HÖLDERLIN AND THE ESSENCE OF POETRY

In memory of Norbert von Hellingrath
Who was killed in action
On December 14, 1916

THE FIVE KEY VERSES

1. Composing poems: "This most innocent of occupations." (III, 377)

2. "That is why language, the most dangerous of goods, has been given to man . . . so that he may bear witness to what he is. . . ." (IV, 246)

3. "Much has man experienced.
Named many of the heavenly ones,
Since we have been a conversation
And able to hear from one another." (IV, 343)

4. "But what remains is founded by the poets." (IV, 63)

5. "Full of merit, yet poetically, man
Dwells on this earth." (VI, 25)
Why choose Hölderlin's work if our purpose is to show the essence of poetry? Why not Homer or Sophocles, why not Virgil or Dante, why not Shakespeare or Goethe? Surely the essence of poetry has come to rich expression in the works of these poets, more so indeed than in Hölderlin's creation, which broke off so prematurely and so abruptly.

That may be so. And yet I choose Hölderlin, and him alone. The question can arise whether it is possible in any case to read off the general nature of poetry from the work of just one poet. We can only obtain what is universal, that is, what is valid for many, by a comparative study. And for that we would need to present the greatest possible diversity, both of poems and of kinds of poetry. For such a study, Hölderlin's poetry could count at best as one among many. In no way would it suffice as our sole measure for determining the essence of poetry. Consequently, our project would be doomed from the start. Certainly that is true—if we understand by "essence of poetry" whatever is drawn together into a universal concept, one that would be valid for every kind of poetry. But a universal like that, equally valid for every particular instance, always proves to be something neutral or indifferent. An "essence" of that kind always misses what is truly essential.

We, however, are searching for something truly essential, something that will force us to decide whether we shall take poetry at all seriously in the future, and whether the presuppositions that we bring along with us will enable us ever to stand within poetry's sphere of influence.

I did not choose Hölderlin because his work, as one among many, realizes the universal essence of poetry, but rather because Hölderlin's poetry is sustained by his whole poetic mission: to make poems solely about the essence of poetry. Hölderlin is for us in a preeminent sense the poet's poet. And for that reason he forces a decision upon us.

But—to make poems about the role of the poet—is that not to betray a misguided self-contemplation, and at the same time to confess one's lack of worldly content? Poems about poetry—wouldn't that be something weak and overly refined, something decadent, a dead end?

The answer may be given by what follows. Admittedly, we shall only approach this answer by adopting an expedient. Properly, one ought to
interpret each of Hölderlin’s poems in a continuous sequence, but here we cannot go that route. Instead, we shall only consider five of the poet’s key verses on poetry. The specific order of these verses and their inner coherence will place before our eyes the true nature of poetry, what really is essential to it.

1.

In a letter to his mother, dated January, 1799, Hölderlin says that writing poems is “this most innocent of all occupations” (III, 377). In what way is it the “most innocent”? Indeed, the pursuit of poetry often looks like little more than play. Without responsibility, it invents a world of images; lost in thought, it remains within an imaginary realm. Such play evades the seriousness of decisions, in which one always assumes guilt in one way or another. So the pursuit of poetry is completely harmless. At the same time it is ineffectual; it remains mere talk. It has nothing in common with action, which takes hold of reality directly in order to transform it. Poetry is like a dream, not reality; a play with words, not the seriousness of action. Poetry is harmless and ineffectual. For what could be more harmless than mere language? Now it is true that by taking poetry as “the most innocent of all occupations,” we have not yet grasped its true nature. But at least we have been given an indication of where we must look for it. Poetry creates its works in the realm of language and out of the “material” of language. What does Hölderlin say about language? Let us listen to a second of the poet’s key verses.

2.

In a fragmentary draft, dating from the same period (1800) as the letter just quoted, the poet says:

But man dwells in huts and wraps himself with a modest garment, for the more intimate he is, / the more attentive too, and that he preserves
the spirit, as the priestess the heavenly flame—this is his understanding. And that is why free will / and higher power to command and to accomplish have been given to him, who is like the gods, and that is why the most dangerous of goods, language, has been given to man, so that creating, destroying and perishing, and returning to the everliving, to the mistress and mother, he may bear witness to what he is / to have inherited, learned from her, her most divine gift, all-sustaining love. (IV, 246)

Language, the field of “the most innocent of all occupations,” is “the most dangerous of goods.” How can these two verses be reconciled? We shall put this question aside for the moment, and consider three preliminary questions: 1. Whose good is language? 2. In what way is it the most dangerous good? 3. In what sense is it a good at all?

