

## Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin (written c. 1799-1803)

### The Ister<sup>1</sup>

Now is the time for fire!  
Impatient for the daylight,  
We're on our knees,  
Exhausted with waiting.  
It's then, in that silence,  
We hear the woods' strange call.  
Meanwhile, we sing from the Indus<sup>2</sup>,  
Which comes from far away, and  
From the Alpheus<sup>3</sup>, since we've  
Long desired decorum.  
It's not without dramatic flourish  
That one grasps  
Straight ahead  
What is closest  
To reach the other side.  
But here we want to build.  
Rivers make the land fertile  
And allow the foliage to grow.  
And if in the summer  
Animals gather at a watering place  
People will go there, too.

This river is called the Ister.  
It lives in beauty. Columns of leaves burn  
And stir. They stand in the forest  
Supporting each other; above,  
A second dimension juts out  
From a dome of stones. So I'm  
Not surprised that the distantly gleaming river  
Made Hercules its guest,  
When in search of shadows  
He came down from Olympus  
And up from the heat of Isthmus.

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<sup>1</sup> Unknown translator. "Ister" is the Classical Greek name for the Danube River.

<sup>2</sup> Along with the Ganges River, the Indus is one of the main rivers on the Indian subcontinent of Asia located mostly in modern-day Pakistan.

<sup>3</sup> River on the Peloponnesian peninsula in Greece.

They were full of courage there,  
Which always comes in handy, like cool water  
And a path for the spirit to follow.  
That's why the hero preferred  
To come to the water's source, its fragrant yellow banks  
Black with fir trees, in whose depths  
The hunter likes to roam  
At noon and the resinous trees  
Moan as they grow.

Yet the river almost seems  
To flow backwards, and I  
Think it must come  
From the East.  
Much could  
Be said further. But why does  
It hang so straight from the mountain? That other river,  
The Rhine<sup>4</sup>, has gone away  
Sideways. Not for nothing rivers  
Flow in dryness. But how? We need a sign,  
Nothing more, something plain and simple,  
To remind us of sun and moon, so inseparable,  
Which go away — day and night also —  
And warm each other in heaven.  
They give joy to the highest god. For how  
Can he descend to them? And like earth's ancient greenness  
They are the children of heaven. But he seems  
Too indulgent to me, not freer,  
And almost scornful. For when

Day begins in youth,  
Where it commences growing,  
Another is already there  
To further enhance the beauty, and chafes  
At the bit like foals. And if he is happy  
Distant breezes hear the commotion;  
But the rock needs engraving  
And the earth needs its furrows;

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<sup>4</sup> The headwaters for the Rhine and Danube rivers are near each other in the Alps mountains, but they flow in different directions, with the Rhine flowing mostly north and west while the Danube flows mostly east.

If not, an endless desolation;  
But what a river will do,  
Nobody knows.

### As on a Holiday<sup>5</sup>

As on a holiday, when a farmer  
Goes out to look at his fields, in the morning,  
After cool lightning has fallen through the hot night,  
And thunder still echoes in the distance,  
And the stream returns to its banks,  
And the earth becomes green and fresh,  
And drops of joyful rain from heaven rest  
Upon the vines, and the trees in the grove  
Stand shining in the quiet sun —

Thus poets stand in favorable weather:  
Those whom no master, but rather Nature,  
Mighty and beautiful in its divinity, wonderfully  
And universally present, educates with gentle embrace.  
And when Nature appears to sleep at some seasons,  
Either in the sky or among plants or nations,  
So the aspect of poets is also mournful.  
They seem to be alone, but their foreknowledge continues.  
For Nature itself is prescient, as it rests.

Now it is day! I waited to see it come,  
And what I saw — my words bespeak holiness!  
For Nature, who is older than time,  
Standing above the gods of the Occident and Orient,  
Has awakened to the sounds of arms.  
All-creating Nature feels the enthusiasm anew,  
From Aether down to the abyss,  
As when she was born of holy Chaos,  
According to the established law.

And as fire shines in a man's eye  
When he plans something great,  
So a fire is kindled again in the minds  
Of poets, by the signs and deeds of the world.

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<sup>5</sup> Unknown translator.

What happened before, scarcely sensed,  
Becomes apparent now for the first time.  
And those who plowed our fields  
In the form of smiling laborers  
Are now recognized as the all-living  
Forces of the gods.

Would you question them? Their spirit moves in song,  
Grown from the sun of day and the warm earth,  
And from storms, those of the air, and others  
Originating farther within the depths of time,  
More perceptible and meaningful to us,  
Drifting between heaven and earth, and among nations.  
They are thoughts of the common spirit,  
Quietly ending in the mind of the poet,

Which, long familiar with the infinite,  
Is struck quickly, and shakes with the memory.  
Set on fire by the holy radiance,  
It creates a song — the fruit born of love,  
The work of gods and man,  
Bearing witness to both.  
Thus lightning fell on Semele's house,  
As poets relate, since she wanted to see  
A god in person. Struck by the god,  
She gave birth to holy Bacchus,  
The fruit of the storm.

Thus the sons of earth now drink in  
The fire of heaven without danger.  
And it is our duty, poets, to stand  
Bare-headed under the storms of God,  
Grasping with our own hand  
The Father's beam itself,  
And to offer the gift of heaven,  
Wrapped in song, to the people.  
If our hearts are pure, like children,  
And our hands are guiltless,

The Father's pure radiance won't sear;  
And the deeply shaken heart, sharing

The suffering of the stronger god,  
Will endure the raging storms when he approaches.

But alas, if from -----  
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Alas!

And if I now say -----

I had come to see the gods,  
They themselves cast me down to the living,  
Me, the false priest, down to darkness,  
That I sing a song of warning to those able to learn.  
There ---<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The unfinished, fragmentary ending of the poem is not unusual among other Romantic poets. Other famous examples of apparently unfinished, fragmentary poems in this time period include "Kubla Khan" by Coleridge, *Hyperion* by Keats, and *The Triumph of Life* by Shelley. (In Shelley's case, this may have been accidental as he died in a boating accident while composing this last of his works.)