

Article

“A Sign We Are”: A Poetical Theology of Passing in Hölderlin’s “Rousseau” and Other Late Poems

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Abstract: The birth of modern aesthetics cannot be separated from the emergence of a new, non-dogmatic conception of religion and theology. Friedrich Schlegel advocated ‘art as new religion’ while Friedrich Schleiermacher developed a vision on religion as a deeply aesthetic experience. In this rich intellectual context, one author stands out as deeply steeped in this field of innovative dialogues between philosophy, religion and art (against the backdrop of profound historical transformations) and as a singular figure beckoning towards a future (and a future language) that was still to come: Friedrich Hölderlin. In his later work, Hölderlin’s poetic voice retreats into a process of meticulous reading and writing, a complex score of traces and signs that articulate difference, not-yet-presence and potentiality, which is nothing other than the experience of finite time. In doing so, Hölderlin retraces the divine in history and in human existence: its retreat and expected arrival. In this article, we present readings and interpretations of Hölderlin’s later poetry, with a specific focus on the *Winke* or hints of the gods, and the vocabulary of nods and signs (*Zeichen*) signifying the experience of time’s passing as the announcement of an unthinkable future. By involving Jean-Luc Nancy’s rethinking of the *Winke* as intersections of the divinity of humanity and the humanity of divinity, we will arrive at a new understanding of Hölderlin’s emblematic figures of modernity: the stranger and the passer-by as receivers and transmitters of these *Winke*.



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1. Introduction: An Aesthetic *Chōra*

The birth of modern aesthetics as a creative force in its own right, which could enable humanity to catch a glimpse of the whole, can hardly be separated from the emergence of a new, no longer dogmatic conception of religion and, as a consequence, of theology. Rather than seeing aesthetics as merely a mechanical, normative set of rules for producing in one way or another the mimetic reduplication of (primarily ideal) reality, philosophers, theologians and poets at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries began to ascribe to aesthetic experience a power that transcended the limits of reason and touched on metaphysical and theological truths in a way that pure thought could never do. Whereas Friedrich Schlegel advocated ‘art as a new religion’ and the artist as the new priest, the absolute mediator who perceives ‘the God in us’ and is charged with revealing, communicating and presenting the divinity of/as humanity to all humanity in his conduct and actions, his friend Friedrich Schleiermacher, in his *Speeches on Religion* in 1799, developed a vision of religion as a profound aesthetic experience that the “steward of religion”—the priest—should bring to the community “like a new Orpheus” (Fourth Speech) (see [Borgman et al. 2007](#)). They are both reflections of what has become known as the idea(s) of an all-encompassing “new mythology”, as it was referred to in the so-called “earliest system program of German Idealism” (around 1796). Since its discovery by Rosenzweig in 1917, this fragment has been

regarded as one of the earliest attempts to design a new mythology that would integrate philosophy, religion, art and science into a complex discourse—sensible or ‘aesthetic’ as well as ‘rational’—through the unifying power of beauty.

In this rich and challenging intellectual context, one author in particular stands out as, on the one hand, intensely involved in the flourishing field of innovative dialogues between philosophy, theology and art and, on the other hand, as a singular figure profoundly affected by the historical events and transformations around 1800 and beckoning towards a future and a future *language* that was still to come: Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843). Hölderlin was well-versed in theology and philosophy, and especially in the work of contemporary thinkers such as Kant and Fichte, whose works he discussed with his friends and fellow students Hegel and Schelling at the famous Tübingen Stift. Though the author of the “Earliest System-Program of German Idealism” has never been established beyond doubt, researchers have long since agreed upon the conclusion that, although the handwriting of the manuscript is clearly Hegel’s, the ideas in the text rather reflect Hölderlin’s than Hegel’s or Schelling’s thinking in those early years and even more so, if one considers Hegel’s later severe critique of romantic “Kunstreligion”. The “higher dignity” that poetry gains through the expectations of the Fragment, the hope that “in the end she becomes again what she was in the beginning—the teacher of humankind”, and the correspondingly high role that is assigned to the poet as educator and priest-like mediator echoes ideas that can be found in Hölderlin’s letters to his friends—Hegel and Schelling, among others—in these years. By the end of the fragment, the text takes a blazing political-republican, political-theological turn: “Only then does the *equal* development of *all* powers await us, of the singular as well as of every individual. No power will be suppressed any longer. Then universal freedom and equality of spirits will reign!—A higher spirit, sent from heaven, must found this new religion among us; it will be the last great work of humankind”. Whereas such radical pathos definitely exceeds earlier visions of the ‘aesthetic state’ (Herder and Schiller), it is not difficult to hear through these lines almost literally the voice of Hölderlin, or at least of his literary spokesman Hyperion in Hölderlin’s only novel with the same name, *Hyperion* (1797/99).

It would be a mistake to situate Hölderlin’s work only in the context of the romantic debate on a new mythology or to focus exclusively on his theoretical-philosophical reflections on aesthetics, without taking into account his growing conviction that poetry, not philosophy (nor theology), was his real vocation, and that—on the other hand—the poetry he was envisaging still had to be developed, not only by thinking metaphysically and theologically, but through the labor of writing, of finding words and rhythms that would express the Heraclitan *Hen Kai Pan* that Hölderlin and his student friends Hegel and Schelling used as their private password. His radical turn towards poetry was not a repudiation of philosophy and theology as such. It followed from his conviction that a new poetic speech—vocabulary and syntax—had to be developed that would surpass philosophical and theological limits or rules, that is: conceptual thinking on the one hand (including philosophical aesthetics) and literature (*Dichtung*) certainly in its more traditional sense, but also perhaps in the still very ahistorical, unworldly Schillerian and romantic sense on the other hand (notwithstanding the experimental literary ambitions and endeavors of the latter).¹ At least from this perspective, Hölderlin had a lot in common with his friend Hegel in his youth and the latter’s turn towards a strong and immanent connection between thinking and (historical) time.² By the end of the century, Hölderlin’s theoretical work on *aesthetics* and the *philosophy of history* undoubtedly goes along with an attempt to develop a dramaturgical or performative *poetics*, a theory and a practice of speaking and writing (and also of listening and reading, as will be argued) in public. In his letters, his theoretical drafts and his literary work from these years, it is impossible to overlook his desire to find such a public stage to speak, a *chōra* (χώρα) between the safe space of autonomous art and its Schillerian (and also romantic) confines and the more or less organized political arena.³ Poetic speech in such a position would have to grasp the trembling point of the intersection between historical time’s transformative force—and there is no doubt that, for Hölderlin, this force has an ardent theological core, “a higher spirit, sent from heaven”—and a new

poetic language to mediate the sounds and signs of time's passing, its continuities as well as its discontinuities, its shifts and fractures, and its productive *finiteness*. In contrast to the obsolete prejudice about Hölderlin's alleged graecomania—a self-destructive elegiac longing for a return of the ancient Greek world—his letters, theoretical reflections and literary attempts make clear that his most fundamental aim is developing a poetic language for “us”, one that—as Hölderlin would write to his publisher Wilmans in 1803, when announcing a series of ‘Songs’ (*Gesänge*)—should “immediately address (*angehen*) the Fatherland or the time” and touch upon the “higher spirit” of our modern time. Hölderlin's aim is not a nostalgic (re-)construction of a lost ‘home’ for the modern alienated Self but the invention of a language for and of “(our) time”: the time of modernity in which a radical openness of history to a real future may turn us all into strangers. As strangers we are passers-by, receptive for the signs of what comes to us from an undetermined future, instead of beings who are frantically seeking the safe contours of a demarcated presence and identity, of the proper, the self and the same (see [Lacoue-Labarthe 1989](#)).

Finding this point of intersection as well as capturing and articulating the occurrence of passing, the experience of the un-familiar and the strangeness of time (which is also its promise) is one thing; sharing it, communicating it to others and initiating through this communication the ‘founding’ of a new community—political and religious—in history is still another matter. What are the requirements, possibilities and limits of such speech? What sort of agency can perform such a complex and demanding task? What instance can mediate this experience of being strangers and passers-by as a fundamental experience of modernity? These are the challenges that Hölderlin identified for himself in the enormously productive, seminal years around 1800. In the following pages, we will delve deeply into this stage of poetical reflection and production around 1800, a stage that circles around the question of what one of Hölderlin's poems of this period calls “Dichterberuf”—the poet's vocation or profession and how it passionately searches for a poetic way of speaking that is also profoundly and genuinely philosophical and theological. Considering the complexity of this question and of Hölderlin's different attempts to address it, we will first engage in a critical close reading of one particular poem—the ode “Rousseau”—in which the different issues (and aporias) are at stake that we have touched upon above and that are relevant for Hölderlin's singular contribution to the topic ‘religion and aesthetics’. In order to discuss this broader theoretical perspective, we will then relate our textual reading to the tradition of philosophical-hermeneutical readings of Hölderlin's lyrical work inaugurated by Heidegger and critically revisited by poststructuralist thinkers such as Derrida and—more extensively and explicitly—Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. For good reasons, our central interlocutor is Jean-Luc Nancy, probably one of the last eminent thinkers in this tradition for now. Nancy engages in reading Hölderlin as well as in a critical re-reading of the Heideggerian approach in his seminal contributions dealing with contemporary discussions on secularization and culminating in his project on a ‘deconstruction of Christianity’, in which the winking stranger—a strong image borrowed from Hölderlin—is thought of as a passer-by. Nancy's contribution to contemporary philosophy and theology is deeply rooted in and inspired by his meticulous reading of Hölderlin's poetry, but he also reveals the original and singular theological core of Hölderlin's poetry and its relevance for “our time”: a poetical theology of passing.

