Tragic Effects
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Thinking in Translation

Ich kenne mich zwar nicht selbst genug, um zu wissen, ob ich eine wahre Tragödie schreiben könnte; ich erschrecke aber bloß vor dem Unternehmen und bin beinahe überzeugt, daß ich mich durch den bloßen Versuch zerstören könnte.

I do not know myself well enough to know if I could write a true tragedy; however, I am terrified of the very undertaking and am nearly convinced that I could destroy myself in the mere attempt. (Goethe to Schiller, 9 December 1797).1

Goethe knew. Perhaps it is not surprising to discover that he knew, but in the shadows cast over the generations that followed him, his words possess an especially marked poignancy. While Goethe does arrive at his own version of classical tragedy in Iphigenie auf Tauris, he ultimately criticizes that attempt as too “damned humane” (verteufelt human); meanwhile, there is little doubt that the peril he describes in confronting the tragic continued to haunt those who bore his legacy: Hölderlin, Kleist, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud.2 To produce “true tragedy” in a modern age implies nothing less than the pursuit of a phantom. Anyone who attempts it must reconstruct a world out of elements that are not only of another language but also of another time, another place, an entirely other system of thought. It demands, in other words, a constant engagement with a past that in

2. Speaking of the development of German drama after Goethe and Schiller, George Steiner describes Kleist and Hölderlin, as well as Georg Büchner and J. M. R. Lenz, as a “family of hectic genius” for whom “drama is the embodiment of crisis.” Steiner, The Death of Tragedy (New York: Knopf, 1961), 216, 218.
many ways has come to define us, but nevertheless remains just beyond our reach; and whoever does not heed this imperative risks losing contact altogether with his distant source. The project of modern tragedy departs from a nucleus that is at once magnetic and inaccessible.

Nonetheless, this inaccessibility has hardly proven a barrier to tragedy’s longevity as a model and point of departure in the post-Enlightenment age. Greek tragedy treats themes that remain universally familiar and provocative for modern readers, and nowhere is this more true than in the intellectual history of modern Germany. Since the birth of what Peter Szondi has called the “philosophy of the tragic” in the late eighteenth century, tragedy has served as a paradigm in aesthetic and intellectual efforts to define, illuminate, and stabilize modern subjective experience. Essential to the development of both Weimar classicism and German idealism, tragedy’s presentation of a society and a central figure in crisis has inspired confrontations with fundamental questions of social justice, ethical action, and individual responsibility. Why have so many poets and thinkers chosen to return again and again to a small set of dramatic texts written for a specific occasion, the Athenian Dionysia festivals, over two thousand years ago? And perhaps even more importantly, what does it mean to appropriate the themes and structures of ancient tragedy in the service of defining modernity? What is lost in such a transmission from ancient text to modern context? What is gained?

This study will place such questions into sharper relief by focusing on a progression of thought inspired by the often controversial practice of translating the Greeks. In 1804 Friedrich Hölderlin published translations of Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus and Antigone that were widely ridiculed by his contemporaries as incomprehensible products of a disturbed mind. “Is the man insane, or is he only pretending to be,” wrote Heinrich Voss, the son of the great translator of the Odyssey, “and is his Sophocles secretly a satire?

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3. “Since Aristotle there has been a poetics of tragedy, but only since Schelling a philosophy of the tragic” (Seit Aristoteles gibt es eine Poetik der Tragödie, seit Schelling erst eine Philosophie des Tragischen). Peter Szondi, Versuch über das Tragische (Frankfurt: Insel, 1961), 7.

4. Classical scholars admit that our knowledge of what went on at those festivals is limited by our considerable historical distance from the events and the small proportion of remaining artifacts at our disposal; as Christian Meier asserts, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides each likely composed about one hundred plays, of which only about a dozen now remain, and they were not the only tragedians to participate in the festival’s competitions (The Political Art of Greek Tragedy, trans. Andrew Webber [Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993], 54). For a concise explanation of the festival setting, see also John J. Winkler and Froma Zeitlin’s introduction to Nothing to do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 4–5.

5. In the Frankfurt edition of Hölderlin’s works, D. E. Sattler includes extensive notes on the reception of these translations in the nineteenth century. Friedrich Schelling, for example, claimed in a letter to Hegel that the translations “express fully his ruined mental condition” (Seinen verkommenen geistigen Zustand drückt die Übersetzung des Sophocles ganz aus). In FA 16: 20.
of bad translators? . . . You should have seen how Schiller laughed” (FA 16: 20). In an age of celebrated and masterful translations, from Voss’s Homer to Humboldt’s Aeschylus and Schlegel’s Shakespeare—an age in which translation, in fact, was regarded as a tactical necessity in the development of German cultural identity—Hölderlin’s Sophocles project could perhaps only have appeared hermetic, tortured, mad. Although philosophers of language such as Herder and Schleiermacher soon argued for a translation practice in which the receiving language gains from being “bent toward an alien likeness,” the most celebrated translations of the time were still clearly characterized by their accessibility and stylistic beauty. The best sort of translation, as Wilhelm von Humboldt stipulated in his introduction to his translation of Agamemnon, benefits from the encounter with the source language while avoiding the loss of identifiable cultural markers: the translator must approach “the foreign” (das Fremde) without crossing over into “foreignness” (Fremdheit) (Schulte 58). No wonder, then, that Hölderlin’s Sophocles, with its jarring hybrid syntax and often disorienting word choice, seemed to have fallen to earth from a distant star.

While Hölderlin’s engagement with Greek tragedy may have begun as a somewhat bizarre digression within the culture of translation around 1800, however, it has maintained a relevance far beyond the reach of its more conventionally readable cohort. In a general sense, as poet Hölderlin has gained nearly all of his renown since the start of the twentieth century, but it is his Sophocles that has captured a particularly large share of scholarly and creative interest. Both between and since the two world wars, no other


7. Friedrich Schleiermacher, “On the Different Methods of Translating,” trans. Waltraud Bartscht, reprinted in Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida, ed. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 47. This tension between translation theory and practice around 1800 might perhaps inhere precisely in the cultural agenda that sought to define German national identity in relation to an abstract and mutable concept of the “foreign.” As Lawrence Venuti has argued, Schleiermacher’s advocacy of the “foreignizing” translation was perhaps based on an agenda of bourgeois nationalism: “Since the category ‘foreign’ here is determined by the educated, Schleiermacher is using translation to mark out a dominant space for a bourgeois minority.” The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation (Routledge, 1995), 103.

