

I

[Frankfurt, September/October 1798]¹

I have to write you, my darling! My heart can no longer be silent toward you. Let my feelings speak to you one time more, and then, if you find it better that way, I shall gladly be still. Gladly.

How arid and empty everything around me is—around me and in me—now that you are gone; it is as though my life had lost all meaning. I can feel a life living in me only through the pain. —

How I love this pain now. When it abandons me, when everything in me goes numb, how longingly I start looking for it again. Only my tears, shed on account of our fate, can give me joy now. — — — And they flow abundantly when, already at nine o'clock in the evening, in order to shorten the day, I lay down to rest with the children, where everything is quiet and no one can see me. How can it be! That is what I am often thinking during these hours. What is to become of this beloved love, this pristine love of ours? How can it go up in smoke and dissolve in thin air without leaving behind a single lasting trace? — I felt in myself the wish to erect a monument to it in written words, words for you, a monument that would preserve that time unaltered and inextinguishable. How I would like to paint it, this noble love of the heart, paint it in all its ardent colors, down to its most minute shadings; how I would like to get to the bottom of it—if only I had the solitude and the tranquillity! The way things are, distracted and torn as I am, I can feel it only piecemeal; I am seeking it constantly, and yet it is whole in me! —

1. All dates and place-indications within square brackets are additions by the editors.

Not everyone I write has to be you. Not everything I write has to have you as its destination. Should my whole life be one long epistle to you, a repetitive paean to you? I refuse to believe it. You are not the only one I have to write. I look into the mirror and see the many morsels of me, all the bits and fragments, each writing someone else. The suspicion and hostility in my eyes write my mother. Suspicion and hostility—but also cunning. Every mother a canny woman, midwife as well as mother, dragging her infant into the world and never letting go. My mother's eyes in me see Hölderlin's mother now, the pious Gok, twice a widow, thrice a mother. Lady Gok, guardian of virtue, champion of the faith, chancellor of the exchequer. My mother's eyes in me uncover her discovering letters written in a woman's hand to her "darling." Why and how are these intimate letters in her timid son's possession? Inconceivable that *he* should be some woman's darling, some *other* woman's darling! How can it be! Yet there they are, these letters, bound in a bundle by a faded lavender ribbon—a kind of monument. Widow Gok reads them. The sweltering summer afternoon fades to a storm-troubled evening. That night Gok writes her pastor and spiritual advisor. For more than one reason, her soul is agitated.

Johanna Gok to Christian Nepomuk Kugel in Nürtingen

Nürtingen, July 15, 1802

Most reverend and esteemed Pastor Kugel!

Piety—devotion—religion—these all say the same thing in different words. Piety comes first because it is of the heart. Devotion sometimes cultivates external appearances alone, as my dear Father, Pastor Heyn, used to tell us, but true religion is of the order of piety and piety is the grace that surrounds this noble love of the heart. All my life I have sought it. My children have

Things go best for me out in the open, out in the liberating fields, and constantly I long to wander to the place where I can see the lovely Feldberg, the mountain that keeps you *gently* from fleeing any farther from me—*wicked fellow* that you are!² Yet when I return to the house, it is no longer the way it used to be. It used to do me so much good to come back and be close to you; now it's as though I were coming back to a gigantic cage and letting myself be locked up in it. It used to be that when my children rushed downstairs to me they were coming from you. How it gave me strength when I was mournful! They would have a gentle blush on the cheek, a deeper seriousness and a tear in the eye, things that exhibited your influence on them. Now they no longer have this meaning for me, and often I have to admonish myself concerning my feelings for them. — — —

The above lines I wrote during the first week of your absence, and my heart struggled with my powers of reason over whether I should really send them to you or not. My heart won out in this case, and I determined to seek an opportunity to give you an accounting of it all, an accounting of all the various ways we used to be with one another, ways that were cut off when you left. For the very thought that two people who are as close as we are could live on and, after such intimacy, hear nothing from one another, or wish to know nothing about one another, was something I could not let happen; it would have been impossible for me to rhyme *that* kind of renunciation with tenderness of heart, and I almost think that you must have expected these lines from me, and that if I had remained silent you would have had good grounds to accuse me of the very opposite of tenderness. You couldn't be the first to write, I sensed that, of course, because I was always the one who

2. Homburg vor der Höhe, or Bad Homburg, where Hölderlin resided after his departure from Frankfurt, lies between Frankfurt and the Feldberg, a foothill of the Taunus range. The Feldberg thus serves as a common horizon—an enclosing wall, as it were—for the parted lovers.

heard nothing else from my lips, except for my lamentation of my deceased husbands, though that too was piety. Piety toward my spouses, piety toward my children, piety toward my Pastors, and piety toward our good God.

