

CONVERSATIONS IN THE FIELD

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Journeying to Patmos

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Setting the scene

Looking across the main port of Skala on Patmos, one sees a high mountainous ridge ringing the harbor and town, revealing the volcanic origins of this island thrust up out of the Aegean Sea. The long ridge is surmounted at one end by the pristinely white village of Chora. Rising from the midst of the bleached, glistening cubes, which huddle and radiate out from its base, are the massively imposing, tanned brown battlement walls of the fortress monastery of Saint John the Theologian. This citadel was founded in the 11th century by a Bithynian monk named Christodoulos, who came here from Mount Latros in Asia Minor. The crowning view from this very midpoint of the island surveys the entire landscape of Patmos; and the monastery and surrounding village of Chora can themselves be seen from every vantage point all around, whether on sea or land. The fortress monastery looms easily visible and dominates from its perch each cove, beach, village, and hill throughout the whole island. It is a constant, sobering, and militantly towering presence, which reminds both inhabitants and visitors what the central concerns of this beautiful island really are.

Halfway up the mountainside towards the monastery is the grotto and Cave of the Apocalypse. It is in that rocky overhang that Saint John the Divine, the apostle of Christ, while in forced exile on Patmos by decree of the Roman emperor Domitian, from 96 to 98 A.D., dictated the biblical Book of Revelation to his scribe Prochoros, who wrote down the dazzling visions and prophecies on the spot with an understandably "trembling hand" (Antipas, 2009, p. 16). In all of the iconic images of this scene, on parchment scrolls, frescoes, panels, canvases, and illuminated manuscripts throughout the ages, we can observe Saint John gazing heavenwards while dictating to his amanuensis what he is inwardly seeing, in all of its magnificently glorified and lavishly embroidered symbolical detail.

The richly-storied and uninterruptedly functioning castle monastery, along with its numerous adjacent outbuildings, is built upon the extremely ancient site of a temple precinct, which was sacred to the goddess Artemis. Marble tablet inscriptions found there refer to Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, who, fleeing to Patmos from the pursuing Furies, erected a statue of Artemis in atonement for the murder of his own mother, Clytemnestra. One inscription in yellowish marble states that because of this dedication and sacrifice to the goddess, the priestess of Artemis ritually releases him from the *mania* and persecutory guilt by which he was possessed.

Excursion to Ephesos

A further note regarding the visionary apostle John and his connections to the great Greek virgin goddess of nature and the hunt, Artemis, needs to be mentioned here. According to the Bible, while Christ was on the cross, he entrusted his own mother Mary to his faithful disciple John's care: ". . . and from that hour the disciple took her to his own home" (John, 19:25). Instructing her to accept and live

with John as her own son for the rest of her life, and simultaneously directing John to “behold” Mary as his own mother, the historical, and scriptural traditions of those words at the crucifixion, and the subsequent early years of the new religion, go on to tell us that the two of them, the Virgin Mary and Saint John, journeyed together from the Holy Land through Asia Minor and finally settled down to live in Ephesus, which was at that time the largest and most prosperous metropolis outside of Rome in the ancient world. The city of Ephesus is located quite close to the island of Patmos and was the central urban center of Anatolia, contemporary western Turkey.

It is also widely held that Mary, the mother of Jesus, died there in approximately 67 A.D. Although no tomb of hers has ever been found, a very ancient house, which could easily date back to the first century A.D., was discovered, excavated, and restored in the late nineteenth century in accordance with the exact details, location, and orientation given in the miraculous visions of an invalided German woman, Catherine Emmerich, whose own revelations inspired the successful archaeological expedition and resultant consecration of the house. The site had already long since been a gathering place for Greek Orthodox Christians on August 15th, when each year they would celebrate the Dormition, or death of the virgin mother there. The House of the Virgin Mary in Ephesus is also coupled with an extensive second century A.D. basilica, which was the first church ever dedicated exclusively to the Virgin Mary; and it was also later the site of the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D., which declared as dogma that the son of the Virgin Mary was also the Son of God.