First of all, we take note of where this key verse about language is found: in the draft of a poem which is supposed to say who man is in distinction to the other beings of nature; mention is made of the rose, the swans, the stag in the forest (IV, 300 and 385). Distinguishing man from the other living creatures, the cited fragment begins thus: “But man dwells in huts.”

Who is man? He is the one who must bear witness to what he is. To bear witness can signify to testify, but it also means to be answerable for what one has testified in one’s testimony. Man is he who he is precisely in the attestation of his own existence. This attestation does not mean a subsequent and additional expression of man’s being; rather, it forms a part of man’s existence. But what should man testify to? To his belonging to the earth. This belonging consists in the fact that man is the inheritor, and the learner of all things. But things, of course, stand in opposition. What keeps things apart in opposition and at the same time joins them together, Hölderlin calls “intimacy.” The attestation of belonging to this intimacy occurs through the creation of a world and through its rise, as well as through its destruction and decline. The attestation of man’s being, and thus his authentic fulfillment, comes from freedom of decision. Decision takes hold of what is necessary, and places itself in the bond of a highest claim. Man’s being a witness to his belonging among beings as a whole occurs as history. But so that history may be possible, language has been given to man. It is one of man’s goods.
But in what sense is language "the most dangerous good"? It is the danger of all dangers because it first creates the possibility of a danger. Danger is the threat that beings pose to being itself. But it is only by virtue of language at all that man is exposed to something manifest: beings which press upon him and inflame him in his existence, or nonbeings which deceive and disappoint him. Language first creates the manifest place of this threat to being, and the confusion and thus the possibility even of the loss of being, that is—danger. But language is not only the danger of dangers; rather, it necessarily shelters within itself a continual danger to itself. Language is charged with the task of making beings manifest and preserving them as such—in the linguistic work. Language gives expression to what is most pure and most concealed, as well as to what is confused and common. Indeed, even the essential word, if it is to be understood and so become the common possession of all, must make itself common. Accordingly, it is said in another of Hölderlin's fragments: "You spoke to the divinity, but this you have all forgotten, that the first-fruits are not for mortals, that they belong to the gods. The fruit must first become more common, more everyday, then it will be the mortals' own" (IV, 238). The pure and the common are both equally something said. The word as word never offers any immediate guarantee as to whether it is an essential word or a deception. On the contrary—an essential word, in its simplicity, often looks like an inessential one. And on the other hand, what shows itself in its finery in the appearance of the essential is often merely something recited and repeated by rote. Thus language must constantly place itself into the illusion which it engenders by itself, and so endanger what is most its own, genuine utterance.

Now in what sense is this most dangerous thing a "good" for man? Language is his property. He has charge over it for the purpose of communicating his experiences, resolutions, and moods. Language serves to facilitate understanding. As an appropriate tool for this purpose, it is a "good." And yet being a means of making oneself understood does not constitute the essence of language. Such an account does not touch its actual essence, but rather only points to a consequence of the essence. Language is not merely a tool which man possesses alongside many
others; rather, language first grants the possibility of standing in the midst of the openness of beings. Only where there is language, is there world, that is, the constantly changing cycle of decision and work, of action and responsibility, but also of arbitrariness and turmoil, decay and confusion. Only where world holds sway is there history. Language is a good in a more primordial sense. It holds good for the fact that man can be as historical, i.e., it guarantees that. Language is not a tool at man’s disposal, but that primal event which disposes of the highest possibility of man’s being. We must first of all assure ourselves of this essence of language, in order truly to comprehend the domain of poetry and thus poetry itself. How does language occur? In order to find the answer to this question, let us consider a third of Hölderlin’s key verses.

3.

We come across these words in a long and complicated draft of the unfinished poem which begins “Conciliator, you who never believed . . .” (IV, 162ff. and 339ff.):

Much has man experienced.
Named many of the heavenly ones,
Since we have been a conversation
And able to hear from one another. (IV, 343)

Let us first choose the line which has a direct bearing on what we have discussed so far: “Since we have been a conversation. . . .” We—human beings—are a conversation. Man’s being is grounded in language; but this actually occurs only in conversation. Conversation, however, is not only a way in which language takes place, but rather language is essential only as conversation. What we usually mean by “language,” namely, a stock of words and rules for combining them, is only an exterior aspect of language. But now what is meant by “conversation”? Obviously, the act of speaking with one another about something. Speaking, then, mediates our coming to one another. But Hölderlin says, “Since we have been a conver-
sation and able to hear from one another." Being able to hear is not merely a consequence of speaking with one another, but is on the contrary the presupposition of speaking. But even being able to hear is itself in turn based upon the possibility of the word and has need of it. Being able to talk and being able to hear are co-original. We are a conversation—and that means we are able to hear from one another. We are a conversation, that always also signifies we are one conversation. The unity of a conversation consists in the fact that in the essential word there is always manifest that one and the same on which we agree, on the basis of which we are united and so are authentically ourselves. Conversation and its unity support our existence.

