
Volume: 

Issue: 

Month/Year: 1999

Pages: 94-120, 424-432

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Article Title: 'Winke': Divine Topoi in Holderlin, Heidegger, Nancy

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That Hölderlin's poetry revolves around certain notions of the divine, of gods, and the holy is almost a commonplace, though it does so in a manner very different from the discourses on the coming god familiar from the Romantics through the later Heidegger. How, exactly, Hölderlin's reference to the divine is made is less clear, including what such reference means for our understanding of both Hölderlin and the traditions of interpreting the divine on which he reflects, from which he departs, or which he, in turn, has called forth. The notion of the divine is often introduced in Hölderlin in a language that invokes topological images, theophanic heavens, and semigodly rivers, each of which seem to mark a specific manifestation or presence that is at once ineluctable and elusive, inscribed on the face of the Earth and the sky but also “immediate” in an utterly undialectical and nonidealistic sense of this word. This immediacy does not let itself be reduced to that of mere empirical reference, biographical detail, or material inscription. Such refusal is obvious in that it finds no better expression than in the figure of the “nod,” the signal or gesture of the Winke. Hölderlin says that this figure has from early on (Vom alters her) been the language of the gods (die Sprache der Götter). This phrase and the constellation it evokes cast surprising light on the problem of divine names—or the lack thereof—that pervades the history of Western philosophy, apophatic theology, and mysticism. Hölderlin’s poetry, in ways all too often overlooked by many of its most insightful readers, in the first place Heidegger, liberates the question “What is God?” (quid est deus) from the dilemmas of linguistic ineffability, of the sayable and the unsayable, and reorients our thought—our gaze, to be precise—in more than one direction at once. In what follows, I will attempt to substantiate this hypothesis by establishing an interpretative context for a few relevant lines, taken from “Was ist Gott?” (“What is God?”) (SA 2; 1: 210) and “In lieblicher Blüte blühst” (“In Lovely Blueness . . . blossoms”) (SA 2; 2: 991–92), relatively short texts that have drawn considerable critical interest.

One of the most recent and most challenging interpretations of the figure of the Winke in relation to the question of the divine and of topology is Jean-Luc Nancy’s Des lieux divins, “Of Divine Places,” first published in a Festschrift entitled Quest-ce que Dieu? (What is God?). Nancy engages the question of whether—and, if so, where—there is still a place for the divine, for its experience and its “presence.” This question opens an inquiry into the concepts, the names, the tropes, or, more precisely, the topoi of the divine, one quite different from most other discourses about difference and the “Other,” which often reduce this problem to that of linguistic insufficiency or ineffability. These apophatic discourses—ranging from Pseudo-Dionysius, to Eckhart and Angelus Silesius, to the atomistic premises which lead to the conclusion of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus and beyond—presuppose another, more challenging suspension, retreat, or dispersion, one that Nancy pursues across his essay’s fractured topology. In fact, “Of Divine Places” is nothing less than an attempt to elucidate and to situate the historic and epochal displacement which resembles a relentless Dei paralysis progressiva.6

It has often been claimed that in the modern epoch the question and the naming of the divine takes the form of an ongoing reduction, a continuous process of erosion, a reductio perennis. This process, Nancy writes, has irrevocably diffused the divine itself, well beyond the scattering of the deity and the gods as separate and significant—immortal, eminent, or infinite—entities:
“God,” the motif or theme of God, the question of God, no longer means anything to us. Or else—as is all too obvious to an unbiased eye—what the theme of God might mean to us has already moved or been carried entirely outside of him. Is there any statement about the divine that can henceforth be distinguished, strictly speaking, from another about “the subject” (or its “absence”), “desire,” “history,” “the other” [autar], “the Other,” “being,” “speech,” “the sublime,” “community,” and so on and so forth? It is as if “God” were in fragments, an Osiris dismembered throughout all of our discourse (indeed there are those who will now continue to speak of the divine in terms of explosion, dispersal, suspension, etc.). As if the divine, God, or the gods formed the common name or place—common and as such erasable, insignificant—of every question, every exigency of thought: wherever thought comes up against the furthest extreme, the limit, against truth, or ordeal, in short wherever it thinks, it encounters something that once bore or seems to have borne, at one time or another, a divine name.4

Distanced from everything else, from beings and Being—even, as it were, from “itself”—the religious and theological notion of “God” loses all specificity and thereby all relevance:

Far from being rediscovered, God disappears even more surely and definitively through bearing all the names of a generalized and multiplied difference. Monothedism dissolves into polytheism, and it is no good asserting that this polytheism is the true word and the true presence of God in his distance from the supreme Being of metaphysics. For the infinitely absent god . . . should no longer be termed “God,” nor be presented in any way as “God” or as divine . . . . There is no theology that does not turn out here to be either ontological or anthropological—saying nothing about the god that cannot immediately be said about “the event,” about “love,” about “poetry.” 5

On the one hand, this implies that the language of “modernity” subtracts the privilege of speaking of “the Other, the Infinitely-other, the Other-infinite” from the jurisdiction of so-called theology: the proper negativity of our present and future thoughts seems to enable us to address the “ad- conditum”6 that was formerly reserved for esoteric discourse alone. And yet, on the other hand, this secularization or, rather, becoming-esoteric of the absolute places thought in a paradoxical situation. Nancy describes this aporia in no uncertain terms:

In baptizing our abysses with the name of God, we are guilty of at least two errors or incoherencies: we fill in the abyss by attributing a bottom to them, and we blaspheme . . . the name of God by making it the name of something. On the other hand, the most subtle—and most theological—error would doubtless con-
sist in believing that the infinite cannot provide a bottom and that naming a person [for example, “God”] is not naming a sort of “thing.”7

Not only does this aporia belong to the very nature of theological discourse, but its slippage and, indeed, blasphemy are as old as Western thought. Here, we encounter the unavoidable and, in a sense, transcendent illusion of all discourse, whether written or oral. The word and the notion “god” is always accompanied by a dual temptation: the seduction to baptize all experiences of the limit of our world with a divine name, and the desire to protect this name and the obscurity of our experience from idolatry and superstition. This double yet incoherent allegiance to two types of naming, of ascription and of apophasis, cannot be resolved as long as one continues to move within the horizon of reference, that is, of positive and negative attribution alone. If “god,” as Nancy insists, is neither “a manner of speaking” nor some “ultimate truth of mankind,”8 then the uses and abuses of this name—which is not a concept, a term, or a figure, properly speaking—are no longer governed by any semantics or metaphoric.

Given the inconsistencies of any discourse on or about God (de Deo), whether ontotheological or not, whether coming from God or not, it clearly no longer suffices to ask: “What is God, if He is?” The question quid est deus? could very well turn out to be the surest means of falling short of the question (if indeed it is a question, if it still hides or still reveals a true question), for God has perhaps become everything (or nothing); perhaps he has become, potentially at least, every true question, exigency, or furthest extreme of thought.9

Instead, “Of Divine Places” emphasizes the question of place and space, with a remarkable turn of thought and an intensity that at once seems close to Heidegger’s thought of the site (of the Ort, the Erörterung, as well as the Situation of which Being and Time speaks) and moves far beyond the confines of the thinking of (Andenken) as well as the prerogative of (the one) Being. Writing of divine places, Nancy interrogates the being-one, the being-indivisible, of the place and the determination of whatever place or space as a site of gathering Being and beings, divinities and mortals, heavens (the sky) and Earth. Thus, rather than asking whether or what “god” is or names, we should, Nancy claims, raise the more central question:
If there is a place for God, if there is still room [place] for him: that is, a place where he does not become indistinguishable from something else, and where it is consequently still worth calling him by the name of God . . . could we then in fact be dealing with a question of place, of distinct location [lieu] and not with a question of being?10

The very title “Of Divine Places,” thus stands for a fragmentary and partial, indeed local and topical, exploration

of the gods and their places; of the places they have abandoned and of those where they hide; of gods without hearth or home, of nomadic gods; of the here where the gods are also; of the common places of God; of the gods common to all places, to some places, to no place; of God: in what way he is topos; topics and atopics of the divine; of gods and places: treatise on divine paronomasia [i.e., on the juxtaposition of divine names which all sound alike, but give the divine a different meaning]; where is God to be found? in what place?11

For all the subtlety of his rephrasing of a traditional question, Nancy retains, if not the question quid est, then at least the form of the question and of questioning as such. Here, the question “Where, if anywhere?” (or “Is there any place, somewhere, where . . . ?”) is substituted for—takes the place of—the ontological interrogation “What is X in its very essence and existence?” Remarkably, Nancy refrains from putting into question the principle of identity in this context. The very exclusion of a third possibility beyond the alternative X or not X (tertium non datur) regulates the basic assumptions on which “Of Divine Places” is based. For the notion “god” to be meaningful and not a mere flatus vocis, an empty word or sound, it should, Nancy maintains, have some differentia specifica, some distinctive feature. This is not to say that the word “god” should have a stable semantic reference (it has none), nor that one ought to be able first to answer the question of God’s existence and essence by proving that and how the substance called “divine” must of necessity have all perfect properties and can therefore, by implication, be said to exist eminently. Clinging to the principle of identity—that the notion and word “god” must refer to some “presence” here and now in order to make sense at all, that “god” is either “god” or “not-god,” without there being any third possibility—Nancy rephrases the traditional question of whether “god” exists (an sit) and, if so, what He is in essence (quod sit) by introducing the more topical and timely question of where He is, not in fact but, again, in essence (quo sit). To ask where and when his essence can be said to exist comes down, Nancy asserts, to posing the question of “how he withdraws from existence, how he is not where we expect him to be.”12

