

The Nearness of Elsewhere: Place and the Ethics of Remembrance in the Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin and Li Po

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Introduction

In the poems “Remembrance” and “Exile’s Letter” by Friedrich Hölderlin and Li Po, the poets explore the natures of place and reminiscence. Remarkably, their concerns with these phenomena come to address the ontology and reach of poetry itself: what it can be, and how it can touch us. In this paper, I wish to argue that Hölderlin and Li achieve a reconstitution of poetry’s nature by spatially staging in their poems the connection between memory and ethics. For instance, the pastoral and transnational movement in Hölderlin’s “Remembrance” and Li’s “Exile’s Letter” are not simply travelogue: they are physical conditions that reawaken and mediate the process of understanding our phenomenal, lived experiences. In other words, Hölderlin and Li arrive at, arguably, a spiritual assessment of what it means to be human, and they largely do so through an exploration of temporal and spatial themes.

While different in their emotional progressions and surely in their contexts, one of the central questions that I think both poems cast into relief is: What is the relation between memory and destiny? As beings of both physical and spiritual needs, how do we reconcile past experience and future decision, especially when the impermanence of our experiences disrupts our sense of how we ought to go on living? As the title of Li’s poem suggests, we can veritably feel like exiles from our own lives. Therefore, I propose that what Hölderlin and Li call on us to remember is the *present place of our own being*, which is simultaneously filled with memories, but “empty” in its certainty of what the future holds. As I hope my comparative analysis shows, the tension that the present embodies does not have to be an insidious one. Instead, I will point out how the poems rely on the remembrance of geo-cultural activity in the past, which assists the speaker’s psychic mobility in the present. Consequently, a dramatic meditation results in which, paradoxically, it is through accepting the seeming instability and emptiness of life that one draws the strength to live and the reason to act.

As Hölderlin and Li’s poems may elucidate¹, self-recollection is a grand moment of presence because it bears the gravity of the past and the void of the future. I argue that Hölderlin and Li invest their poems with culturally embedded experiences because those experiences are not only in the past; they are in the present in the form of a reservoir of meaning. They bleed into the “now” of life. The transitory but palpable experiences of everyday place-making are *particularly* what constitute any sense of a continuous beingness at all. Thus, to fully face this present, however difficult at times—to truly be present *with* one’s present, is to affirm the dynamic historical life of meaning. Whatever events or ideas constitute “meaningfulness”—different for everyone—they will nonetheless form the ground of our present senses of freedom and language. Dialectically, the future eventually subsumes and becomes the past (and passing) present, re-opening the “place” (in a metaphysical sense) in which what is now considered meaningful—or that which will be considered meaningful—shall live.

For Hölderlin and Li, the nature and analytic purchase of remembrance, of physical and psychic mobility, are renegotiated in the perpetual spatial “hereness” of things. Thus, even in the inheritance of past failures and present falterings, what I call an *ethics of re-traveling* exists. Even in the seeming absence of an outside, divine Creator to whom we can appeal, we possess a capacity of value-creation that can *emplace* itself towards meaning with and for other fellow human beings. To the extent that we can establish a relationship with the timeless (i.e. unending or indefinite) act of meaning-creation in the midst of a human condition that is inescapably time-bound, we influence our consciousness, which changes our perceptual experience, which changes our subjectivity, which changes our relations, which changes our choices, which changes our ethics. Poetry², as such “timeless” re-traveling, is one medium to help us register the crucible of existence—full of severance, estrangement, and loss—in as conscious a way as possible.

Hölderlin and Li intimate a wider ontology of poetry beyond its affective qualities, in which poetry yields not just a nostalgic but a sacramental function of preparing for what is to come by acknowledging what one is. As simple as it seems, “what one is” is not a facile or static issue: it requires jostling with conflicting modes of time, space, and reasoning. Paradoxically, “what one is” is subject to change, and yet this apparently changeable kernel at the center of who we are must itself be capable of enduring and never quite losing its primal, even spiritual, “place.”

