Long ago Socrates told us that “a poet is a light and winged thing, and holy,” and the metaphor has enjoyed good fortune in European poetry.¹ The prestige of this image has not been constant in literary history, no more than has the status of the image itself, but it has survived degeneration into a merely “literary” ornament. Romanticism is a sharp reaction against the literary, Jean Paulhan assured us sixty years ago; it is a terrorist movement that prizes the experiences of purity and rupture and that sets its jaw against all rhetoric.² Yet only a breath or two later the same critic taught us to distrust that very distinction, and to recognize the difficulty of deciding whether we are dealing with an audacious experience or an exotic trope. At the very least, however, we can at least say that the Romantics revived and relaunched Socrates’ image. We have only to recall Coleridge’s vision of the poet with “His flashing eyes, his floating hair!” a figure whose sheer imaginative vitality requires his audience to close their eyes “with holy dread.”³

After the high Romantics, Socrates’ image became more and more literary for poets and their readers. In 1823 when Pushkin wrote of “freeing a bird” and not muttering “Against God’s providence,” he may not have been thinking of the poet as “God’s bird” yet many of his readers assumed he was.⁴ The image maintains its force by moving elsewhere, chiefly to critical and philosophical projects. In 1844, when Emerson ruminated on the grand triumphs of the imagination, he concluded that “The poets are thus liberating gods.”⁵ Yet he would have been the first to admit that the final word is a trope. Later still, in 1916, a line like Vicente Huidobro’s “The poet is a little God” cannot avoid appearing somewhat facile.⁶ What has happened? A steady loss of belief in religious transcendence drained energy from one side of the metaphor, while the Arnoldian hope that poetry would replace religion was never able to sustain the other side. Yet the metaphor did not vanish altogether; it was recast this way and that and has enjoyed a remarkable new life in poetry and criticism.

Two of the most intense witnesses of modernity’s advent, Nietzsche and Hölderlin, offer diverging testimonies of what occurred. God is dead,
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says the one in *The Gay Science.* God has withdrawn, says the other when commenting on Sophocles’s *Oedipus* cycle. Nietzsche did not say what role the poet was to play after the divine internment, although I suspect that Rilke gives us a better sense of it than Mallarmé does. If we look at poets who respond deeply to God’s death – Philip Larkin and Wallace Stevens, say – the very idea of there being a “role” seems implausible. Stevens said that “The death of one god is the death of all,” then added, years later, “We say God and the imagination are one...” Quite different in stance and tone is Larkin’s observation that religion is a “vast moth-eaten musical brocade.” Perhaps there is a similar lack of convergence with those poets who display an affinity with Hölderlin, writers as unmatchable as René Char, Robert Duncan and Stefan George. Yet Hölderlin sketched out a role for the poet. In a world where God has withdrawn from humans and humans have turned away from God, the poet must maintain a space between the two infidelities while awaiting another revelation. On this understanding the poet would serve neither the old myths nor the new demythologizing; the one tempts us with nostalgia, the other with reductionism. Rather, poetry would maintain a space where a new revelation might one day be made welcome again.

Hölderlin called this space “the holy,” although it has received other names, including “the impossible.” Of more interest than its various appropriations in modern thought is the central if unremarked point that “the holy” is not aligned with revelation but with revealability. Poetry, then, is not of interest for any spiritual truths it may proclaim but is of value for its preparation of men and women for such truths when they are finally made manifest. Needless to say, this is not quite how Hölderlin’s redirection of the Socratic metaphor has been received. “The holy” is cited by way of making sense of those writers whose verse is meditative or spiritual but who subscribe to no confession and hold no hope of personal salvation. Religiosity is mistaken for religion, and the slip leads admirers of Geoffrey Hill or Charles Wright, for example, to make hasty inductions. In Britain and the United States, we have been hearing for some years of “post-Christianity” and, more recently, of “religion without religion.” Sometimes one encounters talk of “limit experiences” or, in a Romantic register, the sublime. But none of these expressions will take us very far by itself. We can get further more quickly by pondering a central question that many of these people face. In a reality held to be finite what sense, if any, can be made of transcendence?

I put to one side for the moment a set of problems that are consequent on Edmund Husserl’s insistence that all transcendence, whether natural or divine, external or internal, be bracketed. Included in this