

Urge for the Impossible: The Complex, Necessary Hölderlin

by Charlie Louth

Published in the *Times Literary Supplement* 6137 (November 13, 2020).
Paywalled at www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/250-years-complex-necessary-friedrich-holderlin/

Friedrich Hölderlin saw his times – like Wordsworth, Beethoven and Hegel, he was born in 1770 – as in fermentation, a messy process that may lead to clarity. Most of his 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. But almost at once comes the correction, the recognition that reality does not yet match the hopes that it is nevertheless capable of nourishing. If we are taken back to ancient Greece, the chief sustainer of Hölderlin’s belief that a better world was possible, to witness, as in his poem “The Archipelago”, a vision of the growth of Athens so powerful it seems to be happening before our eyes, it is only to have the illusion wrecked by the reminder that Athens now lies in ruins. “The Archipelago” ends with the sober desire to understand the “changing and becoming” (“das Wechseln / Und das Werden”) it has so successfully embodied in its lines, so at a kind of remove; and most of Hölderlin’s completed poems end quietly.

Both Rüdiger Safranski and Karl-Heinz Ott tend to overlook this inbuilt modesty or realism, even disillusionment, and emphasize instead the idealist. Safranski styles himself as a philosopher, but is best known for his well-received biographies of Goethe, Schiller, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger. There is no standard biography of Hölderlin, and *Komm! ins Offene, Freund!** does not aim to fill the gap in that it contents itself with a plain narration of the bones of the life, adding nothing to what we already know. On the other hand, Safranski has produced a compact and readable Life which is careful not to speculate and helpfully fills in the philosophical context. There are neat summaries of Kant, Fichte and Schelling, among others, but he might have taken this further, rather than insisting, as German literary history likes to, that Hölderlin was “definitely not a Romantic”.

Hölderlin passed through his local Lutheran convent schools in Württemberg and ended up, from autumn 1788, in the famous Stift in Tübingen, the seminary which Hegel entered at the same time and Schelling, aged only fifteen, joined two years later – the three of them shared a room. The purpose of the Stift was to train parish priests and, secondarily, university teachers. Students did two years of philosophy followed by three years of theology and could only avoid becoming priests if they went “abroad”, that is beyond the borders of the Duchy of Württemberg. Like many of the other Stiftler, Hölderlin was soon reading Kant and, in the wake of the French Revolution, became enthused by Republicanism. When Hölderlin, Hegel and Schelling parted on leaving Tübingen in 1793, it was with the watchword “Reich Gottes!” (“Kingdom of God”) – an early indication that religious, indeed Biblical, language in Hölderlin’s usage is not confined to its traditional meaning. “Reich Gottes!” expressed the faith in a world where human freedom and divine presence would coincide and the political, the poetic and the religious were indistinguishably joined in an “invisible Church”.

While still in Tübingen, Hölderlin had begun work on *Hyperion*. After going through many versions, the novel was finally published in two instalments in 1797 and 1799; and he had written lots of poetry, not all of which has survived. But it was only after going to Jena in 1795, where he heard Fichte lecture and was for a time under the wing of his hero

* Hanser, €28;
Come into the open,
friend

Schiller, and especially after falling in love with Susette Gontard in 1796, that his poems began to move out of the ordinary. Safranski convincingly proposes the often overlooked “Die Eichbäume” (“The Oak-Trees”), which Schiller accepted for publication in his magazine *Die Horen*, as the poem in which this shift can be felt, noting that it is as love takes hold of Hölderlin and he gives up the ideal of fusing with nature that he finds the words to render nature (here, the oaks) in loving detail. He could have added that it is not in any one turn of phrase or original image that this occurs, but in the amplitude and breathing spaciousness of the hexameter lines, which unfold an ease and reach comparable to that of the oaks:

*Und ihr drängt euch fröhlich und frei, aus der kräftigen Wurzel,
Unter einander herauf und ergreift, wie der Adler die Beute,
Mit gewaltigem Arme den Raum, und gegen die Wolken
Ist euch heiter und groß die sonnige Krone gerichtet.*

