“Christianity is an epidemic”: on Hölderlin and the plague

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Abstract

Throughout literary history the event of a plague has been an interpretation event typically split into two mutually exclusive stances. On one side, the plague is interpreted as the manifestation of divine punishment (for example, Homer’s *Iliad*) or, more ambiguously, as a test of faith. On the other side, it is understood in terms of its material causes in the absence of God (for example, Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*). However, there is an important liminal space in which the plague is understood neither as evidence of divine presence nor as evidence of divine absence but as a sign of discord between the human and the divine and discord *in* the divine. In this space, both humanity and God are infected by a finitude and contingency that the plague, perhaps more than any other phenomenon, renders palpable and unavoidable. It is in and of this temporal space that Friedrich Hölderlin wrote. This article begins with an explication of Jacques Lacan and Jean-Claude Milner’s understanding of the plague as an affront to the belief in the existence of an exception to finitude and contingency (the immortal Absolute in the form of God or the soul) and then combines this with David Farrell Krell’s elucidation of the effect on German idealism’s poets and philosophers of an awareness of this ailing or “tragic Absolute..” It then turns to Hölderlin’s translation of *Oedipus Rex* and later poems and fragments where the plague is obliquely referenced in order to show how what Wilhelm Scherer diagnosed as Hölderlin’s “spiritual epidemic”—his struggle, to the point of madness, with a universe in which the divine exception is a presentified absence—is the result of a recognition that, in Lacan’s provocative terms, “Christianity is an epidemic.”

Keywords Hölderlin · Lacan · Sophocles · Thucydides · Christianity · Plague

The split between the ancient and modern interpretation of plagues is typically presented as a straightforward distinction between recourse to divine intervention and punishment—we can think here of Apollo’s arrows that rain down on the Greek army in the opening of *The Iliad*—or the reasoning of a materialist atheism. As

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Jean-Luc Nancy remarks of the Covid-19 pandemic, “the virus confirms the absence of the divine, since we know its biological nature” (2020, n.p.). However, there is an important liminal space between these two dichotomous paradigms: a period of painful suspension that is neither concluded by the unambiguous death of God nor reversed by his decisive return. This is the perhaps interminable “moment of categorical turning” (Hölderlin, 2018, p. 317), the crisis in the relation between God and man that is suffered and poeticized by Friedrich Hölderlin. In this moment, God is not simply absent but instead ails in the form of what David Farrell Krell has termed the “tragic Absolute.” This is an Absolute that is subject to finitude and contingency. I will begin with an explication of Jacques Lacan and Jean-Claude Milner’s understanding of the plague as an affront to the belief in the existence of an exception to finitude and contingency (the immortal Absolute in the form of God or the soul). I will then examine how the plague is represented as triggering and exemplifying the discord between humanity and the ailing Absolute in Hölderlin’s notes on *Oedipus Rex* and again in a later sonnet and fragment.

For Lacan, the particular trauma of plagues and epidemics derives not from instances of individual suffering and their awful symptoms but from its staging of an essential failure of transcendence that he summarizes in the well-known aphorism as “there is no Other of the Other.” The standard (neurotic) subjective fantasy structuring the relationship between subject and Other supposes the latter as a transcendent and infallible “subject-supposed-to-know,” a loving/persecutory/indifferent external force governing and delimiting the subject’s finite world (and providing the fantasmatic comfort of a limit to finitude). When plague strikes, this fantasmatic screen cracks and the subject encounters a “barred Other” riven with inconsistency and finitude. As Lacan’s brief comments on Jean Laplanche’s *Hölderlin and the Question of the Father* indicate, it was this encounter between the poet and a lapsed Absolute or “the presence of its absence” that lay behind Hölderlin’s poetic experience: “Something is missing and his real effort at substitution and ‘signification’ is directed in desperation at that” (1992, pp. 65–66). The plague appears in Hölderlin’s work at such moments of crisis.

In *Relire la Révolution*, *Clartés de tout* and elsewhere, Jean-Claude Milner, taking Lacan’s lead, distinguishes between a (fantasmatic) limited universal and a (traumatic) unlimited universal and sketches the outlines of a “critical history of the universal” (2011) that would consider the sporadic emergence of the unlimited universal as events that force “an experience of the real” (2011), rupturing the subject’s fantasmatic reality. For Milner, this essentially concerns the subject’s relationship with death and the persistence or failure of an exception to finitude. For example, a plague is such an experience, but a war is not. As Priscilla Wald writes, this distinction concerns universality: “the violence of war could not rival the *inescapability* or level of destruction of the worst epidemics that history [has] recorded” (2008, 18, italics added). In war, an ideal exception, such as a city, persists even if an army does not. According to Thucydides’ account, General Nicias tells his men that, even in retreat, “wherever you plant yourselves you are a city already” (Thucydides, 1881, 7.77.4). However, in *Oedipus Rex*, the chorus offers no such comfort as the plague rages: “With such deaths, past numbering, the city perishes” (Sophocles, 1917, l. 169). Guided by the chorus’s martial

language—"A plague is on all our people, and thought can find no weapon for defence" (ll. 170-1)—Robert Fagles, in his translation, hits upon this distinction when he has the chorus describe Thebes as being "like a great army dying" (Sophocles, 1984, l. 194). As Leo Strauss observes, it was the plague's limitlessness that "brought home to everyone the limitations of the city" (1964, p. 195) because, as we know from Thucydides, Athens could bury its army's fallen but not its plague ravaged citizens.