In the same vein, Nancy reiterates in his essay “The Calculation of the Poet” that: “The god is nothing but the place [Le dieu n’est que le lieu]; the place is the place of departure and of the return, of the coming that withdraws itself and that thereby makes sense.”13 Far from cultivating a romantic imagery, far from nostalgic and irresponsible desire for lost or coming gods, to read Hölderlin here and now means paying attention to the metric precision with which in his writing the without-measure is captured. Nancy formulates it almost apodictically: “Poetry: material calculation of the atheistic passage.”14 One might wonder, of course, why, if the name God can no longer be taken to refer to the highest or the supreme Being, the first cause of all as well as of Himself—causa prima and causa sui—this notion and the very “presence” that it evokes should be distinguishable from something else at all. Why should there be a specific difference where, precisely, a certain indelible sublime indifference vis-à-vis finite differentiations is at stake? How, in other words, could one not sacrifice the specificity of God, even or precisely while one claims to speak to Him, about Him, let alone away from Him and without Him? Is not this what the à dieu, the invocation or denial of an absolute witness as the condition of all claims to truth, to truthfulness—in short, of all utterances made in good and bad faith—expresses economically and most provocatively? Why should presence at or in a certain locus or location provide the divine with a distinctive feature or a discriminatory marker? Would not a confusion and transgression that is always possible—an idolatry or blasphemy—constitute “God’s” or “the god’s” unpredictable occurrence, if and wherever He (or it) occurs? Is not every epiphany characterized by a transposition which in its very transscendere—in its movement upward and downward, in its transascendance and transdescendence, to cite Levinas, who in the opening pages of Totalité et Infinité cites Jean Wahl’s Traité de Métaphysique—retains something (of the) undecidable? It is on both sides of the same line at once, as if this line, which is supposed to set apart, not only the finite and the infinite, but also two different forms or experiences of the infinite, were in itself infinitely divided. That is to say, it is divided, neither in any determinable measure nor randomly, but by being haunted at each given point by a necessary possibility of the intervention of chance.

Instead, in “Of Divine Places” Nancy recalls the Hölderlinean motif
of the lack of holy or divine names, here and now, at this place, where we are, and opposes it to the at bottom metaphysical preoccupation with the inexpressible, the ineffable, the unsayable beyond any ontic or ontological determination, *epokeina tes ousias*, beyond essence. In our days, Nancy writes, “God” is not unnameable in the metaphysical sense of that being that is inaccessible to all names . . . including the name of being itself, according to an unbroken tradition that is the very tradition of ontotheology. God is not unnameable in that sense, because in that sense unnameability is the result of an overflowing of names and language, whereas the unnameability of the god to whom I address myself (if I can) results from the lack of a name. . . . There is no impotence on the part of names in general to express or refer to God (just as, conversely, the unnameable is neither necessarily nor exclusively divine. . . . In fact it could well be that the “unnameable” is never divine, and that the divine is always named—even if it is for want of a name.15

Nancy alludes to the last strophe of Hölderlin’s elegy “Heimkunft” (“Homecoming”)—“es fehlen heilige Namen,” “holy names are lacking,” or “there is a lack of holy names”—a classic topos for the retreat and want of the divine name. Heidegger also traverses this topos in his excurses or elucidations (Erläuterungen) of Hölderlin’s poetry, or rather—more emphatically—Dichtung. Neither Nancy nor Heidegger reads this lack against the background of the tradition of negative theology. The apophatic way, Nancy suggests somewhat surprisingly, was always more obsessed with the difficulty of using *concepts* rather than the singular designators called *names* when speaking of God, of His hyperressentiality, or, more precisely, His abode. He holds that the lack of which (or from which) Hölderlin speaks in “Heimkunft” cannot be interpreted as a merely empirical—historical, cultural, biographical, or even linguistic—absence, as if the names were lacking in the sense of not or no longer being ready at hand (or *vorhanden*).

No doubts are cast, in Hölderlin, on the possibility of divine names. On the contrary, the assertion of a lack of sacred names implies that we know what such names are—names, as Heidegger’s commentary puts it, “which are commensurate with the sacred (or the holy) and which themselves cast light upon it.” These names are thus not only proper to the divine, they bring it to light, they make it known as the divine that it is. These names are the manifestation of the divine, they are thus perhaps not far from being the divine itself. It is simply . . . that these names, here and now, are lacking.16

I will argue that this lack is not a loss or negativity that would make itself available to a dialectics and thus—Nancy assumes, following a long tradition of engagement with Hegelianism—to metaphysical substantialization or ontologization. Hölderlin’s thought here—as it lets itself be read through the prism of Nancy’s *theatopography*—is not so much one of nostalgic, classicist, or romantic mourning, but a mourning that is impossible and, in that sense, a paradoxical affirmation. In order to demonstrate this claim, let me first sketch the horizon from (within) which Nancy departs.

In “Der Fehl Heiliger Namen” (“The Lack of Holy Names”), published in the 1974 *Denkerfahrungen*, Heidegger illustrates the Hölderlinian notion of the Fehl, or want, in heavily charged sentences that—at least typographically, in their very verse form—are reminiscent of poetic prose, of a writing that neither is philosophy strictly speaking nor, in its aspiration to further thought, claims to be Dichtung in the limited, let alone the Hölderlinian sense. If *Dichten* and *Denken* (and, let us not forget, thanking, *Danken*) go hand in hand, they nonetheless belong to distinguishable spheres and follow different regimens. According to Heidegger, a situation of need and distress, namely, the persistent deferral of the divine, solicits the poet’s utterance: “What urges the poet into [his] Saying, is a distress. It hides itself in the deferral of the presence [or presencing] of the divine” (“Was den Dichter in das Sagen nötigt, ist eine Not. Sie verbirgt sich im Ausbleiben des Anwesens des Göttlichen.”). This need insinuates itself throughout Hölderlin’s mature and late poetry and is expressed in his at once “simple,” “illuminating,” and “mysterious” word (“in das einfache, alles klärende und gleichwohl geheimnisvolle Wort”). Heidegger holds this to be how “holy names are lacking.” He hastens to point out, however, that only those who are granted an insight (Einblick) into the “experience” of the “origin” (Herkunft) of this lack can understand its singular meaning (das Eigentümliche). That origin lies concealed in a “reserve” of the “Holy” (in einem Vorenthalt des Heiligen). In Hölderlin’s universe, Heidegger surmises, the “reserve” of the Holy and ultimate meaning of Being withholds itself and thus (but why and how, precisely?) holds us mortals back from access to the holy names or (which is hardly the same) from appropriately naming this divine.17 For Heidegger, to make or write poetry—to poetize, that is, *Dichten*—means to let oneself be addressed by the pure call of the presencing of Being, which gives itself only in and as its retreat and thus never without reservation:
To poeticize—this means here: to let oneself be said the pure call of presence [or presencing] as such, and be it only and first of all a presence [or presencing] of withdrawal and reservation. [Dichten — meint hier: sich sagen lassen den reinen Anruf des Anwesens als solchen, und sei dieses auch nur und gerade ein Anwesen des Entzuges und des Vorenthaltes.]  

In so doing, poetry is at odds with the primacy of “method” in the technological age. Dichten forsakes a path, leads the way forever underway toward a “clearing.” It proceeds, as it were, without “procedure” (Verfahren), without “proof” and without “mediation” (Vermitteln). Only the thought which follows this path, which itself has the character rather than merely the form of the path (in sich Wegcharakter hat), can hope to prepare the “experience of the lack” (the Fehl) and thus help the poet—the sole figure who can and must put this lack into words through his saying (sagen)—to understand. Not that it helps him make the distress and the necessity—the Not—of the lack intelligible or understandable. Instead, it helps him to exist in or, rather, to stand out and stand through the Not. This happens in an original and original sense: the poet’s ausstehen of die Not concerns first and foremost the earliest and primal Not, that of the forgetfulness (Seinsvergessenheit) and the self-concealment (Sichverbergen or Lethe) of Being. This self-concealment is the proper feature of Being’s presence or essence (its essence or Anwesen) and the “source” or “domain” from which the present Not, notably the Not des Fehls “heiliger Namen” stems. Originating in the forgetfulness of Being, the need for holy names eventually might also leap away from this source. The understanding of thought that could help the Dichten does not imply, then, making this Not “understandable” but persevering in it.

