



HÖLDERLIN

A PLAY

Wayne Perry



Hölderlin memorial, Lauffen am Neckar, Baden-Württemberg, Germany

INTRODUCTION

Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) has a magnetic attraction for poets – Rilke and Celan come immediately to mind. It was this status that first drew me to him. In England the work of Michael Hamburger and David Constantine is foremost in explaining the biography and the poetry, which has given me the background to the play.

I have tried to present Hölderlin's argument, from his initial employment with the Gontards to the end, in dramatic form – and, inevitably, with a good deal of intellectual discussion that would accompany such a life. I know there is a danger here of minds wandering away from the drama, and I hope a good director can handle it.

Born near Stuttgart in the age of Goethe and Schiller, Hölderlin's upbringing was strictly Protestant. With the early death of his father, he was bound to his mother by inflexible financial and moral obligations which played their part in his eventual decline. The poetry is driven by the Greek spirit, and his childhood in the village of Lauffen by the River Neckar is a continual theme on the inferences of immanence that he draws from nature.

The challenge is whether one is prepared to acquiesce in his view of the divine in order to enter his imaginative world. If one takes a great poem such as 'The Archipelago', it is an aesthetic portrayal of Greek defeat and then victory at Salamis in which human courage and self-belief accompanied by the gods can overturn everything. 'Then on a day that will hold the past in its arms...' contains in one line the whole aspiration of Hölderlin which he seeks by a lyrical compulsion to embody the truth.

In the play, his relationship with Susette (as we know historically) is central to his being and poetry, but his friendship with Isaac von Sinclair – especially on the political scene – is more problematic and enables me to be more dramatic with it. He was a supporter of the French Revolution but became disillusioned as it descended into Bonapartism. In 1805 Hölderlin and Sinclair were implicated in high treason against the Elector of Württemberg, but Hölderlin was released on grounds of insanity. This led to his confinement in the 'Hölderlin Tower', where a family looked after him for the remainder of his life.

Hölderlin poetry is hardly popular; and, in an age of science whose success is so demonstrable, is there a need for a final defence of the gods? That will depend on the lyrical achievement contained by it, something that only poetry can give and for which there is no physical equivalence.

Wayne Perry, Norfolk, 2019

CHARACTERS

Jakob Gontard, a banker

Susette Gontard, his wife and Hölderlin's lover

Hölderlin, the poet

Sinclair, a diplomat and radical

Napoleon, the French leader

ACT 1

Scenes 1 and 2: the Gontard drawing room

Scene 3: Sinclair's study

ACT 2

Scene 1: Napoleon's study

Scene 2: Sinclair's study

Scene 3: Hölderlin's Tower



'Oedipus and the sphinx' by Moreau

ACT 1

The action takes place in Frankfurt around 1796-98.

Scene 1

The Gontard drawing room. Jakob Gontard stands centrally by the imposing mantelpiece and mirror. His wife Susette is seated on the right; another chair is opposite to the left. A beautiful piano stands to one side.

JAKOB. What do you think of our new tutor?

SUSETTE. So natural, and the children adored him from the first day.

JAKOB. Not too intense?

SUSETTE. Such is a poetic nature. He's already been published by Schiller in *Thalia* and, what will carry weight with you – Goethe is interested.

JAKOB. Ah! So rare, a poet who is a man of the world. Most poets strike me as cowards.

SUSETTE. One might say the same of businessmen; their self-confidence is almost barbaric. But such generalities are always wrong.

JAKOB. I thought there was an air of imbalance in your... poet.

SUSETTE. They are more exposed than us.

JAKOB. I do not want the children imbibing radical nonsense.

SUSETTE. It is I you must watch [*laughs*]. We can talk all day about his ideas. [*Jakob looks angry.*] His poetic ideas, darling.

JAKOB. Is he harmless?

SUSETTE. Politically naive – always France, France!

JAKOB. That way it is we who will be on the streets. [*Pause.*] The latest rumour says the French are just across the Lahn.

SUSETTE. By the Lahn! Jakob, we must leave – the children! Are you sure?

JAKOB. I am.

SUSETTE. We must go, but where?

JAKOB. Bad Driburg – the spa will be perfect for you.

SUSETTE. What will you do?

JAKOB. Safeguard our affairs here... business first.

SUSETTE. Hölderlin can come with us. I will need help with the children.

JAKOB. Thank god you are so steady and so upright. The dear mother of my children. [*Crosses over and kisses her; she, facing the audience, freezes imperceptibly. The maid enters with tea.*] Ah! tea. Will Hölderlin be joining us?

SUSETTE. If you like. [*Pulls a bell cord.*]

JAKOB. Do we know anything of his family?

SUSETTE. They are well-to-do near Stuttgart, on the River Neckar, a very charming area, but I think the family have suffered much – his mother's two husbands and four brothers and sisters have died.

JAKOB. God! How he makes us suffer; imagine the loss of our children on us.

SUSETTE. Don't speak! Surely such deaths can never be cancelled.

JAKOB. People in France are dying like sheep to the slaughter, and who cares – only their families.

SUSETTE. What atrocious times!

[*Hölderlin appears at the door; he is the epitome of the romantic poet in features, but his dress is extremely correct.*]

HÖLDERLIN. You called me, Madame?

SUSETTE. Oh... yes, would you like tea? We usually have it at 4.

HÖLDERLIN. Your children, Herr Gontard, are really quite bright. I already feel attached to them. I propose a number of subjects, and perhaps I can discuss the details with Madame Gontard.

SUSETTE. Susette, please.

JAKOB. Yes... you are part of the family now; my business affairs often keep me away, and Susette will take care of these matters... and your employment, too. [*Pause.*] What do you think of the troubles in France?

HÖLDERLIN. We, too, yearn to be free of the church, the gentry... and the state.

JAKOB. Where will discipline come from?

HÖLDERLIN. Ourselves as a community... and god.

JAKOB. But who is your god?

HÖLDERLIN. The one we must recreate for our time.

JAKOB. What do you mean?

HÖLDERLIN. The Greek gods were multi-headed; we need multi-headed men.

SUSETTE. Surely our present god fulfils all our needs and gives us a sacred promise, making life possible?

JAKOB. [*His voice rising.*] I must insist that the god of our fathers is always in your mind when teaching my children!

HÖLDERLIN. Of course, Herr Gontard. But I assumed we were having a grown-up discussion on the future as I saw it.

JAKOB. [*Uncertainly.*] Well... go on.

HÖLDERLIN. I am only calling god the spirit that emanates from all of us.

SUSETTE. The spirit of love?

HÖLDERLIN. Exactly. Science is bound to show there is no vital force. Yet it is you who control the atoms that move according to the laws of nature. What could be more god-like, more spiritual, than that? Indeed, I go further and say that the whole of our life is a spiritual one as anybody who thinks at all can testify.

JAKOB. A philosopher! I must go; you are above my head. Talk to Susette about

the practical side of of the children's timetable. Education, education! I did not get enough of it! [*Kisses his wife and exits.*]

SUSETTE. How is your poetry going?

HÖLDERLIN. Will you listen to a piece?

SUSETTE. Wonderful!

HÖLDERLIN. Diotima...

Come and look at the happiness:
Trees in the cooling breezes are tossing their branches like dancers' hair
And with sunshine and rain the sky is playing on the earth
as though joy had hands and were raising a loud music
And light and shadows pass in succession and harmony over the hills
Away like the myriad notes that swarm in a loving quarrel over a lute.
Gently the sky has touched his brother the river with silvery drops
And now he is near and he empties wholly the fullness held in his heart
Over the trees and the river...

SUSETTE. [*Interrupting.*] And who is Diotima?

HÖLDERLIN. It is you.

SUSETTE. Already?

HÖLDERLIN. Yes. [*Pause.*] I am at the beginning, the foothills of a huge mountain. I can already see the whole mountain where I must go, how I must climb, what I will find at the top. It is all here [*pointing to his head*]. If I am given a few more summers...

SUSETTE. You have a lifetime.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes. That often means a few more summers.

SUSETTE. Fritz!

HÖLDERLIN. Susette!

SUSETTE. Something has happened.

HÖLDERLIN. It happened for me practically as I came through your door for the first time.

SUSETTE. Then it will always be, Fritz. [*They look at each other for several moments.*]

HÖLDERLIN. How does Goethe do it? He seems to do everything in Weimar – even delivering babies!

SUSETTE. We met him here once – very fond of the ladies.

HÖLDERLIN. Did he make a pass at you – the swine!

SUSETTE. One feels flattered.

HÖLDERLIN. [*Smiling.*] I am not backward there myself, I admit.

SUSETTE. He has in that small province set a new standard for statecraft. What an ideal, a wise man able to educate and make wise a prince.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes. But it dilutes the poetry, and when he tries to be a renaissance man he blunders. His plays are stiff, and when he challenges Newton on optics – risible.

SUSETTE. But his personality is so satisfying; one is at ease immediately, and nothing is more natural than talking to him. He was impossible to resist, a sort of purity, fascinating, and he has a very good figure. I saw him from behind leaning through a window; it was magical.

HÖLDERLIN. We are all a bit resentful of his magnitude. I mean, we poets. One thing is certain, I will beat him on the most important thing – the poetry. Why? It is all I am fit for.

SUSETTE. Children love you, too.

HÖLDERLIN. They love any face that does not torment them.

SUSETTE. You are a natural.

HÖLDERLIN. One fights nowadays to preserve one's naturalness; that is the difference with the past. The pressure of the state, one's family, the church, all wanting their pound of flesh. The position of the poet is hopeless unless he is a Goethe.

SUSETTE. What is the place of a poet in the modern world?

HÖLDERLIN. A very good question. You are back to the question of Being with a capital B. I believe it has a meaning outside the human being, and that is what poetry explores.

SUSETTE. God?

HÖLDERLIN. I loved the Greek gods, still do, but where are they now? After

Salamis, the Athenians returned and rebuilt the city, the temples and returned to their happiness such as the gods have and know what the gods mean. The horses were at peace again on Colonus meadows.

SUSETTE. Perfect... and now?

HÖLDERLIN. The poem is still here... but not the poet.

SUSETTE. He has enlarged Being.

HÖLDERLIN. Exactly.

SUSETTE. So it is the way out?

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, these encounters never end; it is limitless. It is simply endless change.

SUSETTE. Napoleon is on the Lahn – have you heard?

HÖLDERLIN. Then you must leave!

SUSETTE. I want to stay, but the children...

HÖLDERLIN. No!

SUSETTE. Jakob has organised the carriage for Bad Driburg.

HÖLDERLIN. He is right; you must leave. Once the mob is roused there's no knowing what may happen.

SUSETTE. We want you to take us.

HÖLDERLIN. I must stay; we have waited so long for this moment. Liberation! We are needed to prevent excesses. At last to be part of Danton, to be with Camille.

SUSETTE. Jakob is staying to protect the business.

HÖLDERLIN. And leave you on the road alone!

SUSETTE. Business first... the family motto.

HÖLDERLIN. The swine!

SUSETTE. Will you come... for our sake?

HÖLDERLIN. Oh god! Why must I choose between the woman I love – I confess it – and the moment of Revolution for which we have waited so long?

SUSETTE. [*Kneeling.*] Please, please, Fritz!

HÖLDERLIN. Any other person I would wash my hands of. But you, you...

SUSETTE. For my sake.

HÖLDERLIN. Would Danton have done this for Julie? Why, yes. That is why they killed him; there were other important things to do besides the Revolution.

SUSETTE. Then you will!

HÖLDERLIN. Sinclair will despise me.

SUSETTE. I'm sure they will not cross the Lahn.

HÖLDERLIN. Think what this could mean to Germany.

SUSETTE. And to your poetry.

HÖLDERLIN. Ah, if Danton were alive to see it, how we would rejoice.

SUSETTE. This can be your redemption.

HÖLDERLIN. Not without you.

SUSETTE. We leave at daybreak.

HÖLDERLIN. Then take me! [*Pause.*] Enough of this gloom. Evening is falling... the revolution is here... my poetry in its crucible!

SUSETTE. You will join me for supper?

HÖLDERLIN. Supper? Alone? How many more temptations can occur in one night?