The finite universal is epitomised by the famous syllogism that, in moving from the universal to the particular, summarises man's relationship with death as a definition of man: all men are mortal, Socrates is a man, Socrates is mortal. This universal is limited in the sense that it is possible to pose an exception to it (the immortal soul or God), thereby constituting its limits and making the assertion of man's universal condition as a being-toward-death bearable. We are reassured by John Donne's appeal to the "soul's delivery," the moment at which "[o]ne short sleep past, we wake eternally/ And death shall be no more" (1990, p. 176). The coherence of this 'all,' its closure and definition, depends upon an exception or exterior that settles its bounds: all x are y but there exists some x that is not. Milner associates this universal with antiquity's cosmos: the strict separation between the corruptible terrestrial world (the contingent and temporary) and the starry vault, the celestial bodies whose appearance and movement are necessary and eternal.

To this bounded universal or 'all,' Lacan opposes the 'not-all': *there is no exception*, no person that is not mortal but, paradoxically, 'not-all' people are mortal. As Lacan acknowledges, the not-all "in classical logic seems to imply the existence of the One that constitutes an exception" but, he adds, this only follows if "we are dealing with the finite" (1998, p. 103). If there is no exception, if the condition is infinitely applicable, then no 'all' or limited universal is constituted and no totalization is possible. Milner associates this limitless universal with modernity's universe: following Galileo's discovery of contingencies, such as sunspots in what was considered incorruptible and divine, the revelation that modern science delivers is that of an infinite universe—infinite not in its extension but in its contingency; the endless possible permutations and variations, the shock that it could always have been other than it is. Modernity is founded on the axiom that there is no exception to (conceivable) change and therefore no 'all' (*qua* bounded whole). There is nothing that is eternal. As Nietzsche's Zarathustra informs the fallen tightrope walker, in the modern universe "your soul will be dead before your body" (1969, p. 48). For Milner, while what is at stake here is a distinction between antiquity and modernity, this "history of traumatic experiences of the universal" (2016) is not a historicism attached to dates but is instead a matter of structural figures.

On this basis, Milner argues

There exists, according to me, events that impose the material evidence of the unlimited universal by blowing apart the representations founded on the limited universal. Lacan, but I no longer remember where, remarks that the Athenians encountered the universal in the form of the plague. Let us interpret this in the light of the all and the not-all: the Athenians were aware of the limited universal but they had the traumatic experience of another universal, of a uni-

versal without limits, in the form of the plague which can strike anyone. There is no x that cannot be struck by the plague. (2011)

Milner can certainly be forgiven for not recalling the location of Lacan's reflection—the largely neglected *Seminar XXII*—but there is a further interesting slip here, for it was not Athens that Lacan referred to:

Death is the hole in the symbolic...In the symbolic, in fact, something is *urverdrängt*, something to which we never give sense, although we are capable of saying that all men are mortal. But this statement, because of the all, makes no sense. The plague had to be propagated in Thebes for the all to cease to be of a pure symbolic, and to become imaginable. Everyone had to feel themselves concerned in particular by the threat of the plague. (1975b, SXXII, 17/12/74)

Lacan begins by alluding to Freud's observation that for the subject one's own death is strictly unimaginable. When dreaming of one's funeral, one is always present as a witness. It is a hole that one cannot illuminate or make sense of, and is continually repressed by the subject as that which is impossible (a term by which Lacan defines the real). Infinity in the modern universe is derived not from extension but from contingency, not from the fact that the plague strikes everyone but that it could strike anyone. When Mary Shelley's narrator reflects on the plague in *The Last Man* it is a matter of chance rather than reach: "Our minds embrace infinity; the visible mechanism of our being is subject to merest accident" (1998, p. 230). Therefore, it is only an event such as the plague and the unlimited universal that it imposes that invalidates the symptomatic disavowal of mortality ("I know every well, and yet..."). For Lacan, as a psychoanalyst, to make such an extraordinary claim about the plague—i.e. that it can overcome the barrier that *primal* repression (*Urverdrängung*) places over the cognizance of mortality—signals its importance as an event. There is something about a plague as an encounter with the real—the radical unpredictability of its spread, potency and mutations, the fact that it renders the ontological borders of the individual so porous, the contingency or *tuché* of its absent cause (regarding which Thucydides famously refused to speculate)—that makes it perhaps the only phenomenon worthy of this claim. As Ann Carmichael notes in a study of the language used to describe historical plagues, "[s]urvivors of the Black Death often claimed that it was a 'universal plague,' 'universal pestilence' [or] 'general mortality'" (2008, p. 18). The plague is that which makes the subject's repression of death impossible.

