Romantic Theory

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At some point, any inquiry into the promise or potential of theory also has to ask where its limits are. For Friedrich Hölderlin, the limits of theory are, quite simply, those of thought itself. But to arrive at the limits of thought we have to find out what thought can’t conceptualize. Unlike some of those who questioned the primacy of theory in the Romantic period, Hölderlin never doubted the capacity of theory to conceptualize our experiences. He himself, after all, had been close to those who ushered in a new era for philosophy in Germany. As a result, he had seen what the new, abstract mode of theory was capable of. To some extent he had even helped to create it. He knew, then, that it didn’t need to solve the epistemological impasse Kant had worried about. He had seen how the new philosophy had managed to finesse that difficulty, by means of an internal rather than external perspective. Fully aware of all the recent developments in the contemporary philosophical scene, he knew the power of theory. And because of what he had seen, he probably even believed what proponents of the new philosophy professed: that we can achieve ascendancy over anything we can conceptualize.¹

This belief in theory was a legacy of Kant’s successors. Fichte had discovered the generative capacity of thought or theory, its ability to construct an entire system out of itself. All you needed was the difference between I and not-I. Out of that dynamic, you could get everything else to emerge. Fichte, though, had staked out an internal, purely subjective viewpoint. And that meant you didn’t really know whether all the stuff you were able to spin out of the I/not-I difference existed in fact only subjectively. Schelling felt the subjective/objective discrepancy that had haunted theory could be attacked more directly. His idea was that if you squarely confronted the subjective/objective dichotomy, you could demonstrate that it didn’t really exist. Specifically, you’d try to show that what we regard as objective was also subjective, and vice versa. Thus at the outset of the *System of Transcendental Idealism* we find:
All knowledge is based on the coincidence of an objective with a subjective. We can speak of the intrinsic concept of everything merely objective in our knowledge as nature. The intrinsic concept of everything subjective is called, on the contrary, the self, or the intelligence. Hence there are only two possibilities. Either the objective is made primary, and the question is: how a subjective is added to it, which coincides with it? The problem assumes nature or the objective to be primary. Hence the problem is undoubtedly that of natural science. The necessary tendency of all natural science is to move from nature to intelligence. This and nothing else is at the bottom of the urge to bring theory into natural phenomena. —The highest consummation of natural science would be the complete spiritualization of all natural laws into laws of intuition and thought. The phenomena (the material) must wholly disappear, and only the laws (the formal) remain. Hence it is, that the more lawfulness emerges in nature itself, the more the husk disappears, the phenomena themselves become more mental, and at last disappear completely. Or the subjective is made primary, and the problem is: how an objective is added, which coincides with it? The one basic prejudice, to which all others reduce, is no other than this, that there are things outside us: a conviction that, because it rests neither on grounds nor on inferences and yet cannot be rooted out by any proof to the contrary makes claim to immediate certainty. The contradiction, that a principle which by its nature cannot be immediately certain is yet accepted as blindly and groundlessly as one that is so, the transcendental philosopher knows not how to resolve, except on the presupposition that this principle is not just covertly and as yet uncomprehendingly connected with, but is identical, one, and the same with, an immediate certainty. But nothing is immediately certain except the proposition I exist. —The proposition There are things outside us will therefore be certain for the transcendental philosopher only through its identity with the proposition I exist, and its certainty will likewise only be equal to the certainty of the proposition from which it borrows its own. (Schellings Werke 2: 339–44/3: 339–44)

Here what allows theory to overcome the opposition between subjective and objective is a capacity to conceptualize. Even if we start with nature or the objective, what we really have is in fact already inherently conceptual. After all, the sort of impression we receive of nature merely by perception (i.e., sense data) doesn’t yield nature in its totality. To get that, we need the natural sciences. But, by the very way they look at nature, which involves an attempt at explanation, the natural sciences can only be conceptual. Or, as Schelling puts it: “the necessary tendency of all natural science is to move from nature to intelligence.”
What he then goes on to say is perhaps even more significant: “This and nothing else is at the bottom of the urge to bring theory into natural phenomena.” We conceptualize nature, in other words, not because we want to explain it but because we want to assimilate it to intelligence or mind. Yet the reverse is equally true: we also want to posit nature as external. Here again, though, the reason we posit nature as external isn’t because we perceive it that way but because we can relate our belief in external existences to our belief that we exist: the two beliefs elicit the same degree of certainty. Finally, then, the reason why we posit nature is purely conceptual: not because of the way we perceive it but because we can link it to another belief we feel certain about. Equivalently: we posit nature because we can conceptualize what we believe about it.²

But if Kant’s successors believed in the power of theory to conceptualize the totality of our experiences, Hölderlin didn’t share that perspective. For him, the question wasn’t whether theory had a virtually limitless power to conceptualize but whether its power to conceptualize wasn’t itself a form of limitation. Or, to put it another way, he wondered whether the conceptual mode didn’t itself impose an inherent limit on theory. The kind of limit he had in mind would have arisen not because of the particular way we conceptualized, but rather from the very fact that we conceptualized at all.³ To conceptualize was to specify formal relationships of some kind between different objects or experiences. The problem was that the particular formal relationships you were able to specify couldn’t express all the complexity of what you actually perceived. Instead, it seemed to Hölderlin as if the complexity of what he perceived would inevitably transcend what he could manage to describe by means of formal or conceptual relationships. In other words, it was as if the relationships within what he perceived were of an even higher level of complexity. As a result, he began to wonder whether there might be a different kind of limit to theory.

And so we come to “Patmos.” Because nowhere else does Hölderlin consider as clearly the possibility of an inherent limit to theory:

Nah ist
Und schwer zu fassen der Gott.
Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst
Das Rettende auch.
Im Finstern wohnen
Die Adler und furchtlos geln
Die Söhne der Alpen über den Abgrund weg
Auf leichtgebauten Brüken.
Drum, da gehäuft sind rings
Die Gipfel der Zeit, und die Liebsten
Nah wohnen, ermattend auf
Getrenntesten Bergen,
So gieb unschuldig Wasser,
O Fittige gieb uns, treuesten Sinns
Hinüberzugehn und wiederzukehren.

[Near is
And difficult to grasp, the God.
But where danger is, grows
That which saves as well.
In darkness dwell
The eagles and fearless go
The sons of the Alps over the abyss
On lightly-built bridges.
Therefore, since round about are heaped
The summits of time, and the most loved
Live near, getting faint
On mountains most separate,
So give pure water,
O pinions give us, truest faculties
To cross over and to return.]  

