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THE HÖLDERLINIAN  
MEASURE OF POETIC JUSTICE

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Fate, it measures us perhaps with the span of being,  
so that it appears strange to us.

—Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, II, 20

The measure has a name: justice.

—Jean-Luc Nancy, “On the Multiple Senses of Democracy”

“THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES”: “PATMOS”

Poetry opens to us as an act of interpretation. The poet confronts the world in all its recalcitrance and attempts to render its possibilities in terms of the limits afforded the poet by the resources of language. For Hölderlin, poetry as *Dichtung* is fundamentally tied to *Deutung*, as he puts it in the last lines of “Patmos”:

. . . but what the Father  
Who reigns over all loves most  
Is that the solid letter (*Der veste Buchstabe*)  
Be given scrupulous care, and that which endures  
Be well interpreted (*gut/Gedeutet*) . . . (SPF, 242–43)

The poet’s song offers a way for humans to negotiate the venerable distance between gods and mortals by providing an interpretive framework for their awe. The gods are, for mortals, both awe-full and awful: the gods fill us

with awe at their power, distance, and glory even as our attempts at getting close to them often prove awful and threatening. Uncertainly, the poet dwells in the middle between gods and mortals mediating the distance that separates them, caught in the tension between being the voice that brings together a community and being the isolated and homeless wanderer in search of his homeland. To be a poet for Hölderlin, to take on the poet's task of approaching the divine, means to live in tension and ambivalence, ever balancing the poet's special calling with the human, all too human, presumption of hybridic knowledge. In Hölderlin's poetic interpretation, we venture to balance the middle against the ends, the present against the past and future, the human being against nature and the divine. Always the poet lies in the middle, the hermeneutic mediator who strives to interpret the overarching scheme of divine order for a humanity that has forgotten how to read the signs of the times.

In his office as interpreter of divine signs, the poet becomes a prophet, the one who—in its etymological sense—“speaks (*phasis*) before (*pro*)” something is known and through such speaking makes it known. But the Greek root *pha* “to declare, make known, say” also relates to *phan* “to bring to light, to show, to shine.”<sup>1</sup> The poet, then, as the prophet who makes known to other members of the community that which is hidden, stands in the middle, or at the threshold, of darkness and light. And yet the poet is unable to bring the light to the darkness on his own. To arrogate such a claim for himself would be to exceed the boundaries of his office. The poet can only hope to call forth the light, to evoke its force and let it come of its own power. But he can never cross the boundary line between light and darkness, speech and silence, mortality and divinity. To do so would occasion a certain kind of self-destruction and annihilation. For the poet must always know how to honor the boundaries between speaking in the name of a god and striving to become as a god, between interpreting god's will and imposing his own will. In reading the signs of the god's will in the world around him, and by honoring the boundaries between the realm of the gods and the realm of mortals, the poet must balance the tension of nearness and distance even as he must negotiate a way of bringing them into proper relation. As Hölderlin put it in the opening lines of his 1803 hymn “Patmos”:

Near and  
Hard to grasp, the god.  
Yet where danger lies,  
Grows that which saves. (HF, 88–89)

In this much-cited verse, Hölderlin points to an essential problem for the poet: the difficulty of finding the proper balance between the desire for the

unmediated nearness of divine presence *and* the fear and danger of being consumed by its overwhelming force. Caught between these two alternatives, the poet utters a warning about divine presence and an elegiac lament for divine absence. As the first stanza of “Patmos” indicates, the poet’s attempt to negotiate the tension between nearness/distance and presence/absence will require him to take a journey from his own home across the chasm of the Alps to the source of divine/human contact in time and space: the ancient East. What is most difficult to grasp, the poet wants to say, is what lies closest to us. Understanding requires distance, the distance of a journey—and so the poet must journey between Alpine peaks and valleys, heights and abysses, across dangerous bridges guided by eagles. The eagles, emissaries of Zeus, help transport the poet on a flight eastward back to the source of the temporal-spatial *arche* of divine immanence in Asia Minor, the Ionian coast of pre-Socratic *harmonia*, the site of Heraclitus’s *hen kai pan* of “All-Unity.”<sup>2</sup> Because the poet’s journey signifies more than a mere spiritual attempt at communion with the god who lies paradoxically near and far, Hölderlin speaks of it as “hard” in a double sense: communication with the divine is difficult and requires mediators/translators (eagles) even as it demands a transformation (spiritual/geographic) of the traveler’s inner spirituality.

As the title indicates, “Patmos” is a poem about the ancient island of Patmos that lies close to the shores of Asia Minor (v. 46) yet distant from Hölderlin’s own German or Hesperian homeland (v. 18–20). In the second stanza we learn that it is twilight, the time of transition/mediation from light to darkness as the poet begins his imaginative journey from west to east. But the spatial journey to Asia will also be enacted symbolically as a temporal one: across mountains, valleys, rivers, oceans, and continents the poet will be transported from modern Hesperia to ancient Hellas. As the poet reaches the shores of ancient Ionia he encounters, “in its radiance, surging / from the golden haze / with every surge of the sun” (v. 27–29), Asia. “Dazzled” by the sight (one thinks of Plato’s Cave), the poet turns back toward the west and longs “to turn in” (*einzukehren*, v. 55) to the island of Patmos and its dark grotto. As with all of Hölderlin’s poems, the symbolism is striking, the logic unclear, and the overall design puzzling. To further complicate matters, Hölderlin’s spatial-temporal journey from Hesperia to Hellas and from modernity to antiquity will be reenacted in the very writing of the poem, which serves as a circuitous journey on an “eccentric path”—namely a path that veers off slightly from the center of its circular journey. Hölderlin takes over this notion of an “eccentric path” from the astronomer Johannes Kepler who, like Hölderlin, studied theology at the Stift in Tübingen. In Kepler’s theory of the orbit of planets, the heliocentric vision of Copernicus does not adequately account for the irregular, uneven