It was also *from* Ephesus that John was exiled to Patmos in 96 A.D. When the Roman emperor Domitian was assassinated there in 98 A.D., John returned to Ephesus where he remained until the end of his life. In the sixth century, the Roman emperor Justinian built the great basilica of Saint John on the selfsame site, which since the second century had been a memorial place, sanctuary, and then a church erected over his final resting place. The dust issuing forth from a hole around his tomb was considered to have healing powers, and the spot remained one of the major pilgrimage shrines of Christianity throughout the Middle Ages.

There is very little question that during his long sojourn in Ephesus, both before and after his period of exile and apocalyptic revelations on Patmos, John could have been anything less than intimately familiar with the monumental and highly celebrated Temple of Artemis on which construction in Ephesus started in the eighth century B.C. So awesome were this temple’s proportions, grand scale, and ornamental splendor, that this abode of the Orientalized goddess became by the fifth century B.C. one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

The famous multibreasted images of Ephesian Artemis as the goddess of all nature, wild beasts, plants, and the miraculous process of birth itself, like her magnificent temple, were created and literally grew out of a sacred sanctuary complex and cult dedicated to the Anatolian great goddess Kybele, which had been in existence, once again on that very same site, since prehistoric times. So on both Patmos, and in nearby Ephesus, the stories, archetypal topographies, and actual historical monuments linking Christ, his disciple John, the Virgin Mary, and the goddess Artemis, coincide and intertwine to form and shape the very foundations of the Christian religion, mythology, and message from its earliest inceptions.

A vertigo of names

Now we are going to fast forward rather speedily several millennia to the year 1802. There we find the seminal German poet and prose writer, Friedrich Hölderlin, back home in his native Swabia, recently returned from Bordeaux, France, disheveled, agitated, looking much the worse for wear and out of work. His friend,

Isaak von Sinclair, manages to get him a commission for a long poem from his own employer, the Landgrave Friedrich of Hessen-Homburg. Hölderlin, who within just a few years was soon to be deemed and diagnosed as “incurably mad” and given “at most three years to live” (Hölderlin, 1984, p. xix) due to his “terminally degenerative mental illness” — he actually lived an additional 40 years and created some of his most memorable works — in order to discharge his obligation, writes at this time one of his longest and most famous poems, entitled ‘Patmos’. It begins with the lines:

Nah ist
 Und schwer zu fassen der Gott.
 Near
 and hard to grasp, is the god. (Hölderlin, 1990, p. 244)

After continuing with an initial one-stanza prelude, Hölderlin takes us on his own visionary flight, a literally aerial shamanic journey to fabled Patmos, which he sees through his poet’s eyes as lying “in the uncertain expanse of sea...among the nearer isles...that murmur around the gates of Asia...” (Hölderlin, 1990, p. 246). In this encompassing hymn, which is what many of his later and longer poems are called, Hölderlin takes up and carries forward the traditional assumption and identification of Saint John ‘the theologian’, ‘the divine’ author of the last ‘book’ of the Bible, Revelation, with the apostle John, the author of the Gospel According to Saint John, the fourth book of the New Testament, the early disciple of Christ who was present throughout the entire Passion.

So far we are still on sanctified canonical ground with the traditionally-given blurring and merging of these two literary saints, both named John, and both seen to be existing at around the exact same time. Interestingly enough, however, and complicating things yet further, in a later still lengthy fragmentary version of another published poem, also entitled ‘Patmos’, from 1803, Hölderlin conflates these possibly two entirely different figures of the very early Christian John with yet another prophetic John, John the Baptist and older cousin of Jesus, the ascetic, animal-skinned John who lived in the wilderness, considered his crucified kin as somewhat of a heretic, and ended up himself getting beheaded.

The shifting, ambiguous, and polyvalent biblical references to an apocalyptic John, this kaleidoscopic montage of Saint John images presented throughout both of the ‘Patmos’ poems, become joined together “into a single seer who witnesses the end of an eon and foretells the Second Coming” (Sieburth in Hölderlin, 1984, p. 262). By the end of the poems, however, the composite John figure is blended “into a single shared memory” (p. 262) and hopeful anticipation of a savior Christ who *must* appear. The combinatory John becomes assimilated to the fervently desired figure of a resurrected, messianic Christ, who is at times for Hölderlin one, whole, unitary; and then, at other times, is just as suddenly smashed, splintered, many, a manifold god, who appears and disappears, who is wholly, speechlessly present, and then excruciatingly absent, gone, lost; and who, despite all of these many comings and goings, different guises, names, multitudes of manifestations, and vanishings, remains and *is* nevertheless a god that we, along with Hölderlin, now still await.

