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The Untamed Earth: The Labor of Rivers in Hölderlin's *Der Ister*

What would move a river to leave its hiding place? What could compel it to abandon its source? Why would it venture into a valley where it would be exposed to the heat of the sun, when it could still enjoy the protection of trees and rock? These are familiar questions in Hölderlin's late poetry, which returns again and again to the theme of the rivers that at once connect mortals and immortals, while at the same time holding them apart so that each may relate to the other as "harmonically opposing" terms, to borrow a phrase from Hölderlin's poetic theory.¹ Rivers make music, or better yet, they establish harmony. It is, however, a harmony that can be disrupted at any point owing to an excess of matter or spirit. Rivers can overflow, or alternatively they can dry up; they can resist the banks that surround them, or these same banks can resist and impede their progress. Either event exposes the uneasy relationship between spirit and matter that is in fact the basis of life for Hölderlin.

Life emerges out of a conflict, a contest between organic and aorgic tendencies, which can be quelled but never overcome or resolved permanently.² When these two tendencies are reconciled, song arises. It flows like the rivers that turn deserts into luxuriant fields, as Hölderlin notes in more than one poem. In *Der Ister*, for instance, he writes with uncharacteristic bluntness, "Denn Ströme machen urbar / Das Land" (*StA* II: 190, ll. 16-17) and in *Der Rhein* he likewise underscores,

Und schön ists, wie er drauf,
Nachdem er die Berge verlassen,
Stillwandelnd sich im deutschen Lande
Begnüget und das Sehnen stillt
Im guten Geschäfte, wenn er das Land baut
Der Vater Rhein und liebe Kinder nährt
In Städten, die er gegründet. (*StA* II: 144, ll. 84-89)

Finally in *Wie wenn am Feiertage* he compares the rivers that irrigate fields to the grapevine, which unites the fire of heaven (i.e., lightning) and elements from the deep in its fruit and in so doing tames both impulses. Indeed the synthesis of these two harmonically opposing forces produces wine, which is as much a symbol of culture as of

1 The term plays a central role in Hölderlin's theory of the alternation of tones in poetry. See Friedrich Hölderlin: *Über die Verfahrungsweise des poetischen Geistes*. In: Friedrich Hölderlin: *Sämtliche Werke*. Ed. Friedrich Beissner. 8 vols. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer 1946-74, IV: 241-265 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text and in the notes as *StA*). The same text appears under the title *Wenn der Dichter einmal des Geistes mächtig ist*, in Friedrich Hölderlin: *Sämtliche Werke. Frankfurter Ausgabe*. Vol. 14. Ed. Wolfram Groddeck and D. E. Sattler. Frankfurt/M.: Roter Stern 1979, p. 303-322.

2 Ernst Mörgel speculates that the term "aorgic" is Hölderlin's own coinage. It resembles Schelling's term "anorgic" but differs from this concept in important ways. For Schelling the organic and anorgic refer to opposing dimensions of nature. For Hölderlin the pair refers to the difference between humans equipped with the capacity for art and the forces of nature, which stand opposed to all human constructions. See Ernst Mörgel: *Natur als Revolution: Hölderlins Empedokles-Tragödie*. Stuttgart: Metzler 1992, p. 15.

agriculture, of poetry as of collective life: "Und daher trinken himmlischen Feuer jetzt / Die Erdensöhne ohne Gefahr" (StA II:119, ll.54-55).

Yet the achievements of culture are short-lived, and no poem demonstrates this more forcefully than *Wie wenn am Feiertage*, which breaks off as soon as the poet attempts to assume the role of mediator between mortals and immortals and is rejected as a false prophet:

Ich sei genaht, die Himmlischen zu schauen,
Sie selbst, sie werfen mich tief unter die Lebenden,
Den falschen Priester, ins Dunkel, daß ich
Das warnende Lied den Gelehrigen singe.
Dort (StA II:120, ll.70-74)

"Dort" is the last word of the poem, and it is as much a beginning as an end: the beginning of a sentence that was never to be written and a caesura that punctuates the text, although the text does not resume after the interruption, as the poet turns out to be the tragic sacrifice of his own work. That is, he dies as the figure he claimed to be—a heroic poet who could withstand God's presence and grasp "Des Vaters Stral, ihn selbst, mit eigener Hand" (StA II:119, l.58)—and what remains in his absence is merely a place, "Dort," which refers as much to the text as to the now vacant position of the poet. *Wie wenn am Feiertage* ends abruptly, or more precisely it stops *in medias res* because the consciousness that motivated it disappears, consumed by the divine fire it had struggled to grasp.