In Thebes, the distinction between the limited and unlimited universal, between the individual's control and the plague's contingency, is clearly voiced by Oedipus, who continually demands the existence of a definite 'all' in order to combat the plague (Miller, 1928, pp. 214–216). For Oedipus, this 'all' ($\pi\alpha\nu$) principally exists in two variations. Firstly, it is the total effort that he will commit to a total revelation: "I will gladly give you all [$\pi\alpha\nu$] my help" (Sophocles, 1917, ll. 11–12), "I would be no true man if did not perform all [$\pi\alpha\nu\theta'$] that the god reveals" (ll. 76–77), "I order him to declare all [$\pi\alpha\nu\tau\alpha$] to me" (l. 226), "I order you to make all [$\pi\alpha\nu\tau$] these words good" (l. 252). Secondly, it refers to the civic space of Thebes itself whose status as a bounded 'all,' a status menaced by the plague, might be saved if it can reassert

the logic of the exception by locating and expelling a scapegoat. Oedipus repeatedly appeals to the universality of his city. He orders Creon to "speak to all [*παντα*]" (l. 93) and later declares "[to] all [*πανσι*], I do thus proclaim" (l. 223). He establishes this concrete totality in opposition to the impurity that must be put outside: "Ban him from your houses all [*παντας*] of you, knowing that this is the defilement, as the oracle of the Pythian god has recently shown to me" (ll. 241–243). Opposing this finite and bounded totality is the plague: "With such deaths, *past numbering* [*ἀνἀριθμος*], the city perishes" (l. 169).

Speaking of Athens, Milner argues that the plague's imposition of an unlimited universal is exemplified by what Thucydides, in his historical account of the plague, remarked upon: the abandonment of funeral rites which "proves that death had changed its nature, since it no longer respects either mortal humanity or the immortal gods" (2011). As Françoise Dastur points out, not only do burial rites "characterize the very advent of human being" (2012, p. 1) as a distinguishing feature from animals, they are also a ritual registering of what exceeds finite corporeality:

The mission or purpose of funeral rites is to guarantee that the individual who has just died does not completely disappear, that something of the individual remains and endures, at least in the memory of the survivors; it is this invisible presence of the departed that was first called 'soul.' [...] What is therefore celebrated in every funeral ritual is what in the human transgresses the limited share of life granted to the individual. (2012, p. 7)

These rites, thrown into disarray by the plague, make of the universality of death a limited universal. Thucydides describes the impact of the plague on panicked citizens who "grew reckless of all law, human and divine" (1881, 2.52.3), privileging the rapidity of a body's disposal over the collective witnessing of a soul's departure. This depiction is lent greater significance by the extensive account of burial rites granted to soldiers killed in the Peloponnesian war and Pericles' praise of Athenians' temperate observance of procedure.

Milner proposes that it was for this reason that Plato, despite reading Thucydides, ignored the plague, choosing instead to devote an important passage in the *Phaedo* to the death of Socrates. Here, argues Lacan, "contrary to what [Aristotle] allowed in the [syllogistic] logic, it has to be said that Socrates is not a man, because he agrees to die so that the city will live on"—the city as the place of Socratic discourse, the signifier's interminable deployment and redeployment that does not require Socrates' material presence (2016, p. 6). For Plato, death should be the encounter with a limited universal; something in man must survive it:

Plato deals with death in two registers: on the one hand, there is nothing surprising about death because all men are mortal but, on the other hand, the singular death in question, the death of Socrates, is extraordinary because it concerns Socrates, the wisest of men[...] It] demonstrates that the universal of human death is a limited universal because there is something immortal in man[...] which] is the soul [and] as to what there is of the immortal outside man, Socrates' final speech supports it, for he requests a sacrifice be made to the god Asklepios. (Milner, 2011)

This is not just any funeral rite: Crito is required by Socrates to sacrifice a rooster to Asklepios, the son of Apollo, because he is able to bring mortals back to life—a transgressive power for which he was killed by the immortals and nonetheless retained. Socrates, according to the Delphic oracle, is the wisest of men, an exception, and this pronouncement generates what Lacan wryly refers to as Socrates’ “very odd conception of happiness;” the aspiration for the extension of “his little verbal exercises” in the eternal afterlife with various worthy and immortal interlocutors. Lacan argues that “it is in terms of the antinomy between the Immortals and the mortals, which is absolutely fundamental in ancient thought, and no less, believe me, in ours, that [Socrates’...] testimony takes on its full value” (2015, pp. 102–103). The death of Socrates is extraordinary because it concerns the wisest of men; that part of the soul given to thought and logos, the *logistikon*, philosophy itself.

Plato’s sanitised account of Socrates’ final moments is also noteworthy. Forgoing a depiction of the convulsions and choking attested to by medical literature, it contains only the most visually inoffensive symptoms of hemlock poisoning—a numbing that spreads from the lower extremities to the heart, from the body to the seat of the soul. The progressive loss or departure of sensation exemplifies a central idea explored in the *Phaedo*: the emancipation of the immortal soul from its mortal vessel. Thereby, argues Christopher Gill, “a historical event is transformed into a representation of a philosophical idea” (1973, p. 28). This is repeated in Eduard Gans’ account of Hegel’s death: “He died quietly, one can even say philosophically” (1970, p. 501). Although the causes are of course different, it is a notable coincidence that the disease described in Thucydides’ history progresses in precisely the reverse fashion: rather than a loss of sensation that travels upward from the periphery, “it began with violent sensations of heat in the head[... T]he malady which first settled in the head passed through the whole body, starting at the top” (1881, 2.49.2–7). When Lucretius ‘mistranslates’ Thucydides’ καρδία (stomach) as heart and affirms an already present ambiguity (καρδία specifically means ‘cardiac orifice of the stomach’), he introduces a visceral disruption into this idealised part of the body. Furthermore, it is a “sorrowing heart [*cor maestum*]” (Lucretius, 1916, 6.1152): as Lucretius shifts from physiology to psychology, the reader understands that rather than being released, the soul is assaulted by the plague. When Socrates reprimands Apollodorus for noisily sobbing, this is because such grief admits the possibility of the soul’s mortality. There can be no sorrowing hearts here.

