

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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## Friedrich Hoelderlin (1778-1843)

**Life of Friedrich Hoelderlin.** Friedrich Hoelderlin (1778-1843) was born in Lauffen am Neckar, in the kingdom of Wuerttemberg. His father, who worked as a church assistant, died when the child was two years old, leaving Hoelderlin to be brought up by his mother, who not long after remarried, to the Mayor of Nuertingen, to which town she moved herself and the family. Friedrich went to school in Neutraun, then went off to the University of Tuebingen, where he decided to study theology. (Two of his classmates were Hegel and Schelling, two of the most remarkable German philosophers of the early Romantic/late classical transition. It is reliably supposed that Hoelderlin exercised lifelong influence on his two classmates, having inspired Hegel with a fascination for the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, whose theory of a universe of intersecting and self-transforming forces was a foundation for Hegel's dialectical thinking.) During and after leaving University, Hoelderlin realized that he was losing his faith in Christianity—thus in the study of theology—and thus drifted to that last resort activity of the intellectual, a job as a tutor. He was at the same time devoting as much time as possible to writing—which had been his private preoccupation since childhood—and between 83-84, in addition to making a fruitful acquaintance with Schiller and Goethe, he began the writing of what was to be one of his major poetic works, *Hyperion*. (His great love, Gontard, a married woman ten years older than he, entered his life at this point, and would serve as a potent and mythical axis, under the name Diotima, for Hoelderlin's vision of the fusion of Ancient Greek depth with his own quest.) In 1798-1800 Hoelderlin worked on his mythopoetic vision, *Empedokles*, in which, as in *Hyperion*, he returned to archaic and deeply pre rational cult sides of the ancient Hellenic experience. In 1805, however, the condition of his 'hypochondria'—he had had his first episodes in 1800—recurred, more threateningly, and he was obliged to enter a clinic in Tuebingen, from which, after intermittent stays, he was released into the care of a local carpenter friend—a highly educated and well read one—in whose house he remained for the more than three remaining decades of his life.

**Friedrich Hoelderlin's Work.** Though in his last decades, Holderlin composed a wide variety of wonderful smaller poems, epigrams, odes, he had turned in his earlier work to the long narrative, Bildungsroman type poems, *Hyperion* and *Empedokles*, in which he sought, from the depths of his person, to reconcile the Classicism deeply interiorized by German culture during the Weimar period, in fact throughout the Enlightenment, with the sense of new Romantic possibility .

**Hyperion.** This poetic Bildungsroman illustrates well why the readers of Hoelderlin have ranged from bewildered to deeply involved. It is set in modern Greece, around 1770, about the time when the nation was on the verge of finding its own independence—freedom from the Turks. Hyperion quests across the land, in search of the idealized Greece of dream, but instead meets only barbarians and primitives. Totally disillusioned he becomes a mountain hermit, and falls into a deep depression from which only the mistress of beauty, Diotima—she who taught Socrates what beauty means-- is able to rescue him. As lovers they unite, until her death, which leaves Hyperion longing and wandering, until, in a moment of powerful pantheistic empathy, he feels his way back to her, they are united, and her essential Hellenic beauty belongs again to the modern soul.

### Reading

#### **Primary source reading**

Hoelderlin, Friedrich, *Poems and Fragments*, trans. M. Hamburger, 2004.

#### **Secondary source reading**

Heinrich, Dieter, *The Course of Remembrance and other essays on Hoelderlin*, 1997.

### **Further reading**

Constantine, David, *Hoelderlin*, 1990.

### **Original language reading**

Heidegger, M., *Eralueterungen zu Hoelderlin's Dichtung*, 1944.

### **Suggested paper topics**

How does Hoelderlin's quest for the spirit of ancient Greece compare to the longing of older classicist/Hellenists, like Goethe and Winckelmann? Can you see what it might mean to say that Hoelderlin is a 'Romantic'? Look into a poet like Lord Byron, perhaps his Childe Harold? Does his address to ancient Greece at all remind you of Hoelderlin's approach?

Read in Hoelderlin's late shorter poems, like 'Bread and Wine' and 'Patmos' and consider the way this poet experiences Christianity. What kind of symbol of the future does Jesus become for him? Does Hoelderlin work toward a fusion of Christianity with ancient Hellenism?

**Excerpt** [www.poemhunter.com/friedrich-holderlin/](http://www.poemhunter.com/friedrich-holderlin/)

Ages of Life  
Euphrates' cities and  
Palmyra's streets and you  
Forests of columns in the level desert  
What are you now?  
Your crowns, because  
You crossed the boundary  
Of breath,  
Were taken off  
In Heaven's smoke and flame;  
But I sit under clouds (each one  
Of which has peace) among  
The ordered oaks, upon  
The deer's heath, and strange  
And dead the ghosts of the blessed ones  
Appear to me.