
The Achievement

Even if the travel times—two months from Nürtingen to Bordeaux and one month for the return—seem to us incredibly long, Hölderlin's achievement during these months of travel is extraordinary. It is difficult (really impossible) to calculate all the variables—the precise route, the exact number of days traveling, weather and terrain conditions, unforeseen delays, coach breakdowns, inundating rivers, and so on—but here is an approximation. Taking the greatest possible number of days for travel and the most economical route, the result for the journey to Bordeaux is as follows.

First, Hölderlin walks from Nürtingen to Stuttgart, heads south to Tübingen and Freudenstadt, then west to Strasbourg—this over a period of five to nine days, depending on the departure date of December 6 or December 10. To manage this, he would have had to walk about twenty-two to thirty-nine kilometers (some thirteen to twenty-four miles) per day, the latter extremely strenuous but doable. Second, after a two-week delay waiting for a travel visa, he journeys from Strasbourg to Lyon, some 650 kilometers, over a maximum period of eighteen days, some fifty-nine kilometers (about 39 miles) per day. Everyone agrees that he would have had to do the bulk of this travel, and probably all of it, by post-coach or perhaps also by riverboat; even then the distance covered is quite considerable, especially given the reported condition of the roads that winter.¹

1. My calculation here may be off because of Joe's and my decision to follow the Doubs River all the way to its confluence with the Saône at Verdun-sur-le-Doubs, near Chalon, traveling through Dôle to Beaune and then directly south to Mâcon, rather than following the faster post-coach route from Besançon to Lons-le-Saunier and Bourg-en-Bresse. Some kilometers would have been saved by following the hypotenuse instead of the two sides of this more or less right triangle, although the road to Lons-le-Saunier is much hillier.

Finally, third, the stretch from Lyon, via Clermont-Ferrand, Limoges, and Périgueux to Bordeaux, some 590 kilometers, traveled over a maximum period of eighteen days and covering some thirty-three kilometers (about twenty-and-a-half miles) per day. If one speculates that he walked during the final days of his trip, from either Périgueux or Libourne to Bordeaux, the number of kilometers covered per day is much greater. In short, if one hopes to follow in Hölderlin's footsteps, it will not be at a leisurely pace. In the letters to his mother from Lyon, about halfway there, and then upon his arrival in Bordeaux, he tells of the joys, surprises, inconveniences, and hazards of the journey, but he does not offer any details, and he does not sound as utterly exhausted as I believe you and I would have been.

Certainly, like most people of his time, and like most country folk up to the mid-twentieth century in rural Germany, Hölderlin was accustomed to long walks. He generally measured distances by the hours it took to walk them. When his mother asked him how far it was from Waltershausen, where he had taken up a tutorship in the von Kalb household, to Jena and Weimar, he replied, "Jena must be about sixty hours from Nuremberg; from Waltershausen it is only thirty; from Waltershausen to Weimar is about four hours" (CHV 2:572–73).²

He means of course "by foot." He tells her that the winter weather has been harsh and that he has not yet made that proposed walk to Jena but that he plans to make it the following week. During the spring of 1795, when he is living in Jena, he takes a walking trip to Halle, Dessau, and Leipzig, following the Saale River Valley at least part of the way, the whole trip covering some two hundred kilometers as the crow flies. He calls it "a small hike" and remarks to his sister that if one follows the numerous river valleys and has a pair of healthy feet, one can walk much farther than anyone imagines (CHV 2:580). "I made this trip in seven days," he adds, "and I feel now how healthy and invigorating it was for me" (CHV 2:581). Thirty kilometers per day seems like nothing to him, apparently.

As for the much longer journey to Bordeaux six years later, if one simply takes the computer's word for it, having selected routes that avoid highways and toll roads, the total distance traveled in Germany would be

In any case, the number of kilometers from Besançon to Lyon, some 220 (rather than 270) kilometers by the shorter route, still would have meant a minimum of thirty-three or thirty-four kilometers per day—likely too much to achieve by foot.

2. Alexander Bilda, of Freiburg University, informs me that Google maps measures these distances differently, sometimes more, sometimes less, than Hölderlin's estimates. Clearly, Hölderlin neglected to google.