My son's trunk arrived today from Bourdeaux. I opened it—only because I feared his clothing might be musty and moldering from the long journey. At the bottom of the trunk, beneath the travel books and the journals, lay a small metal casket, the kind for documents. It was locked. Fearing that the documents too might be damaged by mold and mildew—what a summer we are suffering! have you ever felt anything like it before?—I sent for locksmith Schweißer. The box contained a packet of letters, nothing else. They were damp from the voyage, but from more than that. Let me explain. For my faith is at stake. A Christian woman raises Christian sons, otherwise she does nothing at all. I have told you about my Fritz. You have read his novel. I have shown you his poems when he sent them to me. You know that they are lofty, not the common run of verse, not the vulgar drivel of our times. I have already explained to you that all his life I have prayed that he take up the ministry of our dear and good God, precisely as you have done. For it is his patrimony—through my own beloved Father. I lost him so soon after the death of the boy's own father, my dear Heinrich, that these two deaths seemed to me but one all-encompassing loss, one compressed agony and woe. Fritz was two years old then. And even though years later I married my beloved Gok, who cared for the boy as though he were his own, Fritz never had the continuous paternal guidance a boy so desperately needs. He was only ten when my good Gok passed on to Glory, so that when the period of a young man's trials and tribulations began for him there was no one to take him by the hand and lead him through that perilous country. He practiced no vice, that is certain: my devoted Mother and I (may the Lord have mercy on her soul!) searched for signs of it and they would not have escaped us. Piety—devotion—religion—all as acts of renunciation—marked his life as much as they did ours, we saw to it. Yet we knew something was wrong when even though he was in the seminary at Maulbronn he declared that he would never wear the Cloth. Reasons he gave none, other than his poetry, which was no real reason. The letters I read today betray the real reason. My son has lost his faith. He has squandered it in immorality. He has wasted his soul over a woman. A married woman. I knew

was against it. These thoughts made up my mind for me. Don't hold it against me, then, that I have written you and that I send you my lament. I realize, of course, that if this lament were not undiluted proof of my feelings, you would not even hear it.

Henry just received your letter, which gave me much solace.³ Up to now I could fix my mind's eye only on your new freedom and independence, your daily life, your quiet room with a green tree outside the window. Your letter, a lovely token of consolation, I held in my hands for all of fifteen minutes—then Henry conscientiously demanded it back from me in order to show it off, and so I never got another look at it. I don't know what was forbidden Henry on account of it, but I found him afterwards very much changed, and he was reluctant to speak of you by name.

You came to Frankfurt . . . and I didn't catch a glimpse of you, not even from afar—that was hard for me! I was counting on Saturday the whole time, but I must have had a premonition you were coming, because on the evening when you passed by, at about 8:30, I opened the window and thought—what if I should see him in the glowing arc cast by the street lamp? Some time afterwards, when I wanted to send Henry to Hegel, he told me he wasn't allowed to go; I replied, very earnestly, that he would prove to be possessed of an ungrateful heart if he made no objection to his having been forbidden, and I asked him if it did not make him very sorry, but nothing would help—he said he had to obey.

3. Henry was Susette's oldest child, named after her brother, Henry Borkenstein. It is clear from the following lines of Susette's letter that she and "Cobus," her husband, discussed at least to some extent her feelings for Hölderlin, and that Susette agreed that the poet had to leave their household. Hölderlin himself complained that during his employment Cobus had treated him more like a hireling than Henry's tutor. Whether or not Cobus's treatment of Hölderlin was related to his awareness of Hölderlin's love for Susette, and hers for Hölderlin, cannot be determined. Hölderlin's letter to Henry is not preserved.

such things went on in the wicked world, but not in my house; with others, but not with my own. Let me explain. Don't hold it against me. He wrote me that one party in the household in which he was tutoring favored him, while the other opposed him. He did not mention that it was a *she* who was favoring him and *her husband* who was opposing him, a detail that changes the whole meaning, don't you see?