But Hölderlin does not simply say "we are a conversation"—rather—"Since we have been a conversation. . . ." Even where man's ability to speak is present and is put into practice, the essential event of language—conversation—does not necessarily occur. Since when have we been a conversation? If there is to be one conversation, the essential word must remain related to what is one and the same. Without this relation, even a quarrel is impossible. But the one and the same can be manifest only within the light of something that remains. However, permanence and endurance come to appearance only when persistence and presence light up. But this occurs in the moment in which time opens itself up in its dimensions. Since man has placed himself in the presence of something lasting, he can expose himself to the changeable, to what comes and goes; for only the persistent is changeable. Only since "torrential time" has been broken up into present, past, and future, has it become possible to agree upon something that remains over time. We have been one conversation since the time when there "is time." Ever since time arose and was brought to stand, since then we are historical. Both—to be one conversation and to be historical—are equally ancient, they belong together, and they are the same.

Since we have been a conversation—man has experienced much and named many of the gods. Since language has authentically come to pass as conversation, the gods have come to expression and a world has appeared. But again it is important to see that the presence of the gods and the appearance of the world are not merely a consequence of the occurrence
of language; rather, they are simultaneous with it. And this to the extent that it is precisely in the naming of the gods and in the world becoming word that authentic conversation, which we ourselves are, consists.

But the gods can come to expression only if they themselves address us and place us under their claim. A word which names the gods is always an answer to such a claim. Its answer always springs from the responsibility of a destiny. Only because the gods bring our existence to language do we enter the realm of the decision concerning whether we are to promise ourselves to the gods or whether we are to deny ourselves to them.

Only now can we fully judge what this line means: “Since we have been a conversation. . . .” Since the gods have brought us into conversation, since that time is there time, since then the ground of our existence has been a conversation. The statement that language is the highest event of human existence thus receives its significance and foundation.

But the question at once arises: How does this conversation, which we are, begin? Who performs the naming of the gods? Who takes hold of something enduring in torrential time and brings it to stand in the word? Hölderlin tells us this with the secure simplicity of the poet. Let us listen to a fourth of his key verses.

4.

This line forms the conclusion of the poem “Remembrance” and reads: “But what remains is founded by the poets” (IV, 63). This line throws light on our question of the essence of poetry. Poetry is a founding by the word and in the word. What is established in this way? What remains. But how can what remains be founded? Is it not that which has always already been present? No! Precisely what remains must be secured against being carried away; the simple must be wrested from the complex, measure must be opposed to excess. What supports and dominates beings as a whole must come into the open. Being must be disclosed, so that beings may appear. But even this, though it remains, is transitory. “Everything heavenly is
quickly passing; but not in vain” (IV, 163ff.). But that this may abide and remain, it is “entrusted to the care and service of those who make poems” (IV, 145). The poet names the gods and names all things with respect to what they are. This naming does not merely come about when something already previously known is furnished with a name; rather, by speaking the essential word, the poet’s naming first nominates the beings as what they are. Thus they become known as beings. Poetry is the founding of being in the word. What endures is never drawn from the transient. What is simple can never be directly derived from the complex. Measure does not lie in excess. We never find the ground in the abyss. Being is never a being. But because being and the essence of things can never be calculated and derived from what is present at hand, they must be freely created, posited, and bestowed. Such free bestowal is a founding.

But when the gods are originally named and the essence of things comes to expression so that the things first shine forth, when this occurs, man’s existence is brought into a firm relation and placed on a ground. The poet’s saying is not only foundation in the sense of a free bestowal, but also in the sense of the firm grounding of human existence on its ground. If we comprehend this essence of poetry, that it is the founding of being in the word, then we can divine something of the truth of that verse which Hölderlin spoke long after he had been taken away into the protection of the night of madness.

5.

We find this fifth key verse in the great and awe-inspiring poem which begins:

In lovely blueness blooms the
Steeple with its metal roof. (VI, 24ff.)

Here Hölderlin says (line 32ff.):
Full of merit, yet poetically, man
Dwells on this earth.

