

HÖLDERLIN'S ATHEISMS

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ABSTRACT

This essay initiates an interrogation of Friedrich Hölderlin's 'last' (post-1806) poetry from the point of view of his pre-1806 works. It argues that, while the theological underpinnings of this earlier writing are systematically rejected in Hölderlin's 'last' writings, this does not necessarily mean that there is no connection whatsoever between the two. On the contrary, I give three readings of the 'last' poetry which attempt progressively to pinpoint its theological significance.

Let us believe in a kind of optimism in which we are our own gods
(Percy Bysshe Shelley)¹

After Heidegger, it has become natural to think of Hölderlin as *the* poet of the holy; it is in Hölderlin's poetry above all, we are told, that the divine is thought through in its most originary manner. However, it is my contention in this essay that such a viewpoint ignores the very last poems of Hölderlin's corpus, which fail to speak (at least explicitly) of these higher things. Indeed, in all his 'elucidations of Hölderlin's poetry', Heidegger mentions these 'last' poems only once in passing², and, until recently, this pattern has been endlessly repeated: critical attention has been devoted to the 'late' hymns, odes and elegies, but only the occasional footnote contrasts them to the 'last' poems. This essay is a preliminary attempt to recompense this lack by considering the stance to the holy Hölderlin takes up in his final works. My purpose is to set into dialogue the evidently theological foundations of Hölderlin's pre-1806 output with the indifference to the divine manifest in his post-1806 lyrics. The structure of this essay is simple: in the first part, (through a reading of *Brot und Wein*) I treat the theological 'schema' which Hölderlin develops in his 'late' poems; in the second part, I then interrogate the 'last' poems in respect to this schema.

To begin, however, a preliminary clarification of the two terms, 'late' and 'last', in terms of Hölderlin's life and literary output is required. Friedrich Hölderlin (born in 1770) spent his youth (until 1795) in the ambit of the literature and philosophy of early Romanticism. However, during the second half of the decade, he began to distance himself from his contemporaries and developed his own idiosyncratic mythic world. After the second part of his novel, *Hyperion*, was published in 1799, Hölderlin embarked on, what are termed, his 'late' poems. This period of his life is marked by two tendencies. Poetically, there is an increasing ambition in his productions; during this period he wrote complex, disjointed but powerful evocations of a mythic world, written in technically fiendish verse forms. It is, indeed, on these poems that his reputation rests. Second, personally, this was a period of growing isolation and descent into mental illness.

In 1806, he was committed to an asylum in Tübingen as a dangerous schizophrenic, and released six months later as still mad but no longer dangerous. He was to spend the rest of his life – 36 years (half of it) – as an invalid, nursed by a carpenter’s family in Tübingen. 1806 also (as one might expect) marked a break in Hölderlin’s poetic production: he abandoned the complex verse forms and mythic content characteristic of his pre-1806 work. The 47 poems that survive from these last 36 years – termed Hölderlin’s *späteste Gedichte* (his last poems) – are, to say the very least, very different from his earlier ones.³

1. MOURNING THE GODS: HÖLDERLIN’S LATE POEMS

1.1 History

In order to get to the crux of the theological foundations of Hölderlin’s late work, it is necessary to first consider more generally the ‘Romantic’ view of history on which this theology is itself constructed. The historical schema I am interested in receives its fullest theoretical statement in Hölderlin’s 1795 “Preface” to *Hyperion*:

We all pass through an eccentric path, and there is no other way possible from childhood to consummation. The blessed unity, Being (in the only sense of that word), is lost to us, and we had to lose it if we were to gain it again by striving and struggle. We tear ourselves loose from the peaceful *hen kai pan* of the world, in order to restore it through ourselves... To end the eternal conflict between our self and the world, to restore the peace that passeth all understanding, to unify ourselves with nature so as to form one endless whole – that is the goal of all our striving.⁴

Hölderlin’s is a *three-stage history*: the past is characterised by a fullness that has been lost; a no longer existing “blessed unity” (“Being (in the only sense of the word)”) reigned in this epoch of history. The present is an era in which humans have alienated themselves from this primal Being. Humanity has torn itself loose from the peaceful unity that characterised its infancy, and is now riven by division. The future, however, is conceived as a return to unity: humanity is able to overcome its divisions and will itself back into ‘blessed unity’.

In the novel *Hyperion* itself, this schema is evident from the beginning. Enthusiastic descriptions of Greek landscape are punctured intermittently by acknowledgements of a loss of connection to it. What would previously have been full immersion in nature is now tinged with the realisation that this is no longer possible. Communion is available solely to memory. Hyperion repeatedly attempts to return to this remembered joy during the novel. Through politics, love and friendship, he attempts to make intimacy with nature not only the relic of a lost past but also a future ideal; the present, however, remains in permanent exile from nature. Thus, Hyperion writes in his second letter,

To be one with all – this is the life divine, this is man’s heaven. To be one with all that lives, to return in blessed self-forgetfulness into the all of nature – this is the pinnacle of thoughts and joys, this the sacred mountain peak, the place of eternal rest... On this height I often stand, my Bellarmin. But an instant of reflection hurls me down. I reflect, and find myself as I was before...the world in its eternal oneness, is gone; Nature closes her arms, and I stand like an alien before her and understand her not.⁵

Despite all his attempts to overcome the present age’s separation from the natural world, Hyperion is always foiled, due, he writes, to “reflection”. It is the distance engendered by man’s conscious activity that stops him returning to nature and experiencing it joyfully rather than mournfully.