Accordingly, my thesis will conclude by inquiring into the ethical implications of Hölderlin and Li’s uses of remembrance. If we accept that remembrance of the presence of “what one is” *can* reconcile one’s memories and one’s destiny, then a natural question is why *should* one want to use remembrance this way? I argue that the poems suggest that *faith* is both the precondition and the reward of remembrance. This sense of faith is not to say that the poems’ speakers are unquestionably optimistic. There are tragic economies to the poems. The proposed faith is, significantly, to state that the speakers are not embodying the extreme *opposites* of faith, which are indifference and nihilism. But faith in what? Historically and culturally, a precise answer to this question for Hölderlin and Li themselves necessarily remains unknown. But within the kino-cognitive space of the poems—within their sensorious and conceptual horizons—there is evidence to suggest that what we realize we have faith in is *exactly* that phenomenon: the faith that there is something *to* remember; that there is something *to* belong to—to literally, *re-member* oneself to the part of that which we feel makes us whole (my vague but nonetheless effectual sense of “meaningfulness” above). Such an integrative counterpart does not necessarily have to be divine; in fact, Hölderlin’s poem, “Remembrance”, and Li’s poem, “Exile’s Letter”, contain a reflexive “traveling” (literally and figuratively) whose path leads not above earth but back to it.

In sum, this paper aims to trace the subtle but compelling ways Hölderlin and Li deliver their sad but faithful hymns; how they use poetry’s voice to “remember” the encouraging and ethical possibilities within our existence’s ambiguity.

I. Loss: *The Birthplace of Time and Space*

When encountering Hölderlin and Li’s spatial effusion within the personal lyric, we are called to inhabit our own experiential or psychological spaces in which life and lyric—event and expression—are so imbricated that to delve into one is to delve into the other. Poetry, in such

moments, is not just a glossing of the surface of subjectivity, but, more dauntingly, the dwelling in the *possibility* of subjectivity—the possibility of language’s capacity to disclose and anchor the world for us. The meaning of a poem’s content, then, will no doubt be a significant finding. But the meaning of the *act* of poetry—of the conditions for its possibility—presents us with a significance that both fuels the writing of poetry and haunts us long after the poem has been written. For example, Hölderlin critic Adrian Del Caro is sensitive to the deep and deepening implications of poetry once we imprint its evocations onto the lived pages of existence itself:

[T]he critic operates under the premise that a poem is a...secret code known only to the poet that will now unfold by virtue of the critic’s application of special tools. While the reader has every right to expect that poetry has *meaning*, that it is indeed meaningful, still it is difficult when confronted by the best poetry to reduce things to “meaning.” “What does the poet mean?” is always a fair question, but in the case of Hölderlin, [...] the meaning of these poems is not easily divorced from the meaning of poetry per se. [...] [F]or this poet [Hölderlin] viewed poetry as an analogue to being, and the continuum of being is constantly overlapping, now reaching into the past, assimilating, now projecting into the future while grounded in the present. (11)

Thus, I suggest that in the cases of Hölderlin and Li, rather than mulling over the question of “What do their poems mean?”, the question of “What does *living* mean?” might enable us to have a more syncretic understanding of not only the poems examined here, but of how Hölderlin and Li understand poetry itself. Attending to this question and its poetic formulations both occasions and supports the potentially sacred act of remembrance; it is a form of “traveling” that we enact literally and internally.

As the poems herein suggest, much of what living means—indeed, what living cannot help but entail—is to live with loss. The two poems, on one hand, denote a very personal and concrete sense of loss in their respective speakers. On the other hand, they also enact this word “loss” in another sense: throughout the poems, the speakers are “lost” within their own reflections, and not necessarily only in a confused way. In line 37 of “Remembrance,” for example, Hölderlin heightens the poem’s dramatic monologue form when he asks, “But where are my friends? Bellarmin / With his companion?” (lines 37-8; 106-109). But before Hölderlin mentions a sense of personal absence, he creates for us a tactile presence by guiding us along a journey from the Northeast of Germany to the Southwest of France: “Along the shore and the stream dives / Riverward, but a noble pair / Of oaks and white poplars / Looks on from above;” (lines 9-12; 107). In the context of the whole poem, the narrator speaks as one who has felt the “northeasterly” winds, or walked through and “greet[ed] /... the gardens of Bordeaux” (lines 1; 5; 7). It is this vivid introspection that both grounds and is grounded by temporal and spatial features. We cross the landscape between Germany and France (where “oaks” and “white poplars” are indigenous, respectively) so quickly, not only because we are syntactically and visually ushered by rivers and waterfalls, but also because the poem has already whisked us off in the opening lines: “The northeasterly blows in, / My favorite among winds,” (line 1; 107).

