

Friedrich Hölderlin: Poets as Philosophers

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Abstract

Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) was a German poet-philosopher who is viewed by scholars as a writer who naturalized the forms of classical Greek verse in German and in melding Christian and classical themes. Nietzsche is supposed to have been influenced by Hölderlin. Martin Heidegger interpreted Hölderlin's poem "Ister" from a philosophical perspective and delivered important lectures and takes Hölderlin's poems as illustrations to interpret his philosophical discourses. This paper aims at studying the predominant themes of the poems of Hölderlin that view the world from the position of a European scholar of the eighteenth century who understands the limitations of time and space and emphasizes on the fluidity of life.

Keywords: Hölderlin, Poets, Philosophers, Nietzsche, Heidegger

Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) was one of the greatest poets of Germany. Schelling and Hegel acknowledged him as their equal. Hölderlin's philosophical fragments were first published in 1961. Many scholars are now studying his influence on German idealism. He is also considered to be a major influence on Hegel. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) referred to him as the "glorious Hölderlin." Themes from Hölderlin are found abundantly in Nietzsche's works. Another philosopher who was highly influenced was Wilhelm Dilthey (Forster in his "Foreword" 1-3.) We have to remember that the English poet Wordsworth was also born in 1770. Therefore, it is possible to interpret the poems of Hölderlin as an eighteenth century philosopher-poet who might have witnessed the fruits of Renaissance, French Revolution, and German academia's Oriental Studies.

Hölderlin is supposed to have naturalized the forms of classical Greek verse in German and in melding Christian and classical themes. He gained little recognition during his lifetime and was almost totally forgotten for nearly 100 years. In the early years of the 20th century he was rediscovered in Germany and his reputation as one of the outstanding lyric poets in the German language has been established in Europe. Today he is ranked among the greatest of

German poets and admired for his expressive style. He spoke about “the return of the gods.” (Witte)

Heidegger celebrated Hölderlin as a prophetic poet and developed philosophical discourses from the poems of Hölderlin. In the essay “What Calls for Thinking?” Heidegger says, “We must learn thinking” (381) and takes Hölderlin’s draft for the poem “Mnemosyne” for analysis and quotes: “We are a sign that is not read / We feel no pain, we almost have / Lost our tongue in foreign lands.” That is, Heidegger says, “We are an uninterpreted sign” and remain “uncomprehended,” and “on our way toward thinking, we hear a word of poesy. But the question to what end with what right, upon what ground and within what limits, our attempt to think allows itself to get involved in a dialogue with poesy, let alone the poetry of this poet” can be taken up after an analysis of the concept of thinking (Heidegger 382).

Every human being becomes a sign system with a particular meaning and this meaning will be lost in a strange land, as in those places these signs may be interpreted differently, Hölderlin says in his draft for the poem “Mnemosyne.” If we extend the meaning of these lines, they will mean that a human being has to locate himself and understand himself and remember that he is a product of his period, location or history.

In another essay “The Way to Language” Heidegger quotes lines from another poem by Hölderlin “The Celebration of Peace:” “Much, from morning onward / Since we became a conversation and hear from one another / Have human beings undergone; but soon (we) will be song” (Heidegger 424). Human experiences will become stories and songs, and will become conversations that will be written down as systems of thought. Live occurrences will become texts later.

Hölderlin’s poem “The Journey” is used as an end note in Heidegger’s essay “The Origin of the Work of Art.” Heidegger launches his definition of the content of art. He says, “Art, as founding, is essentially historical,” and further develops the idea and declares “Art lets truth originate” (Heidegger 202). Truth, as perceived by the later generations, is created by art.

It is here Hölderlin’s line from the poem “The Journey” is brought in: “that which dwells near its origin abandons the site.” The question is, whether “art can be an origin,” and then “forward” its idea to be “carried along as a routine cultural phenomenon” (Heidegger 203). Art begins in a certain time and space and keeps travelling, and finally it becomes difficult to trace its origin.