This is also a view suggested by Hölderlin’s philosophical work. The fragment, *Urteil und Sein* (written around the same time as the early parts of *Hyperion*), describes man’s relation to the world through a similar three-stage history. In order to think about an object, consciousness must separate itself from that object to *gain the necessary distance* to reflect on it. However, being itself⁶ – prior to consciousness – is not divided up in this manner. As Hölderlin puts it, in being itself, “subject and object are united... in such a manner that no separation can be performed without violating the essence of what is to be separated”.⁷ Consciousness ‘violates’ being for the sake of reflection. Thus, consciousness, for Hölderlin, is a form of exile. The goal for thought (specifically for philosophy and art) is to overcome this separation and return to being. Thus, again, there are three moments in humanity’s philosophical journey: preconscious being which, while existing as a harmonious

‘blessed unity’, is unable to generate reflective meaning; a subsequent attempt to gain this meaning through a process of reflection which tears being asunder, causing a conflict between being and meaning; and finally there is the projected future ideal – the perfect unity and equilibrium of being and meaning, of nature and consciousness.⁸

1.2 *Brot und Wein*

Hölderlin’s late poems, written between 1800 and 1806, exhibit (although developed in an idiosyncratic manner) this temporal schema. The present is a time of night, caught between, on the one hand, Classical Greece, when the gods were originally present, and, on the other, a hoped-for return of the gods.⁹ In *Brot und Wein* (which, for the purposes of this essay, will serve as representative of the late poems), this schema is summed up in the first lines of stanza seven:

Aber Freund! wir kommen zu spat. Zwar leben die Götter,
Aber über dem Haupt droben in anderer Welt.
Endlos wirken sie da und scheinens wenig zu achten,
Ob wir leben, so sehr schonen die Himmlischen uns.
(GSA 2/90-5, lines 109-112)

[But, my friend, we have come too late. Though the gods are living,
Over our heads they live, up in a different world.
Endlessly there they act and, such is their kind wish to spare us,
Little they seem to care whether we live or not.]¹⁰

Such is the present age – a belated age – as we have seen. More specifically, however, it is now a time when *the revelation of the gods* has been withdrawn from man – a *godless* age, which both misses and aspires towards reconnection with divinity. In this manner, Hölderlin constructs a full-blown *eschatology* out of the earlier historical schema: the history the poem narrates begins in remembrance of the gods’ first coming and ends in expectation of Christ’s second coming.

This eschatology can also be discerned in the formal layout of the poem. It consists of nine stanzas, split into three groups of three; each of the groups has a different temporal emphasis: the first the present, the second the past and the third the future. Thus, the poem begins by describing a sleepy townscape in the present. It is

“at rest”¹¹, yet also *flat*: something is missing; hence the night which falls during the verse is described as “mournful”¹². What is lacking is brought out in stanza three:

Göttliches Feuer auch treibet, bei Tag und bei Nacht,
Aufzubrechen... (lines 40-1)

[Day-long, night-long we're urged on by a fire that's divine,
Urged to be gone...]

The lack is defined as both a longing to escape the melancholic stillness of the present and also a longing characterised as divine. What is more, towards the end of the stanza we discover that this longing is *for Greece*:

Drum an den Isthmos komm! dorthin, wo das offene Meer rauscht
Am Parnaß und der Schnee delphische Felsen umglänzt,
Dort ins Land des Olymps, dort auf die Höhe Kithärons,
Unter die Fichten dort, unter die Trauben, von wo
Thebe drunten und Ismenos rauscht im Lande des Kadmos,
Dorthier kommt und zurück deutet der kommende Gott. (lines 49-55)

[Off to the Isthmus, then! To land where wide open the sea roars
Near Parnassus and snow glistens on Delphian rocks;
Off to Olympian regions, up to the heights of Cithaeron,
Up to the pine forests there, up to the grapes, from which rush
Thebe down there and Ismenos, loud in the country of Cadmus:
Thence has come and back there points the god who's to come.]

This description of the Greek landscape is remarkably similar to that found at the beginning of *Hyperion*, not least for the mixture of joy and sorrow it evokes. There is obvious enthusiasm once again in Hölderlin's evocation of this land he never visited, but at the same time its distance, the impossibility of embracing it, remains. We have come too late, and can merely remember. In *Brot und Wein*, therefore, as in *Hyperion*, the present is not described on its own terms, but rather only mentioned so as to immediately lead to a description of past and future. The present is never, for Hölderlin at this time, self-present, but is to be defined in comparison to the two times of fullness that border it.

Yet, the *divinity* of this ecstatic longing which takes the poem out of the present is something that is not to be found in *Hyperion*. Thus, in the last line of stanza three, the historical schema is placed firmly in its new theological framework by describing the past as that epoch during which *the gods* were present and the future as that in which one god will return and point back to the past. The same three-term series of presence/absence/presence remains – but it has been theologised.

1.3 Theology and *Brot und Wein*

In comparison to most works of art, the theological relevance of Hölderlin's late poems is not difficult to recognise: these poems are *about* theology – they embed themselves in a mythic worldview obsessed by the gods, their absence and their presence. *Brot und Wein* contains an explicit discussion of the history of the divine and its relation to humanity. We have already seen roughly what this history entails: first, the gods came, inaugurating a golden age of human history; their proximity made the world “full of joy omnipresent”¹³ and man's life “so intense... no one could bear [it] on his own”¹⁴ – “every desire was satisfied”¹⁵. Then, however, the gods fled, and their absence has darkened human life: “All over the earth, rightly, [humanity] started to mourn”¹⁶. These are “the lean years”¹⁷, Hölderlin writes. This mourning took the form of a realisation that something is missing from the present, and so became a longing for something more. And, as we saw in the discussion of stanza three, it is to the past (specifically Classical Greece) that the poem looks in its desire for this something else, but also – by means of such commemoration – it is to the future, and to “the Heavenly who once were / Here and shall come again”¹⁸ which the poem is addressed in hope.¹⁹

Brot und Wein, however, is not merely an exposition of this eschatology; it is also a meditation on the conditions of its possibility – *how* we should now talk of the gods and – even more significantly – *why* we should talk of them at all. *Brot und Wein* puts theology on trial; it interrogates the very possibility of theologising. That is, given (in Hölderlin's schema) the present absence and indifference of the gods, *why bother theologising?*

Indeed, the irrelevance of theology is one of the ironies *Brot und Wein* most insists on. For, according to the poem, the time when the gods are present and *not* indifferent to our fate is precisely when we are unconscious of them and unable to

articulate their presence: “unperceived at first they come”²⁰, Hölderlin writes. Man only fully realises the presence of the divine, and so speech about the gods only really takes place, *once the gods have fled*. It is only when they seem little to care whether we live or not that man gains the necessary distance to reflect upon them. We have here the theological correlate to Hölderlin’s philosophical point in *Urteil und Sein*: thought comes at a price – separation from the original ‘blessed unity’. The original moment of unity corresponds, of course, to the gods’ presence when there is a surfeit of being, without the necessary distance to ‘perceive’ such being. Theologising (and reflection in general), on the other hand, is only possible in the second moment of the schema when meaning is born at the expense of being, when distance is generated between man and gods.

