

# Dialectical Thought in Nineteenth-Century Music as Exhibited in Brahms's Setting of Hölderlin's *Schicksalslied*

by Alan A. Luhring

It is the importance of dialectical thought to nineteenth-century music that Brahms, Hölderlin, and Hegel can show us in the *Schicksalslied*.

The *Schicksalslied*, Op. 54 (1871), by Johannes Brahms is a setting of Friederich Hölderlin's poem of the same name. It is one of three secular poems Brahms set for mixed chorus and orchestra, the others being *Nanie*, Op. 82 (1881), and the *Gesang der Parzen*, Op. 89 (1883). All three present a view of mankind and of fate that is supposed to be foreign to Brahms, the composer of *The German Requiem* and the motets of Opuses 29, 37, 74, and 110. The *Schicksalslied* has received the most attention partly because of its almost ethereal ending: the work concludes with the orchestra repeating the opening introduction. At one time Brahms intended the chorus to repeat the opening couplet of text as the orchestra performed the final measures. He allowed himself to be persuaded that this ending was not possible.<sup>1</sup> As he commented in a letter, "The poem is not one from which a patchwork can be made."<sup>2</sup>

Hölderlin's poem consists of three stanzas of blank verse contrasting the conditions of celestial immortals and mankind. The first two stanzas deal with the immortals, the third with humanity. It is the juxtaposition and the abrupt ending which have caused the poem to be considered dark, pessimistic, or bitter.

Brahms's setting of the poem demonstrates his usual combination of careful treatment of poetic text and musical intensification of mood. Brahms set the poem as two large sections of music. The first, *Langsam*, comprises stanzas one and two; the second, *Allegro*, is stanza three. The orchestral introduction to which Brahms returned for his coda is an integral part of the first section in tempo, mood, and musical material. The *Langsam* sections are approximately twice the duration of the *Allegro*, retaining the structural proportions of Hölderlin's poem.<sup>3</sup> The contrast between the two musical sections is heightened by the fact that they are in different keys: E-flat major for the immortals and C minor for mankind.

The ending has made the *Schicksalslied* the most commented

upon of Brahms's secular choruses. However, unlike the usual commentaries,<sup>4</sup> I wish to suggest that the endings of both Hölderlin's and Brahms's versions are the same: Brahms did not change the meaning of Hölderlin's poem. He did not change even the structural proportions of the entire work. Brahms referred to the ending when he said in his October letter: "I am indeed saying something which the poet does not say, and, of course, it would be better if its absence had been the main idea for him."<sup>5</sup> I suggest that the reason the poet did not state the most important thing was a result of that special kind of circular logic usually called dialectic. The main idea of the poem is a synthesis of the thesis-antithesis between the situations of immortals and mortals. In Hölderlin that synthesis is silent, left to the reader to infer, but is surely not absent. This is the thing Brahms could say in abstract tones that the poet did not verbalize.

Ihr wandelt droben im Licht  
Auf weichem Boden, seelige Genien!  
Glänzende Götterlüfte  
Rühren euch leicht,  
Wie die Finger der Künstlerin  
Heilige Seiten.

Schicksallos, wie der schlafende  
Säugling, athmen die Himmlischen;  
Keusch bewahrt  
In bescheidener Knospe,  
Blühet ewig  
Ihnen der Geist,  
Und die seeligen Augen  
Blicken in stiller  
Ewiger Klarheit.

Doch uns ist gegeben,  
Auf keiner Stätte zu ruhn,  
Es schwinden, es fallen  
Die leidenden Menschen  
Blindlings von einer  
Stunde zur andern,  
Wie Wasser von Klippe  
Zu Klippe geworfen,  
Jahr lang ins Ungewisse hinab.

The circular reasoning we call dialectic is usually ascribed to Hegel. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was Hölderlin's classmate at the theological seminary of the University of Tübingen between 1788 and 1793. The two remained close friends through the 1790s. Without debating the origins of the logical process/system, it is easy to see that people in similar company with similar thought needed common methods of analysis and reasoning. Dialectical thought was merely a common tool.<sup>6</sup>

Hölderlin's poem was originally included in Part II of his novel *Hyperion*, published in 1799. The novel is in the form of a series of letters written by the Greek Hyperion at the end of his life to explain his life and thought to a German friend. The *Schicksalslied* is found directly before *Hyperion* relates receipt of the news of his beloved's death and the contents of her last letter to him. The book, however, is not about a

Ye wander gladly in light  
Through goodly mansions dwellers  
in Spiritland!  
Luminous heaven-breezes  
Touching ye soft,  
Like as fingers when skillfully  
Wakening harp-strings.