(St 8: 682)

From the outset, Hölderlin makes it clear his poem will be about how difficult
God is to conceptualize. From his standpoint, such a difficulty is a problem for
theory. Since the power of theory comes from its virtually limitless capacity to
conceptualize, the possibility of something beyond its scope suggests there might
be a limit to theory. In his effort to find out whether this is true, he’ll be led to
explore a moment when the God seemed to be most human and hence most
graspable: the Last Supper. To represent the Last Supper adequately, however,
takes the poem beyond our normative framework of space and time. In that
sense, such a scene isn’t strictly representable. The fact that it isn’t suggests, in
turn, why the Apostles weren’t able to hold on to their image of the Lord, which
takes the poem into the perspective of the aftertime. From there, it’s only natural
for Hölderlin to ponder the consequences. As a result of his reflection, he arrives
at the motif of the sower, which points toward the agricultural cycle or, more
broadly, the process by which things become. But where Hegel had seen such a
process precisely as what theory ought to represent, Hölderlin sees it as beyond
theory. For him, the fact that we live in time renders it difficult if not impossible to grasp how events in time can form a process. Hence his sense of the need for a perspective beyond that of theory.

The initial statement of the poem, that “the God” is both “near” and “difficult to grasp,” is significant. Note that the text doesn’t say: “Near is/But difficult to grasp, the God.” Instead, it explicitly connects nearness to incomprehensibility.4

Right away, then, we have an apparent contradiction. Normally, nearness ought to mean easier to understand. After all, close proximity lets us observe an object more fully. No doubt such a model subtly bespeaks the predominant role played by our visual faculty. Yet couldn’t we apply it to immaterial objects as well? If our relation to an object is emotional, nearness becomes equivalent to intimacy. If what we want to understand is purely intellectual, nearness is tantamount to knowledge. Even for the wholly immaterial, then, the link between nearness and incomprehensibility is hard to explain.

Here it’s important that we look at the first statement of the prologue more closely. In other words, we need to think about what the nearness of a God might involve. Clearly, the nearness of a God is different from other forms of nearness. Apart from mere physical proximity, even the subjective nearness or intimacy of any two individuals must have its limit: otherwise they would be identical. But the nearness of a God is different, if only because we can’t assign any limits to it. Nonetheless, this needn’t imply that we and the God are identical. On the contrary: if that were true, presumably the God would no longer be “difficult to grasp.” Obviously, the fact that we can speak of the God suggests we must feel it in some way. But if we feel it, what we feel must be a sense of its otherness or difference. And yet, simultaneously, we also feel its nearness: this otherness we can’t grasp is also very near to us, perhaps even within us, since that would be the ultimate form of nearness. What we feel, then, is an otherness we can’t specify even though we know of its presence. Under these circumstances, we might even argue that it’s precisely the nearness of the God, combined with its otherness, that makes it incomprehensible. To grasp it, we would have to imagine ourselves as identical to the otherness, which is impossible.

Significantly, the poem’s next statement refers to danger: “But where danger is, grows/That which saves as well.” Normally, when we talk about danger, our first concern is to identify its source. Curiously, the poem gives us no help on that score. Instead, it simply says “But where danger is . . . ” If we turn back to the initial statement, our first temptation would probably be to equate “where” with “near”: after all, these are the only terms with spatial referents. If we do that, we might infer that danger comes from the nearness of the God. Yet patristic
tradition had amply affirmed the desirability of nearness to God. By itself, then, nearness to God doesn’t quite suffice to explain the danger the poem speaks of. Still, it seems plausible to suppose the nature of that danger has in fact been pinpointed by the text. The third line begins: “Wo aber Gefahr ist . . .” Here the aber (but, however) implies qualification of a previous statement. And since our present focus is on danger, we can only assume it carries over from before. Collectively, these statements suggest that the “danger” of line 3 must consist of everything previously mentioned: that the God is near, and difficult to grasp. In other words, the combination of nearness and ungraspability is what makes the God fearsome.

Together, these conditions produce a need to represent that can’t be satisfied in any obvious way. The ultimate form of nearness, as we’ve seen, is to be within us. So when something within us amounts to otherness or difference, it sparks a tension we instinctively seek to resolve. To resolve it, we need some way to represent that otherness or difference. Yet, precisely because of its nearness, we find the task impossible. But without a way to conceptualize what we perceive, we can’t make sense of what we’ve experienced. The ultimate consequence would be a loss of sanity. Hence the danger that the text speaks of.

Still, the poem does hold out at least a hope. Immediately after he mentions the danger, the speaker goes on to talk about rescue. Specifically: “But where danger is, grows / That which saves as well.” In fact, lines 3–4 tell us even more. Whereas danger merely exists or is, the text asserts that at the same place “grows / That which saves.” Here the use of “grows” hints at a vital source. But if the God must by its very nature remain eternal and unchanged, what “grows” is presumably human. So the danger posed by a God who’s both near and difficult to grasp can ultimately be traced to the mind itself. Because the mind can’t accept the nearness of a God who’s difficult to grasp and unrepresentable, it produces the danger. Less clear is how “that which saves” might come from the same source. The fact that its growth is necessary means it can’t save us in any immediate way. But if “that which saves” requires time, then we who are in danger because of our inability to represent a God who’s too near must learn to abide, to wait.

In addition, we need to look at “that which saves” more closely. Literally, das Rettende isn’t quite “that which saves” but rather “the saving,” or, more fully, “that which performs the act of saving.” To call it das Rettende emphasizes the act involved, as a process or event. Unlike simpler nominatives, though, it isn’t merely associated with an act. Instead, it also hints at some unnamed agency.
And if we don’t know what that agency is, our only recourse is to connect it to the act by which we become aware of it.

Although we might expect the rest of the prologue to indicate how we’ll be rescued, what we actually get is quite different: a depiction of the human scene in which we wait for the desired event. Since the poem’s initial statement was about the mind and its inability to grasp the God, it should come as no surprise that when Hölderlin turns to the purely human sphere he focuses on subjectivity. And specifically on its problems or limits. To a mind that finds it difficult to grasp the God because of its otherness, any attempt to understand human otherness is likely to be fraught with hindrances as well. In particular, if we can’t apprehend another subjectivity in its actual otherness, perhaps our only hope is to do so symbolically. From this standpoint, the symbolic image itself becomes a form of otherness. Accordingly, any effort to interpret it becomes a way to transcend our own subjectivity.5

Symbolically, the poem portrays what human subjectivity might still hope to achieve under difficult circumstances. “In darkness,” we’re told, “dwell/The eagles.” Like the prologue to the Fourth Gospel, much of the poem will be about light and darkness, and that transitional interval we call twilight. But darkness is different. For the author of the Fourth Gospel, darkness and light are absolutely antithetical. Their relationship is depicted as one of struggle or agon: “a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower.” Clearly there can be no reconciliation, no accommodation between light and darkness. From a biblical standpoint, furthermore, darkness characterizes a world where the light hasn’t yet come. The same might apply to the human condition in “Patmos.” Yet here subjectivity has apparently arrived at some sort of accommodation with darkness. For the eagles to “dwell” in darkness hints at a measure of duration. You don’t really “dwell” in a spot if you just happen to be there briefly. But if you’re in for the long haul, you have to become more tolerant to survive. Meanwhile, darkness might well typify the subjective isolation in which we dwell. In that darkness, then, the mind subsists by itself, without perception or awareness of others.