194.8 kilometers, in France 964.4 kilometers, a total of 1,159.2 kilometers—that is, over seven hundred miles. Yet that is a bare minimum, perhaps as little as one-half of the real distance traversed, as incredible as that may seem. Sinuous are the ways of mortals.

I was struck recently by the statistics for one of the Roman aqueducts that fed Lugdunum, the ancient city of Lyon: the aqueduct of Gier, the longest of the four, had its source some forty-two kilometers south of the Roman city as the crow flies; yet the distance actually traveled by the water, since the aqueduct's incline had to be adapted to all the obstacles on the route, crossing every hill and dale at the proper rate of declination, was more than double that length—some eighty-six kilometers of construction were necessary for the water to travel the forty-two kilometer distance. One might think that roads are more efficient than aqueducts, yet probably this is an illusion. The twists and turns of Hölderlin's route, which, as we learned, most often followed the meandering courses of rivers, would readily have increased, and perhaps even doubled, the distances I have cited. On our own trip, Joe and I tried to keep an account of the odometer's numbers, but we soon gave up: the distances covered were always far more than they should have been, indeed something close to double. And automobiles on paved roads are more efficient than people on foot or coaches on mud roads.

How many kilometers could Hölderlin's post-coaches cover in a single day without major stops? The only estimate I have seen in the literature, and that for the English post-coaches, which are said to have been far superior to those on the continent, is some twenty-five miles, or forty kilometers. This seems reasonable, except for the poor horses. And whether this was a blustery winter's day or a breezy summer's day would make all the difference. The average speed? The only guesstimate I have seen is about four miles or six-and-a-half kilometers per hour. During an eight-hour winter day that would mean a bit over fifty kilometers a day without stops, but this seems wildly optimistic and cruel to both passengers and horses. What makes all these estimates even more fraught is Bertheau's remark that the route followed by Hölderlin was by no means an "express" route of the French post, but only an "ordinary" route (JB 94). This would mean that the roads taken were not thoroughfares and probably not in the best condition under winter rain and snow.

One last thought. If the average human walking speed is some five kilometers per hour, or a little over three miles per hour, one can imagine that Hölderlin might often have wondered whether he would do just as well to walk as to take the coach. He tells us that he was able to walk eight full hours a day (CHV 2:589). Forty kilometers per day, which would be

only ten kilometers less than the most efficient coach, seems too strenuous to me, but that may be one of the differences between Hölderlin and me. There can be no doubt that he was a robust walker. Would he have been afraid to walk alone? Probably not. The danger of meeting a highwayman would have been far greater for post-coach passengers, inasmuch as brigands always preferred groups of well-heeled passengers over solitary down-at-heel hikers. (Hölderlin himself was the victim of a post-coach robbery at some point during his homeward journey, but that remains a mysterious event to be discussed much later.) In any case, even though we are probably right to think that the first five days and several of the final days were done on foot, we actually have no idea which stretches of the route he may have hiked. My own surmise is that there were more such pedestrian stretches than recent commentators assume. Floods, storms, inconvenient coach schedules, and unpredictable coach breakdowns—all of these happenstances may have compelled or invited him to walk more than we imagine he did.

The “Precise” Route

Precision is impossible here too, because if Hölderlin kept any sort of travel diary—which to me seems certain—it has vanished. True, painstaking archival research could estimate the weather for each day of Hölderlin’s journey, but even then, so many details and contingencies would escape us. We do not even know the precise dates of most of Hölderlin’s rest stops and overnights. All we know for certain is that on December 15 he is in Strasbourg, on January 9 he is in Lyon, and on January 28 he arrives at Bordeaux.

That said, the main roads he would have taken, whether hiking or riding, would have been the ordinary post-coach roads, so the old post-coach maps are a great help to us. The Historical Library of the Postal Museum in Paris kindly sent me a map from 1812, the map to which I will be referring in the following chapters, suggesting that this would be the best approximation to Hölderlin’s travel route. I worried that the dozen years between the map and Hölderlin’s trip might have seen a lot of road construction in France, but a study shows that only in southeastern France were any real improvements in the road system made, this because of Napoleon’s interest in integrating the newly conquered northern Italian states into what was becoming the Empire. I was also able to check the 1812 map against a less detailed post-coach map from 1720, and this older map confirmed that most of the roads Hölderlin would have followed had been long-established

post-coach routes. Indeed, as I discovered at Lugdunum, the Roman Lyon, many of those roads, especially those between Lyon and Bordeaux, were ancient Roman roads—even if it is also true that the Romans most often followed the routes already established by indigenous peoples.