Structure of This Article

As already mentioned, the poem we will take as a central point of reference in Section 3 is the ode “Rousseau” that Hölderlin wrote (in different stages) in the summer of 1800. In particular, we will analyze a key word used in the ode: *Wink*, which in English is ‘hint’, ‘wink’ or ‘sign’.⁴ But before we undertake this analysis, we will have to sketch out and comment on the debate on the relation between Hölderlin and Rousseau—as a historical figure preceding Hölderlin's time and as a literary figure in Hölderlin's work. In Section 4, we will extend our reading of “Rousseau” by concentrating on the meanings of the ‘stranger’ in the ode, relating this with the concept of the wink. In Section 5, we will compare the

wink in “Rousseau” with the sign (*Zeichen*) in poetic fragments created a few years after “Rousseau” and written down in the ‘Homburger Folioheft’ around 1803. We will focus on one of the most famous Song projects that is usually referred to as “Mnemosyne”. Here, we return to our title, taken from the first line of one of the drafts of “Mnemosyne”: “A sign we are. . .”.⁵

2. Hölderlin and Rousseau: A Complex Connection

A lot has been written on Hölderlin’s fascination for the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). No doubt Rousseau left many explicit and implicit traces in Hölderlin’s work; in his novel *Hyperion* and his dramatic project on Empedocles (*Der Tod des Empedokles*), Rousseau’s echoes and shadows are hard to overhear or oversee, and his presence—either references to his life or elaborated quotations from his work, e.g., *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* from 1776—can be suspected in the first versions of “Dichtermuth” (The Poet’s Courage), which would later be transformed in “Blödigkeit” (“Timidity”⁶) and become more outspoken and explicit in poems such as—obviously—“Rousseau”, but also “Der Rhein” (“The Rhine”) and the different drafts of the three versions of the “Mnemosyne” complex.⁷

In his article ‘Implications of an Influence’ from 2002⁸, Stanley Corngold offers a good and detailed overview of the immense literature and the different interpretations on this relation, from Heinz Otto Burger’s studies in the 1950s, in which the identification theory was introduced (“For Hölderlin, Rousseau is the genius, the solitary seer, and hence the vehicle of his own sentiments, almost only another name for Hölderlin”⁹), to Jürgen Link’s extensive three-hundred-page book *Rousseau-Hölderlin* in 1999, in which he tries to prove that Rousseau’s work is a well-thought-out, all-encompassing reference and paradigm for Hölderlin (Link 1999), and to Heidegger’s total rejection of the identification of the figure of the poetic ‘seer’ with Rousseau in his *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, written as a running thread throughout most of Heidegger’s work between the 1930s and 1960s (Heidegger 2000). Heidegger strongly advocates a ‘pure’ textual reading of Hölderlin and is not interested in his external impact, but stresses the unique autonomy of the text, of the words and of the language of the German poet. Hölderlin, Heidegger seems to think, marks the beginning of literature in the ‘absolute sense’—that is, literature, in this case, poetry, that only refers to itself and its own *Darstellung* of its own sense, its own thought and its own world. Hölderlin’s work does not need an ‘outside’ to clarify it or to give sense to it, and it does not present anything outside itself: *es stellt nichts dar außer sichselbst*, in German. Of course, what is at stake in Heidegger’s protest against the identification thesis in the Hölderlin-Rousseau scholarship is the discovery of the ‘literary absolute’ explored by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe.¹⁰

Despite Heidegger’s reservations, it cannot be denied that the Rousseau figure leads its own intense, dominant, almost obsessive life in Hölderlin’s literary work, from beginning to end. But Heidegger may be partly right in rejecting the exclusive reference to Rousseau. Hölderlin’s poetry is deeply infused with implicit and explicit dialogues—quotations, allusions, apostrophes, etc.—with other figures, ranging from famous names such as Empedocles, Heraclitus, Plato, Socrates, Jesus and Napoleon (among others) to contemporary mentors such as Schiller, Herder and his friends Heinse or Sinclair. Like Rousseau, they are all designed and staged as literary (re-)constructions and spokesmen, “neither purely opposing nor purely relating but poetic characters”, functioning as “external objects” or touchstones for the individual poetic Spirit, as Hölderlin explains in one of his impressive and dazzling theoretical drafts written around 1800: “When the Poet is once in command of the Spirit. . .”¹¹. It echoes what he wrote in the theoretical notes accompanying his Empedocles project (“Grund zum Empedokles”), which he broke off around 1800: the extreme tensions of the time, the disruptiveness of time (its upheaval and transition), the need for “a bolder, a more alien metaphor”¹² to articulate and mediate this change and to live through—bearing or collapsing under—such disruptive transitions, for which figures such as Hölderlin’s Empedocles (who definitely displays many similarities to Hölderlin’s Rousseau) function as ‘bolder’ metaphors. Some psychological and psychoanalytical readings of Hölderlin’s work have focused too

much on the pathological logic of identification; they overlook the intensive reflexive and poetical approach—the analysis and poetic reconstruction—of *the problem of identification as a poetic subject* and the meticulous (and meticulously reflected) staging of such problematic scenes of mediation up to Hölderlin's last poems.

The “Rousseau” poem offers very good insight into this process, not only because it turned out to be a work in progress that was not finished (or—which is perhaps not the same—broke off) like many other projects of Hölderlin and, therefore, shows us the struggle involved in representing the topic of such mediating “bolder”, “poetic character”, but also because it occupies an interesting nodal position in Hölderlin's work at that moment. In the summer of 1800, a few months after he had definitely stopped his attempts to write a drama on Empedocles and after a period of intensive theoretical writings on aesthetics, poetics and history (which also remained unfinished), Hölderlin wrote down a first version of the Rousseau ode.

Philological Preparations

A few philological aspects and circumstances turn out to be very relevant for the significance of the ode. They show that its genealogy is deeply embedded in an intensive writing process, in which different lyrical attempts partly follow each other and partly overlap, probably over a few days. First, Hölderlin wrote “Rousseau” on a piece of paper that was attached to another unfinished poem written just before, in the second half of July 1800, and is perhaps one of his most famous ones: “Wie wenn am Feiertage” (“As on a holiday”). This poem can more or less be considered as Hölderlin's oldest and therefore paradigmatic Song, but its unfinished character also reveals the primal drama of the subject, the agent of the mediation that represents the basic crux of Hölderlin's work and is ‘worked through’ (to use an expression that may remind one of Freud's notion of *Durcharbeitung*) in his later work as a whole, already in the writing process of the poem on Rousseau that followed immediately after “As on a holiday”. In “As on a holiday”, Hölderlin tried to develop a fairly ‘bold and alien metaphor’ by identifying the poets with vines, intertwining—as he did in many other poems—Christian tropology with Greek mythology and fusing the Christological and Dionysian significations of the vine. The ‘bold metaphor’ apparently culminates in the famous invocation of the poets, but the initial rejoicing tone abruptly shifts and turns into a stuttering elegiac complaint and a radical fragmentation of the Song that finally breaks off: “Yet, fellow poets, us it behoves to stand/Bareheaded beneath God's thunder-storms,/To grasp the Father's ray, no less, with our own two hands/And, wrapping in song the heavenly gift,/To offer it to the people./For if only we are pure in heart,/Like children, and our hands are guiltless,//The Father's ray, the pure, will not sear our hearts/And, deeply convulsed, and sharing his sufferings/Who is stronger than we are, yet in the far-flung down-rushing storms of/The God, when he draws near, will the heart stand fast./But, oh, my shame! When of ---//My shame!--//And let me say at once ---//That I approached to see the Heavenly,/And they themselves cast me down/The false priest that I am, to sing,/For those who have ears to hear, the warning song./There . . . /”¹³

The abrupt ending (without an ending) on the fairly crude self-denunciation “the false priest that I am” touches upon the critical renunciation of the status of a prophet finding or receiving the right word to convey “das Heilige” which is announced like the dawning, breaking day: “But now days breaks! I waited and saw it come,/And what I saw, the hallowed, my word shall convey/. . .”¹⁴ The optative “das Heilige *sei* mein Wort “ (“the hallowed, my word *shall* convey”) stresses the consequent logic of temporizing hesitancy and awaiting, expressed by verbs such as *harren* (waiting), *ahnen* (forebode) or *sehnen* (longing), which are at the heart of Hölderlin's ‘poetics of history’: poetry has to capture the subcutaneous rhythms and tones of experiences that seem to have been brooding since ancient times and that now, as the poem says, “more full of meaning and more audible to us [*und deutungsvoller, und vernehmlicher*],/Drift on between heaven and earth and amid the peoples./The thoughts of the communal spirit they are,/And quietly come to rest in the

poet's soul" ("Still endend in der Seele des Dichters") before they can ever be expressed in a song ("Gesang") that—"shaken by remembrance"—might "succeed" ("glückt") in "bearing witness to the work of both gods and men". The indefinable finitude of the present participle ("still endend") subtly conveys the notion of a 'never-really-ending', still ongoing process without closure¹⁵ that resists the too-self-conscious claim of prophetic agency, a premature and untimely becoming-present of "the hallowed", but also a fundamentally failing attempt to turn the future into a not-yet-arrived present. By preventing this both immature and reductive actualization of what "has been prepared in the depths of time" and announcing itself in a "shaking" or trembling act of remembrance, the rupture of the poem, paradoxically perhaps, restores potentiality, or the possibilities of a future becoming.¹⁶ However, Hölderlin does not give up his attempt to develop a poetic language for the passing of time; by creating another lyrical figure—"Rousseau"—as the instance of this struggle to articulate time's passing that the poem then thematizes and reflects upon, he distances himself from the danger of immediacy in the mediation of this 'passing' that he had just encountered.

