

Article

Between Analysis and Metaphor: Forms of Poetic Transport in Hölderlin's Patmos

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Abstract

This article identifies different forms of poetic transport—understood in the sense of metaphor, transition, transfer, crossing and translation—in Hölderlin's poem "Patmos". There are several motifs scattered throughout the poem that semantically express a transition using highly metaphorical language: motifs reflecting on the mediation between the divine and the human, signalling the hybridization of Greek and Christian religion, and indicating transfer from ancient to modern thought. Initially, this article examines the metaphorical quality of language in contrast to its analytical capacity and proposes that the former—by seeking forms of transitions—enables mediation between the associative-affective reading of the text and the critical-analytic method of the scientific view. Hölderlin reflects on this fundamental issue as a result of his spatial transition to Regensburg. The article will further show that various forms of transfer sustain the entire poem: motifs ranging from an epochal transfer to the transition from a topographical space into the text, the superimposition of different figures and the transformation of the biblical narrative, as well as the crossing between the different layers of the draft and the poet's task of a creative translation of various forms of encountering the world, all describe issues central to Patmos.

Keywords: Hölderlin; Patmos; Regensburg; transport; transition; transfer; metaphor; crossing; translation; analysis



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1. Transport: Preliminary Remarks

The following discussion is motivated by the thesis that "the notion of 'transport'—in the sense of crossing, transition, transfer, metaphor, translation—leads to some of the most significant issues found in Hölderlin's writings." Can this hypothesis, which is taken from the Call for Papers for the Special Issue "Hölderlin and Poetic Transport", help to approach Hölderlin's poem Patmos today—to "cross over" to and "to return" (v. 15) from this text?¹

Not the entire text with its 15 stanzas and 226 verses, but at least a fragment of Patmos still has a strong presence today, beyond all philological, philosophical, or theological examinations. The lines draw close to us in unexpected and sometimes alienated ways. Specifically, this is the case with the first four verses, the prologue of the poem:

Nah ist
Und schwer zu fassen der Gott.
Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst
Das Rettende auch.
(*Patmos*, vv. 1–4)

Near is
and difficult to grasp, the God.
Yet, where danger lies, grows
That which saves also.

The first verse leads us to a complete standstill. It speaks of nearness without giving any indication as to what is near. The concept of *transport* does not take us any further at this point. With no means of transport indicated, nor any direction given, transport cannot take place. Beyond the nearness there exists nothing we can speak of: “Nah ist” / “Near is”. This sentence must be heard in its full immediacy and severity. Due to its position at the very beginning of the first verse, the nearness troubles the reader, and it is still undecided whether it will shift towards being threatening or favourable.² If we read the second verse, we are initially told that something is difficult to grasp, which is nothing new in the context of the first verse. What is new, however, is the subject that appears at the end of the verse: “der Gott” / “the God”. This information is almost automatically *transferred* back to the first line. What is near is the God. Why is this reinterpretation of the first verse, which initially gave no indication that it is God who is near, possible? We trust poetic language, which is organised in verse, to intervene across verse boundaries and thereby generate new meanings. We could call this *trust in poetic transport*.

Verses three and four, which form a unit much as the first two verses do, also live from the transport across the verse boundary. If the verse boundaries corresponded to the units of meaning, the passage would have to read as follows:

Wo aber Gefahr ist,
Wächst das Rettende auch.

Yet, where danger lies,
Grows that which saves also.

Read in this way, the first of the two verses would speak of danger, the second of rescue. However, the verses would then verge on cynicism, because it is by no means the case that that which saves always grows where danger lies. However, by drawing the word “wächst” / “grows” into the preceding verse, which speaks of danger, Hölderlin changes the situation. The connection between semantic units (“Yet where danger lies” and “Grows that which saves also”) and verse structure is disrupted by moving the verse boundary to follow the word “grows”. What results from this tension? In his essay *Philologie als Rettung*, Roland Reuß provides an interesting observation on this. Line three, which initially merely speaks of the existence of danger (“Yet where danger lies”), initially corrects itself through the word “grows” (“Yet where danger [...] grows”): “The subsequent intensification through the second verb is a direct intervention by the speaker regarding his own utterance.” (Reuß 2016, p. 6)³. The danger is not simply there, but rather, it grows! The threat increases within the verse (from “lies” to “grows”), before the verse abruptly comes to a halt at the verse boundary: “Yet where danger lies, grows”. At first, it is unclear how the verse will continue after the end of the line. The text continues with the beginning of the new verse, creating a turn—a *versus*. As Roland Reuß explains, speech returns undamaged after the boundary of the verse:

“By actually returning unscathed through the boundary of the verse—this return is due not only to an action of the poetic I, but also at least as much to an undeducible gift over which it has no power, over which it does not dispose—speech has the power to regroup the syntactic references and to set new references: Only now does the word ‘wächst’ (grows), through the speech act of the I, become the predicate of the subject ‘das Rettende’ (that which saves).” (Reuß 2016, p. 7)⁴

Only when the readers have reached the new verse (v. 4) can they assign the predicate “grows” to the subject “that which saves”. Only by negotiating the increasing danger and the uncertainty of the dark verse boundary can the view of rescue or salvation be released. This is no longer an automatic process (*Yet where danger lies, grows that which saves also*), but depends on trust in the sustaining power of language, that is, on its ability to transport. We hope but cannot take for granted that the word will return after passing through the verse

boundary and that language will carry us across the verse boundary into the next verse. That it is possible to trust language's ability of transport derives from its fundamental metaphorical quality, as will be shown in the next section. As long as language is regarded merely as a means, this capacity of language is not a given. Before we can address this, I would like to make a brief comment on the topicality of the question and provide a brief outlook on the subsequent sections of this article.

According to Slavoj Žižek, the quoted verses function as a vehicle for conveying the idea that one's own time has come to an end, but that a turning point in history is emerging. He calls this the "Hölderlin paradigm", in which the entire Judeo-Christian era finds a focal point. He refers to thinkers:

who all conceive their own age as that of the critical turning point of metaphysics: in their (our) time, metaphysics has exhausted its potential, and the thinker's duty is to prepare the ground for a new, post-metaphysical thinking. More generally, the entire Judeo-Christian history, up to post modernity, is determined by what one is tempted to call the 'Hölderlin paradigm': 'Where the danger is, grows also what can save us' ('Wo aber Gefahr ist wächst das Rettende auch'). The present moment appears as the lowest point in a long process of historical decadence (the flight of Gods, alienation. . .), but the danger of the catastrophic loss of the essential dimension of being-human also opens up the possibility of a reversal (Kehre)—proletarian revolution, the arrival of new gods (which, according to the late Heidegger, alone can save us), etc. (Žižek 2014, p. 344)

Žižek's point here has nothing to do with a scientific *analysis* of the poem; he is far more interested in a form of *transfer* that takes place between the poem and our present. If we now consider not only the opening verses of the text, but the poem as a whole, we can retain the question of what forms of *transfer* are associated with this poem, which Hölderlin dedicated to Landgrave Friedrich V. of Hessen-Homburg in 1803⁵. Because, according to Žižek, Hölderlin provides a historical-philosophical description of decadence and the imperative to remain open to change, these verses also enable us to capture the spirit of the times in a single image and therefore spark our research interest. At the same time the question of God is ever resonating—in the tension between proximity and the difficulty of understanding.

If we consider the keywords *transport*, *metaphor*, *transition*, *transfer*, *crossing*, and *trans-lation* mentioned above, we can now turn to the remaining part of the first stanza of *Patmos*:

⁵ Im Finstern wohnen	In darkness live
Die Adler und furchtlos gehen	the eagles and fearless
Die Söhne der Alpen über den Abgrund weg	The sons of the Alps span the abyss
Auf leichtgebaueten Brücken.	on lightly built bridges.
Drum, da gehäuft sind rings	Thus, since heaped all around are
¹⁰ Die Gipfel der Zeit, und die Liebsten	the peaks of time, and the most beloved ones,
Nah wohnen, ermattend auf	nearby live, languishing on
Getrenntesten Bergen,	most separated mountains,
So gib unschuldig Wasser,	So give innocent water,
O Fittiche gib uns, treuesten Sinns	O pinions ⁶ give us, most faithful-minded
¹⁵ Hinüberzugehn und wiederzukehren.	To cross over and to return.
(Patmos, vv. 5–15)	

After the figure of the eagle, to which we will return later, "sons of the Alps" appear, walking on bridges over an abyss. It is not easy to decide who they are. What seems important to me is that the mention of the Alps gives a context to the abyss and the bridges that are mentioned afterwards. We are immersed in a mountainous panorama,

over which the eagle can fly, but which humans can only cross by means of a bridge. We have thus arrived at a first image of transition (*crossing*). This is further expanded by the mention of the “peaks of time” and the “most separated mountains”, where people live near each other but are still separated. The reference of the “peaks of time” adds a metaphorical layer to the geographical description. The peaks of time are a metaphorical device linking different semantic fields. After the bridges, water and wings are mentioned as two means of enabling transfer between the peaks: “To cross over and to return” (v. 15). If the waters filled the abysses, they would become navigable; wings could enable people (as they did before the eagle) to fly over them. The peaks of time, where people dwell who are close and well-disposed towards each other (“the most beloved ones”), but are nevertheless languishing, could—if read diachronically or synchronically—be the respective highlights of a certain time: progress in the consciousness of freedom (Hegel), the sciences, the historical achievements. However, mediation between them (no longer) seems possible because the transitions are so difficult. Apparently, the most beloved ones and the referenced “we” (“give us,” v. 14) no longer are counted among the children of the Alps, for whom the transitions happen easily and without fear. In fact, at the end of the eighth verse, which concludes the passage about the children of the Alps, there is a full stop, indicating that a thought has reached its end here.