I had my first experience with these ancient Roman roads on the Via Augusta at Portofino, south of Genoa. I was following in Nietzsche's footsteps, and I was astonished to learn that the stones of the pavement on this narrow road—one of Nietzsche's favorite walks—were the original ones. Once again at Lugdunum I noticed the paving stones of the Roman roads: they were in fact small boulders flattened on top, each one about a foot thick—no wonder the Roman roads lasted so long! It would be instructive to learn how many of the national roads all over Europe today are Roman in origin. A great many of them, I suspect.

It is important that I mention here one significant decision on Joe's and my part: because of Hölderlin's fascination with the rivers of Europe, we found ourselves deciding to favor the river routes as often as seemed feasible. Usually, the post-coach roads followed the rivers in any case, so that our decision—not so much a conscious choice on our part but our following a kind of fluvial invitation—seems reasonable. If my count is right, Hölderlin traveled along or crossed over more than a dozen major rivers during his trip to Bordeaux, following the course of the Neckar (“Necker” on the 1812 map) for many hours of the initial days, the *walking* days, of his trip, then crossing the Rhine at Kehl, meeting the Ill River at Strasbourg and following it to Colmar; he then meets the Doubs at l'Île-sur-le-Doubs and follows its meander all the way to Verdun-sur-le-Doubs near Chalon (the 1812 map reads “Chalons”); there the Doubs joins the great Saône, which makes its way south to Lyon, where it meets the mighty Rhône; on his way west from Lyon, Hölderlin crosses the Loire at Feurs, then the Allier at Pont-sur-Allier, followed by the Creuse at Aubusson and the Vienne at Limoges; he then follows the Isle River from Périgueux to Libourne, where the Isle meets the Dordogne; and near Bordeaux he confronts the confluence of the Dordogne and the Garonne in what then becomes the Gironde, which flows wide into the Atlantic Ocean. Only in one case, I believe, is this river route controversial: as I mentioned earlier, Joe and I traveled along the Doubs River all the way to its confluence with the Saône at Verdun-sur-Doubs, only then, at Chalon, turning south and following the Saône to Lyon; true, there was a post-coach route connecting Lons-le-Saunier to Bourg-en-Bresse and that route would have been shorter, although over rougher terrain. Adolf Beck speculates that Hölderlin

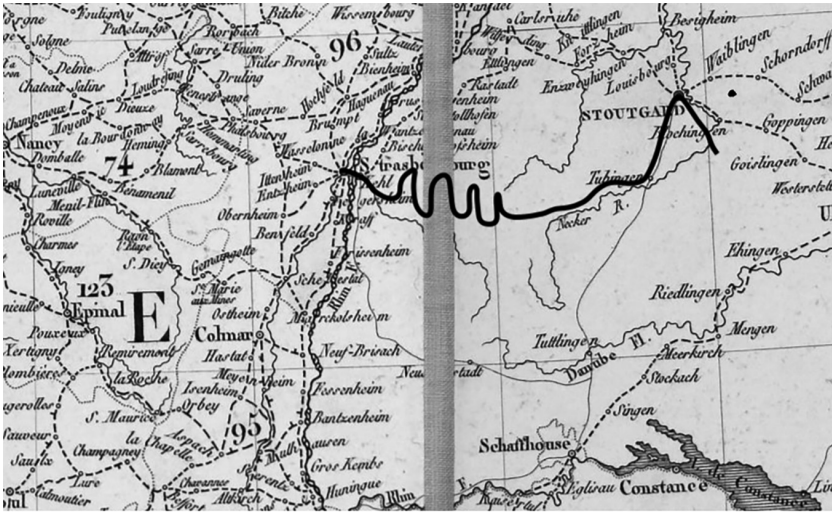
took the river route,³ and Joe and I preferred it as well, simply because the Doubs River Valley, although it is not well known outside of France, is so beautifully serene. It may be that the Burgundies of Beaune tempted us to travel farther westward as well.