Whatever man brings about and pursues is earned and merited by his own efforts. "Yet"—says Hölderlin in sharp opposition—all this does not touch the essence of his dwelling on this earth, all this does not reach into the ground of human existence. Human existence is "poetic" in its ground. But we now understand poetry as a founding—through the naming of gods and of the essence of things. "To dwell poetically" means to stand in the presence of the gods and to be struck by the essential nearness of things. Existence is "poetic" in its ground—which means, at the same time, as founded (grounded), it is not something earned, but is rather a gift.

Poetry is not merely an ornament accompanying existence, not merely a temporary enthusiasm and certainly not excitement or amusement. Poetry is the sustaining ground of history, and therefore not just an appearance of culture, above all not the mere "expression" of the "soul of a culture."

That our existence is poetic in its ground cannot mean, in the end, that it is really just a harmless game. But does not Hölderlin himself, in the first key verse that we cited, call poetry "this most innocent of all occupations"? How can this be reconciled with the essence of poetry which we have now unfolded? That brings us back to the question which we first put aside. By answering this question, we shall try at the same time to summarize, to bring before our inner eyes, the essence of poetry and of the poet.

First it became clear that poetry's domain is language. The essence of poetry must therefore be conceived out of the essence of language. But it later became apparent that poetry is a founding: a naming of being and of the essence of all things—not just any saying, but that whereby everything first steps into the open, which we then discuss and talk about in everyday language. Hence poetry never takes language as a material at its disposal; rather, poetry itself first makes language possible. Poetry is the primal language of a historical people. Thus the essence of language must be understood out of the essence of poetry and not the other way around.
The foundation of human existence is conversation as the authentic occurrence of language. But the primary language is poetry as the founding of being. Language, however, is "the most dangerous of goods." Thus poetry is the most dangerous work and at the same time the "most innocent of all occupations."

In fact—only if we think these two conceptions together as one do we comprehend the full essence of poetry.

But, then, is poetry the most dangerous work? In a letter to a friend, written immediately before his departure for his last journey to France, Hölderlin writes: "O friend! The world lies before me, brighter and more serious than before! I am pleased with what happens, I am pleased as when in the summer 'the old holy father with calm hand shakes the holy lightning flashes out of the red clouds.' For among all that I can see of God, this sign has become my chosen one. I used to be able to rejoice over a new truth, a better view of what is above us and around us, but now I fear that I shall end like old Tantalus, who received more from the gods than he could digest" (V, 321).

The poet is exposed to the god's lightning flashes. This is spoken of in that poem which we consider to be the purest poem on the essence of poetry, and which begins:

As when on a holiday, to see the field
A countryman goes out, át morning, . . . (IV, 151ff.)

Here it is said in the last stanza:

Yet us it behooves, you poets, to stand
Bare-headed beneath God's thunderstorms,
To grasp the Father's ray, itself, with our own hands
And to offer to the people
The heavenly gift wrapt in song.

And a year later, after Hölderlin, struck by madness, had returned to his mother's house, he wrote to the same friend, recalling his stay in France:
The mighty element, the fire of the heavens and the stillness of men, their life in nature, and their confinedness and their contentment, moved me continually, and as one says of heroes, I can well say of myself that Apollo has struck me. (V, 327)

Excessive brightness drove the poet into darkness. Do we need any further testimony in regard to the extreme danger of his “occupation”? The poet’s own fate tells us everything. Hölderlin’s verse in Empedocles resounds like a premonition:

... He must
Leave on time, through whom the spirit spoke. (III, 154)

And yet poetry is the “most innocent of all occupations.” So Hölderlin writes in his letter, not only to spare his mother, but because he knows that this harmless exterior belongs to the essence of poetry, just as the valley belongs to the mountain; for how else could this most dangerous work be carried out and preserved, if the poet were not “cast out” (Empedocles, III, 191) of ordinary life and protected from it by the appearance of the harmless of his occupation?

Poetry looks like a game and yet it is not. A game does indeed bring men together, but in such a manner that each forgets himself. In poetry, on the contrary, man is gathered upon the ground of his existence. There he comes to rest; not, of course, to the illusory rest of inactivity and emptiness of thought, but to that infinite rest in which all powers and relations are quickened (cf. his letter to his brother, January 1, 1799, III, 368f.).

Poetry awakens the illusion of the unreal and of the dream as opposed to the tangible and clamorous actuality in which we believe ourselves to be at home. And yet, on the contrary, what the poet says and undertakes to be is what is truly real. So Panthea, with the clear knowledge of a friend, acknowledges of Empedocles (III, 78):

... To be himself, that is
Life and we others are only the dream of it.
Thus the essence of poetry seems to vacillate within the semblance of its own exterior aspect, and yet stands firm after all. In fact, it is itself, in its essence, a founding—that is: firm grounding.