Finally, the images of transition that follow the prologue (vv. 1–4) are summarised in the expression “to cross over and to return” (v. 15). This is the last verse of the first stanza, which emphasises that the theme of transition is central to the poem. This prompts us to ask the following question: What forms of transport, crossing, transition, transfer, metaphor, and translation will we come across in the rest of the poem? These terms will serve to structure the following considerations and provide a path through Hölderlin’s text. The figuration of transport as metaphor and its juxtaposition to the motif of analysis will play a central role here and serve as the philosophical background of the article.⁷ This will require some preliminary considerations, for which I will draw on the philosopher Hans-Dieter Bahr (Section 2). After that, I will discuss a spatial transition important for the genesis of *Patmos*: Hölderlin’s journey to Regensburg and his return home to Nürtingen (Section 3). I will then attempt to show how a transfer of biblical motifs into the poem occurs in *Patmos* (Section 4). This transfer of biblical and other ancient motifs does not come to a calm or settled end, but multiplies again and again upon its arrival: Hölderlin adds alternative versions of individual words or verses to the page—often without crossing out the older layers, which then requires the reader to mediate a crossing between the different textual figures. This is shown in Section 5. The final section—Section 6—attempts to summarise the concerns of *Patmos* under the motif of translation. To this end, the following article will combine close-reading passages of the poem and selected source material with more contextual arguments. This approach is based on the conviction that close-reading must always be embedded in contexts and that broader claims must be verifiable with reference to specific text passages.⁸

2. Metaphor: Philosophical Framework

If we want to examine what our guiding concepts of *transport*, *crossing*, *transition*, *transfer*, *metaphor* and *translation* have to do with each other, the method of comparative analysis seems appropriate. Like all the other notions, the concept of metaphor must also be analysed. The term analysis denotes a method that can be applied in a variety of ways: if you want to get closer to the meaning of a poem, you carry out an analysis. The subject of this article—the poem *Patmos*—leads us to expect the analysis of a *poem*. Similarly, the results of elections, the reasons for success and failure in sport, stock market prices, wastewater and chemical compounds can also become the objects of analysis. The aim

is always to break something down into its component parts in order to subject it to a systematic, step-by-step examination. The term analysis seems to apply to everything. The *metaphor* for this universally applicable process is *analysis*.

A reversal has taken place: our starting point was the metaphor, which was to be subjected to analysis; now considerations of analysis have referred us back to the metaphor. This raises a significant philosophical question: Which is the more fundamental concept, analysis or metaphor? Admittedly, we ourselves have just employed two dense metaphors with the expression “more fundamental concept” (one spatial-architectural: fundament; the other derived from the realm of the living: concept, a word that has to do with conception); nevertheless, analysis might suggest itself more immediately as a suitable method for clarifying the question.

Analysis can focus on the metaphor, namely either on the concrete linguistic metaphor (e.g., “Gipfel der Zeit”, “peaks of time”, v. 10) or on the concept of metaphor in general. In both cases, we are conducting what Jörg Hagemann, in a foundational text on metaphor and metonymy, has termed a “metaphor analysis”/“Metaphernanalyse” (Hagemann 2017, p. 238). The metaphor can thus become the object of analysis, and therefore the latter seems to take precedence over the former. But what happens when the analysis itself is subjected to analysis? To address this question, I will refer to the theory of metaphor that Hans-Dieter Bahr developed in his book *Die Sprache des Gastes* (cf. Bahr 1994, pp. 93–100).⁹

Generally, the analysis of any metaphor (both of the concept and of particular metaphors) begins with a reference to an opposition: the binary division of metaphor and metonymy (cf. Bahr 1994). However, the fact that we often do not succeed in applying this distinction beyond the well-known school examples is by no means trivial.¹⁰ As Bahr points out, the *analysis* reflects “only its own logical functions” (Bahr 1994, p. 100) back onto metaphor and metonymy. This refers to the “identifying distinction” that analysis applies to all its objects, including metaphor and metonymy. In doing so, however, it “makes the object of its meaning [the metaphor, but also the metonymy] itself disappear” (Bahr 1994, p. 100), since the metaphor stands for a form of transferring meaning that is specifically not (strictly) defining. When the analysis comes to a clear and unambiguous resolution of the metaphor—What is the factual level of the metaphor? What is its actual meaning? Why is it a metaphor and not a metonymy?—then the analysis has missed the essence of the metaphor. When the analysis has fully explained the metaphor, it has resolved and thereby dissolved it.

If one applies the analytical method to analysis itself and asks what constitutes analysis, “the analysis of analysis” reveals “that it itself is inevitably carried by a certain metaphorical imagery [Metaphorik]” (Bahr 1994, p. 100).¹¹ Analysis is itself a metaphor, and a highly effective one at that: The power of transference, i.e., the metaphorical power, enables analysis to unfold its effect on levels as diverse as those indicated above: spiritual, material, social, scientific, etc.

Considering the imagery of the analysis in more detail, one encounters, as Bahr indicates, a connection with the semantic field of “going”. There are clearly defined *steps* that one must take in the analysis. It is the *step-by-step approach* (*schrittweises Vorgehen*) that gives the analysis its systematic character, with which it can also tame the anarchic. Thus Jörg Hagemann, for example, has developed a *methodical approach* (cf. Hagemann 2017, p. 250) (the Greek word for path—*hódos*—can be found in *method*) for finding metaphors, a “procedure of discovery”/“Auffindungsprozedur” (Hagemann 2017, p. 249) (from the Latin *procedere*—to move forward, proceed), which he describes as follows: “As a first step, it has proven fruitful for the analysis of the present example text to pursue stringently the answer to the following question for individual sentences of the sample text [. . .]” (Hagemann 2017, p. 249)¹². The “analysis” is therefore a “first step” that must be consistently “pursued”,

followed—in this case by three—further *steps* (cf. [Hagemann 2017](#), pp. 249 et seq.). The analysis is characterised by metaphors of walking and paths; analytics cannot be conceived without metaphors.

But not only “analysis” is a *metaphor*; “metaphor” itself is also a *metaphor* (“metaphor of metaphor”; [Derrida 1974](#), p. 18)—for the *process of transferring* meanings, which is deeply inscribed in language. Metaphor means carrying over the abyss that separates fields of meaning. It too cannot be represented without metaphorical speech. The metaphor generates meaning and is *mitgänglich*¹³ (i.e., *going along with*; Dieter Mersch) with each step we take in the analysis of meaning. Even if it is often not explicitly visible, it is what must be able to *accompany* all our steps of analysis.

This means reversing the original assumption that analysis is more fundamental than metaphor. We find ourselves once again on the return path that has already led us from analysis back to metaphor—“To cross over and to return” (v. 15). However, this brings us to a fundamental problem of *Patmos*, which must be developed *step by step* in the *course* of the following sections.

For centuries, language naturally lived and drew from its metaphorical character of transfer. This metaphorical character was not considered deficient despite its inexact use of language. With Hölderlin’s *Patmos* we could state that a fearless crossing from one side to the other, from one level of meaning to another, was possible:

[. . .] und furchtlos gehn	and fearless
Die Söhne der Alpen über den Abgrund weg	the sons of the Alps span the abyss
Auf leichtgebauten Brücken	on lightly built bridges

(*Patmos*, vv. 6–8)

This becomes particularly evident, on the one hand, in poetry and, on the other hand, in *the* canonical text of the European Middle Ages and (at least) the early modern period, the biblical canon: biblical texts were not true because they corresponded to the so-called outside world, but because meaning could be transferred from one text to another (typologically, associatively, via keyword references). They were not authorised as facts, but as a network of references. In the 18th century, in the wake of the Enlightenment (Spinoza, Lessing, Reimarus . . .), but also on the part of Pietism (Johann Albrecht Bengel. . .), new forms of differentiated textual analysis emerged, not least of the biblical text (Johann Salomo Semler . . .). The foundations of what is known today as historical-critical exegesis go back to developments of this time, which (almost exclusively) took place in the Protestant context. When Hölderlin came to the Tübingen seminary in the 1780s to study Protestant theology, this associative-metaphorical understanding of the text was already showing cracks. Professors from Tübingen were actively involved in the controversies surrounding the authenticity of biblical texts, in which the question of the correspondence between the biblical text and particular historical events played a central role. Chronological time became the comprehensive standard of judgement, no longer the *Eigenzeit* (i.e., the unique, inherent self-time) that the biblical text releases in and of itself (cf. [Appel 2024](#)).

Hölderlin attempted to create a union between the two traditions with his poem *Patmos*: the metaphorical-associative inhabitation of the text and the critical-analytical position of the scientific view. Throughout the subsequent article as well, both more metaphorical and more analytical approaches are employed and frequently overlap. The analytical character is particularly evident wherever the text is examined step by step in close detail, while the metaphorical character is reflected more strongly in the philosophical references. The opportunity for Hölderlin to devote himself to this topic intensively probably stemmed from his contact with Landgrave Friedrich V., who was unsettled by the new trends in biblical text analysis. The two may even have met in person in Regensburg.