Fearlessly, like the slumb'ring  
Infant, abide the Beatified;  
Pure retained.  
Like unopened blossoms,  
Flow'ring ever,  
Joyful their soul  
And their heavenly vision  
Gifted with placid  
Ne'er-ceasing clearness.

To us is allotted  
No restful haven to find;  
They falter, they perish,  
Poor suffering mortals,  
Blindly as moment  
Follows to moment,  
Like water from mountain  
To mountain impellèd,  
Destined to disappearance below.

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Translation by Edwin Evans, *Historical, Descriptive, and Analytical Account of the Entire Works of Johannes Brahms* (London, 1912), I, "The Vocal Music," 243.

tragic buffeting by fate but about an *Eins und Alles*: a total unity of all things.<sup>7</sup> For example, Part I of *Hyperion*, published in 1797, ends with the lines:

There will be but one Beauty; and man and Nature will be united in one all-embracing divinity. [Translation by Willard R. Trask, *Hyperion or the Hermit in Greece* [by] Friedrich Hölderlin (New York, 1959), 101.]

Divinity, of course, was what both Hölderlin and Hegel were studying at Tübingen. In the early 1790s Hölderlin wrote the Greek motto “*Ἕν καὶ Πάν*” (*Eins und Alles*) in Hegel’s diary,<sup>8</sup> suggesting that Hegel and

Hölderlin were both seeking this unity. It is on this basis that I suggest a dialectical interpretation of Hölderlin’s poem.

The *Schicksalslied* requires dialectical interpretation if it is to fit the novel. Part II of *Hyperion* does not change the focus of the story: indeed, it cannot, since the novel is a retrospective series of letters. Thus, although the *Schicksalslied* directly precedes the notice of his beloved’s death, the poem cannot be merely gloomy in its implication, since Hyperion knows of the death before the book begins. Part II ends only two letters after the poem, with the following rhapsody:

We too, we too are not parted, Diotima, and tears for you understand it not. Living tones are we, we sound together in thy harmony, Nature! which who can undo? who can part lovers?—

O Soul! Soul! Beauty of the World! indestructible, ravishing one! with thine eternal youth! thou art; what, then is death and all the woe of men?—Ah! those strange creatures have spoken many empty words. Yet from delight all comes, and all ends in peace.

Like lovers’ quarrels are the dissonances of the world. Reconciliation is there, even in the midst of strife, and all things that are parted find one another again.

The arteries separate and return to the heart and all is one eternal glowing life. [Translation by Willard R. Trask, *Op. cit.*, 169-170.]

Such lyrical expression of the unity of all things justifies a dialectical reading of the *Schicksalslied*, one which covers the tragic nature with the lyrical.

Brahms may not have been aware of the poem’s silent synthesis since he complained that its absence was not Hölderlin’s main idea. Yet that synthesis is the reason Brahms removed the chorus from the coda; as he wrote a friend after the first reading in 1871, “At the end you will find, of course, no text, no chorus. It simply doesn’t go here.”<sup>9</sup> The chorus is silent because at the ending the subject is no longer the immortals. Similarly, Brahms’s musical ending is not a simple apotheosis of man: the piece remains harmonically open ended. Apparently a new condition exists for both the blessed and mortals: the opening material returns in a new key. The chorus is silent because the subject is not the blessed *Genii* but *Eins und Alles*. In this coda are the only unequivocal tonic arrivals. Even so, the section is not completely static: Brahms’s musical style insures that. Eternal repose is apparently not desirable for creatures which have lived: thus motion continues to the end, but that motion seems more serene, more peaceful than previously experienced. Brahms’s coda is merely a musical expression of total unity: the subject of *Hyperion*. Such total unity is the principal idea the poet did not verbalize but which he did not fail to express either.