Nonetheless, the poem does yield at least limited access to the world outside oneself. Thus we get the “sons of the Alps,” who “fearless go/ . . . over the abyss/On lightly-built bridges.” The term “sons of the Alps” suggests they’re at home in the mountainous scene. Like eagles, who typically build their nests on craggy, inaccessible cliffs, the “sons of the Alps” don’t seem to mind their isolation. At the same time, they don’t just stay where they are. Instead they make
their way “over the abyss/On lightly-built bridges.” The mention of an abyss reveals how dangerous their situation really is. If the symbolism here revolves around subjectivity, an abyss might signify the emptiness or void that lies beyond each individual consciousness. To establish a meaningful relation to others, then, we need to construct some sort of bridge over that abyss. Significantly, the text describes the bridges traversed by the “sons of the Alps” as “lightly-built” (leicht-gebauten). Such a term could mean either that they’re of lightweight construction or were easy to build. But it also bespeaks a definite fragility. My own belief is that these bridges consist of language. Language connects us to others. Of lightweight construction (mere sounds in air, as the text says later), easy to build (as speech acts invariably are), but fragile as well, liable to be forgotten or misconstrued. Yet we (like the sons of the Alps) take these bridges for granted, and so proceed fearlessly.

Linguistic bridges, however, don’t guarantee a relation to others. In fact, Hölderlin seems to find such a relation difficult, at best: “round about are heaped/The summits of time, and the most loved/Live near, getting faint/On mountains most separate.” Presumably the “most loved” should be easy to reach. Especially when they “live near.” Yet even proximity doesn’t suffice. Instead, we learn they’re “getting faint/On mountains most separate.” Here the text hints at their ultimate extinction unless they receive help soon from some external agency. Meanwhile, their location on “mountains most separate” points to the source of their plight: their extreme subjective isolation from those they love most. These mountains, in turn, look very similar to the “summits of time” (die Gipfel der Zeit). In fact, the two might even be identical. At any rate, they seem closely connected, geographically and otherwise, since the first word of the passage where they occur (Drum or darum = therefore) applies to both equally. But if summits form the highest points of a landscape, the highest points in the landscape of time are presumably those where it comes closest to eternity. Eternity, though, suggests the Godlike. What we have, then, is another expression for the nearness of a God whose presence can be felt all around, just as the “summits of time” are heaped round about. Yet the “most loved” live near, on “mountains most separate,” which could easily be these self-same “summits of time.” But why should proximity to the “summits of time” produce subjective isolation? The simple answer is that nearness to the God can have such an effect. Yet this, too, calls for further explanation. We’ve seen that nearness to the God can induce a breakdown in our capacity to represent, and hence understand. But the very possibility of our relation to others is based on that capacity. Thus nearness to the God can dangerously alienate us from everyone else.
The danger of subjective isolation helps to explain the kind of request the poem goes on to make. “So give pure water,” it asks first of all. In fact, “unschuldig [= innocent or pure] Wasser” amounts to a sort of baptismal water, which would imply spiritual renewal. Nor is it irrelevant that for the author of the Fourth Gospel, spiritual renewal comes from metanoia, or “change of mind.” At the same time, the speaker also asks for Fittige, or pinions, “truest faculties/To cross over and to return.” If danger comes from excessive subjectivity, the only way to overcome that is by communion with others. Hence the need for pinions: given the subjective abyss around each mountain peak, our only means of access to the “most loved” who dwell on other peaks is to fly over to where they are. Yet, as the text is careful to specify, we need pinions not only to “cross over” but to “return.” To do the first but not the second would cause us to get lost in pure otherness.

The second major section of the poem reflects on what the Fourth Gospel considers the central events of the Passion narrative: the Last Supper and the Crucifixion. Here, as in the prologue, Hölderlin considers the crucial role of subjectivity. But while the prologue had only hinted at a way to transcend the limits of subjectivity, the Passion reminiscence pointedly focuses on a moment when all subjective limits appear to have been overcome. This transcendence of subjectivity opens up a new perspective on how we represent what we perceive. The text displays that new perspective in the very way it arranges its material:

Gegangen mit
Dem Sohne des Höchsten, unzertrennlich, denn
Es liebte der Gewittertragende die Einfalt
Des Jüngers und es sahe der achtsame Mann
Das Angesicht des Gottes genau,
Da, beim Geheimnisse des Weinstoks, sie
Zusammensassen, zu der Stunde des Gastmals,
Und in der grossen Seele, ruhigahnend den Tod
Aussprach der Herr und die letzte Liebe, denn nie genug
Hatt’er von Güte zu sagen
Der Worte, damals, und zu erheitern, da
Ers sahe, das Zürnen der Welt.
Denn alles ist gut. Drauf starb er. Vieles wäre
Zu sagen davon. Und es sahn ihn, wie er siegend blickte
Den Freudigsten die Freunde noch zulezt. . . .

[Had gone about with
The son of the Highest, inseparable, for
The bearer of thunder loved the simplicity
Of the disciple and the attentive man saw
The face of the God exactly,
When, by the mystery of the vine, they
Sat together, at the hour of the banquet,
And in his great soul, calmly foreknowing, death
Spoke the Lord and the last love, for never enough
Words had he to say of goodness
At that time, and to brighten, where
He saw it, the wrath of the world.
For all is good. Thereupon he died. Much might
Be said about it. And they saw him, how triumphantly he looked,
The most joyful of the friends, still, at the end.  \(SW\ 8: 683–84\)

Perhaps what’s most obvious here is the extraordinary freedom exercised by
the text over its Johannine source. The commencement itself sets the tone. The
first line begins in mid-sentence: “Had gone about with/The son of the High-
est.” In the original the sense of \(in\ medias\ res\) is even more pronounced, as the
text literally splits the verb:

der in seeliger Jugend war

\begin{quote}
  Gegangen mit
  Dem Sohne des Höchsten. . . .
\end{quote}

Effectively, it places all the emphasis on \textit{Gegangen} (gone or gone about), vir-
tually the only word in the first line. Literally, it might refer to the peripatetic
way Jesus performs his ministry. On a deeper level, it hints at a subjective
mobility. Unlike the “most loved” of the prologue, the beloved disciple doesn’t
remain isolated and hence trapped on a mountain peak. Instead he moves about
freely, and always in the company of his master.