SUSETTE. Jakob will be late, and I do not wish to eat alone.

HÖLDERLIN. How the clock ticks for cocks and revolution.

SUSETTE. Fritz! Till 8 o'clock, then.

HÖLDERLIN. Time would be meaningless without you – 8 o'clock, then.
[*Bows deeply and exits.*]

[*Suzette gazes after him, and the stage is darkened for a few moments for a dining table, candles and chairs to be placed. The clock strikes eight. Hölderlin appears looking even more Byronic, Susette in a beautiful evening gown. They enter simultaneously from either side of the stage.*]

SUSETTE. So punctual and so elegant for a poet and a revolutionary.

HÖLDERLIN. We must not be stereotyped. How lovely you look!

SUSETTE. Do sit.

HÖLDERLIN. How easy you are.

SUSETTE. It is all cold, so we can help ourselves.

HÖLDERLIN. Like a Sunday evening.

SUSETTE. Did you notice how quiet the streets are?

HÖLDERLIN. Everybody is waiting, thinking – you can feel it.

SUSETTE. The bourse will be mayhem.

HÖLDERLIN. Poor money; even my family trust may go belly-up in these times. Not that my mother ever lets me get my hands on it.

SUSETTE. Will the French cause much destruction?

HÖLDERLIN. Only if the Council resist.

SUSETTE. But the Emperor will expect them to fight.

HÖLDERLIN. What has he done for us! The Council still represents so few of its citizens. It is a conspiracy of merchants, academics and nobles. Let it embrace the whole people, then the French will have done their job.

SUSETTE. I can hear gunfire.

HÖLDERLIN. What is this taste of blood, of love, that comes over me?

SUSETTE. So soon! [*Pause.*] This morning I was still calling you Hölderlin.

HÖLDERLIN. [*Taking a large glass of wine.*] Why, oh why should I feel this way? The fever of revolution infects the air. [*Goes to kiss Susette, but she draws back.*]

SUSETTE. Not yet!

HÖLDERLIN. I love you.

SUSETTE. Oh, this should have been a thing of the past, this fury of love.

HÖLDERLIN. Like the Greeks we have given in to the passions we feel.

SUSETTE. And the passions we do not feel?

HÖLDERLIN. We will leave those to the 20th century.

SUSETTE. Fritz. I love you, too.

HÖLDERLIN. Now is the time.

SUSETTE. [*Mournfully.*] My children.

HÖLDERLIN. I know you do not love your husband.

SUSETTE. Yes, but he loves me and we both love our children.

HÖLDERLIN. That is almost unanswerable.

SUSETTE. Yet...

HÖLDERLIN. Yes... [*She kisses him.*] My darling girl.

SUSETTE. We must be patient.

HÖLDERLIN. I know.

SUSETTE. It is the worst deceit.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, but it is the price we must pay for the terms we have willed.

SUSETTE. We will both be outcasts.

HÖLDERLIN. Poets are already outcasts.

SUSETTE. And your mother?

HÖLDERLIN. So parsimonious, so afraid. [*They kiss again.*]

SUSETTE. I have lost my appetite.

HÖLDERLIN. Not for love and war, I hope.

SUSETTE. This will all go into your poetry.

HÖLDERLIN. Naturally, for the odds are against us.

SUSETTE. Do not say it. Failure will be unbearable.

HÖLDERLIN. If we fail, the poetry will be profound [*laughing*] – some compensation!

SUSETTE. For you.

HÖLDERLIN. One may as well use the suffering.

SUSETTE. And your secret.

HÖLDERLIN. The poem will take you there O reader,
 a road of longing and loss
 and thus restore them.
 The fire of the gods appears
 and on that burning path
 faces behind the flickering flames
 beg you see a meridian
 where time's abuse is halted
 and victory O sweet victory
 is scented in Spring air.
 O those first warm days
 beside the Neckar swelling
 with cold white water
arm in arm with school friends hurrying home
now vanished in the friends of revolution.
 The absurd is turning its wings,
 eternalising our mortality.
 Thus the gods do bow to us
for death has given us the chance
 of true eternity
greater than the whole universe,
more than self-preservation,
awareness which leads to care
 and care... love.
 Only the lovely guillotine
 keeps us on our toes.
 Poetry will mend it
 and keep us awake forever.

SUSETTE. Bravo! Bravo!

HÖLDERLIN. This is safer ground than the love we have growing like a monster before us.

SUSETTE. In one evening can one come so far?

HÖLDERLIN. Isn't it strange, love, how quickly it arises often after years of sleep?

SUSETTE. And the power is frightening.

HÖLDERLIN. Frightening.

SUSETTE. Where do we go?

HÖLDERLIN. To break all the rules.

SUSETTE. So be it.

HÖLDERLIN. And will we be true to death?

SUSETTE. I can never alter the way I feel.

HÖLDERLIN. [*Quoting.*]

...Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.

HÖLDERLIN. Can anyone say it better?

SUSETTE. Only you.

HÖLDERLIN. One day... soon.

SUSETTE. And if we do not come through this storm?

HÖLDERLIN. We can preserve these coming moments in our heart.

SUSETTE. Somehow I feel we will never be man and wife.

HÖLDERLIN. Only death can come between us.

SUSETTE. That is what I feel.

HÖLDERLIN. The secret door to paradise is opened.

SUSETTE. Let us go through.

HÖLDERLIN. [*Raising his glass.*] To paradise!

SUSETTE. Paradise!... Then it is not an experiment?

HÖLDERLIN. No! No! My affairs have burnt me.

SUSETTE. I have heard.

HÖLDERLIN. But then we looked darkly. Now we know.

SUSETTE. Everything else seems a charade; that tells me it's true.

HÖLDERLIN. It's late.

SUSETTE. We must leave at daybreak.

HÖLDERLIN. Till tomorrow. [*They kiss. Exits.*]

SUSETTE. [*She crosses to the piano and picks up a small portrait of her two children.*] O my children!



Isaac von Sinclair, 1808

Scene 2

One month later. The emergency was a false alarm, and it is apparent to all that Hölderlin and Susette are more intimate. The scene opens with Susette at the piano and Hölderlin on the flute playing Haydn. This lasts a few minutes, conveying an intimate communion.

[*Jakob enters, interrupting the music.*]

JAKOB. Can you two be separated for a moment since the alarm was over?

SUSETTE. What is the matter?

JAKOB. The children are waiting for their lesson!

HÖLDERLIN. It was only the last bar; I am coming [*exits hurriedly*].

JAKOB. Really, Susette, do we need Haydn at 9 in the morning?

SUSETTE. Have you forgotten the soirée tonight? We need to practise together.

JAKOB. I feel neglected. Is something wrong?

SUSETTE. Of course not!

JAKOB. You seem very attached to Hölderlin.

SUSETTE. I do not understand you.

JAKOB. Of course you do – the lady and the hofmeister!

SUSETTE. I admire him; he will be among the German poets.

JAKOB. [*Contemptuously.*] A poet!

SUSETTE. You don't seem to understand – a great poet.

JAKOB. His function here is to teach the children; have you forgotten?

SUSETTE. Do you have any complaint on that?

JAKOB. Pity that I haven't.

SUSETTE. Well, then.

JAKOB. Please do not humiliate me.

SUSETTE. Why?

JAKOB. The husband is always the last to know.

SUSETTE. Do not be petty.

JAKOB. Petty!

SUSETTE. We are in the presence of a master.

JAKOB. You exaggerate.

SUSETTE. No! This is the new voice of German poetry.

JAKOB. How do you know?

SUSETTE. Read it, please read it [*pointing to a manuscript*].

JAKOB. [*Reading.*] I hope he can teach.

SUSETTE. Teach! We are dealing with genius.

JAKOB. Geniuses, villains, heroes, martyrs... how one balks at these categories.

SUSETTE. You do not know.

JAKOB. What is wrong with the bourgeoisie!

SUSETTE. Real powers are frightening. Look at Mozart, 'What am I, what am I doing'.

JAKOB. But...

SUSETTE. I can hardly contain myself.

JAKOB. You admit it!

SUSETTE. I admit nothing. Yes, I love him – so should you.

JAKOB. Love him! You mean...

SUSETTE. What he is, what he is doing.

JAKOB. I don't believe you.

SUSETTE. Against what he is doing, what you believe is nothing.

JAKOB. Have you lost all propriety!

SUSETTE. Of course not; it is beyond all that.

JAKOB. He is capable of anything...

SUSETTE. Nobody is more gentle, more considerate.

JAKOB. Susette, my darling, what is this leading to; where are you going?

SUSETTE. I cannot help my passion for him.

JAKOB. Your duty is clear, to me and the children.

SUSETTE. How I know!

JAKOB. Pull yourself together, for god's sake!

SUSETTE. I did not want this, but I am irresistibly drawn.

JAKOB. He must go – now!

SUSETTE. Never! Never!

JAKOB. I will not be defied!

SUSETTE. Nothing has happened; be calm.

JAKOB. Calm!

SUSETTE. We promised to give him a year; I promised his mother.

JAKOB. That is nothing now.

SUSETTE. Don't you see, for him to leave now could be fatal.

JAKOB. Fatal!

SUSETTE. For him; I know his nature.

JAKOB. What of us?

SUSETTE. We will survive somehow.

JAKOB. I feel alone.

SUSETTE. Give me – give us – time.

JAKOB. You ask too much.

SUSETTE. Think of the past and all our happy times.

JAKOB. I am.

SUSETTE. A little time...

JAKOB. What have you done to me? I worshipped you and the children. Is this love all for nothing?

SUSETTE. It's too late for these regrets. Only I can hold on to the coat-tails of this whirlwind and see where I am cast.

JAKOB. I have neglected you – the damn business – forgive me.

SUSETTE. It's too late.

JAKOB. The servants know...

SUSETTE. The servants?

JAKOB. Oh god, that my life should have come to this!

SUSETTE. Courage, please.

JAKOB. [*Kneeling.*] Oh my darling, is this a dream? Is it you, my perfect, devoted, loving wife? Is it you that has changed so much?

SUSETTE. Yes, Jakob, I have changed. A new, only half-thought of world has stormed into my life. I hardly thought myself capable of such a change.

JAKOB. Am I and the children to be sacrificed to a whim?

SUSETTE. You know me better; I do not have whims.

JAKOB. [*Shaking.*] We must speak to the poet, Hölderlin.

SUSETTE. [*Pulls the bell cord; the maid enters.*] Ask Hölderlin to come.

HÖLDERLIN. [*Enters and sees the situation.*] You called.

JAKOB. Your intimacy with my wife must cease!

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, it is true. I love your wife.

JAKOB. You have the gall! You admit it just like that!

HÖLDERLIN. Yes.

JAKOB. You have destroyed my life... just like that.

HÖLDERLIN. I am sorry for that.

JAKOB. Sorry! Sorry! It is you who will have cause for sorrow. We befriend you, give you the best of existence here, and my reward is humiliation.

HÖLDERLIN. Humility is endless.

JAKOB. [*Spluttering.*] Endless?!

HÖLDERLIN. It happened so very quickly, unconsciously. It was not sought; it is almost a chemical reaction.

JAKOB. Chemistry! Are we not masters of our own actions?

HÖLDERLIN. Not in this area.

JAKOB. I will never permit it, never!

HÖLDERLIN. There is nothing any of us can do.

JAKOB. First, you will pack and leave today. Second, you will have no references. Third, I will write to your mother about these circumstances. Fourth, I forbid you ever to see Susette again.

HÖLDERLIN. It is well for the first three, but the last we shall see.

JAKOB. If I see you near my wife, I will kill you!

HÖLDERLIN. Your passion has increased my respect; I did not think you had it.

JAKOB. Damn your respect! You impudent fool! Never, never see my wife again! [*Storms out.*]

SUSETTE. You were too cool.

HÖLDERLIN. [*Crossing to her.*] What is the use – he has all the cards.

SUSETTE. Except one – me.

HÖLDERLIN. Oh, my wonderful girl!

SUSETTE. My boy, my life! [*They embrace and kiss.*]

HÖLDERLIN. We knew this would come sooner or later.

SUSETTE. I cannot live without you.

HÖLDERLIN. I... [*They kiss again.*]

SUSETTE. Where will you go?