As Milner indicates, the gods—the Absolute whose exteriority and immortality was the exception bounding the universe—were not unaffected by the plague as sacrifices and burial rites were abandoned as a result of the plagues traumatic rupture. In *The Tragic Absolute* David Farrell Krell argues that “the metaphysical or ontotheological absolute,” as that which is independent of change and time, is represented in Hölderlin’s work as being infected with finitude (2005, p. 1). According to Krell, this failure of transcendence does not result in modernity’s death or absence of God but in a disquieting conjunction of the divine with states and affects to which it had been antithetical: “Longing, languishing, *languissement*, disease, plague—and God?” (2011, p. 203) In Hölderlin’s literary imagination the primal scene of this conjunction is Sophocles’ Thebes.

For Hölderlin, as a modern subject, to "poetically... live on this earth" (2018, p. 226) is to be open to the desired presence of God, endure inevitable disappointment, and thereby poetically register the trace of an absence. The ancient world of the Greeks, by contrast, is characterised by the terrifying and thrilling proximity of the gods—hence, Hölderlin's fascination, manifested in the form of idiosyncratic translations of *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. To tragically live on that earth was to catastrophically fail to negotiate a tolerable path amidst the overlapping laws of gods and men. Reading Hölderlin's dense 'Notes to *Oedipus*' where the following definition of tragedy is proffered, it becomes clear that things are not so simple as a neat division between suffocating presence and wretched abandonment (or, for certain able witnesses, presentified absence): "Tragedy consists chiefly in this: that the monstrosity of the pairing of God and Man and the boundless coming together in anger of the powers of Nature and the innermost heart of a man, is grasped in the catharsis of that boundless union through boundless separation" (ibid., 317). How are we to situate Hölderlin's distinction between boundless union and separation with respect to Lacan's distinction between the bounded and boundless universal?

In a re-working of the Aristotelian theory of tragedy, Hölderlin contends that the cathartic mechanism operates in the fall from one desired relation between the subject and the divine Other (an excessive and destructive unity) to another (a devastating and irreparable severance). Oedipus, identifying with the divine will, errs in his response to the plague. According to Hölderlin, when he receives instruction on how to combat the plague from the oracle, the king "interprets the message... too infinitely, and is tempted towards the *nefas*" (ibid., 313)—towards the criminal and unspeakable. Creon begins by presenting the broad and ambiguous terms of the oracle's command which refers to a "shame" nurtured by Thebes. Unsatisfied, Oedipus does not understand this as a behavioural recommendation to "Judge, in a general way, with strict and pure judgements, keep good civic order" (ibid.), to have Thebes succeed where Athens failed by competently managing the city and maintaining social stability and ritual observance during the plague. The infinitude of Oedipus' interpretation consists in his disinclination toward humdrum civic responsibility in favour of a vigorous identification with divine will: "You pray. And in answer to your prayer, if you will give a loyal reception to my words and minister to your own disease, you may hope to find help and relief from woes" (Sophocles, 1917, ll. 216–218). He pushes Creon and with "priestly language" inquires as to how the city might be cleansed. The same talent for reducing ambiguity that allowed Oedipus to best the sphinx then sees him "go into the particular" and prompt Creon's "terrible utterance" (2018, p. 313): a summation of the circumstances of Laius's unresolved murder. The ultimately damning *nefas* consists in Oedipus' wild cursing of the man responsible and a demand that he be banished. It is his attempt to establish a curative dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, his desire for a scapegoat or sacrifice, that damns him. In rashly making himself the representative of what he supposes to be the will of the gods, Oedipus relies upon the logic of the exception, the unfortunate whose expulsion will secure the 'all.' The purpose of the scapegoat is to resolve the boundlessness and contingency of the death wreaked by the plague.

For Hölderlin, the particularity of the language of *Oedipus Rex* lies not just in Oedipus' fraught dialogues—the desperate and furious hurtling towards a

self-knowledge that will decisively dislocate the union that fatally inspires him—but also in the chorus’s mixture of sorrow, religion and pity; the despair at the possible ruin of “the city’s old good standing,” the threat to “never again” go “to the temple in Abae” (which contains an oracle of Apollo more senior than that at Delphi), and even a despondency about the sacred words that any such temple might provide: “Laius’ old/ Words from the gods are coming to nothing and no longer/ Is Apollo manifest in honour./God’s matters are going unhappily [*Unglücklich*]” (2018, pp. 288–289). This, Hölderlin writes, is the “right language for a world in which, amid plague and confusion of the senses and the spirit of prophecy flaring up everywhere,” God and man participate in “divine infidelity,” a mutual abandonment (ibid., 317). As Krell observes, what interests Hölderlin in *Oedipus Rex* is its unfolding “oblivion and betrayal” as an “instant of reversal (*Umkehr*),” “the betrayal of the gods and betrayal by the gods...At the present moment, in the context of *Oedipus the Tyrant*, [Hölderlin] thinks of [this reversal] in terms of the abandoned temples and barren altars of plague-ridden Thebes” (2005, p. 308). This world in turmoil is the turning point between antiquity and modernity, between a king captured by the delusion of immediate access to the divine and a man who must now endure its absence. Interestingly, just as the chorus observes that oracles will be abandoned, when Plutarch offers reasons for the disappearance of the Greek oracles he mentions that the oracle of Teiresias was left unattended due to a plague. In the time of plague, even “divinity suffers the same misfortune as... Oedipus” (Krell, p. 309). Meanwhile, the fated agent of divine necessity has become a “son of Fortune [*Glücks*]” (2018, p. 296), a “bad-luck man [*Unglückliche*] with bad-luck feet [*Unglücksfüßen*]” (ibid., 274), God, meeting vacant temples and tragic misapprehension of the Word, drifts “unhappily [*Unglücklich*]” (ibid., 289). Likewise, the leader of the chorus laments that “my unhappy [*Unglücklichen*] soul/By the withering land is wearied” (ibid., 282). Either dishonoured or not honoured, man and God turn away from one another and bear their degraded states apart. There is a discord with and in the divine.

