, David Gascoyne to David Constantine and India Russell. In fact, Hölderlin's own knowledge of English literature was limited. He engaged intensively with Edward Young's *The Complaint: or Night Thoughts* (1742), which influenced his conception of "Nachtgesänge" (Songs of the Night, 1803), most likely in a German version published in 1789. Likewise, he consulted Richard Chandler's *Travels in Asia Minor and Greece;*

or An Account of a Tour, Made at the Expense of the Society of Dilettanti (Oxford 1775/78), again in German translation (Leipzig 1776/77), as a main source for his novel *Hyperion*. Through his familiarity with Klopstock, Hölderlin may have had some knowledge of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. But he was certainly no "Shakespearian" and, in this respect too, was significantly different from most of his literary contemporaries who unreservedly indulged in "Shakesperomania". In his drafts the name "Shakespeare" is only mentioned once but unrelated and of no consequence. The other name on this sheet of paper is "Columbus". Yet, there is no basis for arguing that Hölderlin regarded Shakespeare as the Columbus of the mind, poetry, or drama. But then there is a puzzling reference to "things English" in a most unlikely context, namely his first, though late (1804/05), attempt at writing a hymn on Greece. The passage reads in German: "Gärten wachsen um Windsor. Hoch/Ziehet, aus London,/ Der Wagen des Königs./Schöne Gärten sparen die Jahrzeit./ Am Canal. Tief aber liegt/Das ebene Weltmeer, glühend." ("Gardens are growing around Windsor./The King's carriage passes by from London./Beautiful gardens are saving the season./At the Channel. Deep down lies/The levelled sea of the world, glowingly."). One plausible connection could be that Hölderlin remembered an event that occurred seven years earlier: The heir to the throne of the Dukedom (later, by Napoleon's grace, Kingdom) of Württemberg, Prince Friedrich Wilhelm Karl, got married in London in May 1797 to one of the daughters of King George III, Charlotte Auguste Mathilde; the ensuing celebrations took place at Windsor Castle. For the "subjects" in the relatively small principality of Württemberg, reports about this union between their future ruler and an English-Hanoverian princess would have been a memorable occasion and subject for smalltalk, even though at the time (18 May 1797) our poet

from Württemberg, Friedrich Hölderlin, lived "abroad" in Frankfurt/Main as a tutor with the Gontard family and the city was threatened to be overrun by French troops. But would the then rebellious and anti-royal Hölderlin really have bothered about these festivities in London and Windsor given these precarious circumstances? And what about the years 1804/05 when he drafted this hymn, arguably alluding to this event? In December 1804, his friend, Isaak von Sinclair, took part as an official representative of the principality of Homburg, where Hölderlin was by now—pro forma—employed as a Court Librarian, at the coronation of Napoleon in Paris. Only two months later, Sinclair had to stand trial for an attempted plot against the sovereign of Württemberg with traumatic consequences for Hölderlin, who was too close for comfort to the accused conspirators. In this situation he comes up with this surprising reference to "Windsor" as if he had wanted to distract himself from these harsh realities. For once, vision and a vague memory blended together in his typically idealized image of Greece and the dream of the bucolic scenario around Windsor.

This example illustrates just how intrinsic allusions in Hölderlin's poetry can be. In all that testifies to the sheer power of his creative imagination in his highly inspired œuvre there was little that happened by accident. I agree with Charlie Louth when he argues that "most of Hölderlin's poems are concerned with the nature and possibility of transition. Through the complexity of their syntax, the intricate jointing of their rhythms, and their abrupt shifts between images, we are trained in the dynamics of moving through uncertainty, and given experiences of how it can resolve itself into coherence." Indeed, these verbal movements and rhythmic dynamics constitute an almost irresistible momentum; it is both uplifting and suggestive, daring

and far-reaching, right into present-day where a renewed belief in the value of words is so much needed. It was therefore not frivolous when a group of young aspiring poets and writers celebrated this poet with a volume full of verbal experiments under the alluring title *Hölderlinks*. For this poet, who shared the year of his birth with Beethoven, Hegel and Wordsworth, with all his aspirations, frustrations and astonishing accomplishments, is truly alive today. Goethe's sibyl, Manto, in the Second Part of his drama *Faust*, could have said to Hölderlin, had she known him better, what she said to the ever-striving protagonist on his way to Greece: "I love those who yearn for the impossible."

This English version of my essay on Hölderlin and his aftermath also represents an essay in translation practices. In the age of *Hölderlinks* it seems not out of place to apply the most advanced digital language techniques to an experiment with translation. Highly sophisticated software programmes facilitated the production of this English version of my examination of Hölderlin, first published in German in 2016. It was in itself the result of a preoccupation with this poet since my student days in Tübingen back in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As it happened, I took "him" with me when I, still a student, came to England in 1981 and soon encountered the very *homme de lettres* who did so much for the comprehensive introduction of Hölderlin's works through his highly accomplished translations, Michael Hamburger. But before meeting him I found myself in extensive conversations with H.G. Adler, a former émigré, survivor of exterminations camps and later their most profound analyst, an eminent writer and poet, who made it plain to me that, in order to understand Hölderlin more fully, I would have to study the works of Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock. Adler, who had earned his doctorate in the pre-war years from the University of Prague with a

thesis on the rhythmical structures and "music" in Klopstock's poetry, turned out to be the ideal *poetic* mentor for this different approach to a poet with whom I believed myself to have been "familiar" already, following my rigorous Hölderlin studies in Tübingen under the direction of the eminent philologist and editor of Hölderlin's works, Jochen Schmidt.