Each among all, joyously, freely, from vigorous roots
Forces upwards and seizes, as eagles their prey
Space with your powerful arms and towards the clouds
Large and serene you lift up your sunlit crowns.*

*Trans. David
Constantine

Hölderlin’s love for Gontard was reciprocated, but she was married with four children. He entered the household as the tutor to her son, the second of four such jobs he took on as a way of avoiding the attentions of the ecclesiastical board in Württemberg and ensuring himself some time to write. This employment, in Frankfurt, lasted by far the longest of the four, but in the end an altercation with Herr Gontard, a banker, forced him to leave, it seems at Susette’s request, in September 1798. He moved to nearby Homburg to be with his activist friend Isaak von Sinclair. From there he could look over to Frankfurt, which later, borrowing Pindar’s epithet for Delphi, he called “the navel of this earth”. For almost two years the lovers continued to meet secretly and exchange letters. During this time Hölderlin tried and failed to set up a literary journal of his own, finished *Hyperion*, wrote and abandoned a play, *The Death of Empedocles* – perhaps intended to inaugurate the hoped-for republic in Württemberg – and, alongside a series of increasingly accomplished poems, worked on his poetological and philosophical essays (all more or less unfinished) and his intensely private and experimental translations of Pindar. After what must have felt like a string of failures, though he was steadily uncovering and affirming his vocation, and because the humiliation of the snatched and clandestine relationship with Susette became too much to bear, he returned home in June 1800.

This pattern, of seeking to establish himself outside the limits of Württemberg only to be driven back home by outward failure, repeated itself a few more times: neither of the final two house-tutoring jobs, in Switzerland and in Bordeaux, lasted more than a few months before Hölderlin returned, perhaps showing early signs of the madness that manifested itself definitively in 1806 when his friend Sinclair, who had again offered him his company in Homburg and even found him a sinecure as court librarian, confessed himself unable to look after him. He was taken by force to a clinic in Tübingen and released the following year, as incurable, into the care of the carpenter Ernst Zimmer, who had read *Hyperion* and had a house on the banks of the Neckar which Hölderlin lived in for the rest of his life, exactly half of it. Neither his mother nor any of his old friends seem to have visited him there.

Safranski gives this second half only one chapter, as against fifteen for the first, which is understandable given his interest in ideas and in context. At Zimmer’s Hölderlin wrote rhyming quatrains which are fascinating for their limpid serenity and detachment, their sense of coming from elsewhere, but which abandon the extraordinary reach and coherence of the completed poems written roughly 1800–3, such as “Homecoming” or “The Rhine”,

as well as the glinting later fragments which have nothing to compare with them for richness of implication and, for want of a better phrase, poetic voltage:

*Reif sind, in Feuer getaucht, gekochet
Die Frucht und auf der Erde geprüft und ein Gesetz ist
Das alles hineingeht, Schlangen gleich,
Prophetisch, träumend auf
Den Hügeln des Himmels.*

Ripe are, dipped in fire, cooked
The fruits and tried on the earth, and it is law,
Prophetic, that all must enter in
Like serpents, dreaming on
The mounds of heaven.*

* Trans. Michael
Hamburger

Nothing like this had ever been heard in German before. In 1805 Hölderlin also published his radical – and, to his contemporaries, bewildering – translations of Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus*. Safranski barely mentions these, and in fact, compared to the lengthy accounts of *Hyperion* and *Empedocles*, he has little to say about the major poems either. He sells Hölderlin very short when he ends his book by saying that he was “above all – a priest of poetry”. This returns to an outdated view of Hölderlin that makes no more sense now, and does him no more good, than it did before. In falling for a cliché, Safranski has failed in his first duty as biographer, which is to get us closer to his subject.