3. The Poem "Rousseau"

How narrowly confined is our day-time here.
You were and saw and wondered, and darkness falls;
Now sleep, where infinitely far the
Years of the peoples go drifting past you.

And some there are whose vision outflies their time;
Abroad a god directs them, but, yearning, you
Must haunt the shore, a shade, an outcast
Cursed by your kin, and no longer love them,

And those you name, whose coming is promised us,
Where are those new ones, that by a friendly hand
You may be warmed, where drawing near, that
Audibly, you, lonely speech, may sound then?

The ball yields no response to your voice, poor man;
And like the unburied dead you must roam about
Unquiet, seeking rest, and no one
To the allotted way can direct you.

So be content! the tree outgrows
His native soil, but soon will his branching arms
The loving, youthful, then begin to
Droop, and his head he will bow in sadness.

Life's superfluity, the immensely rich
That teems and glimmers round him, he'll never grasp.
And yet it lives in him, and present,
Warming, effective, his fruit contains it.

You lived! And your crest too, though but once, yours too
Is gladdened by the light of a distant sun,
The radiance of a better age. The
Heralds who looked for your heart have found it.

You've heard and comprehended the strangers' tongue,
Interpreted their soul! For the yearning man
The hint sufficed, because in hints from
Time immemorial the gods have spoken.

And marvelous, as though from the very first
The human mind had known all that grows and moves,
Foreknown life's melody and rhythm,

In seed grains he can measure the full-grown plant;
And flies, bold spirit, flies as the eagles do
Ahead of thunder-storms, preceding
Gods, his own gods, to announce their coming.¹⁷

It is obvious that the Rousseau ode revisits the problems of the Song "As on a holiday". Interestingly enough, Hölderlin re-used the last stanzas of another unfinished ode to start the ode on Rousseau. He 'recycled' some stanzas from a lyrical fragment called "An die Deutschen" ("To the Germans"), in which the now-familiar issue is addressed again: the difficult divination, expectation and anticipation of a joyfully fulfilled future, represented by "[O] creative one, when, genius innate in us,/Wholly will you appear, soul of our fatherland?" and by "the others to come, those for whose advent we wait". It is *again* thematized as the drama of a lyrical "I" that is struggling with this difficult divination and is condemned to solitude and isolation. By the (unfinished) end of this draft, the "I" is suddenly turned into an anonymous "you" whose tragic fate is evoked: "Without resonance, long empty for you it's been/In your hall, poor seer, now; yearning your eyes grow dim,/And you drowse away, vanish/Never noticed, unnamed, unwept". Remarkably enough, Hölderlin identifies this "you", which had already created some therapeutic distance to the lyrical I, as "Rousseau" and starts his new ode with verses that paraphrase the last four stanzas of the previous ode "To the Germans". The shift corresponds to the poetics of the other or alien 'poetic character', though 'Rousseau' as a poetic construction (and biographical real person) is much less than the Empedocles figure (and his fatal decision to jump into the Etna), an example of a "bolder" and "more alien" metaphor. But this "Rousseau" is therefore presented as a perhaps more successful 'mediator' than the lyrical I/you of the original draft "To the Germans", or so it seems. Yet, the lyrical voice of the poem hesitates and oscillates between apostrophizing a psychologically closer "you" and talking about a stranger "he" or "him".

If we look at the "Rousseau"-ode as an (unfinished) whole, consisting of ten stanzas, it is striking that the fragment begins and ends (without ending) with a reference to time, starting with a moderate elegiac observation of humanity's finite timeframe ("eng begrenzt") and—as a consequence—of the transitoriness of nations ("wo unendlich ferne/Ziehen vorüber die Völkerjahre") and a more specific evocation of such a finite and apparently finished existence of the apostrophized "you" that the title of the Ode identifies as Rousseau: "You were and saw and wondered, and darkness falls/Now sleep etc." The following five stanzas develop the 'story' of this "you"—Rousseau—as a mediator, very akin to the poet in "As on a Holiday", whose mediation does not seem to succeed (again one recalls the "song" that might (or not) be successful). The image of the weeping willow in the fifth stanza emblemizes the theme of mourning, finiteness and ending. But from the sixth stanza on, the elegiac resignation seems to transform into a more hopeful, yet still restrained appraisal of the "you" who—nevertheless—is said to have "heard and comprehended the strangers' tongue/Interpreted their souls". The last stanza breaks off in a metaphorical gesturing towards a future beyond the horizon of humanity's (and "yours", "Rousseau's") "narrowly confined day-time", as "he" (Rousseau) is imagined "fly[ing] as the eagles do/Ahead of thunder-storms, preceding/Gods, his own gods, to announce their coming".

Before having a closer look at this more affirmative, hopeful turn towards a future, we should look more carefully at the first part of the poem and analyze its elegiac tendency in depth. From the very beginning, the poem articulates subtle or explicit contrasts and ambiguities, oscillating between negative and affirmative poles. The paratactic "you were and saw and wondered", followed by the image of the evening as the end of life articulates the finiteness of a human life, and the fairly explicit and slightly parodic allusion to Caesar's *veni, vidi, vici* also evokes the "you"'s reflexive philosophical being, seeing and "wondering"

("staunen") in the "evening", at dusk, when Minerva's owl flies out and passing time may be 'saved' through thinking. It reminds us as well of the contrast that opened the earlier ode "To the Germans": the opposition of action ("Tat") and thinking ("Gedanke") and the reflection on their productive relation that, according to Hölderlin, was realized in the French Revolution (to which Rousseau made his intellectual contribution). The 'Hegelian' reading that the beginning might suggest is nevertheless thwarted by Hölderlin's revision of the first lines of the second stanza: the original line "and many oversee [*übersiehet*] their own time" was rewritten as "and many see beyond [*siehet über*] their own time" to make clear that what is at stake is a real future, a "free" and "open" dimension, not the closure of history in the self-presence of the Spirit. The following stanzas seem to particularly develop the contrast between, on the one hand, the talent to look beyond one's own time ("Ihm zeigt ein Gott ins Freie"), a strong sense of foreboding of the coming of "the new ones", those "promised to come" ("die Verheißenen") as well as the capacity to "name" ("nennst") them, and, on the other hand, the repeated failure or unsuccessful reception and lacking appreciation of this apparent prophetic capacity: the "you" is said to stand "yearning at the shore, an offence [*Ärgernis*] to your kin". The biblical and specifically Christological connotation cannot be ignored he is "a shade", an unburied dead", roaming about without direction, "without resonance" ("klanglos in der Halle"). And yet, what "he cannot grasp", as the sixth stanza points out (articulating a shift from the elegiac towards a moderate hymnic tone), an infinite "fulness of life" dawning ("dämmt") around him, actually lives in him and the fruit springs forth "at present" ("gegenwärtig"), "warming, effective" ("wärmend und wirkend").