HÖLDERLIN. To Sinclair's... you know it?

SUSETTE. Yes.

HÖLDERLIN. There I can finish Empedocles.

SUSETTE. Money?

HÖLDERLIN. My mother must be squeezed.

SUSETTE. If it does not come, I am here.

HÖLDERLIN. No! You have risked so much; I must cope.

SUSETTE. How?

HÖLDERLIN. [*Ironically.*] The church... it is what they have waiting for me in Swabia – imagine.

SUSETTE. [*Alarmed.*] What was that noise?

HÖLDERLIN. I heard nothing.

SUSETTE. There it is again... gunfire!

HÖLDERLIN. My god, they are here... here at last!

SUSETTE. The children!

HÖLDERLIN. Oh, Camille!

JAKOB. [*Rushes in, in panic.*] Susette, they are at the gates! There is still time.
[*Looks hatefully at Hölderlin.*] Are you still here!

HÖLDERLIN. Triumphant!

JAKOB. We will all be killed!

HÖLDERLIN. Death – nature’s greatest invention.

JAKOB. Idiot!... and Susette.

HÖLDERLIN. Quick! I will drive the carriage through the East gate.

[*Exit Hölderlin and Susette.*]

JAKOB. Let them go... [*crying after them*] the children, the children!

[*Carriage wheels are heard; shouting. He waves goodbye brokenly; distant gunfire is heard. Returns to the chair; head in hands. Pause. Urgent knocking is heard without, and Sinclair in full revolutionary outfit bursts in.*]

JAKOB. [*Panic-stricken.*] Who are you?

SINCLAIR. A friend of Hölderlin’s... where is he?

JAKOB. He has left the city.

SINCLAIR. It’s not possible... this is our moment!

JAKOB. Gone with my wife!

SINCLAIR. Only love could have done it.

JAKOB. Another Girondist!

SINCLAIR. Yes, but unfortunately for you I am a Jacobin.

JAKOB. Oh god!

SINCLAIR. Still, I will spare you for the moment. Freedom at last!

JAKOB. [*Gaining courage.*] Freedom for you to impose your will on us.

SINCLAIR. Freedom for all; we will all be equal!

JAKOB. God help us!

SINCLAIR. Many have died; I have not yet seen his intervention!

JAKOB. He loves my wife!

SINCLAIR. Then she has no better protector – have you not seen his genius?

JAKOB. Not yet.

SINCLAIR. His whole manner informs it.

JAKOB. He has no money.

SINCLAIR. His family have.

JAKOB. And you, where do you fit in?

SINCLAIR. We are brothers in arms. I do the politics.

JAKOB. How?

SINCLAIR. I am in the diplomatic service of the Council here.

JAKOB. And?

SINCLAIR. Conveying papers from the Council at Frankfurt to Paris and back.

JAKOB. A spy?

SINCLAIR. How perceptive of you!

JAKOB. Don't you see the danger to Hölderlin?

SINCLAIR. All know he is impractical.

JAKOB. Does he know?

SINCLAIR. No.

JAKOB. And you put him at this risk?

SINCLAIR. I know he accepts it without asking – that is fraternity.

JAKOB. We are left with equality.

SINCLAIR. That will come when the rich are dispossessed.

JAKOB. Without the rich we would all be poorer.

SINCLAIR. We will not exchange one authority for another.

JAKOB. You will see.

SINCLAIR. No! There will be many divisions of power counterbalancing each other.

JAKOB. Only England has achieved it.

SINCLAIR. Then we will look to their model, as crusty as it looks.

SINCLAIR. [*Opening the door again.*] It is quieter now. [*Suddenly, church bells ring.*]

JAKOB. They have been thrown out at the very gates. They have been defeated!
Long live the Emperor!

SINCLAIR. It cannot be!

JAKOB. At last, a defeat on land just as Nelson defeats him at sea!

SINCLAIR. It is only a setback. They will return.

JAKOB. No, Germany is safe; there are easier pickings.

SINCLAIR. I must report to the Council.

JAKOB. Now you change sides again!

SINCLAIR. You don't understand.

JAKOB. I do – how did they know when to attack? Who gave the signal? It was you!

SINCLAIR. [*Looking round.*] I am at the service of the Council!

JAKOB. [*Screaming.*] It is you! It is you!

SINCLAIR. [*Backing to the door.*] Say nothing if you value your life.

JAKOB. [*Turning to a table and getting a revolver.*] You, you who have betrayed our country!

SINCLAIR. Shut up, you fool!

JAKOB. Never, never!

SINCLAIR. Drop that revolver or I will kill you!

JAKOB. My country, oh my country! [*Fires at Sinclair, who is hit in the shoulder and staggers through the door into the night. Jakob rushes to the door after him and fires again.*] Death! Death to traitors! No Trandils here!

[*Turns to the audience and collapses on a chair, holding the smoking revolver.*]

[*Pause in darkness.*]

[*A few days later... Jakob is in an armchair, exhausted. Hölderlin and Susette appear ecstatic in each other's company.*]

SUSETTE. Jakob, why are you sitting there?

JAKOB. Waiting hopefully for your return.

SUSETTE. Well, here we are. Hölderlin and the children and I are all safe.

JAKOB. I have hardly moved from this chair.

SUSETTE. It was all a false alarm.

JAKOB. [*Cynically.*] Not a revolution?

SUSETTE. No, some desperate countrymen of our own have decided to start a revolution.

HÖLDERLIN. Brave men!

JAKOB. Idiots!

HÖLDERLIN. Next time we will be victorious.

JAKOB. A friend of yours was here.

HÖLDERLIN. Sinclair?

JAKOB. I shot him.

HÖLDERLIN. Sinclair? Dead?!

JAKOB. Wounded, worse luck.

HÖLDERLIN. I must go to him.

JAKOB. Go, go...

HÖLDERLIN. Susette, do not upset yourself. I will return instantly.

JAKOB. You are never to return to this house!

SUSETTE. But he has protected me and the children during this emergency. Jakob, nothing has happened.

JAKOB. It is what is happening that is killing me.

SUSETTE. We must settle all this in a civilised way.

JAKOB. Civilised! Am I to be cuckolded in my own house – by a student!

HÖLDERLIN. Our love is our destiny.

SUSETTE. Fritz, be silent!

HÖLDERLIN. We cannot be silent. It has overwhelmed us.

SUSETTE. I did not want this.

HÖLDERLIN. It has happened; there is nothing we can do.

JAKOB. But I can. As master here, you are never to return, never, and Susette will remain the mother of my children – forever.

HÖLDERLIN. We shall see. [*Bowing to Susette, he exits.*]

JAKOB. Well, what is your decision?

SUSETTE. I love him.

JAKOB. It will pass – and the love you bear the children?

SUSETTE. That will never pass. I must have time.

JAKOB. All the time you need if you do not see him.

SUSETTE. Very well.

JAKOB. Good. I know you will never lie to me. [*Pause.*] Now there is pressing business. This interruption by these idiots has closed the bourse, and I must get down there to see our stocks. I will be late. [*Exits.*]

SUSETTE. Goodbye.

[*Walks to the piano and plays a Haydn study. A knocking on the door is heard and Sinclair enters, his arm in a sling.*]

SINCLAIR. Susette Gontard, I presume?

SUSETTE. Yes.

SINCLAIR. Is Hölderlin returned?

SUSETTE. Yes, he went to find you.

SINCLAIR. Then, if you permit, I will wait. I am sure he will return here.

SUSETTE. My husband forbids it.

SINCLAIR. Piffle!

SUSETTE. Will he come this evening? I must see him.

SINCLAIR. He will come. His passion is frightening.

SUSETTE. What are we to do?

SINCLAIR. See the bigger picture. The revolution.

SUSETTE. What use is that to me?

SINCLAIR. Against Hölderlin's love, little.

SUSETTE. This is my apotheosis.

SINCLAIR. Do not worry. It is like revolution and politics; suddenly it all becomes clear.

SUSETTE. And give up my children?

SINCLAIR. Yes, you can have more children by the man you really love, and what children they will be!

SUSETTE. But I truly love my children. I cannot love anything more.

SINCLAIR. Hölderlin?

SUSETTE. It is utterly different.

SINCLAIR. Look at it this way; every life has its crisis. The question is does one have the courage to measure up to it?

SUSETTE. Easy to say.

SINCLAIR. Do it and it proves itself – but only in the doing.

SUSETTE. Well, that decision is not fully made.

SINCLAIR. In your heart it is, and for Hölderlin there is no way back. He is all or nothing.

SUSETTE. I fear that.

SINCLAIR. Yet it is everything. That embrace of love over which even death has no dominion.

SUSETTE. There is always suicide.

SINCLAIR. Suicide? That's failure in every way.

SUSETTE. Why?

SINCLAIR. You have courage, and even courage is not the most important virtue.

SUSETTE. You are right.

SINCLAIR. Anyway, I interrupted your playing – Haydn, wasn't it?

SUSETTE. Yes.

SINCLAIR. Do go on.

SUSETTE. I do not think I am in the mood now.

SINCLAIR. Hölderlin will come shortly. He cannot stay away from you.

[Susette returns to the piano and continues playing. Knocking at the door is heard.]

HÖLDERLIN. Susette! Sinclair! [*They come together and embrace.*] I guessed Jakob would be at the bourse for the evening. Sinclair, you were shot by him?

SINCLAIR. Yes, I came for you but you had both fled.

HÖLDERLIN. Only for Susette [*holding her hand*].

SINCLAIR. Our little revolution failed, and agents are looking all over town for our compatriots – and possibly for me.

HÖLDERLIN. You must leave the city.

SINCLAIR. There is no proof of my involvement.

HÖLDERLIN. Proof? That will not stop them.

SINCLAIR. But I am playing both ends, and neither knows exactly. Jakob will make trouble now that he knows you are my friend. It will implicate you, Fritz.

HÖLDERLIN. Never fear; poetry comes first with me.

SINCLAIR. Action is needed now; your poetry will not be understood until after your death.

HÖLDERLIN. So be it. Always write for the next generation.

SINCLAIR. With you it will be the 20th century.

HÖLDERLIN. That will be a terrible epoch for Germany.

SINCLAIR. How can you know; are you Erasmus?

HÖLDERLIN. I see it already in ourselves. A terrible violence to our neighbours.

SINCLAIR. The French have still got to give us some terrible blows. Look at Napoleon. What things will he do?

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, but it will make Danton and Robespierre look like a tea party. Armies will die crossing and recrossing Europe.

SINCLAIR. A new and united Europe. Hurrah!

HÖLDERLIN. A united uniformity. Imagine the bureaucracy and way of life. Horrible.

SINCLAIR. You are always the pessimist. Anyway, you have your own little problem to sort out [*looking at Susette*].

SUSETTE. Fritz, what shall I do?

HÖLDERLIN. You must leave him. We can stay at Sinclair's for the present. You can see the children from there.

SUSETTE. He will never let me see them if I leave.

HÖLDERLIN. Then we will have our own!

SUSETTE. Fritz...

SINCLAIR. It will be wonderful; you will be much the greatest poet Germany has ever produced. Imagine! Together.

HÖLDERLIN. Oh, shut up, Sinclair.

SUSETTE. It will be wonderful.

HÖLDERLIN. Will you do it?

SUSETTE. I will do it.

HÖLDERLIN. Now?

SUSETTE. I cannot just leave like that. No, I must have an honourable leave-taking. I must try to preserve the right to see my children.

HÖLDERLIN. It will never be granted.

SUSETTE. I must try. It would be heartless to them otherwise.

HÖLDERLIN. Very well.

SINCLAIR. Susette was playing Haydn before you came – not a true revolutionary.

HÖLDERLIN. Let us try that flute duet again.

SUSETTE. Not now.

HÖLDERLIN. We must not let ourselves be overcome by events. The music will soothe us.

[They play and Sinclair, seated, looks on. After a few minutes they pause and Sinclair claps.]

SINCLAIR. Wonderful! [*Pause.*] We should depart, Fritz, before Jakob returns.

HÖLDERLIN. You go. I will follow soon.

SINCLAIR. Do not be long. He is mad with jealousy.

HÖLDERLIN. I will deal with him.