The *Schicksalslied* is not unique in being based upon dialectic reasoning. It is only the most obvious example because the musician makes evident what the poet could not verbalize. The concept of using music for expressing dialectic thought is important in much

familiar nineteenth-century music.

In a fashion similar to Brahms's writing in the *Schicksalslied*, synthesis sometimes replaces recapitulation or tonic arrival. Tchaikovsky framed his *Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy* in sonata-allegro form, contrasting the musical material (known as the conflict between Montagues and Capulets) in B minor with the love themes in D-flat major. In the formal B-minor recapitulation, Tchaikovsky did not reconcile the disparity of key, tempo, and mood; he left the lover's music in D major: at least it is in the same scale as the B-minor tonic. The amount of musical contrast is apparently too great for traditional recapitulation: the real conclusion awaits the final forty measures. The ending may suggest the final apotheosis of the lovers to a listener inclined to fantasy, but in musical terms the B-major coda is a synthesis of the original B tonality (of the families) and the major mode and mood (of the lovers).

It was dialectic thought that allowed Mahler to create symphonic worlds: his own synthesis of folk-style melody and text with fine-art harmony and procedure. The most familiar example is the song-finale of Symphony #4, in which Mahler presented the peasant's vision of heaven first in G major (stanzas one and two), then in E minor (stanzas three and four). After a development section (stanzas five through seven), Mahler wrote his last two stanzas in E major. As a result he ended the symphony, as well as the movement, in a key other than that in which it began. Using text may help explain the procedure to an audience, but surely it is exactly ending off the tonic in a new harmonic region—E major, the synthesis of G major and E minor—that creates the ecstatic finale Mahler desired.

The most extreme example of Mahler's technique is in choral literature: Symphony #8. Mahler juxtaposed a thesis (the medieval *Veni*

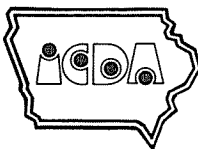
*Creator Spiritus* hymn) and its antithesis (the finale of Goethe's *Faust*, Part II). Through Mahler's music, the listener is to reach a new understanding of the Christian Father's Creating Spirit and Goethe's "Ewig-Weibliche." Indeed, like Hölderlin's synthesis, Mahler's remains forever outside the world of sound—achieved and understood only

after the words or music have stopped. Thus, perhaps, in music the nineteenth-century ends exactly where it began one hundred years earlier in Hölderlin's poem—with an unspoken synthesis.

An analysis of *Schicksalslied* follows. The E-flat stanzas of the beginning of *Schicksalslied* are presented in a roughly strophic fashion. (See Chart I.)

Chart I

	<i>Langsam</i> : Sonatina Form
<i>Exposition</i>	Orchestral Introduction
E <sup>b</sup> major	
Theme 1	Ihr wandelt droben im Licht
E <sup>b</sup> major	Auf weichem Boden, seelige Genien!
Transition	Glänzende Götterlüfte
(antiphony)	Rühren euch leicht,
B <sup>b</sup> major as	Wie die Finger der Künstlerin
V of E <sup>b</sup>	Heilige Seiten.
<i>Recapitulation</i>	
Theme 1	Schicksallos, wie der schlafende
E <sup>b</sup> major	Säugling, athmen die Himmlischen;
Transition	Keusch bewahrt
(ending on	In bescheidener Knospe
I of E <sup>b</sup> )	Blühet ewig
	Ihnen der Geist,
E <sup>b</sup> major tonic	Und die seeligen Augen
	Bliken in stiller
	Ewiger Klarheit.



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The first couplets of stanzas one and two are set to the same music in E-flat; the second couplets each open with an abrupt harmonic shift. Brahms integrated the two stanzas by presenting the third couplet of stanza one in the dominant of E-flat while the final tercet

of stanza two is closed on the E-flat tonic. In this manner the two stanzas are welded into one musical form similar to a traditional "sonatina," a bipartite form in which the first section is harmonically open-ended and the second acts as a harmonically closed recapitulation;

