

## Poetry of Place in Dark Times

On September 11, 1806, the poet Friedrich Hölderlin was removed from the castle of Homburg, where he served as court librarian, and taken home to Tübingen. Hölderlin's mental state had deteriorated to the point that he could no longer be cared for. He was deemed to have been driven "mad" by excessive devotion to his poetry, according to those around him, including his mother. Hölderlin's biographer David Constantine cites a bystander's account:

Poor Hölderlin was taken away this morning to be returned to his family. He tried his best to throw himself from the coach, but the man who was to have charge of him pushed him back. Hölderlin cried out that armed men were carrying him off, and he struggled again and scratched the man with his enormously long nails so that he was covered in blood.

Hölderlin was thirty-six at the time, but he lived for thirty-six more years in a tower in Tübingen, writing little. However, after an early career of producing odes and elegies, the period just before his collapse, roughly 1800-1806, proved to be the most productive years of his writing life. He was obsessively revising his most substantial poems. His feverish writing was seen as evidence of advancing madness.

Hölderlin's overarching outlook in his poetry was based on an ideal past and an ideal future. Such a past was embodied in the ancient Greece of philosopher Plato, playwright Sophocles, and poet Pindar. The ideal future for Hölderlin would consist of a unified Germany, or short of that, a liberated Swabia, the southwestern region of Germany where Hölderlin spent most of his life. His high ideal was that Germany would become a modern version of ancient Greece, where philosophy and art would flourish and prevail. Hölderlin wrote several poems of a patriotic bent, urging his countrymen to higher aspirations.

For him, the present era, situated between ideal states, was a dark time, bereft of gods and belief. His poems often swing between despair and seeking to make the best of his times, sometimes within the same poem. His delight in the life of town and country in his beloved Swabia is a constant in his poetry. The opening stanza of his nine-stanza elegy, "Bread and Wine," evokes a village market at day and at night, thought to be modeled on the town of Stuttgart, then much smaller than it is today.

Calm has fallen over the town; the street grows still in the  
    lamplight,  
And, adorned with torches, the carriages hasten away.  
The people, replete with the pleasures of the day, go home to  
    rest,  
And they carefully reckon their profit and loss  
Well-pleased by their hearth; the busy market is calm now  
    and empty  
Of grapes and flowers and works made by hand.  
But the music of strings sounds afar in the gardens;  
    Perhaps a lover is playing, or a lonely man thinking  
Of faraway friends and his youth; and the fountains,  
    Always flowing and fresh, rush by the beds of sweet-  
    smelling flowers.

The ringing of bells sounds softly through the early evening air,  
    And minding the hour a watchman calls out the time.  
Now a wind comes and rustles the treetops—  
    And look! The shadow-image of our earth the moon,  
Steals into view; night, the enraptured dreamer, arrives  
    Full of stars and seems unconcerned with our lives,  
She shines there, the astounding one, this stranger amidst men,  
    And rises over mountaintops resplendent and sad.

Hölderlin addressed this poem to his friend Heinze, a fellow “philhellene” devoted to ancient Greece. The stanza would seem to evoke a utopian state, the ideal habitation in peace and tranquility.

However, the stanza ends in nighttime, with the moon displaying a general indifference to human affairs and shining in a state of sadness. This stanza was originally published separately under the title “Night.” Typical of Hölderlin, the stanza sends a mixed message, and it could not be otherwise in his conflicted condition. The English poet Matthew Arnold describes a similar state in 1855: “Wandering between two worlds, one dead / The other powerless to be born.”

Hölderlin’s biographer Constantine remarks that

The triadic structure—an ideal past, a benighted present, a hoped-for future—is a commonplace in eighteenth-century thinking and poetry, but it suits Hölderlin particularly well. It is a psychologically true pattern which determines the workings of his poems in a quite precise way.

The triadic structure Constantine refers to remains quite present in thinking and living today. Consider, on a practical level, Hölderlin’s evocation of the daily life that can still be found in European towns, as in these two views taken on the same day in June 2012:



*Market Square, Weimar, Germany, midday.*



*Market Square, Weimar, Germany, evening.*

Today in our own cities and towns of the Pacific Northwest, we are experiencing a resurgence of farmers' markets, offering a similar range of practical commerce in useful items, especially food. The market is set up in early morning on a weekend, flourishes during midday, and by evening is gone. Hölderlin's evocation of this social bustle in his time directly informs and reflects the same basic market occasion in our own day. Farmers' markets would seem to be ripe material for poems, if we learn how they work and maybe have always worked. A poem by Washington's current poet laureate, Claudia Castro Luna, draws from her own experience of this durable institution:

#### FARMERS MARKET

I go early to hear the citrus tales of pomelos and satsumas in January, discuss the snap with favas in May, have a word with a merchant without saying anything, hold a coin bag in one hand and with the other chat with an unsuspecting tomato. Market speak is the language of being a girl walking with my mother down narrow lanes in the Mercado, sweat streaming brow, dogs impatient weaving between legs, stealthy robbers articulating

sneak, sellers shouting incantations to buy this cure-all remedy and for a bargain, *una mano*, all the fruit that can fit in the palm of your hand. At every turn my local farmers market betrays the one I long for. The Mercado I search lives dormant, rhyming festive and mom, inside my heart.

Luna's poem turns on a simple assumption that "market speak" is the language of the poem. The speaker hears "citrus tales," discusses "the snap" with favas, keeps silence with a merchant, and chats with a tomato. But the main "market speak" is the memory of being a girl with her mother walking in the mercado, the Spanish word reflecting her Salvadoran heritage. Dogs roam, sellers shout, and the speaker searches her own memory for the market days she experienced with her mother, carried back to her by the festive feeling of the market. Surely Hölderlin would have recognized that feeling, as we have seen him evoke a similar nostalgic mood in "Bread and Wine":

But the music of strings sounds afar in the gardens;  
Perhaps a lover is playing, or a lonely man thinking  
Of faraway friends and his youth . . .

If the village market is a celebration of the things of the earth that carry the days of our lives, why does Hölderlin consider the present "benighted," compared to an ideal past or an ideal future? One answer to this can be found in stanza seven of "Bread and Wine." Hölderlin addresses his friend Heinze directly:

But, friend, we come too late. It's true that the gods live,  
But they live above us in another world.  
They move without end and it seems to matter little  
To them if we live.

Then Hölderlin begins to address the poet's role:

Meanwhile I've often thought  
It is better to sleep than to be without friends,  
Always waiting, and what to do or say in the meanwhile

I don't know, and what are poets for in these meager times?  
But they are, you say, like the holy priests of the wine god,  
Who roamed from land to land through holy night.

Hölderlin here laments the absence of the gods on earth. (He considered Christ the last of them.) Hölderlin also laments the absence of other like-minded friends, who with Hölderlin and Heinze could constitute a new society in the making. In the last two lines, Hölderlin and Heinze conceive of the poet's role as a reincarnation of the ancient one in Greece: to be a wandering priest of Dionysos, god of wine and festivities (including festivities such as village markets, perhaps).

The absence of gods meant the absence of an entire social order that was attuned to nature and the rituals honoring sacred life within it. Hölderlin was living in a period of massive turmoil. The industrial Revolution was rapidly converting the commons and work into factory systems driven by coal; Napoleon had betrayed the French Revolution with wars of empire that spilled into German lands; Germany itself consisted of a patchwork of bickering principalities ruled by conservative and incompetent members of the nobility. Ordinary people and rulers alike were indifferent to anything more than material gain. In such a context, we can better understand the urgency of Hölderlin's question embedded in the lines quoted above: "What are poets for in these meager times?" (*Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?*) The word *dürftiger* is translated by Nick Hoff as "meager," but it has also been translated as "barren," "desolate," and "destitute."

Hölderlin's answer to his own question is that the poet today should be like a holy priest of Dionysos, roaming the night-bound land, as a herald restoring the ideal. Some poets still write as if conversing with gods. Jack Gilbert sometimes speaks with "the Lord" in his poems, but in one poem, he takes the role of Hölderlin's interlocutor of ancient gods:

#### IMAGINE THE GODS

I imagine the gods saying, We will  
make it up to you. We will give you  
three wishes, they say. Let me see

the squirrels again, I tell them.  
Let me eat some of the great hog  
stuffed and roasted on its giant spit  
and put out, steaming, into the winter  
of my neighborhood when I was usually  
too broke to afford even the hundred grams  
I ate so happily walking up the cobbles,  
past the Street of the Moon  
and the Street of the Birdcage-Makers,  
the Street of Silence and the Street  
of the Little Pissing. We can give you  
wisdom, they say in their rich voices.  
Let me go at last to Hugette, I say,  
the Algerian student with her huge eyes  
who timidly invited me to her room  
when I was too young and bewildered  
that first year in Paris.  
Let me at least fail at my life.  
Think, they say, patiently, we could  
make you famous again. Let me fall  
in love one last time, I beg them.  
Teach me mortality, frighten me  
into the present. Help me to find  
the heft of these days. That the nights  
will be full enough and my heart feral.