Even if Hölderlin's precise route is perforce a matter of speculation, we may gain an idea of the achievement merely by listing the minimal distances from station to station on the way. To be sure, we do not know precisely which stations he stopped at or where he spent the nights. As a general term of measure in the French post-coach system, a *poste* is roughly six miles, a *demi-poste* three. But how many *postes* could be covered on any given winter's day is, to repeat, contingent on weather, roads, the stamina of the horses, and a dozen other incalculables. One may be certain that the towns and villages listed on the 1812 map had relay stations and inns where passengers could overnight, and I will list the major towns here, using the spelling that appears on the map and only occasionally offering the modern spelling. Several of the names seem to designate country inns rather than entire towns or villages, with the result that they cannot be found on modern maps; many of them also designate homonymous towns and cities that are quite remote from the route, so that the names can be misleading. I will indicate this only occasionally in footnotes. As for the places designated in the following lists, Hölderlin could have spent the night at any one of them, though certainly not all of them.

It seems clear that Hölderlin overnighted with friends after he began the trip, walking from his hometown to Stuttgart (see map 2). He probably stayed for more than a night in Tübingen. After that, it becomes impossible to speculate. It seems likely that Freudenstadt would have been a likely town to spend the night; but then comes the formidable climb up the Kniebis Mountain, then back down to the Rhine Plain and on to Strasbourg. As the following chapter relates, this may have been one of the most challenging segments of the journey, but we know nothing about where Hölderlin may have paused. The relevance of the post-coach map picks up only with his arrival at Strasbourg.

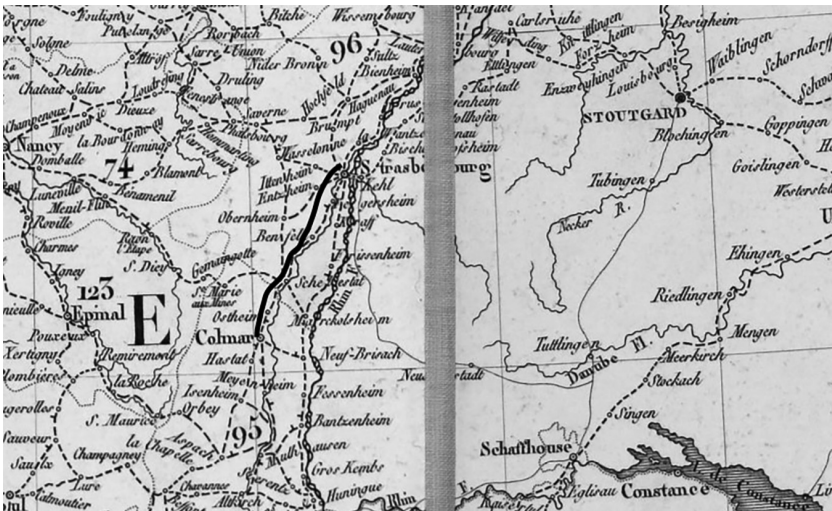
Between the cities of Strasbourg and Colmar we find on the 1812 map (see map 3) the towns of Benfeld, Schelestat (Schlettstadt/Séléstat), and Ostheim; between Colmar and Belfort (see map 4), Hölderlin may have stopped at Hastat (Hattstatt), Meyenheim, Isenheim, or Aspach-la-Chapelle; on his way to Besançon, he could have stayed in the towns of Tavey, l'Île

3. Adolf Beck, *Hölderlin: Chronik seines Lebens* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1975), 87.



Map 2. Nürtingen-Strasbourg

sur Doubs (Isle-sur-le-Doubs), Clerval, Baume-les-Dames, or Roulans. From Besançon to Beaune in Burgundy (see map 5), he could have stopped at S. Vit, Orchamps, and Dôle; after Dôle, at Grand-Noir, Seurre, and Moissey; between Beaune and Mâcon, close to the vineyards of Burgundy and Beau-



Map 3. Strasbourg-Colmar



Map 4. Colmar-Besançon

jolais (see map 6), the post-coach could have stopped and overnighted at Chagny, Chalons, Senecy, Tournus, or S. Albin; between Mâcon and Lyon, we find the villages or inns called la Maison blanche and les Tournelles de Flandre, along with the towns of Anse, Limonest, and Salvagny.⁴