What exactly does this refer to, what is "the fruit" and what time or whose time is referred to by the adverb "gegenwärtig"? Is it not the time of the poem, Hölderlin's time, in which the "you" or "he"—Rousseau—is evoked for us, reading it? Rousseau, whose words were not received, as he himself was waiting utterly alone at the shore of time for the promised ones, announced as coming from the future, called and named by him, but not having (yet) arrived in the presence. This solitary Rousseau, who was apostrophized in the fourth stanza as a "poor man", being "without resonance in the hall" ("klanglos in der Halle")—without public resonance—was, however, already called upon in the third stanza, not in person, but as his "lonely speech": "where [are those new ones] drawing near, that/Audibly, you, lonely speech, may sound then?" It is not difficult to read into this "lonely speech" Rousseau's "Reveries of a Solitary Walker", especially the Fifth Reverie that evokes Rousseau's stay at the 'Lac de Biene' and the Saint Peter's Isle, but this obvious intertextual reference is not the point; what happens in the poem is the repetition, the re-evocation of a former poetic speech in which the speech's act of announcing the future—even if it testified of a painful lack of what it would have liked to announce and transmit—is still handed down. The promise of the future is transmitted in the poem by apostrophizing and reiterating "a lonely speech" for which, almost in vain, in a dramatic rhetorical question, a future reception and understanding are hoped for ("daß du einmal/einsame Rede, *vernehmlich* seiest?"), but that was uttered by someone who had once received and understood "the language of the strangers": "*Vernommen* hast du sie die Sprache der Fremdlinge,/Gedeutet ihre Seele. . ." The "strangers" ("Fremdlinge") are mentioned in the previous line: "The heralds have found their way to your heart" ("es haben die Boten dein Herz gefunden"), and on their turn, these "heralds" are identified as "the rays" of "a distant sun". Hölderlin's ode embeds Rousseau's lonely speech into a new one. Transmitting being suspended between 'having heard' (*vernommen*) and 'hoping to be heard' (*vernehmlich*), it articulates the temporal disjunction and even incommensurability between the past and the future, the non-closure of arrival: "still *endend*" in the soul of the poet were the spirits of time in "As on a holiday" (and some were "deutungsvoller", "vernehmlicher"). "*Wärmend und wirkend*" are the fruit that spring from Rousseau, forever ending in a presence without being fully present. The embedding and re-iteration of the lonely speech—itsself a moment of tradition and the transition of 'messengers' (of what?)—make one wonder whether the apostrophized "you" and the "he" that sometimes takes its place, is still only

Rousseau or—surreptitiously—also becomes the shift for the poetic voice that is speaking now in the poem.

In the ode, this particular poetico-hermeneutic situation of the “you”/“he” that has to receive (*vernehmen*) and has to be received (*vernehmlich*) and the fundamental time lapse that separates these poles is linked to the word *Winke* (winks, hints). “A Hint”—says the poem—sufficed for him who was “yearning” (“*sehrend*”). And “in Winks from/Time immemorial the gods have spoken”. What is a “*Wink*”? Grimms’ Historical Dictionary of the German Language tells us that *Wink* expresses (or can express) three aspects. (1) As a ‘hint’, it refers to something that remains unspoken or is not-outspoken; it is not a fixed signifier with a fixed meaning but a vague sketch of such a sign, thus *more a gesture than an utterance*¹⁸. (2) It is usually very limited in time, *momentary*, like a blink of the eye: a sign that one has to catch. (3) It commonly contains *a performative aspect of appeal or demand*, a gesture that expresses a non-specified will or desire, though one that is not outspoken: it has to be ‘received’ without necessarily being deciphered, carried on rather than carried out. If such *Winke* have been the language of the gods since time immemorial, their ‘message’ has never been a specific presence, meaning or commandment, but in its origin, it is a ‘desire’ waiting for a response. If a *Wink* suffices for the yearning one, it does so because it *is* yearning itself, the process of time as a process of desired but withheld signification, that one can never ‘grasp’ from a traditional hermeneutical perspective; one can only transmit a potentiality of signification and of interpretation, of the hints, already transmitted by messengers in between.¹⁹

But for him who awaits and insists on this standing at the shore of the future, in the breach of time, a miracle seems to take place, which is what the last two stanzas suggest before breaking off: “and wonderful, as if from the beginning/the spirit of man had already experienced all Becoming and Working, life’s path//He already knows from the first sign on how it will end,/and flies, bold spirit, as eagles do/ahead of thunder-storms, before his gods, foretelling their arrival.” This vision seems to deny and negate all the aporias and stumbling blocks that had been evoked in the rest of the poem as well as in former poems on the poet’s difficult task of speaking from within history about the future. The metaphor of the eagle is indeed a “bold” one, too bold to actually be true. But the twist lies in the clear accent on the miraculous ‘as if’ character, imagining the unthinkable, the impossible perhaps, if one thinks of possibility as what will become present as an actualization of what has always been there, just waiting for actualization. The miracle happens as the poet’s speech paradoxically insists on the signs of time as time’s infinite potentiality, its infinite potential for signification that nevertheless refrains from actualizing itself: “still end-end”, always hinting. The future will always be breaking into a presence from elsewhere; the “hints of the gods” (“*Winke der Götter*”), transferred by the “strangers”, the “heralds”, are therefore not signs to be deciphered but to be carried on and over by the poet’s poem as *Winke*—he flies “*before* his gods”, not *with* them, to announce their arrival which is still imminent. The poet’s wink is not a transfiguration of time’s finiteness, but at best, it is a pre-figuration of a future that is paradoxically ‘behind’ him: he cannot see it, he only forebodes it. But despite this lapse, this difference within the vision, it is explicitly envisaged as a wishful but unreal dream (“*als hätte*”), and it is ‘interrupted’ as the poem breaks off, turning itself into a *Wink* that withholds its coming to an end.

4. The Stranger/God: Winking, Coming, Passing

Meanwhile, we can conclude from our reading of the poem so far that Rousseau is an invention, an invented figuration of the stranger invoked by Hölderlin in the poem. Let us read the words and lines studied in the previous section again, now from this perspective.

Rousseau is presented as the stranger himself, *and* as the messenger and interpreter of this figure of the stranger: “You’ve heard and comprehended the strangers’ tongue/Interpreted their soul”, the eighth stanza opens, presenting this ‘you’ as the messenger of the strangers (“*Sprache der Fremdlinge*”). This “you” mirrors the “heralds” mentioned in the seventh stanza whose ‘heralding’ is continued by the “you”.

At the same time, however, Rousseau, mostly addressed by the poet in the second person, ‘you’, and sometimes in the third person, turns out to be not only the herald, but also the one for whom the heralds have “looked for”, that is, “for your heart. . . and found it” (at the end of the seventh stanza). This suggests that the “you” that Rousseau addresses is the stranger *himself*, doubling, so to speak, his or her appearance (the messenger of the mysterious strangers) and in-appearance (the stranger himself). Already in the opening stanza, this double figuration comes to the fore: “How narrowly confined is our day-time here./You were and saw and wondered, and darkness falls;/Now sleep, where infinitely far the/Years of the peoples go drifting past you”. Here, “you” is introduced as a passing stranger who will be forgotten, only to be awakened and remembered in the following verses of the ode. He is gone, but as such, he is here, alive, speaking to us *in* our speaking about him. This is not absence brought to presence, as is the programme of the phenomenological turn in theology executed by thinkers such as Jean-Luc Marion (the logic of apparition: *phainomai*), but, as Nancy would say, absence *as* presence (the logic of the in-apparent).²⁰

Who then is this stranger coinciding with his embodiment, his concrete manifestation? Who is this absence coinciding, not with his presence, but with his constant *presentation* in the words of the poem? “Abroad [ins Freie], a god directs them, but, yearning, you/Must haunt the shore, a shade, an outcast” (second stanza). Here, it is a god who sends the announcing messenger (“ihm”) into a space in which he is free, enabling him to have a “vision” that looks beyond the here and now which “outflies their time” (“siehet über die eigne Zeit”²¹). And in this way, the poem appears to present a god who turns the humans, the messengers, into strangers, “outcasts” themselves. Again, the stranger and his manifestation merge here, but the poet’s suggestion now is that the stranger is *divine*, is a ‘god’ in that he has been sent by “a god”. Further on, the language (“tongue”) of the strangers and that of the gods are equated, and both languages meet in the gesture of yearning. We quote the eighth stanza again: “You’ve heard and comprehended the strangers’ tongue,/Interpreted their soul! For the yearning man/The hint [Wink] sufficed, because in hints from/Time immemorial the gods have spoken”.

In this eighth stanza and the following two, the last ones, Heidegger bases himself—without referring explicitly to Hölderlin’s poem—in his late collection of reflections *Contributions to Philosophy* (Heidegger 1999). In the penultimate and final stanzas, the “you” is identified and generalized by Hölderlin (Heidegger follows this generalization in *Contributions*) as “the human mind” who “foreknows life’s melody and rhythm”, and who precedes gods, “his own gods, to announce their coming”. Why *his own* gods? Because this prophet (he who “announces”; “weissagend”), this eagle, is none other *than* the gods. And why is that, in turn? Because he *is* their hint²², and they, the gods, are nothing but a hint. The hint, the wink—in German *and* in English—is not something belonging to language, some way to express things: the hint is a mode of being between absence and presence.²³ The hint *is*, if we are consistent, the stranger. This peculiar logic of absent presence/present absence returns in a later poem, the second version of “Mnemosyne”, on which we will focus our attention towards the end of this article. There, the idea that we are merely hints—and being hints marks our being strangers to each other, strangers between gods and humans—is presented in a more problematic tone than in “Rousseau”: “A sign we are, uninterpreted [deutungslos²⁴], painless we are/and have almost lost language in exile [“in der Fremde”]”.²⁵

How can one understand Hölderlin’s subtle emphasis on the certain divinity of the stranger? And what is Hölderlin’s problem with this presumed divinity of the stranger, that is, of this entanglement of gods and strangers, a problem posed to modern secular culture? It is this problem that interests us in the 21st century: can one think the figure of the stranger as a ‘human’ who constantly bears the signs, the ‘hints’ of the divine within himself? And in “Rousseau”, Hölderlin adds a second problem to this: what should one think of a world—the modern world—in which the stranger is no longer seen, heard or ‘comprehended’ in his or her divinity, that is, in his or her transcendence?

