Tragic Effects

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TWO RELATED intellectual projects frame the context in which Hölderlin would translate Greek tragedy in the long eighteenth century: on one hand the ongoing discussion of how classical Greek models—including, but not limited to tragedy—might provide the aesthetic ideal to which German culture should aspire, on the other the discourse surrounding the importance of translation for the development of German language and identity. These developments were multifaceted, to say the least, and expressed the underlying principles of the Enlightenment on several fronts. Winckelmann inspired a pan-European frenzy for ancient Greece in 1755 with his treatise on the imitation of classical art, which he considered the only possible path to cultural greatness; meanwhile, Lessing spearheaded efforts to reinvent German drama in the spirit of classical and Shakespearean tragedy (and Schiller aimed for its culmination in Weimar). At the same time, the language philosophers Bodmer, Breitinger, and Herder promoted the expansion of German language and thought through the confrontation with foreign texts and authors, and pioneering translators such as Wieland and Voss paved the way for the Romantic-era achievements of A. W. Schlegel and Goethe. Literary language, confronted with difference and consolidated

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by its contact with foreign models, offered a unifying means by which, as George Steiner writes, “the hitherto divided provinces and principalities of the German-speaking lands could test a new common identity.”

It is no coincidence that the German national character stands as the uncertain, unformed center of these developments, given the ambivalent cycling between the aspiration to models and their overturning that characterized the age of Enlightenment. A generation later, that ambivalence would be inscribed in most artistic and intellectual production. Hölderlin’s was, after all, the generation that had absorbed Winckelmann’s remarks on imitating the ideal abundance inherent in Greek beauty and yet also struggled mightily with new questions of subjectivity posed by Kant’s critical philosophy, had responded to the revolutionary fervor of the French revolution only to revert to a safer stance in support of enlightened absolutism, and had arrived at the notion of Bildung as a compromise between the compulsion to emulate ancient ideals and the creation of new knowledge.

This general awareness of a sea change in and following the age of Enlightenment suggests an intriguing affinity with the “historical moment of tragedy” in ancient Greece as Vernant describes it. Whereas Vernant introduces this concept to describe the clash of the Athenian polis with the traditional values it continually challenged on the tragic stage, the term could be used with nearly equal relevance to describe the political, social, and aesthetic upheavals that characterized the “Kunstepoche.” If the painful contradictions at the heart of tragedy, the “linked polarities” (Segal 1986, 57) that perpetuate its conflicts reflect the messy ambiguity of historical flux, then

2. Steiner, After Babel, 80.
3. See Harold Mah, Enlightenment Phantasies: Cultural Identity in France and Germany, 1765–1914 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 157–63. Mah claims that German intellectuals initially regarded the revolution as a culmination of the Enlightenment conception of linear progress through the exercise of reason (159f.), later struggling with the conflict between that ideal and the reality of extreme violence.
4. For a discussion of the status of “revolutions” in German culture, see Susanne Marchand’s excellent study of the institutional effects of philhellenism in Germany: “That this was a cultural, rather than a political revolution . . . owes both to the more limited aims of reform-minded German intellectuals, and to the more repressive states in which they lived. Over the years, historians have often lamented the unwillingness of this generation of Germans to confront political issues head-on, without recognizing that by avoiding political confrontations, the poets and thinkers of the Golden Age were able to accomplish something more feasible given their small numbers, and something they wanted more passionately than political change: the remaking of German culture and cultural institutions” (Down from Olympus, 4).
5. Moving away from the traditional designation “Goethezeit,” which cannot help but evoke (in some ways appropriately, to be sure) a crushing anxiety of influence, the Metzler German literary history introduces this more general term to describe the period between 1789 and 1830—the age of revolution, classicism, and Romanticism. Deutsche Literaturgeschichte von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1994), 154.
a similar set of contradictions may also serve to concretize the dissonances inherent in an age of revolutions. Greek tragedy’s modern reception, its continued translation into the language of modern thought, bears at least as rich and conflicted a history as its initial production. The study of tragedy in translation thus requires a certain duplicity of approach, a consideration not only of its ancient historicity but also of its resonance in the development of a modern cultural consciousness.

Hölderlin was no stranger to the vacillating mood of his age, and his approach to the Greeks will reflect both poles of influence, the reactionary and the revolutionary. In his early novel Hyperion, for example, Hölderlin echoes Winckelmann’s principles by letting Greek landscapes and scenarios evoke the permanence of the classical ideal within modernity, while his tragedy The Death of Empedocles represents the attempt to heal the division placed by Kant’s critical philosophy within the subject’s potential for self-recognition. Yet his Sophocles could not have taken its particular shape without the simultaneous development of a discourse on translation that valorized the encounter with the foreign in a more general sense extending beyond ancient Greece. While for Winckelmann the Greeks represented the only model worth imitating, Hölderlin’s contemporaries a generation later were more polymorphous in their choices of foreign objects of interest. Within this context, translation did not merely imply reverent imitation but suggested the creation of new life within existing things, the step forward rather than the backward gaze. The experience of the foreign was the means, at once identificatory and contrastive, by which the modern subject might come to recognize himself. This determination led to a virtual explosion in the appearance of foreign works in Germany in the early nineteenth century. When Hölderlin began his project of translating, the German intelligentsia had had its first tastes of Shakespeare and Homer, in new translations by Wieland and Voss; by the time he was finished, Goethe and A. W. Schlegel alone had translated Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Diderot, Voltaire, Corneille, Calderón, and, of course, Shakespeare once again (in Schlegel’s brilliant rendition, which is often still used today).

