

# Another Light

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‘There must be another tempo than this one we’re passing through so profanely, another light.’ (Peter Handke)

‘The light work sheds is a beautiful light, which however, only shines with real beauty if it is illuminated by yet another light.’ (Wittgenstein)

## I

One Sunday morning in April last year, I set off on foot from Stuttgart for the city of Tübingen twenty-five miles to the south, where my then-hero, the poet Friedrich Hölderlin, after his release from the Autenrieth asylum in 1807 as an ‘incurable case’, lived out the last thirty-six years of his life. My idea was to use this walk as the narrative framework for a text I’d been planning to write for several months already and for which the German Romantics – and Hölderlin in particular – were to play a central role. However, my ambivalence at the time toward narrative prose (at least, that which I produced) had left me uncertain how to go on with my work, and increasingly it was only while out walking that I could find that deeper integration with the world I look for in writing. By giving myself over to the trees and the sunlight and the sounds of the birds and the wind, the anxieties that so often shadow my perceptions would melt away and things in turn become more trusting and show themselves. And it was this openness to the world, this way of looking and moving and listening, that I felt my writing somehow had to channel. As walking had become for me a form of contemplation, so too must writing.

## II

The first hour that day was through a strip of suburban woodland that became a kind of sanctuary to me since my move to Germany a few months before. I would go there almost every morning, before starting work, and just walk for hours at a time, until the clamour of voices within me had quietened down and my senses come alive. From time to time, bored of my usual routes, I’d abandon the marked trails and follow the

overgrown foresters’ paths into the underbrush. Though more often than not these paths would come to an end at some impenetrable bramble thicket or chainsaw-shredded clearing and I’d have to turn back and retrace my steps, they also led me to some of my most treasured woodland discoveries – to my first glimpse of a kingfisher, for example (a flash of gold, then gone), and to the only place I ever found in that entire forest where the highway couldn’t be heard (nothing but the creaking of the trees and the very faint crackle, like soft rain, of an anthill). And later in the year, months after my Hölderlin pilgrimage, it was often in their vicinity that I made my finest mushroom finds: ceps, chanterelles, blewits, and, on one occasion, a cluster of bright-violet, velvet-textured specimens, which I later identified, in the *Field Guide to Mushrooms of Britain and Europe*, as *Cortinarius violaceus*.

My fascination for mushrooms began a few years before, in Bulgaria, when I found my first king bolete, or *Boletus edulis*, on Vitosha Mountain outside Sofia. It seemed to be glowing in the bluish twilight of the spruce wood, and I can still recall the thrumming sound of the little birds in the branches over my head and the spongy feeling of the fallen needles under my feet. A few grains of fresh black soil were perched on its cap, as if it had broken through the earth only a moment before, and it looked so pristine and perfectly formed – ‘like a promise’, I wrote at the time, ‘but a promise that fulfils itself in every moment’ – that to pick it seemed almost blasphemous.

Mushrooms’ habits of growth and distribution are mysterious, unpredictable. When conditions are what my field guide describes as ‘ideal’ – the right weather, soil, trees, time of year – it’s almost certain I’ll come home empty-handed, whereas some of my best hauls have been made in the most improbable places and months out of season. In fact, it often seems that the more deliberately I look the less I find: that time a friend and I drove half a day to the Black Forest and found not a single edible mushroom, or those mornings I’ve left the house before dawn to be the first one into the woods, only to return hours later with nothing to show for my efforts but ticks in my armpits and burrs in my hair.

There is a shyness at the core of existence, a hesitance to be seen. The world unveils itself only when you submit to it, when you consent simply to be here, in the quiet. And so you pause now, and breathe, and let the flickering leaflight burn you away.

And for a moment so brief it barely exists, the heart of the world lies open, luminous, uninterpretable.