The lament of the first four stanzas indicates that the poet is critical of such a world and is even in despair about it: such a world, Hölderlin's world, is a "confined day-time", and the messenger/stranger is condemned to "lonely speech", like a "poor man", "roaming about", "unquiet, seeking rest" "and no one".../...can direct you" (stanzas 3 and 4). Modernity has lost its sense of the stranger and has lost the gods that are presented by him or her. In other, more philosophical words: it has lost that strange mode of being that is the hint ("... because in hints from/Time immemorial the gods have spoken").

But, as we already noted in Section 3, after the fourth stanza, the mood shifts to a more affirmative approach to the crisis of the stranger/god, a certain optimism even²⁶: "So be content!..." From this moment on in the poem, the denial of the stranger and the absence of the gods are considered their chance, their momentum at the same time, like some force that "lives in him, and present,/Warming, effective, his fruit contains it" (stanza six; the poet introduced the metaphor of the "tree" in the fifth stanza). How should one understand this shift?

In our view, Hölderlin's attempt to bring together the human stranger passing by and requesting hospitality and the divine stranger/god in the figure of Rousseau mirrors another attempt: to bring together the figures of the ancient, mythical gods and the one God-figure introduced by monotheism and emerging in the so-called 'axial age' with the rise of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.²⁷ The mythical, polytheistic, pre-axial gods were the gods of proximity and presence, manipulating human life from close by. They often appear *into* human life in the form of a stranger. The old laws of hospitality prescribe opening your doors to a stranger passing by, since in every stranger, a god may be hidden. The new God-figure introduced in the Jewish *Tenakh* and resumed and transformed in the Christian and Islamic God is a God of distance and absence. He retreats from the human world He has created and is less of an interventionist or manipulative god. He is first and foremost a transcendent God, living elsewhere and not concerned with the human world that now has become the property and responsibility of humanity. Humans are created in God's image instead of being submitted to and 'operated' by divine fate. "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them; and God said to them: [...] fill the earth and subdue it. [...] and rule over it".²⁸

However, does this new radical distance imply that the monotheistic God is no longer the stranger/god to whom one has to offer hospitality? Is the new God completely removed from the human world? Here, Hölderlin is right to suggest that exactly the absence of this God is also His chance to intensify the role of the stranger as compared to the old gods, who in the end, appeared to humans with familiarity, with their well-known identifiers and attributes. The new God is not knowable at all; He is the ultimate example of strangeness. And as such, parallel to the old gods, the monotheistic God reveals Himself *as* the alien passing by. He is the invisible, unknowable One that visits us at times by not showing Himself at all, such as in Exodus 19, in which Jahwe passes by Moses in a fire, in smoke and in a cloud in order to give him the *Thora*, the Ten Commandments, the first of which calls on humanity to say farewell to the gods and their idols (Exodus 20:3-4). In a literal sense, Jahwe visits Abraham as a stranger—as three strangers that later on reveal themselves as angels—who receive hospitality from Abraham without having to request it in the first place... only to bring their message to Abraham and Sarah that the impossible will take place: the miracle of the old woman becoming pregnant with Isaac.²⁹ The passing by in the wink of a stranger always "announces" a miracle, the unexpected, the unheard of. It is a "seed grain" that promises a future ("a full-grown plant") while coming *from* the future, that is from absence as presence. In a way, the passer-by "precedes" the future and its "coming". The passers-by, the three strangers that astound Abraham and Sarah, "fly" as a "bold spirit", "ahead of thunder-storms"...³⁰

"In seed grains he can measure the full-grown plant;/ And flies, bold spirit, flies as the eagles do/Ahead of thunder-storms, preceding/Gods, his own gods, to announce their coming" (the last stanza).

So, in the “coming” of the gods, this radical absence is addressed. In his poem, we conclude, Hölderlin tries to stage both the old gods and the new God as belonging to a non-existent future, as we already briefly observed in Section 3. But the wink, the “hints” as the gods’/God’s “tongue”, brings this absence into the moment of the encounter with the stranger, into the here and now. We propose to analyze this complex structure—the future figure coming to the present in a wink, in exactly that which does not have any presence—as the dynamic of *passing*. In order to explore this possibility, we will have to turn to Heidegger’s way of dealing with and of ‘using’ Hölderlin’s poetry. Heidegger names the stranger/god passing in a wink as “The last god”: the gods/God who come and disappear, and who, precisely because of this, are always fugitive (Heidegger speaks of the “flight of the gods”). This not being there, always being absent in place and time is the way the gods/God are. Our mediator between the theme of the *Wink*, Heidegger’s rephrasing of it as a form of passing and Hölderlin is a chapter in Nancy’s *Dis-enclosure*.

The Stranger Passing, Winking: Hölderlin and Heidegger

We will briefly investigate the possible meanings of the dynamic of absence and presence interacting with each other, in which God “is” only in “passing”: passing by and passing on or even away, seen as two modes of one and the same moment. This passing as a crucial movement that defines the divine in Nancy’s outlook (the divine does not pass, as a subject of the act, but it *is* the act of passing) requires, *as* the movement, a place, a *topos*. It is always a passing towards, on and away from a place that is “almost nothing”, just a meeting point, a touching point, or as Nancy depicts it in “On a Divine *Wink*”, just a wink or a blink of the eye. Nancy starts from a reading of a formulation in Heidegger’s *Contributions to Philosophy*.

He focuses on two citations from the *Contributions*. The first is from fragment 256 in chapter VII, “The last god”: “The last god has its *essential swaying* within the hint, the onset and staying-away of the arrival as well as the flight of the gods who have been, and within their sheltered and hidden transformation” (“Seine *Wesung* hat er im Wink, dem Anfall und Ausbleib der Ankunft sowohl als auch der Flucht der gewesenen Götter und ihrer verborgenen Verwandlung”) (Heidegger 1999, p. 288). The second is from fragment 255 in the same chapter, “Turning in Enowning” (“Die Kehre im Ereignis”): “Enowning must need *Dasein* and, needing it, must place it into the call and so bringing it before the passing of last god”. (“Das Ereignis muss das *Dasein* brauchen, seiner bedürftend es in den Zuruf stellen und so vor dem Vorbeigang des letzten Gottes bringen”) (Heidegger 1999, p. 287).

Nancy states that the gods/God in these Hölderlinian evocations by Heidegger *are* signs, meaning in fact that the stranger is the one who “makes”, who gives signs. Again, we oscillate between the sign-making of the gods/God, that *are* the gods/God, and we humans who partake in this endless play of absence, who, parallel to the gods/God, *are* the sign-making.

“The god is therefore not the designated but only the designating, the making-a-sign. There is no passage of the god, but this is the passing of the passage, the passage of whoever makes a sign. The passage of the one passing by—whose coming becomes more distant in the instant—makes the gesture that hails from afar and that at the same time puts the distant itself at a distance: the ever-renewed distancing of the other in being, and of the absent in the present”. (Nancy 2008c, p. 114)

We observe that Nancy thinks of the gesture of passing—metaphorically juxtaposed with winking, hinting or signaling—as the dynamic that names and conceptualizes the other dynamic between absence and presence. Passing is always coming and leaving at the same time, as in a twinkling of the eye. The interplay between the proximity of the gods and the distance of the God, that is, the monotheistic problem proper, is addressed here by using a term in Heidegger: *Vorbeigang*, passage. Then, in a next step, still close to Heidegger, the “name God” is applied to the gesture of passing. Heidegger speaks of the *Vorbeigang des letzten Gottes*.

The way to speak of the monotheistic God, if we follow Nancy, is by speaking of a passer-by. This name can only indicate the “unnameable”, since it does not make sense in the ordinary way: its sense is that it hesitates between being and non-being, between the absence of sense and the presence of sense. In this fundamental, dynamic hesitation, it can never be a “stabilized” substance, such as a supreme being:

“Only when reduced to the principle of supreme being does ‘god’ have a sense: but then, he no longer needs his name, and this is what is announced by saying, proclaiming and shouting that ‘God is dead’.³¹ But the name *God* does not die with that supreme being. And that should perhaps make us decide to consider it a proper name. A proper name does not die [. . .]. This proper name, *God*, insists, as if it should be the name that remains in the vacancy left by [. . .] ‘the last god’.” (Nancy 2008c, p. 115)

God as a name—a hint, a sign—refers to a ‘presence of retreat’ that is at the same time a ‘retreat from presence’. Let us note that this retreat is just as much a retreat from absence: both retreats follow on from each other continuously—that is the dynamic of hesitation.