Interestingly enough, however, this German fascination with the foreign did not typically include extensive travel to far-flung locations. As David

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7. For an extensive treatment of translation as both concept and practice in the Romantic period, see Berman.
8. Both Goethe and Schlegel continued to translate well into the nineteenth century; Schlegel eventually turned his attention to the Bhagavad Gita and lesser-known poets of Spain, Portugal, and Italy, while Goethe tackled Lord Byron’s *Manfred*. See Berman 54 and 129.
Constantine has observed, no noted German artists or thinkers of the age traveled to Greece—not even Winckelmann, who had settled in Rome but ventured no further east—and German Hellenists relied instead for their conceptions of Greece on various mediating devices, such as descriptive accounts written by English and French travelers, sketches, and plaster reproductions of statuary. This marks what Suzanne Marchand calls Germany’s “peculiar asceticism and aestheticism,” in which a distance from the desired ideal is stubbornly upheld; like Faust’s love for the inaccessible Greek beauty Helen, the German fascination with Greece was “a marriage in spirit alone, an unsatisfied and unsatisfiable longing.” Far from seeking to alleviate this longing, however, intellectuals and artists preferred to let it define their relationship to Greece, proudly transforming a concrete limitation into a noble abstinence. Wilhelm von Humboldt, the educational reformer and learned translator of Aeschylus, summed up this philosophical stance as an obligation: “Only from a distance . . . only as separate from all that is common, only as a thing of the past should antiquity appear to us” (cited in Constantine 1984, 2: Nur aus der Ferne . . . nur von allem Gemeinen getrennt, nur als vergangen muss das Altertum uns erscheinen). For the thinker or scholar focused on the ideal, this view offered a degree of safety: divided from both the quotidian and the mutable, Greece could remain a static entity contained within the past and effectively defined within the limits of existing tradition.

In this light—with ancient Greece a statue cast in stone and immortalized as the embodiment of “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur”—Hölderlin perceived the twin burdens of Winckelmann’s Greek models and the new classical Bildungsideal taking shape in Weimar. With not only the entire array of classical Greek works but also a generation’s worth of imitations and adaptations to consult, it is no wonder that Hölderlin first regarded the Greeks as at once a model for perfection and a burden that had stifled his own nation’s potential for artistic originality. “We dream of originality and independence, we believe we are saying nothing but new things, and yet all of this is just reaction and at the same time a mild revenge against the servitude with which we have behaved with respect to antiquity,” he writes in the 1799 essay “The Perspective from which we must regard Antiquity” (Der Gesichtspunct aus dem wir das Altertum anzusehen haben). His antidote to

10. Marchand, Down from Olympus, 16.
11. Herder describes the Germans in similar terms: “Since we are not very used to this kind of travelling, since we are vaguely repelled by it. . . .” the translator should expose us to the “awesome secrets of state which abound in Greek literature.” Cited in Lefevere 33.
this condition of servitude is awareness—of the roads already traveled, of the paths that lie as yet unexplored—and forward motion, propelled not by the constant reflection on past ideals but rather by the measure of distance from those ideals: “For there is a difference in whether this Bildungstrieb affects us blindly or with our awareness, whether or not it knows from whence it came and in what direction it strives.”13

This marking of distance will ultimately become the hallmark of his approach to translating the Greeks. Although a certain attitude of distancing was already common in the reluctance of German artists and scholars to visit Greece, for Hölderlin that distance from the source is accompanied less by that sense of unsatisfiable (yet paradoxically satisfying) longing for the ideal than by the questioning of ideals as such. Only by considering the fluidity of the relationship to models, by reflecting on the part those models play in the development of one’s own language and literature, can one gain a sense of cultural history that is “alive” rather than (as Herder put it) “vague or dead.” In suggesting that the modern distance from classical models marks the work’s contextual life in the present, Hölderlin prefigures an idea of textual “history” that Benjamin will later posit, as always in conversation with both Romantic philosophy and Hölderlin’s translation practice. In effect, Hölderlin’s translations will express a subtler version of Novalis’s provocative claim that “the German Shakespeare [i.e., Schlegel’s translation] today is better than the English.”

I. The New Day: Translation is good for the Germans

Where there is a translator who is at the same time a philosopher, a poet, and a philologist: he is to be the morning star of a new era in our literature. (Johann Gottfried Herder, Fragmente 1766–67 [Lefevere 32])

As dawn breaks, a literature, a language, and a culture emerge; and the translator—tasked, it appears, with the probably impossible feat of being all things to all people—guides the nation into the new day. Herder’s challenge places the translator at the center of a movement that would help to shape the social and intellectual contours of the second half of the eighteenth century. In the course of several decades the general view of translation in Germany would shift dramatically, from a concrete exercise to a universal category of thought, from a practical means of developing the artist to a

13. “Es ist nämlich ein Unterschied, ob jener Bildungstrieb blind wirkt, oder mit Bewußtsein, ob er weiß, woraus er hervorging und wohin er strebt” (FA 14: 96).
crucial mode of conceiving both national culture and subjective identity. Likewise, the discourse on Greek tragedy and the concept of the tragic would migrate from the stage to the writing-desk and from the optimistic quest to establish identities, both national and individual, to the questioning of the contours of identity as such. For Hölderlin, the convergence of these two ideas would prove essential, as translation became the vehicle for engendering and intensifying tragedy’s effect in a modern context.

Herder was certainly not alone in his sentiment that the German nation stood before a new dawn; that same rhetoric of potentiality found ample public expression in other intellectual arenas at the same time, from Lessing’s refutation of French classical models on the German stage to Kant’s self-proclaimed “Copernican” revolution in thought. Their mutual call for an intellectual and cultural shift in the age of reason (which is also, of course, the age of revolution) lends credence to that rhetoric; taken together they represent two prongs of what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy have called the “triple crisis” of the eighteenth century: the social and moral crisis of the bourgeois subject, the political crisis of the French Revolution, and the Kantian critique. And indeed, Herder’s depiction of a newly creative and intellectual approach to translation highlights its crucial role in the drive toward cultural autonomy. In this sense it carries clear echoes of Lessing’s famously scathing critique of the neoclassical traditionalist Johann Christoph Gottsched; both Lessing and Herder reject the traditional acceptance of French artistic superiority in favor of the development of more intrinsically German modes of expression. However, there are also important differences between Lessing’s and Herder’s models of German nationhood, chiefly with respect to their views on the ways in which the Germans might learn or profit from the exposure to foreign models.