course through the heavens taken by planets and comets, which diverge as they come closer and move farther from their circular orbits. As with the planets, so too with human life, Hölderlin will claim. The eccentricity of human orbits/striving is not merely self-directed or controlled but, rather, belongs to a larger historical-ontological-cosmological structure from which the individual sets out and to which it returns. The deep structural interplay of these countervailing centrifugal and centripetal forces affect rivers and stars, individual human beings, and the course of civilizations.<sup>3</sup> What the writing of “Patmos” indicates, then, is that an understanding of human history requires that we follow the structural dynamics of Keplerian eccentricity. Kant himself believed that Kepler’s attempts to provide laws for the irregular movements of the planets might be another sign for arriving at a law-ruled understanding of the irregularities and deviations of human behavior.<sup>4</sup> But where Kant sought to overcome the anomalies of eccentric astronomy by subsuming them under the regularity of historical laws, Hölderlin interpreted eccentricity as a structural characteristic of human history that eluded “law” even as it provided an overarching grasp of such history. Following the structural dynamics of the “eccentric path,” the poetic composition of “Patmos” can be understood as an attempt to deal with the irregularities of a journey that proceeds outward from the homeland toward Asia and then involves a return back home that is interrupted by an interlude on the island of Patmos.<sup>5</sup> Yet even as the particularities shift in all their contingent variety, Hölderlin’s poems consistently reenact this same eccentric movement away from unity with the sun (the Platonic center of all being) back toward dispersion, fragmentation, estrangement, abandonment, and exile. Whether it be the course of the Rhine that in its inception veers from its straight course northward toward its divine origin in the East (“The Rhine,” vv. 16–31) or whether it involves the desires of the lover to merge fully with his beloved even as he is thwarted by melancholic parting and separation (H, 132–33/SA III, 99–103), Hölderlin’s poetic compositions invariably enact the orbit of the eccentric path. “Nearness” and “distance” from God, as the opening of “Patmos” frames it, indicates an ever-recurring difficulty for the human being—but also for nations, cultures, races, and civilizations. Originary unity can never be experienced directly; it reveals itself to us only in and through the fragments of nature whose inner force reveals a constant struggle between unity and dispersion, nearness and distance, the centripetal and centrifugal. The eccentric path offers a model for an ever-recurring structural dynamic of human experience. As Hölderlin put in the penultimate preface to *Hyperion*:

We all traverse an eccentric path and there is no other way possible from childhood to completion [of our life’s course]. Blissful

unity, being, in the singular sense of the word, is lost for us and we must lose it if we are to strive for and attain it. We tear ourselves loose from the peaceful *hen kai pan* of the world in order to bring it about through ourselves. We have fallen away from nature and what, if one can believe, was once One, now opposes itself and supremacy and servitude alternate on both sides. . . . To end that eternal conflict between our self and the world, to bring back the peace of all peace that is higher than all reason, to unite ourselves with nature in one boundless and infinite whole—that is the goal of all our striving. . . .

But in no period of our existence does either our knowledge or our action arrive at a point where all conflict ends, where All is One; the particular route unites itself with the universal only in an infinite approximation [*Annäherung*]. (SA III, 236)

All beings follow an eccentric path, not only individuals; all nations, cultures, races, and civilizations undergo an eccentric course of approximation and withdrawal, of getting nearer to “the peaceful *hen kai pan* of the world” and falling back, eccentrically, into estrangement and separation from universal unity, harmony, and peace.<sup>6</sup> Like the errant trajectory of a comet that follows an elliptical path, so too nations and peoples traverse eccentric paths, sometimes getting closer to union with the sun, at other times spinning out away into dispersion and fragmentation.

Throughout *Hyperion* we get glimpses into the structure of Hölderlin’s overall design for human existence: the pattern of a circuitous journey. From a naive, childlike unity with being at the *arche* or origin of human existence, the self journeys forth in an eccentric orbit through isolation and estrangement with the aim of returning back to the *arche*, now understood paradoxically as the *eschaton* itself. As Hyperion puts it in a letter to Belarmin: “Once long ago the peoples set forth from the harmony of childhood; the harmony of spirits will usher in the beginning of a new world history” (SA III, 63). This circuitous journey of spirit configured in terms of an underlying structure for all being, an ontological poetics of *Ausflug* and *Rückkehr*—departure and return—will put its stamp on virtually all of Hölderlin’s writings. Again, as Hyperion puts it, “The life of the world consists in an alternation between unfolding and impeding, between going forth and returning” (H, 51/SA III, 38).

In the very first stanza of “Patmos” we find the poet invoking the gods to provide him with both “innocent water” (so that he might sail to the island) and “wings” (v. 14) (so that he might fly over the abysses that obstruct his path), all in the hope that he might “cross over and return” (v. 15). This journey outward of crossing over to Asia and returning by