Set against the prologue, however, what stands out most is the inseparability
of master and disciple. What especially characterizes the disciple is his “simplic-
ity” (\textit{Einfalt}). That simplicity, in turn, is a form of oneness (lit., \textit{Einfalt} or
simplicity \(=\) onefold). In the prologue, we found that the isolation of the “most
loved” was caused by human subjectivity, which wants to assimilate whatever is
near it into a likeness to itself. To overcome our separateness from others, we
need to overcome that tendency. Hence the turn to simplicity. In subjective
terms, simplicity relinquishes the desire for likeness. On some level, it sees such a
tendency as part of our mental disposition yet feels no need for it. Instead, what it seeks is a oneness that doesn’t have to understand because it’s already become subjectively identical with its object.

By itself, nonetheless, the simplicity of the disciple isn’t sufficient to produce inseparability from the master. In fact, two somewhat more complex requirements have to be met. Specifically: “for/The bearer of thunder loved the simplicity/Of the disciple and the attentive man saw/The face of the God exactly.” If we assume the disciple = the attentive man, the two requirements become closely linked. The first imparts agency to the “bearer of thunder,” who loves the simplicity of the disciple. The second gives the disciple agency: to be inseparable from the “son of the Highest,” he must see the face of the God exactly. In addition, the proximity of the two statements is suggestive.

Here we need to consider precisely how Gewittertragende ought to be interpreted. Instead of “bearer of thunder,” for instance, we could have “bearer of the thunderstorm.” Obviously the two translations point in completely different ways. From “bearer of thunder” we get divine power or omnipotence. Classical mythology had ascribed control over lightning (hence, presumably, thunder) to Zeus. A Christian equivalent might be “son of the Highest.” Yet it would be equally easy to see Gewittertragende as “bearer of the thunderstorm” = one who suffers or endures (tragen) the storm/tempest. For this we get ample support later in the text. Close to the end, we find: “Still ist sein Zeichen/Am donnernden Himmel. Und Einer stehet darunter/Sein Leben lang. Denn noch lebt Christus” [Silent is his sign/In thundering heaven. And one stands beneath it/His whole life long. For Christ lives yet]. So the Christ who suffers the storm of divine wrath is as much a presence in the poem as the representative of divine omnipotence. Taken together, the two glosses seem virtually contradictory: on the one hand, omnipotence, and, on the other, complete passivity.

At this point, the need for simplicity becomes apparent. Because of his simplicity, the disciple can accept both glosses simultaneously. Whereas rationality might try to force one at the expense of the other, the disciple doesn’t. In other words, he makes no attempt at rational consistency. Alternatively, we might say he simply embraces what he perceives, even though he lacks the kind of rational framework necessary to sort it out. As a representative of divine omnipotence, the “bearer of thunder” is easy to make sense of. Equally easy, in a different way, is the Christ who bears or suffers, a figure with whom subjectivity can readily identify because of his likeness to itself. But while either seems feasible alone, their combination produces an extraordinary tension. To survive it, we need simplicity.
Moreover, we know any attempt to grasp the God is fraught with peril. The text clearly hints at this when it says the attentive man “saw/The face of the God exactly.” The prologue to the Fourth Gospel observes that “No one has ever seen God” (John 1:18), an allusion to Exodus 33:20, where Yahweh informs Moses, “You cannot see my face, for man cannot see me and live.” Note that the Exodus passage doesn’t absolutely rule out our capacity to see God. Instead, it merely says we can’t do so and live. Our real problem, then, lies in our inability to conceptualize what we’ve seen. To deny what we’ve seen simply because we can’t conceptualize it, however, would be to call into question our entire cognitive enterprise and, consequently, the only means we have to get beyond pure subjectivity. But if we can’t conceptualize what we’ve seen directly, maybe we can still get there indirectly. To do that, we need to ascertain precisely why we can’t conceptualize what we perceive of the God.

Here the text furnishes a clue by what it has to say about the “mystery of the vine.” Given the allusion, once more, to the Passion narrative of the Fourth Gospel, it seems useful to recall the original:

I am the true vine,  
and my Father is the vinedresser. . . .
Make your home in me, as I make mine in you.  
As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself,  
but must remain part of the vine,  
either can you unless you remain in me.  
I am the vine,  
you are the branches.  
Whoever remains in me, with me in him,  
bears fruit in plenty. (John 15:1–5)

To some extent, we might describe the “mystery” of the vine as one based on the “mutual indwelling” (C. H. Dodd) of Christ and his disciples. Normally, the relation of containment or inherence is exclusive: at most, only one of two elements can be contained within the other. So when Jesus says “whoever remains in me, with me in him,” the sort of relation he speaks of can only be termed a spatial impossibility. Yet that spatial impossibility is precisely what the Fourth Gospel asserts about the relationship between Christ and his disciples in the Farewell Discourses at the Last Supper. But if the Johannine narrative is spatially contradictory, the poem makes no attempt to resolve the paradox rationally. On the contrary, it actually embraces this paradox as the centerpiece of its own re-creation of the Last Supper: “When, by the mystery of the vine,
they/Sat together . . . ” In fact, the original (Da, beim Geheimnisse des Wein-
stoks, sie/Zusammensassen) admits of many interpretive possibilities, which all
depend on how we read the crucial preposition beim (= bei dem). Nevertheless,
most incline to the spatial, some even emphatically (beim = in the presence of).
The effect, I would argue, is that we see the “mystery of the vine” as almost
physically present at the banquet. On some level, then, we might say that for the
poem the mystery of the vine is itself essentially about spatial relationships.

Ultimately, what the poem wants to get at is the connection between thought
and spatial relationships. To what extent, in other words, does our capacity to
think depend on whether we can spatially represent what we want to concep-
tualize? We’ve seen that the mystery of the vine involves a spatial contradiction,
one the poem makes no attempt to resolve. What it does, however, is to try to
situate that contradiction: “by the mystery of the vine, they/Sat together, at the
hour of the banquet.” Here what we have is a mystery that can’t be resolved
rationally, but can be situated spatially. So spatial placement seems to make it
possible to represent what would otherwise be unthinkable. In fact, the absence
of any attempt to explain the spatial contradiction of the mystery rationally is
just what allows the text to represent the mystery at all. And, because we can
represent what we can’t explain, we have to conclude that what makes thought
possible, in the last analysis, isn’t rationality (i.e., our ability to understand what
we represent) but spatial relationships. And this in turn suggests why the divine
presence is so difficult to grasp. The God is difficult to grasp because its nearness
to us is spatial but not rational. Yet the mystery of the vine is precisely what the
text can represent, spatially. Hence the need to see thought in terms that are
purely spatial rather than rational.