In his *Anmerkungen zur Antigone*, Hölderlin observes that in tragedy God comes to the foreground in the tragic hero's death, and this comment would seem particularly apt with respect to *Wie wenn am Feiertage*, even if it is not a dramatic work. As Hölderlin indicates elsewhere, what distinguishes genres is not their external form—say, whether they are written in epic hexameters or elegiac distiches—but the relation of their underlying tone (i.e., *Grundton, Bedeutung*) to their mode of presentation (i.e., *Darstellung, Kunstcharakter, Ausdruck*), a relation that can vary from work to work and which allows for such hybrid genres as a lyric tragedy and a tragic lyric.³ *Wie wenn am Feiertage* belongs to the latter category insofar as its underlying tone or meaning is ideal (pertaining to the *conception* of the poet as mediator) whereas its representation is heroic (pertaining to the *adventures* of an individual), which constitute the basic criteria for tragedy. (Tone and representation or artistic character are always opposing and their alternating relation is consequently dialectical.) That Hölderlin considers *Antigone* to be a lyric tragedy provides support for the claim that the two works are comparable in spite of their manifest differences.⁴ Yet the ultimate basis for their comparison is not their genre. If anything, this is merely an expression of the form that death takes in each—a form that determines their underlying tone and artistic character or representation.

3 Hölderlin discusses the differences in poetic genres in *Über den Unterschied der Dichtarten*, StA IV:266-272.

4 Hölderlin states that the style of *Antigone* is lyrical in contrast to *Oedipus*, which is tragic, in *Über den Unterschied der Dichtarten*: "Ist die intellectuelle Anschauung subjectiver, und gehet die Trennung vorzüglich von den concentrirten Theilen aus, wie bei der Antigone, so ist der Stil lyrisch, gehet sie mehr von den Nebentheilen aus und ist objective, so ist er episch, geht sie von dem höchsten Trennbaren, von Zeus aus wie bei Oedipus, so ist er tragisch" (StA IV:270).

What constitutes the caesura in both texts is a spiritual death. In *Wie wenn am Feiertage* it occurs in the word "Dort," which marks the point of the poet's retreat, the place where he disappears from his work, which functions henceforth as his epitaph, if not his tomb. In *Antigone*, it occurs in the third act as the protagonist considers the fate of Niobe, whose transformation into stone prefigures her own death in a sealed cave. Regarding this scene, Hölderlin writes:

Es ist ein großer Behelf der geheimarbeitenden Seele, daß sie auf dem höchsten Bewußtseyn dem Bewußtseyn ausweicht und, ehe sie wirklich der gegenwärtige Gott ergreift, mit kühnem, oft sogar blasphemischem Worte diesem begegnet, und so die heilige lebende Möglichkeit des Geistes erhält.

In hohem Bewußtseyn vergleicht sie sich dann immer mit Gegenständen, die kein Bewußtseyn haben, aber in ihrem Schicksaal des Bewußtseyns Form annehmen. So einer ist ein wüst gewordenes Land, das in ursprünglicher üppiger Fruchtbarkeit die Wirkungen des Sonnenlichts zu sehr verstärkt und darum dürrer wird. Schicksaal der phrygischen Niobe; wie überall Schicksaal der unschuldigen Natur, die überall in ihrer Virtuosität in eben dem grade ins Allzuorganische gehet, wie der Mensch sich dem Aorgischen nähert. (StA V:267-268)

It is beyond the scope of the present article to analyze this passage in depth, but it is important to point out that it expands upon the idea of infidelity (*Untreue*) introduced in the *Anmerkungen zum Oedipus* where gods and humans are said to turn away from each other as part of a process of purification after having tread too close to each other in an act that violated the separation of realms.⁵ There Hölderlin emphasized the infidelity of the gods who abandon humanity for humanity's sake, as epitomized in the line, "[D]enn göttliche Untreue ist am besten zu behalten," which is among the most frequently quoted lines from the text.⁶ Here, however, the soul would seem to abandon God for God's sake. Or rather: it abandons consciousness at the precise moment when the latter reaches its summit ("das höchste Bewußtseyn") and is all but indistinguishable from God insofar as both are manifestations of Spirit.⁷ At such moments Spirit is tempted to assert itself, that is, to seize or grasp ("ergreifen") everything it can incorporate into itself. Accordingly in the above-cited passage "der gegenwärtige Gott" stands poised to grasp "sie" ("die geheimarbeitende Seele"), which functions as the object of the verb, though the syntax somewhat obscures this point. In attempting to appropriate everything, however, Spirit runs the risk of devouring itself. As Hölderlin demonstrated in a brief text from 1794 with the sweeping title "Urtheil und Seyn," Spirit can affirm or verify itself only to the extent that it remains divided from itself. Every "Urtheil" is predicated on an "Ur-Theilung," a division of what is otherwise inaccessible to thought.⁸ The soul in retreating from consciousness and then blaspheming God provides the distance necessary for Spirit to relate to itself in the one form it can: as the opposing pair of God and human or immortal and mortal.

To create this space, however, the soul must sacrifice itself. This is the significance of the story of Niobe in the above-cited passage. In the *Iliad* Niobe is forced to see her children slaughtered and is turned to stone herself after boasting of her incomparable beauty in an unbridled act of hubris. Hölderlin would say she invites the divine fire with

⁵ Cf. StA V:202.

⁶ StA V:202.

⁷ Françoise Dastur argues in this vein that as soon as consciousness opens itself up to the divine, it runs the risk of being eradicated. See Françoise Dastur: *Hölderlin: Le retournement natal*. Paris: encre Marine 1997, p. 91-93.