way of Patmos indicates both a spatial-geographical journey by eagles (emissaries of the Father God/Zeus) and by the poet. But this movement of crossing-over and returning will structure the writing of the poem as well and will involve the poet in an imaginative engagement and self-reflection on the task of the poet himself. What is the poetic word? How does it figure in the ontological schema of departure and return? What is its role in the working out of the eccentric path? How might a self-reflective poem on the writing of poetry provide insight into the meaning of journeying forth and returning? Hölderlin's "Patmos" will provide a poetological account of the metaphysics of the circuitous journey even as it comes to confront the limits and boundaries of such a task. Essential to such an interpretation, and to my overall project of reading Hölderlin in terms of an ontological ethics of measure, balance, and justice, will be the framing of the opening question of "Patmos"—the distance/nearness paradox of gods and mortals. In this tension between being at home in the nearness of the divine and departing forth into what is strange, foreign, distant and other, Hölderlin will situate the *polemos* of being itself as a way of dwelling upon the earth and honoring nature as divine. As "Patmos" shows, to enter into this tension will be to mediate the terrain of nature and history into an eschatological vision of harmony between divine and mortal beings. A poet's task, the very conditions for poetic composition—what the German tradition names "poetology"—will involve for Hölderlin an understanding of ontology and eschatology. All involve a deeply poetic way of abiding the tension between *arche* and *eschaton*, origin and end, with an eye toward mediating the eternal and the historical through the holy word, the *logos* that the poet finds in the hidden recesses of nature that opens up poetology to the seer/prophet. But as in all of Hölderlin's writings, insight into divine nature lies in its details. Originary unity can never be experienced directly; it reveals itself to us only in the fragments of nature whose signs are left to be interpreted by those who know how to mediate the distance *between* a history that shows us only the signs of a god who has departed *and* a nature that is filled with his presence. In "Patmos" we are confronted with the reality and possibility of each.

Within Hölderlin's poetic geography, Patmos stands as an island of transition and passage between Greece and Asia. It lies "in the middle." But what constitutes a "middle"? And against what extremes can it be measured? Much of the poetic labor of "Patmos" will be directed at precisely these issues. In a hermeneutically self-conscious way, the poem enacts the work of mediating a middle as a geographical-philosophical-poetological site for rethinking the entire Western tradition. As the island where the exiled apostle John is supposed to have written the Book of Revelation, often called "The Book of Signs," Patmos becomes for Hölderlin a symbol for

mediating the two realms of antiquity and modernity. In antiquity Patmos played almost no role at all; because of its poverty it became a place of banishment for outcasts and exiles.<sup>7</sup> Yet Hölderlin calls it “*gastfreundlich*” or “hospitable” (v. 61) because it offered refuge to St. John the Divine at the end of his life when he was shipwrecked, in exile, and still grieving the departure of Jesus. The poetic encoding here is layered and difficult precisely in these contrasting images of succor and suffering indicated in the fifth strophe. But what persists in all this poetic imagery is a vision of Patmos as a place at the crossroads between two extremes that will variously be defined as east and west, Greek and Christian, homeland and exile. Patmos serves as a place of dwelling in the middle, at the crossroads between extremes. For dwelling, understood in its Greek sense as *ethos* (*Aufenthalt*/sojourn) becomes for Hölderlin a way of dwelling in the middle between the extremes of estrangement from the home and dwelling in it, between distance and nearness.<sup>8</sup> So conceived, Patmos becomes the symbol for the possibility of a poetic *ethos* of dwelling, a poetic ontology of mediation and of hospitality that come together to form a Hölderlinian sense of poetic justice. In the details of poems such as “Patmos,” “Der Frieden,” “The Ister,” and “In lovely blueness,” I want to uncover a poetic sense of balance that for Hölderlin shapes not only the temporal sojourn of the human being, but extends to the very cycles of birth and decay that define both history and nature. In this way I want to raise questions about an ethics of human dwelling marked by a nonhuman measure to which the poet accedes, a measure found in the experience of withdrawal and absence.

As with the Evangelist, the poet finds on the island of Patmos refuge from his state of spiritual shipwreck. In his temporary sojourn on the hospitable island, he, like John, finds a site for healing the breach between a god who has departed and the followers he has left behind. If the island of Patmos provides the conditions for John to work through the mourning of his “departed friend” (v. 66) Jesus by writing the *Apocalypse*, it also provides the poet the site for an analogous form of *Trauerarbeit*: the writing of the poem “Patmos” as a way of mourning the departed god (*deus absconditus*) from the realm of history.<sup>9</sup> In attending to the holy word, the poet finds signs of god’s presence even in his absence; in the “living images [that] grow green in the depths of mountains” (v. 120) as well as in “the sand and willows,” the poet discerns the signs of divine nature, signs that he will mediate through the poetic word. It is in absence that presence makes itself felt; it is in default that the longing for abundance makes itself manifest.

The poet’s imaginary journey in “Patmos” will bring him to the brink of a mediation of the god’s distance, much as John’s earlier sojourn on the island brought him ever closer to his departed friend. In this paradoxical relation of distance/nearness, the poet journeys forth (*fahren*) from