The forgetting in question, Heidegger adds, should not be identified with an all-too-familiar privative sense, as if we were dealing with a lack in the sense of Mangel, of something that should not have been, a fault that could have been prevented, a mistake, an omission, an Unterlassung. On the contrary, Heidegger continues, the word Seinsvergessenheit names the sending of Being in the very essence of its clearing, which can only manifest itself if this clearing—that is to say, if its truth, its Aletheia—retains orwithholds itself, if it keeps to itself or keeps itself in reserve for thought, as it has done from (and, Heidegger writes, a) the very beginning of Western thought all the way through the different epochs of the history of Being up until now, that is to say, the present technological age.

Yet as this forgetting has turned into the—forgotten—principle of thought, it has become increasingly difficult or even impossible to understand it properly. Consequently, the lack of divine (sacred or holy) names cannot be experienced in its own right (“Der Vorenhalt der Lichtung des Anwesens als solchen verwehre es . . . , den Fehl ‘heiliger Namen’ als Fehl eigens zu erfahren”), 22 that is to say, in its origin or Herkunft. More than ever, we seem removed from the “possibility” (the Möglichkeit) of gaining insight (Einzblick) into this situation and assessing the appropriate task of thought.

Heidegger leaves no doubt that this task consists in a turn, a turning away, from the dominance of method (the following of a path, methodos, of sorts) in favor of a different, less secure but more demanding path. Underway to whatever is given thought to think, we might come to learn (again?) that in the retreat and the reserve that characterize the dominion of Lethe, the epochal forgetfulness of Being, there reigns a “proper mode of presence (or presencing),” one that is constitutive of; that opens, enables, insight into the anxious situation of the “Fehl ‘heiliger Namen.’” Only our staying (Aufenthalt) or dwelling in the openness of the primary domain (Gegent) guarantees the possibility (die Möglichkeit) of overcoming our present blindness and seeing what, here and now, somehow is, even though, or precisely insofar as, it is lacking.

What lacks is, somehow, if not somewhere, if not at some given moment in time and in space. And this is, Heidegger implies, grounds the very possibility of an insight.

As so often in Heidegger, there is thus an emphasis on the ontological or epochal primacy of the possible, as well as on the grounding, the localization, of lack in the Lethe, that is to say, in the presencing, the Anwesen, of Being insofar as it absconds itself from the present. This preoccupation directs Nancy’s reading. He asks whether or to what extent Heidegger’s thought still reserves for itself the possibility of an ontological or dialectical “reserve,” and, if so, whether the “Fehl heiliger Namen” becomes secondary to a supposed primacy of the Lethe at the bottom of Aletheia. Might this “lack” (Fehl) and the “reserve” (Vorenhalt) that Heidegger thinks it signals and presupposes be understood as the overturn to a new and other beginning or to a return—a re-turn as much as a “re-run,” a turning up again—in which the gods once more might make their appearance? And would the poet—especially der Dichter par excellence, Hölderlin—have a decisive role to play here? Is that how Hölderlin understood his poetry and himself? Or, to avoid interpreting the poet e mente
autoris, is that how he is most fruitfully or plausibly read? Does Heidegger's later thought measure up to the difficulties of Hölderlin's text, or should we attempt a more complex reading, a lectio difficilior, that resists the possibilities of hermeneutic understanding and, indeed, the very premises of the possibilism on which such understanding ultimately rests? If Heidegger's Erläuterungen somehow miss the mark, what help, if any, do Nancy's more elliptical observations offer?

A brief review of a few other commentators will help prepare the ground for an answer to these questions. Richard Sieburth, unafraid of quick identifications, writes in the introduction to his translation of Hymns and Fragments by Hölderlin:

If the heavens are now desolate, it is because a double estrangement has taken place: just as man has forgotten his love for God, so God has ostracized man, leaving him to wander through the night like an orphan. And, by a paradox of negative theology, the disappearance of God may be his most mysterious gift: as Hölderlin tersely observes in his poem "The Poet's Vocation" ["Dichterberuf"], Gottes Fehl hilft ("God's lack helps"). In the new dispensation brought about by the death of God the poet's role is no longer to receive the fire from on high and offer it on in song to his fellow men... instead he has now become guardian of the empty intersection that defines the mutual infidelity of gods and mortals. In this silent locus his words now discover their source.

But the very concealment or hiddenness (Verborgenheit) of the divine, as Heidegger's commentaries on Hölderlin darkly suggest, defines the ground for its disclosure. Radiant by his very occlusion, God reveals himself by taking veils... The distance of God, then, is integral to his proximity; he is, in the celebrated opening phrase of "Patmos," at once "Near and / Hard to Grasp." 26

"Patmos," Sieburth asserts, is Hölderlin's "greatest meditation on the deus absconditus" and, long before the death of God will be announced, testifies to the "terrifying withdrawal of divine presence as Christ, as the last of the ancient gods, abandons his disciples to a diaphora of darkness and devastation." 27 Sieburth's interpretation emphasizes that the poet's voyage upon being seized by a spirit is "at once spatial and temporal," 28 pointing out that in Hölderlin's later hymns and fragments writing came to be associated with a "mapping" that is at once "mythic" 29 and decidedly modern. He suggests, moreover, that for Hölderlin the "distance" of the divine is "integral" to its "proximity" and that it is in his "absence" that God can be found to "establish his presence." 30 This, then, would be why Hölder-
language which comes with baptism into a given community. The want of names is constituted, not by the lack of this or that name, but by the (temporary or perpetual) absence or cessation of the gesture of naming, that is, of appellatives, of invocation or prayer. This allocation has not merely been historically or historically displaced. The lack of names unsettles and uproots the address in a more radical sense than by simply transporting it into a different context. It decontextualizes or eradicates the very *hic et nunc* of saying or praying (or is it cursing?) *mon dieu!* This “apparent possessive” is the basis of the sublime destitution and abandonment that Nancy sees at the origin of the divine *topoi*.

This view might seem to allow one to hold at a distance, at least philosophically or with regard to the task of “thought” the all-too-familiar, naive, and dangerous attempts to explore and exploit a supposed renaissance, resurrection, or *réveil* of the religious. It would seem that the death of God is irrevocable, and that gods return only as idols and idle kitsch. Yet the presupposition underlying this confident distance, the assumption that for want of prayer there can only be a parody of re-citation, is vulnerable in terms of Nancy’s own analysis and is, I would suggest, anything but convincing. Just as the validity of the concepts of the “idol” and “idolatry” are based, as Nancy rightly points out, on the silent presupposition of the *Idea* of which they are thought to reflect a merely distorted—anthropomorphic and profane—image, so also the suspicion of *mere* recitation makes sense only in view of the ideal of direct and pure address, of a full speech, as it were, that is unequivocal and present to itself, here and now. In its very purity, however, this address can never exist or be given as such. This is what resonates in Hölderlin’s phrase about the lack of holy names. What matters most is neither nature nor culture but how, as Hölderlin puts it in the second letter to Böhlerlöff, “the living relationship” and “destination” (*das lebendige Verhältnis und Geschick*), of which nature and culture are the “abstract elements,” 33 manifests or reveals itself only, *if at all*, in relation and *as relation* to its other, and thus, as we shall see, both *immediately* and *inflected*. For us moderns, it assumes the form of the immeasurable, of a sacred pathos or a fire from heaven. Far from mimicking the classicist—supposedly Greek—ideal, this is, in fact, its other.

If one holds to Nancy’s terms, faith must be taken as “entirely an outward act of presence [une comparaison à l’extérieur],” one, moreover, that resembles “turning one’s face toward the manifest heavens.” 34 This comparison should make us pause since it invokes a remarkable Hölder-
While Heidegger’s commentary starts out from the question “What is God?,” his reading takes its lead from a passage, in In lieblicher Blüte blühet (“In lovely blueness . . . blossoms”), whose authenticity has been disputed, but which for Heidegger, in its “substance” (sachlich) and its time, belongs to the same “ambience” (Umkreis) of the poem “What is God?”


Is God unknown? Is he manifest like the sky? This rather I believe. It is the measure of man. Full of acquisitions, but poetically, man dwells on this Earth. But the darkness of night with all the stars is not purer, if I could put it like that, than man, who is called the image of God. Is there a measure on Earth? There is none.

This late fragment confronts us with the difficult problem of the interplay of poetry or poetizing and topology, topography, and theophany: a relation that is not one relation among others, but provides the measure for all these others. How, if at all, can it be thought? How, if at all, is it experienced?

The precise nature of religious topographical imagery—in a word, of topo-theo-graphy—has long been a central focus in Hölderlin scholarship. Richard Sieburth, for instance, suggests that Hölderlin’s ideal landscape is always theophanic, a scripture to be reverently read and interpreted, a radiant figure of divine design. Such visionary topography, however, does not exclude a precise attention to the minute particulars of the genius loci, whatever their local habitation or their name.