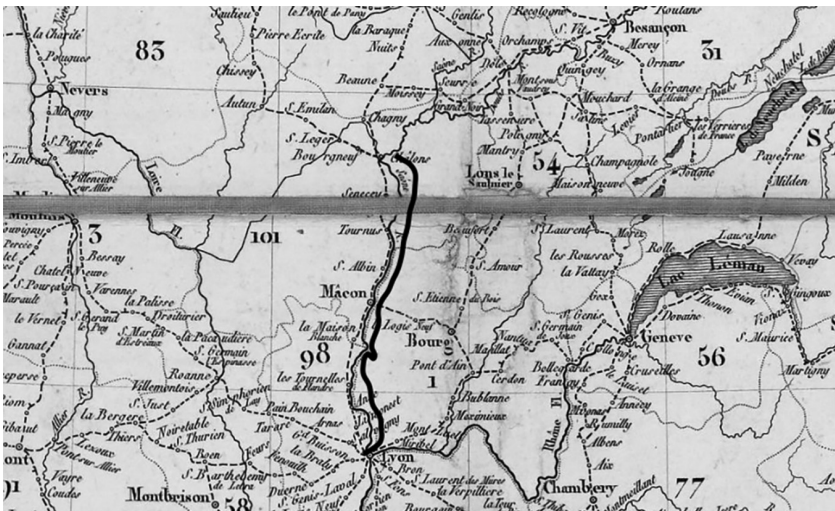
According to the *Bibliothèque historique des postes et des télécommunications* in Paris, Hölderlin would most likely have followed two main postal routes from Lyon to Bordeaux, first, postal route number 91, which carried the mail (and passengers) coming from Strasbourg on the way to Bordeaux, passing through Lyon, Feurs, Thiers, Clermont, Aubusson, and Limoges; at Limoges, the mail and the passengers were transferred to the coach that was traveling southward on postal route number 44, which connected Paris to Bordeaux by way of Chalus, Périgueux, and Libourne.

As one travels west from Lyon, climbing into the hills of the Auvergne (map 7), the post-coach routes become more scarce. Indeed, the 1812 map at this point shows a great deal of empty space, which in nature is filled

4. There is a town on the Mediterranean coast east of Toulon by the name Les Tournelles de Flandre, which I suppose designates “the windmills of the Lowlands,” but it is not the village or relais on Hölderlin’s route. There is a Salvagny in the Canton de Fribourg, Switzerland, no doubt lovely, but not the right one for us. Françoise Dastur informs me that *Salvagny* (meaning “the domain of Salvinius”) was the name given during the Revolution to a village called La Tour de Salvagny, seven kilometers beyond Limonest, a village that is now a part of greater Lyon.