his homeland by confronting the danger (*Gefahr*) of divine presence in an intimate way even as he recognizes the need for distance. By mediating the tension between distance and nearness, the poet (like the apostle) comes to grasp the paradox of divine manifestation. As Jean-Luc Marion puts it, the mystery of such manifestation is intimately tied to the god's withdrawal: "God never arrives more intimately than through the mediation of an envoi. . . . For God gives himself only within the distance that he keeps, and where he keeps us."<sup>10</sup> In this way Patmos itself becomes for both poet and evangelist a place of revelation for mediating the chasm between the divine and the human. As the place of the writing of the Book of Signs, that holy book revered by the Swabian Pietists as the *gnomon* for interpreting the modern age, Patmos functions as the site for revelation itself. As a theology student at the Tübingen Stift, Hölderlin studied the Book of Revelation and later read the commentaries of Johann Bengel (1687–1752), who prophesied the imminent coming of the Kingdom to Swabia.<sup>11</sup> For Bengel, John's *Book of Revelation* was the most important text in the *Bible* since it offered a sweeping vision of a divine plan for history as salvific promise of a new Advent, a *Heilsgeschichte* that would offer redemption from the spiritual estrangement of the present epoch by ushering in a Pentecostal age of peace and reconciliation.<sup>12</sup> In his early poem "Hymne an die Unsterblichkeit," Hölderlin, (echoing the apocalyptic vision of Bengel and his follower Friedrich Oetinger), speaks of an "eternal worldplan" (SA I, 116) and in one of the drafts for "Friedensfeier" announces: "Behold! It is the evening of time, the hour when the wanderers turn to a place of rest and stillness" (SA II, 699). "Patmos," "Friedensfeier," "Der Frieden," "Heimkunft," "Germanien" all share the Swabian pietists' yearning for an eschatological peace as the meaning and aim of human history.<sup>13</sup> And though Hölderlin's poetic vision will depart significantly from the pietists' religious orthodoxy (especially in its embrace of the political messianism of the French Revolution), it nonetheless will draw upon some deeply shared symbols and *topoi*. One that I especially want to draw upon is the notion of *gnomon* from Bengel's theological commentary. *Gnomon* in Greek (from the verb *gnorizo*, "to make known," and the noun *gnosis*, "knowledge") refers to the vertical plate of a sundial that casts a shadow which indicates the time of day.<sup>14</sup> It also can be translated as "interpreter," "the one who knows," or "judge." In common usage it came to signify a carpenter's instrument for determining angles (the "plumb-line"), a compass for geometricians, and a "level" for various kinds of measurement.<sup>15</sup> As the "set square" or "vertical rod" for measurement, the *gnomon* expressed a prominent feature of Greek orthogonality: "the correct relationship between vertical and horizontal."<sup>16</sup> In this understanding that uprightness mapped not only the relationship of the pin or pointer on the sundial to the shadow of the sun but, more significantly, the standing human



body to the earth, the early Greeks came to define the *gnomon* as that which mediates earth and sky. As the *Richtmass* or “gauge”/“right measure” for all kinds of activities, the *gnomon* came to signify a principle of practical conduct, a standard by which to know, judge, and interpret a proper measure for human life. Beyond this, *gnomon* came to signify not only an instrument for marking the time of day but, as Diogenes Laertius relates, a way of indicating the fundamental turning points of the solar year in the solstice and equinox.<sup>17</sup> As an instrument of temporal measure in both an ephemeral and cosmic sense, *gnomon* becomes synonymous with a knowledge of turning points, of *Kehre* and *Umkehr*, so that Aeschylus can understand a *gnomon* as “an interpreter of divine utterances or prophecies (*thesphatoi*)” (*Agamemnon*, 1130). I want to understand Hölderlin’s poetology as a reading of justice formed in the interplay between the *gnomon* as a deictical measure for turning points and as a mediator of oracular wisdom, a way for indicating the proper balance of human interpretation within the cosmic order. In Bengel’s commentary, *gnomon* was defined as “an Index, in the sense of a *pointer* or indicator, as a sun-dial . . . to *point out* the full force of words and sentences in the New Testament.”<sup>18</sup> Yet Bengel also grasped this deictical function of the *gnomon* metaphorically as a means for indicating the “right time” for the apocalypse on the sundial of history. In his own sweeping vision of a poetic philosophy of history, Hölderlin would transform Bengel’s *gnomon* for his own poetic purposes. Bengel looked to the Bible as the ultimate source of gnomonic wisdom and as the only sure *regula* for human conduct; yet Hölderlin did not find the leveling orthodoxy of such a narrow Swabian pietism at all appealing. His deep affinity with the early Greek tradition from Homer, Hesiod, Heraclitus, Pindar, the tragedians, and Plato taught him to honor the gods of Western history in all their forms and to worship Christ as the brother of Dionysus and Apollo. His philosophical engagement with Fichte, Kant, Herder, Schelling, and Hegel, his poetic debt to Klopstock, Schiller, and his contemporaries, all helped to form a deeply layered poetic *Geschichtstheologie* (“theology of history”) that looked for a *gnomon* by which to measure the nearness/distance of the human being to the gods in order to interpret the “signs of the times.” For Hölderlin, the poet as both interpreter and mediator of the turning point in Western history would be thought of as the *gnomon* for indicating the “right time” for revolutionary upheaval or *Umkehr*.

In this chapter I want to explore Hölderlin’s poetic *Geschichtstheologie* because it seems to me that in its vision of modernity as an era in default, an age marked by the departure of the gods from human history (“Gottes Fehl,” SPF, 82–83), we can find traces of a poetic measure that will deeply affect modern German thought—especially the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Celan. Heidegger and Hölderlin both share this same Swabian

pietist vision of history in terms of an eschatological *Heilsgeschichte* of *Ausflug* and *Rückkehr*, departure and return. Each will understand the whole course of Western history in terms inherited from the Swabian pietist typology that shapes the writings of Bengel and Oetinger. (One can find traces of this same eschatological vision in the *Geschichtsphilosophie* of Herder and Hegel as well.) In its most rudimentary form it grasps the creative force of history as a processual movement from East to West modeled on the path of the sun. Hence, Asia is dawn; Europe, dusk. The origins of human history lie in the East, “the land of morning” as the Germans call it, *Morgenland*, whereas the fulfillment and end of human history lies properly in the West, “the land of evening” or *Abendland*. As Hegel put it in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*: “World history travels from east to west; for Europe is the absolute end of history, just as Asia is the beginning.”<sup>19</sup> “The sun rises in the Orient . . . and by evening, man has constructed a building, an inner sun, the sun of his own consciousness.” The very terms “Orient” and “Occident” from their Latin roots *oriri* (v., “to arise”) and *occidere* (v., “to set” or “to fall”) derive their meanings from the movement of the sun across the sky.<sup>20</sup> Little wonder then that Hölderlin should understand the course of human history as a “*Wanderung*” or “Journey” (SPF, 182–89) and interpret it in terms of how “it shifts from the Greek to the Hesperian” (ELT, 111/SA V, 267) where “Hesperia” (from the Greek *hespera*, “evening”) comes to signify *Abendland*, the land of evening.<sup>21</sup>