Hölderlin, as a German scholar from theological seminary with Greek scholarship and Protestant spirituality, became a tutor, and as an academic, remembers the past civilizations,

recollects their contents, and moralizes on the experiences and attempts to liberate the self from being attached to any singular identity or self, and constructs an ethics as a poet.

European scholars refer to Hölderlin as a poet who revived Greek poetic forms –“the Horatian ode, the elegy, and the Pindaric ode—in German literature and to fuse his love for his native land with the longing for ancient Greece” (*Britannica*).

Hölderlin’s poems can be viewed as artistic-philosophic works born out of eighteenth century scholarship – in a Heideggerian perspective that art is born in a particular history and can further influence society. “People’s historical existence is art,” says Heidegger. The location of art is a reflection and it is indispensable for the birth of art. Heidegger puts across a few important questions: “Are we in our existence historically at the origin? Do we know, which means, do we give heed to, the essence of the origin? Or, in our relation to art, do we still merely make appeal to a cultivated acquaintance with the past?” (Heidegger 203) How do we relate to our past?

How do we realize our origin? How did systems and institutions begin? Does the acquaintance with past culture guarantee that we understand its beginning? These are the same questions Hölderlin too poses in his poems.

The poem “Ages of Life” by Hölderlin approaches life as a phenomenon that contains various ages or civilizations with gods and stories, and negotiates between the past of Asia and the present Germany, recollecting and re-understanding the past and constructing a present of morality shaped by the past. The poem follows:

Euphrates' cities and
Palmyra's streets and you
Forests of columns in the level desert
What are you now?
Your crowns, because
You crossed the boundary
Of breath,
Were taken off
In Heaven's smoke and flame;
But I sit under clouds (each one
Of which has peace) among
The ordered oaks, upon
The deer's heath, and strange
And dead the ghosts of the blessed ones

Appear to me. (Poemhunter.com)

The poem is reflective about a past age that has gone out of human memory: the reference is to Tigris-Euphrates river system of southwestern Asia that runs through the heart of the Middle East. The lower portion of the region or Mesopotamia means “Land between the Rivers” - one of the cradles of civilization. Tigris-Euphrates river system of southwestern Asia comprises the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which follow parallel courses through the Middle East. The lower portion of the region is known as Mesopotamia in Greek which meant “Land between the Rivers.” The two rivers have their sources in Turkey and travel through Syria and Iraq to the Persian Gulf (Owen et al).

Hölderlin analyses how the cities built on both the sides of the great river Euphrates and the fertile lands around them have disappeared from mainstream and is thinking now that there are moral lessons to be learnt from them.

The poet transcends reality and becomes metaphysical and ruminates: “But I sit” ... among / The ordered oaks.” The smoke of the past is contrasted with peace of the present. Each cloud becomes a symbol of peace and this peace is lived amidst oak trees that are planted in a regular and systematic manner. The tall oak trees might look as if they are closer to the clouds. And this brings yet another contrast – the past is unordered while the present is ordered and symmetrical. The geopolitical meaning locates the poem in the eighteenth century European oriental studies.

Oriental Studies was established in Germany in 1728 in the University of Leipzig. Professors August Schlegel and Friedrich Schlegel were the leading German orientalisists. In 1821 Franz Bopp became a Professor of Sanskrit and Comparative Linguistics (Choudary).

In ancient Greece oak was venerated. The Christianized Europe preferred the palm tree and Christianity considered Greek sacred trees as profane. As a symbol it was re-discovered during the renaissance. Petrarch celebrated it. It was used as a symbol by poets like Gottfried August Burger (1747-94), Matthias Caludius (1740-1815) and Christian Friedrich Schubert (1739-91). The oak wreath came to be regarded as a political statement in the German empire (Kampmann). Hölderlin locates himself in a land of oaks and recollects the past as historic research has taught him. “The ordered oaks” become the symbol of Eighteenth century Prussia.