Despite the swiftness with which the poem inaugurates us, Hölderlin (or his speaker) also invites us to move with a certain patience, as when he enjoins the reader, or possibly himself, to “go now and greet / The lovely Garonne / And the gardens of Bordeaux,” (lines 5-7; 107). This bidding to greet specific emissaries of nature, so to speak, not only pauses time, it *fills* it: it asks us to shape the unboundedness of time by filling it with a greeting, with language;

and space, such that “sea-crossing” and “mountain-crossing” become bearable, even desirable tasks, especially if it leads persons to be “of that [rare] fellowship.” Pound and Li scholar Ronald Bush infers from the poem’s sentiments “something extraordinary...created not [just] by a single friendship but by a poetic community that disdains gold and has forgotten kings and princes. It is this unique fellowship that allows the poets—almost a miracle in Pound’s world—for once to speak out their ‘hearts and minds...without regret’” (43). Thus, not only is the loss or passing of an ennobling experience ontologically essential to the constitution of remembrance; it makes the act of remembering *experientially* and not just conceptually essential to being alive.

II. The Sociology of the Unseen

If we are to further consider how Hölderlin and Li understand the relation between memory and destiny—as well as between an impermanent past and an unknown future, we must consider how these poets approach and accept this fundamental tension of life. In both poems, the speakers hint that this tension is somewhat difficult to articulate. For Hölderlin, for example, it seems the only way to reconcile that which passes with that which we have yet to encounter, is to hold their shared space in suspension. Their epistemic convergence, or rather, chiasm, is a crossing-over of past beingness and possible beingness that constitutes nothing less than the *present becoming*. Within his concise, panoramic sweep, Hölderlin suspends not only the quietly majestic images of nature, but seemingly time itself, which must eventually—as the beholder *remembers*—find its form in one’s consciousness; in one’s phenomenal life. Hölderlin’s second strophe captures this rare but vital sense of presence by first suggesting a pun on “still” to evoke the poet’s mastery or at least composure with time:

All this still comes to mind and how
The broad tops of elms
Bend over the mill,
But a figtree is growing in the courtyard.
There, on feastedays,
Brown women walk
The silky ground,
Toward March,
When night and day are equal,
And down leisurely paths
Heavy with golden dreams,
Drift lulling breezes. (107)

Both Hölderlin’s Mediterranean journey and journey into remembrance require a “stillness,” and perhaps even a surrender, of one’s mind in order to faithfully observe what is happening in each setting. It is apropos that Hölderlin speaks in the present tense, in which the elms *bend* over the mill, a figtree *grows* in the courtyard, and tanned women dreamily *walk* paths where lulling breezes *drift* in Spring. When the mind and body are in congruence, just as when “night and day are equal” (line 21), the possibility of remembrance can be all the more keen because one is pivoted by the torque of the present: the present is what it is *precisely* because it allows other time frames to co-exist and, therefore, to magnify the existential axis on which we are turning.