### III

‘The question occurs to me – and quite seriously – how many shoe soles, how many ox-hide soles, how many sandals Alighieri wore out in the course of his poetic work, wandering about on the goat paths of Italy. [...] The step, linked to the breathing and saturated with thought: this Dante understands as the beginning of prosody.’ (Osip Mandelstam)

Hölderlin was a walker, and must have covered most of Swabia on foot. He walked from Tübingen to Maulbronn (40 miles), frequently between Stuttgart and Nürtingen (15 miles), and more than once over the Swabian Jura to the Blautopf, source of the river Blau, which ten miles downstream flows into the Danube (‘the Almighty’s joy. How could He otherwise / Descend?’)<sup>1</sup>. In 1800 he walked most of the way to Hauptwyl, near Lake Constance (‘here in this innocence of life, here under the silvery Alps’)<sup>2</sup>, and a year later, more than 600 miles to Bordeaux, crossing the mountains of the Massif Central in midwinter (‘I am preserved – give thanks, as I do’)<sup>3</sup>. He left Bordeaux in May 1802, only a few months after he arrived, and returned, again on foot, via Paris and Strasbourg to Stuttgart. And during his years in Tübingen, ensconced in a tower on the bank of the Neckar River, his long walks in the surrounding countryside were one of the few consolations left to him, supplying the images for the poems he was still writing from time to time (‘How beautiful, clear from the distance / These glorious pictures shine’)<sup>4</sup>. These late poems were often signed with the mysterious pseudonym ‘Scardanelli’ and frequently given fictitious dates – ‘24 May 1848’, ‘15 November 1759’, ‘9 March 1940’. It’s as if time, in any linear sense, had ceased to exist for him; as if he’d travelled so far beyond the walls of selfhood that he was no longer able – or no longer willing – to return. (‘And I walk through thorns unharmed...’)<sup>5</sup>

And while I know nothing finally of Hölderlin’s experience, it’s true that the farther I walked that day, and the closer I came to Tübingen, the more permeable seemed the membrane between past and present,

and the less solid, the less inviolable I felt myself to be. In a meadow near the village of Vaihingen, the lush, green Swabian grass was transfigured into the parched, yellow, shin-whipping grass of the Georgian steppe, a buzzard into an eagle, dandelion leaves into wild sage, and the Neckar no longer rose in the Black Forest but in the heights of the Javakheti Mountains, while on the path out of Breitenstein, the crunch of gravel under my feet became the crunch of mussel shells on the shore of Loch Morar in the Scottish Highlands, and the German placenames on my map rearranged their letters and became the Celtic names of the hills and valleys we hiked that week, names that seemed no less primordial and mysterious to me than the landscape itself, as if a rock had spoken, or an oak.

### IV

I’ve sometimes wished it were possible to write with the world – to write with it, not about it, as certain Native American tribes attune their dances to the wind in the pampas.<sup>6</sup>

But why in fact this distinction between word and world, for what could be more of the world than words, ‘element of elements’?<sup>7</sup>

Which means that writing is concerned not with creating an equivalence of spirit but with actually bodying it forth.

And isn’t this what we find in poetry: not representation, but presence itself? For language isn’t utilised in a poem, it is. And whereas in daily life I sometimes have the sense that words are obstructing me from the world, inhibiting a more immediate contact with things, with poetry the opposite is true. With poetry words bring me closer to the world, to a level of life older, deeper, and less transitory than the one I commonly know.

1 Friedrich Hölderlin, ‘The Ister’, my translation.

2 Hölderlin, from a letter to Carl Gok, March 1801, in *Friedrich Hölderlin: Essays and Letters*, edited and translated by Jeremy Adler and Charlie Louth (London: Penguin Classics, 2009).

3 Hölderlin, from a letter to Johanna Christiana Gok, 28 January 1802, *ibid.*

4 Hölderlin, ‘The Walk’, in *Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments*, translated by Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil Press, 1994).