8. M. B. Benn already noted this retroactive interest in 1967; see “Hölderlin and the Greek Tradition,” Arion 6:4 (Winter 1967): 495. In the subsequent 40 years the degree of creative and intellectual fascination has more likely intensified than subsided.
rendition of Sophocles’ *Antigone* has had a more profound impact on the German stage, and perhaps only Hegel’s reading of the same tragedy has proven a more influential intellectual confrontation with the modern experience of the tragic. Cited and adapted by prominent artists and intellectuals such as Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Bertolt Brecht, Heiner Müller, Martin Walser, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Hölderlin’s translations and accompanying remarks have become something of a specimen piece in the attempt to actualize ancient tragedy.

Discussions of how tragedy continues to raise ethical questions of relevance to modernity have become almost commonplace in literary and cultural criticism, as notable thinkers from Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray to Judith Butler and Carol Jacobs have offered valuable insight into the genre’s continuing relevance. Most of these discussions focus on thematic issues, taking up in particular the conflict between state decree and individual will in Sophocles’ *Antigone*. At least since Hegel placed tragic art at the center of the ethical universe in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1808), the figure of Antigone has maintained an exemplary status within a modern ethical debate encompassing the tensions between civic and religious laws, public and private spheres, the state and the individual, man and woman. Meanwhile, the more contemporary recasting of the ethical sphere sheds new light on the fundamental questions that arise when we are confronted with the tangle of relationships and motivations at the heart of this tragedy—questions that address the claims of justice and the legitimacy of crime; the nature of love and the effects of hatred; the status of siblings, of lovers, of family duties; the articulations of community, of responsibility, of resistance, of violence.

By placing emphasis on the problems inherent in translation, however, my study approaches the question of ethics from another angle. Contemporary discussions of translation address ethics extensively, in the wake of postcolonial and postmodern critiques of the power structures inherent in the relation between a source text (and culture) and its rendering in another form and context. In examining the ever-changing status of Greek tragedy in German translation, however, my focus turns not toward the interchange between radically different yet contemporary cultural discourses, but rather toward the historical implications of translation as palimpsest, over what Samuel Weber has called “instances” of translation.9 Insofar as translation

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9. “...translation always involves not merely the movement from one language to another, but from one instance—a text already existing in another language—to another instance, that does not previously exist, but that is brought into being in the other language.” Translation thus designates “both a general process, involving a change of place, and a singular result of that process.” Samuel Weber, “A Touch of Translation: On Walter Benjamin’s ‘Task of the Translator,’” in S. Bermann and M.
is always an act of close reading, requiring its practitioner to maintain an interpretive position with respect to her source text, it also forces a confrontation with the unfamiliar, the inconceivable, the untranslatable—those elements that, in the case of Greek tragedy, lie amid the ruins of the distant past. At the same time, this practice of reading—defined by distance from its interlocutor and hence a certain hermeneutic urgency—is fluid and profoundly mutable, marked irrevocably by the particular cultural, linguistic and historical context (the “instance”) in which it occurs. In appropriating the themes of tragedy in the service of constructing the modern subject, some readers have failed to account for this stubborn distance and allowed their work to glide seamlessly over the problems it poses, rendering them invisible to the reader; tragedy essentially becomes the property of modern Western intellectual discourse, often functioning—as in Hölderlin’s time—in the service of “nation-building.”

The works of translation and adaptation I discuss in the following pages, however, attempt to confront those problems of undecidability head-on: the persistent unfulfillment that the transfer between linguistic and semiotic systems underscores; the experience of the radical limits of one’s own language and the vulnerability that those limits reveal for a subject constituted by his relation to language; the difficult tension between the task of making the past understandable and the responsibility to preserve its radical singularity.

Hölderlin’s attempt to translate the Greeks in a new way offers a fascinating case study for any reader interested in the history of efforts to make sense of modernity through the confrontation with an ancient past that is both foundational and inscrutable. Rather than adapting the themes and language of tragedy unproblematically to modern modes of thought, Hölderlin’s project affirms their difference in the very obscurity of his translation. His Sophocles reflects a profound commitment to exposing the relation between the structure of Greek tragedy—with its stark separation of chorus from characters, the isolation of the tragic hero, and the unsettling effects of poetic language—and the problem of translation as a mode of transfer from ancient to modern registers. Foreignizing word choices, through which Hölderlin aims to reconstruct the distinctiveness of the ancient source text, continually let translation speak its name, intensifying the precarious expe-


perience of tragedy’s effects by lingering at the fraying margins of language.\textsuperscript{11} This affirmation of disjunction as a mode of representation, both on the tragic stage and in the process of transmission, redefines the ethical impulse of tragedy not in the founding of the self in a modern sense but in the responsibility to a differentiating movement to which the self is continually subject. By tracing the striking influence of these translations within a discourse on tragedy, ethics, and subjectivity extending to Benjamin, Heidegger, Brecht, Müller, Walser, and Lacoue-Labarthe, I aim to unravel the complex dynamics through which the perception of ethical responsibility, having long taken its cues from the themes of classical tragedy, might find resonance with a particular relationship implicit in the theory and practice of translation.

I. Tragedy

While the transmission of ancient text into modern forms models an intersubjective exchange that is fundamentally ethical, discussions of ethics and violence in the context of Greek tragedy have generally taken place on a thematic level. Although in the following chapters I will be more concerned with the translation and adaptation of tragic form and language into the context of modernity, a brief summary of these thematic discussions will nevertheless help to illuminate the fundamental questions at stake in that process of transmission.

By staging a historical moment of transition from the age of myth to that of the Athenian polis, as Jean-Pierre Vernant has discussed, tragic drama has always presented a forum through which to confront political and ethical conflict against the backdrop of violence.\textsuperscript{12} With the phenomenon of tragedy coinciding with the formative years of the polis, Vernant and others claim that the plays typically portray a clash of the new burdens of citizenship with the traditional mythic world that precedes them. While the Chorus corresponds more closely to the contemporary point of view of the civic community, the hero represents a figure “more or less alien to the ordinary condition of a citizen” (Vernant 1988, 24). Within this framework the hero’s

\textsuperscript{11} In After Babel, Steiner eloquently expresses the disorienting effects of Hölderlin’s translation style: Hölderlin “compels us to experience, as in fact only a great poet can, the limits of linguistic expression and the barriers between languages which impede human understanding” (323).

virtues and exploits are no longer glorified by an admiring public, as was the case with epic; rather, “the hero has ceased to be a model. He is, both for himself and for others, a problem” (25). Insofar as it presents the conflicts and discrepancies contained within a moment of historical transition, then, tragedy does not merely reflect the social reality of its time but calls it into question: “... tragedy is born when myth starts to be considered from the point of view of a citizen” (33). That point of view is rent by a fundamental distance, a gap which has developed at the heart of social experience between a mythic past and a political present—a gap “wide enough for the oppositions... to stand out quite clearly... [yet] narrow enough for the conflict in values to be a painful one and for the clash to continue to take place” (27).