SINCLAIR. He can kill – look at me! [*Exits.*]

HÖLDERLIN. Oh, my darling [*taking her in his arms and kissing her*], I cannot be without you.

SUSETTE. And the struggle ahead?

HÖLDERLIN. We will overcome it through our love.

SUSETTE. I fear the future.

HÖLDERLIN. Not by my side.

SUSETTE. Think of my struggle. I still love Jakob in his way. I love my children more. But you, ‘you’ are my whole life.

HÖLDERLIN. It feels cosmic.

SUSETTE. Then you will express it?

HÖLDERLIN. It will also secure my poetry.

SUSETTE. Yes, there will lie your fulfilment.

HÖLDERLIN. If all else fails?

SUSETTE. Yes, your condition of fulfilled humanity.

HÖLDERLIN. Not without you, if it comes to that.

SUSETTE. What do you mean?

HÖLDERLIN. Who can tell the future? Revolution, illness, violence, poverty. All these can come in an instant and change everything.

SUSETTE. Yes, fate throws us over.

HÖLDERLIN. Yet, when there were gods you could get the better of fate.

SUSETTE. But not at this moment.

HÖLDERLIN. No. [*They kiss.*]

SUSETTE. You must not be too long.

HÖLDERLIN. What do I care now that I have seen my fulfilment.

SUSETTE. You must give me time to prepare my family.

HÖLDERLIN. Time?

SUSETTE. To find what peace I can with them.

HÖLDERLIN. There will be no peace.

SUSETTE. Fritz...

HÖLDERLIN. You must see the path we have chosen.

SUSETTE. Oh, Fritz!

HÖLDERLIN. I know.

SUSETTE. And if I fail?

HÖLDERLIN. You, fail?

SUSETTE. I am mortal and divided.

HÖLDERLIN. Even I cannot defy Jakob in his own house before his own children. He does not deserve that humiliation.

SUSETTE. Oh god, that we had met years before!

HÖLDERLIN. You forget, I would have been a child.

SUSETTE. But, even so, it would have been better than this.

HÖLDERLIN. This explosion, yes.

SUSETTE. How will the children bear it? O, little Henry!

HÖLDERLIN. Their sadness will cut me to the quick.

SUSETTE. I do not think I could bear it.

HÖLDERLIN. Later they will see it clearly [*they embrace*], as ours will.

SUSETTE. You must leave tonight.

HÖLDERLIN. I will be staying with Sinclair.

SUSETTE. We can meet there?

HÖLDERLIN. Yes. [*Pause.*] What a mood I'm in for poetry. The lightning will crash around me. I will wake up the German people and keep them awake for ever – everything will come right. Yes, I will point the way out of the struggle, the way out of all this longing and loss.

SUSETTE. Where, where?

HÖLDERLIN. A new and free Germany. Out of the imagination of my mind created in the meadows of Swabia.

SUSETTE. Is it possible?

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, the balance can be kept.

SUSETTE. The world is in turmoil.

HÖLDERLIN. The models are there. Even in Weimar we see that Goethe has nothing to fear.

SUSETTE. Oh for a very world of all of us...

HÖLDERLIN. But the people are expressionless.

SUSETTE. Can they be trusted? Look at the mob and the Robespierres! There is the challenge... [*pause*] but it had to happen, and none regrets more than I the horrible bloodshed.

HÖLDERLIN. Some deserved it; aristocrats being fed in bed by flunkeys while around the walls of the chateaux people were in poverty, dying of starvation and sickness. Yes, they deserved it. But now see the Consul Napoleon; already more people have been killed with his actions against other countries than the whole of the mob ever killed. I predict enormous losses in the future and then, then what will we say?

SUSETTE. Your poetry will say it and contain it.

HÖLDERLIN. I hope so. What a task.

SUSETTE. The centrality of poetry!

HÖLDERLIN. If we can make it so, it will have to be very great.

SUSETTE. But can it really change us?

HÖLDERLIN. Not change us, but help us live with our suffering.

SUSETTE. But we must do more than that.

HÖLDERLIN. You are right. It must be connected with thought and action. Now that means a poetry made according to design, to rules, to obey a code that when understood can be used by many, a sort of scientific methodology.

SUSETTE. Like music.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes.

SUSETTE. It sounds contrary to your being, your spontaneous creation.

HÖLDERLIN. Not really; they come out of this long, protracted labour of precision and reproduction. The technique – this liberates us into the uplands of pure expressive power where a whole people can understand and follow.

SUSETTE. It is prescriptive?

HÖLDERLIN. It is, but this world of creation. This prescription is hardly seen, at least by the people, and only the idea of the values, the beauty of the concept, is seen and enjoyed. Just as you might love your Haydn quartet though you know nothing of reading the music or playing the instrument. [*A noise.*]

SUSETTE. Oh god, it is Jakob.

[*Jakob strides in.*]

JAKOB. Not quite in flagrante! You have been dismissed, Hölderlin; why are you here?

HÖLDERLIN. An au revoir to your wife.

JAKOB. Get out! Get out!

[Hölderlin, looking longingly at Susette, leaves with a bow towards her.]

JAKOB. Just when my back is turned.

SUSETTE. I cannot stop him coming to the door.

JAKOB. And entering? The servants have instructions to bar him at all times.

[A servant enters, timidly.]

SERVANT. Madame, little Henry is not well.

SUSETTE. I am coming.

JAKOB. Go to him, go to him.



Ancient Greek fresco

Scene 3

Sinclair's study, one week later.

HÖLDERLIN. Where is Susette? Where is she?

SINCLAIR. [*Entering.*] I've been to the Gontards. Henry is sick, and she is having to nurse him constantly.

HÖLDERLIN. Oh God.

SINCLAIR. She will come as soon as she can.

HÖLDERLIN. What is wrong with Henry? Why now?

SINCLAIR. Measles, I think.

HÖLDERLIN. German measles! Oh God, will he recover? He must!

SINCLAIR. Be calm.

HÖLDERLIN. How can I be calm? Today is our usual meeting. She must come.

SINCLAIR. How can she come at this time?

HÖLDERLIN. She is my nurse, too. She can come here and nurse the child.

SINCLAIR. Don't be a fool.

HÖLDERLIN. Don't be angry, Sinclair, you know my desperation for her.

SINCLAIR. I know.

HÖLDERLIN. If anything were to happen to her I could not bear it.

SINCLAIR. Only death will bring you happiness.

HÖLDERLIN. Only death keeps us alive!

SINCLAIR. Please, Hölderlin, a touch of levity now if you will.

HÖLDERLIN. Well, she has my sporan on her plate.

SINCLAIR. Ah. Now we can talk.

HÖLDERLIN. After all my peccadilloes, boy and girl, it is the married woman I fall for.

SINCLAIR. Yes, ironic, isn't it? I prefer boys but, as Goethe said, these preferences are of no importance. It helps you in your revolutionary fervour.

HÖLDERLIN. It does not matter what we prefer.

SINCLAIR. How perceptive of you, but at least I have not abetted babies.

HÖLDERLIN. I loved my baby, Louise, at least for the time she was here. Her death reconciled me to my own death.

SINCLAIR. Your tone is letting down the party again.

HÖLDERLIN. What party?

SINCLAIR. My party. It is my twenty-fifth.

HÖLDERLIN. Oh yes, my dear Sinclair [*kisses him*]. I had almost forgotten.

[*Hölderlin turns to unveil a painting of Sinclair that had been covered up, standing behind a chair.*]

SINCLAIR. [*Holding it up.*] Citoyen Sinclair, I presume?

HÖLDERLIN. Unfortunately, if you hang it your double life will be revealed.

SINCLAIR. When Frankfurt is freed by the revolution and I am head of the Council for Public Safety, it will hang there in the City Council.

HÖLDERLIN. What a seraglio that will be!

SINCLAIR. A few necessary deaths and the air will be cleared.

HÖLDERLIN. Jakob will be very convenient for me.

SINCLAIR. You will have Jakob – he nearly had me [*rubbing his shoulder*].

HÖLDERLIN. Is there another chance?

SINCLAIR. If Napoleon has anything to do with it.

HÖLDERLIN. And I shall be the Napoleon of verse.

SINCLAIR. The way this love affair has flattened you, I do not see any of Napoleon in you.

HÖLDERLIN. Only the generations to come will understand it.

SINCLAIR. That is your mistake. We need it now if there is anything to say.

HÖLDERLIN. We are not in a high collar facing the guillotine; let us be happy again.

SINCLAIR. I cannot be happy until this is over. The deception is killing me.

HÖLDERLIN. You chose it.

SINCLAIR. For the sake of liberty. Jakob Gontard has twigged.

HÖLDERLIN. Of all the people.

SINCLAIR. I was carried away by the turmoil, and my guard slipped.

HÖLDERLIN. You idiot. What now?

SINCLAIR. I may have to use you as a diversion.

HÖLDERLIN. Très bien, Citoyen.

SINCLAIR. You must see these are very dangerous waters.

HÖLDERLIN. At least we do not have the death penalty.

SINCLAIR. No, not here, but an accusation like this would go to the Emperor and then... [*he motions to cut his throat*].

HÖLDERLIN. What a hero you would be. And forgotten in a few years. I will immortalise you just as Schiller did for Don Carlos.

SINCLAIR. Is that my fate?

HÖLDERLIN. Why not? To be my instrument and your own. You could choose any subject from history but you, you whom I love. I could pour such feeling, such terrible retribution, into my lines.

SINCLAIR. Pity I will not see it. So I am to be sacrificed to your greatness.

HÖLDERLIN. Why not? You know what I can do. Only Schiller and Goethe are in the way.

SINCLAIR. Certainly it will be a wonderful compensation if it comes to fruition; you promise a great poem.

HÖLDERLIN. I will.

SINCLAIR. Strange that we should plan such a thing. Has it happened before?

HÖLDERLIN. I doubt it. Yet such calculation has all the power of a huge bomb dropped in their midst. The anarchist bomb. Perhaps that should be my farewell.

SINCLAIR. Never! No one else can do it but you, Frankfurt's Danton!

HÖLDERLIN. Here we must preserve our largesse, our humanity, over everything.

SINCLAIR. And your poem?

HÖLDERLIN. You will be its burning path! [*They embrace.*]

SINCLAIR. What are you writing at present?

HÖLDERLIN. My lyrical novel, Hyperion.

SINCLAIR. Will such a form ever take off?

HÖLDERLIN. Only in the theatre of the mind.

SINCLAIR. That is you altogether.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, I must recreate the passion for poetry. The Greek passion, and make it divine again.

SINCLAIR. My death will help you on your way?

HÖLDERLIN. Absolutely.

SINCLAIR. A worthy death, then?

HÖLDERLIN. What we all yearn for.

SINCLAIR. But life is so dear. Another spring. Another boy or girl!

HÖLDERLIN. I know, I know.

[*They embrace again. A knocking on the door is heard, and Susette enters breathless and pale.*]

HÖLDERLIN. Susette!

SUSETTE. Fritz!

[They embrace and turn to Sinclair; who prepares to leave.]

HÖLDERLIN. You look pale

SUSETTE. Henry is so unwell; I am frightened.

HÖLDERLIN. Oh God!

SINCLAIR. What does the doctor say?

SUSETTE. The measles has spread to his lungs.

HÖLDERLIN. Not the lungs!

SINCLAIR. Be calm, Fritz, for heaven's sake!

HÖLDERLIN. How can I be calm if he is dying?

SUSETTE. I feel faint.

[Sinclair and Hölderlin help her to a chair.]

SINCLAIR. I must do some errands *[bows to Susette and exits]*.

HÖLDERLIN. Oh, Susette.

SUSETTE. Fritz.

[A long embrace.]

HÖLDERLIN. Is it so bad?

SUSETTE. Yes. Oh Henry, Henry, Henry!

[Falls into Hölderlin's arms, and they sit.]

HÖLDERLIN. Where is Jakob?

SUSETTE. At the bourse. He cannot bear illness, and keeps away.

HÖLDERLIN. The joy of marriage.

SUSETTE. Don't. Where is God? I have prayed for days by his bedside.

HÖLDERLIN. This burning path. If anything happens to Henry, I... no, no all will be well. It is just a test, a test of our resolve.