In 1720 Prussian government ordered the forest department to plant oaks. Explicit rules were given for growing and transplanting – following the Manteuffel method of planting in mounds (Fernow). Hölderlin is responding to Mesopotamia from this position of time – a German perspective, where forestry had become a science.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 20:4 April 2020

Dr. S. Sridevi

Friedrich Hölderlin: Poets as Philosophers

Lowood studies the system of scientific forestry in the eighteenth century Prussia. Private forestry schools, books and journals flourished in Prussia during 1760s. Officials were trained in the new cameral science, the science of forestry. Forests began to be defined precisely and studied objectively (318). Books demonstrated how forests should be designed mathematically (322). Officials decided the number of trees to be planted (323).

Even today Germany has private forest owners just as most of the European countries. 49.6 percent of European forest is privately owned. More than 80 percent of private forest in Europe is held by individuals or families, followed by private institutions and forest industries. (Hirsch et al 23).

Hence, it is possible to interpret “ordered oaks” as a symbol of Prussian or European way of life that is presented as systematic that it even brings order and symmetry into forests. Living in such an ordered society that looked at natural forests from a scientific and systematic point of view, one might forget the past civilizations and they may go out of memory, and Hölderlin is calling out for the Asian cities that have gone out of mankind’s mind and have stopping influencing people. World’s earliest system of codes in the ancient Babylon and its conquering of the Jews and its domination are remembered by Hölderlin. “What are you now?” – The poet is asking as he moralizes that their crowns were removed by heavens as they enslaved Jews. Heaven has taken them of in smoke and flame as a kind of punishment for their behavior. These lines carry European and Christian thought and the meaning of European superiority as a land of order pitted against the other different civilizations of the Orient.

Hölderlin reminisces about the loss of Eastern religiosity which resonates with the demand to reconnect with German culture, presented with ideas of a “mystical and mysterious Orient” (Twist 40).

In the wealthy and mighty Babylon enriched with the waters of Euphrates 3,770 years ago, King Hammurabi developed laws, “erected massive walls, built opulent temples and united all of Mesopotamia, the land between the rivers,” and later “Nebuchadnezzar II conquered Jerusalem in 597 B.C. and marched the Jews into captivity which is recorded in the Holy Bible’s 137th Psalm as “By the rivers of Babylon / There we sat down and wept / When we remembered Zion.” Nebuchadnezzar built the famous Hanging Gardens - “tiered, lavishly watered terraces regarded as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World” and the Greek historian Herodotus wrote that Babylon was a magnificent city (Hammer).

“It is generally accepted that biblical tales such as the Fall of Man and the Flood of Noah” originated in Mesopotamian lore, as they first appear in Mesopotamian works such as *The Myth of Adapa* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*,” perceived as the oldest written stories in the world.

“The Mesopotamians believed that they were co-workers with the gods and that the land was infused with spirits” (Mark).

Mesopotamians believed that the beginning of the world was a triumph of the gods who won over disorder, and rites worshipping divine beings, conducting correct memorial services to the dead people and other important social works would bring a balance in regular life. Respecting and worshipping elders and paying proper respects to them during and after life were an important part of their culture. The people believed that the gods were in attendance always and hence “in the planning and execution of any building project” very specific prayers were “recited in a set order” to deities which were “considered of utmost importance in the success of the project and the prosperity of the occupants of the home” (Mark).

Hölderlin is perhaps referring to these gods and spirits of Mesopotamia as “strange and dead the ghosts of the blessed ones.” Hölderlin is remembering all these historical facts and he understands the ages of the earth and its various cycles of life and analyses how one cycle is born, lives for a period and is forgotten slowly.

With the blooming of Enlightenment philosophies in the eighteenth century came the first inland explorations and multi-disciplinary scientific expeditions. The first of these to reach Mesopotamia was the Danish expedition of 1761-1767, to which Carsten Niebuhr was connected as mathematician, though the organized study of the Near East through expeditions is often symbolically benchmarked by the large-scale Egyptian expedition of Napoleon at the close of the century. During this period, a negative view of the ancient civilizations that once resided in this region and that had featured so negatively in the Old Testament slowly began to give way to an appreciation of their potential accomplishments. (Ooghe 52)

Kalmar says that Hegel and Hölderlin turned to the Orient with an agenda – to “reinvent Protestant Christianity in the face of the challenge posed to it by the discovery of oriental scriptures” as showed by the scholar Emily Shaffer. They constructed the Germanic world (Kalmar 80-81). The construction of the civilized Europe in art seems to be one of the meanings of this poem.