Nor is this gap, reconstituted on the tragic stage, destined to find resolution there. As Charles Segal notes, the “systems of linked polarity” that determine the tragic universe—conflicts between “mortal and divine, male and female, man and beast, city and wild” (Segal 1986, 57)—operate as a critical instrument that reveals “not the orderly process of transition from one stage of life to another, but the inbetweenness, the marginality, the ambiguity in the juxtaposition of the two sides...” (60). By thinking through this lack of a solution, through the detached discovery on manifold levels “that words, values, men themselves are ambiguous, that the universe is one of conflict,” the spectator “acquires a tragic consciousness” (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 43). From its very start, then, the viewing of tragedy is linked to a critical perspective that extends beyond the identificatory dynamics that have since become associated with Aristotle’s notion of catharsis.

Such polarities extend deeply into the heart of tragedy, such that the dramatic scene does not merely reflect its social context in all of its ambiguity but also presents marginalized outliers, “others” that do not fit neatly into that context but are able to use their difference as a source of power. For example, by elevating female figures to the atypical status of autonomous

13. On this point see also Charles Segal’s comments in “Greek Tragedy and Society: A Structuralist Perspective”: “As part of a public festival, a ritual in honor of the god Dionysus, tragedy validates the social order. . . . At the same time the violence of its action, its radical questioning of justice, both human and divine, its searching explorations of the failure or the betrayal of public and private morality take us outside of that order.” In Greek Tragedy and Political Theory, ed. J. P. Euben (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 47.

14. In an important article, Froma Zeitlin asserts that Thebes, setting of many tragic plays, takes shape as the essential scene of such conflict; it functions in the context of tragedy as the “Anti-Athens” (116), allowing problems to be displaced onto a city imagined as the “negative model to Athens’s manifest image of itself” (102). Insofar as Thebes comes to contain the tragic space, it becomes possible to conceive of Athens by contrast as a space where reconciliation and transformation are possible. “Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama,” in Euben 101–41.
decision-makers, as Helene Foley argues, tragedians were able to present the possibility of other modes of ethical reasoning that involved “the unknowable and the uncontrollable both within and outside the self.”¹⁵ Indeed, Dionysus himself was frequently identified with a femininity that, as Froma Zeitlin has shown, lends power to both him and the theatrical spectacle created in his name.¹⁶

With its focus on historical moments of painful flux, then, tragedy was designed to leave its spectators both attuned to contradiction and yearning for its resolution. And in its appetite for the paradoxical pleasures of tragic pathos, modern Western culture has readily identified with both the oppositional structure and the will to dialectical resolution that this transitional dynamic inspires. Indeed, interpreters of tragedy in the post-Enlightenment era commonly relate their return to the Greeks to the perception of a crisis not unlike that which brought tragic art to light in the first place; the present day is perceived as a time in need of radical transformation, as Dennis Schmidt states in his book on tragedy and German philosophy, a time in which “those who argue most powerfully for a revitalization of the question of tragedy are united by the assumption that the present era is a time of crisis, of exhaustion, of historical limits reached.”¹⁷ Much of that crisis thinking is reflective of the sense that contradiction, the essence of tragedy, lies at the heart of experience and must be confronted. In her study of ethics and luck in ancient tragedy, Martha Nussbaum asserts that modern interpreters of tragedy often view its conflict as a kind of adversity that one should be able to avoid through the application of practical reason, by structuring life and commitments to avoid serious conflict (Nussbaum 51). This is an intellectual movement somewhat separate from the debates surrounding Aristotle’s conception of tragic effect, the awakening of fear and pity in the spectator, that Lessing initiated in the eighteenth century and Schiller transformed into a means of moral education. The German Idealists were also concerned with the problem of how tragic experience can bring resolution despite its

¹⁵. Helene Foley, Female Acts in Greek Tragedy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 15. On this point, see in particular her comprehensive reading of Antigone, 172–200. See also Martha Nussbaum’s comments on moral luck and ethical ambiguity in The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy, rev. ed. (Cambridge, 1986), also in particular with respect to Antigone, which she introduces as “a play about teaching and learning, about changing one’s vision of the world, about losing one’s grip on what looked like secure truth and learning a more elusive kind of wisdom” (52).

¹⁶. “Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama,” in Winkler and Zeitlin 66.

¹⁷. Dennis Schmidt, On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 5. Schmidt’s excellent and comprehensive book also contains new translations of many key texts on tragedy, to which I will refer in the following chapters.
unbearable contradiction, but their field of inquiry was that of dialectics: for Schelling (and in a different sense for Hegel), the affirmative moment of tragedy comes with the reinscription of the possibility of human freedom, despite the downfall of the individual subject. Although Hegel submits that both Antigone and Creon suffer the consequences of their actions in the name of divine or human laws—for within Hegel’s tragic universe both are unquestionably guilty—the restoration of equilibrium brought about by “justice” (Gerechtigkeit) ensures that universal Spirit shall continue its forward trajectory. For Nussbaum, then, Hegel regards tragedy as representative of a “primitive or benighted stage of ethical life and thought,” which suggests that his incorporation of the tragic into his dialectical system is at its heart no less a model for Bildung than the poetic efforts of Lessing and Schiller (Nussbaum 51).

For many others who follow in Hegel’s wake, however, Greek tragedy offers an ethical legitimacy outside the conventions of modern concepts of law and crime, innocence and guilt. While Nussbaum maintains that the Greek tragic universe is uniquely complex insofar as it presents the incommensurability of conflicting value systems (such as those of Antigone and Creon) as a permanent condition, untouchable by reconciliation, others such as George Steiner and Susan Sontag echo this idea to argue that “true” tragedy in Goethe’s sense is unsustainable within the modern Judeo-Christian framework of “moral adequacy”.

Tragedy says there are disasters which are not fully merited, that there is ultimate injustice in the world. So one might say that the final optimism of the prevailing religious traditions of the West, their will to see meaning in the world, prevented a rebirth of tragedy under Christian auspices—as, in Nietzsche’s argument, reason, the fundamentally optimistic spirit of Socrates, killed tragedy in ancient Greece. (Sontag 137)

Central to these readings is a sense of historical distinction; Greek tragedy participates in a historical movement that presents it as capable of

18. This frames Nussbaum’s central criticism of Hegel; what she sees as his tendency to eliminate conflict represents a “dangerous reform” of the tragic universe which neglects the possibility of separateness or difference in the world of value: “...to do justice to the nature or identity of two distinct values requires doing justice to their difference; and doing justice to their difference... requires seeing that there are, at least potentially, circumstances in which the two will collide”[68].