If Safranski's book is nevertheless a serviceable piece of furniture, Ott's is more like a mobile: its parts catch the light interestingly at first, but soon gather dust. Safranski's final chapter surveys Hölderlin's afterlife, and this is the subject of *Hölderlins Geister*** , a title which implies both the continued haunting presence of Hölderlin and the demons which, in Ott's view, his work has released. Ott takes Hölderlin as a “mirror” for what he largely regards as the follies of the twentieth century, and, in short and very loosely connected segments, holds up the uses and abuses to which he has been put. He tells a familiar tale of appropriation and misappropriation at the hands of Heidegger, the Nazis, the radical left and the post-structuralists among others, except that he doesn't tell it but glances at it, treating the whole phenomenon of Hölderlin's reception with a scepticism which is a healthy corrective to Safranski's awe. But the scepticism, sometimes cynicism, seems to extend to Hölderlin's work itself and not just its annexation. Hölderlin has an “urge for the impossible”; he is a naive idealist with no use for the reality of the world, always longing for an elsewhere, unlike his friend Hegel, whom Ott clearly prefers. At one point, Ott quotes from a letter Susette Gontard wrote Hölderlin after their separation and comments, in the testily superior tone he cultivates: “They wanted to exclude the world from the imagined cocoon of pure duality, real life should find no place there”. But this depends on a misreading of Susette's words, which speak not of any desire to exclude the world from their relationship but of her regret they did not find a compromise which would have allowed them to remain under the same roof. Ott's insistence on a particular view of Hölderlin, one he disapproves of, leads him astray. He makes a caricature of Hölderlin in order to pursue his own agenda, which is what he mocks others for doing. The book carries an epigraph from Peter Handke: “At the edge of despair, the myths repeat themselves”.

** Hanser, €22

It is a relief, then, in Navid Kermani's thoughtful selection, *Bald sind wir aber Gesang**** to be brought back to what Hölderlin actually wrote. In his afterword Kermani argues that it is precisely the “dramatic reality” of Hölderlin's life, the particularity of his situation, that makes his work what it is: one of the “great revelations of the world”. And what is a revelation? It is “the mirroring of the whole world in a specific point”. Kermani perhaps has these lines in mind from a late fragment: “But sharp breath blows / Round the holes of the rocks. At that very point [*allda*] I am / All things at once”. It is this total

*** Beck, €20;
But soon though
we be song

exposure and the words that render it that make Hölderlin necessary but also “difficult”: here we are confronted with the world in all its complexity.

* Folio, €20;
Translating
Hölderlin

What to do with Hölderlin’s complexity is among Luigi Reitani’s preoccupations in *Hölderlin übersetzen**. Reitani is well known as the editor of a complete Hölderlin in Italian which also poses some questions for the German editions. The eight mostly short pieces gathered here draw on his work as translator but understand translation as more than the business of converting words from one language into another. The kind of translation Hölderlin demands is that into our lives: like Safranski and Ott, Reitani raises the idea that Hölderlin might have become remote, but refutes it with the elegant assertion that rather than being “too difficult”, Hölderlin’s poetry has a “fragile simplicity that puts our certainties in question”. He knows that the poems’ fragility is their strength, because it protects them from naivety.

The question of translation, of remaking such peculiar structures in another language, is nevertheless a real one. Few German poets have enjoyed the attention of poets in English to the extent that Hölderlin has. Michael Hamburger, David Gascoyne, John Riley and Tim Longville, and David Constantine have all given us extensive and vital selections which together cover nearly the entirety of Hölderlin’s verse writing, not to speak of smaller contributions by poets as serious and various as Denise Riley and Kathleen Jamie. Another name to add to these is Christopher Middleton’s. His versions of Hölderlin first appeared in 1972 in Chicago as an unusual double bill, the *Selected Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin and Eduard Mörike*. Sometime before then (the volume is undated), he had also translated a selection of Hölderlin’s letters under the title *The Poet’s Vocation* (alongside letters by Rimbaud and Hart Crane). A new volume, *Selected Poems and Letters*** assembles the Hölderlin parts of these two long-out-of-print books, and adds several other pieces, ranging from an early poem, “Thinking of Hölderlin” (1962), to one of his last essays, “A Spirit Voice in Loose Alcaic Measure” (2007). It is wonderful to have all this “bound by love in one volume”, as Dante said in a different context, allowing us to see more clearly the nature of Middleton’s long engagement with Hölderlin and to appreciate the close relationship between his roles as a translator, as a critic and, more obliquely, as a poet.