Not everyone I write has to be you—or my mother or his mother. Again I look into the mirror, scan the morsels of me. This nose—too long too thin too avid, the cartilage too prominent too blanched, revealing the skull beneath—my banker's nose smells the moldy, reassuring smell of bank notes. Several days after the death of his son Henry, fourteen years after Susette Gontard's death, Jacob Gontard writes his brother. No one calls Jacob "Cobus" anymore. He is in Paris with his third wife, negotiating with the Rothschilds after Napoleon's first banishment. Henry was only twenty-nine, a good age for a poet to die, but not a banker; it is frivolous for a banker to die so young, irresponsible for a banker not to see to it that his father's investments reach full maturity. Henry had too much of his mother in him; he purged himself of her by giving birth to the death in him. That is too complicated a thought for Henry's father, however; too mixed up for an entry in the ledger that is the Great Book of Reason. Jacob sets aside his ledger for a moment in order to write his brother.

Jacob Gontard to Franz Gontard in Hamburg

Paris, November 1, 1816

My dear Franz,

You came to Frankfurt. It was kind of you, good brother, to travel all the way down from Hamburg for Henry's funeral. A father can find comfort in such lamentable circumstances only among his own kin, only among his own brothers and sisters, who are the sole surety to him. I had to return to Paris immediately after the funeral: the situation here is heady, as you can imagine, with

Now that all our paths of communication have been cut off—and I am simply irate about this—I am hoping to see the man that you once sent to our house from the inn.

If you think it is all right, and if Sinclair should come this way some time soon, you could ask him if he might visit me, as long as you don't put this visit in a false light for him; through him you can send me your *Hipperion*, if you've already received it.⁴ It is not possible for me to buy it with vulgar coin. And if you send it I will have news of you once again. How happy that will make me, if things are going well with you! —

People greet me as I have always known them to, very courteously, offering me novelties, pleasantries, *soirées*. Yet to accept even the smallest pleasantry from someone whom the *heart* of my heart does not embrace would be like poison to me, as long as the sensibility of this heart of mine endures. For who would want to assure herself of some “lovely days,” as people call them, when her friend has fallen from favor? How could such a person claim for herself the qualities of tenderness and sensitivity? Given this state of my feelings, I am living more simply than ever before, and gladly so. I am inclined to limit my needs: this pride, this feeling, is dearer to me than all the Earth's goods. God! my love! preserve me in it.

4. We do not know whether Susette Gontard at this time already possessed the first volume of *Hyperion*, published on April 17, 1797 (that is, some eighteen months before the present letter was written), and was waiting for the second volume (not published until November 1799, that is, over a year after the present letter), or whether she had not as yet seen any of it. Her strange spelling of the name implies that she has seen none of it. It may be, however, that she is writing the title the way Hölderlin himself probably pronounced it, in modern Greek, emphasizing the third, long syllable: Υπερίων. Note the correct spelling at the end of letter V, from February 1799, in anticipation of the second volume; but once again, in Letter VI (in the section dated March 19), the incorrect spelling. In the end, it seems highly unlikely that Susette could not have been in possession of volume one, and her anticipation of volume two—which was a year late in appearing—seems the more likely case.

the Emperor overthrown and the Coalition enforcing an uncertain peace. Some say Bonaparte is not quashed forever, but I don't believe it—the common weal dictates it. I will know more about it after my meeting with the Rothschilds tomorrow, and I shall keep you informed. The banks rule here as everywhere, now as for all times. The fact that John Law, a Scotsman serving under the English flag, founded the Banque Générale de France shows that banks are more potent than nation-states; one day the foolishness of nationality will end and the earnestness of Protestant religion and rational finance will prevail. The fact that John Law's bank had to be suppressed after the bubbles abroad had burst proves only that rulers tremble before the bench—not the bench of law but the bench of bankers. Did you know that the word *banque* comes from the Spanish *banco* and the Italian *banca*, which refer to the bench on which a group of men sat at the market place, trading in vulgar coin and tallying up the values of the sundry commodities, in general sustaining law and order in those motley circuses of banditry and mean dealing? A banker is originally a bencher, and that is why, to return to my point, rulers tremble before the bench. Whether I (or the Rothschilds) am at work in Frankfurt or Paris or London makes no difference: no one on our bench hoists a flag. Yet I believe I will eventually reside here in this luxurious Paris, even though I am inclined to limit my needs. Frankfurt is nothing to me now but a graveyard, the real estate of the moribund.