Gilbert imagines that the gods want to offer him recompense for deprivation by giving him three wishes. Closer reading shows the poet greedily making *eight* wishes. His desire is to recapture particular moments of living on earth: to see the squirrels again, to eat some of the roasted pork he once tasted in one or more cities, and to revisit Hugette, the Algerian woman in Paris of his youth. He asks the gods to let him fall in love, which is consistent with the poet's attitude that all of life, even grief and woe, is worth living. Hence, he wishes a deeper



sense of mortality, the fear of which will drive him deeper into present existence. He wants to weigh or savor each day and each night, and he wants his heart to be wild. The gods, meanwhile, say they can give him wisdom and fame, as if the poet isn't making good use of his wishes. But the poet persists in his devotion to a life of the senses, in all of its memorable particulars, a Dionysian celebration.

Gilbert speaks for most poets in valorizing the life and language of the senses. But he does not relate to gods in the way that Hölderlin does. Gilbert's approach is a casual poetic construct, turning down the advice of the gods in favor of his own experience and desires. Hölderlin's relation to the gods is pious, and their perceived absence is deeply agonizing.

Having normalized the absence of God, today we are left to our own devices. And our own devices, our self-assertions, have proved inadequate to the challenges before us. Failure at conflict resolution has led to two world wars—not that there haven't been big wars in the whole history of humanity, but they are hardly comparable to the mass death, suffering, and destruction of wars in the twentieth century. Lack of social and individual control over consumption has led to a crisis of climate change and the sixth extinction of nonhuman life. Consuming so much of animal life and destroying so much animal habitat has invited a virus plague of worldwide proportions. And increasing social inequality has revived the demands for justice that have festered for generations, unacknowledged but now renewed in protests against elite governments and their minions, the police. Consumers and rulers alike often seem indifferent to anything more than material gain. The protests show that millions are not indifferent.

If we live in a time that is so "destitute" it can scarcely imagine its own destitution, then the poet's role would appear to be to raise awareness of this issue. Certainly examination of our collective past is underway, with reevaluation of the Confederacy and the memorials raised to it and the oppression which nonwhite people have experienced in white America. Certainly we can engage such issues on a local scale in the Pacific Northwest. Racism toward African Americans, Native



Americans, and Asian Americans has flourished up to the present day. When we consider these matters closely, it is hard to agree with Hölderlin that the past was ever ideal.

On the “hoped-for-future” side of the triad, poet Gjertrud Schnackenberg has deployed a method for visualizing the future. Her tactic is to pose a utopia where the worst features of our own age will have fallen away. The loose framework of her poem “A Monument in Utopia” is the story of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam. Mandelstam’s arrest and removal was not nearly as dramatic as Hölderlin’s. After a long period of travelling around the country and keeping a low profile in the years of Stalinist repression, Mandelstam and his wife Nadezhda were picked up and sent to a rest home until his status could be decided. In Nadezhda’s account:

In the morning [May 5, 1938] we were awakened by somebody knocking quietly on the door. M. got up to open the door and three people came in: two men in military uniform and the doctor. M. began to dress. I put on a dressing gown and sat on the bed. . . .

Coming to my senses, I began to get M.’s things together. One of them said to me in their usual way: “Why so much stuff? He won’t be in long—they’ll just ask a few questions and let him go.” . . .

. . . I heard the truck start up outside, but I just remained sitting on the bed, unable to move.

Nadezhda never saw Mandelstam again. She later received a death certificate saying he had died in a transit camp outside Vladivostok on December 27, 1938. Whether by declaring the poet mad and violently deporting him, or by quietly taking the poet away, the poet is silenced, and the poetry is suppressed as somehow subversive. We would like to think that such arrests “can’t happen here.” That’s what people often think before it happens. Federal agents using unmarked vans to pick up protestors in Portland sends an ominous signal, reminiscent of the “black marias” he-hawing through night streets of European and

Russian cities of the last century.