Besides what it does to space, the Passion reminiscence of “Patmos” also alters
time. Once more, its source is the Fourth Gospel itself. A prominent element of
the Passion narrative is prophecy. Jesus speaks of his own end, and of a time
when he’ll no longer be with his disciples. Nevertheless, his tone is troubled,
informed no doubt by his knowledge of Judas’s imminent betrayal. In contrast,
the poem displays no such anxiety. The key to its lack of anxiety lies, I believe, in
the term ruhigahnden. To foreknow calmly or peacefully doesn’t mean that
knowledge of the future induces serenity. Rather, the very act of prescience itself
is only possible to one who no longer lives in human time, as if all the foreseen
events had already been experienced as well. And perhaps, in some way, they
have. So the text would seem to suggest when it says: “in his great soul, calmly
foreknowing, death/Spoke the Lord and the last love.” The effect is almost one
of interior monologue, as if death and the last love were spoken inwardly. In that
respect, even the Godlike consciousness of Christ displays a subjectivity. From his standpoint, death and the last love exist simultaneously. That simultaneity, in turn, points to how time itself can be understood in terms of spatial relationships. Because death and the last love exist in a way in which sequence is no longer involved, their relation is, to that extent, purely spatial. Thus subjective simultaneity allows time to be defined spatially.

Of that process, the text offers at least one other significant example. As the disciple recalls the crucified Lord, he remembers "how triumphantly he looked,/The most joyful of the friends, still, at the end." Yet we know that the Fourth Gospel mentions no such detail, and that the Synoptics explicitly indicate the contrary. So how do we explain it? In a striking way, the Fourth Gospel employs the term ὑφοθηνατος to signify the crucifixion. Yet ὑφοθηνατος can mean either crucified or elevated, raised. Within the framework of the Fourth Gospel, it refers simultaneously to both crucifixion and resurrection. As a result, it manages to collapse two distinct moments into one: the event by which Christ is abased, and that by which he is glorified. The poem attempts a similar compression. The triumphant look on the face of the Lord obviously announces the resurrection. In this fashion, a framework of sequence is transformed into a framework of fulfillment.9

The second half of "Patmos" depicts the situation of the faithful after the death and departure of their Lord. If the Passion reminiscence takes us back to the highest moment of human consciousness, whatever comes later is clearly aftertime. As such, it pertains to modernity. Specifically, the period after Christ’s departure marks a return to human time, to sequence rather than simultaneity. From now on, what we experience sequentially can no longer be arranged spatially. As a result, events within a temporal framework tend to lose the effect of presence. Perhaps the most crucial consequence, though, concerns our relation to the Christ. Even when he was alive, to "see the face of the God exactly" had required all the attentiveness of the disciple. But now that the Christ is gone, conditions are obviously no longer the same. So the poem needs to consider what its new standpoint ought to be.

Under these circumstances, it seems only natural for the text to adopt the form of a question, which it then tries to answer:

Wenn aber stirbt alsdenn
An dem am meisten
Die Schönheit hieng, dass an der Gestalt
Ein Wunder war und die Himmlischen gedeutet
Auf ihn, und wenn, ein Räthsel ewig füreinander
Sie sich nicht fassen können
Einander, die zusammenlebten
Im Gedächtniss, und nicht den Sand nur oder
Die Weiden es hinwegnimmt und die Tempel
Ergreift, wenn die Ehre
Des Halbgotts und der Seinen
Verweht und selber sein Angesicht
Der Höchste wendet
Darob, dass nirgend ein
Unsterbliches mehr am Himmel zu sehn ist oder
Auf grüner Erde, was ist diss?

Es ist der Wurf des Säemans, wenn er fasst
Mit der Schaufel den Waizen,
Und wirft, dem Klaren zu, ihn schwingend über die Tenne.
Ihm fällt die Schaale vor den Füssen, aber
Ans Ende kommt das Korn,
Und nicht ein Übel ists, wenn einiges
Verloren gehet und von der Rede
Verhallet der lebendige Laut,
Denn göttliches Werk auch gleicht dem unsern,
Nicht alles will der Höchste zumal.
Zwar Eisen träget der Schacht,
Und glühende Harze der Ätna,
So hätt' ich Reichtum,
Ein Bild zu bilden, und ähnlich
Zu schaun, wie er gewesen, den Christ. . . .

[But when dies thereupon
To whom most of all
Beauty adhered, that in form
A wonder was and the Heavenly had pointed
To him, and when, an enigma perpetually for one another
They could not understand
Each other, who lived together
In remembrance, and not the sand only or
The willows it takes away and the temples
Seizes, when the honor}
Of the demigod and of his own
Is blown away and even his face
The Highest turns away
On that account, so that no
Immortal is to be seen any more in the heavens or
On the green earth, what is this?

It is the cast of the sower, when he takes up
With his shovel the seed,
And throws it, toward clear space, swinging it over the threshing-floor.
The husks fall at his feet, but
The grain comes to an end,
And there’s no harm if some of it
Gets lost and of speech
The living sound dies away,
For the divine work too is like our own,
Not all does the Highest intend at once.
To be sure, the pit bears iron,
And Etna glowing resins,
So should I have wealth,
To form an image, and truly
To see, as he was, the Christ.]

Almost immediately, we get a sense of why it might prove difficult to represent the Christ. Right away, the present passage comes across as strongly subjective. Whereas the Gewittertragende motif had embraced both the divinity and humanity of the Christ, the present description focuses solely on his beauty. But beauty, obviously, is a very subjective category. Nor does the text try to minimize that. Instead, it explicitly invokes beauty as a category: die Schönheit. Furthermore, the text seems to imply a quantitative assessment of some kind. The Christ is referred to as one “To whom most of all/Beauty adhered.” All of this, however, is more or less the terminology of aesthetics. For me, it bears a definite resemblance to Friedrich Schlegel’s notion of das höchste Schöne. Yet subsequently the text goes even further, when it speaks of the Christ as one “that in form/A wonder was.” Clearly, “a wonder” reflects the viewpoint of an observer. Note, too, the hint of aesthetic appreciation in the mention of form (der Gestalt). Altogether, what we get is that the disciple’s perception of Christ has become distinctly subjective. As such, it no longer possesses its earlier exactness.