14. Louth describes Germany’s particular openness to a historical moment of translation, whereas British intellectuals were less receptive to the “potential lying in translation” (31).
15. Schmidt submits, in fact, that every thinker concerned with Greek tragedy in the post-Enlightenment era, from Schelling to Nietzsche to Heidegger, departs likewise from the assumption that “the present age is a time in need of radical transformation.” On Germans and Other Greeks, 5.
17. For an illuminating discussion of their respective views on translation, see Katherine Arens,
In the seventeenth installment of his immensely popular journal *Letters Concerning the Latest Literature* (*Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*), published with Mendelssohn and Nicolai in 1759, Lessing had argued passionately for a turn from French ornamentation to a more Shakespearean approach to tragic theater, while his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767) offers a reading of Aristotle’s *Poetics* that reframes the conventions established by the likes of Corneille and Racine.\(^1\) His campaign is clearly intended to incite rebellion in German theatrical circles, as is immediately evident in the seventeenth letter:

“No one,” say the authors of the library, “will deny that the German stage has Professor Gottsched to thank for much of its initial improvement.” I am this no one; I deny it point-blank.\(^1\)

The final lines of the text are equally audacious in their call for a more specifically German mode of expression. After presenting a scene from a Faust drama purportedly written by one of his “friends” (who turns out to be Lessing himself), he challenges the reader directly: “You wish to see a German play full of such scenes? So do I!” (Lessing 60).

Herder composed his *Fragments* as a direct response to Lessing’s *Briefe*, and he takes aim at the same target as his compatriot, submitting that the “French” mode of translation (which Gottsched had also come to represent) is just as imperfect a model for the Germans as their theater was for Lessing: \(^2\)

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\(^1\) His pairing of Shakespeare and Aristotle is itself a risky gesture, since in fact Shakespeare was likely unfamiliar with Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Still, as Steiner points out, Lessing’s assertion continues to color our view of modern tragedy (*The Death of Tragedy*, 188).


\(^2\) “Sie wünschen ein deutsches Stück, das lauter solche Szenen hätte? Ich auch!” Arens indicates that the *Letters* generally represented a new, satirical style of criticism not previously seen in German (Arens 91).

\(^2\) Gottsched regarded translation primarily as a useful exercise for aspiring authors, just as copying the works of great painters would train beginning art students. Although he does not directly reference the “French” manner of translation in the way that many of his contemporaries do, he advocates a form of translation that leans toward the transformative description others give: “. . . express everything by means of locutions that do not sound strange in your own language, but have a familiar ring to them” (Lefevere 16).
The French, who are overproud of their national taste, adapt all things to it, rather than to try to adapt themselves to the taste of another time. Homer must enter France a captive, and dress according to fashion, so as not [to] offend their eye. But we poor Germans, who still are almost an audience without a fatherland, who are still without tyrants in the field of national taste, we want to see him the way he is. (Lefevere 33)

The tone of the passage, just as that of Lessing’s letter, implies a rivalry of cultural values: although the Germans may be “poor” in their lack of “national taste,” they already surpass the French in recognizing that foreign models must be allowed to exert particular influence on cultural life.22 Translation in Gottsched’s view functioned as a useful exercise for the aspiring author, just as copying the works of great painters would train beginning art students (Lefevere 15). For Herder, however, translation has a higher potential as an instrument of cultural enrichment and identity formation. As an audience “almost . . . without a fatherland,” the Germans are more capable than the French of accepting the patronage of Shakespeare, or Homer, or Sophocles; and as a result, German language and culture profit by exposure to the previously unknown, unheard, and unseen.23 For Herder, who regarded thought as directly conditioned by its relation to language, a translation of the properly expansive sort sheds light on other ways of thinking and perceiving the world, unique to particular linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts. A proper translation does not attempt to transform these unique structures but rather makes it “incumbent on each writer, critic, scholar, and translator to perceive and preserve the perspectival alterity of the products of each foreign nation.”24 What Berman identifies as the two key concepts for translation in the Enlightenment period, Erweiterung (expansion) and Treue (fidelity), collaborate in Herder’s view, not as a slavish literalness but as the “ability to capture the uniqueness of the original in its form, expression, characters, ‘genius,’ and ‘nature’” (Berman 40). Referring to the Bildung of language itself, Herder elaborates in another context: “Thus we edify [bilden] our language through translation and reflection” (Man bilde also unsre Sprache durch Übersetzung und Reflexion).25 Translation plays a significant role, therefore,

22. Berman identifies the German cultural problematic as “the reverse of the French” (36).
23. This idea of “profiting” through the study of foreign models is common in the theoretical discourse of translation during the Enlightenment: Bodmer, for example, describes the “enrichment of [one’s] stock of words and images,” and Herder encourages German readers to “make use of the treasures of one of the most excellent nations” (Lefevere 20 and 32; my emphasis).
in the development of a free subject who is, as Kant will posit in 1784, “müündig” (a word which denotes a subject’s maturity but which the Grimms’ dictionary also relates to the mouth [der Mund]). As Johann Jakob Bodmer, one of Gottsched’s contemporaries, writes already in 1746, “we are living in a country in which we would like the freedom of words to match the freedom of things” (Lefevere 21).

While Herder insists here that the Germans must meet Homer “the way he is” rather than forcing him to conform to familiar patterns—a dislocating experience in which Homer remains essentially inimitable (“unnachahmlich”)—Lessing regards the encounter with foreign models as a meeting on more common ground. An important distinction between Lessing’s dramaturgy and the view of translation advanced by Herder emerges, therefore, with respect to the question of identification. Lessing’s theoretical framework for a new German theater in the Hamburgische Dramaturgie—anchored by his influential rereading of Aristotle’s Poetics—depends on a more self-centered idea of recognition. Only through identification with tragic heroes (and heroines, as was the case for much German bourgeois tragedy of the eighteenth century) “of like kind” (vom gleichen Schrot und Korn) can the audience experience dramatic effect as both sympathy (Mitleid) and fear (Furcht), which Lessing identifies as a self-reflexive form of sympathy (das auf uns bezogene Mitleid).26 The recognition of my likeness on the stage, along with the accompanying fear that the same fate could befall me, has a didactic aim in the awakening of a moral capacity for sympathy (Mitleidsbereitschaft).27 Whereas Aristotle regarded recognition (anagnorisis) as an essential plot element of tragedy, Lessing displaces that gesture upon the spectator, who recognizes his similarity to the tragic figure on the stage—specifically, with a figure who faces misfortune as a result of his or her all too human imperfections.28

26. Max Kommerell captures the main thrust of Lessing’s conception of the tragic stage in describing it as a “school of compassion” (Schule des Mitgefühls). Lessing und Aristoteles: Untersuchung über die Theorie der Tragödie (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1941 [1957]), 72 and 91.

