Heidegger: Preparing to Read Hölderlin’s Germanien

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Und noch lange sie seufzen, die fallverkündende Worte . . .

Traulich summen benachbarte Abendgloken zusammen,

Hölderlin, Die Tek

. . . sondern Jegliches, was ist, wird durchwest vom Gegenwesen.

Heidegger, Hölderlins Hymne “Der Ister”

Because Heidegger’s thinking holds itself rapt on one issue, Being, the poetry of Hölderlin must pertain essentially to that issue; no mere aesthetic preference or personal liking for Hölderlin could justify Heidegger’s extensive reading of that poet’s poetry. Reading Hölderlin, Heidegger says, is a question “only of That which sets this work into work and, that is, always, what it conceals and holds contained in itself” (A, 6).¹ More specifically, Heidegger says that Hölderlin’s poetry speaks in a mode of saying that overcomes the tradition’s forgottenness of Being and prepares for thinking the way unto another beginning.² Involved deeply “in the withdrawal and in the reserve” of Being,³ Hölderlin’s poetry speaks neither the language of logic nor that of formal grammar, because Hölderlin’s essential words, Heidegger writes, do not issue from anything like a metaphysical subject (I, 203).

Hölderlin’s poetizing is essential thinking, and thrives in the Free (G, 50).
About Hölderlin, Heidegger writes, "Essential thinking must always originally say the same, the old, the oldest, the original. As Hölderlin says it—the most German [of poets] because he poetizes from the occidental history of Being itself and thus is the first coming poet of the Germans." Hölderlin is crucial to Heidegger's thinking of Being, because in Hölderlin's poetry we witness for the first time the transcendence beyond the realm of art and of beauty and, in fact, of all metaphysics (A, 63); because Hölderlin's poetry remains outside metaphysics and outside the realm of western art metaphysically interpreted (I, 21); because the thinking that goes on in and as Hölderlin's poetry uncovers (I, 21), thus engaging it explicitly with the question of truth, "since what is poetized itself lets emerge the authentic truth of the true" (A, 53); and because the saying peculiar to Hölderlin's poetry "is in itself the jubilation of Being, the exulting peace of Being in the endurance of its storms" (G, 255). Accordingly, Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin's poetry understands itself as a "thoughtful discussion with the revelation of Being gained in this poetry" (G, 6).

Hölderlin's poetry has established standards—measures—different from the measures of the tradition, wherein the principle of noncontradiction reigns with surpassing authority, demanding univocity of word-meanings and precision of concepts and rejecting all vestiges of ambiguity and indeterminateness (A, 14–16). Judged in the light of that principle, Hölderlin's poetry would not fare well. For example, in Hyperion, Hölderlin writes, "There are sacred names," while in Heimkunst he writes, "Sacred names are wanting." In the fragmentary essay "Über Achill," Hölderlin calls Homer "the poet of all poets," although in the second of his Magisterspecimina, Geschichte der schönen Künste unter den Griechen, he writes that the hymns of Pindar mark the "zenith of poetic art" in Greece. In Andenken, Hölderlin asks that some one "pass me the fragrant cup / Full of dark light, / So that I might rest." In what sense are goblets fragrant? Is it the cup's contents, the dark light, that is fragrant? Is this hypallage? Is there an aromaticity to light? Is that synaesthesia? Does not "dark light" stretch the most resilient oxymoron to the edge of senselessness?

Furthermore, Heidegger makes the following observations: First, he suggests that Hölderlin's use of the arch categories Apollo and Dionysos must be understood as presaging the overcoming of metaphysics and thus as indicating precisely the reverse of what Nietzsche and hence the entire tradition have meant by them (A, 154). Second, Heidegger points out that, according to Hölderlin, men are and are not signs (cf I, 30–31); that at the source the poet is and is not at home (I, 160–61); that mysteries must be spoken yet allowed to remain unspoken (G, 44–45). Third, maps and documents from antiquity indicate that the ancients named the northern portion of the Danube River the Donau and the southern portion of that river the Ister; yet