SUSETTE. But what is our love against Henry's life?

HÖLDERLIN. Nothing. But then, perhaps again, everything.

SUSETTE. This love that has come on us is so unbelievable.

HÖLDERLIN. It is the real thing, the distinguished thing. One might search one's whole life for it and never come near. This bliss in spite of all events.

SUSETTE. Yes. Having felt it, everything falls into place.

HÖLDERLIN. Even if we are stopped, this love I feel for you is unalterable through life and death. [*They turn and embrace.*] It will carry on through our whole lives regardless of what events now transpire.

SUSETTE. It may have to.

HÖLDERLIN. What do you mean?

SUSETTE. If Henry dies, what can I do?

HÖLDERLIN. Do not say such a thing.

SUSETTE. The death of a child...

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, it bewilders mortal man, and all we have left is to look into the depths.

SUSETTE. We will become just one more tragedy in the endless history of mankind.

HÖLDERLIN. Take my hand.

SUSETTE. Can we look out again into the lovely garden?

HÖLDERLIN. We can all become jesters or, if necessary, completely selfish.

SUSETTE. Yes, half insane we will dance in the streets.

HÖLDERLIN. We are like trapeze artists, hanging suspended, reaching out for that coin of happiness.

SUSETTE. Fritz, I feel so alone. I know even in love we are alone. What is the point of this existence?

HÖLDERLIN. If anything happens to you, I will no longer care for my life.

SUSETTE. You must succeed.

HÖLDERLIN. Can it be done in the face of all this human exhaustion; can one find happiness such as the gods have and know what the gods mean?

SUSETTE. You mean to act as if they did?

HÖLDERLIN. Almost, yes.

SUSETTE. We are not gods; we are built to suffer.

HÖLDERLIN. But that is it; only we can eternalise our mortality. This is beyond the gods.

SUSETTE. Perhaps in the end we do see, arriving at the place where we started.

HÖLDERLIN. That would be some comfort, but for children?

SUSETTE. Yes, for children, what can one say?

HÖLDERLIN. There must be an answer.

SUSETTE. How extraordinary our autonomy is.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, it is the only true existence, knowing ourselves.

SUSETTE. And our commitment to the world?

HÖLDERLIN. Do not exaggerate it for we all have a path to tread and not to be criticised for it.

SUSETTE. Each has a way out?

HÖLDERLIN. Rather a way in. To the X factor.

SUSETTE. The X factor?

HÖLDERLIN. The illumination that restores our life to ourselves.

SUSETTE. Then poetry is that X factor.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes. Its study will help everybody to their X factor, whatever it may be for them.

SUSETTE. And ours, too?

HÖLDERLIN. Of course.

SUSETTE. Thus poetry is the articulation of being.

HÖLDERLIN. Exactly. Others may find many vocations, but only the language of poetry can articulate being.

SUSETTE. Suddenly we have forgotten Henry.

HÖLDERLIN. A little forgetfulness will heal you.

SUSETTE. We need another life.

HÖLDERLIN. There is only one, once and once only.

SUSETTE. Does our small drama matter?

HÖLDERLIN. One person can outweigh the whole world. At least your Christ has taught us that.

SUSETTE. Events seem to take over in the end.

HÖLDERLIN. But this is the secret of our freedom.

SUSETTE. What do you mean?

HÖLDERLIN. These unpredictable, unknowable events force us to react in ways we will never know. Without these events, horrible and joyful, there would be no freedom. No human nature, no sense of being in time.

SUSETTE. And our nature?

HÖLDERLIN. That, too, turning on and off like a twinkling star, is infinite.

SUSETTE. Won't science predict us?

HÖLDERLIN. No, for the permutations will be endless. How many moves has a chessboard? Multiply that by millions of moves and you have a choice so infinite that it is incalculable.

SUSETTE. And the poetry brings us back to us.

HÖLDERLIN. The wonderful, irreducible us.

SUSETTE. Both looking rather washed out.

HÖLDERLIN. Events, my dear, events.

SUSETTE. Can you say, then, who we are and what our relation is to the universe?

HÖLDERLIN. The poetry of the race grows step by step through each individual... and has that power to reveal the concealed, just like science, but also can invent not only new realities but new myths by which we can live.

SUSETTE. A double power.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes.

SUSETTE. But it will never cure the body.

HÖLDERLIN. Only by curing the spirit.

SUSETTE. We are back full circle – the spirit, the mystery of the personality.

HÖLDERLIN. It is us. There is nothing else.

SUSETTE. Nothing else that matters.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, for as I said before the paradox is that the whole of our life is spiritual whether you can see it or not.

SUSETTE. No more metaphysics, please!

HÖLDERLIN. You were leading me on.

SUSETTE. And us?

HÖLDERLIN. Forever

[They embrace; Sinclair enters.]

SINCLAIR. Susette, they are looking for you. Henry is worse.

SUSETTE. Oh God, this is my penance!

HÖLDERLIN. Nonsense. Go to him.

[*Susette leaves, hurriedly.*]

SINCLAIR. There is some good news.

HÖLDERLIN. Tell me.

SINCLAIR. Gontard is not inclined to talk to the Council about our meeting. He thinks I am just a hothead, and my wound is a sufficient alarm for both of us.

HÖLDERLIN. This lack of decision is in my favour.

SINCLAIR. Susette is already won, then?

HÖLDERLIN. Won?

SINCLAIR. Yours?

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, it's complete.

SINCLAIR. Your happiness is fulfilled.

HÖLDERLIN. Not in my loins. I fear the future.

SINCLAIR. Remember the future unneeded.

HÖLDERLIN. Of course.

SINCLAIR. I will be receiving orders to go to Paris.

HÖLDERLIN. Sooner or later the Council will find you out.

SINCLAIR. I will have messages for Napoleon from the Council.

HÖLDERLIN. You will meet him?

SINCLAIR. Yes.

HÖLDERLIN. God, what a moment of serendipity, ecstasy.

SINCLAIR. Yes. To me, the genius of power himself. I cannot wait for it.

HÖLDERLIN. My hairs stand on my neck to think of it.

SINCLAIR. The revolution is just incredible the more one sees it.

HÖLDERLIN. Still, it will be 200 years before we can fully assess it.

SINCLAIR. Yet the blood Napoleon has already spilled is far greater than Robespierre, let alone Danton.

HÖLDERLIN. How terrible to remember Robespierre's words: 'Christ redeemed them with his blood but I will redeem them with their own'.

SINCLAIR. Chilling, but...

HÖLDERLIN. I know.

SINCLAIR. Why do you not come with me? To have another genius as my secretary is rather swanky.

HÖLDERLIN. But Susette...

SINCLAIR. It will give you some time for reflection.

HÖLDERLIN. How old you are!

SINCLAIR. We are the same age.

HÖLDERLIN. Exactly.

SINCLAIR. I see.

HÖLDERLIN. I cannot leave her now at this moment. Not even for you and Napoleon.

SINCLAIR. I know, you are no St Just.

HÖLDERLIN. Of course not.

SINCLAIR. Not even for your love of Danton?

HÖLDERLIN. I think Danton would have said love instead of revolution.

SINCLAIR. To meet Napoleon would be a transforming moment.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, to be part of a new German revolution.

SINCLAIR. What a project.

HÖLDERLIN. But I have a deeper project.

SINCLAIR. Which is?

HÖLDERLIN. To reanimate our sense of being.

SINCLAIR. With a little spilled blood, perhaps.

HÖLDERLIN. Blood is not my forte, as you know.

SINCLAIR. Yes, I can see the need for a revolution of the spirit.

HÖLDERLIN. A reconnection to the happiness we deserve and have lost.

SINCLAIR. Is happiness so important?

HÖLDERLIN. When all your politics are over, when the blood has dried and the rivers run clear again, to their godlike sources, what will be the point if we are not transformed?

SINCLAIR. He will transform them by the spilling of their blood!

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, but the masses must have a new way of seeing themselves and growing each to their own fulfilment. The revolution is a project to produce the conditions for a fulfilled humanity.

SINCLAIR. You are right. However, I fear human nature is not up to it.

HÖLDERLIN. It doesn't have to be complex; look at religion.

SINCLAIR. Not to go back!

HÖLDERLIN. Of course not, but a new method could do the same thing. On the Greek model of citizen responsibility.

SINCLAIR. And the gods?

HÖLDERLIN. Ah! There is the crunch.

SINCLAIR. There never is one way, as the modern world is showing.

HÖLDERLIN. Without it, some national unity, we will fragment.

SINCLAIR. So be it. Out of it will come something.

HÖLDERLIN. It will be a terrible process.

SINCLAIR. And then...

HÖLDERLIN. That is what my poetry will prepare for.

SINCLAIR. It will require a lifetime to do it.

HÖLDERLIN. Somehow I think I will be granted that.

SINCLAIR. But you will be happy with Susette and lots of little children.

HÖLDERLIN. Who knows...

SINCLAIR. Nothing except science is done by happy people.

HÖLDERLIN. What nonsense you talk, Sinclair.

SINCLAIR. Still, I love your poetry and know you are the new Goethe.

HÖLDERLIN. Goethe is still very much alive and well.

SINCLAIR. But stiff, so stiff.

HÖLDERLIN. Not in his poetry – when he deigns to write it.

SINCLAIR. Yet your verse is so personal, so true for the coming century.

HÖLDERLIN. If only I can...

SINCLAIR. You will, and when we are all forgotten your name will remain.

HÖLDERLIN. Your way is necessary. The practical action of the state.
My way is the transformation of the individual.

SINCLAIR. But not ourselves, which of course do not exist.

HÖLDERLIN. They are just another word for you. The irreplaceable,
unrepeatable mystery of you; that is all.

SINCLAIR. Expendable?

HÖLDERLIN. Never.

SINCLAIR. That is the difference between you and Danton and me and Robespierre.

HÖLDERLIN. And Napoleon.

SINCLAIR. Very large numbers will have to be expended.

HÖLDERLIN. Then something is deeply wrong.

SINCLAIR. Think of it as a natural force.

HÖLDERLIN. Nature we can accept, but human-made destruction is intolerable. And that is why I talked of souls.

SINCLAIR. Life is nothing without a revolution.

HÖLDERLIN. Transformation – the god of nothingness! That is the challenge from hereon.

SINCLAIR. And what do you propose?

HÖLDERLIN. A new, deeper look at the Greeks.

SINCLAIR. But everybody is doing that in Germany. Surely it is a hold-up?

HÖLDERLIN. But it holds the key, I am sure of it.

SINCLAIR. It is just another civilisation – gone.

HÖLDERLIN. But to recreate ours, theirs has so many clues to a more complete hold on ourselves and our society.

SINCLAIR. It sounds state controlled.

HÖLDERLIN. No. In that struggle of individuality and society a new civilisation will emerge.

SINCLAIR. Science has already created that way out.

HÖLDERLIN. For a Greek that was only one arrow to his bow. He had a sheath full. That is why he was happy.

SINCLAIR. Did they have love?

HÖLDERLIN. Of course, and with all these arrows they enlarged themselves – arts, science, life. It is this enlargement, this ever-growing enlargement, that I seek.

SINCLAIR. Meanwhile, the official world is busy trying to control you.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes.

SINCLAIR. Let's face it, there is no way out.

HÖLDERLIN. That's what makes our efforts and ourselves so fascinating.

SINCLAIR. But if such an idea became widespread...

HÖLDERLIN. It will cause a collapse of self-esteem, of energy and motive. What can we do?

SINCLAIR. You mean to sustain ourselves?

SINCLAIR. Yes.

HÖLDERLIN. The big problem is numbers. The more there are of us, the more the state will have to seek or have to intervene with more controls and regulations.

SINCLAIR. So?

HÖLDERLIN. We are being forced to enter into two worlds, one the official world and one the internal one.

SINCLAIR. What will govern the internal one?

HÖLDERLIN. The creativity of the individual.

SINCLAIR. But that will only apply to a few.

HÖLDERLIN. I do not think so. Yes, at the level of art and science, but in daily life relationships, things, there is much to be creative about.

SINCLAIR. Be more specific.

HÖLDERLIN. Well – growing vegetables is a very satisfying habit and ability. It is beautiful to look at, anybody can do it, good exercise, fresh air, instructive and delicious. What could be more simple and satisfying than that?