Eric Santner, in his notes to ‘Patmos’, writes that:

The poem is perhaps Hölderlin's most powerful evocation of the primal scene of dispersion and fragmentation that marks the advent of modernity for the poet, which,



he suggests, is a time when the divine is only available in the form of signs to be recollected and interpreted. (Santner in Hölderlin, 1990, p. 297)

We are thus still here engaged in a hermeneutic, following along the looping, spiraling trail, and noting the telltale tracks of a god who meanders, criss-crosses, and reverses the path, and even disguises the few cryptic indications of their own hierophanies, fleeting transits, or disappearances.

Hölderlin's inclusion in these poems of so many explicit references paraphrasing biblical passages where John and/or the other evangelists witness and testify to appearances of the suffering or resurrected Christ, may be due to the fact that the Landgrave to whom 'Patmos' was dedicated and given, requested a work "expressing true Christian piety" (p. xvii) and "reaffirming traditional biblical values" (p. 297). Rather than simply shoring up and soothing the Landgrave's extremely conservative social, political, and religious views, however, the 'Patmos' poems, and in particular the fragmentary version, which at that point Hölderlin was writing just for himself, keep insistently veering off and becoming immersed in something more foreign and strange, in remote, sundrenched, and exotic regions of Hellenic, Near Eastern, and even far Asian spirituality, to conjure up yet other god figures whom Hölderlin apparently feels lurk behind and around the edges of the beneficent, noble, lonely, and martyred Semitic god of Christianity with whom he at times seems so attuned. His natural inclination towards the figure of Christ, as well as his own identification with aspects of the multiple John images, particularly the visionary whose calling it is to establish the poetic reality and reign of the one god over a vibrant, transfigured, and redeemed world, keeps becoming disrupted in his life and work by powerful appearances of an even earlier and more unsettling god-figure: a lord of the vine, one whose body, fruit, and substance is also dismembered, distributed, drunk, eaten, and reborn anew amongst his devotees, the ancient Greek god of wine and madness, Dionysos, Bacchus.

The Dionysos that Hölderlin invokes so frequently throughout his poetry is a god, however, who clearly appears as alien and uncanny, not only to the poet, and to his native Germans and fellow Europeans, but is also a god who, as Hölderlin knows, always arrives with the chaos and confusion of total "otherness", even originarily to the Greeks themselves, and further geographically afield, to the Asians whom he triumphantly overcomes as well, in a wild, westward rout of ecstatic impulse. The first stanza of 'The Poet's Vocation' (1800-01), begins in the hot, tropical, imaginal far east of the god's eventual returning to his Grecian birthplace:

Shores of Ganges heard the paen for the god
Of joy when Bacchus came, conquering all,
Young, from the Indus, with holy wine
Rousing the people from their slumber. (Hölderlin, 1990, p. 153)

In this poem as in numerous others, and particularly in the two versions of 'Patmos', Hölderlin retraces the route of Dionysos and his conquering cortege over the same Asian landscapes portrayed by Euripides in the prologue to his tragedy, the *Bacchae*, which Hölderlin himself had earlier translated (Santner in Hölderlin, 1990, p. 294).