5 Hölderlin, ‘The Merry Life’, my translation.

6 Cf. Mary Austin, *The American Rhythm* (Sante Fe: Sunstone Press, 2007): ‘One winter at Tesuque I saw the Eagle dancers on a windy day catch up the rhythm of the wind through the tips of their wind-spread plumes and weave it into the pattern of their ancient dance, to the great appreciation of the native audience. After twenty years’ observation, it remained for Ovington Colbert, a Chickasaw, to point out to me that the subtle wavering of the movement of the Squaw Dance, which I had supposed to be due to the alternate relaxation and tension of interest, was really responsibly attuned to the wind along the sagebrush.’ As quoted in C. D. Wright, *Cooling Time: An American Poetry Vigil* (Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2005).

7 Cf. Marina Tsvetaeva, ‘Art in the Light of Conscience’, in *Art in the Light of Conscience: Eight Essays on Poetry*, translated by Angela Livingstone (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2010): ‘So long as you are a poet, you shall not perish in the elemental, for everything returns you to the element of elements: the word.’

In the late afternoon, five miles north of Tübingen, I left the Schönbuch forest and made my way down the valley into Bebenhausen, a small medieval village surrounding a twelfth-century Cistercian abbey. As I walked, a crow swooped from tree to tree beside me, as if escorting me. A man in a floppy, wide-brimmed hat, like the one Goethe wears in Tischbein's portrait, was mowing the verge. In the woods behind me, a gunshot rang out and a tree erupted into a thousand glittering fragments – a flock of starlings.

According to the brochure I picked up on the way in, the original architecture of the abbey is Romanesque. However, it's the later Gothic additions that dominate, and it's perhaps telling that the only details I felt compelled to record there were the plain, round panes of glass in the chapel windows – 'like the bottoms of wine bottles' – and a brief inscription carved into a doorsill: *Subportantes Invicem*, 'bear with one another'. For while I can appreciate Gothic architecture – the virtuosity of the craftsmanship, the force of its effects – it expresses a relation to the world I cannot finally consent to. A typical Romanesque church finds its form by cleaving to the limits and possibilities of its constituent materials (stone, light, gravity); the Gothic, however, is always straining beyond these limits, as if in denial of the fact it's built on earth, of matter. This is a theology that has turned its back on the world, that has rejected the profane perfection we can live and praise in favour of an idealised perfection we can only long for. And such a theology, in the words of poet and farmer Wendell Berry, 'has promoted and fed upon a destructive schism between body and soul, heaven and earth.'

It has encouraged people to believe that the world is of no importance, and that their only obligation is to submit to certain churchly formulas in order to get to heaven. And so the people who might have been expected to care most selflessly for the world have had their minds turned elsewhere – to a pursuit of 'salvation' that was really only a form of gluttony and self-love, the desire to perpetuate their lives beyond the life of the world.<sup>8</sup>

In one of his early essays, the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam writes that 'the fine arrow of the Gothic belltower is angry, for the whole idea of it is to stab

the sky, to reproach it for being empty'.<sup>9</sup> And indeed, what I see in the Gothic is not the joy and humility of a faith rooted in a living and present reality, but the fear and hubris – the confusion, arrogance, and ultimately anguish – that comes from forgetting, or denying, our origin and end in earth.

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I can say I've never wanted to escape this world, only to come nearer to it. And it was this sense of coming near, of being drawn into proximity with the elemental, that I found in some of the ancient churches in Armenia – the fourth-century monastery complex of Gegherd, for example, where the finely carved walls seem to fuse with the unhewn rock of the mountain itself, as if to efface any distinction between the architecture and its natural support. There's a sense of inevitability, almost, about these structures, as if they had always been there, latent in the stones, and were simply uncovered; as if the genius of the masons who worked there all those centuries ago lay not in their powers of expression, nor even in their mastery of their craft, but in achieving, through their slow, patient labours, their own disappearance.