3. Transition: Historical Context

In September 1802, Hölderlin travelled from Nürtingen to Regensburg at the invitation of his friend Isaac von Sinclair, who had been staying there for several weeks to take part in the negotiations of the Reichstag on behalf of Landgrave Friedrich V. A passport issued in Hölderlin's name on 28 September 1802 in Nürtingen, valid for four weeks, states that the poet intended to leave Nürtingen on "29th Septbr: 1802, travelling through Blaubeuren—Ulm to Regenspurg [. . .]" (Hölderlin [1992] 1998, MA III, p. 608). This route took him away from the Neckar River, which was so important for Hölderlin and along which the cities of Tübingen, Nürtingen, Stuttgart, Lauffen and Heidelberg (all of them important reference points for Hölderlin) are situated, and which flows into the Rhine and then into the North Sea. In Ulm, he entered the basin of the Danube, which, along with the Rhine, forms the other central river system in Central Europe and eventually reaches the Black Sea in the southeast. As several of Hölderlin's poems show, he saw rivers not only as geographical entities, but also as historical-philosophical phenomena that essentially determine the essence of Europe: the Neckar/Main/Rhine on the one hand and the Danube on the other span the cultural realm of Europe (cf. Heinrich 2025). After leaving the drainage basin of the Neckar and Rhine, the route from Ulm to Regensburg runs parallel to the Danube for about 200 kilometres. Thus, Hölderlin journeyed for several days along the Danube. In Regensburg, he probably stayed at the same inn as Sinclair, the "Goldener Adler" (Golden Eagle) in the "Goldene Bärengasse" (Golden Bear Lane). It is worth mentioning that the inn was only a few steps away from the famous Stone Bridge, which has spanned the Danube since the 12th century.

Crossing the Stone Bridge entailed *crossing over* and *returning* between the Free Imperial City and the surrounding Bavarian area, which, in terms of political rule and religious affiliation, had followed different laws from the city throughout history. The bridge thus marked an important place of transition. From Hölderlin's Ode *Heidelberg* we recognise a fascination with another old bridge—the bridge over the Neckar in Heidelberg: "As though divinely sent, an enchantment once/Transfixed me on the bridge as I walked that way" (Heidelberg, vv. 9 et seq., Hölderlin [1992] 1998, MA I, p. 252, transl. by Hölderlin [1966] 2004, p. 186). During his two-week stay in Regensburg, Hölderlin thus lived close to one of the most important bridges over the other river, the Danube, which flows opposite the Neckar (cf. Franz 2024a, pp. 119–27; Nestler 1929).

"There is no hymn to Regensburg as there is to Stuttgart and Heidelberg," (Hölscher 1981, p. 428), we read in the succinct recapitulation of the 16th annual meeting of the Hölderlin Society, which took place in Regensburg in 1980. And yet, it seems to me, this stay had a great, though not directly demonstrable, effect on Hölderlin's poetry: "As brief and fortuitous as his stay in Regensburg in the first half of October 1802 may have been, it nevertheless marks an important phase, indeed a crisis point, in his life." (Hölscher 1981, p. 428). After the low point of Hölderlin's return from Bordeaux in June 1802, the stay in Regensburg was his first attempt "to find himself again. Here, the relationship with the Landgrave of Hesse-Homburg was established or renewed, whose favour would create the external conditions for him to lead a life of his own." (Hölscher 1981, p. 428)¹⁴. We have no direct evidence of any encounter between Hölderlin and Landgrave Friedrich V. (cf. Franz 2024a, p. 127), but the work on *Patmos*, which was taken up (or resumed) soon after his stay in Regensburg and completed in January 1802, and the dedication of the poem to him suggest that some form of contact was highly likely. It also seems plausible to me that the poet was affected by the Reichstag in Regensburg. After the Peace of Luneville in 1801, which ended the war between France and the Holy Roman Empire, Hölderlin seemed to have entertained hopes of lasting peace (cf. Hölderlin [1992] 1998, MA II, pp. 891–93)¹⁵. After the losses to France, the Reichstag had to decide on a redistribution

of territories among the German principalities. The end of the Holy Roman Empire was already becoming apparent. Hölderlin's writing during this period shows a great interest in historical developments and their interpretation in terms of the philosophy of history, which is why the Reichstag must also have been of great importance to him.

Hölderlin's return from Regensburg to Nürtingen marked the beginning of a very productive work phase. Possibly at this time, Hölderlin began revising and recording completed poems and writing drafts of new ones in the large manuscript convolute known today as the *Homburger Folioheft*, at least initially with the aim of publishing a collection of his longer poems.¹⁶ The manuscript begins with three elegies, written in beautiful fair copy hand: *Heimkunft*, *Brod und Wein*, and *Stutgard*. These are followed by drafts of the free-rhythmic poems *Der Einzige* and *Patmos*. The latter represents an advanced stage in the development of the poem, that precedes the dedication manuscript sent to Sinclair in 1803 for presentation to Landgrave Friedrich V. (cf. [M. Müller 2024](#), pp. 291–97).

Hölderlin's stay in Regensburg seems to have had a positive effect on his mood and productivity. On 20 December 1802, at a time when Hölderlin was probably working on *Patmos*, his mother wrote to Sinclair: "On the journey to Regensburg [sic!], which he owed to the mercy of H. Landgrave and Your Honour, he was in a calm state of mind for some time [...]" ([Hölderlin \[1992\] 1998](#), MA III, p. 610)¹⁷. In retrospect, Sinclair says that he "never saw him with greater strength of mind and soul than at that time [in Regensburg]" ([Hölderlin \[1992\] 1998](#), MA III, p. 615)¹⁸. I suspect that various factors contributed to the creative period Hölderlin enjoyed following his stay in Regensburg, after clear signs of psychological deterioration had presented themselves earlier upon his return from Bordeaux in the summer of 1802. During his travels and his stay in Regensburg, Hölderlin experienced the Danube; in the wake of the Reichstag, an awareness of the great historical transformation that Europe was facing grew stronger; the encounter with Landgrave Friedrich V.—as will be discussed below—nourished the awareness of having a poetic task that would be heard. What did Hölderlin understand this poetic task to be during that time?

4. Transfer: Biblical Refigurations

After the prologue (vv. 1–4), which focuses on the question of God, and the second part of the first stanza, which speaks of the difficulty of transfer between the most separated mountains (vv. 5–15), the poetic I (and we as readers) are taken, indeed swept along, on a journey. A genius carries off the poetic I: in flight (2nd and 3rd stanzas), it crosses the ancient Greek world to finally arrive on the island of Patmos after journeying across the waters (4th stanza). The island is first mentioned in the fourth stanza (v. 53), and the poetic I reaches it in the fifth stanza. Various forms of transfer are associated with this arrival, of which I will outline six in the following.

Firstly, following Alexander Honold, we can speak of a *virtual epoch transfer* ([Honold 2020](#), p. 275) "from the Western present into a Middle Eastern past" ([Honold 2020](#), p. 274)¹⁹. Patmos is the place where according to tradition, *the Book of the Revelation to John* was written, and in addition, it was a place of Roman exile. Yet, there is also a notable transfer in the opposite direction: Martin Luther referred to the place where he translated the Bible into German, the Wartburg, as the Isle of Patmos (cf. [Franz 2024b](#), p. 112), a term subsequently adopted by Goethe (cf. [Schmidt 1990](#), p. 191).

This island (in German a feminine noun, and referred to in the following lines with the feminine definite article) is hospitable and welcoming to those arriving, yet it is poor.

Gastfreundlich aber ist
Im ärmeren Hause
Sie dennoch
(*Patmos*, vv. 61–63)

Hospitable though is
in poorer house
she nevertheless.

At first, the island appears deserted; it builds a soundscape that echoes the lamentations of those stranded on the island or exiled to it. The poor, hospitable, deserted island therefore becomes a resonance chamber (cf. [Deibl 2019](#), pp. 234–36):

Und wenn vom Schiffbruch oder klagend
⁶⁵Um die Heimat oder
Den abgeschiedenen Freund
Ihr nahet einer
Der Fremden, hört sie es gern, und ihre Kinder
Die Stimmen des heißen Hains,
⁷⁰Und wo der Sand fällt, und sich spaltet
Des Feldes Fläche, die Laute
Sie hören ihn und liebend tönt
Es wider von den Klagen des Manns.
(*Patmos*, vv. 64–73)

And if from shipwreck or lamenting
for the homeland or
the distanced friend
To her draws near one
of the strangers, she is glad to hear it, and
her children
the voices of the hot grove,
And where the sand falls and split apart
is the field's flat surface, the sounds
They hear him and lovingly it resounds
From the lamentations of the man.