All three would have been aghast at the sheer thought of allowing a "machine" to facilitate translation of this kind. I myself was initially reluctant to consider a proposal made by my reader at Metzler Verlag (Stuttgart), Oliver Schütze, who informed me about this new arrangement with the Nature Publishing Group, including Palgrave Macmillan. But coincidence had it that I had just completed a study on *Bildung im digitalen Zeitalter* (*Education and Cultural Formation in the Digital Age*), very much under the impression of the Corona pandemic, in which I argued in favour of a measured and responsible utilization of virtual environments in educational contexts. This meant that I was somehow prepared for agreeing to subject *Hölderlin und die Folgen* to this experiment with artificial intelligence.

Moreover, it occurred to me that, on reflection, the notion of a somewhat artificial intelligence had begun to germinate in Hölderlin's time already. From the French Materialists of the late eighteenth century to E.T.A. Hoffmann's story about an "automaton" (1814), let alone Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, eminent writers had suggested the idea of creating simulations of individuals on the basis of a paradox, "organic artificiality". The over-arching question and concern come back to us today with a vengeance and sharply intensified urgency: Is therefore the digital world, with its full implementation and activation of artificial intelligence, the new form of

"materialism"? Or is it an expression of a continuing hybridization of artificial and human inputs?

But back to the admittedly smaller, but nonetheless exemplary, case of our book: Even though, initially, *Hölderlin and the Consequences* was to appear under the label book "auto-translation"—the necessary editorial processes made it a blending of artificial intelligence, a human sense of style and human knowledge of contexts—a potent hybrid indeed. Going through what AI provided me with was an experience of a truly special kind. In some cases, the solution found by AI for highly complex phrases was staggeringly ingenious, if this the right word to use in this context, whilst there were (frequent and, dare I say, predictable) instances of complete "misunderstandings" and misconceptions, if there is such a thing as "cognitive comprehension" in the world of digital impulses.

In terms of content, this English version includes references to material that was not available to me back in 2015/16. Most notably, this refers to a poem by the Austrian Expressionist poet, Georg Trakl on Hölderlin, which only came to light in 2016. I offer it in my translation with permission by Hans Weichselbaum of the Trakl Centre in Salzburg. My main thanks go to the copy editor Aishwarya Iyer and project manager Nikita Dhiwar at Springer's for their consideration and patience, and to Oliver Schütze (Metzler Publishers) for his initiative in the first place.

Attuning Recollection

I distinctly remember an evening in May 1991 after closing time on the Zeil, the main shopping mall, in Frankfurt. According to the poster, a puppeteer coming from Jena stows his puppets in a travel bag and counts his coins. Drunken people surround a bronze sculpture; meanwhile young people with or without tattoos and mohawks jeer on their roller skates.

Then the Katharinenkirche opens its doors. Not far from here, the Gontards lived in the Palais *Weißer Hirsch* am Großen Hirschgraben, where Hölderlin held his second tutor position, at a time when Goethe's mother still lived in the neighbourhood, as did the poetess Karoline von Günderrode and, for a time, Hegel. A queue quickly forms in front of the box office at the church portal. One of the visitors asks whether there is a reduced entrance fee for dropouts; those standing in line acknowledge this with a tired laugh.

In the Katharinenkirche, which has been cleared out except for a few rows of benches at the sides, plastic sheeting

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covers the floor, steps, altar and organ. Chorus ladies appear behind the altar. In the middle of the church, an actor taking the part of Friedrich Hölderlin's protagonist Hyperion crouches and tells of his youth, his upbringing as an idealist, his love and how it was transformed into an insatiable longing for the unattainable. The chorus ladies, half Muses, half Erynnia, comment on Hyperion's life and failure.

Some glowing evening light falls through the colourful church windows, enhanced by the mirrored glass of the bank skyscrapers all around. One hears a dreamily sounding bell, as if it vaguely remembers the passing time.

Hyperion plays his youth, Diotima her own, wrapped in plastic foil. They thus appear clothed and exposed at the same time, strong and vulnerable. The sacred space is transformed into a place of sacrifice, that is to say, love and (political) ideal, hope and faith are to form a new religion. What remains is the feeling of futility and irritation. "This is how I came to be among the Germans" ("So kam ich unter die Deutschen"), Hyperion argues, played in Frankfurt by a Turk named Ömer. He says what is not in the text, but could be: "WE ALWAYS HAVE ONE FOOT IN THE DOOR."

Then he calls *Diotima* several times, although she is standing next to him. They try to hug, reach into the void, and in doing so move further and further apart. *Diotima*. The lover turned into a pseudonym. Of course, she was not allowed to be called by her real name *Susette Gontard* in the novel. And Hölderlin could only be Hyperion. But just how much trouble had Hölderlin gone to in order to separate Diotima from Susette and Hyperion from himself, I wonder. Could the work on the novel cancel out his desire or did it increase it? And what did she, Susette, feel when reading *Hyperion?* We do not know, and will never know the decisive thing. *To whom else but you*—has there ever