27. Kommerell 1957, 82. As he notes, the formality of classical tragedy is thereby replaced by a psychological intimacy that is, in fact, a far cry from Aristotle’s Poetics (121). This also renders problematic the issue of guilt and innocence, insofar as pity, through its proximity to identification, becomes situated “jenseits von schuldig und unschuldig” (120).

28. See The Complete Works of Aristotle, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984): 2324f. Terence Cave offers an interesting analysis of the term anagnorisis, suggesting that the prefix ana- represents a double negative, thus that anagnorisis would be “the shift from ‘not-knowing’ to ‘not-not-knowing.’ The truth has been present from the start in veiled form, and the hero was only unaware of it until the crucial moment. Lessing’s version of recognition on the part of the spectator corresponds well with this analysis; even if it is not exactly Aristotelian in style; the spectator, too, is implicated in a relationship that he suddenly recognizes as true. Cave, “Recognition and the
Although Lessing claims, therefore, that his dramaturgy represents a radical departure from established models—a true statement, to be sure, with respect to its break with the French tradition—that upheaval does not lead the Germans beyond themselves but rather ensures that they remain within a recognizable comfort zone. As von Wiese explains, the discovery of a character’s imperfection allows the spectator to feel sympathy rather than awe (Bewunderung), and thus to retain an experience pertinent to the human as such: “In tragedy man discovers who he is, a being between perfection and error.”29 If the viewer is disturbed by the fear that emerges from this universal sense of likeness, he is more than compensated by the greater understanding of “who he is.” The encounter with another on the stage only counts if it is, in the end, an encounter with a version of the self.30 Herder’s journey towards Homer also assumes identification, and even empathy (Einführung), as the reader must attempt to imagine the sensations that underlie another’s words in order to understand the meaning of those words.31 That identification occurs, however, on the rather more unsettling terms of the other rather than those of the self: a translation must present Homer “the way he is,” and it is the task of the receiving culture not only to “see” him, but to attempt to see like him.

As uncomplicated as it sounds, however, the translator’s task of bringing Homer to the Germans “the way he is” is deceptively arduous. Herder himself writes in the Fragmente that a translator must be a “creative genius” (schöpferisches Genie) in order to carry out his craft successfully, must not just imitate a text but recreate its language in every nuance of its relation to culture and history. For Herder, then, a good or “authentic” translation has no chance of being a perfect one; even as translation remains a necessary task, every foreign text remains “fundamentally untranslatable” (Arens 103).

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31. See Michael N. Forster’s detailed treatment of Herder’s concept here: “in order to understand another person’s concepts an interpreter must not only master the person’s word-usage in an external way but must also in some manner recapture the person’s relevant sensations. . . . [I]n order really to understand the Greeks, we must learn to see like them. . . . ” “Herder’s Philosophy of Language, Interpretation, and Translation: Three Fundamental Principles,” The Review of Metaphysics 56:2 (Dec. 2002): 353–54.
Still, there are degrees of success among translations, chiefly with respect to a translator’s ability to render the specific tone of a foreign work in the target language. In this vein Herder describes a particularly good translation of Sophocles:

For the geniuses that read “ethereally,” it [the translation] leads them securely by the hand to a clear source. They see the tragic spirit of the Greeks, learn of that which is most particular to their manner of thinking and their feeling: can follow their simplicity and their composition, their talents and development through to the construction of a purpose.\(^{32}\)

If a translation can never perfectly capture the particularity of an age and its language, that does not imply that the translator is exempt from responsibility for its success. An “authentic” (Arens 98) translation must, at best, replicate a text’s “primary tone” (*Hauptton*), must reveal the “spirit” of the source text rather than copying its form.\(^{33}\)

Yet even if Herder’s notion only functions as an ideal—and he indicates himself that his model of translation is more aspirational than achievable\(^{34}\)—the concept he advances of bringing the reader to the foreign text persists throughout the period as a central aspect of translation theory and practice, echoed in the writings of A. W. Schlegel, Goethe, Schleiermacher, and Humboldt. Little wonder, then, that the translator who transports readers across great distances is frequently characterized as needing “courage” for the journey. Translation in Herder’s form calls to mind at once the ubiquity of translation as a concept and its persistent practical inadequacy.\(^{35}\)

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33. Sauder discusses what Ulrich Gaier has called Herder’s concept of “restorative translation” (*restaurative Übersetzung*), in which the translator “attempts to reach ‘behind’ the original texts—for example, when he tries to discover behind Macpherson’s *Ossian* the ‘palimpsest’ of ancient and undocumented folk poetry” (“Herder’s Poetic Works, His Translations, and His Views on Poetry,” in Koepke 2009, 320). This idea suggests an intriguing link to Hölderlin’s later formulations about bringing out the “Oriental” behind the Greek source text.

34. Herder jokingly suggests that the “best translator” who is also the “best explicator” would be able to produce a book with the title, “A Poetic Translation of Hebrew Poems, Explained in the Context of the Country, the History, the Opinions, the Religion, the Situation, the Customs, and the Language of their Nation and Transplanted into the Genius of Our Time, Our Thinking, and Our Language” (Lefevere 31).