Once the island has become a sound space that echoes the lamentations, the second transfer can take place: the transfer from a specific place into a text—the entry into the biblical story, which receives and carries the reader. It becomes, as it were, a carrier wave that can now also transmit the individual lamentations of the people:

Sie hören ihn und liebend tönt
Es wider von den Klagen des Manns.
So pflegte
Sie einst des gottgeliebten,
⁷⁵Des Sehers, der in seliger Jugend war

They hear him and lovingly it resounds
from the lamentations of the man. Thus,
she cared
once for the beloved of God,
the seer, who in blessed youth

Gegangen mit
Dem Sohne des Höchsten, unzertrennlich,
(*Patmos*, vv. 72–77)

had accompanied
the Son of the Highest, inseparable,

The entry into the biblical story is introduced by a reminiscence of several biblical figures, who are superimposed or blended over one another: the *disciple whom Jesus loved*, who is mentioned in the Gospel of John but not identified by name; the seer John, who according to tradition wrote the Book of Revelation on the island of Patmos. Hölderlin identifies the two figures when he writes: “the beloved of God,/the seer” (vv. 74 et seq.). Furthermore, there is also a refiguration of quotations from the Gospel of John in subsequent lines, indicating that the two other figures are also blended or superimposed with the figure of John the Evangelist²⁰. Instead of blending, we could also speak of a third form of transfer—the transfer of the figures into one another.

In this superimposition of disciple, evangelist, and seer, Hölderlin renews a practice of transferential exegesis: as Martin Vöhler explains, the poet was interested in “the bundling of different identities” ([Vöhler 2020](#), p. 232)²¹. In doing so, he follows a long tradition of associative-metaphorical biblical exegesis that was highly influential from antiquity to the early modern period ([Frey 2015](#), pp. 71–133). This is worth mentioning, especially since a debate about the authenticity of the *Book of Revelation* and its authorship had begun in the 1770s, in which Johann Salomo Semler from Halle an der Saale was particularly involved as a critic and Jeremias Friedrich Reuß and Gottlob Christian Storr from Tübingen

as defenders of the authenticity of the Book of Revelation (cf. [Hayden-Roy 1994](#), p. 90). Semler published the treatise *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canon* in 1771 and added a detailed response *Antwort auf die tübingsche Vertheidigung der Göttlichkeit von dem Buche so Apocalypsis genant wird* ([Semler 1771](#), pp. 141–253). When Hölderlin came to the Tübingen seminary more than a decade later to study Protestant theology, this controversy likely was well known (cf. the commentary by Jochen Schmidt in [Hölderlin 2005](#), DKV I, pp. 969–1004, here 970 et seq.). In this situation, in which there was already great doubt about the “triple identity” ([Vöhler 2020](#), p. 232) of the figure of John, Hölderlin once again superimposes the various figures with the name John in his poem. Why is this so important to Hölderlin? In one figure, the figure of John, the transition “from eyewitness to ‘seer’” ([Vöhler 2020](#), p. 232) is depicted. “Using the example of John, the transition from the experience of divine abundance to its sudden withdrawal is impressively demonstrated.” ([Vöhler 2020](#), p. 233). Thus John, who was previously inseparable from the Lord, as seer and author of the Apocalypse shares the “experience of separation” as the “fundamental experience of modern poets” ([Vöhler 2020](#), p. 234)²². Martin Vöhler has shown that the multi-layered figure of John was perceived by Hölderlin as one of the first writers to cross over to the post-ancient, i.e., modern era of writing (cf. [Vöhler 2019](#), pp. 50 et seq.). This began with the departure or absence of Christ, i.e., with his ascension. John was still an eyewitness of Christ—“and the attentive man saw/the face of the God clearly” (v. 79 et seq.)—and yet he already shares the conditions of modernity: the experience of the withdrawal of God. With the author John, a transfer to the time of Hölderlin opens up (cf. transfer 1, virtual epoch transfer) to show this is the aim of the poem, and it requires utmost philosophical and poetic exertion.

Inspired by this Johannine presence in the poem, one reads the eagle, the first figure to rise out of the darkness or even become recognisable in the darkness after the programmatic four opening verses, as an allusion to the symbol of John the Evangelist. Jerome writes about the attribution of this symbol: “John was given the eagle because in the prologue about the Word that was with God in the beginning, he rises higher than the others and ascends to the highest regions, just as an eagle soars to the sun.” ([Jerome n.d.](#))²³. The prologue of the Gospel of John (John 1:1–17) recounts, in the form of a theological meditation, how the divine *lógos* became flesh to dwell (literally: to tent) among men. However, darkness prevented this event from taking root. Perhaps the eagle, which takes shape against the background of darkness in the poem, is an indication that the first stanza of *Patmos* transfers fragments of the Gospel of John’s prologue into Hölderlin’s time? God, who in Jesus “is near” to man, is “difficult to grasp” (v. 1 et seq.). How can this narrative, which, with its metaphorical and associative richness, constitutes a peak of Western culture, be connected to the other peak, the new modern forms of scientific analysis? It is from this vantage point that Hölderlin seeks to answer Landgrave Friedrich V.

On 26 January 1802, Landgrave Friedrich V. complains to the poet Klopstock, whom he holds in high esteem, about the cold methods of analysis used in enlightened biblical scholarship:

“But now I come to the real reason for my letter. When I have higher thoughts within me, when I want to recover from gloomy memories and even gloomier prospects, when I want to turn away from the ruins that surround me (for everything is in ruins: religion, fatherland, friendships, surroundings, financial circumstances), I read the songs of your “Messiah.”

Since I do not know the oriental languages, the thought fell upon my heart; today’s philosophers, enlighteners, and purifiers, water down scripture and theology under the pretext of linguistic knowledge; if there is anyone among us who understands these languages like a mother tongue, who has fathomed them

far more deeply, who knows their hiddenmost subtleties better than all modern exegetes, that man is Klopstock. But he interprets the Scripture quite differently from them, and when I freeze at their ice, I hasten to warm myself at his fire. They must be wrong. This is the syllogism that has often strengthened me.

I now presume to ask you, as the Homer and Nestor of our poetry, as more than Homer, as the father of our sacred poetry, by the shadows of the palm grove you have discovered, to add one more poem, one more ode to your entire works, to crown them, and to shame these new interpreters and to cast their exegetical dreams to the ground, even if only through your testimony.” (Klopstock 1999, p. 250)²⁴

Klopstock’s answer did not follow for several months. On 2 April 1802, he finally wrote a long-winded reply, declining:

“I have spoken so loudly about religion and said so much that it would be difficult for me to add anything. But even if I were to overcome this not insignificant difficulty, the purifiers would write against me because of what I am now saying to them, for they are capable of anything. And should I, who has never answered them, then answer them? Of course I would not; but they would say, because they are capable of anything, that I could not answer such a profound thought as they had expressed. I would not answer that either. You see, the matter would not be resolved as you wish.” (Klopstock 1999, pp. 254–55)²⁵

There is no way of knowing whether Hölderlin was familiar with the letters. As Michael Franz notes, it is “quite possible that Hölderlin knew about this correspondence through Sinclair, for this would indeed explain why the theme of *the interpretation of Scripture* in the last stanza of the poem—immediately following the stanza dedicating it to the Landgrave—forms the final chord of the poem” (Franz 2024a, p. 127)²⁶. Jochen Schmidt also points out the “wealth of quotation-like echoes of Klopstock’s ‘Messiah’ in the hymn” (Schmidt 1990, p. 186)²⁷. Presumably, it was in Regensburg that Hölderlin accepted the commission that Klopstock had turned down, but he only fulfilled the Landgrave’s wish insofar as he transferred it. He tried to combine external analysis and inhabitation of the text: to build a bridge that would enable transfer between the separate peaks of time. We may call this a fourth form of transfer connected to *Patmos*. On 13 January 1803, Hölderlin sent a flawless fair copy of the poem to Sinclair, who presented it to Landgrave Friedrich V. on his 55th birthday on the 30th of January 1803. Hölderlin received a thank-you letter in response, sent on the 6th of February (cf. Deibl 2020).

As described above, the transition from the fifth to the sixth stanza marks the entry into the story of Jesus on the Isle of Patmos, with allusions to Jesus’ last supper with his disciples, his parting speeches, his death, the scattering of his disciples, the encounter with the Risen One on the road to Emmaus, the Ascension of the Risen One and Pentecost. All these biblical events are freely re-figured. The references to the Gospel of John are particularly clear. This will be shown now in greater detail with reference to the sixth stanza:

und es sahe der achtsame Mann	and the attentive man saw
⁸⁰ Das Angesicht des Gottes genau,	the face of the God clearly.
Da, beim Geheimnisse des Weinstocks, sie	There, at the mystery of the vine, they
Zusammensaßen, zu der Stunde des	sat together, at the hour of the communal meal
Gastmahls,	
Und in der großen Seele, ruhigahnend den Tod	and in the great soul, calmly-foreboding death
Aussprach der Herr und die letzte Liebe, denn	declared the Lord and ultimate love, for never
nie genug	enough
⁸⁵ Hatt’ er von Güte zu sagen	had he to say of kindness

Der Worte, damals, und zu erheitern, da	of the words, in those days, and to brighten, for
Ers sahe, das Zürnen der Welt.	he saw it, the wrath of the world.
Denn alles ist gut. Drauf starb er. Vieles wäre	For all is well. Whereupon he died. There would be much
Zu sagen davon. Und es sahn ihn, wie er siegend blickte	to say of it. And the friends saw him, gazing victoriously
⁹⁰ Den Freudigsten die Freunde noch zuletzt, (<i>Patmos</i> , vv. 79–90)	the most joyful, still at the end.

