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Greek Tragedy
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Nature By Design

The hymn of the Ister, as authored by Friedrich Hölderlin, bears a significant weight regarding the concept of dwelling as understood by the twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger, on account of the metaphysical quality which it intrinsically possesses. The relation of human dwelling on this earth must be contrasted to that of the gods, which carries its expression in the very nature, or *physis*, of the earth itself. As Hölderlin expresses, the river, in particular the Ister, more colloquially known as the Danube, represents the site of interaction between humankind and the divine. It bears this quality on account of its very nature as a lifeblood for civilization, not only literally in the sense of provision but also, as Hölderlin posits, as a vehicle for cultural transformation and transfusion. It is through this passage that the Ister both as a work of art and as a physical entity brings into harmony mortal and the gods. This must bear analysis from a Heideggerian perspective, which posits the site of human dwelling as the source of their very ethos. This ethos as well as the river itself, comes from the gods who provide for the necessary conditions for life in the first place, making this work at its core an expression of thanks to the divine.

The river known as the Ister serves as a site of human dwelling due to its properties of transportation which bring both time and space together. The very name Ister serves as a mechanism of relation between past and present, as this reference comes from the days of antiquity, as opposed to the modern name of the Danube. The very river which was the border of the Roman empire and the end of the civilized world, holds itself as a physical tie

between the world of the Greeks and Romans and that of the modern German people. To this end, Hölderlin states that “yet almost this river seems to travel backward” (P 257), which refers to how despite its origin physically being in the Alpine mountain range, the chronology of civilization begins at the Black Sea where the Greeks colonized. He then goes on to refer to the river coming from the east, which much could be said about for the reason many features of religion, philosophy, art, and culture traveled from the societies east of the river such as from Persia and India to the world of the Mediterranean. The line, “we sing from the Indus” (P 255) refers to this as well, as this river serves as a breeding ground for society in the region of India. Here, again the physical concept of a river has implication as the source of societal development. This concept bears straightforward enough logic, for water has always been a necessary ingredient for human civilization, with the Indus, Nile, Tigris, Euphrates, and Yangtze all spawning civilizations in the earliest of days.

The river of the Ister serves as a connection between the world of humanity and the gods themselves. The references to such in the poem include that of it “invit[ing] Hercules” (P 255), the Roman demigod. Its coolness found appreciation even in the greatest hero of legend. To this end, rivers exist as gods acting upon the earth to provide for humankind's needs. Humanity cannot bring a river into being, yet they require such in order to prosper, which speaks to the providence of the divine. As the poem begins, with a command for heavenly fire to come, so do the gods bring into being rivers for the sustenance of life. As Hölderlin transcribes, rivers “make arable the land”, which allows humanity to dwell around them. To this end, they exist as permanent dwelling sites for humans. Rivers allow for the process of habitation which defines the experience of life. Heidegger understands dwelling to be something that the human being does in an uncomfortable state as there is a constant dynamic at play between the native and the foreign. These concepts bear significance in this poem as well. The foreign for Hölderlin of course being that of the Greeks, while the native of the Germans, and the relation between both can be understood through the Ister.

The metaphysical presence of the river relates to the spaces in which both cultures exist, as well as allowing for the physical transportation of ideas between them. In order to understand his position as a German, Hölderlin relates his understanding to that of the Greeks, in such a process enacting the transition between that of the proper and the alien with which Heidegger is concerned. A reading of the Ister done in a true Heideggerian sense, understands that the river allows for habitation to develop for human society. This is because it provides sustenance and provision that maintains life. To Heidegger as I see it, dwelling exists as a process through which one finds one's identity, so the site where life finds its origin bears great significance.

The characteristics of the poem itself serve as an ode to the relation between humanity and the gods, due to the intent made by Hölderlin to characterize it as a hymn. The word choice enacted compares in style to that of religious works paying respect to the work of divinity. The characteristics of the physical river are drawn out as specific efforts by the gods to provide for life's existence. It is praised for its existence, and its specific features as a vehicle for the movement of culture draw attention to as an intended design. The reason why water cuts through rocks is for life to come into existence, but this is, for Hölderlin, not without design. What a river is for in a human understanding, none can say, for its creation does not belong to us. Without a river, Hölderlin states the earth would be "desolate else, unabiding" (P 257). This last word can also be translated from German as "inhospitable", which relates in theme heavily to the idea of Heidegger's dwelling. The hospitable is what is proper to oneself, and to this end is the native, to the author of the poem this would be German culture, yet the title bears the name in Latin. This bears a sense of irony which defines an understanding of the native and the foreign as intrinsically related, and bearing definitions from each other. The hospitable remains what is unknown to oneself, also bearing back to Heidegger and his sense of the human being uncomfortable in its own existence. The gods give to each person their own proper existence, but this cannot be understood without stepping into what was not granted to oneself.

To understand this poem from a perspective of Heideggerian dwelling it is impossible to overstate the significance of the contrast between the native and the foreign. This poem as a work bears definition through this specific distinction as it is made between the Germans and the Greeks as peoples. One must find one's way in the world by navigating this distinction under his worldview, and no better representation exists than the river of the Ister to make this comparison. It is the gods themselves that bring into being a river, yet it is the development of human society across it that makes this comparison so apt. It is "not for nothing rivers flow through dry land" (P 257). This comment is made just after speaking on the Rhine river, which flows north to south, which does not align with the diffusion of culture which remains relevant to the understanding of the native and the foreign in Hölderlin's context. The flow of the river from east to west exists as significant because it distinguishes the two cultures under examination here.