19. Thus it is certainly fitting that Steiner and Sontag wrote pieces with the same title. See Steiner, The Death of Tragedy, 4–8 and Sontag, “The Death of Tragedy,” in Against Interpretation and Other Essays (New York: Picador, 1966), 132–39. With respect to the demise of Goethe’s “true” tragedy, Steiner offers some intriguing if schematic comments about Goethe’s “avoidance of the tragic,” 166–68.
speaking to modernity and at the same time maintaining its secrets. (To be sure, Hegel himself also addressed this issue of historical development as it pertains to tragedy, but not in the interest of preserving any trace of secrecy within that movement of history.) However, Hegel’s reading of Antigone has become such a mainstay of modern ethical discourse that its version of tragic events, even more so than Sophocles’ play itself, often assumes center stage. Many such critics take issue with Hegel’s account of sexual difference in his reading of tragedy, arguing that the tragedy of Antigone in particular, far from codifying gender roles in relation to the “laws” of family and state, calls established categories of sexuality and kinship radically into question.20 Judith Butler’s essay on Antigone is a case in point: the tragic heroine “upsets the vocabulary of kinship that is a precondition of the human, implicitly raising the question for us of what those preconditions really must be.”21 However, not unlike the models it criticizes, Butler’s reading of “kinship trouble” in the Antigone finally runs aground in its claim to an essential universality—the universality of multiplicity, as it were—in its presentation of the Greek tragedy as a work that conveys truths into a modern context with minimal disruption.

While the philosophy of the tragic, born in the long eighteenth century, has thus given rise to much important debate, in some ways the text of tragedy tends to remain isolated from this. (It is perhaps no coincidence that Schelling and Hegel refer only obliquely to tragic situations; Schelling never even names Oedipus, though he is evidently the subject of his discussion, and Hegel’s only citation of Sophocles’ Antigone, as we will see later, is taken badly out of context.) Thus a new question arises where the Idealists leave off: where must the ethical stance of tragedy be situated, if it is not to become a mere reflection of modern systems of philosophy? And how does its performativity—the particularity of its language and rhetorical sway—come into play in the recognition of that stance? While Hegel and Schelling engage with the enduring legacy of tragedy, the perception that it expresses certain universal truths, it is their friend Hölderlin who considers

20. See, for example, the essays by Luce Irigaray (“The Eternal Irony of the Community”) and Patricia J. Mills (“Hegel’s Antigone”), in Mills, ed., Feminist Interpretations of G. W. F. Hegel (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1996).

21. Judith Butler, Antigone’s Claim (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 82. As Butler emphasizes, the family headed by Oedipus and Jocasta hardly remains within a recognizable kinship structure, as Oedipus is both father and brother to Antigone and her siblings; and Antigone herself, as Butler and other readers have pointed out, is described in Sophocles’ language not only as a sister and daughter but also as a man (the Greek aner), a son (see Butler 62), and a mother (Jacobs, “Dusting Antigone,” MLN 111 [1996]: 910).
above all the differences that tragedy also expresses, both in structure and in language. And who allows his writings on tragedy—the translations, but also his weirdly hermetic essays—to reflect those differences in a manner that makes their existence, if not always their explicit content, intelligible.

II. Translation

Even when the material of a “true” tragedy such as Goethe describes above aims to be wholly original, any modern attempt to approximate tragedy approaches the transformative dynamics of a translation. The modern tragic poet must strive to illuminate the obscurities of the original form, to connect, however imperfectly, to the inscrutable quality that within the context of modernity would still lend tragedy its “truth.” As Goethe’s dread at the very thought implies, taking on the ancient forms of the tragic involves the acknowledgment of a distance both within the work and from it, a recognition and suspension of the work’s foreignness that may be destructive.

Matters become even more complicated when that confrontation also involves the mechanics of translation itself, as it so frequently has in the two centuries since Goethe’s remarks. Inspired to a “most comprehensive predilection for all things Greek” by the classical aesthetics of Johann Jakob Winckelmann, Goethe’s own age featured a rash of classical material in translation, from Voss’s celebrated Homer (1781) to Humboldt’s translation of *Agamemnon* (1816) and Hölderlin’s and Solger’s translations of Sophocles (1804 and 1824). Under these circumstances, the undertaking redoubles the risk to which Goethe referred. If any act of translation is inherently violent insofar as its need for comprehensibility is also a call to assimilate the distinctive elements of the other (text) to the familiar cadence of native language and thought, that violence may exact a toll not only upon the translated object but the translating subject as well. Particularly in the extensive discourse concerning translation in and around Goethe’s age, these two forms of violence frequently stand in direct tension with one another; the translator who aims to mitigate the violence of transmission also exposes himself to the limits of his own language and process of thought, that which had been most radically his “own.”

22. Of these, Voss’s Homer was the most influential and held in the highest regard; Goethe, for example, described Voss’s translations as the most perfect of their kind, achieving a “perfect identity” with the original in which “one does not exist instead of the other but in the other’s place” (Schulte and Biguenet 61). For a concise but nevertheless engaging summary, see Charlie Louth, *Hölderlin and the Dynamics of Translation* (Legenda: European Humanities Research Center, 1998), 5–53.
This consideration only renders more curious—and perhaps, at the same
time, more understandable—the most intriguing aspect of the long tradi-
tion of translating the Greeks, particularly in Germany: the prevalence of
translators who are also, or even primarily, poets. To be sure, one of the most
prolific and enduring of all modern translators, A. W. Schlegel, was also
involved in the Romantic aesthetic project presented in the Athenäum
and other literary documents, but he was not a poet in the same vein as Hölder-
lin, Goethe, Hofmannsthal, Brecht, Pound, Müller, or Heaney. Nor did
he attempt, as they did, to translate Greek tragedy. Does the encounter with
the outermost limits of expression inherent in the task of translation—which
Enlightenment theorists of translation such as Bodmer and Herder already
regarded as essential to the development of thought itself—demand, in the
extreme case of tragedy, a poet’s sensitivity to the openness of one language
to another, to the elasticity of representation and the conveyance of image?
And what happens—to the poet, to the text, to the reader—if that encounter
fails?

