The mystic philosopher Hegel dedicated this poem to his friend Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin in August 1796. The two had first met at the Tübingen Seminary in 1788, and had remained in contact. Rich in mystical symbolism, the poem expresses the importance of the ancient mystery schools to these eighteenth century philosophers and literary figures.

Oh! If the doors of your sanctuary should crumble by themselves
Oh Ceres, you who reigned in Eleusis!
Drunk with enthusiasm, I would shiver with your nearness,
I would understand your revelations,
I would interpret the lofty meaning of the images,
I would hear the hymns at the gods’ banquets,
the lofty maxims of their counsel.

Even your hallways have ceased to echo, Goddess!
The circle of the gods has fled back to Olympus
from the consecrated altars;
fled from the tomb of profaned humanity,
the innocent genius who enchanted them here! —
The wisdom of your priests is silent, not one note of the sacred initiations preserved for us—and in vain strive the scholars, their curiosity greater than their love of wisdom (the seekers possess this love and they disdain you)—to master it they dig for words,
in which your lofty meaning might be engraved!
In vain! Only dust and ashes do they seize,
where your life returns no more for them.
And yet, even rotting and lifeless they congratulate themselves, the eternally dead!—easily satisfied—in vain—no sign remains of your celebration, no trace of an image.
For the son of the initiation the lofty doctrine was too full, the profundity of the ineffable sentiment was too sacred, for him to value the desiccated signs.
Now thought does not raise up the spirit, sunken beyond time and space to purify infinity, it forgets itself, and now once again its consciousness is aroused. He who should want to speak about it with others, would have to speak the language of angels, would have to experience the poverty of words. He is horrified of having thought so little of the sacred,
of having made so little of it, that speech seems to him a sin, and though still alive, he closes his mouth. That which the initiate prohibits himself, a sage law also prohibits the poorest souls: to make known what he had seen, heard, felt during the sacred night: so that even the best part of his prayers was not disturbed by the clamor of their disorder, and the empty chattering did not dispose him toward the sacred, and this was not dragged in the mud, but was entrusted to memory—so that it did not become a plaything or the ware of some sophist, who would have sold it like an obolus, or the mantle of an eloquent hypocrite or even the rod of a joyful youth, or become so empty at the end, that only in the echo of foreign tongues would it find its roots. Your sons, Oh Goddess, miserly with your honor, did not carry it through the streets and markets, but they cultivated it in the breast’s inner chambers. And so you did not live on their lips. Their life honored you. And you live still in their acts. Even tonight, sacred divinity, I heard you. Often the life of your children reveals you, and I introduce you as the soul of their acts! You are the lofty meaning, the true faith, which, divine when all else crumbles, does not falter.

Remains of the main entrance to the Sanctuary at Eleusis. Note the grooves in the stone floor where the doors to the temple opened and closed thousands of times over the millennia. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

ENDNOTE