** The Last Books,
€22/£19

Like Hamburger and Constantine, Middleton was a scholar and teacher of German literature as well as a poet and translator. A phrase from J. H. Prynne’s puff on the back of the book, “imaginative intelligence”, will do very well to characterize what one finds when reading Middleton in any of his forms. A sense of risk and acuity, sharp stabs of intellectual venture, can be felt in everything he wrote. The translations are reliable, modest and intense. Middleton’s sensitivity to formal questions, to the way the shape and timbre of the poem modulate with the development of its preoccupations, is present in both his translating and his critical writing, and joins them together. For this reason, he translates most of the poems into close equivalents of their German classical forms, but then with the Pindaric hymn “Patmos” he suddenly shifts into “a freer layout” which resembles Pound’s in the *Cantos*, and justifies it by explaining that his aim was “to sharpen the profiles of particular words and phrases, and to invest the English with some of the glowing and vigorous rugosity which [Hölderlin] achieves by rhythmical turns, elliptical syntax, eccentric word order, and changes of key”. We are taken right into the sense-making heart of the writing, and witness not the transposition of meaning but its reconstitution on the page, in the different conditions of the new language and time.

The fascinating poem “Andenken” (“Remembrance”) is of particular importance to Middleton. In the longest essay here, on its “syntax and signification”, he calls it “a gnosis telling of the Spirit’s voyage and its intrinsic, recurrent structure”, and with the help of a remark by “an old Eskimo poet” addresses the poem’s “vibrance between abstruseness and directness, elasticity and straightness, ‘style’ and rectitude”. Another essay focuses on the poem’s closing lines, and in particular on the fact that poets, in the famous last line, are spoken of in the plural: “Was bleibet aber, stiften die Dichter”. Middleton reads this as a reference to tradition. Though no two translations of this line are the same, most of

them render “aber” as “but”. Middleton argues for a stronger sort of contradiction, and translates: “What abides, even then, the poets ordain it”, maintaining the pause in the middle of the line.

* Wallstein, €39.90

Franz Zinkernagel, in *Kritisch-historische Ausgabe von Franz Zinkernagel, 1914–1926**, a late supplement to an edition which first appeared without its apparatus between 1914 and 1926, does not remark on the “aber”, nor on the plural, but comments that the poets, unlike the sailors with whom they are contrasted, have their experiences “deeply engraved in their hearts”, something the pause seems to corroborate. He also makes the slightly fantastical but somehow tantalizing suggestion, apropos of an earlier line in the poem, that “auf seidenen Boden”, which is usually taken to mean “on silken ground” (as Hamburger, Middleton and Constantine all have it), perhaps with reference to a dancefloor, should be treated as a plural and read as referring to “stockings or shoes”. It’s not clear whether this assumes some dialect or obsolete meaning for “Boden”, or whether Zinkernagel is simply extrapolating. The main intention in issuing this edition, which comes as a CD-ROM with 1,354 pages of text to which the bound book is a long editorial introduction, is to demonstrate that Zinkernagel was ahead of his time in wanting to make available every word that Hölderlin wrote. The world of Hölderlin editing is possibly the most contentious such field. Hans Gerhard Steimer’s editing of Zinkernagel’s Hölderlin adds to a plethora of competing and complementary editions, and is more than just a late act of piety, though its exact value will take time to emerge. The Middleton volume – beautifully produced – is a model of imaginative and committed publishing, and its value is self-evident.

** Hölderlin, Celan and the Languages of Poetry

An exhibition on *Hölderlin, Celan und die Sprachen der Poesie*** showing in Marbach am Neckar at the time of writing is open to anyone willing to don a mask and rubber gloves. If not, the catalogue by Heike Gfrereis (Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, €20) is perhaps even better. At the core of both are hundreds of instances of other writers taking bits of Hölderlin and integrating them into their own writing – the best proof perhaps of the continued life of Hölderlin’s work. Hölderlin knew how unusual the language of his poems had become but said he could not help it. He was confident it would find an audience: “On a fine day, after all, almost every kind of song may be heard, and nature, where it comes from, will take it back again”. This is true even in these unfine days.