Hölderlin had read Thucydides (Fóti, 2006, p. 126) and would have been very much aware of the trauma inflicted by the plague. It is therefore no surprise that he abandoned early plans for a play titled *The Death of Socrates* in favour of the tragedies of Empedocles and Oedipus. The suffering of these figures derives from their dangerous consideration of themselves as being more than mortal and worthy of some unmediated communion with the Absolute. For example, Oedipus promises to vanquish the plague while Empedocles is said to have revived the body of a disciple, Panthea, thirty days after she expired from the plague. In ‘Bread and Wine’ Hölderlin conflates the two plague-ravaged cities when, after having evoked “the lovely temples and cities” that “stand well in the presence of the heavenly gods,” he asks “But where are they now?... Thebes has faded and Athens” (2018, p. 97). As Robert Jan van Pelt and Carroll William Westfall note, Hölderlin and contemporaries “in an epoch marked by such catastrophes as the French revolution and the Napoleonic empire... brought to light a new and appropriate reading of Greek civilization marked by crisis and catastrophic dislocation. In short, Hölderlin broke with the neo-classical celebration of ancient Greece as that untroubled realm of Apollonian perfection” (1991, p. 224). If, at a time of plague, empty temples and the destruction

of the city's standing as a place of intellectual heroism and measured discourse, man and God separate, this is not because the latter merely radicalizes an exceptional status, splendidly distinct from the terrestrial plane, but because this status is no longer retained. The ontotheological absolute that man dreams of uniting with is travestied when the only thing that is limitless is the subjection to contingency and finitude. In this "boundless separation," God is not the exceptional x beyond the mortal 'all' but is instead infected by the modern axiom: not-all are mortal. For Hölderlin, Greek tragedy imposes a "categorical turning-point" (2018, p. 317); the point at which death becomes a limitless universal. In theorizing about this, Hölderlin adds to Aristotle's reversal of fortune a Kantian resonance ("categorical"), reminding us that, for the modern or Kantian subject, the vital point is not that fortune episodically takes against him but that its regime is instead imposed without limit. The categorical reversal at stake in Greek tragedy's "boundless separation" is the realisation of boundless finitude: man, unable to immediately access the absolute, is finite while God languishes unhappily, incapable of being this absolute.

Oedipus' attempt to subdue the plague through union with the gods—to, as Hölderlin's eponymous hero Hyperion puts it, realise the moment at which "man and Nature will be united in one all-embracing divinity" (1990, p. 74) in a triumphant surmounting of finitude—merely confirms the full desolation of the modern condition. From the ancient presupposition of a bounded universal, Oedipus hubristically tries to break through the bounds and boundlessly unite with the divine exception. Here Oedipus is not dissimilar from the subject of scientific modernity and globalization that Nancy describes in reference to the Covid-19 pandemic; the subject who attempts to exceed his or her own bounds but paradoxically gets mired in a terrestrial boundlessness:

What used to be divine has become human—too human, as Nietzsche says. For a long time, modernity could be defined according to Pascal's formula "Man infinitely surpasses man." But if he surpasses himself "too much," that is, without rising to the Pascalian divine—then he does not surpass himself at all. Instead, he becomes mired in a humanity overwhelmed by the events and situations it has produced... Too human? Or are we to understand that there can be no such thing as "too" human, and that it is precisely this which surpasses us infinitely? (2020, n.p.)

Oedipus' efforts result not in a glorious passage to the divine beyond but a boundless separation experienced in the boundless universal. In one of his illustrative puns, Lacan suggests we contract *pas tout* ('not-all') as *pastout* in order to hear *par-tout* (everywhere): there is no exception beyond the bounds; the condition of finitude is effective everywhere (2001, p. 466). The boundless universal, an open set, does not support the binary opposition of inside-outside, mortal-immortal. In this boundless separation—a separation that does not derive from the logic of the boundary—Hölderlin's God is no longer beyond the bounds, nor indifferent, nor dead, but is instead, to use another of Lacan's neologisms, "nullibiquitous," everywhere and nowhere. As Hölderlin puts it, "the god, in the shape of death, is present" (2018, 370). The modern subject is finite not because there exists some divine absolute beyond her grasp but because there is no exception to finitude. In Lacanian terms,

the divine Other is barred. What Oedipus will subsequently endure in *Oedipus at Colonus* is not a physical death—the corporeal finitude distinct from the soul—but mortification as the spiritual undead divested of the absolute, experiencing the boundless efficacy of finitude: “Son of Laius, poor stranger in Greece! Life is death, and death too is a life” (Hölderlin, 2018, p. 217). As Foucault observed, “denying us the limit of the Limitless, the death of God”—the death of the transcendent exception that delimited antiquity’s universal—did not simply lead to the absence of limits: “the death of God is an explosive reality [of an experience that] discloses as its own secret and clarification, its intrinsic finitude, the limitless reign of the Limit” (1977, p. 32). Here, Foucault describes the transition from a limited universal to a limitless universal. However, in order to understand Hölderlin’s particularity, it is important to maintain the distinction between the death of God and the presence of God “in the shape of death.” This presence of an absence is a significant feature of his writings about Christ.