One of the principal negative consequences of increased subjectivity is an
inability to understand anyone else. Or, as the text puts it: “an enigma perpetually for one another/They could not understand/Each other, who lived together/In remembrance.” Here the poem refers to the gift of glossolalia, received by the disciples at Pentecost. After the departure of Jesus, the disciples continue their communal existence, united by the memory of their Lord. Assembled together on the day of Pentecost, they experience a form of inspiration symbolized by the strong wind that shakes the entire house. Inspired, they preach in different languages to various groups of foreigners gathered in Jerusalem. Earlier, the poem had rendered the event more fully: “Drum sandt’ er ihnen/Den Geist, und freilich bebte/Das Haus und die Wetter Gottes rollten/Ferndonnernd über/Die ahnenden Häupter” [Therefore he sent them/The Spirit, and indeed/The house trembled and the divine storm rolled/Distantly thundering over/The foreknowing heads]. Yet the ultimate consequence of glossolalia is an inability to understand each other. Because the disciples no longer speak the same language, they lose their capacity to communicate with each other. Significantly, the text doesn’t pinpoint the exact cause. Perhaps the omission is meant to imply that glossolalia isn’t a gift after all but a hindrance. A private mode of discourse, it amounts to the most extreme, most indulgent expression of individual subjectivity. Hence the inability to understand anyone else. In German, *fassen* is the term used by the prologue for our unsuccessful effort to grasp the God. Like that earlier attempt, the present one seems doomed by its excessive subjectivity.

A crucial indication of how bad things are appears just after the allusion to glossolalia at Pentecost. In its wake, we witness various disappearances: “and not the sand only or/The willows it takes away and the temples/Seizes . . . ” The cause of these disappearances, however, remains unspecified. Instead, the text speaks only of a mysterious “it” by which they’re brought about. Interestingly, the pronoun has no clear referent. Meanwhile, the rest of the passage offers a slight clue: “when the honor/Of the demigod and of his own/Is blown away.” Here the use of *verweht* (blown away, scattered) suggests a forceful wind of some kind. A passage from Acts helps to clarify it: “When Pentecost day came round, they had all met in one room, when suddenly they heard what sounded like a powerful wind from heaven, the noise of which filled the entire house in which they were sitting; and something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire. . . . They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak foreign languages” (Acts 2:1–4). Note that the wind is closely associated with the tongues of fire, and hence glossolalia. But glossolalia, as we’ve seen, is itself associated with excessive subjectivity. And excessive subjectivity doesn’t care about the exter-
nal world. As a result, our perceptions (of, say, the materiality of sand, or the beauty of the willows) no longer matter. The strong wind of subjectivity, so to speak, simply blows all of these away. By its seizure of the temples, moreover, it shakes the foundations of religion itself. To become a cult, religion has to transcend individual subjectivity. Its location somewhere other than in the mind of the individual worshipper is precisely what leads to collective worship. For radical subjectivity, however, the solidarity of a cult is irrelevant. In effect, radical subjectivity attempts to deny whatever isn’t determined by subjectivity itself. Thus religion, the very source of sanctity, gets brought into question. In this fashion, the “honor / Of the demigod and of his own / Is blown away.”

But if what happens to the demigod is due to excessive subjectivity, we still need to explain how we know that “even his face / The Highest turns away / On that account.” After all, the ability to see the God exactly had required that we relinquish our subjective tendency. Conversely, any return to subjectivity must presumably make perception of the God difficult. We know he’s turned his face away, then, only because we no longer perceive the God. Since we still yearn to do so, we infer a withdrawal on his part. Ultimately, however, we no longer perceive the God because of a change in our own subjectivity. Equivalently, we might say: we no longer perceive the God because we’ve lost the capacity. And we know we’ve lost it because we can no longer see what’s temporal in terms of spatial relationships. Unable, in other words, to transcend the temporal, we fall back into the realm of sequence and hence of time.

After the first half of the passage ends on a question, the second half considers what might be possible within a temporal framework. With its figure of the sower, the passage is undoubtedly meant to recall the parable of the sower from the Synoptic Gospels. As told by John the Baptist, the parable is about separation of the wheat from the chaff (Matthew 3:12). In the version told by Jesus himself, however, it’s about our reception of the word of God (Mark 4:3–9, 14–20). What “Patmos” does is to combine these in its own unique way. Here a variant from a later version of the poem proves useful: “Es ist der Wurf das eines Sinns” [It is the throw of a sense] (SW 8: 824). After the parousia, or historical appearance of Jesus, the true meaning of what he preached has become a matter of some uncertainty. As a result, our reception of the word of God is no longer just a matter of faith. Instead, interpretation is now necessary. But interpretation involves a separation of wheat from chaff. For Hölderlin, the process of interpretation can be compared to the process by which we sift grain. Hence the motif of the “throw of a sense”: to throw a sense is equivalent to a toss of grain. In both
instances, what we’re after is a way to sift the genuine grain (i.e., the true interpretation or sense) from the chaff (i.e., non-sense).

It’s all summed up by the figure of the sower. Whereas the God is difficult to grasp (fassen), and while the disciples can’t understand (fassen) each other, the sower manages to seize or take up (fassen) the seed with his shovel. Moreover, the movement by which the sower sifts grain from husks is strongly suggestive. The text describes how the sower throws the seed upward “toward clear space.” The original simply says “dem Klaren zu” (lit., toward clearness). Here the separation of genuine grain from chaff would seem to depend on clarity. Which is to say: we throw the seed or sense upward, toward the clear or open space, in an effort to force it to clarify itself. Conversely, confusion comes about because the genuine sense or seed is mixed with chaff or non-sense. But once we manage to sort these out by a perception of their differences (like the process by which we sift grain), the result should be hermeneutic clarity. Yet that clarity, as we see here, is inevitably the result of a process. Nor does the poem seem to mind that. On the contrary. Of the process by which we sift grain, it explicitly avers: “And there’s no harm if some of it/Gets lost.” Likewise it’s also okay if “of speech/The living sound dies away.” Speech, of course, is the conveyor of sense. On a deeper level, however, we can’t always manage to grasp the sense of what people say right away. Like the agricultural cycle that hovers as the background for the sower, the process by which we come to understand is one for which time is profoundly necessary. And, as for the agricultural cycle, it’s a process that has its own internal economy.