Paul de Man addresses this relation at different places throughout his Critical Writings, nowhere clearer than in “Hölderlin’s Riddle.” Speaking of “Brot und Wein” (“Bread and Wine”) and “Andenken” (“Remembrance”), de Man begins by observing what no attentive reader should ignore:

This is not descriptive poetry as we would find it in Wordsworth or Coleridge, nor is it the kind of reverie associated with a Rousseauistic response to natural settings. The landscapes are made up of an intricate network of forces whose relationships are strongly dramatized. As a result, despite the absence of explicit symbolism or allegory, one feels behind these landscapes a working principle that encompasses mind and nature within a larger element. Like landscapes in a dream, every detail seems to have a meaning, to refer back to a will, to a purpose, even if this purpose remains hidden. Hölderlin modulates almost without transition from nature descriptions to dramatic scenes describing the actions of entities endowed with more than human or natural status. The course of the Rhine becomes the bearing of a demigod; the fall of night over a city the way in which a god ambiguously manifests his presence in withdrawal; a sunrise in the Alps suggests the proper distance between god and man.

In a late eighteenth-century work, such sudden and apparently effortless transitions from nature to divine presences are by no means easy to understand. The word god in Hölderlin, in the singular or in the plural, does not have behind it the weight of doctrinal and literary tradition that gives its anagogic level of meaning as in Dante or Milton. Nor are we dealing with a humanized and secularized version of Hellenic or Christian symbolism, as when Shelley or Keats represents the historical destiny of humankind in mythological form. It would also be false to think of Hölderlin’s poetry as a form of pantheism. He does not reach what he calls “the gods” through the mediation of nature; nature, in his work, is not closer to god than the thoughts and the deeds of man. Least of all does the theocentric vocabulary designate a religious experience in the traditional sense of the term: it refers to no dogma or act of faith.

It is precisely this overflowing of religious and mythological figures, the fact that Hölderlin adopts a “more-than-human point of view” throughout most of this writing that has led, de Man continues, to countless misreadings in the large body of textual criticism devoted to work. This pertains in particular to the understanding of “Nature” as an infinite, eternal, and ultimately all-encompassing notion—surpassing man and gods—a motif that can be found in the letter novel Hyperion, in the different versions of The Death of Empedocles, in the odes and elegies of the middle years no less than in the free-verse poetry of the later hymns. According to de Man, one nefarious “misrepresentation” stands out here and deserves further attention since it will enable us to circle back to the discussion of Nancy’s “Of Divine Places” above. De Man formulates it as follows:

There has been a persistent tendency to treat Hölderlin as a prophetic and eschatological poet, the precursor of a new historical era that his work helps to prepare. The trend goes back to Stefan George and his circle, who were closely associated with the rediscovery of Hölderlin shortly before World War I. It prevails, in a subtler form, in some of Heidegger’s commentaries on Hölderlin’s poetry during the thirties, whose ideological and nationalist overtones others, at the same time, were stating much less obliquely. But even when it appears in a nonpolitical or politically acceptable form, the messianic schema that one tends to associate with Hölderlin’s view of history distorts his actual statement.
Jacques Derrida, in his *Mémoires: For Paul de Man*, reminds us of the stakes of this reading, which seems consistent throughout most of de Man’s critical writing on the subject but finds its strongest statement in the essay “Heidegger’s Exegesis of Hölderlin,” in *Blindness and Insight*. Here, de Man addresses Heidegger’s reading of Hölderlin’s complex notion of “Nature” as distinct from the metaphysical understanding of *phusis* since the Greeks, including the pre-Socratics, and its disastrous distortion in modern, techno-touristic exploitation.\(^{46}\)

De Man starts out by citing Hölderlin’s “Wie wenn am Feiertage . . .” — “Denn sie, sie selbst, die älter denn die Zeiten / Und über die Götter des Abends und des Orteis ist, /Die Natur” (For she, she herself, who is older than the ages / and above the gods of the Occident and the Orient, /Nature) — and then goes on to claim that Heidegger rightly reads these lines as stating the poet’s major concern: the fact that nature, by being “marvelously omnipresent” (*wunderbar allegegenwärtig*), is not to be understood in any “pastoral” sense, but rather as “the immediate apprehension (presence) of that which serves as a support to all things, that which precedes and makes possible their representation to consciousness.”\(^{41}\) This possibility dimension, De Man goes on to suggest, is indeed that which in Heidegger’s own terminology is generally called the presence of the presents, the common *Wesen* of all individual presents that makes for the all-presence of things. It is the immediate givensness of Being that, for Hegel, is “just Being” (*nur Sein*) as long as it has not been represented to consciousness.\(^{42}\)

Much, of course, could be said about this all too hasty sketch of Heidegger’s thought in terms of a thinking that — supposedly from the perspective of Hegelian dialectics — concerns “just Being” (*nur Sein*), and that as such, as de Man puts it, has “neither the possibility nor the necessity to constitute itself into logos.”\(^{43}\) None of this seems very precise or convincing. The relationship between Heidegger and Hegel, like that between Hölderlin and Hegel, is far more complicated. This triangular constellation sheds a peculiar light on de Man’s confident assumption that in the passage cited above the poet, Hölderlin, gives voice to the “anguishing question” of “how to speak of Being” or, more precisely, how to “say Being itself.”\(^{44}\) Is this indeed the “subject” or the “experience” of this poem, of this poetry? For de Man there seems to be no question here: “Heidegger is right . . . to see in the poem a statement of the relation of poet to Being.”\(^{45}\)

De Man claims that only when Heidegger’s commentary reaches the point of attempting to demonstrate that the poet, in fact or in essence, *names* “the presence of the present”\(^{46}\) does it start to “distort” Hölderlin’s meaning and make him say exactly the opposite of what he — in fact and in essence — says. This explains de Man’s final — and finally deeply ambivalent — judgment:

Whatever one may otherwise reproach in Heidegger’s commentaries, their great merit remains to have brought out precisely the central “concern” of Hölderlin’s work; and in this, they surpass other studies. Nonetheless, they reverse his thought.

Again, this judgment is based on a rather curious interpretation of the stakes of Heidegger’s thought. Surely, no careful reader of the *Erklärungen* would want to conclude that for Heidegger Hölderlin’s poetic universe is a placeholder for Being, for its *Anweisen*, a presencing that sustains itself as time passes by. Yet de Man reduces Heidegger’s exegeses to precisely this caricature:

For the promise of Heidegger’s ontology to be realized, Hölderlin must be Icarus returned from his flight: he must state directly and positively the presence of Being as well as the possibility of maintaining it in time. Heidegger has staked his entire “system” on the possibility of this experience. This may explain why, obeying a tactic perhaps not fully conscious, he feels the need to base himself upon the work which proclaims that it is this experience, among all others, that is totally forbidden to men.\(^{47}\)

This analysis lays the ground for the debate that interests me here, speaking of topoi and topographies, of their *logos* or lack of *logos*. For Hölderlin, de Man concludes, the “eccentric road man travels to the primeval unity of the immediate”\(^{48}\) is far from assured, certainly not a given. Hölderlin does not imply “that the poet dwells in the Parousia,” only, de Man explains, that Parousia is “the principle of his becoming.”\(^{49}\) If, moreover, Hölderlin’s word — de Man quotes the line “Und ich sah, das Heilige sei mein Wort” (And what I saw, the Holy be my word) — states an “eternal poetic intention,” then, de Man insists, it “can be no more than intention”:

It is not because he has seen Being that the poet is, therefore, capable of naming it; his word prays for the Parousia, it does not establish it. It cannot establish it for as soon as the word is uttered, it destroys the immediate and discovers that instead of stating Being, it can only state mediation.\(^{50}\)

To the extent that re-citation constitutes the basis, if not “the heart,” of all prayer, de Man is quite right to state that Heidegger cites Hölderlin “as a
believer cites Holy Writ.” But is “Hölderlin the only one whom Heidegger cites as a believer cites Holy Writ”? If one abstracts from the polemical fervor with which this claim is made; if one recalls that, for Heidegger, the structure of language—in particular that of *Dichtung*, more precisely still, that of saying in relation to its said—is marked in advance by an affirmation which ties the possibility of the *Denken* to which it (*Sprache*) aspires to a *Denken* from which it comes, then Heidegger himself could not have hoped to cite, re-cite, and elucidate otherwise.

What is important here is perhaps not what de Man notes, namely, that Heidegger’s commentaries “do no more than formulate his own thought and use Hölderlin as a pretext.” Nor should it surprise anyone that the “exegeses”—a term Heidegger avoids with good reason—rarely, if ever, take the form of a “critical dialogue.” Whatever the philological impieties of his exegeses, whatever their enormous thematic schematizations, Heidegger’s *Erläuterungen* of Hölderlin’s poetry—and even their reduction of this poetry to *Dichtung*—obey a forceful repetition. They signal a distortion and a doubling at once. One might be tempted to ask whether de Man’s text, in its turn, might not also double (and thus also distort) the reading propelled by Heidegger. The former is at once faithful and unjust to the latter, if only because de Man accounts much less for Heidegger’s “insights” than for his major “blindness.” De Man takes the proven misreading to be the sign of a total mismeasuring and misrepresentation of the Hölderlinean *physis*. In doing so, he loses sight of a more crucial hint or Wink which Heidegger’s text—here closer to the *Wortlaut* of Hölderlin’s poetry than de Man suspects—also allows to be discerned (i.e., to be heard and to be seen).