When Hölderlin turns from writing about the Greek gods to Christ, the languishing of the Absolute in Athens, Thebes and elsewhere is not resolved. As Lacan argues, the logic of the unlimited universal is intrinsic to Christianity. In the same seminar session in which he discussed the Theban plague, Lacan enigmatically proposed that “God is the not-all that [Christianity] has the merit of distinguishing, in refusing to confuse him with the stupid idea of the universe” (1975b, SXXII 17/12/74). For Lacan, Christianity’s merit derives from the incarnation of the Absolute in the contingent and finite figure of Christ, which fundamentally unravels the prior limited universal guaranteed for the subject by the big Other (God’s transcendence). Lacan is relying here on Hegel: “Hegel said that the destruction of the gods would be brought about by Christianity” (1992, p. 178)—when, in other words, the “stupid idea” of God as the big Other or the infallible subject-supposed-to-know is replaced by “a notion infinitely less stupid”: the Holy Spirit (Lacan, 1968, SXV 21/2/68). For Hegel, what dies on the cross—an event that only the materialist incarnation makes possible—is the transcendent God overseeing that ‘all’ of humanity to be replaced by the Spirit that binds the ‘not-all’ community of believers.

In the following year, continuing this vein of thought, Lacan remarked in conversation with historians, sociologists, and literary critics at Yale that “What I call history is the history of epidemics... Christianity is an epidemic. Psychoanalysis is an epidemic... An epidemic is not a social phenomenon... it is a radical rupture. It is a historical event that has propagated itself and has greatly influenced the conception of what one calls a universe” (1975a, n.p). Again, the term “universe” refers to the “imaginary” (ibid.) notion of a coherent and totalizable universal beyond which exists the Absolute. History as a history of epidemics (or critical history of the universal) is that of events that make palpable the not-all in the all.. This was particularly evident in the spread of HIV since it involved what Lacan considers the infinite expression of the subject’s finitude: desire. As Wald argues, HIV “exposes the fiction of containment. The virus cannot be ‘contained’ in ‘risk groups’ because desire cannot be contained by special classifications... [It] demonstrates the indifference of those desires, like the virus through which they are manifest, to national boundaries as well” (2008, p. 240). As psychoanalysis tells us, there is no logic of ‘natural’ necessity in desire and intersubjective relations. Psychoanalysis is an epidemic

because its discoveries, the unconscious and unconscious desire, are the result of the infinite *qua* contingent sliding of signifiers making any interpretation that seeks a totalized and unified meaning impossible. Speaking in the United States, Lacan doubtless has in mind the famous words he attributed to Freud upon arriving there: "They don't realize we're bringing them the plague." Just as viruses have made the image of the body politic as a unitary whole untenable, so too has the psychoanalytic revelation of unconscious desire, to paraphrase Lacan, influenced the conception of what one calls a subject.

There are few who felt the import of the Christian epidemic as keenly as Hölderlin. This withdrawal of God "brought about by Christianity" is, to use the Freudian term, worked-through (*durcharbeiten*) by the poet in 'Patmos' and its revisions. At the "moment of categorical turning," God "turns about," and it is as that which turns away that God appears (2018, 317). This categorical reversal is explicit in the eulogy 'Bread and Wine':—"the Father averted his face from the human race" (ibid., 98). However, Christ's movement in 'Patmos' is rather more ambiguous: "Hurrying away the god looked back at them" (ibid., 157). Once again, the boundless separation does not consist in the separation of a boundless god beyond the bounds of man—as in the ancient cosmos—but the dual occupation of a boundless universe in which God is both present and absent because the logic of boundaries that would support the binary opposition no longer exists. The categorical reversal initiates a shift not from presence to absence but from presence to the dissolution of the binary, the undecidable oscillation between the immanent and inaccessible that haunts Hölderlin. There is not sufficient space here to elucidate the entirety of this complex poem, in which Hölderlin pays poetic witness to a god that is "near and/ Hard to grasp" (ibid., 154). I will instead focus on a single image that is developed in the revisions.

In the middle of the poem, Hölderlin describes the departure of Christ and the grief of the disciples who were left behind. They had "loved life in the sun" but now "the shadow of their beloved kept them company" (ibid., 156). In the revisions to 'Patmos' an addition is made: "the shadow of their beloved kept them company, like a plague [*wie eine Seuche*]" (ibid., 164). As if triggered by this sinister addition, the fragments then enigmatically terminate by returning to Thebes—the scene of the primal catastrophe –, signalling perhaps the ultimate failure of Hölderlin's consolatory turn to Christ:

Therefore he sent them
The spirit and the house
Shook and God's turbulence rolled
Thundering into the distance, creating men, as when dragon's teeth,
Of a splendid fate (ibid., 164)

Following Christ's departure, the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles—an event that is compared with the scattering of dragon's teeth and its contingent consequences. The apostles occupy that famous victim of Greek tragedy; the wretched "house" that, neither warmed by the sun nor cooled by a shadow, lists in the broiling chaos. The soldiers that spring from the dragon's teeth sown by Cadmus will assist him in building Thebes and the "splendid fate" of boundless separation that is realized in this city is universalized ("creating men"). Although

the fragment ends here, we know what “the plague god brings” and how it “empties Cadmus’ house” (ibid., 259).