⁸ Cf. StA IV:216.

these boasts, much like a bountiful land that attracts the rays of the sun and becomes a lifeless desert. Yet what links these two stories is not so much the transformation of a once fertile land or womb into a barren space. It is the power that the inorganic world acquires as the soul comes increasingly to identify with it and not with the mind or consciousness. The soul as the *locus classicus* of interiority is turned inside out; it becomes an exteriority and in this capacity stands opposite Spirit not just as a vehicle for Spirit's impress but as a force in its own right. Exteriorized, the soul functions as "[der] Geist der ewig lebenden ungeschriebenen Wildniß und der Todtenwelt" (StA V:266), which is how Hölderlin refers to "das Aorgische" elsewhere in the "Anmerkungen zur Antigonae."

This is the terrain into which rivers wander. It is a terrain that is hostile to all form and which as such makes the same claim to totality as the world of Spirit. Neither brooks any differentiation. What would lead a river to enter this space is a genuine question for Hölderlin and not merely a metaphorical one. How the wet interacts with the dry, water with earth, and finally water with fire and air is central to his cosmology. The lines "Umsonst nicht gehn / Im Troknen die Ströme" from *Der Ister* are consistent with this concern.⁹ What purpose the flowing of rivers serves in this poem and elsewhere in Hölderlin's writing is the subject of this essay.

I. *Jetzt komme, Feuer!*

The opening lines of *Der Ister* are among the most exultant Hölderlin wrote.¹⁰ In them, the poet calls on the sun to appear after what has presumably been a prolonged period of darkness:

Jetzt komme, Feuer!
Begierig sind wir
Zu schauen den Tag,
Und wenn die Prüfung
Ist durch die Knie gegangen,
Mag einer spüren das Waldgeschrei. (StA II:190, II.1-6)

However simple these lines may seem, they represent as speech acts a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. As soon as the word "Jetzt" is uttered, the moment for the sun's arrival has already come. The term marks a decisive break with whatever has happened heretofore. It signals that the moment has come in which we can now speak of the coming of the sun; it indicates that we can now say the word, "Now," without hesitation, since what unleashes the poem is nothing other than this moment, this day, this now which it struggles to catch up with or to meet ahead of its occurrence. In this respect the poem resembles the river after which it takes its name: the "Ister" which is Hölderlin's variation on the Greek *Istros*, the name for the lower portion of the Danube where the latter feeds into the Black Sea.

⁹ StA II: p. 192, II.49-50.

¹⁰ It should be noted that *Der Ister* is the title that Friedrich Beissner gave to the work. It is frequently referred to by its first line, "Jetzt, komme Feuer," in the secondary literature. While there are legitimate arguments for using the first line as a title, *Der Ister* strikes me as more fitting to the extent that it emphasizes the river, which is the explicit theme of the poem, rather than the fire which is important but secondary.

The Danube is a river that runs west to east rather than east to west, as the poem does not hesitate to point out. Indeed the speaker draws attention to this exact feature at the outset of the third stanza:

Der scheint aber fast
Rückwärts zu gehen und
Ich mein, er müsse kommen
Von Osten. (StA II:191, ll.41-44)

This is the first of two occasions in which the speaker reflects on how the river appears to him. The second occurs at the end of the same stanza when he comments on the river's lackluster pace at its beginning: "Aber allzuredultig / Scheint der mir" (StA II:191, ll.58-59). What is significant about these remarks, however, is not their personification of the river, nor even their emphasis on the speaker's subjective experience. (Neither gesture is unique to the poem.) Rather it is the parallel they establish between the river Ister and the poem Ister, both of which are loath to leave their source. Both hesitate to move forward when the future that awaits them seems to lie in their past—specifically in the East where Indo-European culture is born and the sun also rises.

The poem *The Ister* like the river Ister turns back as soon as it starts. No sooner does it announce the coming of the day, then it directs its attention toward the path the poet must have traveled to greet this day, to make this pronouncement—in short, to write this poem:

Wir singen aber vom Indus her
Fernangekommen und
Vom Alpheus. (StA II:190, ll.7-9)

In one of the most conspicuous instances of enjambment in the poem, the poet conflates what would seem to be the subject of his song—"Wir singen aber vom Indus her"—with the story of his origins, as in the statement, "Wir sind vom Indus her fernangekommen." This is hardly a surprising gesture given that we have come to expect poets to recount their past and to reflect on their adventures. But the overlap in these lines is more complicated than this. It is not merely that the poet sings of the place from which he and his fellow poets come. It is that his history is simultaneously the history of song. In other words, his story is simultaneously the story of culture as it moves from east to west, from the Indus Valley to Northern Europe via ancient Greece. This is the third meaning of the lines that the enjambment brings to the fore. The poet sings not only *of* the Indus river but also *from* this very place ("vom Indus her). His song is "[f]ernangekommen" in that it carries within it its past, its ancient origin in itself.