Chart II

*Allegro*: Sonata-Allegro Form

<p><i>Exposition</i> C minor I — V</p>	<p>Doch uns ist gegeben Auf keiner Stätte zu ruhn, Es schwinden, es fallen Die Leidenden Menschen</p>
<p>Transition</p>	<p>Blindlings von einer Stunde zur andern,</p>
<p>G minor I — V</p>	<p>Wie Wasser von Klippe Zu Klippe geworfen, Jahr lang ins Ungewisse hinab</p>
<p><i>Development</i> Modulation and counterpoint</p>	<p>[Doch uns ist gegeben [Auf keiner Stätte zu ruhn;]</p>
<p><i>Recapitulation</i> C minor I — V</p>	<p>[Doch uns ist gegeben [Auf keiner Stätte zu ruhn, [Es schwinden, es fallen [Die leidenden Menschen</p>
<p>Transition (key shifted)</p>	<p>[Blindings von einer [Stunde zur andern,</p>
<p>Begin E minor, shift to end in C minor (no third)</p>	<p>[Wie Wasser von Klippe [Zu Klippe geworfen, [Jahr lang ins Ungewisse hinab.]</p>
<p>C major</p>	<p>Orchestral Coda</p>

there is no development section.

The third stanza receives musical elaboration as a real sonata-allegro form in C minor. (See Chart II.) Because of the form and of his desire to lengthen the work, Brahms set the entirety of stanza three twice — with completely parallel music. The first statement presents lines one through four as C-minor tonic; the couplet, lines five and six, acts as a transition section, and the final tercet is in G minor, ending on the dominant of G. The second statement of the text is a true recapitulation: lines one through four are exactly repeated; lines five and six are repeated with a shift in key; and the final tercet is closely paraphrased to return to G. Between these two statements Brahms wrote a two-part development on the opening couplet of stanza three, exploiting counterpoint and modulation. At the end, the orchestral coda returns — not in the opening E-flat major, but transposed to C, thus ending the work in the same mode as its opening but without key closure.


In both the *Langsam* and the *Allegro* sections Brahms used melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic techniques that create colorful movement and tension. The contrast between the two sections of the composition appears to be between motion and frenetic activity rather than between tranquility and instability as usually described. In Hölderlin's poem the ethereals are addressed in terms of motion: "you wander" (or "change") and "sparkling air strikes you softly, as sacred strings [under] the artist's fingers."

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**Example 1.**

**Example 2.**

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Brahms's music reflects this movement. (See Example 1.) The opening line is set to a chorale-like alto melody under descending movement in the woodwinds, *senza basso*. The couplet occupies two three-measure phrases—a symmetry that is not in repose. The end of phrase one is denied repose by 1 measure of the alto melody is the first with an upward leap of a minor seventh, creating a dominant of IV. Phrase one is thus elided to phrase two in music as in its poetic meaning. Similarly, at the end of the couplet, there is a musical elision: the sixth measure of the alto melody is the first measure of the four-voice repetition of phrase one. Restless motion is increased in the four-voice statement by a “walking bass” similar to those of the Baroque period: the opening solo achieved a similar effect through the conflict between duplet and triplet eighths. These techniques keep the opening music from a feeling of static repose. (Example 2.)

The harmonic drop of a third (from the dominant of E-flat to G major) which inaugurates “Glänzende Götterlüfte” intensifies the activity, as do the harmonic alterations on “rühren euch leicht.” In this couplet, activity is intensified by the antiphony between orchestra and chorus. (Example 3.)

The final couplet of stanza one arrives on B-flat as the dominant of E-flat. That B-flat is dominant is clearly pointed out when Brahms abruptly returned to E-flat for the opening of stanza two, demonstrating the ongoing nature of the vibration of the “sacred strings.”

In stanza two, Hölderlin's imagery

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### Example 3.

Fin-ger, wie die Fin-ger der Künst-le-rin hei-li-ge, hei-li-ge  
 fin-gers, as the fin-gers in-spired that wake hea-ven-ly, hea-ven-ly

Fin-ger, die Fin-ger der Künst-le-rin hei-ven-ly  
 fin-gers, the fin-gers in-spired that wake hea-ven-ly

hei-dim- li-ge  
 hea-ven-ly

57 *poco a poco cresc.* *dim.* *f* *dim.* *p*

*V* *B<sup>b</sup>* = *I* *minor* *V*/*V* *I*/*4*

Sai-ten-chor-lyre.