Again in 'Bread and Wine', which in a previous stage was called 'Der Weingott', 'The Wine God', he reconfigures the topography of Euripides' *Bacchae*, still the basic bible and testament for all Dionysiac religion, while establishing Bacchus as the sacramental predecessor to Christ and his founding ritual of the Eucharist:

Bread is the fruit of the earth, yet it is blessed by the heavenly light,
 And from the thundering god flows the joy of the vine.
 These, therefore, put us in mind of the gods, who once
 Were here and shall return, whenever the time is right.
 Therefore also the poets in serious hymns to the wine-god,
 Never idly devised, sound that most ancient one's praise. (Hölderlin, 1990, p. 187)

"The thundering god" is Dionysos *Bromios*, the "roarer", "bellower", who often comes with a transporting tumult of sound surrounding him, high-pitched musical instruments, drums, loud calls, and percussive cacophony. And in the very next stanza, this "god who is to come" is:

Always glad, like the living boughs of the evergreen pine tree
 Which he loves, and the wreath wound out of ivy for choice
 Since it lasts and conveys the trace of the gods now departed. (p. 187)

In the first version of 'The Only One' (1802), the poet walks "by Ephesos", seeking only one god, the "last" of the race, and "jewel" of the house, "a passing stranger" who is yet hidden from him. In this very touching, poignant poem, Hölderlin purely expresses his ardent longing and search for a god who has been absconded, taken away. He is wracked by grief and loss, and even feels punished by the gods, as if they decreed:

That serving the one, I
 Thereby lose the other.
 But I know, the fault
 Is all mine. For I cling
 Too close to you, Christ,
 Though you are Heracles' brother
 And, I must confess, the brother
 Of Euios too, who
 Harnessed tigers to his
 Chariot and, commanding
 Joyous worship down
 To the Indus,
 Founded vineyards and
 Tamed the wrath of nations. (p. 241)

"Euios" is an epithet, cult name, and a ritually-making-manifest performative cry for the devotees of Dionysos.

Despite his most strenuous efforts, Hölderlin could not integrate the images, affects, and experiences that might have held together and contained Christ, the crucified one, and Dionysos, within the same lineage, and/or within his own besieged body and soul. The inner and outer splits and fault lines between his own Europe and Greece, the near eastern lands of the Bible, and the more distant expanses of Asia, were ultimately



too great for him to embrace, bind together, or heal. Already by the time of the fragmentary version of 'Patmos', it is all he can do to put the names down next to each other on the blank sheet of paper:

John. Christ. This latter now I wish
To sing, like Hercules . . . (p. 261)

Attempting to stake out a poetic *topos* built out of words, names, and remembrances that could protect him and prevent the widening cracks and fissures from deepening in his own psyche, one senses in the phrases, images, and whole lines that sometimes drop away into nothingness, or simply break off, fracture, and end in mid-air, Hölderlin, especially in the later hymns and fragments, precariously lodges people, places, and scenes next to each other, like building blocks of words, or stones, names lathered with mortar, desperately enjambling the language of these poems in the hope that they could hold back the darkness and silence from, which all words emerge. Although Hölderlin's later works are fashioned out of strong, crystalline, lapidary-like language, they are ultimately extremely fragile edifices. While reading them, they almost seem to teeter and sway. The words and images, and the thoughts behind them desperately reach out for something palpable to hold on to, as they threaten to topple and crumble back into the primal particles and astral dust out of which they were so painstakingly created. Hölderlin, despite his more simple desires, always lived dangerously. He made his life and fabricated his meanings at the edge of a precipice, at a dizzying height, and he plucked his inspiration and poetic efforts themselves from that abyss, which constantly swirled beneath his feet.

Speaking in tongues

Saint John *Theologos*, the 'divine' author of the revelations, the man who 'utters the word of god' and 'speaks god', wrote that he himself actually was here: "I John, your brother ... was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 1:9). He, or someone like him, like John, saw Christ scourged in Jerusalem and crucified on the cross; and with blazing eyes, burning ears, and flaming tongue, received and transmitted the words of his god on this stony island. Amidst these same rocky inlets and steep craggy coves, he dictated the Book of Revelation.

He witnessed, suffered, and voices the unmitigated cataclysm happening all around him, on every level. In his dazed wanderings through Asia Minor, he reels from the seismic shocks rending the temples, altars, and palaces of power, as well as the more widespread hovels and wretched huts of the oppressed.