In the so-called Böhlendorff letter—the letter Hölderlin wrote to his friend Casimir Ulrich Böhlendorff in December 1801 on the eve of his departure to Bordeaux—he underscores the reversal of ancient and modern as well as eastern and western cultures outlined above.¹¹ The premise of the letter is that the most difficult skills to learn are

¹¹ Eric Santner points out that the letter is as much about reversal as it is about integration. Drawing on Peter Szondi's reading, he stresses that the challenge for the moderns is to absorb antiquity, albeit in a peculiarly modern way. See Eric L. Santner: *Friedrich Hölderlin: Narrative Vigilance and the Poetic Imagination*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1986, p. 56-60. Peter Szondi's remarkably elegant meditation on the letter can be found in Peter Szondi: "Überwindung des Klassizismus: Der Brief an Böhlendorff vom 4. Dezember 1801." In: Peter Szondi: *Hölderlin-Studien: Mit einem Traktat über philologische Erkenntnis*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1970, p. 95-118.

those that are innate. The terms Hölderlin uses are “das Eigene” and “das Nationale,” as in “Wir lernen nichts schwere als das Nationale freigebrauchen” (StA VI:426). He points to the ancient Greeks to argue that because the Hellenes were given to “sacred pathos,” their art remains composed, sober, and sedate; we by contrast are given to measure and thus tend to be exuberant in our art to overcome the distinctions between individual phenomena and events.¹² The chiasmic relation between innate character and artistic expression, however, is not limited to a single culture. It operates across cultures as well, and this is where Hölderlin’s anthropological theory of art becomes an aesthetic model of history. In what is perhaps the most revealing statement in the letter he recommends, “Aber das Eigene muß so gut gelernt seyn wie das Fremde. Deßwegen sind uns die Griechen unentbehrlich” (StA VI:426). The matter-of-factness of this statement should not belie its radicality. If the Greeks are indispensable to the modern Europeans, it is because they bring to the fore something that is otherwise hidden from the moderns: their essential character, their innate gifts. For Hölderlin, classical Greek art is quintessentially modern in that it expresses the restraint typical of European culture, even if the moderns are unaware of it. The case in point for this theory is Homer, whom he praises for his unrivalled “Geistesgegenwart und Darstellungsgaabe” (StA VI:426). Conversely modern art displays the passion that the ancient Greeks had to struggle to contain given their unique closeness to the gods or what Hölderlin calls “das Feuer vom Himmel” (StA VI:426). This fire, which is native to the Greeks, can only safely manifest itself abroad in Hesperia, the western land, the Occident.

Read against this backdrop the speaker’s appeal, “Jetzt komme, Feuer,” is an affirmation of the presence of fire at once in this work and in the river Ister. Fire is the inspiration that gives rise to the poem, even if the speaker claims it has yet to come pass or, as one might pun in German, it constitutes *das Zu-Kommende*. The same, however, holds true for the river Ister, which runs geographically from west to east, but which is nourished by rivers running east to west, including the Alpheus. Indeed in the *Aeneid* the Alpheus is said to pass under the Ionian Sea only to resurface in the island of Ortygia, modern day Sicily, where it feeds into the Arethusa River:

Alpheum fama est huc Elidis amnem
 occultas egisse vias subter mare, qui nunc
 ore, Arethusa, tuo Siculis confunditur undis.

[The tale runs that the Elean stream, Alpheus,
 Took hidden channels there under the sea,
 And through your fountain, Arethusa, now
 Infuses the salt waves.]¹³

Of note is that in the *Aeneid* the island of Ortygia is located in Hesperia and as such provides a bridge between the rivers of the Orient and the Occident otherwise divided by the sea.

12 Cf. StA VI: 426. Peter Fenves argues that in the eighteenth century Plato’s notion of *enthousiazsein* was often translated into German as *Schwärmerei*, which because of its etymological link to *Schwarm*, swarm, implies a blurring of boundaries in *Arresting Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2001, p. 98-102.

13 Virgil: *The Aeneid*. Tr. Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Vintage 1984, p. 90. The book and verse references are as follows: Book III, ll. 919-922 (Latin ll. 694-96).

Der Ister alludes to this geography when it describes the gulf separating the speaker from his projected home in the north:

... lange haben
 Das Schikliche wir gesucht,
 Nicht ohne Schwingen mag
 Zum Nächsten einer greifen
 Geradezu
 Und kommen auf die andere Seite. (StA II:190, II.9-14)

Although the distance the speaker refers to may not be great, it requires extraordinary means to reach the “other side” of what could be a mountain range or a sea. Given that the poem is devoted to a river and one moreover named in Greek, the latter hypothesis would seem more likely. Oceans are unbridgeable for human beings without the aid of wings; rivers by contrast can navigate large bodies of water subterraneously according to the ancient geological theory presented in the *Aeneid*. What is more significant, however, than the precise geography is the pursuit that sends the speaker on his way, and here the letter to Böhlendorff proves to be particularly illuminating with respect to his aim. To reach “das Schikliche,” which is not only what is fitting for the poet but also what has been cut for him as his fate (*Geschick*), he must venture overseas. Only in a foreign land does he discover what is “nearest” to him (“das Nächste”), as only in Greek art does the modern subject discover what is native to him. “[L]ange haben / Das Schikliche wir gesucht,” the speaker tells us, as if he has been underway for centuries, if not since the time of the ancient Greeks. And to the degree that his history is simultaneously the history of culture, it is not improbable to say that he is an incarnation of Greek culture that finds its proper home abroad, in a foreign place.