“Whatever the unnameable non-meaningful may be, the retreat of being into its *différance* the bearer of the name, signals it. . . It signals it in passing, since it cannot be stabilized in a presence. He who signals in passing is the passer-by himself. The passer-by passes, and in order to pass, is someone. Someone who passes is but the tread of the passing, not a being who would have passing as an attribute. One should not speak—Heidegger himself should not—of the passing of the god: but God is in the passing. God is the passer-by and the step of the passer-by. This step is his gesture, which, in passing, *winks* and differentiates itself from itself” [. . .]. (Nancy 2008c, p. 115)³²

The structure of presence and absence we encounter here, mediated by the gestures of retreat and passing (both gestures involving the elements of coming, arriving and leaving), is what Heidegger calls the *event* (*Ereignis*). In other words, it is an event structured by presence in absence, absence in presence: “. . .the onset and absence of an arrival . . . flight of the gods that are past. . .” and thus are absent, but still are present in “their hidden transformation” (Heidegger 1999, p. 288).

Among the three monotheisms, one can describe Christianity in particular as a religion staging this passing event and introducing its God as a passer-by. The incarnation is the narrative of the coming, passing and leaving of God, told not as an historical, but as an infinitely repeating, event: God in Christ *is* this passing movement, problematizing the distinction between humans and God, because he is neither of the two and both at the same time. The unique staging of this passing event is rephrased in numerous scenes and stories in the gospels: from the famous visitations and annunciations by the stranger-angel, announcing the coming of God and simultaneously conceiving him in the virgin Mary, via the many ‘passings’ of Jesus when calling—beckoning—his disciples, to Christ’s passing by the travelers to Emmaus after his death, lingering between absence and presence.³³ The fourfold, complex narrative of the incarnation, laid down in the four Gospels, and developing later on into the centre of Christian doctrine, is the story, told in endless variations, of “. . .an alterity that passes through, and throughout, the world, an infinite separation of the finite. . .”. (Nancy 2008b, p. 47)

“Likewise, it follows that the ‘divine’ henceforth no longer has a place either in the world or outside it, for there is no other world. What ‘is not of this world’ is not elsewhere: it is the opening in the world, the separation, the parting and the raising. Thus ‘revelation’ is not the sudden appearance of a celestial glory. To the contrary, it consists in the departure of the body raised into glory. It is in absenting, in going absent, that there is revelation. . . (Nancy 2008b, pp. 47–48)

However, within the context of a deconstruction of monotheism, this event is mostly and above all a modern event: it is the event of modern sense in its instability and groundlessness. Modern sense is without a transcendent Giver, who is outside this world; it simply “happens” in a moment, at a place, caught up as it is between presence and absence. The event of sense in its modern, aporetic condition mirrors the event of the passing God who is no longer simply outside nor inside—who deregulates the opposition of outside and inside. Because he is no longer the external Giver of sense, Heidegger can speak of the “last God”. Nancy formulates this issue clearly in the chapter “Atheism and Monotheism” in *Dis-Enclosure*. The last God is the monotheistic God who “dissolves the very essence of the divine”, and in this way, he “figures” the *Ereignis* of modern humans, that is, their “expropriation” from themselves—the self as an essence encompassing ‘properness’, ‘property’ and ‘identity’ (as in the expression: ‘I am myself’).

“That god, that ‘last god’, as he [Heidegger] puts it elsewhere—that ‘god’, insofar as every god is the ‘last one’, which is to say that every god dissipates and dissolves the very essence of the divine—is a god that *beckons* [*winkt*]. That means, it makes a sign without sense, a signal of approach, of invitation, and of departure. This god has its essence in *winken*. And that sign-making, that blink of the eye comes to pass, starting from and in the direction of the *Ereignis*—the appropriating event through which man, appropriated to or by being, may be expropriated (*ent-eignet*) of an identity closed in on its humanity”.³⁴

5. “A Sign We Are. . .”

The interruption and fragmentation of this stranger/god passing by in his hints will remain the crux that Hölderlin’s later work addresses in many ways. It is a complex attempt to evoke a continuity of *vernehmen*, of receiving *and* giving the “hints of the gods” without succumbing to the “false priesthood” that was protested against in the fragmentation of voices in “As on a holiday”.

Returning again to the beginning of the “Rousseau” and its evocation of the transitoriness, the passing of life—human lives, the lives of nations and the lives of cultural worlds—Hölderlin’s famous (almost) opening lines of the theoretical fragment “The Declining Fatherland. . .” (also known as ‘Becoming in Decline’ or Becoming in Dissolution) come to mind:

“(. . .) For the world of all worlds, which always *is* and must be, the all in all, only *exhibits* (*stellt sich dar*) itself in all time—or in the decline or in the moment, or more genetically, in the becoming of the moment, and in the beginning of time and world; and this decline and beginning is like language, expression sign exhibition (*Darstellung*) of a living, but particular whole, which precisely becomes the whole in its effects, and specifically in this way, that, as is the case with language, from the one side little or nothing living and existent seems to reside in it, whilst, from the other, everything does”.³⁵

Hölderlin’s vertiginous linguistic specifications and paraphrases, his both syntactical and paratactical search for the ‘genetic’ moment of time, world *and* language as an infinitesimal separation of finiteness seem to be an attempt to catch the very moment of time’s passing as the moment of the “all in all” (and isn’t that the *Hen kai Pan*?) with a reiterated revealing simile (“like language”) that may very well go to the heart of the *Winke*: all this points toward the fact that there is no genesis—becoming and dissolution—of life without the co-constitutive moment of exhibition (*Darstellung*) and signification that is not yet (or not necessarily) signifying something. This can be the zero degree of language, or it can signify “everything”, the “all in all”.

It is exactly this ambivalence that constitutes the *Winke*: it is this constitutive undecidability of signification that only hypothetically is virtually sublated in the “first sign” (“*im ersten Zeichen*”) in which “he” is supposed to recognize the end of all becoming—a ‘sublation’ that is interrupted. “He” cannot transcend his status as a carrier of “Winks”,

and perhaps this impotentiality is the real, the stronger attitude and the genuine potentiality of “Dichtermuth” (“Poet’s courage”), another poem already referred to above, which Hölderlin reworked and renamed—paradoxically—as “Blödigkeit” (“Timidness”). The young Walter Benjamin wrote an essay on Hölderlin’s rewriting of the one poem into the other, in which he claims that “Timidness” became the authentic stance of the poet. Since he has been transposed into the middle of life, nothing awaits him (the poet) but motionless existence and complete passivity, which is the essence of the courageous man—nothing except to surrender himself wholly to relationships [*Beziehung*]” (Benjamin 2000). ‘Nothing but’, ‘nothing except’: this usually neglected caveat reiterates the paradoxical act of impotentiality: of enduring, persevering at this linguistic watershed of nothing and everything, in the pure mediality of language as gesture.³⁶

5.1. “Mnemosyne”: From the Winks of the Gods to the Winks of Humanity

To understand this, one could consider again Hölderlin’s intensive ‘quoting’ of Rousseau’s Fifth *Reverie*: “Vorwärts aber und rückwärts wollen wir nicht sehn. Uns wiegen lassen, wie/ Auf schwankem Kahne der See”. (“Forward, however, and back we will/Not look. Be lulled and rocked as/On a swaying skiff of the sea”).³⁷ These verses appear in a late fragmentary Song, best known under the title “Mnemosyne”, and they echo a passage in Rousseau’s *Reverie* in which he tries to forget everything, lying in a little skiff on the lake, a situation “where the soul finds a solid enough base to rest completely and to gather there all its being, without needing to recall the past nor to step on the future”.³⁸ Adorno commented upon Hölderlin’s peculiar paraphrase by stressing this passivity paradoxically as a moment of resistance against a dialectical synthesis: “The decision, finally, expressed as an anacoluth in an amazing reversal, ‘Be rocked as/On a swaying skiff of the sea,’ is like an intention to cast aside synthesis and trust to pure passivity in order to completely fill the present” (Adorno 1992, p. 142).³⁹

Against this background of Hölderlin’s late—maybe last—evocation of Rousseau in the fragmentary Song “Mnemosyne”, the most famous opening verses of the second draft may invite a slightly different interpretation than those readings that tend to stress (only) the pathological and/or tragic decline of a (Hölderlin’s) poetic voice: “Ein Zeichen sind wir, deutungslos/Schmerzlos sind wir und haben fast/Die Sprache in der Fremde verloren”—“A sign we are, uninterpreted [or: uninterpretable, or: without interpretation]/painless are we, and have almost/lost language in exile”. The shift in the personal or singular voice—I, you and he—to the plural “we” had been ongoing since “As on a Holiday”, reflecting his attempts to solve the problem of subjectivity and/or false prophecy and priesthood by choosing the choral plurality of a ‘we’, the collective voice of a community. Yet, its utopian perspective—“Soon we will be Song”/“bald sind wir aber Gesang” (“Celebration of Peace”/“Friedensfeier”)⁴⁰—is apparently turned into its negation, an almost speechless sign that cannot be interpreted anymore, though we still share it, but as strangers in a foreign world or exiles: “in der Fremde”. This collective “we” does not transcend the status and task of winking either, though the shift reflects Hölderlin’s conviction that the problem he has been addressing—how to transmit this *Wink*—is one that can only be a shared one, the sharing of it does not overcome the undecidability of the *Wink* but addresses it as a collective task of humankind. The ‘watershed of language’ that Hölderlin evoked to conceive of the almost genetic moment of time as an abysmal process of dis-appearing, of becoming (emerging, appearing) and dissolving of temporal worlds s—“from the one side little or nothing living and existent seems to reside in it, whilst, from the other, everything does”—now runs through mankind itself; we *are* this watershed. They—“we”—have ‘become’ such signs that resist transfiguration, the transfiguration of our being in time, in the here and now, but this resistance also creates a paradoxical relation to our temporal condition. The resistance to ‘interpretation’ (“deutungslos”) as well as the utterly unpathetic attitude that is ascribed to “us”, who are said to be “painless” (“schmerzlos”), and the almost speechless character of this “Zeichen” (“fast die Sprache in der Fremde verloren”) are all negativities that do not just refer to the lack of symptoms of a decline that are either *faits accomplis* or dialectical negations waiting to be sublated. They echo Hölderlin’s ideas about the complex and