Like Hölderlin, John is clearly a prophet, one who has been seized, scorched, and branded by visions of an end time. As his own story and 'history' itself are irrevocably ruptured before his eyes, he is blinded by revelations of the absolute end of all time itself. Horrified by what he sees, he creates an 'other' world, a transcendental world to go to, to flee the misery, abjection, and degradation he is confronted with at every step. Speaking Greek, or possibly Aramaic, Syriac or Hebrew, John is called to proclaim the arrival of a completely transmogrified reality. He strives to perform the sublimated essence and highest possible pitch of a religious thought in a language that urges and bursts itself apart in the superhuman effort to propel its hearers through a monstrous and terrifying age.

Whether the Apocalypse, the final book of the Bible, was written by a man named John, or whether John 'the theologian' was the same or different John than the apostle who stood by Christ at the cross and authored The Gospel According to Saint John, or whether this unparalleled compendium of eschatological images was recorded by some one or some others who lived at or around the same time as either one of the



scriptural and literary Johns, what unmistakably emerges from this still-vibrating document, is that the Revelations are a deeply felt and powerful response to total holocaust. They well up out of a painful and profound experiencing of massive trauma, on both individual and collective levels. In addition to everything else that they may be, these revelatory visions are a rabidly rageful revolutionary rant directed against the mercilessly militaristic occupation of John's native Judaea. The text's relentless torrent of cosmic and natural disasters, which befall an idolatrous humanity and prepare the way for the Second Coming, replete with its own images of blissful conjunctions, totalizing wholeness, and the unending glories of a wondrous eternal life after death for the faithful, speak to the actual obliteration and annihilation that the author(s) seem to have actually experienced in the ruined and desecrated cultures of their own ravaged, outlying province of Asia. It is a choral dirge and howling lament of ferocious retribution and righteous revenge that John would wreak upon the perpetrators of the calamities and injustices he immediately suffers. The fabric of John's existence is torn to shreds. He abolishes all history, time, and death itself, as human civilization flashes towards and reaches its apogee and culmination in a blaze of revealed perpetual holiness. John's last judgment finalizes itself in an unchanging superordinate realm, beyond all time and space. The perfect bliss of eternity is here completely literalized and concretized.

The deluge of retributive violence unleashed by John arises from the deep woundedness and veritable crack opened in his being by events that could not be grasped or repaired, only escaped. The dazzling, ageless text of the Apocalypse was bought at very great expense. The overcompensatory imagery of the glorious finale leads us back to a brutality, shock, and horror at its origins that could not possibly have been countered psychologically by its author(s), except through radical splitting and dissociation. The impotence and weakness felt in the face of an unbearable reality summon up soaring, otherworldly visions of ineffably divine brightness. There is no trace of shadow or doubt in this renovated and resurrected realm of infinite peace and composure.

Thirty-seven years after Christ's death on Golgotha, three years after the death of his mother Mary, and during a period of wholesale persecution, torture, and slaughter of nascent Christians, the Roman army under the emperor Vespasian completed their demolishing and pulverization of Judaea, the former ancient kingdom and traditional homeland of the Jewish people. With the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., the Jewish and Christian communities of the region were either enslaved, killed outright, or dispersed and scattered throughout the Mediterranean provinces of the growing Roman Empire. On that same summer date, which often coincides with or overlaps the date of Mary's death, the repository and receptacle of Judaism's most revered shrine, the ark of the covenant, the dwelling place of the god, was leveled, razed to the ground, and the second Temple itself disassembled into piles of rubble, along with the sites of Christ's passion and suffering.

As Jerusalem and the Temple toppled to the ground, the vessel, and central containing feminine god image and symbol was also shattered. Disappropriated of their protecting gods and dislocated from their homes, the many peoples and syncretic religious groups of Judaea were forced underground into a diaspora of repressive nomadism. The maternal soul images of both the Jewish and Christian cultures, the Shekhinah and the Virgin Mary, were pressed down to wander the deep labyrinthine mazes of the Western psyche where the soul of Judaeo-Christian culture languishes still, imprisoned in matter, in the body, in the earthen vessel of nature, and in the unconscious. Once a nourishing matrix of civilization, Judaea turned literally back into arid desert, a marginalized and impoverished corner of a huge and greedily consuming empire with Rome at its insatiable center.