Indeed, one might ask what “failure” means at all in this context. In one
sense, Hölderlin’s translations have continued to be an object of interest
precisely because they violate an essential pact at the heart of translational
practice: in their foreignizing tone they allow language, and therefore that
which produces language—the voice of the translator—to be heard between
the lines of text. Yet as we know from the writings of Lawrence Venuti, the
translator has long been expected to strive for the opposite pole: to remain
invisible. The translator is meant to be a mere intermediary, not to have a
voice of her own but to reproduce, seamlessly, the voice of another (Venuti
1995, 2). But this is a false transparency, as Venuti has shown: while main-
taining the appearance of unmediated access to a source text and author, the
smooth transition from one language to another by an “invisible” translator

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23. Josephine Balmer discusses the “close, symbiotic relationship” between creative writing and
classical translation, claiming that the “translator of a classic text can be seen more as an innovator,
making their own mark on an already well-known work, reimagining it for a new generation, a new
audience. . . . [I]n certain circumstances, a translation can supersed the original and become iconic in
its own right.” “What comes next? Reconstructing the classics,” in Susan Bassnett and Peter R. Bush,

24. Bodmer and Herder were early proponents of the idea, further developed by the Romantics,
that translation offers a means of confronting one’s own language that is essential to the edification of
the self. Bodmer advocated the expansion of language, and by extension the expansion of the possibili-
ties of thought, via the translation of “substantial instances of special beauty,” figurative expressions
that exhaust a particular thought through descriptive images. Such “instances” differ from language to
language, yet each is intuitively comprehensible in any language because the images are recognizable.
See Bodmer, Der Mahler der Sitten, reprinted in Translating Literature: The German Tradition from
in fact requires a particularly violent degree of intervention (16ff.). A common thread among newer theories of translation, then, involves advocating a more activist and ethical mode of translation, regarded not as a seamless transfer but as a creative practice that remains receptive to the distances—cultural, linguistic, temporal—traveled between languages and modes of expression. This represents a different sort of transparency than the illusion of the “invisible” translator: translation acts as a layer of “translucence” over the source text, not concealing it with the appearance of transparency but rather engaging with it in a manner that allows new connections to emerge in the context of the receiving culture. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes this level of engagement as “the most intimate act of reading,” a “surrender” to the source text that attends to its specificity. The translator’s invisibility is displaced by her readiness to disturb her own language, to let it reflect the otherness of the foreign text rather than offer it to the reader in familiar forms.

Yet this truer form of translation may exact no less a price than the “true” tragedy in Goethe’s estimation. As we must realize from Hölderlin’s example, this approach to the source text carries with it a potentially dangerous imperative for the “true translator,” who, as Friedrich Schleiermacher had already suggested in 1813, subjects himself to “the most extraordinary form of humiliation that a writer . . . could inflict upon himself.” More than merely receding into invisibility, the translator in Schleiermacher’s model must deliberately expose himself to danger, must be willing to bear the stain of failure and sacrifice the quality of his own expression, all for the sake of a voice that would otherwise be effaced in the transmission from one language to another.

Who would not like to have his native tongue appear everywhere in its most enticing beauty, of which every literary genre is capable? Who would not rather beget children who are in their parents’ image rather than bastards? Who would like to show himself in less attractive and less graceful move-

25. The recent work of Susan Bassnett, a translator, poet, and scholar, is particularly interesting in this respect. See her discussion in “Writing and Translating” (Bassnett and Bush, The Translator as Writer [London: Continuum, 2006], 173–83), as well as her creative dialogue with the Argentinian poet Alejandra Pizarnik in Exchanging Lives: Poems and Translations (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2002).
26. For a discussion of this idea of “translucence” in translation, see Sherry Simon’s response in Buden and Novotny 211.
ments than he is capable of, and at least sometimes appear harsh and stiff, and shock the reader as much as is necessary to keep him aware of what he is doing?... These are the sacrifices that every translator must make; these are the dangers to which he exposes himself. ... (Schulte and Biguenet 46f.)

Along with Johann Jakob Bodmer, who sixty years previously had likewise prevailed upon translators to have the courage to make use of the “natural freedom” of language (“so that the freedom of words matches the freedom of things” [Lefevere 31]), Schleiermacher equates a translator’s fidelity to the foreign text with the possibility of ridicule on the home front. However, this does not by any means lessen the significance of the exercise. If, as Schleiermacher advocates, the proper method of translation is indeed to move the reader to the author rather than the author to the reader (“leaving the author alone as much as possible” [Schulte and Biguenet 42]), then the translator’s fidelity to his text may have an even more disconcerting result than invisibility; it may imply vulnerability of a most fundamental sort. To translate in these terms is to assume responsibility for communicating the foreign text while renouncing regard for one’s own voice, to enact a relation that refuses to reduce the difference of another voice to the discourse of the same. It represents, in other words, testing ground for a relation between self and other that evokes the ethical as such.

This call to ethical responsibility remains a vital aspect of the current field of translation studies, which approaches the history of such appropriations of the “foreign” (such as Schleiermacher’s here) far more critically. Schleiermacher composed his theoretical remarks in a period in which the practice of translation was regarded as essential to the construction of a national culture, and his advocacy of the foreign as a vehicle for establishing identity, while


30. This tone of responsibility to an other that the subject does not negate or appropriate but rather recognizes as primary and ineffaceable recalls the ethical thought of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom the relation to the Other constitutes “first philosophy,” the primary dimension of experience. For a perspective on the relevance of Levinas’s ethics for translation theory, see Robert Eaglestone, “Levinas, Translation, and Ethics,” in Bermann and Wood 127–37.

31. See Lawrence Venuti, The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference (London: Routledge, 1998). In his discussion of “the power of translation to form identities and to qualify agents” [6], Venuti attempts to outline an ethical stance through which both the practice and the reading of translation take place with a more nuanced view towards linguistic and cultural difference.
common among theories of translation in his time, also betrays a reliance on essentialist categories such as “nation,” “culture,” “equivalence” and even “the foreign” that contemporary critics call radically into question. Rather than an interaction between two static poles of identity (what Michael Cronin calls a “zero-sum of binary opposition” between “source and target language, source and target culture, author and translator, translator and reader”), translation today exemplifies flux; and the translator must once again muster her courage for the path that lies ahead, for she is charged with maintaining the productive tensions and discontinuities between a text and its translation. Susan Bassnett describes the practice of translation as “a process of negotiation between texts and between cultures, a process during which all kinds of transactions take place mediated by the figure of the translator.”

Both source and product of translation cannot remain unaffected by this process: while the text in translation introduces discontinuity and conflict into the perception of uniformity, the “original” obtains meaning in a new and different context. This transaction lies at the heart of Walter Benjamin’s notion that translation represents the “living on” (Fortleben) of a given text.

The responsibility of the translator in such models is no trifling matter. The basis for the translator’s more ethical stance—the imperative of “keep[ing] the reader aware of what he is doing,” in Schleiermacher’s terms—is risk: risk of exposure, of ridicule, and ultimately of failure. Indeed, the specter of failure looms large in any attempt at translation, and reflections on the ultimate impossibility of translation are as common in the theoretical discourse as discussions of its significance. Benjamin—who famously praised Hölderlin’s translations as “prototypes (Urbilder, originary images) of their form” that confirm “every important aspect” of his own thoughts on translation—alludes to this limit in his concept of the translator’s “Aufgabe,” a term which contains within it not only the idea of a task but also, as Paul De Man first pointed out, of giving up (aufgeben): “It is in that sense also the defeat, the giving up, of the translator. The translator has to give up in relation to the task of refinding what was there in the original.”