To be sure, every founding remains a free gift, and Hölderlin hears it said: “Poets be free, like swallows” (I, 168). This freedom, however, is not unrestrained arbitrariness and headstrong desire, but supreme necessity.

As the founding of being, poetry is bound in a twofold sense. In viewing this most intimate law, we first grasp its essence in its entirety.

... and hints are,
From time immemorial, the language of the gods. (IV, 135)

The poet’s saying is the intercepting of these hints, in order to pass them on to his people. The intercepting of hints is a receiving, and yet at the same time, a new giving; for in the “first signs” the poet catches sight of what has been completed, andboldly puts what he has seen into his word in order to foretell what is not yet fulfilled. Thus

... the bold spirit flies, like the eagle
Ahead of the thunderstorm, prophesying
The coming of his gods. (IV, 135)

The founding of being is bound to the god’s hints. And at the same time the poetic word is only the interpretation of the “voice of the people.” That is what Hölderlin calls the saying in which a people remembers its belonging to beings as a whole. But often his voice falls silent and exhausts itself. It is not at all capable of saying by itself what is authentic—it has need of those who interpret it. The poem which bears the title “Voice of the People” has been preserved for us in two versions. It is primarily the concluding stanzas which are different, but in such a way that they comple-ment each other. In the first version, the conclusion reads:

Because it is pious, for love of the heavenly
I honor the voice of the people, the calm,
But for the sake of gods and men,
May it not always rest too willingly. (IV, 141)
We add the second version:

... and sayings
Are indeed good, for they are a memory
To the highest, yet there is also a need of
One to interpret the holy sayings. (IV, 144)

Thus the essence of poetry is joined to the laws which strive to separate and unite the hints of the gods and the voice of the people. The poet himself stands between the former—the gods—and the latter—the people. He is the one who has been cast out—out into that *between*, between gods and men. But first and only in this between is it decided who man is and where his existence is settled. “Poetically man dwells on this earth.”

Unceasingly and ever more securely, out of the fullness of the images pressing on him, and ever more simply, Hölderlin has consecrated his poetic word to this realm of the between. It is this that compels us to say that he is the poet’s poet.

Can we still believe that Hölderlin is trapped in an empty and excessive self-contemplation owing to the lack of worldly content? Or do we recognize that this poet, because of an excess of impetus, poetically thinks through to the ground and center of being. It is to Hölderlin himself that we must apply the verse which he said of Oedipus in that late poem “In lovely blueness blooms . . .”:

Perhaps King Oedipus has
One eye too many. (VI, 26)

Hölderlin puts into poetry the very essence of poetry—but not in the sense of a timelessly valid concept. This essence of poetry belongs to a definite time. But not in such a way that it merely conforms to that time as some time already existing. Rather, by providing anew the essence of poetry, Hölderlin first determines a new time. It is the time of the gods who have fled *and of* the god who is coming. It is the *time of need* because it stands in a double lack and a double not: in the no-longer of the gods who have fled and in the not-yet of the god who is coming.
The essence of poetry which is founded by Hölderlin is historical in the highest degree, because it anticipates a historical time. As a historical essence; however, it is the only true essence.

Lean and needy is the time, and thus its poet is overrich—so rich that he would often like to languish in the thought of those who have been, and in expectation of the one who is coming, and would simply like to sleep in this apparent emptiness. But he holds firm in the Nothingness of this night. In that the poet in his supreme isolation keeps his mission to himself, he brings about the truth vicariously and therefore truly for his people. The seventh stanza of the elegy "Bread and Wine" (IV, 123ff.) proclaims this. There it is said poetically what here could only be thoughtfully discussed.

But, my friend, we come too late. Indeed, the gods are living,
But above our heads, up in another world.
Endlessly there they act and seem little to care
Whether we live, or not, so much do the heavenly spare us.
For a fragile vessel is not always able to hold them,
Only at times can man bear divine fullness.
Henceforth life is a dream about them. But wandering astray
Helps, like sleep, and need and night makes us strong,
Until heroes enough have grown in the strong cradle,
Hearts, as once, resemble the heavenly in strength.
Thundering then they come. Meanwhile, I often think it is
Better to sleep than so to be without friends,
So to be always waiting, and what to do and say in the meanwhile
I do not know and what are poets for in a time of need?
But they are, you say, like those holy priests of the wine-god
Who traveled from land to land in holy night.

NOTES

1. Ereignis. See EHP, Second Edition (1951): "intentionally ambiguous—strictly speaking, it [Ereignis] would have to mean 'but the primal event, which as such...’"
2. EHP, Second Edition (1951): “see Being and Time, Sections 79–81.”