*Hölderlin in Bordeaux*

Hölderlin's story is obviously very different from the legendary John's. Though he imagined himself on that faraway Greek island of Patmos, he of course never actually saw those incredibly blue, beckoning waters, or that seared hallucinatory landscape.

He did, however, on one occasion at least, travel quite far from his native Swabian homeland. On December 10, 1801, Hölderlin set out from his mother's house for Bordeaux, France, where through the mediation of a friend, he had acquired a job as a private tutor. He started out on foot on what was to be, especially in those days, a seven-week journey. He almost did not make it at all. Risking life and limb, he passed over the snow-covered heights of the Auvergne in deep winter, slept with a loaded pistol next to him in his rough bed, and prayed all night long. After finally getting there, he lasted only three months in his new position and arrived back in Stuttgart in mid-June to find out from his friend Sinclair that the one and only great love of his life, Susette Gontard, the wife of a wealthy Frankfurt banker and earlier employer of his, had just died. She had been his 'Diotima', the closest confidant of his many letters, books, poems, and clandestine trysts, his muse and his lover. Both during and after his employment as the Gontard's household tutor from 1796, their relationship had blossomed, and they had continued to meet secretly for an additional four years even after he had left his position with them.

Though plagued since youth by melancholia, headaches, and an intermittently deep, life-long depression, with the devastating news of Susette's early death, a more serious psychic decline began to set in. On his return from France, while staying at the home of friends in Stuttgart, he is described as "pale as a corpse, emaciated, with hollow wild eyes, long hair, and beard, and dressed like a beggar" (In Hölderlin, 1990, p. xviii). He soon went back to his mother's house and was placed temporarily in the care of a local physician. His half-brother recognized in him "obvious traces of mental derangement" (p. xviii). Despite all this, he continued to translate Pindar and Sophocles, write some of his major elegies and hymns, and then later that year travelled with Sinclair to Regensburg to receive the commission to write 'Patmos'.

Like the two main figures who haunt the 1802 poem, as well as the fragmentary version, Hölderlin's first two names are Johann Christian. John and Christ. His mother, to whom he was deeply attached his entire life, was Johanna Christiana; and his step-father, whom his mother married when Hölderlin was four years old and who died when he was nine, was named Johann Christoph. From early on, names and naming became in the young poet's life a kind of direction and destiny. The loss of not just one, but two fathers at an early age, and his consequent and self-admittedly powerful identification with his sorrowfully mourning mother's grief on both occasions, provoked in Hölderlin a tendency to accept sadness and absence as inseparable companions on his own tragic-stricken life's journey.

Hölderlin, in a similar vein to John, the author of Revelation, lived during times of tremendous social, political, and religious upheaval. In the wake of the American and particularly the French Revolution, which he experienced first hand, Hölderlin's entire personal and creative life was spent in oscillating between the twin poles of exultation and despair, as the ebbing and flowing tides of republican idealism and democratic freedoms alternated with the immediate horrors of war and demagogic tyranny. Germany was in continuous tumult at this time as the 'divine rights', privileges, and powers of monarchy, aristocracy, and the church all came under severe attack. The seats and centers of established authority and control, the courts, palaces, monasteries, and churches, the residences of rulers, lords, and sovereigns, both temporal and spiritual, were all under siege. A black hole was torn in the space where God had formerly been enthroned.

After returning from France and the beginning of his more precipitous psychic decline, Hölderlin's anti-royalist and populist sympathies only deepened. In 1805, before disappearing into a more permanent period of 'madness' that would last until the end of his life, Hölderlin was implicated in allegations of an assassination plot of the Elector of Württemberg and arrested. He was judged "mentally incompetent" to stand trial because of his "constant wild agitation" and completely unintelligible speech, "a jumble of German, Greek, and Latin" (p. xix).