Moreover, theology does not *only* take place when the gods have stopped caring about humanity, but also when humanity has ceased to be bothered about the divine. Hence, the beginning of the poem describes a scene in the present where mortals go about their business oblivious to the religious darkness which enshrouds their lives. The townsfolk are, Hölderlin writes, “replete with the days and its pleasures”²¹; they do not need or even desire the excess of joy divine proximity would bring. They (or, we) are “the godless down below”²², as Hölderlin puts it in the final stanza of the poem. And it is at this moment that the theology of *Brot und Wein* is written.

Theology, therefore, only fully takes place when the indifference of man to gods and of gods to man is at its maximum. Theology is premised on the absence of the gods and our ignorance of them; it is, to put it bluntly, an *atheistic* enterprise. Talking about the divine takes place whilst the divine is lacking.

Yet, this is not the whole story. For Hölderlin, there are, in fact, two ways in which the practice of theology can be justified. First, theological thinking is *a means to prepare*. Articulating the holy helps educate humanity in anticipation of the second coming of Christ. Such a practice Hölderlin names in the second stanza, “holy remembrance... keeping us wakeful at night”²³. During the darkness of the gods’ absence, the poet/theologian²⁴ must accept “a life more intense and more daring”²⁵ than that of the contented *Bürger*, “so that in the wavering moment, / Deep in the dark there shall be something at least that endures”²⁶. And this endurance is safeguarded, Hölderlin makes clear in the third stanza, once the wakeful poet turns his memory

towards Classical Greece. ‘Holy remembrance’ is, therefore, intimately concerned with the *eschaton*: by remembering the gods’ previous presence, one makes ready for their return; it is through *nostalgia* that one waits with the proper attitude. Such is, of course, the very point of the poem *Brot und Wein* itself, since, by tracing the narrative of the gods’ relation to man and so forcing its readers to recall it, the poem helps prepare for the second coming. It is even referred to in the title of the poem: just as bread and wine are used as tokens of Christ’s previous presence and of his promise to return, so too must the poet’s “serious hymns”²⁷ be used in the same manner.²⁸

There is also a second way in which Hölderlin legitimises the practice of theology. Here is an extract from the fifth stanza of the poem:

Unempfunden kommen sie erst, es streben entgegen
 Ihnen die Kinder, zu hell kommet, zu blendend das Glück,
 Und es scheut sie der Mensch, kaum weiß zu sagen ein Halbgott,
 Wer mit Namen sie sind, die mit den Gaben ihm nahn...
 ...dann aber in Wahrheit
 Kommen die selbst und gewohnt werden die Menschen des Glücks
 Und des Tags und zu schaun die Offenbaren, das Antlitz...
 So ist der Mensch; wenn da ist das Gut, und es sorget mit Gaben
 Selber ein Gott für ihn, kennet und sieht er es nicht.
 Tragen muß er, zuvor; nun aber nennt er sein Liebstes,
 Nun, nun müssen dafür Worte, wie Blumen, entstehn. (lines 73-90)

[Unperceived at first they come, and only the children
 Surge towards them, too bright, dazzling, this joy enters in,
 So that men are afraid, a demigod hardly can tell yet
 Who they are, and name those who approach him with gifts...
 ... But then they appear in
 Truth, in person, and now men grow accustomed to joy,
 And to Day, and the sight of the godhead revealed, and their faces...
 Such is man; when the wealth is there, and no less a god in
 Person tends him with gifts, blind he remains, unaware.
 First he must suffer; but now he names his most treasured possession,
 Now for it words like flowers leaping alive he must find.]

Much of this stanza is, of course, concerned with the inconspicuousness with which the gods are present to man: man remains “unaware” and “silent” while the gods bring him joy and daylight. However, Hölderlin makes clear, this occurs *only for the most part*: after a while, he writes, ‘men grow accustomed to joy, and to day, and the sight of the godhead revealed, and their faces’. Hölderlin returns to this important moment at the end of the stanza: “First he must suffer; but now he names his most treasured possession, / Now for it words like flowers leaping alive he must find.” That is, despite the emphasis on silence, a linguistic act (the act of naming) *does take place* while the divine is present to man.

Thus, while theological discourse predominantly takes place once the gods have fled, there is one moment in which both the gods are present to man and also man is able to articulate their presence, and this, for Hölderlin, is when man names the gods. It is here – to revert back to the schema of *Urteil und Sein* – that meaning and being meet in equilibrium: not as that fragment suggested in a projected future age, but at a precise moment in the past where *logos* is co-present with *theoi*. Here meaning and being are in harmony and it is here that theology grounded in an actual acquaintance with the divine – a genuinely kataphatic theology – occurs.²⁹ Hence, whilst during the long night that marks the gods’ absence theology must merely remember their former presence in expectation of the *eschaton*, it is able to do so only because there is a moment of genuine theological insight *preserved in the divine names*.

2. THE LAST POEMS

2.1 A Poetry of Perpetual Affirmation

I now turn to the ‘last’ (post-1806) poems: in them, Hölderlin abandons the theological eschatology outlined above to produce work very different in both form and content.³⁰ What is so striking about this break is the total disappearance of the mythology which so dominated Hölderlin’s late poems. There is now no mention of the gods fleeing or returning, of the role of the poet recollecting the past to make ready the future. In fact, in the last poems, there is a complete absence of any reference to individuals, events or eras at all. The poems have become *impersonal*. I quote an example, entitled *Der Sommer*,

Im Thale rinnt der Bach, die Berg' an hoher Seite,
 Sie grünen weit umher an dieses Thaales Breite,
 Und Bäume mit dem Laube stehn gebreitet,
 Daß fast verbogen dort der Bach hinunter gleitet.