Besides, here I am among the people who gave us our name and our original tongue, which we have almost lost in foreign lands. I think often of Henri IV's sagacity: the Edict of Nantes gave us our protection and France her one and only chance to join the modern world. I think too of the foolishness of Louis XIV, who revoked the Edict: the sun king suddenly went behind the clouds, as twenty thousand men sworn to Reform and Thrift abandoned France for more promising investment opportunities elsewhere. The Great Elector of the Holy Roman Empire (which of course was neither an empire nor Roman nor holy), Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg-Prussia, welcomed the Huguenot families, the DuBoscs and the Gontards, into all the German lands. (Did you know that Madame de Staël writes of us in her diary? She says, "*Francfort est une très jolie ville; on y dîne parfaitement bien, tout le monde parle le Français et s'appelle Gontard.*") I swear it is true. Her memoirs are published: you can

I am almost always alone with the children. I try to be as useful to them as I can be.

How often I have regretted the fact that when we parted I advised you to leave as quickly as possible. I still cannot grasp what feeling it was that made me implore you to do that, but I think it was fear in the face of the overwhelming sensation of our love, which came to a crescendo in me and opened a terrible wound. The violence I felt made me capitulate immediately. How many things we could have arranged for the future—that is what I thought afterwards—if only your parting had not taken on such a quarrelsome color. Then no one could have forbidden you to set foot in this house again. But now? Oh, tell me, my good friend, how can we arrange matters so that we may see one another again, at no matter how great a distance? — I cannot renounce it altogether! It remains my dearest hope! — — Think on it.

I won't be able to write you often, for *this* is something I can dare but once at most. You will receive a few lines in return through Sinclair. Further, I don't think that we can meet at the Comic Opera very often: people would soon notice, because they are not accustomed to seeing me attend bad plays, and *we* don't want any spectators. Further, it would hurt me to know that you are having to travel in bad weather. If you find it agreeable, we will make the *following* arrangement: you shall come on the first Thursday of each month, and if the weather is bad, you'll come the first lovely day after that when there is a performance at the Opera, and I'll adapt myself accordingly.

Now, I've had to release a flood of words over you, and yet I would gladly have told you so much more that I cannot properly express. It all lies buried deep in my heart; only tears of melancholy can say it, only they can nurse it, allowing me to grow calm once again. You see perfectly well that I can't find the words! — I've changed so much: this powerful blow of fate has turned me inward entirely; a profound and holy solemnity pervades my whole

look it up.) The Great Elector welcomed our families with tax incentives and superfluous instructions. “Make a profit!” he commanded. For more than a century now we Huguenots have been obeying the Great Electors, trying to be as useful to them as we can be. And France? I have been perusing the volumes of the vast *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, in order to reacquaint myself with the culture, and the writer of the article that recounts the revocation of the Edict of Nantes says, rather wryly, I think, “Never was such a great sacrifice offered up to religion.” He means to the *papacy* of course. France has never emerged from the shadow of England, the Low Countries, and your own illustrious Hansa city. And Napoleon? A mere excursion. It will mean nothing in the long run, you will see. As backward as glorious France is, however, there is money to be made here.

Paris is quite different from Frankfurt. Here wealth is measured by the possession of luxury items. It is as though the Revolution changed nothing, nor the costly Wars, which now at last will come to an end. We make mountains of money during wartime, it is true, but affairs are too rushed and too unstable. There is no substitute for steady trade and commerce. But to return to my point, which is Paris: often these luxuries, these mere baubles and trinkets, adorn a family of financial corpses. Women in high-bodiced, deep-cut, well-nigh transparent Empire gowns—with fleshless bones beneath. These people have no substance. Yet life here is pleasant, and I’ll adapt myself accordingly. If my new wife is agreed, and I am certain she will be, we shall live here some day. For the moment, Henry’s death leaves me no choice but to return to Frankfurt for an extended period: I now have his branch of the firm as well as my own to run. We Huguenots all marry our own cousins, and so our children do not last. It is an unprofitable venture. Think on it.