To be sure, in light of the contemporary discourse on translation, De Man’s remarks about “refinding what was there in the original” sound posi-

33. See Cronin’s contribution to the forum in Buden and Nowotny 218.
tively antiquated. In an interview on his concept of the “third space” in translation, Homi Bhabha argues that the “original,” precisely insofar as it is open to translation, does not constitute an *a priori* totality.

. . . translation is a way of imitating, but in a mischievous, displacing sense—imitating an original in such a way that the priority of the original is not reinforced but by the very fact that it *can* be simulated, copied, transferred, transformed, made into a simulacrum and so on: the ‘original’ is never finished or complete in itself.37

Likewise, the familiar allusion to the translator’s inevitable “failure” reflects an attitude that newer translation theory aims to transcend, not least since translators succeed in completing translations all the time. Where Benjamin’s interest in Hölderlin becomes most instructive for contemporary translation theory, then, is with respect to more fundamental questions about the nature of translation as “Aufgabe”: what if the task of translation, for Hölderlin in particular but also in a more general sense, were not to “refind what was there” at all? Not to reconstitute an “original” but rather simply to produce a relation between texts and contexts that reflects the differential and variable use of language as such?38 The relevance of that relation would then persist and evolve over time, offering a key means by which to address the ethical implications of translation practice within literary and cultural histories. Jorge Luis Borges claimed that Homer in translation represented not merely the Greek classic itself but also “different perspectives of a mutable fact, . . . a long experimental lottery of omissions and emphases,” and examining a translation’s evolution within a given language sheds much light on the stakes inherent in that process.39 The critical study of a text’s “living on” in other forms and contexts shifts the central question of translation away from a binary of success or failure: from a yes or no to a why and how.40

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38. See Weber on Benjamin’s notion of “origin” in “A Touch of Translation,” Bermann and Wood 65–78.
40. An outstanding example of this type of study is Antoine Berman’s *Experience of the Foreign*, in which he outlines the process by which degrees of receptivity to difference as well as pockets of resistance become legible in the ambivalent manner in which a translating culture approaches its object: “We may formulate the issue as follows: Every culture resists translation, even if it has an essential need for it. The very aim of translation—to open up in writing a certain relation with the Other, to fertilize what is one’s Own through the mediation of what is Foreign—is diametrically opposed to the
As that progression aims to cross ever broader temporal and spatial chasms, moreover, as the orientation of the original grows more distant from what is familiar, the potential violence of translation cuts deeper still, necessitating not only the negotiation between languages but also the conceptual transmission of an alterity that cannot be entirely recovered. Winckelmann’s double imperative of imitating the Greeks and surpassing them (“the imitation of the ancients is the only way for us to become great—yes, if it is possible, inimitable”41) left poets and would-be translators around 1800 acutely aware of this dilemma. Friedrich Schiller may have best described its implications in his essay On the Use of the Chorus in Tragedy (Über den Gebrauch des Chors in der Tragödie)—an essay that accompanied his only attempt to reproduce classical Greek forms in a modern drama, The Bride of Messina:

The palace of the kings is locked up now, the courts have withdrawn from the gates of the cities into the interiors of houses, writing has suppressed the living word, the people have therefore become an abstract concept, the gods have retreated into the hearts of men. The poet must open up the palaces again, must lead the courts back out into the open air, he must prop up the gods again, he must reproduce everything immediate that has been annulled through the artificial institution of real life and cast off, as the sculptor does with modern garments, all of the artificial constructions on and around the human that hinder the appearance of his inner nature and his original character; he must take up, from all of his external surroundings, nothing except that which makes visible the highest of forms, the human.42

41. “Die Nachahmung der Alten ist der einzige Weg für uns, groß, ja wenn es möglich ist, un-nachahmlich zu werden” (The imitation of the ancients is the only way for us to become great, yes, if it is possible, to become inimitable). J. J. Winckelmann, Sämtliche Werke, ed. J. Eiselein (Osnabrück: Otto Zeller, 1965), 8.

42. “Der Palast der Könige ist jetzt geschlossen, die Gerichte haben sich von den Toren der Städte in das Innere der Häuser zurückgezogen, die Schrift hat das lebendige Wort verdrängt, das Volk . . . ist . . . folglich zu einem abgezogenen Begriff geworden, die Götter sind in die Brust der Menschen zurückgekehrt. Der Dichter muß die Paläste wieder auftun, er muß die Gerichte unter freiem Himmel herausführen, er muß die Götter wieder aufstellen, er muß alles Unmittelbare, das durch die künstliche Einrichtung des wirklichen Lebens aufgehoben ist, wieder herstellen, und alles künstliche Machwerk an dem Menschen und um denselben, das die Erscheinung seiner innern Natur und seines ursprünglichen Charakters hindert, wie der Bildhauer die modernen Gewänder, abwerfen, und von allen äußeren Umgebungen desselben nichts aufnehmen, als was die Höchste der Formen, die menschliche, sichtbar macht” (Friedrich Schiller, Werke und Briefe, Band V, ed. M. Luserke [Frankfurt: Klassiker, 1996], 286f.).
Schiller's lines here evoke an arduous and solitary process of reconstruction that captures both the exertion and the artistry of confronting the ancients, highlighting the special task of anyone who aims to become their translator. The long tradition of translating Greek tragedy, insofar as it demands a degree of transformation perhaps unmatched by the exchange between modern works, may subject both text and author to a particularly ruthless form of violence. Perhaps this is what Goethe knew.

III. Other Ethics

In her introduction to the recent anthology Nation, Language and the Ethics of Translation, Sandra Bermann proposes that translation as an object of study “might be effectively re-thought in historical and temporal terms rather than only in ontological and spatial ones.” In this sense, translation gains relevance not only as a means of intercultural exchange but “in terms of a history of ‘instances’ or of linguistic negotiations occurring over time, each a poeisis, each establishing a new inscription and, with it, the possibility of new interpretation” (6). Bermann’s model provides a compelling framework for examining the impulse to translate the Greeks since the Enlightenment, with each new version a different manifestation of the exchange between modernity and its nearly imperceptible shadows.

In seeking to frame this exchange as it develops diachronically, I examine a constellation of texts that reflect upon the ethics of translation as a way of thinking—an epistemological category that proposes to call a dialectical-mimetic progression of thought (what Heidegger will call “metaphysics”) into question. Hölderlin’s translation project, emerging out of a discourse in which both translation and tragedy operate in the service of establishing identity (in conversation with and in opposition to the “foreign”), allows language to slip its moorings in a manner that effectively undermines a fixed concept of identity. The intersection of tragedy and translation thus opens up the possibility of thinking otherwise, of experiencing the foreign not only as it relates to the perception of identity or the process of Bildung but rather also as that which cannot be reconciled, that cannot offer any greater lesson than its own fundamental, permanent dissonance. In the sense that it aims to reveal tragic experience as both radically foreign and curiously foundational, Hölderlin’s translation project prefigures, as Heidegger recognized, a concept of “das Unheimliche.”