So glänzt darob des schönen Sommers Sonne,
 Daß fast zu eilen scheint des hellen Tages Wonne,
 Der Abend mit der Frische kommt zu Ende,
 Und trachtet, wie er das dem Menschen noch vollende. (*GSA 2/300*)

[Brooks thread the valleys, each high mountain-side
 Is greening far around this vale so wide
 And trees in all their leafage stand outspread
 So that the brook glides down an almost hidden bed.

The lovely summer sun so shines on it
 That almost the day's radiance seems to flit.
 Then evening with coolness makes an end,
 Seeks to perfect it and for men amend. (781)]

This could be a poem by any poet about any landscape at any epoch. Indeed, in all the last poems, there is almost no use of personal pronouns, deixis, or reference to immediate circumstances or historical events.³¹ The poems are purely abstract entities, independent of particular places and times. They do not, therefore, participate in the very determinate temporal schema in which the late poems were embedded. There is no reference to an alienated present, contrasted with a happy past and an ideal future; instead, as one critic has observed, there is a “despotism of the present” in the poems.³² Only the present indicative tense is widely used. It is for this reason Pierre Bertaux has described these poems as “*intemporel*”.³³

This can be clearly seen in the *tone* of Hölderlin's last poems as well. *They are cheerful*. The perpetual present of the poems is a time of fulfilment and ease, free of the tensions of the late poems. Hölderlin's guiding thought here is, in his own words, “perfection without complaint”³⁴. Everything has relaxed. As P.L. Coriando writes, “Nature is no longer characterised by the tear of mourning... Language rests in the element of what is simple”.³⁵ To quote another of the last poems, *Der Frühling*,

Wenn auf Gefilden neues Entzücken keimt
 Und sich die Ansicht wieder verschönt und sich
 An Bergen, wo die Bäume grünen,
 Hellere Lüfte, Gewölke zeigen,

O! Welche Freunde haben die Mensch! froh
 Gehn an Gestaden Einsame, Ruh und Lust
 Und Wonne der Gesundheit blühet,
 Freundliches Lachen ist auch nicht ferne. (*GSA 2/272*)

[When new enchantment sprouts in the meadowlands,
 And when the view grows lovelier once again
 And over hills where trees are verdant
 Breezes more bright and small clouds are passing.

O what a joy it is for mankind! Content
 The lonely walk on river-banks, peace, delight
 And bliss of healthy vigour bloom, and
 Not far away is kind-hearted laughter (749)]

The titles of these poems, which more often than not refer to seasons, should not mislead us. Hölderlin is not evoking a cyclical temporality of annual decline and ascent; rather, in *each* of the four seasons, consummation occurs and ‘what is’ is present in its fullness. Hölderlin writes poems for all four seasons, each of which celebrates the fullness experienced at that time.³⁶ *Each season is embraced on its own terms*: what is present is affirmed in so far as it is present, without negative comparisons to decline from a lost past or anticipation of a hoped-for future. The poems are, as David Miles writes, “lived out in the naked present, free from all tensions in time... [they celebrate] an idyllic landscape experienced totally in the present”.³⁷ This is the significance of “the despotism of the present” in Hölderlin’s last poems: a construction that is present on its own terms, an affirmation of what is positive in itself. Here, “the world is restored to its simplicity: it is what and as it is, and its simple Being is full of meaning.” (Coriando)³⁸

There is obviously a naivety to this enterprise; yet, composing poetry in this manner is by no means easy. We can get a sense of these two points by looking at the

formal structure of the poems. Nearly all of them are formed of quatrains, all of them rhyme (compared with the obscure, unrhymed versification of the late poems) and the range of vocabulary employed in them is notably small.³⁹ Yet, the apparent simplicity of such forms belies the complex structures which underlie them, as Jakobson and Lübke-Grothues' analysis has demonstrated. The patterns of sounds and stresses built up within each poem obey strict rules, often in accordance with the proportion of the golden mean; the linguists conclude, "It is precisely in [the] interplay of the parts as well as in their integration into a carefully constructed whole that the magic grace of these allegedly naïve verses consists."⁴⁰ Like the proverbial swan gliding above the water while frantically paddling underneath, the naïve exterior of Hölderlin's last poems masks the complexities of their composition. It is for this reason Philipsen has entitled his book-length study of these poems, *Die List der Einfalt* – the cunning of simplicity. One can, thus, speak of the *art* required to produce such an artless impression – *the labour of constructing the simple*. It is by means of great effort that the saying of 'it is' (the present) is no longer said eschatologically as 'it was, it is not and it will be again'.

Critics have usually written off Hölderlin's last poems as *too simple*, implying that the poems' blithe cheerfulness seems oblivious of the tragedy endemic to existence. David Constantine is representative here; he writes, "The world is not like that, and such harmony is only possible in poetry not engaging with it." (312) Such views happily coincide with Hölderlin's biography: the last poems occur simultaneous to his madness; they can, then, be written off as symptoms of this lunacy; and critics can keep demanding that literature at its best should continually flee the present to the past and future.

Hölderlin's last poetry, to repeat, flouts this demand, producing poetry that considers the present as such, that considers events not through the eyes of mourning but cheerfully. It does not do so, I contend, out of folly, but purposefully: these poems are still – despite facile appeals to Hölderlin's madness – technically sophisticated, and so, I think, must be taken more seriously than many commentators do. In so arguing, I refer to a suggestion of Anselm Haverkamp that, though different from the trajectory of modern thought, Hölderlin's last poems are equally justifiable. He writes,

The question is still open and remains to be formulated, of how Hölderlin's shift from the so-called failure of his late hymns to his seemingly simplistic last poems offers an alternative solution to what, with equal right, one could call the romantic predicament of Keats, Kierkegaard or Baudelaire.⁴¹

According to Haverkamp, Hölderlin's last poems offer a different type of romantic literature from that which mainstream Romanticism has bequeathed us. Hölderlin's last poems are not permeated by nostalgia for an original 'blessed unity', nor do they hope for a second coming which will rescue man from his frailties; they just affirm the present with unflinching joy.