Dead at twenty-nine. At first the doctors thought it was the measles, but I told them that he had had the measles just before his fifteenth birthday. He brought them into the house when he came back from Hanau for the summer holidays. They were a grave danger to him—he was well into his coming of age. Yet they were a graver danger to his mother. No, it wasn’t the measles that swept Henry away: it was a simple cough and cold, a catarrh that wouldn’t quit his lungs. He had no stamina. I think he lost heart when he was eleven

being. It's just that most of the time I feel so stifled, and I have no capacity to think. If I try to read, my thoughts grind to a halt, refusing to advance; I can perform only the most necessary duties and have become so lethargic that people are astonished. My health is otherwise fine—it's only that I am lacking courage and activity. It's as though I were a bit paralyzed. All I want to do is lounge about and daydream! Yet my imagination often won't do even that much. Oh! things will surely go better with me if only I am assured of receiving news of you, and if I have ahead of me a particular window, a day of hope, inasmuch as hope alone keeps us alive. — — It is a matter of certainty that in this I will never change. — — —

Thus far written on Wednesday.

Friday morning, 9:30

Since I saw you yesterday only one wish flourishes in me: that I will be able to speak with you face to face.⁵ If you dare to risk it, and if you are not obligated by other appointments, come this afternoon at a quarter-past three. Go straight to the back door, which is always open, proceed quickly and quietly up the stairs as you used to do; the door to my room, near the stairwell, will be ajar for you; the children will be having their lessons at that hour in the blue room at the back, and they won't be able to see you outside if you walk along the garden wall. Wilhelmine will be tending Molly in the parlor,⁶ and we can hope to have an hour to ourselves for quiet talk. If you find it unwise, however, or if there are other reasons why you can't make it, I promise to respect them, and we certainly don't have to change anything, we can let the old

5. Apparently, Susette Gontard had seen Hölderlin the previous evening at the Comic Opera.

6. That is, Susette's maid, Wilhelmine Schott, will be tending her infant daughter Amalie, called "Maly" by the family—here "Molly."

and I had to tell him about his mother. A boy's mother is infinitely important to him, my dear Franz, no matter what she has done. The death of our own sweet Mother, who was so innocent and pious all her days, was such a powerful blow of fate—do you remember? Henry was fifteen when his not-so-innocent mother died, and only eleven when she lost her soul. It could not be helped: I had to explain to him that his tutor had lured her into something wicked, something that could not be uttered; if Henry wanted to continue living in the House of his Father he would have to denounce the interloper, renounce the tutor, whose name he must never again allow to cross his lips and whose letters he must burn. He obeyed me of course. Yet he grew listless and lethargic, as though he were a bit paralyzed. His mother shrank in stature before his very eyes—I saw him gazing on her at supper while he pretended to be wiping his mouth with his serviette, thinking no one would notice. Fathers notice. That is what we are for. All our existence is a watch. Exactitude and decisiveness are our watchwords. I know that I was a good father. The girls' tutor, Marie Rätzer, a beautiful, large-breasted young woman, once said of me: "The best, most tender father could not be more faithfully devoted to the care and well-being of his most beloved child than good Herr Gontard is to me." I should have married her.

We never talked about it again, Henry and I, not even after her death. Yet it seemed to be on his mind all the time; it sapped his confidence and strength. I was loyal to her, far more so than she had ever been to me: "Do not taint your mind," I warned him, "but leave her to heaven." He didn't listen. He brooded. He tried to conceal his despair behind a mask of insouciance. I believed his marriage to Cäcilie Marianne would alleviate matters, but his own marriage seemed to aggravate the unannealed wound of doubt. I am sure he never risked telling Cäcilie about it. He seemed to fear it as though it were a contagion running in the family—would she do the same to him? Perhaps that is why they had no children of their own, even after five years of marriage. It was unnatural; it was unprofitable. She left the door to her bedroom ajar for him, but to no avail. Children are a couple's only real surety, generally speaking, although you see what has become of my firstborn.

You wrote me, dear brother, that you had heard rumors of the affair all the way up in Hamburg. That is no surprise. Rumors against such as we

arrangement stand. You can organize things any way you like; you will always find me.

And even if somebody does see you, it really doesn't matter. Why should it be conspicuous if persons who have lived under the same roof for three years spend a half-hour together? The opposite would draw more attention.