Nowhere does this intersection of tragedy and translation have more lasting effects than in the German intellectual tradition. Chapter 1 thus makes
the case for considering the significance of translation for the modern understanding of tragedy by situating Hölderlin’s project within the intellectual climate of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a time in which translation was regarded as a crucial means toward national and individual Bildung and most German intellectuals had something to say about the relationship between ancient Greece and modern subjectivity. While many of the models that emerged were essentially ahistorical in approach, treating the themes of tragedy as universal truths to be mined for their modern relevance, the texts of Greek tragedy themselves were regarded by translators and educated readers as immutable ideals to be rivaled, perhaps, but never changed. Hölderlin, who grappled with the issue of the tragic for most of his productive life, finally manages in his translations to hollow out a space between these two poles, neither appropriating ancient tragic concepts in the service of a modern intellectual agenda nor pledging unquestioned fidelity to the original text. Neither a relic nor a modern transformation, Hölderlin’s translations represent a space in which transition itself can come to light.

It is this concern for marking the space between texts that defines Hölderlin’s project as a valuable counterpoint to a conception of ethics more commonly shaped by the thematics of Greek tragedy. Most voices in this debate address the identity of tragic figures more than the structure of tragedy itself. However, Hölderlin’s illumination of the process of transmission represents something else in its rapt attention to the otherness of tragic language and structure; as a result, the writers that follow in his footsteps inevitably reflect on problems that his translations both confront and produce. What questions, if any, can we answer by reading Greek tragedy today? How do we represent a past that eludes our comprehension? What can we understand of tragedy at all, and what can we glean from that which we do not understand?

The following two chapters focus on Hölderlin’s translation project, the uniqueness of which lies in his attempt to make the experience of translation an integral part of the tragedy’s effect on a modern audience. That modern experience rests upon the sheer foreignness of the material and is intensified by a strange and hauntingly beautiful syntax that is neither German nor Greek. Thus not only the plight of Oedipus and Antigone but the language of the plays themselves is unsettling, unfamiliar—and nevertheless captivating. In this synthesis of form and content, translation and tragedy, Hölderlin’s texts suggest that the modern subject is brought to a place that the tragic figures already inhabit: a place in which, as Antigone’s Chorus testifies, “Much is monstrous, yet / Nothing more monstrous than the human.” While other readers of Antigone’s tragedy, most notably Hegel, understand her decision to bury her brother as representative of divine law in conflict
with the law of the state, in Hölderlin’s translation she not only resists that
gesture of assimilation into the structure of legitimacy but also brings those
around her “outside of the law.” The modern subject’s apprehension of Anti-
gone’s solitary entry into the tomb, and of a language that constantly slips
its moorings, forms the basis for the recognition of an essential difference—a
“monstrosity”—that exceeds that subject’s presupposition of his own imma-
nence. What others in his time see as the ethical context of tragedy—the
conflict of divine and human realms, the dialectical advancement of subject,
community and finally history—is thus complicated by a model of tragic
experience inseparable from the dynamics of translation. For Hölderlin the
ethics of tragedy is grounded in nothing more than the imperative to pre-
serve the dignity of an unfathomable and ultimately untranslatable differ-
ence; by calling into question the reflected immanence of the subject, it
brings into focus that subject’s responsibility for engaging with a form of
alterity that both disrupts and defines it.

In the following chapters, I extend my discussion to Hölderlin’s most
influential twentieth-century readers, all of whom problematize the ethical
stance that these translations illuminate. Common to these engagements
with the same set of texts is an emphasis on the particular timeliness of trag-
edy, and particularly of Hölderlin’s translations, in the political and cultural
milieu of the present day. Consequently, the relationship between the ethical
and the political becomes central, particularly with respect to the question of
identity (both national and individual). Insofar as all these writers attempt
to engage their thinking about tragedy with the horrors of recent events and
with efforts to come to terms with the violence of the past, the question of
responsibility gains even greater urgency.

Walter Benjamin’s engagement with Hölderlin’s Sophocles, which opens
this second section, is a thread, an accumulation of reflections over two
decades rather than a single essay or text. At no point does Benjamin offer
a sustained reading of the translations and remarks in the manner of his
writings on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* or even Hölderlin’s twinned poems
“Dichtermut” (“The Poet’s Courage”) and “Blödigkeit” (“Timidity”). There
is no question, however, that Hölderlin’s Sophocles represents a crucial foun-
dation not only for Benjamin’s concept of translation but for his theory
of criticism in a more general sense. From his early essay “Two Poems by
Friedrich Hölderlin” through the celebrated “Task of the Translator” and his
monumental habilitation, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, it is apparent
that Benjamin regards Hölderlin not only as a poet but also always as a trans-
lator—as a translator, in fact, of the very highest order. If Benjamin was not
the first reader to acknowledge this, he was certainly the most impassioned.
For Benjamin, Hölderlin’s renditions of Sophoclean tragedy underscore the ethical implications of translation as a mode of reading and engaging with the continued “life” of a text; and in this sense, they inch closer to a relation to an abstract notion of “truth” to which all poetry, and essentially all cultural artifacts, refer. By examining the individual moments in which Benjamin turns to this text, either directly or obliquely, as an example of his own thinking, I consider the extent to which a concept of translation informs not only his notion of Aufgabe or “task” in that celebrated essay but also, in a much larger sense, the idea of criticism itself as integrally related to the expression of a higher truth. Although his earliest reading of Hölderlin emphasizes the idea of the poet’s courage (“Dichtermut”), I attempt to trace the less-trodden path by which the translator comes to express a particularly Benjaminian (and thus profoundly ethical) fortitude.

In his remarks on translation and tragedy in his lecture “Hölderlins Hymn ‘The Ister,’” Martin Heidegger also develops his own concept of courage, particularly with respect to the poet or thinker, but that courage is ultimately expressed in a political rather than an ethical realm, and its ramifications are considerably more controversial. Delivered in 1942–43, the lecture has drawn much criticism for its violent and transformative readings of Hölderlin’s poetry and Sophoclean tragedy, which many critics view as indicative of the totalitarian streak still legible within Heidegger’s philosophy. To be sure, Heidegger’s usual reading practice is in evidence in the lecture; the texts he examines are ultimately brought in line with a disturbing conception of “the Germans” that renders the past a mere reflection of the destiny about to be fulfilled. However, I argue that the lecture also presents a fascinating tension between this totalizing violence that silences reading in any genuine sense and a more fluid reading practice, thematized in the concept of dialogue or “Zwiesprache,” that both describes Hölderlin’s relationship to the Greeks and frames Heidegger’s own reading on a rhetorical level.