2.2 A Theology of Cheerfulness

One must ask, however, what has happened to the gods? They are – compared to Hölderlin's obsession with them prior to 1806 – conspicuously absent; instead, the concentration in the last poems is on natural landscapes or regular human routines. The supernatural referent has all but vanished.

If we attempt to bring the two eras ('late' and 'last') into dialogue and thus to see the last works as referencing and responding to the late poems, then there are a number of ways to interpret this eclipse of the holy. First, the last poems could be seen as *a real forgetting of the divine*. Hölderlin completely rejects the foundation of his pre-1806 work; he is no longer remotely concerned with commemorating the gods' previous presence; eschatology has vanished.⁴² For example, one of the last poems, *Freundschaft, Liebe...*, depicts humanity getting on with life; a life which involves religious ceremonies, but is not concerned with the divine meanings they possess.⁴³ Religious paraphernalia is part of *human* life – which is celebrated *as it is*, not for the joys the gods *could* bring. The poems do not succumb to nostalgia for a holy past, nor expectation of a divinely-infused future, but get on with celebrating human life in the here-and-now.

On this reading, the last poems can be called secular, or even *a*-theistic – to the extent that they are oblivious to the divine. To translate this post-1806 worldview back into the terms of *Brot und Wein*, the irresistible longing the poet felt then to escape the benighted present and return to Greece is a desire that is now rejected. Melancholy is not an emotion that perturbs the final poems. Instead, they remain true to the citizens of the town from the first stanza of *Brot und Wein*, contented with the

peaceful rhythm of an unexceptional life. Striving has come to an end *without* transcending the human, *without* succumbing to apotheosis.

However, this is not the only way to read the last poems. There are three pieces of evidence for a more theologically positive interpretation. First (and this is the most circumstantial), the ailing Hölderlin himself (the man not the poet) thought himself imbued with a special relation to the divine. Hence, in a celebrated letter from 1802 to his friend Böhlendorff, penned after returning from Bordeaux (at a time when, most biographers agree, Hölderlin's illness was becoming increasingly manifest), he writes of his trip:

The tremendous element, the fire of the sky and the silence of the people, their life within nature, and their limitedness and satisfaction has continually affected me, and as it is said of the heroes, so I may say that Apollo has struck me.⁴⁴

Hölderlin's period of illness begins with an admission of a direct relationship with the divine: Apollo, no longer indifferent to humanity, has deigned to become present to Hölderlin. Hölderlin is here deeply embedded in his pre-1806 mythic worldview, in which reality is described by means of the actions of the gods. Yet, surprisingly, this turn of phrase occurs alongside a celebration – not of anything divine or extraordinary – but of the 'limitedness and satisfaction' of the people of Bordeaux, their silence and 'their life with nature'; that is, all the elements which are perpetually affirmed throughout the last poems. Hölderlin, struck by Apollo, sides with finite simplicity and limitation over against divine longing. Here, therefore, the return of the gods is (preliminarily) associated with the ethos of the post-1806 productions.

Second, we can return to the schema of *Brot und Wein* itself, for the 'atheism' of the last poems does not fully contradict its theological underpinnings. This is because, *Brot und Wein* makes clear: *when the gods are present is precisely when discourse about them stops*. When the gods come, they come – to begin with – 'unperceived'.⁴⁵ At this moment, nothing is said about the gods, for they are not recognised. This is the moment when being exceeds meaning, when life wins out over discourse (whether poetry or theology). Hence, *the atheism of the townsfolk and the silence of the divinely intoxicated are indistinguishable*. The difference between the

god-inspired and the god-oblivious is null. Thus, Hölderlin's final silence on the topic of the gods could be read – not as complete atheism – but rather as its converse.

Third, there is an exception to the general silence Hölderlin observes concerning the gods in his last poems: *Wenn aus dem Himmel....* For the most part, this poem reads like a typical product of the last period: it celebrates the peaceful life of man and describes vividly, if abstractly, the splendour of the natural world. The present is joyfully affirmed without reference to a better past or a better future. However, added onto this are several introductory lines, very atypical of the period; indeed, they seem to belong far more to the mythic world of the late poems. The lines read as follows,

Wenn aus dem Himmel hellere Wonne sich
Herabgießt, eine Freude den Menschen kommt,
Daß sie sich wundern über manches
Sichtbares, Höheres, Angenehmes:
Wie tönet lieblich heiliger Gesang dazu!
Wie lacht das Herz in Liedern die Wahrheit an,
Daß Freudigkeit an einem Bildniß... (*GSA* 2/269, lines 1-7)

[When down from heaven there gushes a brighter bliss,
A human joy approaches for human kind
So that they feel amazed by much that's
Visible, lofty and pleasing to them
How lovely blended with it, sound holy hymns!
How the heart laughs in canticles at the truth
That to one image clings rejoicing! (741)]

Despite the superficial similarity to the worldview of the *late* poems, this passage almost reads as *a manifesto for the last works*. Humanity here feels amazement – *not* at the heavenly bliss that has descended – *but* at the 'visible' and concrete; the joy they experience is *not* excessive like the Dionysian joy of holy drunkenness honoured in *Brot und Wein*, *but* remains human joy, joy *proper* to humanity. These lines, then, describe the very celebration of the finite which occurs in all the last poems.

Once again, however, affirmation of the finite is here acknowledged to be possible *only under the influence of a god*. Only when 'down from heaven there gushes a brighter bliss' can mankind celebrate what is proper to it. The implication is

that the affirmation of human cheerfulness in the last poems is made possible by divine gift. It is by means of the unrecognised gods, who invisibly bring joy from above, that what is natural can be celebrated – which, of course, approaches the ‘unperceived’ first moments of the presence of the gods in *Brot und Wein*.

All this is not to argue that Hölderlin’s last poems *were* written in the presence of the divine. For one thing, as many critics have pointed out⁴⁶, one must not transform into the triumphant finale of Hölderlin’s life what (from a biographical perspective) was the slow deterioration of a broken man. It would be wrong to make too much of these poems. Yet, it would also be wrong to make too little of them: as we have seen, they are far more sophisticated than most give them credit for; they also hint at a continuing conversation with the eschatology that informs the late works. We should at least recognise that traces remain in the last products of Hölderlin’s life that testify to an abiding exploration of the divine and a persistent attempt to situate his own poetry in respect to it.