But the notion of process doesn’t just apply to human time. Subsequently, we’re told: “For the divine work too is like our own,/Not all does the Highest intend at once.” Here, once more, it’s useful to look at the Fourth Gospel. From it we learn that on a visit to Jerusalem Jesus happens to cure a sick man at the pool of Bethzatha. Previously bedridden, the man is now able to pick up his mat and walk. His activity angers the Jews, who tell him he isn’t allowed to carry his mat on the Sabbath. He answers that he was told to do it by the man who cured him. Jesus himself is then attacked. His reply is: “My Father goes on working, and so do I” (John 5:17). Influenced by Hellenistic Judaism, the Fourth Gospel had seen work as the constant, ceaseless activity of the divine energeia. In one respect, nonetheless, the acts of God are for “Patmos” like human acts: they don’t always achieve their end immediately. Not, however, because of any lack of power to bring it about. On that point the text is explicit: “Not all does the Highest intend [lit., “will” = will] at once.” Of course, whatever the Highest does intend should
presumably happen instantly. For precisely that reason, it seems strange for God not to want it that way. The result would obviously be a form of simultaneity. Which is to say: no more time. All of which points to the divine work as a work of time, at the deepest or most profound level. And even more: that time itself is ultimately a creation of the God. To dwell in time, then, should no longer be seen as a fall from a higher mode of consciousness in which the temporal had become spatial. Instead, our existence in time is clearly a condition that was meant to be.\footnote{11}

Inevitably, the notion of time as a natural human condition leads one to ask whether, within a temporal framework, we can still see the Christ exactly. No doubt the poem wants to believe we can. After all, the notion of time as natural is related (as we’ve seen) to the theme of a natural economy. But a natural economy implies productivity. The land produces grain for the farmer. Similarly, “the pit bears iron,/And Etna glowing resins.” And all these forms of wealth arise naturally from the productive capacity of the earth itself. The same should be true for the speaker: “So should I have wealth.” For the speaker, however, wealth means creativity. Creativity, in turn, should enable one to form images. In the original we get “Ein Bild zu bilden.” Specifically, the speaker wants to form an image of the Christ. By means of that image, the speaker hopes to see the Christ “as he was.” But the notion that we could somehow manage to do so by means of an image is obviously a problematic one. As a visual icon, the image has no real temporal aspect. On some level, moreover, the text knows it. The term \textit{ähnlich} (which I translate as “truly”) has more to do with likeness or verisimilitude. In other words, the text doesn’t pretend that an image or picture will really yield the Christ as he actually was. Nonetheless, the speaker yearns for that image. Its appeal, I would argue, comes precisely from what it \textit{doesn’t} give: the sense of time that frames any of our real perceptions. Instead, an image attempts to translate the temporal into the spatial. Despite our awareness that the divine work takes place in time, we want somehow to transcend it. For what the image ultimately gives us isn’t the Christ as he actually was, but a representation. So it comes back, in the end, to our need to represent the God in its nearness. The final section of the poem, by contrast, looks at what it might be like to submit to the nearness of a God we can’t represent:

Und wenn die Himmlischen jetzt
So, wie ich glaube, mich lieben,
Wie viel mehr dich,
Denn Eines weiss ich,
Right away, subjectivity becomes apparent. The initial statement starts off with a conditional: “And if the Heavenly now/ . . . love me.” This, moreover, is itself qualified by “as I believe.” Subsequently, the initial statement is further qualified in other ways: “And if the Heavenly now/So . . . love me.” The temporal modifier “now” restricts any love by the Heavenly to the present. Instead of the timeless love of God for the Son (“because you loved me before the foundation of the world,” John 17:24), the speaker can only vouch for the present moment. Similarly, “so” points to a particular kind of love, rather than the unqualified variety of the Farewell Discourses in the Fourth Gospel. Clearly, then, his purely subjective viewpoint doesn’t take the speaker very far.

The sequel is equally characterized by uncertainty. After the conditional
premise “And if the Heavenly now/So, as I believe, love me,” the speaker goes on: “how much more you.” I give the line as literally written. A fuller version would be: “how much more [must they love] you.” In the original, the objective case of Dich (you) means the verb (love) must be directed toward “you.” Significantly, the poem can’t quite bring itself to say so explicitly. The premise that the speaker is loved by the Heavenly had elicited, as we’ve seen, a similar hesitancy. But what holds for the premise must presumably apply equally to the conclusion. While not so explicitly qualified as the premise, the inability of the text to actually say the Heavenly loves “you” would seem even more indicative of hesitancy.

Given his general uncertainty, it isn’t clear why the speaker should insist that the Heavenly do indeed love the “you” whom he addresses even more than himself. By way of preface, he observes: “For one thing I know . . .” His preliminary comment is reminiscent of the Cartesian formula for which the only indubitable fact is that of self-consciousness. Yet what the speaker says next appears at first to promise a distinctly more objective form of knowledge: “That namely the will/Of the eternal Father is of much value/To you.” Initially, the original seemed poised to assert even more: “Dass nemlich der Wille/Des ewigen Vaters viel.” Here we expect the rest of the passage to say what the will of the Father is about to make happen. And that should decisively demonstrate how much the “you” is loved by the Heavenly. Instead, the poem suddenly veers into the subjective: “Dir gilt.” Which means: is of value to you. So, rather than a statement about visible evidences of the divine will, we get a statement about subjective viewpoint. In other words, we know the “you” is loved by the Heavenly not because of any sign from the Heavenly itself but because of what it means to the putative recipient of that love. But if all we know about divine love comes from what we feel, the very basis of our relationship to the God never gets beyond subjectivity.

In fact, the only objective statement we get about the God points to his absence: “Silent is his sign/In thundering heaven.” Not a word about love, or even concern. On the contrary: here, silence looks curiously like indifference. In the original, the word for silent is “still.” Which naturally suggests stillness. Silences can be intervals between what gets spoken, hence meaningful in their own way. Stillness, however, hints at absence. Not only, then, do we not get any sign from the God, but we can even feel we shouldn’t expect any. At the same time, the abode of the God isn’t exactly silent. “Thundering heaven” is a reminder of Pentecost, when the divine storm rolled “distantly thundering” overhead while the house of the disciples shook freely. The fact that it was visibly
shaken would appear to indicate a latent destructive force. And yet, despite the threat posed by its nearness, the God gives us no sign. So we have no reason to construe its nearness favorably. Even as it threatens us by its nearness, then, the God doesn’t communicate in any way.

Nonetheless, we still have one last resource. From a theoretical standpoint, we don’t know quite how to address the nearness of a God we can’t represent. Given that fact, our only hope is to try to learn from someone who’s managed to avoid the problems caused by that nearness. The text distinctly has a person in mind: “And one stands beneath it / His whole life long.” Clearly, that person makes no attempt to avoid the danger posed by the nearness of the God. Instead, his lifetime endurance of it suggests an effort to live with it. Hence the use of the term “stands” (stehet). To “stand” is to endure, but also to exist. By his choice merely to “stand” he teaches a crucial lesson: that it’s possible to live under such circumstances.