35. Arens claims that Herder’s argument ultimately renders any foreign text “fundamentally untranslatable,” since the best translator must be able to explain and form ideas (*bilden*) rather than merely recreate them (103).
As a young philosopher-poet deeply engaged with both the intellectual icons and the volatile politics of his time, Hölderlin was well aware that the path to Bildung demanded the study of foreign models, and he also recognized the potential of translation as a mode of communication and linguistic expansion. (An avid reader of Herder, moreover, he would likely have had some knowledge of his views on translation as outlined in the *Fragmente.*) At an early stage, however, he also identified the translator’s particular vulnerability in that process. In February 1794 Hölderlin writes a letter to Ludwig Neuffer, who was working on translations of Virgil as well as the Roman historian Sallust. Hölderlin first praises his friend’s efforts to remain “loyal” (treu) to Virgil, since that struggle will pay off in the strengthening of both language and spirit: “The spirit of the great Roman will surely strengthen yours wonderfully. Your language will gain more and more agility and strength in the struggle with his” (StA 6, 1: 109ff.).36 A few months later he writes to Neuffer again, extolling the “healing gymnastics” (heilsame Gymnastik) of translation practice, in which one’s own language becomes more “supple” (geschmeidig) through striving for “foreign beauty and magnitude” (nach fremder Schönheit und Größe).37 Despite its beneficial effects, however, the practice also carries risks for the translator: in what Charlie Louth describes as “an uncanny proleptic evocation of the whole of his development as a translator” (58), Hölderlin proposes that spending too much time in “foreign service” might cause a dangerous loss of contact with one’s own language.

Language is the organ of our heads, our hearts, the sign of our fantasies, our ideas; it must obey us. If it has lived too long in foreign service, I think it is nearly to be feared that it will never again become entirely the free, pure expression of our spirit, formed out of nothing but our interiority, thus and not otherwise.38

“Translation is good for you,” then, to cite the title of a recent lecture

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37. In this letter he also describes the pitfall of remaining so long in “foreign service” that one cannot safely return to one’s own language, an uncannily prescient observation that both Louth and Constantine have discussed in some detail, see Louth 58f. and Constantine, “Translation Is Good for You,” lecture at Swansea University, 30 June 2010.

38. “Die Sprache ist Organ unseres Kopfs, unseres Herzens, Zeichen unserer Phantasien, unserer Ideen; uns muss sie gehorchen. Hat sie nun zu lange in fremdem Dienste gelebt, so denk’ ich, ist fast zu fürchten, daß sie nie mehr ganz der freie reine, durch gar nichts, als durch das Innre, so und nicht anders gestaltete Ausdruk unseres Geistes werde” (StA 6, 1: 125).
by David Constantine, but not always.\textsuperscript{39} To be more precise, it is surely good for the Germans but not necessarily good for the translator. Friedrich Schleiermacher would later recognize the extent of the translator’s exposure, describing the “extraordinary form of humiliation” to which he must subject himself for the sake of his source text; Hölderlin—at least in the eyes of many readers, from his contemporaries to the present day—has come to embody its consequences. Within the specific context of the nascent German nation, however, the sacrifice \textit{makes sense}; translation, which is at once a look backward and a step forward, a negotiation with difference and a gesture that constitutes new identity, grants the source text a renewed hermeneutic urgency. This was especially true for Greek tragedy, given the distances the form had traveled and the passionate responses it nevertheless continued to inspire. An ancient text has the potential to \textit{mean} something different in a modern context, Hölderlin and his cohort imply, and by that other relevance to lend shape to the intellectual and aesthetic activity of the day.

II. The Step Forward: Romantic Translation

When I read Homer I have no choice but to become a Greek. . . . The reader’s soul secretly translates him for itself, wherever it can do so . . . (Herder, cited in Lefevere 34)

The secret of reading, at least for Herder and the early Romantics who studied his work, is that it is always a process of translation. (Novalis will eventually agree with and radicalize this notion, suggesting that “not just books, everything can be translated” in the differentiated ways in which he imagines the process [Störig 33]). In the moment that Homer speaks to the reader, that reader becomes a Greek, identifies with that position and occupies it in absentia. The idea that we have “no choice” in the matter, that reading transports and transforms us secretly and regardless of our will, does not invalidate this process as a crucial step on the path of \textit{Bildung}. Translation thus exceeds the boundaries of literary practice and becomes a metaphor, a “category of thought” (Lefevere 30) that describes and validates a particular mode of aesthetic experience.\textsuperscript{40} Such an experience goes beyond

\textsuperscript{39} David Constantine, “Translation is Good for You,” keynote address, The Author-Translator in the European Literary, Context, Swansea University 30 June 2010.

\textsuperscript{40} Indeed, as Louth points out, translation as a theoretical construct in the long eighteenth century closely resembles the process of \textit{Bildung} in microcosm, sending the self on a journey into the unknown that ends with the return to a more complete self (24). At least for Herder, then, the
the mere study of models, engaging the soul, rather than the intellect alone, in following the “flight” of Homer’s Greek.

To understand Homer is one thing, says Winckelmann, to be able to explain him to yourself another; and this happens in my soul only by means of a secret translation, a rapid change in thought and language. (Lefevere 34)

Herder invokes a contrast here that will continue to resonate in the coming decades as the study of the Greeks gains momentum alongside the will to translate. On one side is Winckelmann, with his idealizing, even paganistic passion for the beauty of ancient Greece, and those readers who would seek to follow, by “secret translation,” the paths laid along those distant shores; on the other, “a commentator, an annotator, a schoolmaster, or a learner of languages”—the reader who studies the Greeks, who understands their language and traditions in a concrete sense, but does not surrender to the transporting experience of “secret translation” (see Constantine 1984, 101f.). Herder describes this reader’s approach to classical Greece—or any such encounter with foreign shores, for that matter—as “vague or dead.” Hölderlin will likewise equate this latter approach with “dead” reading, with the collector of artifacts and his excessive concern for “everything positive” (alles Positive); as Constantine explains, “’positives Beleben des Tödten’ [the positive reanimation of the dead] was the way of the antiquarians rummaging in the ruins of Athens, and by extension it is the illusion, under many forms, that a living work can be made by assembling enough material” (Constantine 1984, 102f.). Meanwhile, as we will see, one of Hölderlin’s primary concerns in translating the Greeks was to render their texts “more alive” to a modern audience. Far from a static artifact, the “living” text is one that engenders an effect, not just passive admiration but surrender to its “flight.”