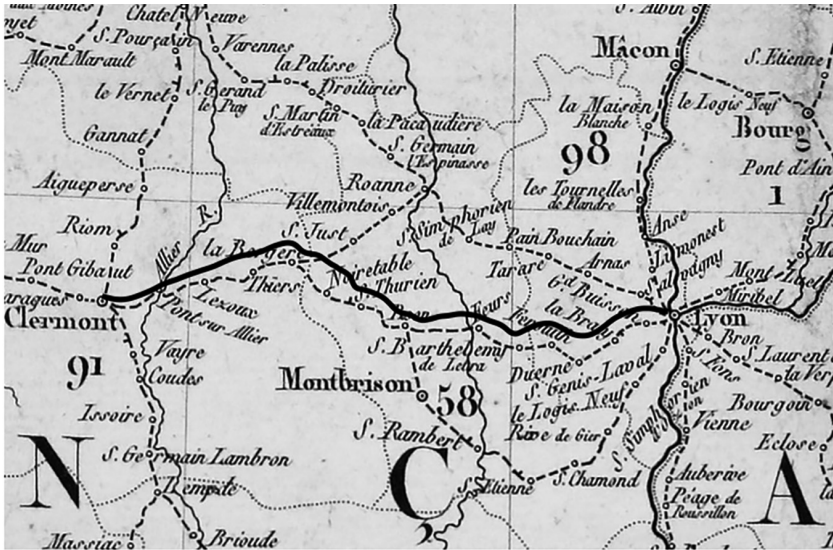
Map 5. Besançon-Chalon



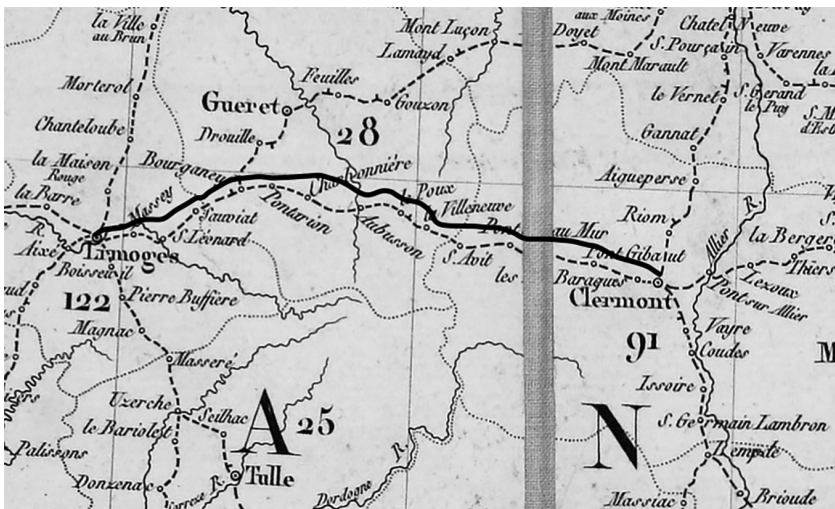
Map 6. Chalon-Lyon

by the wild volcanic countryside of the Massif Central. On the long way to Clermont the coach could have stopped at Gd. Buisson (not the one in the Jura mountains, however!), la Braly, Fenouilh (not the Fenouilh in the Maritime Alps west of Sisteron), Feurs, Roen, S. Thuriens (not the Saint-Thurien close to Le Havre, obviously), Noirétable, la Bergere, Thiers, Lexoux, and Pont sur Allier (not the Pont sur Allier that is eighty kilometers north

of Hölderlin's route, however). On the even more remote and forbidding road from Clermont-Ferrand west to Limoges (map 8) the coach may have stopped at "les Baragues" (not the town in the central Pyrenees), Pont Gibaut, Pont au Mur (not the Pont au Mur near Toulouse—but I will stop adding these parenthetical notes: readers will have seen how often place names are repeated in France as everywhere else!), S. Avit, la Villeneuve, le Poux,



Map 7. Lyon-Clermont



Map 8. Clermont-Limoges



Map 9. Limoges-Périgueux.

Aubusson, Charbonnière, Pontarion, Bourgneuf, Sauvial, S. Leonard, and Massey. Heading southwest at Limoges (map 9), crossing the Vienne River at Aixé on its way to Périgueux, the coach may have stopped at Gatinaud, Chalus, la Loquille, Thiviers, “les Palissons,” and “les Tavernes.” Following the Isle River to Libourne (map 10), it could have stopped at “la Massouli,” Mucidan, Monpon, and S. Médard.



Map 10. Périgueux-Bordeaux.

By this time Hölderlin is probably walking again—perhaps he has left the post-coach behind at Libourne, if not earlier at Périgueux—and is passing through the towns and country inns of S. Pardoux and “le Carbon Blanc” on his way to Bordeaux. As Joe and I followed the national or departmental routes (all of them marked by the letters *N* or *D* on modern maps and road signs), roads that usually adhere quite closely to the traditional post-coach routes, we could identify most of these towns, villages, and inns listed on the 1812 map, even if the spelling of their names had changed in intriguing ways.