For Derrida, it is with respect to the interpretation of the “law” that de Man “intends to rescue Hölderlin from appropriation-by-identification, from what might be called Heidegger’s hermeneutic mourning.” Derrida cites *Blindness and Insight*, where de Man states:

> When he states the law, the poet, the poet does not say Being, then, but rather, the impossibility of naming anything but an order that, in its essence, is distinct from immediate Being.

Heidegger interprets the first lines taken from “In lieblicher Bläue blühet . . .” as saying that the divine, while retaining its invisibility and unknowability, is made manifest (*offenbar*) by the heavens, sending, dispatching, or destining itself in the appearing of the world, which nonethe-

less remains completely foreign to it. However, in doing so, he also takes the risk of reducing the modality of this manifestation to a logic of absence and presence, revelation and concealment. Here, in other words, the divine epiphany is still thought, Nancy suspects, in terms of an Idealist alternative, as the manifestation of a god who does or who does not wish to be “close to us.” Yet he urges us to ask, “Can we still be content to go on conceiving of God, with or against Hegel, with or against St. Augustine, as a form of extreme intimacy? Will a day not come when we shall have to confront a god outside, exposed in the open sky, nowhere hidden and internal to nothing?”

Nancy proposes another, in my view far more provocative, reading of the lines cited above. The poem, he states, maintains less that God is revealed “by means of the heavens” than that “the god” is only “as manifest as the heavens.” The face of God is as manifest as the *Angesicht* of the heavens. This means that, for Hölderlin, the heavens are not the mere appearance, reflection, mirror image, or projection screen for a god whose existence (or presence) and essence ought to be located elsewhere, beyond this surface, or who would jealously retain some space, some reserve, some *Vorenbalt*, for himself. What alternative do we have for thinking divine manifestation as an occurrence that takes places *either* in interior (psychological or, rather, spiritual) enlightenment or that draws on the resources of an outer nature (from, say, “elements of the cosmos,* stoicheia tou kosmou*, through the created universe, to the Pascalian infinite voids of infinitely extended and infinitely divided spaces filled by divine grace alone): “The invisible divine lets itself be seen resting, itself, upon the face [the *Angesicht des Himmels*], or woven into it, sent or destined therein, but as another face that lets itself be seen here, without ‘here’ serving as a mediation for it.” For lack of a better word, Nancy speaks here of the “immediacy” (im-*médiate*) of the divine, the “im-” implying neither negation nor privation nor, for that matter, mere indifference, but rather a relation or a state which has absolved itself from that of both mediacy and immediacy, and, we should add, concerns man alone.

He discusses this relation, whose terms absolve themselves from every possible mediation—and thereby from the very mediation that is kept in reserve by every possible, whether transcendental, virtual or real—extensively in his *L’expérience de la liberté* (The Experience of Freedom). There he notes that “immmediacy”—this time around, the immediacy of “freedom”—should not be confused with “sensuous immediacy”:
Nor is it an absence of mediation in the intelligible. It is neither a sentiment nor an intellectual given. This might resemble what we could call the specific pregnancy of the “feeling of reason,” which for Kant is the respect for the law of freedom. The immediacy of this experience [the “passion” of freedom] must be understood as the affective im-mediacy of freedom in existence insofar as freedom affects existence from an infinite distance.

One should not, therefore, confuse im-mediacy with “temptation itself, the cunning abdication of thought into [that other] immediate, into the ‘lived,’ into the ineffable, or into the praxis and art designated as the others of thought,” as it can be found, for instance, in the well-known reference, in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, to the image of the young girl who “presents the outstanding products of ancient art and the divine places that the gods have left.” Rather, Nancy insists, “im-mediacy,” as that which enables and characterizes freedom, calls for a “returning of praxis to thought,” and in this turn, he adds, a central element from Marx’s writings “resonates” with “something from Heidegger.”

The “im-mediacy” of which Nancy speaks in “Of Divine Places” gives a hint man can follow up on, or not. It is all too easy to miss the point, the pointer, which is nonetheless somehow there, out there, but “in,” if one can still say so, a “there” that cannot be fixated—indeed, pinpointed—with the help of the usual coordinates. What the heavens and the god have “in common,” is neither a common measure—“Giebt es auf Erden ein Maass? Es giebt keines”—nor an *analogia entis*, but “the sovereign interplay [jew] of darkness and radiance [l’éclat], of radiance withdrawn into darkness and of darkness as manifest as radiance.” From this Nancy draws a dazzling conclusion. Seen in this light, against the background of this radiance, revelation can be thought neither as “presentation” nor as “representation,” since it is not the conveying of some message, but merely as “the evidence of the possibility (never the necessity) of a being-onto-god.” The “radiance,” in its very indeterminacy, is itself as such the revelation, though it reveals nothing but a possible. It reveals a pure relation or relatedness from which the terms (addressor and addressee) have withdrawn or absolved themselves completely and irrevocably: “What there is revelation of is not ‘God,’ as if he were something that can be exhibited . . . . it is rather the unto-God [l’a-dieu] or being-onto-god. Or more exactly, it becomes manifest that such a being-onto-god is possible.”

These formulations expose the fragility of Heidegger’s suggestion that the divine is made manifest by the heavens, that the presence-absence of the gods should be projected against the screen of Being’s manifestation and concealment, that the Hölderlinean “time of need” (dürftige Zeit) should be taken as the time in which the gods have fled while the god is still to come. These are all premises of a reading that enables Heidegger in advance to “extract” a future “positive” out of a past and present, supposedly nonprivative and nondialectical, “negative.” Indeed many, if not all, of Heidegger’s formulations which seek to determine the relation between Being and the highest Being, between the holy and the gods, between the gods or the holy and the Christian God (the others, we have seen, are either kept in reserve or not to be mentioned, let alone taken seriously, at all), are deeply ambivalent in this respect. One example must suffice here to illustrate this claim. Heidegger writes, in *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*:

As Hölderlin founds the essence of poetry (*Dichtung*) anew, he determines . . . a new time. It is the time of the gods who have fled and that of the coming god. This is the time in *need*, since it stands in a doubled lack and not in the no longer of the gods who have fled and in the not-yet of the coming.

Here, the doubled “not” has already the structure of a lack which calls for and calls forth a presence, if only by opening a space, by ending or, rather, closing an epoch, marked by the flight of the gods. These gods, in turn, serve, if not as the medium, then at least as the signs and the mediators of the god (der Gott): “Die Göttlichen sind die winkenden Boten der Gottheit. Aus dem heiligen Walten dieser erscheint der Gott in seine Gegenwart oder er entzieht sich in seine Verhüllung.”

How are we to understand these words? Do they confirm the basic tenets of Nancy’s suspicion? Does not the thought of Being from the very outset prejudge the eventuality and the very modality of the coming of gods, by framing this coming or not coming in terms of a possible and associating the present lack—the *Fehl* “heiliger Namen”—with a withholding or keeping itself in reserve, with a *Lethe* at the bottom of *Atheieia*? This question has far-reaching implications, not the least of which would be to problematize a common reading of the relation of Being and the divine topoi.

Nancy’s question posed to Heidegger’s reading of the Hölderlinean manifest heavens, his rethinking of this figure as a mere “possible” or as...
the "possibility of a possibility," is itself open to question. This attempt to frame the relationship between Being and the heavens, gods and mortals, in terms of a—possibilizing—dimensionality remains therefore steeped in the ultimately metaphysical presupposition of the existence, the deontological force, and the aesthetic value, of dispositional capacities (i.e., the Möglichkeit identified with a Vermögen, a dunamis, a potencia). Such forms of thought can no longer satisfy, because in any thought of possibilization, what is supposedly made possible is ipso facto also made into what it is not. It is screened in all senses of the word: projected onto and limited by properties, and be it in light of a horizon deemed most proper to its, the openness of the there (Da) its ownmost being or the Being—again, the Dimension of Being—that opens it up while folding it back into the One, the very simplicity that for Heidegger, following a long tradition, remains the index veri. Indeed, Heidegger's attempt, in the Beiträge zur Philosophie and elsewhere, is, as has been noted by Courtine, to delineate a new post-metaphysical concept of and space for the transcendence or epiphany of the divine that departs from the "long christianization of God." 70

Only when he reinscribes Heidegger's problematic formulations into the Hölderlinean topos of the Winke of the divine does Nancy efface the last remnants of the ontotheological legacy discernible in the restriction of thought to the openness to a possible being unto-God. Reading Heidegger against Heidegger, without referring to other, perhaps more topical, discourses (ones developed by Levinas, Derrida, and Marion), Nancy proposes that a better name for the peculiar modality of the "presence" of "God," "god," "the god," and "the gods," as they are revealed and manifest like the heavens, is that of the Winke, the divine "nod" or "sign." The divine does not signal something; it signifies nothing in particular, nothing that exists, nothing phenomenal, not even the radiance of the heavens. But if the divine "glory" is said to be "open, offered, dazzling like that of the heavens and effaced like them," 71 then this appears to mean, if anything (since the order of meaning and appearance is precisely what is displaced or erased here), that it has the "nature," the "mode," or the "quality" of a Winke, of a Winke, moreover, which in its elusiveness ambivalently evokes joy and fear at once, 72 thereby recalling the formal features of the sublime, not only in a Kantian sense. The god, Nancy writes, is only im Vorbeigang, "passing," "in passing," 73 de passage, and, to the extent that all departure entails some sort of death (partir c'est . . . ), has always already passed away.