Herder’s comments on the practice of translation uphold this distinction between antiquarian and aesthete, as he pegs the ideal translator as “creative genius”: “A German Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles . . . builds a monument unnoticed by pedants and schoolmasters, but it holds the eye of the wise by virtue of its silent grandeur and simple splendour” (Lefevere 31). At the practice of translation turns this secret self-transformation into a conscious exercise in individual and universal betterment. The one who translates, however, bears a heavy burden: as the transmitter of the foreign, he is responsible to both text and reader. Little wonder, then, that such a translator must be, in Herder’s estimation, a “creative genius” (Lefevere 31).

41. Spivak 1993, 180: “Translation is the most intimate act of reading. I surrender to the text when I translate.”
same time, however, he complicates Winckelmann’s notion of *Nachahmung*, since the emphasis on the translator as “creative” force suggests an engagement with the text that shifts away from reverent imitation. In this light he imagines the preface to the ideal translation as a challenge both to aspiring translators and to the reader as such:

And should you want to make use of the treasures of one of the most excellent nations: look, they are here. I want to teach you their art of transforming history and religion into poetry; do not steal what they have invented; steal their art of inventing, of creation, of expression. (Lefevere 32)

Steal the *art* of inventing, not its substance: the primary task of translating is not to copy foreign material (what Herder calls “wretched imitation” [Lefevere 31]) but to learn from foreign methods in the creation of new material, “an imitation which manages to remain original.” As Gerhard Sauder discusses, Herder’s formulation clearly echoes the aesthetic ideology of the *Sturm und Drang*, with its emphasis on the essential role of genius for achieving great art, and we also see most clearly his influence on the Jena Romantics’ thinking on translation as expansion and improvement over the original (Sauder 319). His comments find an echo in Novalis’s provocative claim, in a 1797 letter to A. W. Schlegel, that “the German Shakespeare (i.e., Schlegel’s translation) today is better than the English.” This process of improvement does not suggest, as it would have for Gottsched or even for Lessing, that the translation must compensate for a source text’s poetic weaknesses. Rather, as Berman discusses, Novalis refers here to the Romantic idea that “the original has an *a priori* scope that never quite *is*” (106); translation, in the sense that it implies continued aesthetic and intellectual reflection, represents a potentiating process that moves the work of art toward its culmination. The look backward is always a step forward—and for Novalis, a step upward.

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42. Lessing: “the hand of a master [. . . ] has compensated, with countless little improvements and corrections, for that which in the original text is often a bit cross-eyed, a bit affected” (eine Meisterhand [. . . ] mit unzählig kleinen Verbesserungen und Berichtigungen desjenigen, was in der Urschrift oft ein wenig schielend, ein wenig affektiert ist, kompensiert hat” [cited in Arens 96]). Gottsched: “. . . you should leave each writer his own nature, which identifies him, in the translation. Yet I would not therefore advise to leave together in one piece all the long-winded sentences. . . . No, in this case a translator is rightfully entitled to the liberty of splitting up a convoluted sentence into two, three, or more parts” (Lefevere 16).

43. Louth calls Novalis’s formulation an example of “Bildung . . . von außen hinein” (from the outside in, quoting Friedrich Schlegel), in which the translation of Shakespeare has “taken him up and transmuted him into a continuum, extended his reach, introduced that self-reflexivity which unsettles the finished work . . . and exposes it” (Louth 35).
For the celebrated translator and language philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt, translation was certainly a “potentiation,” as Berman describes it (77), though not as much for the text itself as for the subject who reads it; insofar as it has the capacity to illuminate—or, even better, to provide readers with the tools to illuminate for themselves—the dark contours of ancient text, classical translation provides the basis for the subject’s dialectical progress toward enlightened citizenship. A comparison between Humboldt’s approach to translating Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* with Hölderlin’s work on Sophocles is instructive, not only because the two projects are nearly contemporary but also because of their starkly divergent perspectives on what a translation can and ought to achieve. If Humboldt retains in his approach a touch of the “antiquarian,” in stark contrast to Hölderlin, he also provides precisely the kind of critical reflection on the text that Herder and the Romantics regarded as essential to its “improvement.”

III. Divergent Methods: Humboldt and Hölderlin

Humboldt embarked on his translation of *Agamemnon* at approximately the same time as Hölderlin began translating Sophocles (although Humboldt devoted another decade and a half to the project before publishing it in 1816). Yet although the two projects emerge from similar contexts, their respective approaches—as well as the finished products—are quite different. While Hölderlin used a source widely regarded as corrupt, the Frankfurt Juntina edition of 1555, Humboldt consulted closely with Greek philologists to achieve the “historical rigor and conscientiousness” that the source text merited (*historische Strenge und Gewissenhaftigkeit*, Störig 85). While Hölderlin’s remarks are cryptic and offer little explanation of the texts they introduce, Humboldt’s introduction evinces a careful engagement not only with the material of Aeschylus’s text but with the “monstrous background” (Störig 77) of the Trojan war. Situating the plot of the *Agamemnon* within the broader context of the Greek world, he repeatedly invokes metaphors of darkness and light to argue that the text represents a bridge to greater understanding of myth and history, for Greek and modern audiences alike: “. . . a line of torches binds Asia and Europe in one shining night” (*eine Fackelreihe verbindet in einer glanzvollen Nach Asien und Europa*, Störig 78).

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44. Steiner has particularly high praise for Humboldt in *After Babel*, describing him somewhat quaintly as “among the last Europeans of whom it may be said with fair confidence that they had direct professional or imaginative notions of very nearly the whole of extant knowledge” (*After Babel* 80).
Where darkness once obscured the potential for connection, a row of flickering flames lights the crossing; a description of the mythic-historical impact of the play thus also stands as a metaphor for its translation in Humboldt’s able hands.