II. *Hier aber wollen wir bauen*

In lines so simple they are almost gnomic, the poet declares:

Hier aber wollen wir bauen.
 Denn Ströme machen urbar
 Das Land. Wenn nemlich Kräuter wachsen
 Und an denselben gehn
 Im Sommer zu trinken die Thiere,
 So gehn auch Menschen daran. (StA II:190, II.15-20)

According to these lines, the “we” of the poem follows a river that has already made a place for it, which is in one sense a banal observation: Civilizations tend to grow up around rivers where they find ample sustenance. On the other hand this place owes its being to a river that arguably comes from abroad insofar as it bears within itself the “fire of heaven.” What the speaker calls “here,” then, arises by virtue of a “there” which may account for the Ister’s sluggishness at its ostensible beginning in the Black Forest. In the poem *Die Wanderung*, which likewise traces the course of the Danube River, albeit in its path to the Black Sea, Hölderlin writes, “Schwer verläßt, / Was nahe dem Ursprung wohnt, den Ort” (StA II:138, II.18-19). Yet it remains unclear how to identify this origin or to locate this “Ort” given that every “here” carries within it a “there” and is as such a divided site. The Ister begins here where we build our homes but also there where the “fire of heaven,” i.e., the sun, first dawns, and this double origin makes it all

but impossible for the river to come or go, as reflected in the oscillation between these two verbs in the text.¹⁴

If anything, the Ister would seem to linger in the environment it creates for itself at its source, which is simultaneously its mouth, to the extent that it is a continuation of the Indus and the Alpheus. Hence in the first explicit reference to the river, the poem underscores its placidness, as if it were a pool instead of a stream of rushing water:

Man nennet aber diesen den Ister,
Schön wohnt er. Es brennet der Säulen Laub,
Und reget sich. Wild stehn
Sie aufgerichtet, untereinander; darob
Ein zweites Maas, springt vor
Von Felsen das Dach. (StA II:190, II.21-26)

The unmistakable metaphor in these lines is that of a house. The river inhabits—“Schön *wohnt* er”—what would seem like an interior space with arboreal columns (“*Säulen*”) surrounding it and a stone roof that juts out over its head (“*Von Felsen das Dach*”). It is even conceivable that this setting is a temple given the columns and other architectural features the poem names, all of which serve to protect the Ister from the elements. As a result of this protection, it can rest while everything around it stirs. The foliage burns in the sun and quakes in the wind; and the trees press against each other as they compete for light to nourish their roots. The vertical axis formed by the trees and the horizontal axis formed by the roof satisfy the basic requirements for a temple.

The poem, however, establishes the sacred dimensions of this site in another way, which goes to the heart of the question regarding what distinguishes “here” from “there” and whether the river originates in the Orient or Occident. The tranquility of the grove reminds the speaker of Hercules’ trip to the source of the Ister where he finds respite from the heat:

... So wundert
Mich nicht, daß er [der Ister]
Den Herkules zu Gaste geladen,
Fernglänzend, am Olympos drunten,
Da der, sich Schatten zu suchen
Vom heißen Isthmos kam. (StA II:190-191, II.26-31)

It is unclear whether the adjective “fernglänzend” refers to Hercules, whose fame would have spread far and wide in the mythological world, or to the Ister, whose reflection, even if filtered through trees, would have lured the hero north. The fact that this “Glanz” issues equally plausibly from the two places attests to the difficulty of keeping them apart. The difficulty only increases, when one considers the classical intertext for these verses, which themselves represent an amalgam of ancient and modern culture. The allusion is to Pindar’s Third Olympian Ode, for which Hölderlin produced a partial

14 A particularly notable example of the convergence of “coming” and “going” can be found at the outset of the third strophe: “Der scheint aber fast / Rückwärts zu *gehen* und / Ich mein, er müsse *kommen* / von Osten” (emphasis added, StA II:191, II.41-44). Other examples include: “durch die Knie gegangen” (I.5), “Fernangekommen (I.8), “Und kommen auf die andere Seite” (I.14), “Und an denselben gehn” (I.18), “Der Rhein ist seitwärts / Hinweggegangen. Umsonst nicht gehn / Im Troknen die Ströme” (II.48), “Denn wie käm er / Herunter” (II.56-57), etc. Curiously the one strophe that does not play with variations of the verbs to go and to come is the second one concerning Hercules’ visit to the Ister.

translation. The ode recounts in some detail how Hercules came to the north and discovered the olive tree on the banks of the Ister. He convinces the Hyperboreans to let him take the tree “[v]on des Isters schattigen Quelle” (*StA* V:51, l.25) back to Olympia “für den erlauchten / Hain das schattige Gewächs” (*StA* V:51, ll.30-31). Henceforth the olive branch is used for garlands to crown victors at the Olympic games. Additionally it serves as an offering to Zeus at the temple dedicated to him in Olympia on the banks of the Alpheus.

The story of the olive tree is at heart the story of the transplanting culture, which explains in part why Hercules must return from the north with a plant, rather than, say, a stone, which can flourish in foreign soil. In fact the tree comes to dominate the southern landscape, turning the parched valley alongside the Alpheus into an “illustrious grove” [“erlauchten / Hain”] according to Pindar in Hölderlin’s translation. The Peloponnesian Peninsula thus comes to resemble the thickly wooded hills surrounding the Ister in a remarkable instance of cultural reversal and exchange.