ambivalent relation of art (poetry, tragedy) and ‘our time’, the urgency of a poetic speech that would address us, our—modern—time and political ideal (“fatherland”). In the “Remarks on Antigone” (*Anmerkungen zur Antigone*), Hölderlin called “das Schicksallose (lack of fate, of destiny) the *δυσμορον*, our deficiency” (“*Schwäche*”).⁴¹ These cryptic remarks certainly allow for different interpretations, but if read together with Hölderlin’s famous poetological letter to Casimir Böhlendorff in December 1801 on the differences between Greek and modern art (especially writing), the “*Schwäche*” of being “*Schicksallos*” may refer not to a modern condition as such that would make us ‘deficient’—a lack to be deplored and to be ‘overcome’—but rather to the lack of an approach to this fundamental, perhaps even constitutive condition: the lack of a poetic language to address what is most intimately ‘ours’, a being without destiny that does not seem to match with pathetic tragic forms of suffering, nor with hermeneutic or speculative transfigurations of this modern condition. In his letter to Böhlendorff, Hölderlin uses the concept “Sobriety” (“*Nüchternheit*”) as the aesthetic denominator of such an un-pathetic “*schmerzlos*” and “*deutungslos*” exhibition of a being without destiny, which is a challenging task, since “the free use of what is one’s own is the most difficult to learn” (Hölderlin to Böhlendorff, H.’s italics).⁴² We cannot analyze Hölderlin’s letter at length here, but at its core, there is an astonishingly modern analysis and critique of what is considered to be “one’s own” (“*das Eigene*”) and the practicing of this “*Eigenes*”; for Hölderlin, this is an almost impossible relation with a fundamental non-identity, with expropriation rather than appropriation (see Philipsen 2012).

In the second (as well as in the first) draft of “*Mnemosyne*”, reference to Rousseau’s Fifth *Reverie* is still lacking, but the original verses are quite astonishing and ‘echo’ in many respects and perhaps even more accurately the thematic core of the Rousseau ode:

“(Nicht vermögen/Die Himmlischen alles [only in the first draft]). Nemlich es reichen/Die Sterblichen eh’ an den Abgrund. Also wendet es sich, das Echo/Mit diesen. Lang ist die Zeit/Es ereignet sich aber/Das Wahre”.

(They are not capable of everything, the celestials. Then mortals rather reach into the abyss. Therefore it turns with them, the echo. Time is long, but what is true will come to pass).

The relation between the mortals and celestials, humanity and god(s), as it is evoked here echoes other similar passages in Hölderlin’s poetry in which the interdependence of humans and god(s) is thematized. The mortals seem to have a ‘privileged’ relation with the abyss—the abyss of beings without destiny, of the “*dusmoran*” and of our finiteness that the gods cannot experience without “us” as the necessary incarnation of an abysmal disappearing—and this capacity—the capacity to ‘relate’ to our own being without destiny, to be capable of our own incapacity—echoes through us (“also wendet es sich, das Echo/Mit diesen”). The celestials, the gods, need mortal humans to endure and carry on with a message that is nothing but the echo, the reverberation, of our finiteness; but in or through this reverberation that “we are”, through our almost (“fast”), yet not absolute speechlessness, the long *durée* of our finite temporality eventually acquires a truthfulness that ‘comes to pass’, not as a revelatory closure of our finite narrative but as its sheer ‘happening’, its passing, its passing by and passing on without destiny. The ‘turn’ that is taken here at the end of the stanza (“es ereignet sich aber das Wahre”) recalls the turn in the Rousseau ode from the melancholy of not being heard as “*einsame Rede*” to the hymnal “bold” image of the eagle that flies before “his own gods”, a messenger of their *Winke*. We argue that the poet’s wink is not a transfiguration of time’s finiteness, but at best a pre-figuration of a future that is paradoxically ‘behind’ him; he cannot see it, he only forebodes it. Moreover, the poem breaks off, turning itself into a wink that withholds its coming-to-an-end and ‘keeping’, in a paradoxical sense, its promise. Likewise, the “*Wahres*” that is said to happen cannot be seen as a teleological perspective, it—“es”—“comes to pass”—to disappear—and only acquires its significance in the reverberation of what does not seem to have an origin or a *telos*.

5.2. Conclusion: A *Chōra* of Winking Strangers

In Section 4, we explored with Nancy how the essence of gods *and* humans lies in the gesture of the *Wink*. The divinity of humanity and the humanity of divinity consists in their being strangers to each other and strangers to themselves. In this fifth section, we demonstrated how Hölderlin creates a poetic world in which a constant, fundamental expropriation of the self takes place. This *Ereignis* as *Enteignis*, as Heidegger coins it, or this ‘happening’ of estrangement is precisely where and how humans appear to one another, where and how they meet and touch. In this poetic theology, the divinity of humans/strangers and the humanity of the gods/strangers unveil their *nicht vermögen*, weakness, finitude and timidity as their *vermögen*, their capacity to expose themselves to the other, to ‘be-in-common’ as Nancy names it. Having nothing in common, having no identity as one’s proper being, but being just a sign, a wink, that suggests who one is, we *are* in common time and again, differently every time. The poetic language of “Rousseau” and “Mnemosyne” results in an enquiry into this signaling, winking logic that puts the modern claims of identity, agency and control of self under pressure.

In this way, Hölderlin introduces the possibility of a new *chōra*, a public space, that mirrors the aesthetic *chōra*, the artistic stage that we evoked in Section 1, a stage which Hölderlin aims to rephrase from Schiller’s and Hegel’s ambitions of an infinite world to be appropriated and changed by art into a finite space in which just the signs of the time are received and signaled among the humans. Such a public space may function as an *agora*—the first meaning of the *chōra* in classical Greece—where people meet and pass each other: they touch each other, they appear to each other as unique persons who only become these persons *in* the fragile, brief and unstable relation of their being in common.⁴³

However, this place, this being *in* the ‘in-common’, this *agora* is, at the same time, the *in-between space*, the *inter-esse*⁴⁴ that remains ungraspable and unsayable: it is a secret and a mystery how this place brings us together as passers-by only to prevent us from identifying any ‘us’, leaving us as signs that “audibly, you, lonely speech, may sound. . .” (“Rousseau”, third stanza). The *agora* of passing strangers invoked by Hölderlin is also always this unknowable, hidden place that defies the logic of philosophers, that is, of reason and of being in Plato’s *Timaeus*: *chōra* is and is not at the same time. It is a mystical space where the distinction between yes and no no longer exerts its regime, where the space *between* both poles signals itself, very briefly but continuously, as in a blink of an eye. Precisely as such, a *chōra* is the place where something new and unexpected can emerge between divinity and humanity, and its “coming” is “announced by the “bold spirit” of the passing “eagle” (“Rousseau”, the last stanza).⁴⁵

6. Coda

Hölderlin’s winking language projects a public space which now, two hundred years later, has evolved into the complex globalized world of strangers: not only refugees and migrants, but indeed all of us. The “ethics of the passer-by” is necessary, as the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe proposes. We hope to have shown that Hölderlin’s late poetry evokes the first hints of such ethics:

“... the ‘passer-by’, that figure of the ‘elsewhere’, since the passer-by is only passing by, because, precisely, arriving from another place, he is moving toward other skies. He is ‘passing’ through—and therefore enjoins us to welcome him, at least momentarily”.⁴⁶

If we take Mbembe seriously, should not we conclude that every *Wink* is an unconditional ‘welcome!’, a gesture in which one loses oneself and, as such, a sign of timid hospitality? We have attempted to read Hölderlin’s late poetry with this inspiration in mind.

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Notes

¹ See (Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe 1988), esp. Ch. 3, “The Poem: A Nameless Art”.

² Dieter Henrich (1972)’s essay still offers a sharp and convincing analysis of the similarities and divergences between Hegel’s and Hölderlin’s philosophical trajectory.