62 *p dolce*

*V* *4-3* *I*/*B<sup>b</sup>* = *V*/*E<sup>b</sup>*

becomes more restful: the immortals "breathe free from fate as a sleeping suckling." Yet here, Brahms intensified his music. (Example 4.) He compressed the opening melody into four measures and elided the phrase structure. The three-measure plus two-measure phrase structure warps the lyricism and pacing of the opening melody and, just as Hölderlin's enjambment, belies the tranquility of "athmen die Himmlischen" (the breathing of the heavenly ones). Though he returned to

### Example 4.

Schicksallos, wie der schlafende Säug-ling, at-men die Him-mli-schen.  
 Free from Fate, like the slumbering suck-ling, breathe the im-mor-tals.

*p dolce*

*Viol. (arco)* *Str.*

*Basso (pizz.)*

the tonic for the final tercet of stanza two, Brahms created no real repose: the "blessed eyes" may have "quiet, eternal clarity," but they still "gaze." (Example 5.) Beginning in the middle of measure 86, Brahms used a chain of dominant resolutions (F, B<sup>b</sup>, E<sup>b</sup>, A<sup>b</sup>). This movement from V/V around the circle of fifths to IV continues with dominant-tonic motion to E<sup>b</sup>, but the passage does not end there: the E<sup>b</sup> chord in measure 89 is not the tonic, but rather the dominant of IV. Even in measure 96, after the final chorus note, the restless triplet of the tympani sounds at the same moment as the addition of a flatted-seventh to the E-flat tonic. Once again this denies repose. Throughout the first section, the music intensifies Hölderlin's suggestions that the blessed are not at rest but moving—watchful.

The C-minor *Allegro* is a demonstration both of Brahms's ability to create and build key contrast without real arrival on the tonic and to maintain the intensity of expression through chromatic and ambiguous progressions. (Example 6.) The opening unison choral passage in combination with its accompaniment defines C minor through its scale and its opening and closing on a dominant sonority. The direction is only intensified by the temporary implication of F minor through the melodic suggestion of the diminished third (D-flat-B-natural) on "Stätte." Rhythmically, the *Allegro* tends to move in two-measure units, but this is disturbed by prolonging "Stätte" for two measures. The result is a macro-rhythmic syncopation. The

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**Example 5.**

Au - gen bli - cken in stil - ler, - - - - - ler, *dim.*  
 bles - sed gaze in tran - - - - - quil

se - li - gen Au - gen bli - cken in  
 eyes of the bles - sed gaze - - - - - in  
 bles - gen bli - cken in e - wi - ger  
 bles - sed gaze in tran - - - - - quil bright - ness e -

Au - gen bli - cken in stil - ler, *dim.*  
 bles - sed gaze in tran - - - - - quil

Klar - heit, bli - cken, bli - cken in e - wi - ger  
 ter - nai, gaze, in bright - ness e -

*pp* *pp*

Viol. *pp* Str. *dim.*

$\frac{V}{IV}$   $\frac{V}{IV}$

Klar - heit, ter - nai.

Viol. *pp* Str. *pp*

$\frac{V}{IV}$

**Example 6.**

4d.

Doch uns ist ge - ge - - - - - bep, auf  
 But to us is it ge - - - - - ven, in

5d.

kei - ner Stät - te zu ruhni - ce  
 no - a bid - - - - - äng place to dwell we

*pp* *pp*

Viol. *pp* Str. *pp*

*C minor*

of this is that it is exactly the opposite of three measures of four beats. Thus, the opening phrase of stanza one in which twelve beats are presented as 146-152 (and its repetition in measures

asymmetry of the nine-measure phrase (4 + 5) increases the tension.

The two-measure groupings allow hemiola to be used as a means of rhythmic intensification. In Example 7, Brahms repeated the word "leidenden" so the  $\frac{6-3}{4-2}$  cross rhythm between orchestra and chorus delays arrival on the word "Menschen." The delay, activated by the hemiola, unbalances the phrase structure (4 plus 6 measures) and thus creates a strong accent on the inclusive noun.