In the writing of 'Patmos', as well as in other poems from the same period, we can hear and feel the struggles of a man staggering from catastrophe and loss. Mostly without work or livelihood, and ignored by many of his most influential erstwhile friends and colleagues, Hölderlin's world view, sense of himself, and already decompensating personality, began to shatter under the impact and final blow of Susette Gontard's death. He became both pained observer and participant in the disintegration of his own creative powers, poetic energies, and unraveling affective life. His fervent and youthful revolutionary visions of an egalitarian, renovated, and redemptive social order, as well as of a new aesthetic, revitalized poetry, and refashioned language that would collapse and unify all dualities, crumbled around him, and became instead a nightmare of cyclothymic mood swingings.

Chora/chora/Kore

In *The Timaeus*, one of Plato's last and greatest works, his major opus on cosmology and creation, Socrates begins the dialogue with his interlocutors by saying: "One, two, three — but where, my dear Timaeus is the fourth of those guests of yesterday who were to entertain me today?" (Plato, 1937, p. 9). Where indeed do we find the missing fourth? Where do we even look?

Plato goes on in this dialogue to carefully and precisely delimit a particular form and quality of space, which he claims is absolutely necessary for any 'becoming', life, or creation whatsoever to take place, to occur. He uses the Greek word *chora*, introducing it for the first time here towards the end of his own life, to talk about this recipient and receptacle in which all sensible phenomena must manifest, and without which, the world and life itself would be unimaginable and inconceivable. The *chora* is "the nurse"; and as the female container, the very image of the feminine itself, she completes the Platonic *quarternio* of 'being', 'becoming', and the *ur* creator god, whom Plato also only introduces in the *Timaeus*, "the demiurge", he who initiates everything out of himself, the master craftsman. The *chora*, then, *is* the missing fourth. Only in fact, the *chora*, as the completion of the three in herself as the fourth, is not really missing, as much as she *is* seriously endangered, and in our own time, in extreme peril of extinction. Our sacred space and container, the vessel of the earth, is rent with tears.

Chora is also the name of the village that lies huddled around and embraces the fortress monastery of Saint John the Theologian on Patmos. It is the name of many villages throughout Greece, though in particular, the name of villages specifically on the Greek islands, practically every one of which has a village named 'Chora'. All of these towns were for centuries, or even millennia, the centralized walled bastions where the island's scattered inhabitants could gather, arm, and protect themselves in case of invasion or attack from enemies and hostile outsiders. Their usually narrow winding streets and fortified walls and roofs were designed for the islanders to fight off incursions from the countless waves of mercenaries who would routinely plunder the isolated islands.



Taking a sharply divergent turn, we find in the contemporary writings of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and in particular the French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, that the notion of the semiotic maternal *chora*, coming from Plato's cosmology, is re-conceived in this current psychological context as the source and origin of all instinctual and signifying resources. This innermost space of experiencing, Kristeva claims, derives developmentally from the infant's earliest states of symbiotic union and pre-verbal containment within the maternal environment, extending from the neonatal state *in utero* until approximately six months of age. The *chora* is the basis and matrix for our most grounded sense of an original and indivisible self, our core being.

In her writings on art, and especially in her essay on Giovanni Bellini's numerous depictions of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ child, Kristeva states that his portrayal of the primordial space of the *chora* is represented through the luminous color and serenity of the inexpressible maternal body, itself paradoxically conveyed through the painting. This aesthetically stimulated experience of our *own* deepest being lies at the heart of all *jouissance*, a joyfulness in the embodied self stemming from the matriarchal *numinosum* of the *chora*. It is a joyfulness rooted in the unnameable, improbable receptacle of the *chora*, which is anterior to all signs, linguistic or symbolic. All naming and all names, all language, art, and *poiesis* itself, originate in this deep place/space of the *chora*, in the union of subject and predicate, and of subject and object.

In breaking through primal repression and primary narcissism, and penetrating to this archaic maternal core prior to the sign, whether through art or analysis, we are allowed, Kristeva says, to "arrive at the space of fundamental unrepresentability towards, which all glances nonetheless converge" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 249). By returning us to this primordial disposition, this modality of our earliest identification with the maternally protective and nurturing space of the *chora*, the artist and analyst challenge the closure of meaning through lodging the experience into language, attempting thereby to produce a specific *jouissance* that traverses "both sign and object" (p. 242). With the *chora* as the basis and vessel of 'the work', the task of art, and analysis becomes not to 'mean', to represent, or to signify something, but to *do* something, to, with, and in relationship to the 'other', this 'other-ness', in all of its own original, unique singularity.