The mere fact of the revisions evinces the poet’s dissatisfaction with his attempts to capture the divine while, in instances such as these, the scandalous imagery indicates the pessimism that shadows the later works in which “it is not an abstract, romantic longing for the Divine that drives Hölderlin; it is the real suffering of a human being in the real darkness of an existential crisis” (van Woezik, 2010, p. 231). It is entirely appropriate then that at such moments the poet returns to the tragic language of “a deadly fate” or “splendid fate” and the plague that triggered, and is symptomatic of, the existential crisis of boundless separation and the limitless imposition of finitude that cast Oedipus into a blindness no radiance could breach.

Several images from Renaissance Italy, as legacies of the Black Death, indicate that Hölderlin’s representation of an Apollonian Christ associated with the plague is not without precedent. In one example of Bernedetto Bonfigli’s plague banners (*gonfalon*) hoisted by flagellant confraternities in penitent processions (that can be found in the church of St. Maria Nuova at Perugia), Christ grips arrows that will bring the plague while a dark, shadowy sun lurks to his right (Crawford, 1914, p. 139). We can draw a tangential line from the Apollonian plague that rains down in *Oedipus Rex* to the Christological pestilence that lingers in ‘Patmos,’ but there is one significant difference: Christ is not the bringer of the plague. He is instead like a plague; his very ex-sistence, by virtue of its uncertainty and the disciples desperate mourning, reminds Hölderlin of the Greek catastrophe. In his late work, the optimism invested in the figure of Christ seems to fade as resonances of the tragic dislocation intrude.

What distinguishes Christ from the Greek gods is that despite boundless separation, the latter persists in the written Word. It is striking then that the plague recurs in the Word, as it was written at Patmos. St John—explicitly named in fragmentary revisions of ‘Patmos’—retired to the island of Patmos to mourn the departed Christ and write *Revelations* in which we find the following injunction: “testify to everyone who hears the words of prophecy in this book: If anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book.” This association of the plague with a failure of interpretation following the severing of direct communion between humanity and God recalls the situation in Thebes where there was “plague and confusion of the senses and the spirit of prophecy flaring up everywhere.” Oedipus, in his interpretation of the oracle’s message, adds to these words of prophecy by seeking direct and absolute meaning. It was a failure to appreciate the fragmentary and ambiguous nature of the new Absolute mediated by the Word that resulted in Oedipus’ fall. Hölderlin must instead mediate as a poet: God “Loves best that we tend/ The solid letter and make good sense/ Of what we have” and not add to it. “German poets try to” (2018, p. 160). Therefore, God sends the Spirit and the apostles speak in tongues. But does this resolve matters?

That the time of plague and confusion of senses has not been decisively dispelled is confirmed by the late fragment ‘...the Vatican...’ where, after a familiar warning that “God’s judgment” will follow “an error in/ The sign” that has been “entrusted to us,” the poet observes:

Majestically, chastely
 The crane holds upright over there
 In Patmos, the Morea, in the pestilential air [*pestluft*].
 Turkish. And the owl well-known in scripture
 Speaks like hoarse women in destroyed cities. But
 These preserve the sense. Often like a conflagration
 Comes confusion of tongues. (ibid., pp. 206–207)

Here, the plague and confusion that tore Thebes apart has been replaced by a pestilential miasma that menacingly hangs over Patmos and a "confusion of tongues." The crane, a metaphor for the abandoned subject looking upon the ruined city that Hölderlin had previously used in 'Greece' (1793), is now, like John, situated at Patmos. The Morea is the name given to the Peloponnesian peninsula under the Byzantine Empire that was ceded to Ottoman control. Attempts by the Republic of Venice to conquer the territory in the Morean War of the late seventeenth century were hampered by plague. "Turkish" thus bespeaks the desolation of Greek civilization. Hölderlin's sadness at this state of affairs is of course in common with many romantics. The eponymous hero of *Hyperion* participates in the attempted liberation of Greece, inspired by the possibility of realising what Schiller termed "universal world-history [*allgemeine Weltgeschichte*]" (1972, p. 328). Hyperion hopes to begin again in Greece, reunite subject and Other and revive "the harmony of spirits [that] will be the beginning of another world-history [*Weltgeschichte*]" (Hölderlin, 1990, p. 51). However, recalling Milner's distinction between universal history and a critical history of the universal, Hölderlin only represents the dissolution of a project that, following separation, is no longer tenable. Ultimately, Hyperion is critically dispirited by the chaos that ensues. The 'all' of this burgeoning universal history fails when his soldiers lapse into lawlessness and plundering, a "rapacity [that] rages like the plague [*wie eine Seuche*] in Morea" (ibid., 97). As contingency, metaphorized in terms of the plague, tears apart the universal community, he laments that "Fate casts me adrift in uncertainty" (ibid., 97–98). This line summarizes Hölderlin's paradox: if a transcendental force persists, then it is no longer a source of necessity.