This is not an attempt to “rescue” Heidegger, whose methods of interpretation remain problematic on many levels, but rather to engage with his text in a way that goes beyond the often knee-jerk tendency to expose Nazi sympathies in his writings of the 1930s and 40s. Heidegger’s concept of “Zwiesprache” represents a movement away from the totalizing violence that characterizes his earlier texts on Hölderlin, offering a mode of reading posited on a semiotics of incomprehension, on the possibility that the failure of reading can also convey a certain kind of knowledge. That failure is highlighted in the clash of differences that ancient tragedy represents in a modern context. In the negotiation between foreign and familiar that informs both Sophoclean tragedy and Hölderlin’s writings, Heidegger argues, the
unsettling experience of being “not-at-home” (Unheimischsein) constantly underlies the process of “coming to be at home” (Heimischwerden)—is, in fact, integral to that very process. By allowing this instability to permeate the practice of interpretation itself, Heidegger performs the same exchange with Hölderlin that Hölderlin, as he argues, undertakes with Sophocles: a “dialogue” that allows for the possibility of being moved by the past and its echoes—even those still to be heard—in the present.

In Chapter 6, the 1948 adaptation of Hölderlin’s Antigone by the notorious anti-Aristotelian Bertolt Brecht highlights this issue of violence as expressed within the various media that form history. With his Antigonemodell, a collection of script, notes, photographs, and sketches that creates a record of the play’s performative genesis and development, Brecht attempts to lay bare the process by which recorded history marks and shapes dramatic forms and possibilities. His presentation of the modern ruins of Greek tragedy offers a model and an ethical argument for what he calls the “ruination” of German theater in the immediate post-war period. By basing his adaptation on Hölderlin’s alienating translation, he underscores the sheer foreignness of the Greek original and thereby rejects the violence of transformation that would leave the past as a mere version of the present. Meanwhile, his construction of the Modell serves both as an example and as open-ended stimulus for continued adaptation. The “Modell” introduces another dimension of historical transformation by assuring at its very foundation its own infinite variability, thus the impossibility of ever being “finished” with the past.

The concluding chapter deals briefly with more recent appropriations of the translations by Heiner Müller (Ödipus, Tyrann, 1967), Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (L’Antigone des Sophocle, 1977), and Martin Walser (Antigone, 1989). All three authors emphasize the special timeliness of tragedy for the historical moment in which they write their adaptations; all consequently grapple more or less openly with the ethics of mining the past for the sake of its affinities with the present, in particular with respect to the particularly German task of coming to terms with the past (Vergangenheitsbewältigung). Composed in three different milieus—the GDR, France, and the Federal Republic—the texts express vastly different comfort levels in setting parameters for this process of appropriation. As each adaptation is intriguingly mirrored upon Hölderlin’s own structure—a text accompanied by detailed remarks—I show how each author takes a particular conception of “rewriting” as a point of departure in the attempt to situate tragedy within modernity. Rewriting the past as text thus gains a metaphorical significance that underscores the responsibility inherent in any process of remembrance:
a responsibility to preserve the traces of singularity, even eccentricity, that resist the sway of ideology, of tradition, of historical transformation.

As a side note, I am painfully aware of the considerable ironies of presenting a text of and about translation, in translation. As a compromise I have provided the German texts of most primary sources, particularly where the use of language is consequential or intentional, either in the body of text or in footnotes. Where an author’s particular mode of expression in German must be foregrounded – in poetic passages, as well as in much of Hölderlin’s, Benjamin’s and Heidegger’s theoretical language—I have placed the German source text ahead of the English translation; for passages in which content is more important than expression, I have placed the German text in footnotes. Moreover, while many translated passages are based on published material, I have often modified those existing translations to correspond more precisely to the arguments I wish to make. This is not in any way meant to suggest that the published translations of Hölderlin, Heidegger, or Benjamin are deficient—on the contrary, in general they are admirably precise—but rather to underscore the extent to which translations are always individual inscriptions within a multitude of possible readings.

IV. The Task of the Reader

Each of the texts I will examine in this study undertakes the challenge of engaging with difference through a particular mode of performance that I would describe as rhetorical—taking shape through the effects of discursive form rather than through the transmission of content alone—and that ultimately concentrates its effects on the practice of reading rather than spectatorship. Hölderlin’s performative expression rests in his concept of translation, Heidegger’s in Zwiesprache; Brecht’s in the Modell, which is presented as a kind of “image-text” that is meant to represent the text’s infinite malleability and yet also carry the same weight as Sophocles’ and Hölderlin’s written “originals.” That practice of reading takes place in the unmistakable presence of difference, of distances both temporal and conceptual that lead the reader in each case to limits that remain uncrossable: to the untranslatable in Hölderlin; the unreadability of “poetic knowledge” in Heidegger; the gaps between word and image, between text and performance in Brecht.

43. See Spivak on the distinction between the focus on rhetoric and the reliance on logic in translation: “Logic allows us to jump from word to word by means of clearly indicated connections. Rhetoric must work in the silence between and around in order to see what works and how much” (“Politics of Translation” 181).
All these texts, in other words, demand from the reader a receptivity to the singularity of the past and a preservation of the distance that separates past, present and future.

In this regard, the translation of tragedy takes on precisely the characteristics that its German synonyms suggest: it is at once a crossing from one “instance” to another (Über-setzung), a carrying-over (Über-tragung) and a passing-on, the reception of a history (Über-lieferung). For the reader, this trifold context involves an engagement with the material of that translation that goes beyond the traditional sense of “tragic effect.” Reading in this manner implies not an active, identificatory suffering for the sake of a tragic hero but a suffering more closely related to receptivity, to the effort involved in finding one’s way through a text that is transparent, in the sense that Martin Buber claimed all translation should be transparent: not clarifying the “true” meaning of the “original” but on the contrary, as in Buber’s Bible translation, allowing the obscurities of the source text to shine through its language so that “its otherness in comparison with much that is familiar will become clear, but so will the importance of our receiving this otherness into the structure of our own life.”

It is an experience of reading that implies a suffering of distance itself, a relentless attentiveness to singularity, an ethical challenge to modernity.

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44. Martin Buber, “On Word Choice in Translating the Bible,” in Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, Scripture and Translation, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 76f., Buber, in making the case for his and Rosenzweig’s new Bible translation in 1930, argues forcefully that the reader should have to work his or her way into a foreign text, rather than receiving it in familiarized form—that in fact such a mode of reading bears all the more fruit: “Readers openmindedly looking for the way to the Bible will find words of the new version at odds with what they are used to; but then they will seek to pass from those words to the realities that are expressed in them, will consider whether the usual rendering does justice to the special character of these realities, will measure the distance between the two, and will consider how the new rendering holds up in comparison. For such readers the biblical world will in their reading be revealed, sector by sector; its otherness in comparison with much that is familiar will become clear, but so will the importance of our receiving this otherness into the structure of our own life.”