The hermit-monks who inhabited the monastery in its earliest days slept and prayed in little niches hollowed from the cliff face, and as I scrambled up there on my hands and knees one afternoon, I realised just how intimate their relationship to the earth must have been. The cells in which they woke each morning were too small even to stand in, and what they saw when they opened their eyes was no grand vista but the sheer wall of the cliffs on the opposite side of the valley. Wherever they looked they were confronted with rock, dust, matter – with the sheer facticity of the world. And I don't think it was a coincidence that it was here they settled in their search for God. Here, there was no horizon to distract them from the work of presentness; here, they could not help but be reminded at every moment of the original relation between 'human' and 'humus'.

A few days after visiting Gegherd, we arrived in an off-road Lada at the Akhtala Church in the north of the country, not far from the Azerbaijani and Georgian borders. We spent the night there, sleeping on the grass, and the next morning, a Sunday, woke to the trilling of crickets and the cries of swifts swooping in and out of the crumbling roof. It was a feast day, and as we ate our breakfast families were arriving

8 Wendell Berry, 'A Native Hill', in *The Art of the Commonplace* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002).

9 Osip Mandelstam, 'The Morning of Acmeism', in *Mandelstam*, edited and translated by Clarence Brown (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

from the nearby village with carefully groomed hens and cocks and even sheep, which would later be sacrificed by the priest and offered to the poor.

Many of Armenia's churches – Akhtala among them – are built on ancient pagan temples, and some of this pre-Christian animism seems to persist. This apparently less dogmatic, more embodied vision of Christianity can perhaps be traced to the Armenian Church being one of the few denominations not to accept the doctrine instituted at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 – that Christ is both fully human and fully divine, having two natures in one being. Instead, the Armenian Church maintains, simply, that the nature of Christ is unknowable.

The theologian Maggie Ross identifies the Council of Chalcedon as a key moment in the transition of the Church from a space of mystery, wonder, and openness to the inarticulable, to an institution built on ideology and dogma, incapable of sustaining paradox and obsessed, like all institutions, with politics, control, and power:

Institutional and imperial advocates sought to nail down definitions so that everyone would believe in the same way. They were opposed by those who understood the provisionality of language, who sought to restrain the temptation to define, categorise, and politicise the indefinable, which they regarded as blasphemous. They lost, of course. Language shouts down silence, and its advocates were labelled heretic, monophysite.<sup>10</sup>

Is it possible that something of early Christianity has been preserved in the Armenian Church in a way that it hasn't in other denominations? I couldn't presume to say. However, when you visit that country you understand why it was there, among those landscapes strewn with rocks and ancient monuments – with the traces of East and West, of Hellenic, Judaic, Islamic, and Christian – that Osip Mandelstam, who confessed to 'consulting frankly with chalcedony, cornelian, crystallised gypsum, spar, quartz',<sup>11</sup> recovered his poetic voice after five years of silence:

The Armenians' fullness with life, their rude tenderness, and their splendid intimacy with the world of real things – all of this said to me:

10 Maggie Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2014).

11 Osip Mandelstam, 'Conversation About Dante', translated by Clarence Brown and Robert Hughes, in *The Selected Poems of Osip Mandelstam* (New York: New York Review Books, 1973).

you're awake, don't be afraid of your own time, don't be sly. [...] I found myself among a people who, though renowned for their fervent activity, nevertheless lived not by the clock in the railway station nor by that in some institution, but by the sundial such as I saw among the ruins of Zvartnots in the form of an astronomical wheel or rose inscribed in stone.<sup>12</sup>

The Mass itself lasted long into the afternoon, and my memories of it are infused with the smell of incense and the radiant blue of the ancient frescoes. When the liturgy reached its climax – the consecration of the bread and wine – the priest slipped off his shoes, as God commanded Moses to do at the burning bush, and began chanting the Words of Institution. And whether or not bread and wine really did become flesh and blood in that moment, it was clear that *something* had been enacted. It was as if the world had been stripped, washed, given back to itself, renewed, as if those words, that rite, had restored to the world something of that which the world so freely gives, and in so doing, even if only fleetingly, brought the scales of justice level. And yet there was nothing ethereal or otherworldly about this moment. On the contrary, my flesh was fleshier than it had ever been before, my sorrows more deeply sorrowful. And precisely this was evidence that the world had been transfigured – not into something other, but into itself, which might be the rarest miracle of all.