Two observations should be made here. First, for all its continuity with Heidegger's interpretation of the kairos, in the early lectures on the phenomenology of religion, notably in a reading of St. Paul, the "passage" in question here has no longer the character of a Parousia. 74 As Courtine notes, we should seek the source of Heidegger's concern with the specific modality of the "passage" and, indeed, the Winke in the Zweisprache with Hölderlin. Here, Hölderlin's "Friedensfeier," "Der Einzige," and "Famphos" would be particularly revealing. 75 Second, it is important to remark that the divine Winke thus found is, in Heidegger's view—and here he may come closest to Hölderlin—intrinsically linked to an understanding of finitude which it radicalizes or pushes to its extreme. 76 Important differences, however, remain intact.

Citing Hölderlin's passage on divine Winke, Heidegger comments:

... und Winke sind
Von Alters her die Sprache der Götter . . .

The saying of the poet is the capturing of these nods, in order to gesture [winken] them further in his people. This capturing of the nods is a receiving and yet at the same time a new giving; for the poet sees [erblickt] in the "first sign" also already the accomplished and boldly puts this vision [Erschaffen] in his word in order to predict the not-yet-accomplished. Thus, "fliegt, der kühnen Geist, wie Adler den Gewittern, weissagend seinen Kommenden Göttern voraus." 77

Nancy emphasizes the double reading that these words allow. Hölderlin's verse does not presuppose that the realm of the profane has the ability to gesture toward the sacred. No analogical continuity surmounts the abyss between appearance and essence, the many and the One, the mortal and the divine. And yet, he adds, this does not exclude the possibility that "to give a sign" is perhaps always—divine. 78

To be sure, the relation between the different modes of giving a sign while signifying nothing in particular, between the Winke that is a divine gesturing and gesturing that is a Winke, is hardly symmetrical, despite a secret correspondence. Not every giving of signs, calling, seducing, and so on, can pretend to present us ipso facto with the divine. For Hölderlin no less than for Heidegger, only poems function as the heralds—and, perhaps, the very Winke—of the Winke called "divine." Yet the privilege accorded their words can hardly be attributed to the semantic or metaphorical potential of poetic speech, just as the lack of divine proper names cannot simply be ascribed to a supposed "metaphysical surfeit of the thing over the sign, of the real over language." 79 On the contrary, if the lack of
names is the absence of a Wink which "is" or evokes a gesture of naming, then the want of a name has nothing to do with some "signifying capacity" or lack thereof. As a result, the lack of divine names "cannot be judged in relation to sense," and precisely this circumstance and not some "dispositional capacity" may enable all names, in principle and in fact, to address—or name—the divine.

In one of the texts published in Denkerfahrungen and dated 1941, Heidegger describes the Winke, his own "Winke," in careful words which deserve extensive quotation, not least because they circumscribe the status of the Winke while "forging a path" between the supposedly separate domains of poetry and thought, aesthetics and philosophy:

The "nods" [again, Heidegger speaks of his own Winke] are not poems. Nor are they "philosophy" put into verse and rhyme. The "nods" are the words of a thought that in part needs this expression [Aussagen], but does not fulfill itself in it. This thought finds no anchor [Anhalts] in being[s], for it thinks das Seyn. This thought finds no example in being, since what is thought thinks being [das Seiende]. The saying of thought is other than the word of poetry without image [bildlos]. And where there seems to be an image, it is neither the poeticized of a poem nor what is intuited by a "sense" [meaning], but only the desperate anchor of an attempted but failed abstinence from any image [Bildlosigkeit].

Here and elsewhere, the word Winke retains an intimate relationship with the manifestation and the revealability of the essence of Being, that is to say, of Truth. None of this, however, is assumed in Hölderlin’s poetry or in the commentaries on which we have been focusing. On the contrary, the quintessence of the interrogation of the relationship between the poetic, on the one hand, and the thought of Being and (its) Truth, on the other, consists in questioning the primacy of the latter over and against the former.

How, then, can Hölderlin’s "poeticizing"—the writing, reading, or re-citation of his "poem" as well as the simple aesthesis of the heavens of which it speaks—signal the turning of a possible being-undo-the-god, without at the same time returning this relation to the order of signification and of aesthetic representation? And where, if anywhere, does the Wink touch upon art? Nancy’s demarcation between the two modes of manifestation seems to leave no room for confusion. Apodictically, “Of Divine Places” upholds a clear-cut distinction between the presence without (re)presentation of the divine, on the one hand, and the presentation of as representation of art, on the other: “God . . . comes in the ruin of all appearing [le paraître]. Art, on the contrary, infinitely incises the edges of appearance [l’apparaispré], but keeps it intact.”

At least three traditions seem to cross paths here, one of which is passed over in silence: the one which relies on the New Testament figure of the hoops mé (ôs, as if not) that forms an important key to understanding Heidegger’s exegetes, not of Hölderlin, but of St. Paul. Nancy identifies the two remaining ones as two particular modes of the sublime, each of which seems to have left its imprint in the very texture of his essay:

There is the sublime in art, going from Kant to Benjamin and from there on to us. It signifies: to feel the fainting away of the sensible, to border on the furthest extreme of presentation. . . . And there is divine sublimity, that in terms of which Hegel seeks to characterize the Jewish moment in religion. . . . The coming of God reduces the phenomenon to nothing. Here the sublime is no longer to be found at the furthest extreme of presentation where presentation is transformed into offering. It is in a presence that ruins all presentation and all representation. It is no longer the gesture of offering; it is the imposition of glory. It is no longer the limit of forms and figures, it is the light that disperses the visible.

Nancy tries precisely to capture the difference between these two sublime modes of signifying at the limit of and beyond the phenomenal world, at the limit of and beyond art, in the fragmentary—and indeed paratactic—form of presentation adopted in “Of Divine Places.” Its most significant stylistic feature is that of “juxtaposition,” without explanatory connectives, not so much of grammatical or syntactical elements (as in the parataxis of Hölderlin’s late poetry), but, so to speak, of the structures of argumentation or, rather, elucidation. It takes, quite literally, the form of a fragmented topology or, rather, topography. It allows of no gathering, no Versammlung, no logos. It does not let itself be folded into any Einfall, nor does it limit the domain (the Gegend) of thought to any fourfold (Geviert), folded, in its turn, into one.

“Of Divine Places” demonstrates—in its propositions as much as in their performative structure—that the sublime modes of the divine and the aesthetic are fundamentally irreconcilable. They cannot be translated into each other, for they have no common measure. And yet, Nancy writes, each mode can offer the other: each can offer itself to or as the other:
Between the "thing" of sublime art and the sublime "thing" of the divine, there can be said to be that infinitesimal (and in its turn sublime?) difference that lies between presentation at the limit and naked presence: it follows that each can offer the other, but also that it is impossible to confuse one with the other.98

One might argue that the reverse must be equally true. Given the "infinitesimal" difference and distance between the two sublimes, neither one of them can ever hope to offer the other, strictly speaking. Nonetheless, it is impossible not to take the one for the other. One cannot but keep them apart and confuse them. On both counts, the infinitesimally small but lasting difference or distance between the limit(ed) and the limitless regulates their impossible yet inevitable relation. Or so it seems. One hints at the other, as its other, its Wink.

Hölderlin’s Christ

Jean-François Courtine

. . . Schön
Und lieblich ist es zu vergleichen . . .

Confronting the question of Hölderlin’s “christology” remains now, as previously, a risky task, despite Xavier Tilliette’s convergent and ever more precise indications in La christologie idéaliste, Christ de la philosophie, and, recently, La semaine sainte des philosophes.2

If it is true, as Tilliette emphasizes, that Hölderlin’s major “authorized” editors from Beißner to Sattler, like the commentators who more or less follow the Heideggerian reading of the poet, have in general tended to occult, or at any rate minimize, the christological dimension of Hölderlin’s great poems, whether it be a question of the elegy “Bread and Wine” or of the final hymns, the resistance to this reading—which, if not neopagan, is at least resolutely Greek and syncretic—has nonetheless been notable. Suffice it to mention here Erich Przywara, Romano Guardini, Eduard Lachmann, or Heinrich Buhr, not to mention the discussions raised by the interpretation of the hymn “Friedensfeier” (“Celebration of Peace”) after its discovery and publication in 1954 by Beißner.3

It is not my intention here to remake the history of this occultation or, inversely, to remake the history of that timid christological inflection in the reception of Hölderlin, both of these engaging in the interpretation of the famous “vaterländische Umkehr” (“Anmerkungen zur Antigone”; [“Remarks to Antigone”] SA 5: 419). Is this “return to the homeland,” which marks a clear rupture with the enthusiasm of Hölderlin’s youth and
32. Ibid., 2:1:114.
34. Benjamin, 2:1:123.
35. Ibid., 2:1:124.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 2:1:125.
39. Ibid., 2:1:126.