In fact, we should take the moral of Hölderlin’s eschatology seriously: the most benighted and the most inspired products of humanity are all but indistinguishable. Writing poetry in which “nature’s mind is very simple” (as in the appropriately named *Das fröhliche Leben*)⁴⁷ does not, Hölderlin’s poetry emphasises, necessarily preclude it from a far greater significance. Interpretation must remain open.

2.3 The Asylum Window

To conclude, I want to follow up one more interpretive twist. The image of the asylum that haunts Hölderlin’s last years provides, I contend, a significant commentary on and illumination of Hölderlin’s final poetry. Biographically, of course, the years after his brief visit to a mental ‘asylum’ were spent lodged in what turned out to be a more genuine ‘sanctuary’, in the carpenter Zimmer’s Tübingen lodgings – kept away from the world and the turbulence of his earlier life. Poetically, the image of the asylum occurs in three important passages written during his illness.

The first is the letter to Böhlendorff (from which I quoted above) which dreams enthusiastically of a secure retreat with a window to look through, providing a vision in which *all of life would be concentrated*. Speaking of “the nature of my

country”, he lists “the coinciding of various characters of nature in one area” and, continuing, he explains:

That all sacred places of the earth are gathered around one place, and the philosophical light around my window; they are now my delight; may I remember how I have come to this point.⁴⁸

The natural world seen from Hölderlin’s window is *enough* for him; in fact, he goes further to suggest such a limited view is *ideal* for him. The best medium through which to perceive the ‘sacred’ is not a narration of the comings and goings of the gods as embarked on in *Brot und Wein*, but, rather, the stable and self-same vision of what is nearest – the finite natural world.

The second passage is Hölderlin’s 1805 commentary on the Pindaric fragment entitled *Die Asyle*. Hölderlin’s translation of the end of the fragment reads:

[Themis] aber hat
Die goldgehefteten, die gute,
Die glänzendbefruchteten Ruhestätten geboren. (GSA 5/288)

[[Themis], the good, gave birth to
The gold-riveted,
The shiningly fertilized places of rest. (719)]

On which he comments,

Themis, the order-loving, gave birth to the human sanctuaries, the quiet places of rest, which nothing alien can touch, because in them the working and life of nature was concentrated, and something around them divines, as though remembering, experience that which they experienced formerly. (*ibid*)

Again, *it is by means of the divine* that the asylum is established, and so the desired concentrated perception of nature – without reference to anything ‘alien’ – is made possible. What is more, Hölderlin also suggests: in *this concentrated experience of nature in itself*, something else is also present. It is not, as it was in the late poems, the commemoration of the gods’ past presence, but it still operates ‘as though remembering’. The gods are present, even if not explicitly; the holy is manifest in these experiences that are solely of what is proper to man.

The third relevant passage is the short poem, *Überzeugung*, from Hölderlin's last period,

Als wie der Tag die Menschen hell umscheinet,
 Und mit dem Lichte, das den Höh'n entspringet,
 Die dämmernden Erscheinungen vereinet,
 Ist Wissen, welches tief der Geistigkeit gelinget. (GSA 2/360)

[Like the bright day that shines on human kind
 And with a light of heavenly origin
 All things obscure and various gathers in,
 Is knowledge, deeply granted to the mind. (747)]

The same sentiment concerning the asylum is here repeated within the last poetry itself. Once more, it is by means of the divine ('a light of heavenly origin') that the natural world is concentrated together. Through such gathering, moreover, there is initially an increased intensity of the limited, finite reality that confronts the subject, but then, secondly, because of this, something 'deeper' and 'obscure' is suggested. Again, in a manner completely different from the late poems, Hölderlin describes the manifestation of the holy.

This, I contend, suggests a third reading of the relation between the last poems and the theological schema of the late poems. The first reading posited a suppression of this theology by the post-1806 poems in favour of a fully atheistic worldview; the second reading implied that the last poems fulfilled the late schema as the very moment at which the gods return; this third reading both links the last poems to the late schema, but also interprets this schema atheistically. That is, I read the last poems as providing an atheistic version of *the act of naming* which was so crucial in *Brot und Wein*. The limitations provided by the asylum window gather the holy into (what *Überzeugung* calls) 'a knowledge deeply granted to the mind'. Instead of the excess of being generated when the gods first arrive 'unperceived' that the second reading attributes to the last poems, here the holy is present *and* man is aware of it – being and meaning are in equilibrium. The window allows for the distance the poet requires in order to generate meaning from being, but simultaneously does not distort or 'violate' what is seen through it in any way. In the words of *In lieblicher Bläue*, "the

windows... are like gates in beauty.”⁴⁹ The asylum window Hölderlin constructs in his last poems permits a consciousness of nature which is in no way alienated. In this manner, the last poems perform the role of the act of naming described at the end of stanza three of *Brot und Wein*.

However, what takes place at the asylum window is *not this act of naming*, since it is the very names of the gods which are lacking (or suppressed) in the last poems. Genuine perception of being gives rise here not to kataphatic theology (as *Brot und Wein* claimed), but a celebration of the natural, visible and finite. Humanity is aware of the holy but the language in which he articulates it is resolutely *secular*. The act of naming no longer longs mournfully for an impossible beyond (whether temporal or spatial), but rests content in affirming human ‘limitedness and satisfaction’. Only through the mediation of the asylum window does constructing the simple become possible.

Thus, while consonant with the theological schema of the late poems, the last poems, on this third reading, diverge strongly from it. For the Hölderlin of *Brot und Wein*, theology was atheistic because it took place in the absence of the gods – as a vain attempt to recall their presence and prepare for their return. For the Hölderlin of the last poems, however, theology is atheistic because – while the holy *is* being made manifest – the ‘theologian’ now considers it in a secular fashion and celebrates solely what is proper to humanity – the limited. Indeed, employing a thought from Hölderlin’s own *Anmerkungen zur Antigone*, one might characterise the break in his poetry that occurred in 1806 as one which “reverse[s] the *striving from this world to the other* into a *striving from another world to this one*.”⁵⁰

Thanks to Pamela Sue Anderson, Jenny Bunker, Paul Fiddes, George Pattison and Ben Quash for their helpful suggestions and discussion.