What the poem offers next is a comment on this example of how we might live. In its terse assessment, the text simply says: “For Christ lives yet.” Here, the use of present tense seems a bit odd. After all, if the “one” is supposed to be identical to the historical Christ, the only appropriate verb tense would have to be the past. Furthermore, the poem employs the phrase “his whole life long.” But a life that can be so described must presumably have come to an end. Since the next line begins with a logical connective, the fact that Christ stands beneath a thundering heaven for his entire lifetime would seem to be related to the assertion that he lives yet. Specifically, I would argue that his endurance of the threat of divine nearness serves to perpetuate his example in human memory. In other words, the perpetual significance of his act of endurance from a human standpoint makes his accomplishment relevant to the present rather than just to the past. This transformation of past into present is similar to the rearrangement of time we encountered earlier in the Passion reminiscence. But the transformation that now takes place is very much a work of collective memory. As such, it pertains distinctly to the aftertime.12

In addition, the current transformation of past into present differs from the Passion reminiscence in another way as well. The text observes that “the heroes, his sons, / Have all come.” Earlier, in its description of Pentecost, the poem had spoken of the Todeshelden (heroes of death, or death-heroes), assembled after the death of Jesus, who await the advent of the Spirit: a clear reference, it would seem, to the Apostles. Yet even here, the text displays a trace of irony. For, in their fearful, anxious frame of mind after the death of their Lord, the Apostles can hardly be considered heroic. That, in effect, comes later, in the Acts of the
Apostles. Both the disciples (as “sons”) and “holy scriptures” (i.e., Acts) can be said to emanate from the Christ in some way. The same is true for lightning; different in kind, it also attests to the God. All of these, the poem goes on to say, are “explained by/The deeds of the earth up to now,/A race that cannot be stopped.” To some extent, as we’ve often heard, the significance of any event emerges as a result of subsequent events. In its description of these, however, the poem betrays a slightly negative tone. As if to imply the Christ himself has inadvertently been forgotten in a process of elucidation that’s focused excessively on the emanations. Thus, perhaps, the comment: “a race that cannot be stopped.”

We live, in other words, in an aftertime marked by an endless succession of events that provide explanation or commentary. In the process, we’ve somehow managed to lose sight of the source from which they all come.

Nonetheless, even the forgetfulness of the aftertime can lead us back to the theme that formed our point of departure: the nearness of the God. For, as the text points out: “He is however near.” Near, though, with a difference. In the original, the term is *dabei* (lit., thereby, or, more idiomatically, nigh or nearby). Which isn’t quite the same as the nearness of the God in the prologue: “Near is/And difficult to grasp, the God” [Nah ist/Und schwer zu fassen der Gott]. Whereas the earlier nearness of the God had been too close, and so impossible to conceptualize, the present nearness of the Christ has a somewhat different quality. We might describe it as the sort of nearness that allows one to render aid or assistance. Given the problem posed by the nearness or presence of the God, however, it’s crucial that the text specify how it knows about the nearness of the Christ. And so it says: “For his works are/All known to him from the beginning.” From a divine standpoint, knowledge is equivalent to presence. In order to know his works (i.e., his emanations or manifestations), the Christ has to be present at the scene of their occurrence. But if his “works” are “known” to him from the very outset of time, his “knowledge” must then involve the same sort of temporal rearrangement we found earlier in the Passion reminiscence. In that respect, you might say, he fills all of time. Consequently, any knowledge we obtain in human time must be distinctly informed by an awareness of his presence. As the presence of the God, it’s obviously beyond our capacity to conceive. All the same, we can apprehend it, like the seasonal cycle of the sower, by means of its relation to time.

If we retrace our steps all the way back to the prologue, we can now see in what sense “Patmos” is essentially about the limits of theory. The nearness of the God forced us to become aware of our inability to conceptualize particular experiences. Specifically, the poem seemed to imply that in the case of the God
we couldn't conceptualize what we perceived precisely because of its nearness. Here, then, was the blind spot of theory: if you got too close to it, it could no longer see you clearly. Instead, we conceptualize only what we manage to place at a distance. So the abstract tendency of theory had an inherent weakness: it couldn't deal with anything that impinged on it too closely. Put in another way, we might say it couldn't deal with presences. If theory emerges out of our own subjectivity, what we can't conceptually frame is the proximity of another subjectivity. For theory, then, the nearness of the God might just be the nearness of another subjectivity. At the same time, it could just as easily be the nearness of thought itself. What the text doesn't say, but seems to hint at as a possibility, is that the nearness of the God might come from the similarity between its element and that of thought. In other words, what theory can't conceptualize is thought itself.

Perhaps what prompted Hölderlin to introduce the Passion narrative was a sense of how it might afford some way to transcend concepts. From Kant he knew space and time were merely concepts, part of the framework by which we perceive. But if space and time were no more than that, it ought to be possible in principle to get beyond these. Equivalently, we ought to be able to apprehend what we perceive more immediately, without the mediation of that framework. Hence the motive for his version of the Passion narrative. It offers, in effect, a conceptual equivalent of what Rimbaud would later call the “dérèglement de tous les sens.” Moments of the narrative that we perceived sequentially before now come to be seen simultaneously. And what had before been expressed only abstractly is now treated spatially. For Hölderlin, the Passion narrative within “Patmos” marks an attempt to break down our tendency toward a conceptual framework. What he hoped to achieve by means of that breakdown was an immediate apprehension of what we perceive that would be closer to the way things really are. The nearness of the God, as it were, without the danger it only seemed to pose because of our fear of what might happen if we abandoned concepts.

Finally, however, Hölderlin knew he also had to think about the aftertime, about what might happen if the mind couldn't sustain those epiphanic moments of consciousness at which all of our conceptual framework broke down in face of the fullness of what we perceived. Yet even here, he felt, was another way we might go beyond the limits of theory. It had to do with the process by which things come to be, become what they are. Hence his use of the motif of the sower. That sort of process couldn't really be expressed by means of concepts. And yet, at the deepest level, he felt that it defined what we are. To talk about it, then,
theory would have to look beyond itself, beyond what could be expressed by means of theory. Ultimately, the reason why theory couldn’t really think about this sort of process by means of concepts was that they, too, were subject to that same process, by which they came to be. In other words, theory couldn’t think about the process by which things came to be because it, too, came to be in the process of its reflection on that process. But if thought or theory itself came to be, perhaps to think about the process of its own genesis would somehow enable it to transcend the limits of theory.