DE VRIES ‘Winke’ Divine Topo in Hölderlin, Heidegger, Nancy

4. Nancy, Of Divine Places,” 112:3–4 (trans. modified). Nancy shies away from Jean-Luc Marion’s suggestion that it is precisely in this discovery of the structural insufficiency of the principle of reason—in the uncovering, that is, of a “principle of insufficient reason,” culminating in the death of the ontological and moral conception of God—that theology, as the privileged discourse of difference or, rather, “distance,” can take its chances and conquer its proper place. An elaboration of this view is to be found in Marion’s reading of Hölderlin. See L’Idôle et la distance (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1977), 115–79.
6. Ibid., 113:5.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 142:40.
12. Ibid., 133:29.
13. See his contribution to this volume.
15. Ibid., 117–18; 10 (emphasis added).
18. Ibid., 178.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.: “In Wahrheit is das Wort [Seinsvergesessenheit] der Name des Geschicks der Lichtung des Seins, insofern dies als Anwesen nur offenkundig werden und alles Seiende bestimmen kann, wenn die Lichtung des Seins, die χάρισμα, an sich hält, sich dem Denken vorenthalt, was im Anfang des abendländischen Denkens und als dessen Anfang geschah und seitdem die Epochen der Seinsgeschichte bis in das heutige technologische Weltalter kennzeichnet.”
22. Ibid., 179.
23. Ibid.: “Solange uns der Wegblick dafür versagt ist, dass und wie auch im Entzug und im Vorenthalt eine eigene Weise des Anwesens waltet, solange bleiben wir blind und unbetroffen vom bedrängenden Anwesen, das dem Fehlen eignet, der den Namen des Heiligen mit ihm dieses selbst in sich birgt, und jedoch verbirgt. Nur ein Aufenthalt in der offenen Gegend, aus der her der Fehl anwesst, gewähr die Möglichkeit eines Einblickes, in das, was heute ist, indem es fehlt.”
26. Richard Sieburth, introduction to Friedrich Hölderlin Hymns and Frag-
27. Ibid., 20–21.
28. Ibid., 15.
29. Compare Ibid., 39–40:

In an early essay “On Religion,” Hölderlin defined the “mythic” as a dialectical synthesis of the local and the universal, of the particular and the general, of the concrete and the abstract. The geography of his late hymns is “mythic” in a similar sense. . . . For Hölderlin, writing was a kind of mapping—legend has it that the walls of his room were covered with maps of the four quarters of the earth. . . . Hölderlin’s landscapes are most frequently imagined as a pattern of vectors or moving energies. . . . All trace a process of becoming, a motion at once toward and away from the source.

30. Ibid., 21.
31. Ibid., 20–21, note 4. Sieburth notes that although Hölderlin “distinguishes between ‘God’ (Father Aether, Zeus the Thunderer, the Almighty or Most High, a remote and often wrathful sky-god) and ‘the gods’ (die Himmlischen, the celestial or heavenly ones), the distance between singular and plural is far from absolute, indicating an open sweep of theological possibilities that includes both polytheism and monotheism, both paganism and Christianity, as well as their eventual reconciliation.”
32. Ibid., 38.
36. Sieburth, Hymns and Fragments, 42.
37. Paul de Man, “Hölderlin’s Riddle,” in Critical Writings, 1953–1978, ed. Lindsay Waters (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 202. See also his essays “The Image of Rousseau in the Poetry of Hölderlin” and “Wordsworth and Hölderlin,” both in The Rhetoric of Romanticism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 19–45 and 47–65, respectively. Some relevant remarks on Hölderlin may also be found in this book’s first essay, “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image” (1–17), as well as in the essays “Patterns of Temporality in Hölderlin’s ‘Wie wenn am Feiertage . . . ,’ ” “Hölderlin and the Romantic Tradition,” and “Heaven and Earth in Wordsworth and Hölderlin,” all of which have been published in Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gaus Seminar and Other Papers, ed. E. S. Burt, Kevin Newmark, and Andrzej Warminski (Balti-

more: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 50–73; 123–36; and 137–46, respectively.
38. Ibid., 60, note 15.
39. Ibid., 211.
40. One example of Heidegger’s diagnosis must suffice here.

Nature, separated from being by science, what happens to it through technology? The growing or rather the simple destruction of “nature” that rolls towards its end. What was nature before? The momentary place for the arrival and stay of the gods, when it [nature] was still physis and when it rested in the essentiality of Sein itself. Since then it rapidly became the counterpart to “grace” and after this degradation it was fully exposed in the determining force of calculable exploitation and economy. And what remained, finally, was “countryside” and “an opportunity to relax.” [Die Natur, herausgesondert aus dem Seienden durch die Naturwissenschaft, was geschieht ihr durch die Technik? Die wachsende oder besser einfach zu ihrem Ende abrollende Zerstörung der „Natur.“ Was war sie einst? Die Stätte des Augenblicks der Ankunft und des Aufenthalts der Göter, als sie, noch physis, in der Wesung des Seyns selbst ruhte. Seitdem wurde sie alsbald ein „Länderei“ und dann gar das Gegenspiel zur „Gnade“ und nach dieser Absetzung vollends herausgesetzt in die Verzwingung der berechenbaren Machenschaft und Wirtschaft. Und schließlich blieb noch „Landschaft“ und Erholungsgelegenheit.]

From Beiträge zur Philosophie: Vom Ereignis, Gesamtausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1989), 65: 277 (trans. mine).
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., 257.
47. Ibid., 255.
48. Ibid., 257.
49. Ibid., 258.
50. Ibid., 258–59.
51. Ibid., 259 (emphasis added).
52. Ibid., 252 and 254. Yet, de Man does seem surprised: “It is in the commentary to ‘Andenken’ at most that one may find, and not without applying some force, the traces of a dialogue. In all of the other commentaries, dialogue is out of the question, and Heidegger’s attitude differs fundamentally from the one he adopts toward all metaphysicians, the pre-Socratics included.” Ibid., 254, note 3.


36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., 123; 17. The lines in question figure prominently in a host of critical writings on Hölderlin, Heidegger’s Erläuterungen, and so on. For example, we find them in Maurice Blanchot, L’espace littéraire (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 374; Marion, L’idole et la distance, 123; Dastur, Hölderlin: Tragédie et modernité, 91; and also Beda Allemann, Hölderlin und Heidegger (Zürich: Atlantis, 1954), 169.


40. Ibid., 131, note 1; 195–96, note 6.

41. Ibid., 200; 156–57.

42. Ibid., 157.


44. Ibid., 124; 17.

45. Ibid., 124; 17–18.

46. See Andrzej Warminski, Readings in Interpretation: Hölderlin, Hegel, Heidegger (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 47 and 64.

47. “... indem Hölderlin das Wesen der Dichtung neu stifft, bestimmt es... eine neue Zeit. Es ist die Zeit der entflosenen Götter und des kommenden Gottes. Das ist die därfliche Zeit, weil sie in einem gedoppelten Mangel und Nicht steht: im Nichtzahl der entflosenen Gott und im Nechohnt des Kommdens.” Martin Heidegger, Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1971), 47. Or, in “Building Dwelling Thinking”: “Mortals dwell in that they await the divinities as divinities. They wait for intimations of their coming and do not mistake the signs of their absence. They do not make their gods for themselves and do not worship idols. In the very depth of misfortune they wait for the seal that has been withdrawn.” Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 150. (“Die Sterblichen wohnen, insofern sie die Göttlichen als die Göttlichen erwarten. Hoffend halten sie ihnen das Unverhoffte entgegen. Sie warten der Winke ihrer Ankunft und verkennen nicht die Zeichen ihres Fehls. Sie machen sich nicht Götter und betreiben nicht den Dienst an Götter. Im Unheil noch warten sie des entzogenen Heils.” Vorträge und Aufsätze, 145.)