Hölderlin's psychic equinox, however, paves the way for yet a deeper kind of remembrance. The epiphany Hölderlin is approaching cannot be so readily described, for it is not bound only to geography. And yet, an equally earthly engagement—that of friendship dialogue—assists the speaker in conveying the insight of his remembrance. In fact, Hölderlin remembers *himself*—his own spiritual discipline—while remembering others:

But someone reach me
A fragrant cupful
Of dark light, that
I might rest; it would be sweet
To drowse in the shade.
It is no good
To let mortal thoughts
Rob you of your soul. Yet
Dialogue is good and to speak
The heart, to hear all
About the days of love
And deeds that have taken place. (107)

While Hölderlin recognizes the value and reprieve of a fragrant cup of wine, and by extension, of fraternity and revelry, he doesn't wish to escape the higher beckonings of one's soul, but to face them fully. At the same time, this third strophe itself conveys a delicate tension between communal encouragement and the solitary interrogations of life that one must inevitably make when she is alone with her own soul. Dialogue, Hölderlin acknowledges, helps to open up the heart's channels; it is like the confluence of rivers that remind each other of the sea to which they are racing, unwittingly or not. With such a discourse of equilibrium, or at least antinomy, Hölderlin is reinforcing the idea that what we remember in the end is the *present place of our own being*. Even in remembering one's friends (which is an important event in its own right), one's memory doubles back on itself, as one often goes from the remembrance of alterity back to the remembrance of the mind's feeling of its own unity, precarious at it is.

This development of the sociology of the unseen through the culture of observation is also expressed in Li's meandering poem. Like Hölderlin, Li is in an act of remembrance, but he is careful to do imagistic and perhaps metaphysical justice to his memories by narrating them in the present tense. Li's intoxicated verses ensorcell us, and the remembrance is all the more poignant upon realizing how vigorous the friendship was:

And you would walk out with me to the western corner of the castle,
To the dynastic temple, with the water about it clear as blue jade,
With boats floating, and the sound of mouth-organs and drums,
With ripples like dragon-scales going grass-green on the water,
Pleasure lasting, with courtesans going and coming without hindrance, 60
With the willow-flakes falling like snow,
And the vermilioned girls getting drunk about sunset,
And the waters a hundred feet deep reflecting green eyebrows—
Eyebrows painted green are a fine sight in young moonlight (260)

An orchestral velocity drives much of Li's poem, allowing us to witness the infinite and the infinitesimal seemingly all at once. The participial verbs not only conjure the past, but they

III. Nomadic Vitality: *The Ethics of Re-traveling*

In my Introduction, I stated that the latter half of my argument would inquire into the ethical implications of Hölderlin and Li's understanding of remembrance. To recapitulate the line of inquiry: if we accept that remembrance of the presence of "what one is" *can* reconcile one's memories and one's destiny, then a natural question is why *should* we want to use remembrance this way? I argue that what these poems elucidate is that the reason *why* we should remember the present time of our own being—why we *ought* to remember in such a "presencing" way—is that it is what we already do. We *ought to* because we *can*.⁵ The question Hölderlin and Li invite us to answer is, how *conscious* (present) will we be of that which we already are?

The notion seems inane, but these poems suggest that "dwelling poetically"—living presently and authentically with the responsibility one carries throughout what one has done, does, and will do with her travels—is often the most pressing and eminent of tasks. With respect to Hölderlin's existential and spiritual endeavors, and not to the socio-political misprisions of Heidegger's general aesthetics, Heidegger's meditations on Hölderlin's poetry are fruitful here:

Poetry awakens the illusion of the unreal and of the dream as opposed to the tangible and clamorous activity in which we believe ourselves to be at home. And yet, on the contrary, what the poet says and undertakes to be is what is truly real. [...]

Thus the essence of poetry seems to vacillate within the semblance of its own exterior aspect, and yet stands firm after all. In fact, it is itself, in its essence, a founding—that is: firm grounding.

To be sure, every founding remains a *free gift*, and Hölderlin hears it said: "Poets be free, like swallows." This freedom, however, is not unrestrained arbitrariness and headstrong desire, but *supreme necessity*. (62-3, emphases mine)

Like our own freedom, the process of remembrance is given to us upon existing. But, because we cannot avoid it (which would be tantamount to avoiding life as such)—and because we must assume responsibility for it, the act of remembrance is at once a "free gift" and a "supreme necessity." It compels us to acknowledge our being (what is "freely" already there, or what has naturally accumulated in our being-through-living), but also to *reaffirm* our being (what we *cannot help* but do if we are to continue valuing life as such, as opposed to, say, committing suicide upon reaching recurring ethical or spiritual anomie).