SINCLAIR. Still, one yearns for the bigger picture.

HÖLDERLIN. I know. Perhaps it is our greatest weakness.

SINCLAIR. Why?

HÖLDERLIN. Because it is never our real experience; growing vegetables is.

SINCLAIR. But when the profound emotions like love go badly wrong...

HÖLDERLIN. Ah! Then we have suffering, and suffering often leads to creativity and the most unpredictable of outcomes.

SINCLAIR. From which...?

HÖLDERLIN. We gain our freedom. Our complete freedom, if we can see our way through it.

SINCLAIR. Not every time.

HÖLDERLIN. No, I see that. One fails, one succeeds, but the outcome is equally true for all.

SINCLAIR. An equal eternity.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes.

SINCLAIR. And is there a measure?

HÖLDERLIN. No, only that which we give.

SINCLAIR. And the gods?

HÖLDERLIN. They can always be aspired to even if they do not exist.

SINCLAIR. Can we integrate them?

HÖLDERLIN. Maybe. It is what I exist for.

SINCLAIR. And Susette?

HÖLDERLIN. There you have it. Can I resolve the struggle from one's own point of view above the crowd? We are back to Empedocles. There is a conflict between democracy and individual insight. This dilemma could kill us.

SINCLAIR. The way out?

HÖLDERLIN. Somehow we become, in the internal sense, gods ourselves... but with the flaws such as a Greek god had – a very human god. *[Pause.]* Yes, it comes to me again – the eternalisation of our mortality, Sinclair. Amen.

[Darkness for a few moments; a few days pass.]

[The same scene with Hölderlin and Sinclair; a sudden knocking at the door is heard.]

SINCLAIR. Who is it?

[*A servant from the Gontard family runs in.*]

SERVANT. Mrs Susette Gontard has died!

SINCLAIR. Dead! Dead! It's not possible!

HÖLDERLIN. What is this?! Death? [*Cries out. Slowly turns to address the audience.*]

Earth speaks and hands her sentence
My temple crushed and as the gods are speechless
Emboldens me to tell the hopeless burden of oneself
The loveliness has gone that makes us one existence
Now slowly beating down our strong resistance
January in the mountain descends upon our soul
We live on...

A necessary burden to ourselves
The next few years in highest tension like a pistol waiting for the crack
The doom of nowhere
For nowhere lies ahead.

O comrades, what path is this now shown
The forest growth sees that life has flown
and you are asked to clear the way again
to cut the trees and make the thunder grow
To hear the music, see the swallows dip
O Earth, so soon your poison you have made me sip
Through these my gentle lips intended for Susette.

Who will raise me now?
Thrown headlong down the years
And now too late
The poem with her worm is my true fate.

[*Collapses in the arms of Sinclair.*]



Napoleon's study at Malmaison

ACT 2

Several years later (conveyed on a blackboard?).

Scene 1

Napoleon's study. Sinclair and Hölderlin are seated on a sofa near his desk awaiting him. Napoleon enters; they stand.

NAPOLEON. My dear Sinclair and...

SINCLAIR. The poet Hölderlin who comes, well, as my secretary
[*looks quizzically at Hölderlin*].

[*Hölderlin bows.*]

NAPOLEON. Charming, charming – though I think poetry is for chambermaids.

HÖLDERLIN. Christ!

NAPOLEON. Of course, and how wise since I am surrounded by cuckolded effeminate. You are forgiven as you are one of us [*turning to Sinclair*]... I hope.

SINCLAIR. Of course, Sir.

NAPOLEON. And how is Frankfurt – ready for plucking?

HÖLDERLIN. Are you not tired of war, Sir.

NAPOLEON. No! No! It keeps me alive. This is only the beginning; they must shed blood – it will encourage them.

SINCLAIR. Frankfurt is ready; all is in place.

NAPOLEON. Good, good, your reports are apt. Pity you are not here to help me; the intrigues would test your nerves.

SINCLAIR. When you have victory we are ready for elections.

NAPOLEON. Elections?! Yes, yes, but later. Ferdinand must be taught a lesson he will not forget. My brother Jerome will become King, and then we will see what Ferdinand is made of. We will sort out the system later.

SINCLAIR. But...

NAPOLEON. I know what you imagined, but you will see that I must establish my hegemony first. That must be secured, otherwise everything we are striving for could be lost.

HÖLDERLIN. This is not what we imagined.

NAPOLEON. It never is in the realm of power. The confederacy first under me and my appointees, then... then, we look to the Code Napoleon to give the people their rights.

SINCLAIR. What of Danton's ideals?

NAPOLEON. Danton... ah, Danton! How long since I have heard that name on a man's lips. So lovely, so harmonious. He is hardly mentioned now, or Camille – they are seen as moderates. I intend to pursue their balance at home but abroad I will be the liberating lion, shit-scaring the ancient regimes. In France the price of bread is everything; control that and you control the mob. Bread and force!

SINCLAIR. Bread and force...

NAPOLEON. Exactly... you must control the army; bread for the mob and love for the army. When I speak to a man on parade I know everything about him. In return, he loves me, will follow me anywhere. He shares his story with hundreds; they imagine I know them all.

SINCLAIR. What psychology!

NAPOLEON. You will see the effect of this beyond the army. I will be the first general to win countries purely with my hat.

HÖLDERLIN. Your hat?

NAPOLEON. A symbol of pure power can quell all resistance. [*Sinclair and Hölderlin look at each other.*] I will tell you the main problem in this great enterprise – staff. Even in a populous and well-educated country like France there are few men up to the job, and fewer you can trust. This is why I am forced back on relatives, mostly idiots, but at least they obey. Everywhere I am let down, and most of all on the battlefield. If I am not everywhere, God knows what would happen.

SINCLAIR. Here is my advice on the state of Frankfurt [*hands Napoleon a document*].

NAPOLEON. [*Reading.*] Yes... yes. You have served me well over these last few years... at personal risk. When I take Frankfurt you will be Chief Minister.

SINCLAIR. When?! When?!

NAPOLEON. That depends on Prussia and Austria. When I move they will be destroyed, but I must avoid bringing in Russia.

HÖLDERLIN. To destroy?

NAPOLEON. Gentleman, the new European Federation...

SINCLAIR. A wonderful idea!

NAPOLEON. The forces I employ are so complex. I threatened India through Egypt, overrode Italy, and threw out the sleeping Austrians, made the Pope kneel, made Albion fear invasion across that little pond, then through Poland who love me and into The Bear. I tell you, the next 10 years will be a rollercoaster and those who stay loyal will be rich.

HÖLDERLIN and SINCLAIR. Rich?!

NAPOLEON. I will be the new Caesar, the new Alexander.
[*Hölderlin and Sinclair bow.*]

NAPOLEON. But all is in the detail. Your reports give me insight into the mind of the Emperor. His weakness and vacillation mean he will leave the hard roles to others. I will go with the army; it is worth 50,000 men. If we are caught on too many fronts... ah, there is the danger, for then you rely on others and others rarely turn out. Nelson has his band of brothers who are so drilled they know his instincts, but also he gives them their head – this produces miracles. I have a few Marshals who can do it, but not enough for the colossal task ahead. Still, you have to be an egomaniac to survive; there are many of those, but egos with talent are rare, and with genius hardly any. Except, of course, your humble servant [*bows*].

SINCLAIR. I remember Aboukir.

NAPOLEON. I don't. You must pass over your defeats very quickly, preferably by pretending they did not happen.

HÖLDERLIN. But Nelson is so fascinating, another genius.

NAPOLEON. Yes, one other on this battlefield at present.

SINCLAIR. And...

NAPOLEON. Yes, I can see it in your eyes. Mr Pitt the other genius at home.

SINCLAIR. A formidable combination.

NAPOLEON. Perhaps, but it is early days. Aboukir was our first really major defeat, but again the admirals are all idiots. It ruined my Egyptian sortie. What audacity as the French slept. Only a man of genius could have seen the narrow way and depth of water in that harbour. Badly wounded, too, he smashed us. What a hero! Lucky England... for Aboukir I would have made him a Prince of France and put him at my right hand. The English... so parsimonious! Indeed, another victory like that over us at sea and I will keep very closely to the continent. If he did it again and he was mine, I would make him King of Italy!

SINCLAIR. He hates you.

NAPOLEON. Naturally, but sad to be a servant of such a state. Together we would rule the world.

HÖLDERLIN. Where lies your genius of control?

NAPOLEON. A profound question from our poet. It lies in this, bringing the instincts of the mob to the level of genius.

HÖLDERLIN. But that's...

NAPOLEON. You are shocked.

HÖLDERLIN and SINCLAIR. Yes!

NAPOLEON. You will see, we have a whole collection of different mobs in France. The Jacobins, the Girondists, the monarchists, the clergy, the peasants, the army, the Vendée, the aristocracy, the merchants... now to keep them guessing requires great skill. One played off against the other – there's the trick. But to do it well, ah...

HÖLDERLIN. Do many need to die?

NAPOLEON. There is no other way.

HÖLDERLIN. You would become a reproach to God.

NAPOLEON. How Jesuit! I have been called many things, but a reproach to God... my dear poet, God is dead. I only keep him alive for his use in politics.

SINCLAIR. Fritz... Hölderlin still struggles with some obscure divine presence in our creative life.

NAPOLEON. Yes. There is a divine element in man; such delusions can be ennobling.

HÖLDERLIN. How do you define it?

NAPOLEON. To oppose anything that negates us – including God.

SINCLAIR. How is Madame Josephine?

NAPOLEON. Thank you, she is my heart. A necessity.

HÖLDERLIN. That's true.

NAPOLEON. Still, one needs more than one Hölderlin?

HÖLDERLIN. Never!

SINCLAIR. He is angry because he lost the woman he loved.

NAPOLEON. I thought he preferred boys; such preferences are of no consequence except to philistines.

SINCLAIR. His Susette died...

NAPOLEON. You must recover; there is so much to be done! Don't you see, this is no time for personal tragedy to intervene. Each body must fill the gap in the barricade! Objectify your loss and so gain from it.

HÖLDERLIN. I...

NAPOLEON. Cheer up! I hear you will be a great poet... are a great poet. Pace my first remarks, it is a great calling. Really, Danton and Camille were poets – that was their downfall dealing with Robespierre. I am more like him, yet I am full of mercy and lack all arbitrariness except in war. Robespierre did not know one end of a sword from the other. Combine these characters and throw in the instincts of the mob – your humble servant. I have talked too much. Here, Sinclair, are your instructions. My official reply to the Council is there. You may wait here for refreshments; I must depart. Au revoir, mes citoyens, Europe awaits me!

[Hölderlin and Sinclair bow.]

SINCLAIR. Phew!

HÖLDERLIN. What a braggart! Susette would have hated him.

SINCLAIR. We are not asking Susette! [*Exasperatedly.*]

HÖLDERLIN. But when I see people through her eyes, the truth is revealed.

SINCLAIR. Do you not feel the power he exudes?

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, horrible... like a smell.

SINCLAIR. Why?

HÖLDERLIN. A foretaste of things to come.

SINCLAIR. What do you mean?

HÖLDERLIN. Rivers of blood.

SINCLAIR. But if he succeeds...

HÖLDERLIN. He will never succeed. The English will always blockade him, and the Russians always prove indigestible.

SINCLAIR. Look at Austerlitz!

HÖLDERLIN. He is a one-man band in the end.

SINCLAIR. You do not think he is a democrat?

HÖLDERLIN. Of course not.

SINCLAIR. He is our best bet for liberation from the Emperor.

HÖLDERLIN. To be replaced by his gimcrack brother!

SINCLAIR. Even that [*weakly*].

HÖLDERLIN. You may have backed the wrong horse.

SINCLAIR. I will be making history – imagine!

HÖLDERLIN. The wrong type of history.

SINCLAIR. Nonsense, you are too timid.

HÖLDERLIN. This would have been a good moment to assassinate him and save Europe.

SINCLAIR. Quiet! Such thoughts cannot be thought, let alone uttered.

HÖLDERLIN. We will see. Now let's get out and do Paris... I'm longing for some fun.