The sixth stanza can be described as a collage of elements from the Gospel of John.²⁸ Not a single verse fails to refer to some passage in the biblical text, although it is never quoted literally. This process of creating a collage of quotations from (older) biblical texts can already be found in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), quite clearly, for example, in the psalm of the prophet Jonah (Jonah 2). And it can be found again in the Book of Revelation. This book is largely composed of transformed quotations from older biblical writings (and extra-biblical apocalypses). These quotations are recombined in an alienated and rearranged way, i.e., refigured. Jürgen Ebach has spoken of a “montage and collage of quotations” (Ebach 1998, p. 228, cf. also pp. 225–29) in this context. Hölderlin, who transfers the poetic I to Patmos and lets him enter the biblical text there, applies a procedure that he had already found in the biblical text, especially in the Book of Revelation. As Priscilla Hayden-Roy has shown, this free handling of the biblical text cannot be derived from Württemberg Pietism, even where there are factual echoes of it. She speaks of a “competitive or agonistic relationship between their language. Hölderlin appropriated pietist and Christian ideas in order to subsume them under an aesthetic philosophy with universal claims.” (Hayden-Roy 1992, pp. 376 et seq.).

The attentive man who saw the face of God (the eyewitness) is the *disciple whom Jesus loved* (and who, according to the tradition of the early church, was the apostle John and author of the Johannine scriptures). He saw the face of Jesus clearly because he was very close to him: “One of the disciples was lying close to Jesus; it was the one whom Jesus loved.” (John 13:23) What is the secret of the vine, where “they” (v. 81)—probably Jesus’ disciples—sat together? The Gospel of John describes it in the 15th chapter in one of the “I-am-words”, which, in the context of this gospel, are Jesus’ deepest self-declarations about his person:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:1–5)

The mystery of the vine is the intimate connection between the faithful and Jesus, which is to continue even after his death and ascension. Hölderlin places the revelation of the secret of the vine in the time of the “hour of the communal meal” (v. 82). This meal is reminiscent of the Last Supper and, as Jochen Schmidt explains, also overlaps with Plato’s *Symposium*, which is traditionally translated into German as *Gastmahl* (literally guest banquet; communal meal) (cf. Hölderlin 2005, DKV I, p. 981). The reference to the “hour” also seems to be motivated by the Gospel of John. Immediately before the description of the Last Supper we read: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” (John 12:23) And then: “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? But for this purpose I have come to this hour.” (John 12:27) It is the introduction

to the account of the Last Supper that connects the topic of the hour with that of love (v. 84): “Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” (John 13:1).

After the meal, Jesus begins his parting speeches (John 13:31–16:33), which Hölderlin was probably thinking of when he wrote: “And in the great soul, calmly-foreboding death/declared the Lord and ultimate love” (vv. 83 et seq.). In fact, they also begin with the motif of love: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34 et seq.) “Ultimate love” (v. 84) probably refers to a love which is willing to go to death: “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13). It is the love that lasts “to the end” (John 13:1).

Jesus could say much more, “for never enough/he has to say of kindness” (vv. 84–86). The words of Jesus resonate in this: “I still have many things to say to you [...]” (John 16:12). Hölderlin’s Jesus in the poem *Patmos* wants to “brighten” his disciples (v. 84). The Jesus of the Gospel of John also proclaims that spirits will change again to joy: “So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.” (John 16:22). This is especially so, since “he saw it, the wrath of the world” (vv. 86 et seq.). The Gospel of John also speaks of such wrath: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.” (John 15:18).

Hölderlin’s description of Jesus’ death—“For all is well./Whereupon he died.” (v. 88)—is a free refiguration of the description of Jesus’ death as given by John “‘It is finished’, and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (John 19:30). A brief statement that evokes the idea of totality (“all” in Hölderlin/“finished” in the Gospel of John) is followed by the news of Jesus’ death. “There would be much/To say of it” (vv. 88 et seq.). This line echoes the end of the Gospel of John, where it is said that much remains to be written: “There are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25). There is a surplus, a “more,” that transcends words—spoken or written. We can ask who should say what still needs to be said: Who is the subject of the sentence? The poet, who writes in the succession of John? The stanza ends with the words: “And the friends saw him,/gazing victoriously/the most joyful, still at the end” (vv. 89 et seq.). To the disciples, who are also apostrophised by John as friends (John 15:13–15), Jesus says at the end of his parting words: “But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Therein—in *Patmos* and in the Gospel—the idea of resurrection already resonates, even though John goes on to describe the death of Jesus, and Hölderlin the mourning of Jesus’ disciples (“Yet they mourned, now that/evening had come,” vv. 91 et seq.).

Neither text follows a linear chronology but rather presents a refiguration of the story of Jesus: the Gospel of John is a refiguration of the story of Jesus as it is recounted in the Synoptic Gospels, and *Patmos* is primarily a refiguration of the narration of the Gospel of John—forms of transformative transfer that extend into the present. This is the fifth transfer: from the biblical narrative to the poem.

In summary, this section has shown that Hölderlin’s reference to the notion of *Patmos* can be better understood in terms of a number of different forms of transfer: geographical-historical (the transfer of regions and epochs), textual (the transfer from experienced reality to the written text), interpersonal (the transfer of figures into one another), methodological (the transfer between analytical and metaphorical methods) and exegetical (the transfer between biblical text and poem). A closer look at the development of the poem *Patmos* shows that these transfers do not come to a calm and settled end but are repeatedly set in

motion. *In the text* of the poem itself, a sixth transfer occurs, which will be discussed in the next section—a transfer between different layers of the draft.

5. Crossing: Textual Revisions

Hölderlin's poems from the period between 1800 and 1806 generally exist in several drafts, occasionally in a fair copy, and mostly in the form of later revisions. It is not uncommon for Hölderlin to have written alternative versions of individual words or entire verses in the space between two verses or next to a verse. Between these textual layers, a form of transfer unfolds that can be better understood and described by the word "crossing".²⁹

Often, earlier versions of the text are not deleted during the revision process, but instead two or more text *layers* exist side by side. As Gunter Martens explains, "at least in the case where there are no explicit deletions by the poet, we can assume alternative (or even multiple) validity of texts written next to or on top of each other" (Martens 2017, p. 147). It is not a matter of corrections, but "of expanding the space of imagination" in accordance with a "principle of simultaneity that largely resists reproduction in the linearity of the printed word" (Martens 2017, p. 148 et seq.). I agree with Martens that a linear reading of the text or a "one-dimensional, conclusive interpretation" must bypass the complex poetological structures and would deprive the "multi-voiced, polyphonically set song" of its "deliberately set ambiguity" (Martens 2008, pp. 39, 41)³⁰. It is much more a matter of building up meaning in the sense of expanding it to include new and alternative variants (cf. Deibl 2024): where the different layers are not separated into distinct variants but remain on a single page (also in their reproduction in print), transitions become possible. The page in its materiality, which must not be dissolved along individual layers bearing meaning, enables a *crossing*: the page as a unit is "a place where something such as a road, river, etc. can be crossed safely"³¹. In the text, roads or lanes of reading arise, as it were, which meet and necessitate a deceleration of one's reading, much as traffic slows down when approaching a crossing. The layers intervene reciprocally and disrupt one another. In the process of reading, the gaze wanders from one layer to another, the perspectives and points of view *cross* one another. With this in mind, let us take a brief look at the development of the text of *Patmos*.

The poem *Patmos* initially develops in a rather straightforward manner compared to other poems. A first sketch contains stanzas nine to fifteen (Hölderlin 1975–2008, FHA 7, pp. 34, 218–25). Although a few revisions were made to the draft, some passages already had assumed a stable form which was retained through the dedication manuscript. The draft begins in the second part of the poem, which deals with the problems and strategies of transferring the story of Jesus to the present day. The *Homburger Folioheft* then already contains a largely complete draft of the poem on pages 19 to 28, which corresponds to the dedication manuscript over long stretches (Hölderlin 1975–2008, FHA 7, pp. 238–57). As already mentioned, this was completed in January 1803 and sent to Landgrave Friedrich V. However, this does not mark the end of the development of *Patmos*, but rather the beginning of an intensive revision of the poem, which can be traced in manuscripts 309 and 310 (Hölderlin 1975–2008, FHA 7, pp. 402–21, 490–97).