But the poem crosses the limitations of geopolitics with the last lines: “the ghosts of the blessed ones /Appear to me.” Hölderlin is able to see the blessed gods of Asia in his mind’s eye. To him the eastern gods are blessed. He approves their godliness. Also he seems to sanctify these Mesopotamian elders and gods, implying that instead of a god, multiple gods too may have a possibility of sanctity. We are reminded of Zarathustra who appears later and says: “Greater

ones, verily, have there been, and higher-born ones, than those whom the people call Saviours, those rapturous blusterers!” (Nietzsche 86)

This vein of thought is found in another poem by Hölderlin: “As on a Holiday:”

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. (Poemhunter.com)

Nature has to be the guiding spirit for poets. It has the power of god and is divine. The holiness in nature is in the poet too. Nature is “mighty and beautiful in its divinity” and the poet declares: “my words bespeak holiness.” It is superior to anything constructed by ideologies of mankind.

Nature is older than the concept of time or calendar systems as created by civilizations. Poets have visions: “the aspect of poets is also mournful. / They seem to be alone, but their foreknowledge continues.” Like nature and its varied seasons, poets have quiet periods when their visionary qualities become prominent. They have to think deeper and go beyond any thinking processes. Poets have to rise above any type of ideologies tying them down to a particular culture, religion born out of a particular region and history. Hence, their words “bespeak holiness.”

We can hear Zarathustra saying something similar:

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 20:4 April 2020

Dr. S. Sridevi

Friedrich Hölderlin: Poets as Philosophers

Remain true to the earth, my brethren, with the power of your virtue! Let your bestowing love and your knowledge be devoted to be the meaning of the earth!... Not only the rationality of millenniums – also their madness breaketh out in us. Dangerous is it to be an heir...A thousand paths are there which have never been trodden, a thousand salubrities and hidden islands of life. (Nietzsche 69)

Hölderlin, and later Nietzsche are suggesting that intellectuals have to invent new ways of thinking and not be caught in earlier traditions. When we inherit values and patterns of thought from earlier socio-religious institutions and ideologies, we also would be inheriting certain adverse elements. It is not idyllic to be a mere follower of the Establishment. Poets have to be loyal to nature or earth and approach life in a fresh manner with new insights. They have to understand the meaning of life without being influenced by preconceived ideologies. Nature is “standing above the gods of the Occident and Orient,” and still has lessons to teach young minds that are ready to learn from her. Earth creates gods of many types, and poets have to learn to disassociate from one particular religious, social and political dogma.

For example, we can take the description of Thucydides of the origin of Greece. His book became a classic, and the later historians just continued writing about Greece from where he left. Thucydides’ definitions are now frozen and are accepted as correct. Till the twentieth century, his historical descriptions were accepted as objective. From the perspective of Hölderlin, we can read the prejudices in the writings of Thucydides as he presents Asians as barbarians and rich. Thucydides says that Homer did not use the word “barbarian” (4); barbarians in Asia practiced wrestling not properly dressed (5); Pelops brought vast wealth from Asia (6); Persians, the barbarians, brought huge armament to subjugate Greece (10); a joint effort drove away the barbarians (11).

A poet cannot think like a historian projecting his country, Hölderlin might suggest. As a thinker, a poet has to rise above subjective thoughts that arise from geopolitical location of oneself. Thus, a poet belongs to the universe, and not to one country with its special customs, languages and religion. He has to be true to earth – the period before the birth of religions and even culture or nations.