Based on the spiritual journeys attempted in these poems, I would qualify Heidegger's claim that while poetic freedom in the sense we've been unfolding may be "supreme necessity," its beingness is not fully experienced until there is the continual *non-necessary* avowal of it. That is, our freedom to remember the complexity and (re)unity of our being may be a default, ontological apparatus. But that act of remembrance means little to us unless we *want* it; unless and until we desire and, dare I say, *love* the capacity more than its necessity. Such a remembrance—a remembrance of our *faith* in remembrance—keeps us tethered to the particular earth from which our lofty thoughts often try to leave. It keeps our veritably god-like capacity of creation telluric and *ad hoc*, not secretly arrogant and abstract. Hölderlin is absolutely sincere and not just diplomatic when he says, "Yet / Dialogue is good and to speak / The heart, to hear all / About the days of love / And deed that have taken place...And the eyes of love do not waver in their gaze," (lines 32-36, 58: 109).

Likewise, in Li's life-world, the freely chosen expression of one's faith in existence, of why it matters—in a word, one's particular *remembrance*—can be said to manifest itself in what Li Po translator David Hinton identifies as Li's knowledge of *tzu-ja*: literally "self-so" or "being such of itself," hence "natural" or "spontaneous." Li Po's work is suffused with the wonder of being part of this process, but at the same time, he *enacts* it, makes it visible in the self-dramatized spontaneity of his life. To live as part of the earth's process of change is to live one's most authentic self: rather than acting with self-centered intention, one acts with self-less spontaneity. This spontaneity is *wu-wei* (literally: "doing nothing"), and it is an important part of Taoist and Ch'an (Zen) practice, the way to experience one's life as an organic part of *tzu-jan*.... (xi-xii)

Contrary to Heidegger's more compulsory view, the desire to embody the worth of existence must strike a delicate balance between desire that is spontaneously received and desire that is gladly stoked. The speaker of "Exile's Letter" does not try to rationalize or transcend the impermanence of things; he is completely honest and in good faith when he declares, "What is the use of talking! And there is no end of talking— / There is no end of things in the heart" (lines 80-81; 260). I say the speaker is in "good faith" in an existential sense because he is not deceiving himself or masking his anguish when he bemoans that there is both no use in talking *and* that there is no end to talking. Life ambushes us with aporias daily. Our consciousness absorbs the whole spectrum of fragmented existence, not just its polarities. How actively or passively Li's speaker will live depends, again, on how he chooses to remember which of life's experiences he wishes to be conscious of. And like Hölderlin, Li suggests that if a kind of human faith in the presence of one's own being *is* chosen, it must be committed to with "a spirit so high that it [is] all over the heavens" (line 40). This faith is only an in-spiriting faith when it is remembered; when it is "drunk...month after month;" when it is spontaneously and freely "spoke[n] out [with] our hearts and minds.../ and without regret" (line 6; 15-16).

Conclusion: *Odysseys and Gifts*

I have tried to argue (with some injustice, I imagine) that Hölderlin and Li's poems take us somewhere in ways that provoke our own revelatory abilities. Spatially, they navigate us through a culturally and socially edifying backdrop. Moreover, they open up places in which they re-introduce us to ourselves by inviting us to remember not only the impermanence and ambiguity of life, but also that those conditions of life *are* life. It is not until we sincerely and fully accept that there is a profound lack of stability and meaning in our life that we can remember *what else* life can be for us. What kind of spontaneity or love exists within our facticity? We did not put the rock that is the bulk of our lives here. But can we build a rose from it? When Hölderlin concludes "Remembrance" with the oracular line, "But poets establish what remains" (line 59; 109), what "remains," I gather, is nothing less than *nothing*. I do not mean a literal negation or oblivion remains. On the contrary, I mean "nothing" in the best sense remains. What Hölderlin leaves us with is a generous emptiness; a not-yet-ness; not a resolute dialogue, but the ever-present space for the *possibility* of dialogue, even if it is only between one and one's remembrance of what one could be. What remains is a lack. But this lack is a gift—perhaps the grandest gift, for only by there being a lack of meaning can we give any meaning at all. And a gift is only fully realized when it is also *wanted*, and not just had. The very remembrance of how to realize the presence of a gift is a gift itself—a self-replenishing and