In the first edited manuscript, to which we must limit ourselves here, an alternative version is repeatedly written above individual verses of the first eleven stanzas of the text of the dedication manuscript. The earlier version is hardly ever crossed out. As Michael Knaupp has done in the "Munich edition", one can construct a second variant of the text from these interpolated lines (Hölderlin [1992] 1998, MA I, pp. 453–60). This is certainly legitimate and helpful, but it renders the multiple validity of individual passages invisible. In the following, we will attempt to interpret the text at the crossing or intersection of both

layers: “This will always require the reader to transfer ideas from one shore of meaning to the other, from one layer to another, in order to mediate a crossing between the two layers. In the context of this section, we could think of this metaphorically as the crossing of a ship.”³² We will focus on the end of the fifth and the sixth stanzas, the passages that were interpreted in more detail in section four. I will highlight the later layer in bold:

[...] Eins Tags diente

⁵[...] So pflegte

**Patmos, thiergleich, dem Seher, denn
dem war es ein Übel**

Sie einst des gottgeliebten

im Sausen des Rohrs, war, in der Jugend

¹⁰Des/m Sehers, der in seliger Jugend war
menschenliebenden

Gegangen mit

Dem Sohne des Höchsten, unzertrennlich,
denn

**Nicht gar allein seyn mochte, des Geistes
wegen**

¹⁵Es liebte der Gewittertragende die
Einfalt

**Der Sohn des Höchsten, doch sahe der
Jünger**

Des Jüngers und es sahe der achtsame
Mann

Wohl, wer er wäre

Das Angesicht des Gottes genau,

²⁰**Damals**

Da, beim Geheimnisse des Weinstocks, sie
Zusammensaßen, zu der Stunde des
Gastmahls,

Die große Seele aber der großen

Und in der großen Seele, ruhigahnend den
Tod,

²⁵Aussprach der Herr und die letzte Liebe,
denn nie genug

Hatt’ er von Güte zu sagen

schwaigen

Der Worte, damals, und zu erheitern, da

Ers sahe, das Zürnen der Welt.

³⁰Denn alles ist gut. Drauf starb er. Vieles
wäre **liebes**

Zu sagen davon. Und es sahn ihn, wie er
siegend blickte

Den Freudigsten die Freunde noch zuletzt,
(*Patmos*, [Hölderlin 1975–2008](#), FHA 7, p.

409: 4–32, HS 309/4)

Once served

Thus, she cared

**Patmos, animal-like, the seer, for to him
it was an evil**

once for the beloved of God

**in the buzzing of the reed, was, in his
youth**

the seer, who in blessed youth

people-loving

had accompanied

the Son of the Highest, inseparable, for

**Not at all wanting to be alone, on account
of the Spirit**

The storm-bearer loved the simplicity

**The Son of the Highest, and yet the
disciple saw**

of the disciple, and the attentive man saw.

well enough, who He was

the face of the God clearly,

At the time

There, at the mystery of the vine, they
sat together, at the hour of the communal
meal,

The great soul however of the great

And in the great soul, calmly-foreboding
death.

declared the Lord, and ultimate love, for
never enough

he has to say of kindness.

maintaining silence

of the words, in those days, and to
brighten, for

he saw it, the wrath of the world.

For all is well. Whereupon he died. There
would be much **dear**

to say of it. And the friends saw him,
gazing victoriously,

the most joyful, still at the end.

The beginning of the passage is a bit of a puzzle: Patmos is said to be like an animal, there is a buzzing in the reed. Neither image is immediately accessible. What is important is that certain elements are preserved: the figure of the seer, the favourite disciple as well as his connection with Jesus. The reference to the island of Patmos is intensified by its repeated mention. The characters, their relationship and their location do not change. Consequently, it is not a different story that is being told, but a story told differently. The setting changes.

To understand the new designation of the island as “thiergleich”/“animal-like”, we have to look far back in the poem. In the second stanza, which describes a rapid departure from the homeland towards Asia, the poet describes the woods and streams of the homeland with the later addition of “Menschen ähnlich”/“human-like” (Hölderlin 1975–2008, FHA 7, p. 405: 1), so that one could construct the following text: “[...] **They clothed themselves**/In the twilight, **human-like**/The shady forest/ And the yearning streams/Of the homeland [...]” (Hölderlin 1975–2008, FHA 7, p. 404: 16 and p. 405: 1–5). Elements of nature in the homeland appear human-like. The situation on the island of Patmos is different. At the beginning of the fifth stanza, Patmos is first described as “poorer”; Hölderlin then adds the attribute *menschenlos/people-less (uninhabited)*: “Hospitable though is/In the **people-less** house/She nevertheless’ (Hölderlin 1975–2008, FHA 7, p. 406: 18.20–21.24). The description of the island as uninhabited further defines its poverty. It consists of the fact that, obviously unlike in the homeland, human attempts at mediation are not available here. People and their forms of transport do not (yet) play a role here. It is the island with its topographical phenomena, the sand and the crevices, that help the newly arrived, not people (see fifth stanza). Hölderlin reinforces this impression by comparing the island to an animal (“Patmos, thiergleich”/“animal-like”) and thus refrains from personifying it. The symbolic backdrop is possibly formed by the legends of saints who had retreated into solitude and were helped by animals that assisted them in their lives. In this context, the story of St. Jerome, who like Luther after him produced a groundbreaking translation of the Bible, could be of interest: at the end of the fourth century, he created the so-called *Vulgate*, the translation of the Bible into Latin that is still authoritative today. For a time, Jerome was served by a lion—a subject that is very present in iconography. The newly added reference to the seer’s evil in v. 6 underlines his need for help. What the words “in the buzzing of the reed” can mean exactly remains unclear to me. The fact that the island had become a sound space, which echoed the sounds of the person stranded on it, can perhaps be a remedy for the buzzing in the reed, which in the German language echoes a buzzing in one’s ear (assonance of Ohr (ear) and Rohr (reed)).³³ Where John at first only hears a buzzing, an articulated soundscape can gradually re-emerge, allowing him to become a subject once more—specifically in a retrospective view of the time of Jesus, which he will then put into words in his narrative: “who, in blessed youth, had accompanied” (Hölderlin 1975–2008, FHA 7, p. 409: 10.12).

In the revised version, the seer is no longer described only as beloved of God, but also as someone who loves people. This echoes a saying of Jesus in his parting speeches: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15:12).

As already mentioned, the fact that the seer was connected with Jesus in his youth remains unchanged. However, the path into the biblical narrative becomes more complex if the changes are taken into consideration. The edits intervene by raising the question of whether the transition can happen as directly as it did in the first version (i.e., the dedication manuscript). The path cannot be created by human means and must overcome the buzzing in the reed.

The explanation for the close connection between Jesus and the disciple has also changed. Initially we read: “The storm-bearer loved the simplicity of the disciple”. The term “storm-bearer” adopts a typical Greek term for the supreme god and applies it to the

biblical God. The reason for the close connection between Jesus and the disciple is seen in God's love for the disciple's sincerity. In the revision, another motif is added to this. Jesus does not want to be completely alone, and that is because of the Spirit: "The Son of the Highest, inseparable, for not at all wanting to be alone, on account of the Spirit". In the parting speeches, John introduces the topic of community right at the beginning: "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" (John 14:2). The speeches are entirely characterised by the theme of not wanting to be alone. In the gospel, Jesus emphasises the consolation of *his disciples*, who cannot be alone. In the poem, Hölderlin states that Jesus, too, did not want to be alone and therefore sought the community of people. Where this community exists, he can also send them the spirit, which is also a central theme of the parting speeches.

If we consider lines 13 to 19 of the sheet on which the fifth stanza is written (Hölderlin 1975–2008, FHA 7, p. 409: 13–19), although they come from different layers, the Spirit, the storm-bearing Father and the Son of the Highest, as well as the disciple, are all found in close proximity. In the text, the elements of the divine Trinitarian community and the community with human beings cross here. This takes on added significance in view of the further progression of the poem and the dangers that arise during the second part: forgetting the message of Jesus, the dispersion of his disciples, which further continues with the eventual loss of unity within the church and the ensuing schism of Christianity. In contrast, this constellation in the poem manages to hold together these elements (the three divine Persons, community with the faithful) in the text and thereby offers a moment of resistance to various forms of dissolution. This crossing *in the text* even enables the poem to speak of the possibility of seeing "well enough who He was" (v. 18) and "the face of the God clearly" (v. 19).

Another addition is interesting. Originally, the text states that in the face of the wrath of the world, Jesus cannot say enough words of kindness and joy ("erheitern"/"brighten") to counter it. Hölderlin then writes the word "schwaigen"/"maintaining silence" over the word "erheitern"/"brighten", which now enters into a tension with the word "sagen"/"say" (Hölderlin 1975–2008, FHA 7, p. 409: 26–28). In the face of the wrath of the world, one strategy is to speak and to brighten the mood, the other is to speak and to remain silent, as is appropriate in each case. One can overcome anger not only by speaking, but also by retreating into silence. This, of course, goes beyond poetry—perhaps towards gestures of mere presence with the other.

Hölderlin has expanded yet another passage dealing with the topic of speaking. "There would be much/To say of it" becomes "There would be much/dear to say of it" (Hölderlin 1975–2008, FHA 7, p. 409: 30 et seq.). The content-driven speech about the death of Jesus, about which much more could be said, is juxtaposed with the reference to another kind of speech: there would be much that is dear or kind or loving to say. When the two layers cross, they make us aware that the issue is not merely transferring the story of Jesus to later times but also how language must change to accommodate this process.

There would also be much more to be said here in this paper, especially with regard to the further revision of the hymn in manuscript 310. However, that is beyond the scope of this article; I can only summarise briefly and then conclude.

If we consider Hölderlin's poetry under the motif of transport, which is an important aspect, the following emerges: Even in the later versions of the hymn, the author continues to adopt and transform biblical motifs and quotations. The possibility of dwelling in the biblical text remains relevant. However, it becomes clear that the transfer from antiquity to the present, which Hölderlin repeatedly struggles for, is not a transition that conveys a message x from A to B. In the transfer, the message shifts without arriving at a fixed form. It is repeatedly revised, usually by adding new layers that cannot be separated from one

another. They intervene in and cross over one another. When reading, one has to find one's bearings in these paths: in this way, new (contingent, never entirely unambiguous) meanings can emerge.