As Hölderlin was well aware, however, this dynamic works in the opposite direction as well, and the second strophe of *Der Ister* acknowledges this movement through another allusion, this time to Hölderlin’s own work. In the previously mentioned hymn *Die Wanderung*, composed shortly before the Böhlendorff letter in 1801, the poet tells of another ancient people who traveled far to find relief from the piercing rays of the sun. But the people in this case are Germans and their destination is not the Black Forest but the Black Sea:

Es seien vor alter Zeit
Die Eltern einst, das deutsche Geschlecht,
Still fortgezogen von Wellen der Donau,
Am Sommertage, da diese
Sich Schatten suchten, zusammen
Mit Kindern der Sonn'
Am Schwarzen Meere gekommen;
Und nicht umsonst sei diß
Das gastfreundliche genennet. (*StA* II:139, ll.31-39)

The parallels between these verses and the second strophe of *Der Ister* are striking. Just as Hercules travels north (and west) “sich Schatten zu suchen,” so too this supposed race of Ur-Germans travels south (and east), “da diese / Sich Schatten suchten.” And just as Hercules is lured to the banks of the Ister and is received as a guest (“zu Gaste geladen”), so too this race is welcomed by the Black Sea, known as the Hospitable Sea (“Das Gastfreundliche”) not only in this poem but in much of Greek and Roman antiquity.¹⁵ Whether in Hölderlin’s mythical universe the Ur-German’s trip to the south precedes Hercules’ trip to the north is impossible to determine. A case could be made for either itinerary. What we do know is that they along with the “Kindern der Sonn’” sire a new race of men who disappear but would seem to be the forefathers of the poets in their ability to live in harmony with each other and with nature. Whether Hercules precedes or succeeds this race matters little. More important is that the two-fold movement north and south allows for a two-fold process of cultural appropriation. A northern people heads southeast for the shade of trees; perhaps it brings these trees

¹⁵ Hölderlin also describes Patmos as “gastfreundlich” in the poem by the same name, although the island is located in the Aegean Sea, not the Black Sea. See *Patmos* *StA* II:167, l.61.

back to the once parched north to form a grove around the Ister. In similar fashion a southern people leaves their now parched homeland for the northeast and discovers trees which they take home with them, possibly leaving the sun behind as a gift. As this brief sketch indicates, cool and hot, wet and dry, passion and restraint are reversible terms, as are beginning and end, southern and northern, past and future, and the Alpheus and the Ister. The Ister is a divided river in that it points in two directions at once, and this division, which seems to impede its flow, raises the question, what would prompt a river to move, a stream to flow?

III. *Ein Zeichen braucht es*

The sluggishness of the Danube at its beginning, which is simultaneously its terminus, is the source of some consternation for the poet. Throughout the third stanza he returns to this point again and again, each time acknowledging that this is merely his opinion, though he is unable or unwilling to dismiss it. In rapid succession he tells us, “Der scheint aber fast / Rückwärts zu gehen” (ll.41-42), “Ich mein, er müsse kommen / Von Osten” (ll.43-44), “[W]arum hängt er / An den Bergen gerad” (ll.46-47), and finally “[A]llzuedultig / Scheint der mir, nicht / Freier, und fast zu spotten” (ll.58-60). In foregrounding the subjective nature of his objections, he implicitly reveals their cause. The course of the Ister disobeys logic for him. The river does not comport itself as it should, and to bolster this view he compares it to the Rhine, first noting the different directions of their flow and then commenting on their opposing characters. Unlike the Ister, which for the speaker is disturbingly self-contented, the Rhine is bustling with energy, like a colt champing on the bit (“Und Füllen gleich / In den Zaum knirscht er”). The metaphor of a river as a colt is not unusual, but it has a special resonance for Hölderlin. For if the Rhine is like a colt, it is not because it refuses to accept constraints. The situation is, if anything, reversed. It refuses to accept constraints, because it is at heart a colt, a centaur, which is the god or spirit of rivers for Hölderlin. He develops this figure most explicitly in his translations of Pindar’s fragments.¹⁶

In the note appended to his translation of the fragment *Das Belebende*, he writes, “Der Begriff von den Centauren ist wohl der vom Geiste eines Stromes, sofern der Bahn und Gränze macht, mit Gewalt, auf der ursprünglich pfadlosen aufwärtswachsenden Erde” (StA V:289). The Centaur, as presented here, tames an otherwise unruly earth—unruly not because it rebels against any authority but because in its continuous expansion and growth, it undoes all distinctions. If left to its own devices, the earth would become an undifferentiated mass. The same, however, could be said of rivers, which is why Hölderlin eventually suggests that the two mutually constrain each other and in so doing mutually protect themselves.