Perhaps it would be helpful to list here the national roads that best approximate the post-coach routes, the roads that Joe and I actually traveled. I will begin with Strasbourg, since Hölderlin’s walking tour from Nürtingen to Strasbourg, via Stuttgart, Tübingen, Horb, Freudenstadt, Kniebis, and Kehl, did not necessarily follow any given post-coach route. From Strasbourg to Colmar, Belfort, and Besançon, there are two possibilities: one can stay closer to the Rhine if one follows departmental road D 468, passing through Rheinau and Marckolsheim to Neuf-Brisach, then heading west on D 415 to Colmar. Joe and I took the more direct route to Colmar, via Séléstat and Benfeld, on D 1083, mainly so we could visit the well-preserved relais at Benfeld. After Colmar the road becomes D 83 to Belfort, then D 663/683 to Besançon. There, one picks up the D 673, which follows the Doubs River, leading the traveler past Dampière, Rochefort-sur-Nenon, and Dôle to Seurre, at which point one takes the D 973 to Beaune. (If one chooses to travel directly to Chalon-sur-Saône, one follows the N 73.) At Beaune, one heads south on D 974 and D 933 to Mâcon, then on to Lyon on that same D 933.

From Lyon westward to Clermont-Ferrand, the route becomes more complicated: one can follow the D 24 due west to D 389, then head south, then west once again on D 81/89 to Feurs; D 1089 leads on to Thiers; D 2089 then takes one into Clermont.⁵ From Clermont-Ferrand, one heads west into the mountains of the Massif Central on D 941, by way of Aubusson, all the scenic way to Limoges. At Limoges, one heads southwest on the N 21 to

5. Full disclosure requires that I confess that Joe and I departed from Hölderlin’s route to spend Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with Françoise Dastur, one of finest philosophers and scholars of Hölderlin’s work in France, joining her and her husband Sarosh in the lovely village of St. Pons in the Ardèche. This took us several hours south of Lyon. Readers of Françoise Dastur’s books and articles on Hölderlin will call this a wise decision on our part. Joe and I then headed north to Clermont by way of Aubenas and Le Puy-en-Velay—which explains why there are photos of Issoire, a town that would have taken Hölderlin a bit farther south than his probable route. This was our only major sin, I believe. But we were happy to commit it, and we thank the Dasturs for their hospitality and friendship. One can only imagine what a lonely Christmas Hölderlin himself would have had in Strasbourg, as he waited impatiently for his travel visa for Lyon.

Aixé-sur-Vienne, Châlus, Thiviers, and Périgueux. From Périgueux, one takes the D 6089, following the Isle River past Saint-Astier, Neuvic, Mussidan, and Monpon to Libourne. From Libourne, the D 936 takes one to the suburb of Lormont, which Hölderlin visited on occasion during his stay in Bordeaux. At Lormont, one crosses the Garonne River into Bordeaux proper.

The following table presents the minimum distances between some of the major stopping points, “minimum” because—especially when one avoids major highways and toll roads—the genuine distance by foot or by post-coach, to repeat, would have been much greater than Table 1 suggests.

This comes to a total of some 1,159.2 kilometers, more or less as the crow flies, at least if the crow is using a computer map. But let us back up a bit. We are relatively certain that Hölderlin walked the entire way from Nürtingen to Strasbourg, so that the German post-coach routes are irrelevant for the first part of Hölderlin’s journey. Thomas Knubben, who, younger and braver than Joe and I, actually walked much of Hölderlin’s path from Nürtingen all the way to Bordeaux, is particularly helpful for the early stages of Hölderlin’s journey. We may now take up our own detailed story of Hölderlin’s journey to Bordeaux, with Knubben’s, Beck’s, and especially Bertheau’s help.

Table 1. Minimum distances between major stops from Nürtingen to Bordeaux

Nürtingen to Stuttgart	37.3 kilometers
Stuttgart to Tübingen	34.3 kilometers
Tübingen to Horb-am-Neckar	34.2 kilometers
Horb to Freudenstadt	24 kilometers
Freudenstadt-Kniebis to Kehl	56.4 kilometers
Kehl to Strasbourg	8.6 kilometers
Total kilometers in Germany	194.8 kilometers
Strasbourg to Colmar	71.4 kilometers
Colmar to Belfort	71.3 kilometers
Belfort to Besançon	95.8 kilometers
Besançon to Beaune	110.7 kilometers
Beaune to Mâcon	91.8 kilometers
Mâcon to Lyon	74.1 kilometers
Lyon to Clermont-Ferrand	186.9 kilometers
Clermont (Auvergne) to Limoges	171.8 kilometers
Limoges to Périgueux	100 kilometers
Périgueux to Bordeaux	130.6 kilometers
Total kilometers in France	964.4 kilometers



Photo 7. The swollen Saône River flooding its banks in December.