Hemiola provides an interesting interrelation between Brahms's *Langsam* and his *Allegro*. As part of a buildup to the climax of the third stanza, Brahms set the words "wie Wasser von Klippe zu Klippe geworfen" to a much commented upon hemiola. (Example 8.) The eight measures are written as twelve half-note beats divided into four groups of three. The interesting aspect

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**Example 7.**

1 2 1 2 Hemiola:

schwin - den, es fal - len die lei - den - den,  
 von - ish, we stum - ble, we suf - fer - ing,

122 non legato

1 2 3 1 2 3

lei - den - den Men - schen blind -  
 sor - row - ing mor - tals blind -

128 Hemiola:

**Example 8.**

1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3

Wis - ser von Klip - pe zu Klip - pe ge -  
 zu - ter from boul - der der flug

146 2 Viol.

1 2 3

wor - fen, jahr - by - lang  
 down - ward, year year

152 Bl. Str.

306-313) is used for rhythmic intensification, it also serves to unite the *Allegro* and *Langsam* sections.

The instability and intensity of the C-minor section reach a peak in

measures 219-254 of the development section. Counterpoint is used to layer the texture at the same time as double appoggiaturas in the accompaniment increase the forward thrust of the music. The harmonic activity of this section is most telling since the contrast between minor and major (B<sup>b</sup> minor and D<sup>b</sup> major at the opening) creates a sound that is brighter, more major, than anything heard previously in stanza three. Even

the tonic C is heard as major (measures 242-252) before the minor sonority closes the passage in the repetition. The effect is surely as unsettling as the words.

The recapitulation rounds Brahms's musical form and adds emphasis to the third text stanza by its total repetition. However, the return to the C-minor tonic brings no conclusion, certainly no repose. The stanza ends with an ex-



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tended "fade out" on the words "ins Ungewisse hinab" (into the unknown below), where C sounds both without a third (neither major nor minor) and with a major third and flatted seventh, suggesting the dominant of F. The unknown is without repose. It is this choral conclusion reinforcing the poem's restless agitation that is often called "hopeless."

At this point Brahms returned to the opening music for his coda. It is not surprising that a return to the opening mood is not possible after the C-minor section. Even Brahms was in doubt about the ending: in a letter of October 1871, two months before the first reading, Brahms said, "It may be a misguided experiment."<sup>10</sup> The ending is not a true *da capo*: the opening returns in C major, not the original E-flat. The result is a synthesis of the opening E-flat-major thesis and its C-minor antithesis.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>A facsimile of the choral ending is contained in Max Kalbeck's biography: *Johannes Brahms* (Tutzing, 1921) II, 366; reprint (Tutzing, 1976).

<sup>2</sup>*Johannes Brahms im Briefwechsel mit Reinthaler, Bruch, Deiters, Heimsoeth, Reinecke, Rudorff, Scholz*, ed. Wilhelm Altmann (Berlin, 1908) quoted in Siegfried Kross, *Die Chorwerke von Johannes Brahms* (Berlin, 1958), 306.

<sup>3</sup>As a starting point for interpretation, I suggest the possibility of relating the eighth-note triplets of the *Langsam* with the three-quarter-note measures of the *Allegro*. This relates the two tempi and thus the lengths of the two sections, especially since the *Allegro* moves in two-measure groups, creating the effect of a larger duple beat. Similarly, a relation of triplet to measure has both the advantages of setting a faster pace than usual for the *Langsam* and a slower than usual tempo for the *Allegro*.

<sup>4</sup>Commentators almost unanimously agree that Brahms changed Hölderlin's ending, most recently, Virginia Hancock, *Brahms's Choral Compositions and His Library of Early Music* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1983), 129-30.

<sup>5</sup>Kross, 306.

<sup>6</sup>Michael Hamburger, *Hölderlin* (New York, 1952), 24-5, discusses the idea of thesis, antithesis, and "final fusion" in the odes and elegies and cites Karl Vietor, *Die Lyric Hölderlins, Deutsche Forschungen*, III, 1921, reprint (Darmstadt, 1967), as a source.

<sup>7</sup>See: Richard Unger, *Hölderlin's Major Poetry, the Dialectics of Unity* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1975).

<sup>8</sup>H. S. Harris, *Hegel's Development Toward the Sunlight 1770-1801* (Oxford, 1972), 96-108.

<sup>9</sup>Kross, 306.

<sup>10</sup>Kross, 306.



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