## VI

Just outside the abbey in Bebenhausen, I found the cottage, marked by a plaque, where the poet Eduard Mörike spent several months in 1863.

Hier schrieb  
Eduard Mörike  
Seine Gedichte

### BILDER AUS BEBENHAUSEN

Mörike – whom, incidentally, Mandelstam was reading on his journey through Armenia – was born in Ludwigsburg near Stuttgart in 1804, less than a day's walk from Hölderlin's birthplace, Lauffen am Neckar. Both men, who met several times in the 1820s, were educated at the Tübingen Stift, a seminary run by the Lutheran Church. Hölderlin dodged

12 Osip Mandelstam, 'Journey to Armenia', in *The Noise of Time: Selected Prose*, translated by Clarence Brown (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002).

the pastoral career expected of a Stift graduate by taking employment as a tutor to the children of the rich, while Mörike became a reluctant curate, frustrated by the itinerant life it required of him (he held ten posts between 1828–33 alone).

Mörike is a poet of the ordinary, the incidental. His language is quiet, unassuming, conscious of its limits and lovingly attuned to the objects and events of daily life. Christopher Middleton describes him as ‘a master of condensation, at his deepest when he senses the universe as an organism living by measure, as a matter of proportion, modulating itself in the subtlest perceptions and the tiniest forms’.<sup>13</sup> Even a poem with a title as pious as ‘Offering’ depicts merely a few peeled apples, while the first of his poems from Bebenhausen is a homage not to the famous abbey but to ‘that empty abandoned dell [...] to which you owe your massive stones’.<sup>14</sup> In Mörike’s vision, it seems, an overgrown quarry is no less worthy of praise than the meticulously worked steeple for which it supplied the raw materials.

I find something similar in the fragments composed by Hölderlin in the few years before the onset of his madness. But whereas Mörike’s poems, for all their subtlety, situate natural phenomena within an order of signification – one can sense the discriminating human gaze at work – these verses of Hölderlin’s feel purely immanent, as if language itself has become an organ of perception. He’s not so much describing the world as naming it; and these names are not invented or imposed but given by the things themselves.

The dynamic tensions that weld these fragments together have all but vanished from the poems written after his breakdown in 1806. In place of the prophetic grandeur of his earlier work, we find an almost frightening modesty – a near-complete self-effacement. According to Maurice Blanchot, ‘it’s as if he had been broken by the effort of resisting the impulse which dragged him away toward the boundlessness of the All [...] but as if he had also vanquished this threat, accomplished the reversal’.<sup>15</sup> In a draft of the hymn ‘Mnemosyne’, which may have been written as late as 1805, making it one of the last poems he composed before being committed to the Autenrieth asylum, we find the lines, ‘And always /

There is a longing that seeks the unbound. But much / Must be contained.’<sup>16</sup> Just one year later, however, such a containing would no longer be possible for him. In the words of the carpenter Ernst Zimmer, who cared for Hölderlin during the last decades of his life, ‘It was the too much he had in him that cracked his mind.’<sup>17</sup>

The Swiss poet Philippe Jaccottet describes one of Hölderlin’s post-Autenrieth poems, ‘If from the Distance’, as an example of ‘the moment when poetry, without seeming to do so, attains what for me is the highest point, which seems at first to be simpler than anything else. In reality, though, it is the most difficult and rarest of all.’<sup>18</sup> It’s as if, in these poems, his language has been so utterly stripped of the obscuring lens of self that the world shines purely through it – as if he’s drawn as close to silence as it’s possible for a poet to come without ceasing to write entirely. But who could follow him there? Who would *want* to follow him there?