49. For instance the one proposed by Christopher Fynsk, who, in the context of a discussion of the same poetic fragments that concern us here, “What is God?” and “In lovely blueness,” and with reference to Heidegger’s “... Poetically Man Dwells ...,” writes that here “the holy is defined more precisely as the condition for the reception of divine presence (the godhead), which, in turn, names the self-disclosure of the deity (der Gott).” Heidegger: Thought and Historicity (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), 222, note 33. Fynsk goes on to cite David White’s Heidegger and the Language of Poetry, which, he claims, “offers what is probably the most exact and helpful analysis of these terms,” by defining the holy as “the dispositional capacity in all that is other than the deity to receive the appearances of the divine presence.” For White, see Heidegger and the Language of Poetry, 127 (cited in Fynsk, Thought and Historicity, 222, note 33) (emphasis added). With this definition of the holy as a possible in terms of a “dispositional capacity,” it is suggested here, one would also be able to capture the relation Heidegger describes in the “Letter on Humanism,” and according to which “the holy, which alone is the essential sphere of the godhead, which in turn alone affords a dimension for the gods and for God, comes to radiate only when Being itself is beforehand and after extensive preparation has been illuminated and is experienced in its truth.” “Brief über den Humanismus,” Wegmarken, 338–39. By the same token, Fynsk claims, White’s definition seems to adequately rephrase what is at stake in “What are Poets for?,” where Heidegger states:

Poets are the mortals who, singing... sense the trace of the fugitive gods, stay on the god’s tracks, and so trace for their kindred mortals the way toward the turning. The ether, however, in which alone the gods are gods, is their godhead [Gottheit]. The element of this ether, that within which even the godhead itself is still present, is the holy. The element of the ether for the coming of the fugitive gods, the holy, is the track of the fugitive gods. But who has the power to sense, to trace such a track? Traces are often inconspicuous, and are always the legacy of a directive that is barely divined. To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet in the time of the world’s night utters the holy. (Poetry, Language, Thought, 94; Martin Heidegger, Holzwege [Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1977], 23)

50. Heidegger, Beiträge zur Philosophie, 24, cf., 416:

Originating in a disposition towards being that has been determined by “metaphysics,” it is only with difficulty and slowly that we will come to know the Other that appears neither in the “personal” nor in the “collective” experience of the god, but only in the abysmal “space” of Seyn itself. [Herkünflich aus einer durch die “Metaphysik” bestimmten Stellung zum Seienden werden wir nur schwer und langsam das Andere wissen können, dass weder im “persönlichen” noch im “masseweise” „Erlebnis” der Gott noch erscheint, sondern einzig in dem abgrundigen Raum des Seyns selbst.] For Courtine, see “Les traces et le passage du Dieu,” 529–30.
72. Cf. Martin Heidegger, Hölderlin’s Hymnen “Germanien” und “Der Rhein” (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1980), 54 and 110.
75. Ibid., 524, note 20.
76. In the Beiträge zur Philosophie, Heidegger writes: “If we do not even understand ‘death’ in its extremity, how then can mature enough for the rare nod of the last god?” (Wenn wir schon den ‘Tod’ in seinem Aussersten so wenig begrei- fen, wie wollen wir dann schon dem seltenen Wink des letzten Gottes gewachsen sein?), 405. However, it would seem that the motif of radical finitude is at the same time inspired by the experience of a certain indelible elusiveness, a relation without relation — religion — or, at least, by a finitude that is experienced and thought as absolute, in the etymological sense of the word, that is, as that which infinitizes itself in the very measure with which we approach it.
77. Heidegger, Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung, 46:

Das Sagen des Dichters ist das Auffangen dieser Winke, um sie weiter zu wünken in sein Volk. Dieses Auffangen der Winke ist ein Empfangen und doch zugleich ein neues Geben; denn der Dichter erblickt im „ersten Zeichen“ auch schon das Vollendete und stellt dieses Erschaffen kühn in sein Wort um das noch-nicht-Erfüllte vorauszusagen. So “... fliegt, der kühnen Geist, wie Adler den Gewittern, weisend seinen Kommenden Göttern voraus.”

See also the poem, the Dichtung or, more precisely, the Winke, entitled Winke, in Denkerfahrungen, 162—63:

Je aufdringlicher die Rechner,
je massloser die Gesellschaft.
Je seltsamer Denkende,
je einsamer Dichtende.
Je notvoller Ahnende,
ahnend die Ferne
rettender Winke.
Die das Selbe denken
im Reich tum seiner Selbichtigkeit,
gehen die mühsam langen Wege
in das immer Einfachere. Einfältige
seiner im Unzugänglichen
sich versagenden Ortschaft.

78. Nancy, “Of Divine Places,” 115; 7. See also Jean Greisch, La parole heureuse: Martin Heidegger entre les choses et les mots (Paris: Beauchesne, 1987), 108, on a “weisendes Offenbarmachen,” and 109: “Every donation of a sign refers in the final instance to an arche-sign, which Heidegger calls Wink,” Greisch gives yet another citation from Heidegger that suggests an intimate link between poetry, the response — indeed, the deference and also deferral — with respect to godly hints, and the founding acts in which Being (or Seyn) manifests itself: “Poetry — to endure the nods of the gods — foundation of Being” (Dichtung — Aushalten der Winke der Götter — Stiftung des Seyns), 109.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.
82. For example, one that reads:

Mahnt je das Seyn
den werklosen Gott
in die Ankunft entfernten Bleibens? . . .
Anfänglich naht verhüllt die Zeit
Der Inständigen des letzten Gottes.
(Heidegger, Denkerfahrungen, 32)
83. Ibid., 33:

84. Compare the “Enleitung” to “Was ist Metaphysik?”: „Aletheia könnte das Wort sein, dass einen noch nicht erfahrenen Wink in das ungedachte Wesen des esse gibt,” Ibid., 11.
86. Ibid.
87. Cf. Sieburth, Hymns and Fragments, 30—31:

In an influential essay on Hölderlin’s late poetry, Theodor Adorno has defined its most outstanding stylistic feature as parataxis, that is, the juxtaposition, without explanatory connectives, of various syntactical and grammatical elements (as opposed to hypotaxis, the subordination coordination of phrase or clause). . . . The style of parataxis, as Auerbach’s Mimesis reminds us, is as ancient as it is modern: Hölderlin is only so new because he has travelled so far back to poetry’s most archaic roots. Norbert von Hellingrath was perhaps the first to demonstrate that Hölderlin’s late hymns, far from constituting an aberration, rejoin the tradition of “austere harmony”
as defined by Dionysius of Heliocarnassus in reference to Homer, Pindar, Alcaeus, and Sophocles.


COURTINE Hölderlin’s Christ

1. “Der Einzige” (“The Only One”), third version, S 2: 1: 164: “… Beautiful/And good is it to compare.”


5. Martin Heidegger, Hölderlin Hymnen “Germanien” and “Der Rhein” (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1980).


7. See Hölderlin, “Patmos”:

   . . . sie
   Zusammenlaufen, zu der Stunde des Gastemals
   Und in der großen Seele, ruhigahend den Tod
   Aussprach der Herr und die letzte Liebe, denn nie genug
   Hätt’ er, von Güte, zu sagen
   Der Worte, damals, und zu schweigen, da
   Er’s sahe, das Zürnen der Welt.
   Denn alles ist gur. Drauf starb er. Vieles wäre liebes
   Zu sagen . . .

   . . . they sat together, at the banquet hour,
   And in his great soul, calmly foreboding
   The Lord spoke death and the final love, for he never
   Had enough words to speak of goodness
   At that time, and to remain silent, when
   He saw it, the wrath of the world.

   . . .

   For all things are good. Thereupon he died. There would be much
   good to say . . .

   (S 2: 1: 175).

   Rather than seeing, along with Wolfgang Binder, the clear witnessing of a
   “Christ without Passion and without reconciliation” in this extraordinarily re-
   served account, we can also read there the expression of that “modesty” [pudeur],
   the affective disposition that for Hölderlin responds strictly to the necessary divine
   “infidelity,” Hölderlin-Ausfütze (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1970), 363–64.

   8. See “Griechenland”: “Alltag aber wunderbar zu lieb den Menschen / Gott
   an hat ein Gewand. / Und Erkennissen verberget sich sein Angesicht . . .” (“But
everyday, wonderful for the sake of men / God wears a garment. / And his face is
   hidden from knowing . . .”) (S 2: 1: 257).

   9. I will thus keep myself from simply opposing an Empedoclean principle
   characterized by the aspiration for unity and for the immediate return to Nature
   in its divine overpoweredness to a Hesperidian principle that is attentive to med-
   ication and to the “statute.” In fact, Hölderlin’s work on “modern” tragedy, that is
   Empedocles, leads him to superimpose with increasing precision the “christo-
   logical” traits on the royal figure of the sovereign of Agrigente. In order to move
   quickly, allow me to refer to the indications I have given in my study “Qui est l’Empédóclet de Hölderlin?,” in Nietzsche, Hölderlin, et la Grèce (Paris: Belles Let-

   10. The English translation is from Friedrich Hölderlin, Essays and Letters on Theory, trans. and ed. Thomas Pau (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 102 (trans. modified). All further lengthy translations from Hölderlin’s prose will be from this edition, are noted parenthetically after the German
citation as Essays and are sometimes modified.—Trans.

   11. Mittelbarkeit is also, as we know, the key term in the commentary given by
   Hölderlin to Pindar’s fragment 7 (Hellingrath). See S 4: 265. We find in Gerhard
   Kurtz’s work Mittelbarkeit und Vereinigung: Zum Verhältnis von Poesie, Reflexion und
   Revolution bei Hölderlin (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1975) a good study of this theme, in
   which, however, the “theological” dimension is curiously lacking.

   12. The “Occidental and Junoian sobriety” that Hölderlin evokes in the first

   50.

   14. Ibid., 51.

   nu nimmergeglaubt . . .” (S 2: 1: 130–37); and “Patmos” (S 2: 1: 165–72). For
   “Friedensfeier,” see Allemann: “The poem ‘Patmos’ cannot be named, properly
   speaking, a ‘Hymn to Christ.’ On the contrary, this hymn sings of John the
   Evangelist, the hero who protects from uprooting” (Hölderlin und Heidegger, 52).

   For a study of all the christological hymns in the context of German Idealism,