Vector illustration in ancient Greek style

Scene 2

Sinclair's study, some years later.

SINCLAIR. We can't go on like this, Fritz.

HÖLDERLIN. Who says so?

SINCLAIR. Betrayal surrounds us; my days are numbered.

HÖLDERLIN. You imagine it.

SINCLAIR. Your imagination is killing you, and that's illusory.

HÖLDERLIN. There is nothing illusory about Susette's death!

SINCLAIR. Don't you see, we all lose the thing we love.

HÖLDERLIN. But the pain in my heart...

SINCLAIR. Will be added to by me soon.

HÖLDERLIN. Surely you are protected?

SINCLAIR. It's too late for Napoleon; I will be a sacrifice for the bigger game.

HÖLDERLIN. Where is Susette?! [*Looking around helplessly.*]

SINCLAIR. Dead! Dead, for God's sake!

HÖLDERLIN. I still see her golden light.

SINCLAIR. It's seven years! You are a wreck.

HÖLDERLIN. Wrecked, yes wrecked...

SINCLAIR. If I go, what is to become of you?

HÖLDERLIN. To the Landgrave of Homburg. [*Bows.*]

SINCLAIR. Fritz, be serious.

HÖLDERLIN. Happy the man...

SINCLAIR. Has it come to this?

HÖLDERLIN. Your very obedient and humble servant.

SINCLAIR. Are you mad?

HÖLDERLIN. To the lunatics...

SINCLAIR. Your genius, you owe us that.

HÖLDERLIN. Gone, gone to Susette, in her safekeeping. [*Kneels.*]

SINCLAIR. Get up, get up!

HÖLDERLIN. I will always be on my right-angled knees.

SINCLAIR. You make no sense.

HÖLDERLIN. Don't you see, it is nonsense that make us human, frees us from the frozen sea within us.

SINCLAIR. You will lose it all.

HÖLDERLIN. So be it.

SINCLAIR. Why, oh why?!

HÖLDERLIN. What is work without love?

SINCLAIR. There are other loves.

HÖLDERLIN. Ah! There we see your mind. Long ago I quoted to Susette that wonderful sonnet of Shakespeare – 'Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks'. I could never write again with somebody else.

SINCLAIR. You are not going to write without it.

HÖLDERLIN. I am, I am.

SINCLAIR. I have seen you fumbling over the same, endlessly crossing and recrossing. It's pathetic.

HÖLDERLIN. Pathetic!

SINCLAIR. Be the man, be the poet.

HÖLDERLIN. What I have done, I have done.

SINCLAIR. Then at least leave it alone, for God's sake.

HÖLDERLIN. Listen, into any mind comes a poem written 200 years hence about me, someone I have moved. I see the poem. Now it captures me. Listen.

To Hölderlin
what tenderness in your lines
the gods are omnipresent
can we speak to you now, to them now,
can you be the conduit of our woes
intercede among the strings of the universe
transmit our thoughts as gifts
to the divine all-seeing absence
plead our cause from this far-off world
whose unseeing masses revolve
around your parks and old estates,
O Hölderlin, what edge of world
do you now gaze from
where are those lips whose words
sung on German soil before
the horror of our modern time,
that Germany who gave us you and Beethoven
the very world of all of us
do not neglect us now
who was so unneglectful in your life,
what right has death depriving us of your love,
your word, your note calls across the Alps
and the land of your fathers still reaps and sows
in spite of the unnumbered corpses lying there,
thank god you were spared it
terrible it would be to see your gaze
across the wrecked and burning land of Germany,
but now in peace and prosperity
where Rhine and Ister and your Neckar
renew the life of new gods
questions of life and limb grow ever larger
and your steady hand can exculpate us
from the torment of our numbers
and our way of life
O Hölderlin, can one end a poem better
than German poets try to?

HÖLDERLIN. I love that last line, ‘than German poets try to’.

SINCLAIR. Very fine. What are you working on now?

HÖLDERLIN. Oh, revising.

SINCLAIR. Revising [*contemptuously*].

HÖLDERLIN. My head aches so much.

SINCLAIR. By turning into a bourgeois hypochondriac.

HÖLDERLIN. What is so wrong with the bourgeoisie?

SINCLAIR. Ugh – they are so predictable.

HÖLDERLIN. What you call predictable gives us our clean water, warm houses, mends our bones. It is time for revolutionaries to realise they must get the middle class on their side if they are ever to succeed.

SINCLAIR. Napoleon will think of all that.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, but he is not going to save you now; he is a dictator.

SINCLAIR. Yes, but he will dictate the new rules of equality, liberty, fraternity.

HÖLDERLIN. Not the middle one, I think.

SINCLAIR. See, you still think!

HÖLDERLIN. Thinking – what is it for?

SINCLAIR. You ask that question!

HÖLDERLIN. What is thinking – even more fundamental.

SINCLAIR. The black box will never be understood.

HÖLDERLIN. True, the brain can only rely on the sensory qualities to observe it, thus it can never be known itself.

SINCLAIR. What a relief for poetry.

HÖLDERLIN. A declining art. What is wrong with people when they prefer politics to poetry? What a disaster.

SINCLAIR. They must live practical lives.

HÖLDERLIN. Practical! There is nothing more practical than poetry, and above all its civilising influence. All kinds of monsters will love music and the arts, but poetry – we will never breed monsters. It is our greatest claim to be authentic. He who follows poetry follows the Holy Grail.

SINCLAIR. Not back to that!

HÖLDERLIN. Metaphorically. Of course, there are inauthentic poets – indeed, so many of them.

SINCLAIR. And where does your Holy Grail lead to?

HÖLDERLIN. The golden fleece.

SINCLAIR. You speak in riddles.

HÖLDERLIN. Then we will gain something of the world I conjured in Archipelago. Somehow the Greek islands tell the history of the gods. Of any god, of despair or happiness. But it is their happiness that interests me.

SINCLAIR. To be happy?

HÖLDERLIN. So difficult.

SINCLAIR. Surely you are the worst example?

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, but in my attempt, in my succumbing, I may yet predict the way, the way of practising happiness such as the gods have.

SINCLAIR. Give up the gods.

HÖLDERLIN. The god in us is reborn if we attain the happiness our soul yearns for. Don't you see, our constant striving is for something. Not only knowledge, which is clearly not enough; not only creativity, which a few can master; but happiness such as the Greeks had when after Salamis they rebuilt the temples, the city, among the meadows of Colonus.

SINCLAIR. What gave them this courage, this confidence?

HÖLDERLIN. A belief in happiness based on the gods.

SINCLAIR. Is that where it sprung? Seeing their suffering?

HÖLDERLIN. What else? It must be a connection between each of them – a special rapport and feeling – call it love – but based on a larger vision, a larger Being.

SINCLAIR. Can we go further?

HÖLDERLIN. That is the task of poetry, my poetry, but this special poetry of loving confidence held by large numbers produces an individual and co-operative understanding which itself is god-like.

SINCLAIR. They were often the reverse, hateful and cruel.

HÖLDERLIN. Of course, they were human, flawed. Even they did not accomplish it since they are no longer here.

SINCLAIR. Meaning?

HÖLDERLIN. There will be a moment when that happiness descends and you know it is all in place.

SINCLAIR. I wish.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, but our numbers may defeat us.

SINCLAIR. Very depressing.

HÖLDERLIN. So I lose my happiness, and without that chance I am descending into the personal hell that awaits me.

SINCLAIR. Work! Work! It is the only way out.

HÖLDERLIN. Work is not being.

SINCLAIR. But it makes a community.

HÖLDERLIN. But the meridian is what we need – the meridian.

SINCLAIR. Which is?

HÖLDERLIN. Have you not listened? To practise happiness such as the gods have.

[Hölderlin sits, head in hands.]

SINCLAIR. What is the matter?

HÖLDERLIN. I am ill.

SINCLAIR. It's your nerves.

HÖLDERLIN. I am ill with life withheld.

SINCLAIR. You have succumbed to tragedy.

HÖLDERLIN. Succumbed! – Forced!

SINCLAIR. Given way!

HÖLDERLIN. Forced by pity!

SINCLAIR. Survive by the beauty of your poems.

HÖLDERLIN. Beauty and pity, the formula of life.

SINCLAIR. And our love for each other.

HÖLDERLIN. Ah. That has kept me sane these last years. Our friendship, what a star in the dark firmament of my life.

SINCLAIR. And I hear they are coming for me.

HÖLDERLIN. Who?! Who?!

SINCLAIR. The secret police.

HÖLDERLIN. Flee then, flee!

SINCLAIR. They have been watching us for months.

HÖLDERLIN. Go to Paris. Go to Napoleon. He will protect you.

SINCLAIR. There is no escape.

HÖLDERLIN. I cannot live here without you!

SINCLAIR. You must.

HÖLDERLIN. No, if your fate is prison so must mine be.

SINCLAIR. They know you are innocent.

HÖLDERLIN. I will go with you – an honourable end.

SINCLAIR. No! No! I have made arrangements.

HÖLDERLIN. What arrangements?

SINCLAIR. A place for you to stay and be looked after.

HÖLDERLIN. What right have you to do this?

SINCLAIR. Every right. My house will be closed and I will be sure you are safe and looked after.

HÖLDERLIN. I will look after myself.

SINCLAIR. Really?

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, yes.

SINCLAIR. Who has cooked for you these last five years?

HÖLDERLIN. You.

SINCLAIR. Who has arranged the laundry?

HÖLDERLIN. You.

SINCLAIR. Who has paid the bills?

HÖLDERLIN. You.

SINCLAIR. Who has cared for you when you were ill?

HÖLDERLIN. You.

SINCLAIR. And now I go.

HÖLDERLIN. Now? Today?

SINCLAIR. Yes, I have been warned, they are coming.

HÖLDERLIN. Let us die together. Yes, die!

[Goes up to Sinclair and clasps him.]

SINCLAIR. There is still a future.

HÖLDERLIN. Not for me.

SINCLAIR. We still hope for your recovery, your new poetry.

HÖLDERLIN. You are my last link to the world I believe in, care for.

SINCLAIR. But I will go sooner or later.

HÖLDERLIN. Later, I think.

SINCLAIR. Do nothing precipitous. Let us see how it goes.

HÖLDERLIN. How can you be so sanguine?!

SINCLAIR. It is all that is left.

HÖLDERLIN. No, death, adorable death. Do you not see how beautiful it now appears? How complete for our lives so entwined?

SINCLAIR. I cannot take the responsibility of leaving Germany without our greatest poet.

HÖLDERLIN. Nonsense, I will be Werther.

SINCLAIR. Goethe will never approve.

HÖLDERLIN. You mean... yes, he can invent, imagine, all these things. but to do it...

SINCLAIR. I see.

HÖLDERLIN. To know, that is the thing.

SINCLAIR. I hear a noise outside...

[Loud knocking and a shout from the policeman, 'Isaac von Sinclair!'. He opens the door; two policemen enter, followed by two doctors.]

POLICEMAN. We have orders to arrest von Sinclair. Who is he? *[Sinclair steps forward.]* This is a warrant issued by the head of police, on the direction of the Frankfurt Council, and countersigned by the office of the Emperor. Are you ready to go?

SINCLAIR. Yes.

HÖLDERLIN. No! No! You cannot take him [*tries to intervene*].

SINCLAIR. Be calm, Fritz.

HÖLDERLIN. [*Screaming.*] Never! Never!

[*They march Sinclair away. The two doctors advance.*]

DOCTORS. We have an order for your restraint.

HÖLDERLIN. Restraint? [*Cackling laughter from Hölderlin.*] Don't you see – my whole life is an everlasting restraint!

[*They struggle as the doctors put a straitjacket on him and Hölderlin is led screaming and shouting from the study.*]



Hölderlin Tower in Old Tübingen, Germany

Scene 3

A few months later, in Hölderlin's tower.

Before us, a window looks out on a perfect landscape of the picturesque Swabian countryside. Two large seats look out. One contains Hölderlin; the other, Hölderlin's alter ego, Scardanelli.

SCARDANELLI. Stop gazing into the meadow!

HÖLDERLIN. There is nothing else.

SCARDANELLI. What an idiot!

HÖLDERLIN. Here there is peace among the flowers.