These governing tropes of Orient and Occident, morning and evening, Hellas and Hesperia, will come to form a poetic theology of history marked by the experience of exile, loss, asylum, estrangement, and distance—in other words, the poetry of “Patmos.” It is the experience of the god’s distance that forms the epochal mood of mourning for the poet. But how are we to understand this mourning and what does it signify for Hölderlin’s poetic theology (*Dichtertheologie*)? Moreover, how do the Johannine writings on revelation, prophecy, and the *parousia*, especially in the chiliastic form mediated by Bengel’s notion of the *gnomon*, come to affect Hölderlin’s reading of the Greeks? In the textual readings to come I will look at the paradoxical crossing of the Greek and Hesperian in Hölderlin’s work as a way of exploring a poetic ethics of dwelling and an ethics of “hospitality,” one that honors the tension between journeying and dwelling, the foreign and the native, self and other. I do so because it seems to me that in Hölderlin’s diagnosis of the spiritual shipwreck of the modern *conditio humana* we can find hints and traces of a nonanthropological grounding of ethics that seeks a measure of the holy in *physis*, not metaphysics. Here, Hölderlin’s poetry offers a way of thinking through the problem of distance/nearness as another kind of difference/identity without finding a resolution or *Aufhebung* of the metaphysics of presence/absence. On the contrary, Hölderlin’s work embraces

the tension between presence-absence by underscoring the positive role of limits, boundaries, and ambiguity in shaping human fate. In the lessons of Greek tragedy Hölderlin will confront the *aporia* at the boundary between the divine and the human. What the justice of the gods vouchsafes often exceeds human understanding. In turn, human beings often respond with an excess of their own, with what the Greeks call *hybris*—what in German is translated as *Anmassung* (“arrogance”).<sup>22</sup> In this tragic condition of being “measureless,” Hölderlin will situate his interpretation—not only of human excess, but of the whole sweep of world history as a narrative about the loss of measure. Within this narrative the modern epoch distinguishes itself as an age of excess, of a boldly Cartesian exuberance to make *physis* conform to our will, to transform human beings into becoming “the masters and possessors of nature.”<sup>23</sup> But Hölderlin will seek to redress this imbalance by offering a tragic interpretation of Cartesian egology and attempting a mediation of the abyss that separates us from nearness to divine nature. In taking upon himself this poetic task of mediating the distance between gods and mortals, Hölderlin will attempt to find a poetic measure for measuring the spiritual measurelessness of the modern age, the Age of Night where the gods have fled. In his poem “Patmos” he offers a clue. At the very center of the fifteen-strophe hymn, in line 113 of a 226-line poem, he writes of “the coming again” (*wiederkommen*) of the god “when the time is right” (*zu rechter Zeit*). In this chialistic allusion to “the coming of the Lord” in the *parousia*, Hölderlin will express his hope for the return of measure to the earth. What his poetry expresses is a Pauline call to prepare ourselves for this *kairos*-event: “But of the times (*chronoi*) and seasons (*kairoi*) brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night” (I Thess. 5:1–2).

I want to look at Hölderlin’s work, especially his river hymn “The Ister,” his fragment “In lovely blueness,” and his translations of Pindar and Sophocles as a way of showing how, under the expectation of a radical turn or *Umkehr* of/within time, Hölderlin seeks to develop a proper *ethos* for preparing the coming of the *parousia*. Clearly, Hölderlin’s theological training will shape the way he poses his questions, but his sense of the coming of time is not merely Christological. Rather, he sees the signs of this coming revealed to him on his imaginary Patmos in the political events of his day: the French Revolution, the Peace of Luneville, the arrival of Napoleon. All of these historical occurrences stimulate his hopes for the formation of a new Swabian republic to extend north from the Swiss Alps all the way to the Swabian Alb. But beyond Hölderlin’s dream of social and political revolution, I want to show how Hölderlin develops an ethics of poetic dwelling, a way of experiencing nature as *physis* that finds in the limit (*peras*) of this experience (*expeiri*) a measure for the human being’s belonging to the holy.<sup>24</sup>

For Hölderlin, poetry, beyond all other forms of human expression, helps us find a Pindaric *gnomon*, a measure of wisdom for human conduct rooted in an experience of *physis* as “the holy.” This poetological interpretation of *physis* will have ontological consequences for the work of Heidegger, as we will see later, even as it helps to form what, in our postmodern lexicon, we might call an ecological ethics of justice. Before I turn to a fuller reading of Hölderlin’s poetry as an ethics of dwelling, however, I will need to explore his interpretation of the Greek-Hesperian dynamic in more depth. I will do so by turning to a reading of two short texts written between 1799–1801—the poem “Der Frieden” (“Peace”) and the famous letter written in December of 1801 to Casimir Ulrich von Böhlendorff.