In the following excerpt from "A Monument in Utopia," Schnackenberg imagines a "utopia" cleared of the offenses against the poet, and hence of offenses against us all:

No one will be under arrest;  
The enlightenment will be behind us;  
When we hurry past the metropolitan library  
No one will look out at us in fright  
From the top of his cast-off overcoat,  
No one will reach from his orphan's sleeve  
With a child's yearning hand  
Trapped in the rising waters of the age,  
No features hauntingly difficult to place  
Will perch precariously on a throat  
As gaunt as a starved pencil.  
And the vexing labyrinths  
Of injury and debt will have plunged away  
Together with the false testimony of  
Bad neighbors and ungrateful friends;  
No one will scrawl a message that ends  
*If I can just get through these years . . .*

So, we too can ask ourselves, what features of present life in our Pacific Northwest would we like to see abandoned as a minimum requirement for a livable future? The more that we take away from our present unsustainable way of consuming, buying and selling, and especially of disposing and polluting, the simpler our lives would become. How can this be realized in specific and local terms? One possibility, but a rigorous one, would be to simplify one's life as much as possible, to conflate the ideal past and the ideal future into the present. From a simplified life, authentic poems can flow. Consider the world of Washington poet Robert Sund, who died in 2001, as described by Tim McNulty:

Whether spending the winter with friends in town or living alone on the river, his residences were more hermitage than domicile. His small cabin at Shi Shi on Washington's wilderness coast was set back from the driftwood among windswept spruce, a teapot always steaming by the fireplace. His river shack, "Disappearing Lake," while only two miles from town seemed "far back" in time. A converted net shed on the Skagit estuary, it was raised on pilings to accommodate daily tides that flooded the freshwater marsh; access was by Robert's rowing dory *Svalan*.

In the following excerpt Sund demonstrates the simplicity by which he lived, which was also his joy in living.

WOODPILE DOWN TO NOTHING

*for George Durham, Boatmaker*

Woodpile down to nothing,  
I rowed across the river  
and down into Beaver Creek.

Tied *Svalan* to a snag and  
searched through the drift,  
walking through cat-tails  
eight feet tall.

A touch of blue September flower,  
marsh marigolds, and the golden  
drift orchid speckled with rust  
in the full mouth of the bloom  
hanging serenely below the leaves.

Looked long for dry alder.  
Not much new drift this year,  
winter floods carried it off.  
About to give up and search  
some other spot, I found a  
big alder: twenty inches through,

perfectly cured. Stove-ready alderwood!  
Saw, chop, stack, and carry to the stove.  
The river is good to bums and  
retired scholars!

In a quintessential poem of place, Sund appears to adopt his own miniature version of triadic structure. In terms of the past, the poet is low on firewood, which has all been burned. In terms of the present, he sets out in his rowboat in search of wood. In terms of the future he comes home with a supply of dry alder. Unlike the grand scheme of Hölderlin, in which the past is ancient Greece, the present a benighted Germany, and the future a Germany resembling ancient Greece—Sund is much more direct and simple: Reality is not ancient or ideal; rather, reality is like Gilbert's, here and now, in the wonder of "living on the river."

The message of Sund's lifestyle, similar to the message of Thoreau's at Walden Pond, is not that we should live like them, but that we should simplify our own lives. A future that includes climate change may make demands and deprivations to which we will have no choice but to adjust. But even so, as we often hear during the COVID-19 shutdowns, people are simplifying their lives by reducing their possessions and commitments in anticipation of a more sustainable life after COVID-19 has passed. What are your experiences in this regard? How have you and others simplified life where you live? Therein poems are waiting.

If we take Sund's approach a step further, the entire triad of past, present, and future can be collapsed into one moment, as in Wendell Berry's short lyric:

THE PEACE OF WILD THINGS

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought

of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

### **Works referred to in this afterword**

Matthew Arnold. "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse." *Poetry in English: An Anthology*. Edited by M. L. Rosenthal, et al. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. 715-20.

Wendell Berry. "The Peace of Wild Things." *Collected Poems*. New York: North Point Press, 1984. 69.

David Constantine. *Hölderlin*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988; reprinted 2004. 382, 164.

Jack Gilbert. "I Imagine the Gods." *The Great Fires: Poems 1982–1992*. New York: Knopf, 1999. 72.

Friedrich Hölderlin. "Bread and Wine." *Odes and Elegies*. Translated by Nick Hoff. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008. 133-43.

Claudia Castro Luna. "Farmers Market." 2019. Poets.org, Academy of American Poets, [www.poets.org/poem/farmers-market](http://www.poets.org/poem/farmers-market).

Nadezhda Mandelstam. *Hope Against Hope: A Memoir*. Translated by Max Hayward. New York: Atheneum, 1976. 361.

Tim McNulty. "A Stalk of Grass Where the Wind Is Blowing." Afterword. *Poems from Ish River Country: Collected Poems and Translations*. By Robert Sund. Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004. 254-57.

Gjertrud Schnackenberg. "A Monument in Utopia." *A Gilded Lapse of Time*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992. 95-127.

Robert Sund. "Woodpile Down to Nothing." *Poems from Ish River Country: Collected Poems and Translations*. Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004. 202-03.