¹ P.B. Shelley, "Letter to Maria Gisborne, 13th or 14th October 1819" in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* Vol. 2, ed. F. L. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), 518.

² M. Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, tr. K. Hoeller (New York: Prometheus, 2000), 205.

³ For more sustained biographical treatment in English, see D. Constantine, *Hölderlin* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998). The relation of poet to man is obviously a very contentious one in the case of Hölderlin. Questions concerning the extent to which Hölderlin's madness impinges on his poetry will, however, be studiously avoided in this essay in favour of an analysis which remains rooted in the texts themselves. It is only through this separation of man and poet that, I think, criticism of Hölderlin's last poems can avoid degenerating into symptomatic diagnosis.

⁴ F. Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke: Grosse Stuttgarter Ausgabe* Vol. 3, ed. F. Beissner and A. Beck (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1943-85), 236; translated in M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1971), 237-8. Hölderlin's prose will be quoted in English with a footnote providing a citation to the German source; extensive quotations of his poetry will be initially given in German with the English translation following. All references to Hölderlin's work are to the *Grosse Stuttgarter Ausgabe* (abbreviated to *GSA* – volume/page number).

⁵ *GSA* 3/9; translated in F. Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, tr. W. Trask (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 23.

⁶ One can already see the connection between this use of being and that in the *Hyperion* "Preface".

⁷ *GSA* IV/216-7; translated in F. Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, tr. and ed. T. Pfau (Albany: SUNY, 1988), 37-8.

⁸ Of course, much of Hölderlin's thought here is Romantic in a derivative sense. Schiller's influence, especially the Schiller of "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry", is extremely evident. On Hölderlin's dependence on Schiller's view of history, see P. Lacoue-Labarthe, "Hölderlin and the Greeks" in his *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. C. Fynsk (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 237-47. The temporal schema both Hölderlin and Schiller share Constantin Behler has dubbed, "nostalgic teleology" (C. Behler, *Nostalgic Teleology: Friedrich Schiller and the Schema of Aesthetic Humanism* (NY: Peter Lang, 1995)). This term captures both the forward and backward looking aspects of this view of history in which the present is a time of mourning for a lost past of immediacy and of hope for a utopian future when this immediacy will be recovered. In Heidegger's terms, nostalgic teleology is "both a fore-thinking and a thinking-back", due to which the present becomes "the between", defined by "a double lack, a double not" (as neither past nor future) (Heidegger, *Elucidations*, 64 & 77). M.H. Abrams famously uses the image of the spiral to describe this three-stage view of history in European Romanticism (*Natural Supernaturalism*, 183).

⁹ By 'gods', Hölderlin is referring – at least in *Brot und Wein* – not only to the pagan gods of Greece, but also to the ambiguous figure of the 'Father' (line 127) and explicitly to Christ (line 155-6, for example).

¹⁰ F. Hölderlin, "Bread and Wine" in *Poems and Fragments* 4th Ed, tr. M. Hamburger (London: Anvil, 2004), 318-29. All English translations of Hölderlin's poetry are taken from this edition (which uses the text of the *GSA*), and I will merely quote the page number of subsequent quotations of other poems.

¹¹ "ruhe" (line 1).

¹² "traurig" (line 18).

¹³ "allgegenwärtiges Glücks voll" (line 63).

¹⁴ "es ertrug keiner das Leben allein" (line 66).

¹⁵ "alles Verlangen beglückt" (line 86).

¹⁶ "das Trauern mit Recht über der Erde begann" (line 128).

¹⁷ "dürftiger Zeit" (line 122).

¹⁸ "der Himmlischen, die sonst / Da gewesen und die kehren" (line 139-40).

¹⁹ A very different theological schema is developed by Jean-Luc Marion through an analysis of another two of Hölderlin's poems (*Der Einzige* and *In lieblicher Bläue*). (J.L. Marion, *The Idol and Distance*,

tr. T. Carlson (NY: Fordham UP, 2001), 81-138) According to Marion, the withdrawal of the gods is what makes revelation possible: “Divinity gives itself in... withdrawal.” (93) The gods are known precisely due to (and not despite of) their distance to man. Marion’s Christological reading explicitly uses the concepts of *kenosis* and *affiliation* to bring out further this need for the divine to leave the world in order for the world to know it. Marion goes on to see in the post-1806 Hölderlin’s life the instantiation of these earlier views (133-6). However, there are problems with this account: Marion himself realises that much of what he says contradicts other poems, such as *Brot und Wein*; indeed, *Brot und Wein* becomes for Marion both a less profound poem than (for example) *Der Einzige* and also one written from the point of view of the “fools” who bewail the gods’ withdrawal without seeing its positive significance (123-4).

²⁰ “unempfunden kommen sie erst” (line 73).

²¹ “satt... von Freuden des Tags” (line 3).

²² “Götterlosen hinab” (line 148).

²³ “heilig Gedächtnis... wachend zu bleiben bei Nacht” (line 36).

²⁴ Hölderlin dubs poets “heilige Priester” (line 123).

²⁵ “kühneres Leben” (line 35).

²⁶ “daß in der zaudernden Weile, / daß im Finstern für uns einiges Haltbare sei” (lines 32-3).

²⁷ “singen... mit Ernst” (line 141).

²⁸ In stanza eight, Hölderlin writes of these ‘tokens’ as follows: “Ließ zum Zeichnen, daß einst er da gewesen und wieder / Käme, der himmlische Chor einige Gaaben zurück, / Deren menschlich, wie sonst, wir uns zu freuen vermöchten” (lines 131-3) [“Then, as a token that once they had been down here and once more would / Come, the heavenly choir left a few presents behind, / Gifts in which now as ever humanly men might take pleasure”]. For further discussion of this Eucharistic element, see Marion 131-2.

²⁹ Implicit here is also Hölderlin’s belief that it is once man has finally become accustomed to the gods, just prior to their flight, that Christ appears. Thus, ‘genuine’ theologising and the appearance of Christ occur at similar moments in the eschatology. Again, my account should be contrasted to Marion who conceives of the act of naming as a purely *apophatic* enterprise (133).