Both Saint John and Hölderlin experienced the breach of the *chora* in their own lives on a multitude of both internal and external levels. The crucifixion of Jesus, the death of the Virgin Mary, the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the persistent persecution, and oppression of Christians, including his own forced exile on Patmos, were some of the many challenges provoking John's visionary prophecies. For Hölderlin, the loss of his beloved Diotima, the rejections of his colleagues and friends, his repeated failures in earning a livelihood, the dissolution of his creative powers, and the dashing of his revolutionary republican ideals, all seemed to exacerbate his depression and the subterranean schizophrenic rending of his personality already taking place. The deeply feminine interiorities and innermost soul spaces of both these men were overwhelmed. While John projected both anima and self outwardly, out of this life and into the perfected world to come, Hölderlin retreated inwardly and inaugurated a modernity and postmodernity for our time, firmly rooted in this world and in this life. Though also creating an imaginal and psychical Patmos as the site of the soul's longing and fulfillment, he never strayed far from his poet's calling to invoke and prepare for the gods' return to this earth. Hölderlin institutes the language and possibility of a *poiesis*, a creating anew, which itself must redeem the world. He addresses the dawning reign of soul in language, and of a language that can and must perform the work of soul, in this life.

Theotokos Ascending

Back on Patmos, it is early evening. On the glistening little beach located just beneath the church, one can hear the bells ringing loudly over loudspeakers, calling people to the religious service to be held at the small hilltop chapel of the Virgin Mary of Geranos. It is the 15th of August.

The picturesque chapel is located on the extreme northeast promontory of the island, ringed by a number of sandy coves. It was built 160 years ago on a series of ancient pre-Christian sites commanding a spectacular view.

Several priests and monks are chanting the liturgy. Already quite a crowd has assembled. Billowing clouds of incense waft over the gathering group and dissipate out to sea in the breezes, which wildly flap colorful pennants and flags strung across the chapel's outdoor courtyard.

Filing into the tiny chapel, the faithful kiss the antique hand-painted panels portraying the Mother of God. This is, after all, the day that she dies, and evening when she will rise up again. This solemn though joyful holiday is called by the Greek Orthodox 'The Dormition of the Virgin', the going-to-sleep of Mary, her death day, The Dormition of Our Most Holy Lady of the Theotokos.

Today is also the Ascension of the Virgin Mary, the day she rises up and goes to heaven. And at least since Pope Pius XII's declaration of the dogma in 1950, this day also honors the actual Assumption of the Virgin; finally acknowledging and declaring that she is indeed 'taken up' in both body *and* soul, into the celestial spiritual realm where she now resides along with the Father, her Son, and the Holy Ghost, thus completing the *quarternio* (Jung, 1969, p. 171; Jung, 1980, p. 688-9).

The religious rituals concluded and the festivities now in full swing, the magnificent ball of the sun is slowly going down into the sea. From here one can gaze over the entire spiny-ridged backbone of the island. Sloping down on both sides from the high central ridge and its winding road to numerous rocky coves, inlets and beaches, the warm brown, rounded hump of the island appears to be a gigantic, beneficent slumbering beast that has risen from the sea and settled its large body here.

Before leaving, we offer up our remaining wine to Dionysos and ask for safe guidance on the way home from his female consorts, the *Maenads*, his "mad women" followers, lovers, mothers, nurses, and nymphs. The Virgin Mary is here too, the protectress, folding us in the embrace of her heavenly blue cloak, the *chora*, *Kore*, the "maiden", Artemis, the girls playing, having fun.

Back in Skala, the night air is soft and soothing. The evening quietly unwinds, gently loosening and releasing its grip on this port village on Patmos, just under the mountainside Cave of the Apocalypse, lying below Saint John's monastery and the ancient temple mount of Artemis, underneath the brilliantly shining stars.

The following day we heard that the Virgin Mary's party continued in Geranos the whole night long, music, dancing, and feasting wildly unabating well into the mid-morning hours of summer's bright sunlight.

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