“THE EVENING OF TIME”: “PEACE” (*DER FRIEDEN*)

Hölderlin experiences his own age as a time of advent, as an epoch not merely of transition or change, but as a fundamental turning or *Umkehr* (SA II, 878) in/of time. Especially in his poetry at the turn of the eighteenth century we can detect an underlying millennial attunement to the signs of “a coming revolution of ways of thinking and of imagining that will cause us to blush with shame at everything that’s happened till now” (SA VI, 229). Within Hölderlin’s poetic mythology, however, the *Umkehr* or “reversal” would involve a *Wiederkehr* or “return” of the gods. What was required to unify and transform the splintered race of Germans at the end of the old historical epoch was a poetic annunciation of the *parousia* at “the evening of time,” a revelation that “the golden age of innocence is returning, the time of peace and freedom, that there is one joy, one place of rest upon the earth!” (SA III, 252). Accordingly, the task of the poet involved announcing this event of coming, the time when “the day of all days shall go forth” (SA VI, 185), to prepare his countrymen for its mediation. Caught “in the middle of time” (SPF, 194–95) or, rather, in the time “between the times” of the ancient Greek Day (in which gods and mortals lived in harmony and balance) and the millennial Day to Come (which would signify the return of the gods to earth), the poet called out in a godless Hesperian Night to reflect on the power of the departed gods, to offer them remembrance, as in an “Andenken.” Juxtaposing an archaic longing for the Pindaric wisdom of Delphi (“Nothing in excess”) with a revolutionary faith in Herder’s notion of cultural-historical “rejuvenation” (*Verjüngung*) and palingenesis, Hölderlin attempts here a complex retrieval of the Greek achievement even as he sets it into confrontation (*Auseinandersetzung*) with his Hesperian vocation.<sup>25</sup> This crossing of the Greek and Hesperian will be experienced as both a return and a reversal, all in the name of “a categorical turning”

(HS, 68/SA V, 202), a radical, unconditional reversal of time that finds in the signs of the times a revelation of the coming day. As Hölderlin puts it in his fragment “Die Verjüngung”: “the sunlight wakens in me joys that have passed” (SA II, 316).

One of the places where we can trace the outlines of this day-night-day typology as a categorical reversal in the age of Hesperian night is the poem “Der Frieden.” Written in the late fall of 1799 under the shadow of the approaching century and the second coalition wars between French and German-Austrian-Russian armies, “Der Frieden” offers a poignant call for peace at the end of the long Hesperian night of godlessness. The “Peace” ode is structured triadically in fifteen strophes that are modeled on a Pindaric design.<sup>26</sup> The first six strophes present an account of war as a destructive, vengeful, and violent occurrence; the last six strophes offer a hopeful call for a coming peace. It is, however, in the middle three strophes that the poet turns to the *arche* of war, that great Heraclitean theme that is “father of all things” and that rules over all being from its very beginning.<sup>27</sup> In this ontological questioning of *polemos* as the originary ground of *physis*, Hölderlin will find a philosophy of strife and conflict that will help him to find unity, order, and purpose even in the contentious political struggles of the wars of the French Revolution.

Going back to his student essay “Parallele zwischen Salomons Sprichwörtern und Hesiods *Werken und Tagen*” (1790), Hölderlin follows Hesiod in understanding *eris* (strife) as having a dual nature (SA IV, 176–88). On the one hand, as Hesiod puts it, *eris* “stirs up the evil of war [*polemos*] and conflict of battle”; on the other, she takes root in the earth and brings about prosperity by instilling in the human being a competitive eagerness “to work whenever he sees another prospering.”<sup>28</sup> In the tension between these two realms, Hesiod—and Hölderlin—find an underlying dynamic for the unfolding of human history. In *Hyperion*, Hölderlin draws on the Heraclitean insight into *eris* and *polemos* as a way of understanding the Greek War for Independence that forms the background of the narrative. Whatever harmony is achieved happens through a reciprocally determining balance of conflicting forces that finds reconciliation only momentarily, never permanently (SA III, 163). Human existence follows an eccentric path that ever again diverges from the center of being even as it strives to draw nearer to it. In human life and in the life of nations, peace and reconciliation can only be achieved through strife, conflict, struggle, *polemos*, and *eris*. In this sense, war takes on the positive function of redressing the imbalances within an epoch by setting them into a necessary and cathartic form of confrontation. Hölderlin addresses this question of the cleansing function of war in the opening strophe of “Peace”:

As if the ancient flood waters, which  
 in an other more  
 terrible, metamorphosed wrath were returning  
 again, to cleanse, since it was needed. (SA II, 6)

Through an analysis of the dense imagery of these opening lines we can perhaps better understand how Hölderlin situates the problem of war within his overall poetic theology of history and its vision of a coming *parousia*. In his allusions to the “ancient flood waters” and the “other more terrible, metamorphosed wrath” of Zeus, Hölderlin seeks to bring the ancient Greek myth of Deucalion told in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Bk I, vv. 262–415) to bear on his understanding of the situation in Europe at century’s end. As Ovid relates, Deucalion was the son of Prometheus who, when Zeus wrathfully sent a flood to the earth during the Iron Age to destroy the human race for their transgressions against the gods, survived the flood and brought forth a new race. In Pindar’s version of the myth, Deucalion becomes the father of the Greek peoples (Oly. IX, 43–55).<sup>29</sup> In Hölderlin’s reappropriation of the myth, the coalition wars following the French Revolution are likewise “sent by Zeus” to cleanse and purify Europe for its *hybris* in overstepping the boundaries between mortals and gods. Moreover, like the original flood of Deucalion, they signal a radical turn in human history. From Hesiod’s *Theogony*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Vergil’s “Fourth Eclogue,” and the odes of Pindar, Hölderlin draws on the image of “the golden age” when mortals and gods lived in originary unity. With the passage of time, however, and the onset of human forgetfulness, human beings strove to set themselves in equal measure to the gods. Due to this excessive, hybriatic overstepping of the boundaries between gods and mortals, human beings lost the innocence of unalienated oneness with divine being and fell into a state of estranged conflict. What each of these poets deemed necessary for a return to the golden age of unity was purity of heart and the unspoiled simplicity of childhood wonder, a disposition that Hölderlin found expressed in Rousseau’s *Emile*.<sup>30</sup>