Hölderlin’s poem “As On A Holiday” continues:

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. (Poemhunter.com)

Nature kindles fire in the minds of the intellectual poet – Hölderlin’s poet has to be an intellectual or scholar, as a poet is given the responsibility to go beyond contemporary institutions and re-understand life. “Fire is kindled again in the minds / Of poets, by the signs and deeds of the world,” and not by written books or codes. A poet has to study the deeds of the world, its activities and its other signs, instead of merely following written myths, and other scripts. He is a liberated being, a philosopher who has the power to see beyond things. Nietzsche captures this quest and says:

I became weary of the poets, of the old and of the new, superficial are they all unto me, and shallow seas. They did not think sufficiently into the depth, therefore their feeling did not reach to the bottom.... Ah, I cast indeed my net into their sea, and meant to catch good fish; but always did I draw up the head of some ancient God. (Nietzsche 122-123)

Nietzsche finds poets to be superficial as he continues the outlook of Hölderlin – expecting a poet to be an original thinker and philosopher. Poets are caught in institutionalized ideologies and are not free to express their original ideas. They sing songs of gods or some religion, and what they write is soaked in their religious beliefs. They become echoes of established concepts, not creating any fresh outlook.

Hölderlin analyses further: “What happened before, scarcely sensed, / Becomes apparent now for the first time” – when we get used to familiar things, we do not sense the way they would have happened in the beginning or the reasons for their existence. Hence, we have to re-understand things as if we have seen them happening for the first time. For a poet-philosopher, this understanding of the early period of life - before languages, culture and religions were created – is very important. He has to understand the period before the beginning of civilization when agriculture began and understand “those who plowed our fields / In the form of smiling labourers / Are now recognized as the all-living / Forces of the gods.” This pre-civilization period must have been the time where the origin of art, culture, economy, and religion can be located. Once a poet-philosopher understands this period, he will be able to explain the reasons for the continuation of the present ideological systems – how and when they were formed and why they have been created.

Hölderlin says further:

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. (Poemhunter.com)

Religions are written down in poetry and songs reflecting the geographical conditions in various lands. They reflect the spirit of the common man which is recorded by the poets of that period in their works. These words of the poets become a permanent part of the people's memory. Legends and epics are thus constructed by the lives of gods and men. The poet with his holy radiance creates a song of these legends. Art originates in a location for a particular purpose. In Greek mythology, Semele is the mother of Dionysus or Bacchus. Poets relate this already existing, legendary story of Zeus and Semele. Hölderlin continues:

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. (Poemhunter.com)

The poets have a duty now – they have to re-interpret this legend once again and not ignore its traditions without understanding it directly. The father, Zeus, has to be grasped by poets personally – poets have to steep themselves in Greek religions and become familiar with their gods. Poets have to keep pure hearts like children, and they will not be hurt by the radiance of Zeus. They have to dip themselves in Greek culture and traditions, apart from their practicing religion of Christianity. Hölderlin wonders if he will be accepted and ends the poem as a fragment:

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 - - (Poemhunter.com)

Doubt enters the heart of Hölderlin, as he wonders if people will call him a false priest. He calls this a warning song for people who are willing to learn – how to handle contemporary and earlier religions. Scholars try to interpret this zeal of Hölderlin to rise above the shackles of a contemporary culture and its accepted religion.

Friedrich Hölderlin was disillusioned with the French revolution and the poems he wrote in response to it seek to bring a sense of revolutionary élan and hope which it promised into his oeuvre. “He did this by returning to the classical tradition and a reworking of ancient Greece which, instead of the usual promotion of a static understanding of the way history works, he emphasized the old Heraclitean adage that everything is in flux” (Thompson).

We understand why Nietzsche and Heidegger kept going back to Hölderlin’s creative texts for inspiration – Hölderlin has defined the scope of philosopher-poet. He has sown the seeds for Nietzschean philosophy of life – that attempts to rise above contemporary religious institutions.

Interpreting the hymns of Hölderlin poses challenges to scholars, as they are rigorously philosophical in nature. Heinrich analyses Hölderlin's poem "Remembrance" and says that the challenge in interpreting comes from the mythical significations present in the poems. Another challenge is to find unity of poetic and philosophical ideas (Heinrich 145).

Hölderlin's conception of a poet as a philosopher who is not tied down to any geo-political systems of thought is indeed a Greek view, Socratic in nature. Though we expect such rigorous framework for philosophy, Hölderlin demands that poets too learn to keep away from the narrow walls of race and identity.

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