6. Translation: Concluding Remarks

Let us return to the very beginning of our considerations: The theme of this Special Issue has prompted us to think about the motif of poetic transport in Hölderlin. As this article has attempted to show, the poem *Patmos* can be read and understood against the backdrop of various facets of this motif: from crossing the boundaries of single verses to bridging the abysses that separate the peaks of time, from transitions occurring within the text to the shifts between lived experience and textual reality, from the historical, social and cultural changes reflected in the poem to questions about the role of poetry and the poet, from epoch transfer to contemporary issues.

The poem *Patmos* asks what enables these forms of transport, what carries them. A central thesis of this article is that the underlying reason lies in the metaphorical quality of language, which is most clearly evident in the trope of the *metaphor* (Section 2), but also in the possibility of drawing associative parallels and keyword connections, as well as in comparative and figurative speech. This metaphorical power of language is more fundamental than its analytical capacity. While analysis separates the peaks of time and must keep them separate, the metaphor seeks forms of transitions. In a poem, namely in *Patmos*, and thus in the affirmation of metaphorical language, Hölderlin seeks to show that the metaphorical dimension of language is not necessarily hostile to enlightenment and scientific analysis.

Any attempt at a reconciliation or rapprochement between biblical and ancient thought on the one hand, and modern philosophy and science on the other, must reflect on the relationship between the metaphorical power and analytical capacity of language. Both of these moments have to be preserved and cannot be fully dissolved into one another.³⁴ This is a fundamental issue that Hölderlin raises but cannot exhaust. I think that the entire project of the *Homburger Folioheft*, which aims to provide a poetic historiography and geography, “a poetic view of history” (Hölderlin [1992] 1998, MA II, p. 928)³⁵, will to a certain extent depend on whether this mediation or *translation* is at least partially successful.

I think it quite possible that the impulse to address this fundamental question is connected with Hölderlin's *transition* (Section 3) to and stay in Regensburg. This presented him with the geographical experience of the Danube and the historical experience of a major upheaval, namely the transformational processes that Europe found itself in. Any response to this cannot depend solely on forms of analysing the situation and organisational renewal, one must also accompany this time poetically. This is where Hölderlin saw his public mission.

Hölderlin is convinced that historical transformation can only take place if we succeed “most faithful-minded/to cross over and to return” (vv. 14 et seq.). “The solid letter”/“Der veste Buchstab” (v. 225) has to be cared for, as it says at the end of the hymn, but it must not be frozen; its *transfer* is only possible if it is also “well/interpreted”/“gut/Gedeutet” (vv. 225 et seq.). Furthermore, it must be translated into new forms of song, which requires a *transfer* (Section 4) at different levels. The hymn ends with the words “This is followed by German song”/“Dem folgt Deutscher Gesang” (vv. 226). *Song* requires a free and playful approach to the written word, to the canon and to everything canonical.

In addition, due to the fact that Hölderlin's texts often exist in multiple drafts, the form of the texts itself also requires the readers to engage with them in such a free and creative way. The multiple validity of the text demands that the interpreter mediate between the

layers that mutually intervene, and understand the text at the *crossing* of the different versions (Section 5).

What is the role of the poet in all of this? To quote Michael Franz: “The poet is not a visionary, but a translator.” (Franz 2024b, p. 111)³⁶. He does not know what the future will hold, but he does have a knowledge of the irreducible multi-perspectivity of the way we approach the world. *Translation* is a creative process and does not follow any predetermined algorithm, but rather enables mediation between various forms of encountering the world by considering them mutually translatable.

As Johann Kreuzer notes, there is no reason to claim that “Hölderlin no longer strove for a completed form in the ‘Songs’” (Kreuzer 2001, p. 71)³⁷. Rather, a dynamic of its own arises in his writing, causing him to add alternative layers repeatedly to what already existed. Poetry is a creative process, never merely a linear transfer. This point also leads us to the heart of the poem *Patmos* and to the question of how to understand the Divine. In *Patmos*, we read:

Denn itzt erlosch der Sonne Tag Der Königliche und zerbrach Den geradestrahenden, Den Zepter, göttlicheidend, von selbst, (<i>Patmos</i>, vv. 108–11)	For now the sun’s day was extinguished the Royal, and it shattered the straightly beaming the sceptre, divinely suffering, of its own accord.
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Any linear transfer of the divine and thus of every origin has been shattered. This is not just an evil, the rupture must be thought of as having been initiated by God himself: the royal day of the sun shattered the straightly beaming sceptre itself. Consequently, every transfer then always already has a mediated character, it is a translation and a displacement. The dangers of mistaking them for immediate are reflected in the second part of the poem *Patmos* (esp. vv. 162–73), which we do not have time to discuss here. To shape these displacements freely and playfully is the task of poetry. In these shifts lies poetry’s capacity for renewal.

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Notes

¹ Quotations from Hölderlin are given in the original German and in English translation. The English translation prepared for the context of this text is based on the translations by Michael Hamburger (Hölderlin [2001] 2004), Richard Sieburth (Hölderlin 1986), William A. Sigler (Hölderlin 2020) and David Constantine (Hölderlin 2018). Together with Magdalena Lorenz, I have tried to construct a text from the existing translations that comes as close as possible to the German original. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from *Patmos* refer to the so-called Widmungshandschrift (dedication manuscript); they are cited only with the verse number, e.g., v. 15. Quotations from the drafts and edits of *Patmos* are based on the seventh volume of the Frankfurter Hölderlin Ausgabe (FHA). They are cited by indicating the volume), the page number and, if applicable, the line number after a colon, e.g., Hölderlin 1975–2008, FHA 7, p. 409: 30 et seq. Other texts by Hölderlin are cited from the Münchener Ausgabe, indicating the volume and page number, e.g., Hölderlin [1992] 1998, MA II, pp. 891–93. References to the edition by Jochen Schmidt, published by Deutscher Klassikerverlag, are cited with the abbreviation DKV, e.g., Hölderlin 2005, DKV I, p. 350–56. Citations from originally German sources are translated by Magdalena Lorenz, unless otherwise indicated. The German version is given in Endnotes.

² For this remark, I would like to thank Friedrich Kern.