The river of the Ister characterizes the relationship between humankind and the divine, due to the nature of its existence as has been explained thus far. The *physis* of the river unites the *nomos* or cultures of the ancient Greeks and modern Germans, and in doing so encompasses the essence of being. This correlation between culture and nature speaks to the work of the divine, as these two opposing forces serve as the *chiasm* around which all of human society bears formulation. The ability to enact such connections across time and space intrinsically speaks to the divine, as humans themselves can not live to make such connections physically but can only comment on them in art such as poetry. It is in poetry itself that language is encompassed most effectively, as the meaning of each word can be broken apart and analyzed for its unique qualities and meanings. For such reasons, the poem *The Ister*, itself serves as a relation between these two modes of life: mortal and immortal. The ability of humanity to see beyond *kronos* time, or that of chronology, bears limitation in all but poetic and philosophical thinking. It remains through *kairos* that such connections as those undertaken by Hölderlin can be articulated. Viewing the river of the Danube as a metaphysical capsule for cultural experience and knowledge must place time

on a scale of measurement that extends far beyond a lifetime, so it must be understood instead from the perspective of the divine.

The very name of the poem and that the river is given itself as stated before bears great importance. The concept of something receiving a name speaks to it being civilized and thus categorized and understood. The line, "This one, however, is called the Ister" (P 255) must be analyzed, for the name selected defines how the thing itself should be understood. Those who give a name to a place or thing are those who have power over it, and to this end, it is humans who give names to aspects of nature such as a river. It is unknowable if the divine gives names to things, so therefore the way something bears understanding to humans must come from them. This relates to the idea of dwelling, as to continue it typically is those who live in a place who name it, thus associating a name with dwelling as a concept. The gods do not live around or have a need for rivers, instead, they are constructed for humans to habituate. This again is why the reference to Hercules bears such weight for he should be the ideal hero and person in a classical sense, and he himself had need for the Ister's provisions. The name of the Ister comes from humans themselves and bears employment here at the utilization of it by them.

Taken as a whole, the text of the Ister represents an ode to the divine to appreciate what they provided for humanity to flourish alongside. The connections to the divine are essential to define the way in which Hölderlin believes the river to be significant. That is to say, it is a metaphysical tie between the society and people of the ancient Greeks to the modern Germans. It represents a gift from the divine, where humanity can make itself at home, and to this end dwell and find habitation. To incorporate Heidegger into this reading, one must understand dwelling as something that is done in relation to the native and the foreign, which again Hölderlin is playing out even with the title of the work itself. The ability of the river to bring about life gives it its divine quality, as there is a specific intention in the place of the river as well as its existence in the first place. Humanity can not bring about the means of its own existence, but simply take advantage of what exists from the provision of on high. This defines the hymn-like quality of the poem itself, for

Hölderlin gives thanks to the gods for their creation which has allowed for the development of society as he sees as necessary from the Mediterranean to above the Alps.

The existence of the Ister serves as a connection between the gods and humanity because it serves as a throughline for the development of society in Europe as seen by Hölderlin. The specific river of the Ister remains selected for this poem for the reason it connects the many different *chiasms* that are under investigation by the author. The connection between *nomos* and *physis*, *kairos* and *kronos* time, the relation between the native and the foreign, the interactions between Greeks and Germans, and lastly that of humanity and the gods, are all defined under the umbrella of the river itself. The poem itself serves as a hymn to thank the gods for their creation, which has allowed the author to connect these numerous points, due to the nature of dwelling itself as a concept. The idea of a river makes possible the reality of life, and so does the specific idea of the river Ister allowing for the progress of civilization in a Western context. The river itself appears to travel from east to west instead of its actual course of west to east due to this progress. The metaphysical idea of the river gives Hölderlin a sense of where he dwells in his own time and space, and so does the physical existence of a river provide for the existence of life itself. In both regards, the gods must be thanked.

The name of the poem and river defines how it should bear perception, for instead of being known by its modern name, Hölderlin selects that the term from antiquity be employed, as one must understand the foreign in order to exist in the native capacity. To understand this in a Heideggerian measure one must prioritize the position of the human being as unaware of its own existence, and therefore needing to understand what exists outside the boundaries of what has proper qualities to oneself. This exercise remains what Hölderlin practices in this poem, in the sense that he is defining his understanding of how he relates to a river essential to his own cultures self-concept through the filter of the culture of the ancient Greeks. This exists as precisely the effort which Heidegger would wish for us all to do on a nearly daily basis, in order for each person to be aware of what truly belongs to them. The river of the Ister serves as a critical *chiasm* for each particular

connection Hölderlin attempts to achieve throughout his poetry, and specifically it represents a key source of where Heidegger receives his understanding of how humans dwell in the world. It would be impossible to not make the connection that the former inspired the later, specifically as Heidegger wrote on this poem specifically. To this end he is reaching back into his own culture in order to understand the development of the world from a standpoint of the gods and man. Ultimately, the poem and the river of the Ister itself serve as a crucial point of inflection on the relation of human dwelling to their connection with the gods, and ultimately how the natural world itself exists as a product of design with specific intentions to bring about both life and culture.