## VII

There is a light in things that appears only when we face them with unmixed attention. This is the light Giotto paints in his *Miracle of the Spring*, where the landscape gleams though the sky is almost black; or that the narrator of Peter Handke’s *Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire* observes on the Route Paul Cézanne: ‘Bushes, trees, clouds, even the asphalt of the road, had a shimmer, which came neither from the season nor from the light of that particular day.’ And a few lines further on: ‘The world of nature and the work of man, one with the help of the other, gave me a moment of ecstasy [...] which has been called the *Nunc stans*, the moment of eternity.’<sup>19</sup> And in another of his books, Handke describes how certain gazes painted by Giotto – ‘narrow, elongated eyes, as if they were merely glancing at what was happening and at the same time intimately participating in it’ – can ‘impose shape, impart rhythm, cast light’.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, metaphors of light can be found everywhere in religious and theological texts. The association of light with truth or knowledge or purity

13 From the Introduction to *Friedrich Hölderlin and Eduard Mörike: Selected Poems*, edited and translated by Christopher Middleton (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1972).

14 Eduard Mörike, ‘Pictures from Bebenhausen’, *ibid.*

15 Maurice Blanchot, ‘Hölderlin’s Itinerary’, in *The Space of Literature*, translated by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).

16 Friedrich Hölderlin, ‘Mnemosyne’, *ibid.*

17 From the Introduction to *Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments*.

18 From the notes to *Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments*.

19 Peter Handke, *Slow Homecoming*, translated by Ralph Manheim (New York: New York Review Books, 2009).

20 Peter Handke, *My Year in the No-Man’s-Bay*, translated by Krishna Winston (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998).

is one the most deeply archetypal of human conceptions. However, the light I'm speaking of here is not a metaphor – it shines. And even if it does indeed indicate an encounter with, or at least an intuition of, divine unity and the eternal – Hölderlin's *Hen kai pan*, Handke's *Nunc stans* – it nonetheless manifests itself through the common objects of our world: clouds, grass, stone, an asphalt road.

So it is not a purely transcendent light. It is not the tongues of fire that descended to the Apostles on the day of the Pentecost, nor the blinding flash that converted Saint Paul on the road to Damascus, but something immanent, near. And while I love those stories – of the Apostles, of Saint Paul – and can even say that I believe in them, they remain finally inaccessible to me, because I'm unable, or perhaps unwilling, to imagine a higher revelation than the evening sunlight glowing at this moment on the roofs across the street, or the budding beech leaves in the otherwise leafless woods on that Sunday morning in early spring (their luminous green!). For how could I presume to speak of receiving some sort of delivery from beyond this world when I scarcely attend to the world itself? And aren't our lives dangerously lacking in unpurposed reality, in the exacting otherness of flower, lake, tree? And isn't the unwritten Commandment simply to heed, to bear witness to what is closest?

## VII

It was dusk by the time I arrived in Tübingen. The trees seemed to be lifting the darkness out of the earth and gathering it in their branches. The edges of things were crumbling in the powdery light, and colours were at once more intense and elusive. I wandered for a while through the streets of the Old Town, until my feet could no longer carry me, then sat under one of the giant plane trees on the little island in the middle of the Neckar. The current was swift and quiet, and tufts of willow cotton drifted through the air. The hours of walking seemed to have attuned my senses more precisely to the forms of the outside world, and as I watched the light from the street-lamps dancing on the surface of the river, I was struck again by the sheer articulacy of the inanimate world, even while aware that its language will remain forever alien to me. Somewhere a coot clicked at its mate. A quiet rushing sound, like far-off water, rose from the city. Lights were coming on in the windows of the houses, and already Venus could be seen in the west. I was there – *here*. And only one thing disturbed the

perfection of this moment (or did it in fact complete it?): the realisation that it would finally be worth nothing unless I could bring something back with me – a little more tenderness, a little more humility; a willing hand, a listening ear.

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Other texts in this series:

- 'The Sun of Words', excerpts from *Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenräumen*, an interview between Herbert Gamper and Peter Handke
- 'Across the Border: Peter Handke's *Repetition*' by W. G. Sebald (both translated by Nathaniel Davis)
- 'We Shall Have Worked' by Phil Baber