- 3 “Die nachträgliche Steigerung durch das zweite Verbum ist ein direkt intervenierendes Verhalten des Redenden zur eigenen
Äußerung.”
- 4 “Indem im Durchgang durch die Versgrenze die Rede tatsächlich unbeschadet wiederkehrt—diese Wiederkehr verdankt sich
nicht nur einem Tun des poetischen Ich, sondern mindestens ebenso einer unableitbaren Gabe, über die es keine Macht hat,
nicht verfügt—hat es die Kraft, die syntaktischen Bezüge umzugruppieren und neue Bezüge zu setzen: Erst jetzt wird das Wort
‘wächst’, durch das Redehandeln des Ich, zum Prädikat des Subjekts ‘das Rettende’.”
- 5 In addition to the so-called Widmungsfassung (dedication version) or Widmungshandschrift (dedication manuscript) of 1803,
there also exist preliminary stages (the most important of which in the Homburger Folioheft) and later revisions of the text.
- 6 I would like to thank the reviewer of this article for his insightful comment that one can hear “Fichte” behind the German
“Fittiche”, Hamburger possibly aims for a similar assonance, so one can hear “pine” behind “pinions”.
- 7 Considerations on metaphor also play a central role in Charlie Louth’s interpretation of Hölderlin, even if his focus lies more
strongly on developing the concept of translation. Interestingly enough, most of the guiding principles of both this article and the
Special Issue also appear in close proximity in Louth’s Introduction (metaphor, translation, transference, transition; cf. [Louth](#)
[1998](#), p. 1).
- 8 Obviously, it will not be possible to provide a complete analysis of the entire text and its development. For comprehensive
interpretations, (cf. [Hölderlin 2005](#), DKV I, pp. 969–1011; [Schmidt 1990](#), pp. 185–288; [Binder 1970](#), pp. 362–402; [Beyer 2008](#),
pp. 142–89; [Stierle 1981](#), pp. 47–68; [Przywara 1949](#), pp. 11–13, 124–28; [L. Müller 2001](#), pp. 195–233; [Liebrucks 1979](#), pp. 807–21;
[Hölderlin \[2001\] 2004](#), pp. 1514–26; [Kreuzer 2008](#), pp. 107–35; [André 2003](#), pp. 129–56; [Honold 2020](#), pp. 272–98; [Willmann 2024](#),
pp. 349–479; [Deibl 2019](#), pp. 215–54).
- 9 For the purposes of this article, I am limiting my discussion of the theory of metaphor to Bahr’s insights. A comprehensive
discussion of the literature on the theory of metaphor is not possible within the confines of this paper.
- 10 Jörg Hagemann also points out difficulties. “For theories of semantics, metaphors and metonymies represent a kind of burden:
although they are ubiquitous phenomena, explanatory models of metaphor and metonymy do not provide a fundamental
theory that can be applied to all lexical units.” ([Hagemann 2017](#), p. 231 et seq.)/“Für Semantiktheorien stellen Metaphern
und Metonymien eine Art Belastung dar: Sie sind zwar allgegenwärtige Phänomene, Erklärungsmodelle zur Metapher und
Metonymie stellen allerdings keine grundlegende Theorie bereit, die auf alle lexikalischen Einheiten anwendbar ist.”
- 11 “nur ihre eigenen logischen Funktionen”/“identifizierende Unterscheidung”/“den Gegenstand ihres Bedeutens selber zum Ver-
schwinden”/deckt “die Analyse der Analytik” auf “daß sie unvermeidlich selber von einer bestimmten Metaphorik getragen ist.”
- 12 “Als ertragreich für die Analyse des vorliegenden Beispieltextes hat es sich erwiesen, in einem ersten Schritt die Beantwortung
folgender Frage zu einzelnen Sätzen des Beispieltextes stringent zu verfolgen [. . .].”
- 13 For the references to Dieter Mersch, I would like to thank Sibylle Trawöger.
- 14 “Auf Regensburg gibt es keinen Hymnus wie auf Stuttgart und Heidelberg”/“So kurz und zufällig auch sein Aufenthalt in
Regensburg in der ersten Oktoberhälfte 1802 gewesen ist, er bezeichnet doch einen bedeutenden Abschnitt, ja Krisenpunkt seines
Lebens.”/“wieder sich selbst zu finden. Hier haben sich die Beziehungen zu dem Landgrafen von Homburg geknüpft oder
erneuert, dessen Gunst ihm noch einmal die äußeren Bedingungen schaffen sollte, um ein ihm selber gehöriges Leben zu führen.”
- 15 Brief Hölderlins an die Schwester, Hauptwil bei St. Gallen, 23. Februar 1801.
- 16 Michael Franz dates the beginning of Hölderlin’s work on the *Homburger Folioheft* to 1801 (cf. [Franz 2024b](#), pp. 81–84). One
important argument is that a hopeful and expectant perspective, which can be observed in the draft of Patmos on page 26 of the
Homburger Folioheft, does not align with the mood of disappointment in 1802: “Then, as now, is the time of song.” (Cf. [Hölderlin](#)
[1975–2008](#), FHA 7, p. 253: 33–35). The reference to the “now” of song is connected with the “present-day eschatology, the
imminent expectation in 1801” ([Franz 2024b](#), p. 83). However, it also seems possible to me to attribute it to the impetus to
devote more time to song again after his stay in Regensburg.
- 17 Brief von Hölderlins Mutter an Sinclair, Nürtingen, 20. Dezember 1802. “Auf die Reise nach Regensburg welche er der gnade des
H. Landgrafen, u. Euer Hochwohlgeboren zu verdanken hatte, befand er sich einige Zeit in einer ruhigen Fassung [. . .].”
- 18 Brief Sinclairs an Hölderlins Mutter, Homburg, 17. Juni 1803. “nie grössere Geistes u. Seelenkraft als damals [in Regensburg] bei
ihm gesehen.” As Sinclair also points out, this assessment did not correspond to the general opinion. This frequent divergence in
the assessment of Hölderlin is the starting point for Giorgio Agamben’s excellent study on the years 1806–1843 in Hölderlin’s life
(see [Agamben 2021](#): La follia di Hölderlin).
- 19 “virtuellen Epochen-Transfer”/“aus der westlichen Gegenwart in eine nahöstliche Vergangenheit”.
- 20 Due to the clear hints in the text, we are prompted to think of the described figures, even though the name John is not explic-
itly mentioned.
- 21 “gerade die Bündelung der verschiedenen Identitäten.”
- 22 “vom Augenzeugen zum ‘Seher’”/“Am Beispiel des Johannes wird der Umschlag von der Erfahrung göttlicher Fülle zu ihrem
plötzlichen Entzug eindrucksvoll vorgestellt.”/“Erfahrung der Trennung” als “Grunderfahrung der Dichter der Moderne”.

- 23 “Johannes erhielt den Adler, weil er im Prolog über das Wort, das am Anfang bei Gott war, höher steigt als die anderen und sich in die höchsten Regionen aufschwingt, so wie ein Adler sich zur Sonne erhebt.”
- 24 “Jetzt komme ich aber auf die wahre Ursache meines Schreibens. Wann ich höhere Gedanken in mir weken, wann ich mich von trüben Erinnerungen und noch trübere Aussichten erholen, wenn ich mich von den Ruinen abwenden will die mich umgeben, (denn alles ist in Trümmern, Religion, Vaterland, Freundschaften, Gefilde, Vermögens Umstände) so lese ich in den Gesängen des Messias. Da fiel mir der die orientalischen Sprachen nicht kent, der Gedanken aufs Herz; Die heutigen Philosophen, Aufklärer, Aufräumer, verwässern die Schrift und die Theologie, unter dem Vorwand der Sprachkenntniß; ist iemand unter uns, der diese Sprachen wie die Muttersprache versteht, der sie weit tiefer ergründet hat, der ihre verborgensten Feinheiten besser als alle neuern Exegeten, kent, so ist es Klopstock. Er legt die Schrift aber ganz anders aus wie sie, und wann ich bei ihrem Eis erstarre, so eile ich mich an seiner Glut zu erwärmen. Sie müssen Unrecht haben. Dieses ist der Sillogismus der mich oft gestärkt hat. Ich wage es nun, als den Homer und den Nestor unsrer Poesie, als mehr wie Homer, als den Vater unsrer Heiligen Dichtkunst, Sie zu bitten, Sie bey den Schatten des Palmenhaynes den Sie entdeckt haben, noch in irgend einem Gedicht, einer Ode die Ihren sämtlichen Werken die letzte Krone aufsetzte, diese neuen Ausleger zu beschämen, und ihre Exegetischen Träume zu Boden zu werfen, sey es auch nur bloß durch Ihr Zeugnis.”
- 25 “Ich habe von der Religion so laut geredet, u so viel gesagt, daß es mir schwer werden würde, noch etwas hinzu zu setzen. Aber angenommen, daß ich diese nicht kleine Schwierigkeit überwände; so würden die Aufräumer, bey dem, was ich ihnen nun noch sagte, denn sie sind zu allem fähig, wider mich schreiben. Und sollte ich ihnen, der niemals geantwortet hat, dann etwa antworten? Das würde ich freylich nicht; aber sie würden sagen, denn sie sind zu allem fähig, ich könnte, auf so Tiefgedachtes, wie sie gesagt hätten, nicht antworten. Auch hierauf würde ich nicht antworten. Sie sehen, die Sache würde nicht nach Ihrem Wunsche endigen.”
- 26 “gut möglich, dass Hölderlin von diesem Briefwechsel durch Sinclair wusste, denn so wäre in der Tat erklärlich, warum das Thema der Schriftauslegung in der letzten Strophe des Gedichts—unmittelbar nach der Widmungsstrophe an den Landgrafen—den Schlussakkord des Gedichts bildet”.
- 27 “Reichtum zitartiger Anklänge an Klopstocks ‘Messias’ in der Hymne.”
- 28 In the following, I am referring primarily to the excellent research work of Jochen Schmidt, but I am also expanding on it in a few places (see [Schmidt 1990](#), pp. 220–23; [Hölderlin 2005](#), DKV I, pp. 981–84).
- 29 For her suggestions regarding the metaphorical use of the word “crossing”, I would like to thank Magdalena Lorenz.
- 30 “zumindest für den Fall, dass keine ausdrücklichen Tilgungen des Dichters vorliegen, von einer alternativen (oder gar mehrfachen) Geltung neben- oder auch übereinander geschriebener Texte auszugehen”/“um Erweiterungen des Vorstellungsraumes”/“Gestaltungsprinzip der Simultanität, das sich weitgehend einer Widergabe in der Linearität des Druckes sperrt.”
- 31 This definition is taken from the Cambridge Dictionary.
- 32 I am quoting verbatim a comment from Magdalena Lorenz, whom I would like to thank very much for this.
- 33 I would like to thank the reviewer for offering some possible explanations for this difficult passage. The focus is perhaps not only on hearing, but also on what is heard. The buzzing may also allude to the rumblings and the rumours of Jesus’ opponents and his circle of disciples, from which Patmos might be an island of refuge. The passage may also allude to “those who don’t have ears to hear” (cf. e.g., in the Book of Revelation: Rev 2:17).
- 34 David Constantine offers some truly insightful and very noteworthy reflections on the fundamental significance of metaphor in Hölderlin’s poetry. However, there is a danger that the equally important dimension of analysis and reflection is lost in the process: “Strictly speaking, in strict accordance with Hölderlin’s poetics, there is no way of saying what a poem is about; we realize it as we read, in the poem’s precise forms, and to convert that realization into discursive ‘knowing about’ is not a gain but loss. Such knowledge, once acquired, can actually hinder and impair our readings thereafter. We know in advance what we think and what we ought to feel, our ready interpretation immunizes us against the poem; or, worse, as we reread we try to remember what we thought (what we knew) and what we ought to feel. But what matters is realization; and knowledge in advance, remembered knowledge about, is a hindrance to that. To read these poems well we need constantly to forget.” ([Constantine 1986](#), p. 393).
- 35 “poetische Ansicht der Geschichte” Brief Hölderlins an Leo von Seckendorf, 12. März 1804.
- 36 “Der Dichter ist nicht Visionär, sondern Übersetzer.”
- 37 “Hölderlin habe in den ‘Gesängen’ eine fertige Gestalt nicht mehr angestrebt.”

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