While Hölderlin begins with the violence of rivers, he quickly switches to the violence of dry land, and this shift calls into question what is more originary: the force exerted

16 Heike Bartel explores the connection between Hölderlin’s translation *Das Belebende* and *Der Ister*, though her interest is somewhat different than mine. She focuses on the function of rivers for the establishment of culture in both texts. In what follows I place more emphasis on a theory of elements as exemplified in the relation of rivers to *terra firma*. See Heike Bartel: *Centaugesänge: Friedrich Hölderlins Pindarfragmente*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2000, p. 166-172.

by water or earth, the power of the wet or the dry. According to Hölderlin's mythopoetic vision, at their origin rivers do not flow in any direction. When they surface, they spread in multiple directions at once, creating ponds, wetlands, and grottos where wildlife can feed and drink.¹⁷ Shades of this theory can be heard in the second strophe of *Der Ister* where the river is said to rest—"Schön wohnt er"—in the domestic setting it has created for itself. It is a place where "Kräuter wachsen" (l.17) and "an denselben gehn / Im Sommer zu trinken die Thiere" (ll.18-19), like the landscape Hölderlin describes in *Das Belebende*, which is lush at the river's source in spite of the lack of any movement. Yet this state in which everything would seem to stand still cannot endure. What sets the water and possibly the process of history in motion is the dry land. This is Hölderlin's most stunning contribution to the theory of elements, not to speak of the interpretation of Pindar's fragment. It is the earth that compels water to move, long before water has an occasion to cut paths. Hölderlin reiterates this point twice, as if to underscore that it is not spirit, but inert matter that moves water, even if water is usually considered "das Belebende," the life-giving force.¹⁸

In the first instance he proposes,

Jemehr sich aber von seinen beiden Ufern das trocknere fester bildete, und Richtung gewann durch festwurzelnde Bäume und Gesträuche und den Weinstock, destomehr mußte auch *der Strom, der seine Bewegung von der Gestalt des Ufers annahm*, Richtung gewinnen, bis er, von seinem Ursprung an gedrängt, an eine Stelle durchbrach, wo die Berge ... am leichtesten zusammenhiengen. (V:289, emphasis added)

Thanks to the "Gestalt" provided by the earth, the river can flow. Hölderlin elevates the immobile to the status of a prime mover in what would seem like a contradiction in terms. In a curious side-note, he singles out the grape vine as one of the plants that contributes to the solidity of the earth. The observation is motivated in part by the Pindar fragment in which the centaurs are said to learn "Die Gewalt / Des honigsüßen Weines" (*StA* V:289) before springing into action themselves. But the presence of this one plant on banks that constrain the centaurs would suggest that the potency of wine comes not from rivers but from the fire that rains upon it from above and the elements that feed it from below.

Thus in elaborating on the wine motif in the fragment, Hölderlin stresses again that the violence of rivers is merely a reflection of the violence that the solid earth brings to bear on them. To convert bodies of water into flowing streams, the earth must impress upon it a form that not only determines its direction but also gives it its tempo, energy, vitality:

So lernten die Centauren die Gewalt des honigsüßen Weins, sie nahmen von dem festgebildeten, bäume-reichen Ufer Bewegung und Richtung an ... [D]ie gestaltete Welle verdrängte die Ruhe des Teichs, auch die Lebensart am Ufer veränderte sich, der Überfall des Waldes mit den Stürmen und den sicheren Fürsten des Forsts regte das müßige Leben der Haide auf, das stagnierende Gewässer ward so lange zurückgestoßen vom jähren Ufer, *bis es Arme gewann* und so mit eigener Richtung ... sich Bahn machte, eine Bestimmung annahm. (*StA* V:288-89, emphasis in the original)

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- 17 Maria Behre argues that rivers in Hölderlin's poetry are neither allegories nor metaphors but myths in that they represent the intersection of *poesis* and *aesthesis*, artistic production and perception. See Maria Behre: "Hölderlins Stromdichtung: Zum Spannungsfeld von Naturwahrnehmung und Kunstauffassung." In: *Neue Wege zu Hölderlin*. Ed. Uwe Beyer. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 1994, p. 17-40, esp. p. 20-25.
- 18 Martin Heidegger draws attention to the role of rivers in breaking paths but ignores the role that the land plays in this process in his brief reflection on *Das Belebende*. See Martin Heidegger: *Hölderlins Hymnen "Germanien" und "Der Rhein"*. Ed. Susanne Ziegler. 3rd ed. Frankfurt/M.: Vittorio Klostermann 1999, p. 93.

No sooner does Hölderlin draw attention to the fact that the river's direction and pace do not originate within but rather from without, then he suddenly changes tack and enumerates the ways that rivers transform life on firm land. "Die gestaltete Welle," "der Überfall des Waldes," "die Stürmen," and "die sicheren Fürsten des Forsts" are all manifestations of the river as a sovereign force, which carves the surface of the earth and in so doing dictates forms of life. However it achieves this sovereignty only in a paradoxical manner, namely by submitting to the pressure of solid land, which recasts its power as an orchestrated phenomenon, a display of something secret. Hölderlin's commentary culminates in the paradox that rivers are determined to be a determining force; they are shaped to shape the earth. Their form and tempo come from the entity they are charged with engraving or sculpting in a circular process not unlike the exchange between the ancients and the moderns developed in the Böhlendorff letter. Still the commentary on Pindar leaves open the question of why the earth would set something in motion that etches and carves it. Why does the earth compel water to move across it and to write on its surface? *Der Ister* may be the only work in which Hölderlin tackles this question directly. While comparing the Ister and the Rhine, he launches into a meditation on the relation of rivers to the banks surrounding them that constitutes the poem's most philosophical moment:

... Umsonst nicht gehn
 Im Troknen die Ströme. Aber wie? Ein Zeichen braucht es
 Nichts anderes, schlecht und recht, damit es Sonn
 Und Mond trag' im Gemüth', untrennbar,
 Und fortgeh, Tag und Nacht auch, und
 Die Himmlischen warm sich fühlen aneinander.
 Darum sind jene auch
 Die Freude des Höchsten. (StA II:191, ll.49-56)

Few lines have been more misread than the ones quoted above. Critics all but unanimously agree that the poet speaks of rivers when he states, "Ein Zeichen braucht es / Nichts anderes."¹⁹ But in the context of the poetry of Hölderlin, whose syntax is notoriously difficult and stretches the bounds of German grammar to its limit, the statement is relatively direct. The pronoun "es" cannot refer to the river, nor can it be an impersonal "es" given its recurrence two lines later as a personal pronoun. Rather it refers to "das Trokene," which requires a sign for reasons the poet then enumerates. *Der Ister* is consistent with the commentary on the Pindar fragment in that it is the dry land that compels the river to flow, to cut a path, to be a sign on an otherwise unmarked surface. Hence in *Das Belebende* he observes that the centaur brings its might to bear on "[die] ursprünglich *pfadlose* aufwärtswachsende Erde."

According to Grimm's Dictionary, the first signs were boundary markers on fields, and the association of agriculture with signs has a long history, as evidenced in the etymological link between the Latin *signum* and the German *sägen* and *sagen*, all of which derive from the Latin verb *secare*, to cut. The poet acknowledges this tradition when in the closing lines of *Der Ister* he states, "Es brauchet aber Stiche der Fels / Und Furchen die Erd'" (StA II:192, ll.69-70), in a formulation reminiscent of the earlier

19 See, for instance, Wolfgang Janke: *Archaischer Gesang: Pindar—Hölderlin—Rilke: Werke und Wahrheit*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2005, p. 162 or Herta Schwarz: *Vom Strom der Sprache: Schreibeart und 'Tonart' in Hölderlins Donau-Hymnen*. Stuttgart: Metzler 1994, p. 121.

meditation on why rivers venture from their origin. Yet the explanation does not clarify what makes rivers flow. If anything it avoids this question by focusing instead on what rivers do to make the earth inhabitable and traversable for us. Why the earth would need signs, however, is a question that has little to do with us. It concerns the earth's relation to itself, and any answer to this question is necessarily mythical, as it involves a matter that does not refer to us and which cannot be assumed to conform to our faculties.

Time is a river. Whether Heraclitus ever intended to propose this metaphor, it has become bound up with his name thanks to the position attributed to him in Plato's *Cratylus*: "Heraclitus is supposed to say that all things are in motion and nothing at rest; he compares them to the stream of a river and says that you cannot go into the same river twice."²⁰ *Der Ister* takes this quote, which has become a virtual truism, and converts it into something new and strange by treating the central figure as a literal phenomenon. According to this procedure, time is not only a river; rivers are also time and to make a river move is to set time in motion, to launch history, to establish day and night. If the dry land ("[das] Trockne") needs rivers, consequently, it is because it needs time, and to usher in the latter it must rely on a body that moves and reflects divine fire:

Ein Zeichen braucht es
Nichts anderes, schlecht und recht, damit es Sonn
Und Mond trag' im Gemüth, untrennbar,
Und fortgeh, Tag und Nacht auch, und
Die Himmlichen warm sich fühlen aneinander. (StA II:191, II.50-54)

Sun and moon, day and night gain a place on earth through rivers that mirror the stars. As a result of this reflection, the earth can have a history. It can move in time even if it is consigned to the same place, or rather even if it is nothing but place. For, as Hölderlin would have it, space would lack all distinctions, were it not for time, which separates what is from what is no longer and in so doing generates the first division. Without the labor of rivers, the earth would be what he calls in the *Anmerkungen zur Antigonae* "die ewig lebende ungeschriebene Wildniß und die Todtenwelt" (StA V:266), that is an endlessly expanding but also spiritless force. What the river gives the earth, then, is a "Gemüth," a mind in which the suns and moons it has witnessed can reside. Gods consigned to different hemispheres and which normally appear on the horizon at different times converge in the river which carries their reflection forward. But, and this is crucial, it also carries their reflection back ensuring that the past meets the future, the Orient the Occident, and antiquity modernity in a never-ending cycle. These are the lines that *Der Ister*, the river and the poem, trace. As a tribute to the mystery of the Ister the poem ends with an oracular pronouncement: "Was aber jener thuet der Strom, / Weis niemand" (StA II:192, II.70-71).

20 Plato: *Cratylus*. Tr. Benjamin Jowett. In: *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*. Ed. Edith Hamilton/Huntington Cairns. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1961, p. 439 (402a).