This whole poetic mythology of a golden age, when crossed with the chiliastic vision of Swabian pietism, comes together in Hölderlin to form a poetic theology of history modeled on the Heraclitean-Hesiodic principles of strife and conflict. If the archaic Greek “day” of unalienated harmony with nature had been superseded by the onset of Hesperian night that began with Christ’s departure from the earth, then the signs of contemporary history promised to Hölderlin the coming of a new day and the return of peace to the world. Drawing upon Herder’s “theory of organization” outlined in *God: Some Conversations*, Hölderlin envisioned a Neoplatonic cycle of *mone-proodos-epistrophe* (rest-procession-reversion) that followed his onto-

logical poetics of *Ausflug* and *Rückkehr* (SA III, 63; SPF, 152–53, v. 54).<sup>31</sup> Everything in nature loses its ordinary balance (*mone*) as it goes forth from itself (*proodos*) only in the end to return to itself (*epistrophe*) via a circuitous journey back to the *arche*. From the childlike innocence of peace through the contentious struggles of war that cease and thereby usher in a renewed epoch of harmonious peace and balance, the movement of human life proceeds according to a circuitous, eccentric journey from its *arche* eccentrically outward and then back again. This poetic theology of day-night-day renewal, grounded in the purifying journey outward from the homeland, would, Hölderlin believed, ultimately bring us back home where we could dwell in greater proximity to the gods.

For Hölderlin, poetry in its deepest sense is homecoming. No matter how difficult the journey, no matter how much isolation, estrangement, conflict, and strife we encounter in our wanderings, there is ultimately a purpose in the crises and caesuras of our experience. But as “Der Frieden” shows, human beings fail to recognize this. Like Heraclitus, Hölderlin understands the poetic word as a *logos* spoken to those who are asleep and are not attuned to the signs of the times (Heraclitus, Fr. 1, Fr. 89).<sup>32</sup> In this sense, his poetry needs to be understood poetologically as an attempt to transform the understanding of poetic language through a philosophical reflection on its meaning. And, like Heraclitus, this entails for Hölderlin an understanding of poetic *logos* as being an interpretation of the *kosmos*—of *physis*, *nomos*, and *dike*. “Der Frieden” attempts just such a broad philosophical reading by offering a theodicy of history, a justification of the conflicts, strife, and violence of war in the age of night. As Hölderlin put it at the end of *Hyperion*: “Like lovers’ quarrels are the dissonances of the world. Reconciliation is there even in the midst of strife [*mitten im Streit*] and all things that are parted find one another again” (H, 215/SA III, 160).

This cosmological interpretation of *eris* and *polemos* is expressed in the first six strophes of “Peace” where Hölderlin describes the tumult of the coalition wars in Switzerland and Italy in terms of the role played by the goddess Nemesis. Nemesis is the ancient Greek goddess of justified retribution, the daughter of Dike (Justice). In her role as “avenger” (v. 10) she brings on the “flood” of war to purify the nations. “The stern scales of Nemesis,” as Pindar puts it (Pythian X, 44), balance out in an unrelenting and pitiless way the excess and transgressions of human impiety.<sup>33</sup> When *hybris* (*Anmassung*) and excess (*Übermaß*) bring mortals beyond their limits, Nemesis strikes to reassert balance and measure (*Maß*) once again. In Isthmian Ode V, Pindar offers this stern warning to those tempted to overstep their boundaries: “Do not seek to become Zeus! You have all there is, if a share of blessings should come to you. Mortal things befit mortals.”<sup>34</sup> In “Peace,” Hölderlin interprets Pindaric Nemesis as a counterbalancing force



to such hybriistic impiety, as she brings “needful” war to the Germans.<sup>35</sup> Addressing “holy Nemesis” (SA II, 391), the poet asks her:

have the nations done you  
 Penance enough for their luxuriant slumber?  
 Who started it? Who brought us the curse? Not from  
 Today nor yesterday does it spring, and those  
 Who first lost the measure [*Das Maaß verloren*], our fathers,  
 Knew it not, their spirit drove them. (PF, 166–69; translation  
 altered)

Hölderlin’s analysis of the coalition wars finds their causes less in the power politics of French, German, Austrian, or Russian aggression than in the eternal principles of *eris* and *polemos* found in Hesiod and Heraclitus. It is only amidst the wasteland and destruction of war that peace can take effect; only by experiencing in a productive way “the eternal conflict between our self and the world” can we achieve “the peace of all peace that is higher than all reason” (SA III, 236). How did human beings “lose the measure”? How did the process of historical decline begin? Hölderlin draws on two traditions for his answers—the archaic Greeks (Hesiod-Heraclitus-Pindar) and the modern Hesperians (Bengel-Herder-Rousseau). In cosmological terms, *physis* is ruled by limits and boundaries. Anaximander’s insight that all things “must pass away according to necessity; for they must pay penalty and be judged for their injustice according to the ordinance of time” can be read as a moral dispensation of cosmic justice. But it also can be read as an ontological account of the *Gefüge* or “structure”/“jointure”/“just fitting” of beings where *Fug* serves as a German translation (as in Heidegger) for *dike* (“justice”).<sup>36</sup> On this reading, “measure” is not something imposed from without by divine fiat, but lies within the very ligatures of being as part of the dispensation of energies that inexhaustible *physis* generates out of itself. No part of *physis*, not even the deathless sun, can serve as the originary source of measure since measure is not an entity or a being, but a phenomenological process; it does not exist external to this process as a standard or benchmark. Nor should measure be understood anthropologically in terms of “values” on a human scale; rather, Hölderlin, following his pre-Socratic sources, reads it ontologically as something written into the very grammar of being by *physis* itself. Hence, Heraclitus writes, “The sun will not transgress his measures (*metra*). If he does, the Erinys, ministers of Justice (*Dike*), will find him out” (Fr. 94).<sup>37</sup> Nemesis rules over all things as a way of countering transgressions and setting things back into their proper jointure. And it is this hidden jointure within being that rules over all things from their *arche* following the path of *polemos* as a polemology of being. This cosmological