In general, Humboldt advances the argument that a critical and learned approach to ancient text enhances its aesthetic impact. This applies not only to the translator’s work but also to that of the reader. Aeschylus’s text does contain obscurities (*Dunkelheiten*), Humboldt suggests, particularly in the Choral passages, but it is not the translator’s duty alone to illuminate them; the reader is primarily responsible for negotiating his own understanding of the text’s dark contours.

As one thinks oneself into the mood of the poet, into his time, into the characters he puts on the stage, the obscurity gradually fades and is replaced by a high clarity. A part of this careful attention must also be given to the translation: never expect that what is sublime, immense, and extraordinary in the original language will be easily and immediately comprehensible in the translation. (Schulte and Biguenet 59, trans. modified).

The basis of reading here is attention, “*thinking* oneself into” another age and mode of expression; darkness fades and is replaced by “high clarity” (*hohe Klarheit*), implying the elevation of the viewing subject to an elevated level of understanding (indeed, his word choice recalls the German Enlightenment [*Aufklärung*] itself). This is somewhat reminiscent of Herder’s “secret translation,” in the sense that the reader is swept away, by the power of his own reading, to another time, place, and “mood,” but Humboldt’s model insists on activity, the *work* of thinking, rather than surrender to the effects of foreign expression. Indeed, the reader must be challenged to think through a text’s obscurities, left conspicuously in place by the translator, while avoiding the interference of “feeling” at all costs: “Least of all should one allow the influence of so-called aesthetic feeling, to which translators may feel themselves called, if one wants to avoid encroaching on the text in a manner that sooner or later will make space for other encroachments (the worst thing that can happen to an interpreter of the ancients).”

45. “Sowie man sich in die Stimmung des Dichters, seines Zeitalters, der von ihm aufgeführten Personen hineindenkt, verschwindet sie [die Dunkelheit] nach und nach, und eine hohe Klarheit tritt an die Stelle. Einen Theil dieser Aufmerksamkeit muss man auch der Uebersetzung schenken; nicht verlangen, dass das, was in der Ursprache erhaben, riesenhaft und ungewöhnlich ist, in der Uebertragung leicht und augenblicklich fasslich seyn solle” (Störig 84).

46. Störig 85: “Am wenigsten darf man dem sogenannten ästhetischen Gefühl, wozu gerade die Uebersetzer sich berufen glauben könnten, darauf Einfluss gestatten, wenn man (das Schlimmste was
The idea that translation from the Greek involves and fosters intellectual work, not only for the translator but for the reader as well, strongly reflects Humboldt’s vision for the reform of educational institutions in the early decades of the nineteenth century. As a model of Bildung, the philological study of the ancients would instill in the individual the drive toward “self-willed citizenship” (Marchand 28). (Again—as with the translation that leaves some obscurity in place for the reader’s “attention”—the subject’s momentum toward clarity emerges as an act of volition rather than in the form of Herder’s surrender to “secret translation.”) As Marchand discusses, Humboldt’s model of Bildung identified “appreciation of the Greeks with the ideal of individual self-cultivation, thereby drawing him away from, rather than into, the public sphere” (26); the individual subject, turning inward in the interest of developing intellectual skill, places himself (and for Humboldt it can only be himself\(^47\)) on the path to active citizenship.

Only one “feeling” proves productive for both translator and reader in Humboldt’s estimation, namely, a form of aesthetic judgment concerning the extent of a translation’s effect of “foreignness.” Some foreign feeling is essential if a translation is to remain “loyal” to its source: a “certain shade of foreignness” (Störig 83: \textit{eine gewisse Farbe der Fremdheit}) must coexist with a “love for the original.” However, that touch of the foreign (\textit{das Fremde}) may not cross over into outright foreignness (\textit{die Fremdheit}), or the translation will merely reveal its translator’s lack of skill:

The line . . . can easily be drawn. As long as one does not feel the foreignness (\textit{Fremdheit}) yet does feel the foreign (\textit{Fremde}), a translation has reached its highest goal; but where foreignness appears as such, and more than likely even obscures the foreign, the translator betrays his inadequacy to the original. (Schulte and Biguenet 58; trans. modified)\(^48\)

Humboldt goes on to say that “the feeling of the unbiased reader (\textit{das Gefühl des unvoreingenommenen Lesers}) is not likely to miss this true line of separation:” the reader will simply know when a line has been crossed.

It is at this juncture, where impressions of the foreign are governed by

\(^{47}\) See Marchand 28: with his educational reforms Humboldt sought to promote “civic harmony and loyalty to the state” by curing “one-sidedness” in learned men. However, he did not consider this “one-sidedness” to be a bad trait at all for women.

\(^{48}\) “Die Gränze . . . ist hier sehr leicht zu ziehen. Solange nicht die Fremdheit, sondern das Fremde gefühlt wird, hat die Uebersetzung ihre höchsten Zwecke erreicht; wo aber die Fremdheit an sich erscheint, und vielleicht gar das Fremde verdunkelt, da verräth der Uebersetzer, dass er seinem Original nicht gewachsen ist” (Störig 83).
the reader’s “feeling,” that Humboldt’s and Hölderlin’s projects contrast most productively. In granting the reader authority to place a limit on a translation’s degree of foreignness, Humboldt implies that the translator must not only be sufficiently learned to command both source and target languages but eloquent enough to make that command accessible to a reading public. And it is undeniable that Hölderlin as translator would stumble under both of these conditions. Not only were his contemporaries bewildered by the tone and language of his Sophocles, but, as Beissner has thoroughly shown, the combination of his limited knowledge of Greek and his imperfect source text led to numerous errors and nonsequiturs that undermined his scholarly credibility. Yet Humboldt’s “true line of separation,” easily recognized by the unbiased reader, has its limits: it cannot account for the gradual expansion of cultural tastes and preferences (in an age, moreover, in which those values were most definitely in flux). Goethe would later (1819, in Noten und Abhandlungen zu bessern Verständnis des west-östlichen Divans) suggest a more dynamic model, arguing that an audience becomes accustomed to and prepared for new forms through the development of translation as medium, that with time and experience an audience comes to tolerate more and more “foreignness.” His distinction among three different “epochs” of translation posits a final phase, the “highest and last,” in which “the goal of the translation is to achieve perfect identity with the original, so that the one does not exist instead of the other but in the other’s place” (Schulte and Biguenet 61). Of the three phases of translation, this last one elicits the most resistance from its audience and yet offers the greatest potential reward, as Goethe argues with the example of Voss’s Homer:

At first the public was not at all satisfied with Voss . . . until gradually [nach und nach] the public’s ear accustomed itself to this new kind of translation, became comfortable with it. Now anyone who assesses the extent of what has happened, what versatility has come to the Germans, what rhetorical, rhythmical, metrical advantages are available to the spirited, talented beginner . . . may hope that literary history will openly acknowledge who was the first to choose this path in spite of so many and varied obstacles. (Schulte and Biguenet 61)

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50. Steiner justifiably points out that Goethe’s model is in general “unsatisfactory,” leaving too much open to conjecture, but that it does fit in well with Goethe’s central philosophic beliefs: “Translation is an exemplary case of metamorphosis” (After Babel, 259).

51. “. . . Voß konnte das Publikum zuerst nicht befriedigen, bis man sich nach und nach in die neue Art hinein hörte, hinein bequemte. Wer nun aber jetzt übersieht, was geschehen ist, welche
The gradual (nach und nach) education of a modern audience is accomplished for Goethe through the process of “sich hineinhören” (literally, hearing oneself into the foreign work); by exposing the senses to new and unfamiliar forms, the public makes itself comfortable with those forms (Goethe’s formulation is “sich hineinbequemen,” an echo of “hineinhören;” interestingly enough, Humboldt had insisted on the importance of “sich hineindenken,” emphasizing once again the work of the intellect rather than the senses). Voss’s translations may never be duly appreciated in his own age, Goethe suggests here, but their time will come. Humboldt’s easily recognizable distinction between the desirable “foreign” and undesirable “foreignness” is perhaps only temporary, then, and the question of its limit must continually be posed anew as the senses expand to meet more challenging material. Goethe’s notion of an audience in flux points to a dynamic and historical dimension of Fremdheit, thus of translation itself: if translators such as Voss or Hölderlin push the boundaries of their readers’ tolerance for the foreign, it does not mean that their works are failed or “ruined” translations. Indeed, to follow Goethe’s point, perhaps a translation must be situated at this limit, must risk foreignness in order to sustain that experience of the foreign that even Humboldt regards as essential. The continued life of the text in translation (its “living on,” in Benjamin’s terms) depends on the translator’s maintaining that precarious balance.

This is where Hölderlin enters the picture as translator: he holds the text in a suspended position between foreignness and familiarity, refusing ever to cross completely over into the safe zone of the “familiarly” foreign. Indeed, perhaps it is because his translations are situated on this precipice that they have remained an object of interest to literary history. By challenging Humboldt’s limit of Fremdheit, he effectively ensured that his project would not become a relic of a particular historical period but rather would continue to resonate as a set of questions that would engage audiences over time. The very difficulty of the text, its suspension between sense and nonsense, guarantees its “living on.”

IV. Suspension

Der scheinet aber fast
Rückwärts zu gehen und

Versatilität unter die Deutschen gekommen, welche rhetorischen, rhythmischen, metrischen Vorteile dem geistreich-talentvollen Jüngling zur Hand sind . . . der darf hoffen, dass die Literaturgeschichte unbewunden aussprechen werde, wer diesen Weg unter mancherlei Hindernissen zuerst einschlug” (Störig 37).
Ich mein, er müsse kommen
Von Osten. Vieles wäre
Zu sagen davon. Und warum hängt er
An den Bergen gerade? (“Der Ister”)

That one seems, however, almost
To go backwards and
I think it must come
From the East. Much could
Be said of this. And why does it cling
To the mountains, just there? (“The Ister”)

As is so typical for Hölderlin, the poetic depiction of the Danube’s flow evokes the depth of his relation to the ancient past (here “the East”): the look back, the reflective contact with the source, the fleeting effect of suspension as the river, seemingly moving forward and backward at once, clings momentarily to the mountainside. In a similar way, his translation practice will enact a suspension between two languages where the reader must hold each one in brief abeyance, dislocating herself from the steady flow of her own language in order to measure the distance traveled by the text. In a recent article, Stanley Corngold eloquently describes a similar “delay” in the process of translation that implies a fundamental ethics:

How should we begin to know such a person—and we must—otherwise than by becoming acquainted with dislocation, our own dislocation, outside language, outside competence? What room is there for this difficult strangeness, if we have not learned to stand firm in the midst of it, abiding a moment of inexpressibility, an incommunicable sense of otherness, of intimacy with a common human grain.

Although Corngold’s comments here do not refer directly to Hölderlin, they nevertheless evoke this scholar-translator’s long engagement with the poet-translator. His image of “holding together in the mind” two disparate ways of meaning—of affirming, at once, not only likeness but unlikeness—sketches out Hölderlin’s mode of translation quite precisely and highlights its key distinction from the theory and practice of translation as the path to

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Bildung. For Hölderlin, translation is not “good for you” because it expands subjective horizons outward but because its effects unsettle identity at its very core. This leaves his translation practice at some distance not only from the “antiquarian” mode of imitating the ancients but also from the idea of “surrender” to the text that Herder proposes (and that contemporary translation theorists like Spivak have continued to refine). Hölderlin’s investment lies rather in the possibility of rendering tragedy “more alive” by allowing the translation to speak, always imperfectly, of the complexity of relation between contexts and languages. The resonance of such “tragic effects” is evident, as we will see, in the extent to which Hölderlin’s Sophocles has sent (and continues to send) ripples through modern concepts of translation, reading, and interpretation.