SCARDANELLI. Have you no ambition, no purpose, left?

HÖLDERLIN. Not without Susette, dear boy.

SCARDANELLI. But don't you see that suffering has produced your finest poetry, the odes, the sonnets, the hymns...

HÖLDERLIN. Suffer yourself.

SCARDANELLI. You must go on; you owe it to Germany and Susette.

HÖLDERLIN. Silence, please, you phantom – silence!

SCARDANELLI. Not while I have breath.

HÖLDERLIN. Why do you torment me?

SCARDANELLI. You are the tormentor of yourself.

HÖLDERLIN. The loss has maddened me.

SCARDANELLI. Everybody else bears it.

HÖLDERLIN. That is their path.

SCARDANELLI. And you who think that in your poetry you can give the rest of us a way out, a way through this world of contradictions.

HÖLDERLIN. There you are right. I thought I could.

SCARDANELLI. But it is there in your poetry. Why not apply it to yourself?

HÖLDERLIN. I will revise it all.

SCARDANELLI. Revise it! It is perfect.

HÖLDERLIN. No it must be improved, completed, tidied up.

SCARDANELLI. How can poetry be clear? It encompasses the mystery of the personality.

HÖLDERLIN. But, like music, its experience can be regularised.

SCARDANELLI. Regularised! Are you mad!

[*Aside.*] Yes, I forgot you are mad.

HÖLDERLIN. So that others can follow the path and take up the form.

SCARDANELLI. But the form always changes.

HÖLDERLIN. It is a question of technique, education.

SCARDANELLI. Education! [*Laughing hysterically.*] Piffle, who said nothing worthwhile can be taught!

HÖLDERLIN. But you are wrong, poetry least of all. There is a huge history of poetry.

SCARDANELLI. It is an ideal of hope.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, and I have abandoned hope. That is my tragedy.

SCARDANELLI. There is your writing desk [*pointing to it*]. Immerse yourself in a new form.

HÖLDERLIN. But I am. All these days I revise my poems. Perfecting them.

SCARDANELLI. Don't, don't, you will destroy their balance, their perfection.

HÖLDERLIN. No! No! Take that line in Archipelago, 'Then on a day that will hold the past in its arms...'

SCARDANELLI. But it's wonderful, wonderful.

HÖLDERLIN. My new and better revision is...

SCARDANELLI. Stop! Do not touch it...

HÖLDERLIN. Is... more modern, less theological, less sentiment.

SCARDANELLI. I do not want to hear it!

HÖLDERLIN. The parallel...

SCARDANELLI. [*Groaning.*] Spare me, spare me!

HÖLDERLIN. The parallel world where no time exists observes us.

SCARDANELLI. But it's awful.

HÖLDERLIN. It is more accurate...

SCARDANELLI. It is meaningless – parallel worlds are for astronomers, figments of theory. We must face the here and now in time. Your lines give us the hope of reconciliation in time. A way to carry on against the supreme test of reality.

HÖLDERLIN. That is a false hope. Only science will give us some inkling of other dimensions.

SCARDANELLI. Nonsense! Only poetry can express being. We are not just molecules.

HÖLDERLIN. If only...

SCARDANELLI. Leibnitz has dealt with all that materialism.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, but...

SCARDANELLI. Breathing is necessary for life, but we are not just air.

HÖLDERLIN. Still. Being is extinguished.

SCARDANELLI. Yes, but the reasons for going on. Why else were you distinguished?

HÖLDERLIN. Touché.

SCARDANELLI. So get on with it – a new work. Work is the only thing for sanity.

HÖLDERLIN. But the loss of love, it paralyses me.

SCARDANELLI. It is nearly eight years, for God's sake!

HÖLDERLIN. It is like yesterday.

SCARDANELLI. I will summon Susette.

HÖLDERLIN. Can you? Can you?

SCARDANELLI. Just as I am part of you, so she is part of you.

HÖLDERLIN. She will answer me. Show me.

SCARDANELLI. And my reward...

HÖLDERLIN. My devotion to work, to poetry.

SCARDANELLI. Then your wish is granted.

HÖLDERLIN. Oh, Scardanelli, beyond all risks, all colours, all knowledge, you enact the Faustian past – the return of the beloved.

[Scardanelli disappears, and in his place appears Susette.]

HÖLDERLIN. My darling!

SUSETTE. Dear Fritz, why do you still grieve?

HÖLDERLIN. For you! For you! Beyond the shades.

SUSETTE. I am safe in another country.

HÖLDERLIN. And Henry?

SUSETTE. We are reunited.

HÖLDERLIN. Is it possible?!

SUSETTE. In your mind.

HÖLDERLIN. You are not real.

SUSETTE. As real as love.

HÖLDERLIN. Then you live.

SUSETTE. In your mind.

HÖLDERLIN. In a parallel world?

SUSETTE. In your mind.

HÖLDERLIN. Do not play with me...

SUSETTE. Am I not Diotima. Am I not immortalised?

HÖLDERLIN. But flesh and blood.

SUSETTE. What is that against the eternity you have given me?

HÖLDERLIN. That is all I could give.

SUSETTE. Without my death you could never have achieved it.

HÖLDERLIN. You were the price?

SUSETTE. Yes.

HÖLDERLIN. Can one accede to a life such as that?

SUSETTE. It is the price of human freedom, human being.

HÖLDERLIN. A price worth paying?

SUSETTE. A price...

HÖLDERLIN. A price worth paying?

SUSETTE. A price...

HÖLDERLIN. Not worth paying.

SUSETTE. A price we have to pay.

HÖLDERLIN. Or?

SUSETTE. The watery depths of Ister.

HÖLDERLIN. If so, I shall join you there.

SUSETTE. You have many years ahead. Your work calls you.

HÖLDERLIN. My work is finished. All this [*pointing to many manuscripts*] is dross.

SUSETTE. If you make it so.

HÖLDERLIN. Don't you see, my mind is exhausted from my loss of you. Maybe it is not heroic... no, even very poetic. I fought against this depression. Fought and fought, and in those years after your death I have produced great work. Work that one day will be acknowledged for its worth. Now I am finished. My mind falters – you are here. Scardanelli summoned you and...

SUSETTE. Your loss is measured. The loss that Germany will have in the future can hardly be measured. Yet she will recover.

HÖLDERLIN. Each to his path and fate. My love for you is the price I now pay.

SUSETTE. And your doctor?

HÖLDERLIN. Doctors! He will probably kill me. They have put me here – here in this tower – for ever. I hate the weights and measures of this world, and look for my enchanted view.

SUSETTE. The view is wonderful.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, I can see you and Henry playing in the meadows there below [*gestures*].

SUSETTE. Colonus meadows.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, oh yes.

SUSETTE. And where is that happiness your poetry was supposed to lead us to?

HÖLDERLIN. Do not remind me.

SUSETTE. I do.

HÖLDERLIN. I failed.

SUSETTE. You were there.

HÖLDERLIN. Till you departed.

SUSETTE. But this is the point. To repair the city after the defeat.

HÖLDERLIN. Yes, I thought so.

SUSETTE. Why not?

HÖLDERLIN. Because I feel my life with your death deluded me. My constitution did not have the grit to rebuild.

SUSETTE. Nonsense, you had genius.

HÖLDERLIN. Oh to hear you play Haydn again. To stand behind you with my hand lightly on your shoulder. Turning the pages, gazing into your hair, touching your brow, realising the depths of your personality.

SUSETTE. You make me yearn to leave the shadows of your mind.

HÖLDERLIN. Are you only there.

SUSETTE. There and there also.

HÖLDERLIN. Do not speak in riddles.

SUSETTE. There on that branch, at the window, the robin plays his game of hide and seek. So we play ours. This guessing game drives the Earth forward between the beat of the waxwing and the roar of a jungle night; the imagination never ceases to fire its guns of pure insight as you will move us forward to the faint hope that always stays.

HÖLDERLIN. Then, then...

SUSETTE. Only a faint hope.

HÖLDERLIN. Is all I need. I can sit here by the window revising my manuscripts, dividing and taking away each version having its own truth. Closer and closer to revelation. It is not pretty. Not heroic. But Hans – my guardian downstairs – brings my meals. His wife brings my garments. His little boy and girl play at my feet. The mountain dog nuzzles my hand. Scenes pass before the window. The clouds in their homes among the Alps look down and smile. The Neckar winds past us on its way to its sacred source, carrying life-giving blood of the gods. I know every tree and shrub along its banks. The wildflowers that blow, the butterfly that sits upon the pane, and the goldfinch that eats from my hand. In all this you are present.

SUSETTE. This keeps me alive.

HÖLDERLIN. And so my life winds its way constrained and uneventful. War and

disease plague Europe. Sinclair and Schiller dead. Only Goethe survives. God, will that man never cease. But your life, my muse, survives as my faint hope carrying the sun and moon with you. On the morning sky I see your image. The blue sky surrounds you, and the white-topped Alps glow with your happiness. You have attained the happiness of the gods and know what the gods mean. This I can still believe in.

SUSETTE. This is love, love.

HÖLDERLIN. It has cost me my life.

SUSETTE. It cannot be cancelled.

HÖLDERLIN. Never, never, never.

[*Susette disappears and Scardanelli reappears.*]

SCARDANELLI. Well, your promise was granted.

HÖLDERLIN. Where is Susette?

SCARDANELLI. She is there in your mind forever.

HÖLDERLIN. Why have you returned?

SCARDANELLI. To give you back to creation.

HÖLDERLIN. No! No!

SCARDANELLI. It is all you are fit for.

HÖLDERLIN. I no longer care for my life.

SCARDANELLI. Then you can wither here for years.

HÖLDERLIN. Little things, little things.

SCARDANELLI. Idiot!

HÖLDERLIN. All my hopes have died.

SCARDANELLI. Then die!

HÖLDERLIN.

I am waiting for it, dear Scardanelli.
Do not hurry me so
After all there are still lovely things
To wait and see
My poetry speaks it.
In the new world science is love
These things we must praise.
But I drink to all mankind.
As each soul faces his world
His struggle for mastery
Can one end it so?

[Addressing the audience.]

Already I see the summer garden
The heat of the sun flows through it,
The pattern of our lives falter
But the carpet is resown,
This I could not do for Susette
Perhaps a question of temperament,
But Apollo will answer for me
I go to meet his shade,
If all that energy and hope and style
Can make us gods
We have achieved it
We have strived upward.
Farewell then as the mind darkens
The names of flowers recede
The torture of Mnemosyne
Grants me a reprieve
My being hovers over Colonus meadows
And from my horse I drink in the sea and sky
Plunging into the bay of Salamis
To join the buried gods.

Farewell!

[Bowing to the audience.]

FINIS

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments, translated by Michael Hamburger
(Anvil Press Poetry, 2004).

Hölderlin, David Constantine (Clarendon Press, 1998).

PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS

Front cover: ancient sculpture of Greek historical monuments. Hare Krishna/Shutterstock.

Title page: memorial dedicated to Hölderlin showing a portrait of the poet, Lauffen am Neckar, Baden-Württemberg, Germany. Alamy.

Page 4: ‘Oedipus and the sphinx’ by Moreau. Alamy.

Page 18: Isaac von Sinclair, Gemälde von Favorin Lerebours, 1808, Museum im Gotischen Haus, Bad Homburg v.d.Höhe.

Page 40: ancient Greek fresco of woman. Viacheslav Lopatin/Shutterstock.

Page 58: Napoleon’s study, Malmaison. Albert Knapp/Alamy.

Page 66: vector illustration in ancient Greek style. Hoika Mikhail/Shutterstock.

Page 78: Hölderlin Tower in Old Tübingen, Germany. Villy Yovcheva/iStock.

In modern culture, specialisation tends to be much valued. If you have a particular profession or passion – in the case of the author, medicine – you should probably stick to that. But there is a long, distinguished list of fellow doctors impelled to explore the literary disciplines that illuminate the human condition, with Keats, Chekhov and Schiller among the grandest. Of course this is very high company, but the precedent is well set – and all one can do in fulfilling a need greater than oneself is to submit to the critical gaze of the public.

**The author's main work in medicine and poetry can be found at:
www.waynemedicineandpoetry.co.uk**