In his 1789 lecture on universal history, Schiller hailed humanity's surpassing of the "[b]lind compulsion of chance" (1972, p. 326), the end of "dangerous overpopulation" in cities (that was so damaging in Pericles' Athens) and "chaotic entanglements" (ibid., 329) on the battlefield. In the progress of history, just as "barbarism" drove our forebears "from the bloody judgments of God to human tribunals, devastating plagues had to recall medicine to scientific inquiry" (ibid., 329). In Schiller's vision, the plague is merely a necessary motivation toward a universal history to which we can all contribute and thus open our own "path to immortality" (ibid., 334) and surpass ourselves. For Hölderlin there can be no such teleology of the spirit, no return to immaculate unity or path to transcendence. Through Hyperion he instead confronts what Percy Shelley in his homage to the war of Greek independence termed "the spirit of the plague" (2003, p. 569). The plague here becomes a term for the infinite force of contingency that demonstrates to the subject his or her finitude. No wonder then that Wilhelm Scherer denigrates Hölderlin in his 1874 *History of German Literature* as the figurehead of a "spiritual epidemic," a contagion

threatening the “power of will” (qtd in Bontempelli, 2004, p. 220) and warping the trajectory of the (national) spirit.

Following this recollection of an earlier project, Hölderlin then turns in ‘...the Vatican...’ to the fate of the “solid letter.” In the very lines that attest to the preservation of sense, sense is lost: the reader cannot tell if it is the owl or the women who preserve the sense or if, as is indicated by the “But,” the scripture preserves its sense despite their vocalisation. Amidst this failure of the literal absolute in which Hölderlin had invested some final hopes, the plague god emerges in order to depart: “Apollo... says Farewell!” (2018, p. 207). This is the ultimate defeat of the optimism Oedipus expresses when he consults the god: “Lord Apollo, may he come to us in the brightness of saving fortune” (Sophocles, 1917, l. 80). With this final image of ruined, pestilent cities echoing with the misspoken and misheard signifiers of a fragmented community of the Spirit (the contingent relation between signifier and signified), a landscape of life-death, mortification and confused activity, Hölderlin comes close to what Žižek argues is the ultimate conclusion of a Hegelian understanding of the Other: “necessity is not the underlying universal law that secretly regulates the chaotic interplay of appearances—it is the ‘All’ itself which is non-All, inconsistent, marked by an irreducible contingency” (2006, p. 79). Žižek’s distinction is exemplified by the very different ways in which the same analogy is employed in Camus’ *The Plague* and ‘Patmos.’ Seeking coherence and divine meaning amidst the chaos of the plague in Oran, Father Paneloux informs his terrified congregation that “plague is the flail of God and the world His threshing-floor, and implacably He will thresh out His harvest until the wheat is separated from the chaff” (1948, p. 95). This is the consistent and coherent Other whose law, despite the apparent randomness of events, reveals itself to a sufficiently assured interpreter. In Hölderlin’s rendition, the immortal’s masterful organisation of finitude and contingency, the “universal law” amidst the “chaotic interplay of appearances,” is altogether more uncertain:

And the highest himself
 Thereupon averts his countenance
 And nowhere is the sky is anything
 Immortal to be seen nor on
 The verdant earth—tell me, what is this?
 It is the throw of the winnower when he catches
 Corn in the fan
 And flings it towards daylight over the threshing floor.
 The chaff falls at his feet but
 The wheat gets through
 Nor is that bad if some
 Is lost and the living sound
 Of speech disperses for
 God’s work resembles ours and he does not wish
 Everything at once...
 So I would have the riches
 To shape a shape and see
 Him how he was, the Christ (2018, p. 158)

In the wake of the categorical turning ("averts his countenance") and the apparent absence of "anything/Immortal," the work of man and God becomes alike; it is incomplete and fragmented: some wheat is lost, speech disperses, and it cannot be completed at once. Hence the revisions to 'Patmos': as the poem's later fragments attempt to "shape" a recognisable picture of the absent God, the material of letters is scattered "towards daylight" and forms a "shadow... like a plague."

Hölderlin's poetic task was twofold. Firstly, he sought an appropriate representation of the presence of an absence. For this he looked to the separation between God and humanity in Thebes before turning to the figure of the departing Christ without, as we have seen, comprehensively leaving Thebes behind. Secondly, following a transition from a direct communion with God fatally presupposed by Oedipus to the mediation of the Word, Hölderlin called for a mode of reading the lingering traces of divine departure that was sensitive to their fragmentary form and ambiguous signification. Importantly, as the very different treatment of the same analogy by Hölderlin and Paneloux suggests, the former stressed that chance existed not just on the side of the interpreter but also on the side of the Absolute. An ethic of patience is required because "God's work resembles ours and he does not wish/ everything at once." It is this awareness that Oedipus lacks. He is the excessively hasty and ambitious reader who, in accordance with Nancy's recapitulation of Pascal's formula, surpasses himself "too much." In Hölderlin's return to Thebes and representation of the modern situation, the plague recurs as neither evidence of divine control nor confirmation of a materialist and godless universe. It should instead be read as a symptom of the relationship between the subject and a contingent Absolute that infinitely confirms the subject's finitude.

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