³ This thesis on the dramaturgical perspective underlying and connecting Hölderlin’s work—Songs, the Empedocles tragedy and translations of Sophocles—is most convincingly elaborated by Jörn Etzold (2019)’s book. Etzold proposes that Hölderlin’s Songs should be understood as drafts written for public choral songs that cannot be realized yet in the present, but which can be expected in the future. These ‘choral’ songs (*choros*) would have to ‘take place’ on the fault line of the politically organized space and the ‘outside’, an area surrounding the former and no longer (or not yet) belonging to the cultural human order, something that reminds one of the concept of the political as opposed to politics. This in-between or fault line obviously reminds one of *chōra* as one of the notions that Jacques Derrida has reflected upon throughout his work: an opening that allows and invites beings that are not available or completely sayable, giving space and time without coinciding with this or that moment and place in historical time. See (a.o. Derrida 1995).

⁴ The German *Wink* means hinting at something *and* beckoning someone; it also conveys ‘giving a sign’. The possible English translation with ‘wink’ (of the eye) or ‘sign’ covers some of the meanings in German. Jean-Luc Nancy deals with the problems and possibilities of the translation of this German word at length in the opening section of his “On a Divine *Wink*”, in (Nancy 2008c, pp. 104–20; 104–7). In Section 4, we will delve into Nancy’s treatment of the *Wink*.

⁵ In general, the German original of Hölderlin’s texts is taken from the ‘Münchener Ausgabe’: (Hölderlin 1992). The first reference for the English translations of the poems is (Hölderlin 1998). For theoretical texts or letters, we have used Friedrich Hölderlin (1988, 2009). But we have taken the liberty to make use of other translations or our own translations if we thought that a translation was not accurate. In all cases, the origin of the translation is identified.

⁶ This is Michael Hamburger’s translation of *Blödigkeit*.

⁷ For a detailed analysis of Rousseau’s presence in Hölderlin’s “Der Rhein”, see (Philipsen 1990).

⁸ (Corngold 2002). See also Ulrich Gaier’s chapter on (Gaier 2020).

⁹ Translation S. Corngold.

¹⁰ See note 1 above.

¹¹ Adler, p. 287.

¹² Adler, p. 259.

¹³ MH, pp. 465–67. See the original German poem in MA, pp. 262–64: “Doch uns gebührt es, unter Gottes Gewittern,/Ihr Dichter! mit entblößtem Haupte zu stehen,/Des Vaters Strahl, ihn selbst, mit eigner Hand/Zu fassen und dem Volk ins Lied/Gehüllt die himmlische Gabe zu reichen./Denn sind nur reinen Herzens,/Wie Kinder, wir, sind schuldlos unsere Hände,/ /Des Vaters Strahl, der reine, versengt es nicht/Und tieferschüttert, die Leiden des Stärkeren/Mitleidend, bleibt in den hochherstürzenden Stürmen/Des Gottes, wenn er nahet, das Herz doch fest./Doch weh mir, wenn von//Und sag ich gleich, //Ich sei genaht, die Himmlischen zu schauen,/Sie selbst, sie werfen mich tief unter die Lebenden,/Den falschen Priester, ins Dunkel, daß ich/Das warnende Lied den Gelehrigen singe, //Dort ---”.

¹⁴ MH, pp. 462–63.

¹⁵ See Samuel Weber’s succinct but very perceptive analysis of the present perfect on Hölderlin’s verse at the end of his essay Weber (2010).

¹⁶ Potentiality or plural ‘potentialities’ are a key concept in Giorgio Agamben’s work. Inspired by Walter Benjamin’s political theology, Agamben writes “Remembrance restores possibility to the past, making what happened incomplete and completing what never was. Remembrance is neither what happened nor what did not happen but, rather, their potentialization, their becoming possible once again. (...) Potentiality (...) keeps possibility suspended between occurrence and non-occurrence, between the capacity to be and the capacity not to be” (Agamben 1999, p. 267).

¹⁷ MH, p. 179 and p. 181 and MA, pp. 267–269.

¹⁸ In a brief but inspiring essay ‘Notes on Gesture’, Giorgio Agamben defines gesture as “expos[ing] the word in its own mediality, in its own being a means, without any transcendence. The gesture is, in this sense, communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality ... the gesture is

essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language" (Agamben 2000, pp. 48–59, 58). But again, what sounds like a deficit of communication turns out to be an essential emancipatory moment for Agamben, the very essence of politics: "Politics is the sphere of pure means, that is, of the absolute and complete gesturality of human beings" (59). Just before the conclusion of the essay, Agamben defines a gesture in another way by distinguishing it from both acting and making: "What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported". He adds: "The gesture, in other words, opens the sphere of ethos as the more proper sphere of what is human" (56). Gesturality seems to open the space where we share being human by speaking or listening to each other without the obligation to claim or understand (and more emphatically: to judge) something, let alone to start acting, only supporting and enduring the other's as well our own desperate attempts to "figure something out".

For the possible meanings of *Wink*, see note 4 above.

See also (Ten Kate 2008), esp. pp. 330–333.

On this remarkable formulation, see Section 3 above.

In his posthumous Heidegger (1983), a chapter of poems was included entitled "Winke" (23–34). Here, Heidegger often connects his notion of the *Wink* with the figure of the wanderer, the passer-by: "Wir kennen nicht Ziele/und sind nur ein Gang" (We do not know about goals/and are but a course), from the poem "Unterwegs" (Underway). Our translations.

See note 18 above, on Agamben's notion of gesture.

See on the difficulties of translating *deutungslos* in Section 5 below.

All citations from the second version of "Mnemosyne" are made by the authors since this version is not included in MH.

A similar optimism can be read in the poem "Timidness", mentioned above, in Section 2.

See for an elaborate analysis of the emergence of the one God as the farewell to, even the death of the old polytheistic gods: (Ten Kate 2014).

Genesis I:26–27. Translation *New American Standard Bible*.

Genesis 18:1–14.

See also Richard Kearney's philosophical reading of this story in Genesis in (Kearney 2010, chp. 1, "In the Moment: The Uninvited Guest", pp. 17–39).

Needless to say, Nancy refers to Friedrich Nietzsche's famous parable in his *The Gay Science*, fragment 125.

Here Nancy uses Derrida's well-known neology *différance*, probably the key concept in the philosophy of deconstruction (which is therefore sometimes designated as a 'philosophy of difference'). *Différance* is a variation on the French *différence* indicating an active, verb-like meaning of the word. See also Laurens Ten Kate (1998). "On a Divine *Wink*" was originally Nancy's contribution to a conference on Derrida's work in Coimbra, 2003.

Luke 24:13–49.

Nancy (2008a), p. 27. Translation modified. Here, Nancy is referring to Heidegger's play with the German *Ereignis*, in which the words (*zu-jeignen* (appropriate) or *eigen* (own, self, proper) are present.

"Denn die Welt aller Welten, welcher immer *ist* und seyn muss, deren Seyn als das Alles in Allen angesehen werden muß, *stellt sich* nur in aller Zeit—oder im Untergange oder im Moment, oder genetischer im Werden des Moments und Anfang von Zeit und Welt *dar*, und dieser Untergang und Anfang ist wie die Sprache, Ausdruck Zeichen Darstellung eines lebendigen aber besonderen Ganzen, welches eben wieder in seinen Wirkungen dazu wird, und zwar so, daß in ihm, sowie in der Sprache, von einer Seite weniger oder nichts lebendig Bestehendes von der anderen Seite alles zu liegen scheint" (MA II, p. 72) Hölderlin himself stresses the words "*ist*" and "*darstellen*". The translation of Adler (p. 271) is slightly adapted.

See again note 18 above.

MA I, p. 437.

"...où l'âme trouve une assiette assez solide pour s'y reposer tout entière et rassembler là tout son être, sans avoir besoin de rappeler le passé ni d'enjamber sur l'avenir (...)" Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1959), p. 1046. (English translation BPh and LTK).

"Der als Anakoluth und in wunderlicher Verkehrung ausgedrückte Entschluß endlich 'Uns wiegen lassen, wie/Auf schwankem Kahne der See' ist wie ein Vorsatz, der Synthesis sich zu entschlagen, der reinen Passivität sich anzuvertrauen, um Gegenwart ganz zu erfüllen." Adorno, "Parataxis", in: Th. W. Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981, pp. 447–491, 483.

MA I, p. 364.

Pfau, p. 114.

Pfau, p. 150.

On this non-identity understanding of the person and his or her unique life story, see (Arendt 1958). While still using the notion of identity, she at the same time deconstructs it: "In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world [...]. This disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is [...] is implicit in everything somebody says and does". (179) Human speech and action as forms of appearing and relating to one another are "implicit" signs of who we are.

Needless to say, this is again a concept introduced by Arendt in her *The Human Condition*, 182.

- ⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida has analyzed this space of the in-between and the many possible meanings of the notion of *chōra* in his essay “Khōra”. See also note 3 above.
- ⁴⁶ (Mbembe 2019, p. 186). Mbembe implicitly bases himself on Nancy’s work—with which he is in a constant dialogue, throughout his own oeuvre—in particular in (Nancy 1996, p. 99): “The passer-by passes, is in the passage: what is also called existing. Existing: the passing being of being itself. Coming, departure, succession, passing the limits, moving away, rhythm, and syncoated blackout of being”.

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