ever-particularizing one. Li Po might deem this recognition *tzu-jan*: the “self-so;” the All-that-is-there. On this route, our remembrance—that ancient and yet breath-near place of wandering—is never quite lost. It is simply (or not so simply) re-traveling those spaces that sustain us so that we don’t forget them. We might, then, view the ethics of re-traveling (belonging to a poem’s speakers and, alas, our own) as a perceptual process that both fragments our life (and living) history by narrating it as a form of wandering within consciousness, *and* reconstructs it through that very locution.

If Hölderlin and Li’s respective rivers are metonymies for the unstoppable passage of time, then our remembering—indeed, our very breathing—is the spontaneous motion of an irrepressible faith to *experience* time; to flesh it out; to embrace it, like Li does to the moon. Adrian Del Caro deduces that the inner odysseys in Hölderlin and Li’s poems are about *determination*, and determination is “meant here not only as the human act of volition, but [as] the ontic event of one coming into one’s own” (13). In such moments, when we clutch at the air or chase down the dawn, we too perhaps are no longer exiles to ourselves, but sudden avatars of ethics, brushed by the specter of poetry; emplaced not in a paralyzing, vague Meaning, but in the particular *nearness* of it, in which language is as authentic as being. It is by no means unusual then, in our own wanderings, to feel at home in a place we’ve never been.

Notes

¹ I have included a transcription of Hölderlin’s “Remembrance” and Li’s “Exile’s Letter” at the end of this paper for immediate reference.

² It may be recalled that “poetry” derives from the Greek *poiein*, meaning “to make, to create, to author.”

³ Li’s introductory lines even juxtapose the actionable past with the active present: “So-Kin of Rakuho, ancient friend, I *now remember*, / That you built me a special tavern,” (lines 1-2, emphasis mine). See Li Po, “Exile’s Letter.” Translated by Ezra Pound (1915) In *The New Poetry: An Anthology*. Ed. Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917, p. 258. Pound maintains many of the Japanese versions of Chinese names and places, as in the address to “So-Kin of Rakuho,” instead of “Yüan,” or “the bridge at Ten-Shin” (line 3) instead of “the bridge at T’ien-ching.” Originally published in his book of fifteen translated Chinese poems, *Cathay*, Pound’s version of “Exile’s Letter” is in turn a translation based on the notes and glosses of Ernest Fenollosa. Pound possessed no knowledge of the Chinese language himself, and so certain liberties and inaccuracies inevitably remain. But for an essay claiming that Pound succeeds on the whole of capturing the spirit of Chinese poetry in his translations, see Ronald Bush, “Pound and Li Po: What Becomes a Man.” In *Ezra Pound: Among the Poets*. Ed. George Bornstein. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985. Pp. 35-62.

⁴ Emery is quoting here from Ernest Fenollosa. *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: An Ars Poetica*. (Trans.) Ezra Pound. Washington, D.C.: Square Dollar Series, 1918, p. 72.

⁵ Though not necessarily with his categorical and ethical projects in mind, I allude to Immanuel Kant’s transcendental argument that any normative expression, especially of a moral nature, precisely has meaning and consequence for us only because we are inherently *capable* of it, over and above our manipulations or denials of this capacity. Under this reasoning, what we “should do” is always an announcement of what we “can do,” and any future action (the “should”) presupposes past or, put another way, always-present experience (the “did” or “can”). Our ethical task, argues Kant, is to synthesize (or “remember,” in the context of my paper) these ontologies in our daily conduct. For the *a priori* relationship between human will and human beingness, see Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, (Ed. and Trans.) Allen W. Wood. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 5-7; 54-57.

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