reading is given a mythic foundation in the work of Hesiod and Pindar. As Pindar tells it, the origins of human strife, war, and suffering lie in the ancient violation of the boundaries between mortals and gods perpetrated by the mythic figure Ixion. Driven by unrestrained *hybris* (*Übermaß*), Ixion attempts to seduce Hera and violate Zeus's marriage-bed. Moreover, as "the very first to bring upon mortals the stain of kindred blood" (Pindar, *Pyth.* II, 32–32), Ixion receives divine retribution, chained to a fiery wheel that rolls on perpetually in Hades.<sup>38</sup> Reflecting on the fate of Ixion, Pindar offers his poetic *gnome*: "It is ever right to mark the measure [*metron*] of all things in the limits of one's own station."

On Hölderlin's reading, Ixion is one of the originary Greek "fathers" who first "lost the measure" for mortals and helped draw upon them the counterbalancing force of *nemesis*. He functions as a mythological counterpart to the Hebrew Cain, the prototype of the intermediate period of human history when the gods' distance from mortals brings on the age of night.<sup>39</sup> Given the return in 1799 of "the ancient flood waters" (v. 1) of the archaic Greek era, Ixion's fate stands for Hölderlin as a mythic reminder of human excess and violation. As Hölderlin grasps it, Ixion's fate exemplifies an unbalanced form of subjectivity and willful singularity that serves as a source of estrangement from the gods. The whole process of human history during this period of *Götterferne* (distance of/from the gods) is marked by the tragic dominion of singularity, a singularity that refuses to acknowledge or remember its archaic roots in divine *physis*. Nowhere is this one-sided form of willful singularity better expressed than in the tragic figure of Sophocles's Oedipus. For Hölderlin, Oedipus in his manic search for his "own" identity violates the boundaries of nature, upsetting not only his own sense of balance, but the very balance of *physis* itself (patricide, incest, murder, impiety). In his attempts to mold Apollo's oracles to his own strategic planning and in his arrogant dismissal of the god's prophet (Teiresias), he exhibits an uncanny form of isomorphic leveling, of calculatively reducing all difference to a monstrous sameness with an eye toward control and subjugation. Like Ixion, Oedipus too has "lost the measure" and has become an icon of modern subjectivity in its distance from the gods. In his aorgic rage, Oedipus rends all sense of connection and integration with organic nature; in his rigidity and excess (*Übermaß*) he embraces only the extremes of his own choosing and, in so doing, both violates and forgets what lies in the "middle," the hermeneutic center of complexity.

Tragically driven to the extremes of measurement in his planning, calculation, and instrumental projection, Oedipus is in the end unable to find a measure, powerless to harness his unbounded will to power. In this he becomes for Hölderlin a symbol of modernity itself in its Cartesian form as the grounding subject pressing itself onward in its unending quest to

subdue nature.<sup>40</sup> Within this Cartesian metaphysics of self-presence, “the human being gives beings their measure by determining independently and with reference to himself what ought to be permitted to pass as being. The standard of measure [*Maßgabe*] is the presumption of measure [*Anmassung*], through which man is grounded as *subjectum* in and as the midpoint [*Mitte*] of beings as a whole. However, we do well to heed the fact that the human being here is not the isolated egoistic I, but the ‘subject,’ which means that the human being is progressing toward a limitless representing and reckoning disclosure of being, . . . the discovery and conquest of the world” (Heidegger, N iv, 121/N II, 171).<sup>41</sup>

In his self-made identity as enlightened riddle-buster, armed with the tools of sophistic *mathesis*, Oedipus will offer a calculus of human fate and futurity that abandons the cryptic language of divine oracles for the instrumental language of political and psychological control. Oedipus’s lack of attunement to the infinitely elusive and recalcitrant forms of human discourse, especially poetic discourse, is no mere idiosyncratic character trait. It represents nothing less than a fundamental inattention to the other, to the need for understanding limits. In this Oedipus comes to symbolize a modern form of subjectivity that lacks the measure for measure itself, a way of being and self-comportment that, for Hölderlin, comprise the very foundation of tragedy. Here tragic insight and Cartesian calculation reveal themselves as irreconcilably opposed, so much so that, as Dennis Schmidt has so incisively put it, “the conception of philosophy found in Descartes does not make the themes that tragedy represents necessary.”<sup>42</sup> The whole early modern project of instrumental rationality that finds its apotheosis in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment erases the possibility of the tragic by subjecting all human difficulties to the project of therapeutic amelioration. Yet the figure of Oedipus remains for Hölderlin as a symbol of the tragic imbalance that persists between gods and mortals.

In one of the great ironies that only tragedy can properly reveal, Oedipus’s relation to Apollo, the god of music, poetry, archery, medicine, and prophecy, shows how out of balance a human being can truly be. To honor Apollo is to honor the power of measure. In the measured pacing of musical and poetic meter, in the medical practice of moderate intervention, in the archer’s attunement to the tautness and amplitude of the bow, in the interpreter’s reception to the mystery and paradox of the oracle, lies the enigmatic riddle of Apolline wisdom. But Oedipus, of course, is unable to heed the lessons of Apollo’s *metron*. When he visits the god’s oracular shrine at Delphi to find an answer to his true parentage, he wildly misinterprets its message.<sup>43</sup> Instead, he claims that “Apollo sent [him] home again unhonoured in what [he] came to learn” (*Oedipus*, ll. 788–89).<sup>44</sup> Inscribed above that shrine were the two great precepts of archaic Greek ethics: *meden agan* (“nothing