³⁰ For a long time (as I mentioned in the introduction) this ‘last’ poetry was ignored; however, during the latter half of the twentieth century interest has grown steadily. My reading follows those by B. Böchenstein, “Hölderlin’s späteste Gedichte” in *Hölderlin-Jahrbuch* 14 (1966), R. Jakobson and G. Lübke-Grotheus, “Two Type of Discourse in Hölderlin’s Madness” in L. Vaina and J. Hintikka ed, *Cognitive Constraint on Communication* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1984), D.E. Sattler, “Le pauvre Holterling” in F. Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke: Frankfurter Ausgabe, Blätter* 1 (Frankfurt: Stern, 1984), A. Haverkamp, *Leaves of Mourning: Hölderlin’s Late Work*, tr. Vernon Chadwick (Albany: SUNY, 1996) and B. Philipsen, *Die List der Einfalt: Nachlese zu Hölderlins spätester Dichtung* (München: Fink, 1995).

³¹ See Jakobson and Lübke-Grotheus 129-31.

³² Böchenstein 39 (my translation). See Jakobson and Lübke-Grotheus 130-1.

³³ P. Bertaux, *Hölderlin ou le temps d’un poète* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 331. (The reason I leave this term untranslated will become clear below.) Thomas Ryan also comments on “the monotony of form and theme, the lack of a sense of historical time, the almost exclusive use of present tense, the tensionlessness” in these poems, continuing, “It is above all in the total absence of *historical* consciousness that this transformation [from ‘late’ to ‘last’] is most apparent. The same poet who once attempted to contain in his words a sweeping vision of the plan of history... [now] reflects the condition of *ataraxia*, a nearly complete acceptance of, and contentment with, the dispensation of things as the poet observes them.” T. E. Ryan, *Hölderlin’s Silence* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 345-6.

³⁴ “die Vollkommenheit ist ohne Klage” (*GSA* 2/284, line 16; my translation).

³⁵ P. L. Coriando, “What is Simple and Language – Hölderlin and Heidegger”, tr. G. Pattison; paper given at “Heidegger on Language, Poetry and the Holy” at Christ Church, University of Oxford, on 26/01/2008. Accessed at: <http://ora.ouls.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid%3A9c44ce9f-fa09-4b13-873f-855f2aa52538>.

³⁶ For examples of the same sentiments with respect to autumn and winter, see *Der Herbst* (*GSA* 2/299, translated in Hamburger 779) and *Der Winter* (*GSA* 2/296, translated in Hamburger 775).

³⁷ D. H. Miles, “The Past as Future: *Pfad* and *Bahn* as Images of Temporal Conflict in Hölderlin” in *Germanic Review* 46:2 (1971), 115.

³⁸ Despite this monopoly of the present tense, there still, however, remain temporal references in these poems (‘new’ and ‘once again’, to take examples merely from *Der Frühling* above). It is important to

emphasise, however, that these references always remains *implicit*: Hölderlin never speaks *as such* about these other times in his last poems; the reference is no sooner made than it is forgotten or even suppressed. However, I think there is still a need to note a temporal dimension in these poems, although it must stand in opposition to the unfulfilled present of nostalgic teleology which Hölderlin definitively rejects in his post-1806 output. Such is what Bertaux indicates in his employment of the neologism, ‘*intemporel*’ to describe the last poems: “‘*Intemporel*’ is not an exact term, for it refers to the almost unique passing of time [within these poems]... It suggests another temporal dimension than that of human action... [and] the historical dimension with its dates.” (Bertaux 331; my translation) In ‘*intemporel*’ temporality, there is no progress or decline, but merely successive and repeated moments of consummation. Each consummation may well be qualitatively different (for example, the four seasons are all complete in incomparable ways), but each is – on its own terms – equally consummate. Herder is here a precursor when he writes, “Each period has in itself the centre of its own happiness. The youth is not happier than the innocent, contented child; nor is the peaceful old man unhappier than the energetic man in his prime.” (J.G. Herder, “Yet Another Philosophy of History” in *Against Pure Reason: Writings on Religion, Language and History*, ed. and tr. M. Bunge (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 45.)

³⁹ See Constantine 311-2 and Jakobson and Lübke-Grothues 124.

⁴⁰ Jakobson and Lübke-Grothues 132. See also 122-7.

⁴¹ Haverkamp xi.

⁴² Thus, Haverkamp: “Hölderlin’s poetry after 1806 fully refutes every eschatological implication of the previous poems.” (5)

⁴³ *GSA* 2/261; translated in Hamburger 727.

⁴⁴ *GSA* 6/432; translated in Pfau 152.

⁴⁵ I am assuming here that, when the gods return, they do so following the same pattern as when they revealed themselves in the past. This will be assumed throughout.

⁴⁶ For example, Constantine 306.

⁴⁷ “die Natur sehr einfältig [ist]” (*GSA* 2/275, line 37; translated in Hamburger 753).

⁴⁸ *GSA* 6/433; translated in Pfau 153. Philipsen draws attention to this passage (and to the image of the window in general) for interpreting the last poetry (116-34). As early as December 1800, Hölderlin had desired “somewhere quieter and more peaceful where everything that concerns me would touch me less closely and so less destructively.” (Quoted in Constantine 155)

⁴⁹ “Die Fenster, daraus die Glocken tönen, sind wie Thore an Schönheit.” (*GSA* 2/372, lines 7-8; translated in Hamburger 789) A full discussion of the figure of the asylum window in Hölderlin’s poetry would need to engage extensively with this poem, which (despite its questionable attribution) Marion describes as marking “the fundamental dimensions that outline the poetic figure of the whole oeuvre” (81). Indeed, Marion’s interpretation is highly relevant to my concerns here (81-103). Mention should also be made of Lacoue-Labarthe who uses *In lieblicher Bläue* to stress Hölderlin’s atheism. (P. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, tr. A. Tarnowski (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 118-9)

⁵⁰ *GSA* 5/268; translated in Pfau 112.