Tragic Effects

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Augst, Theresa.
Tragic Effects: Ethics and Tragedy in the Age of Translation.
The Ohio State University Press, 2012.
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(it should be said from the start that Hölderlin will repeatedly prove to be an exception and so needs to be singled out as offering something unique) (Schmidt 2001: 19)

But you, you must not put yourself at risk; your noble nature, the mirror of all that is beautiful must not shatter in you; you also owe to the world what appears to you transfigured in a higher form. . . . Few are like you!¹

F ew a re l i ke h im, as his muse Susette Gontard insists; and already, with the mirror placed both before him and in him, we begin to reflect on what has set him so very far apart. To be sure, the dominant image of Hölderlin in the German cultural imagination remains that of the Einzelgänger: the sensitive loner, the conflicted revolutionary, the tragically silent madman. His translations, moreover, were widely regarded as the unfortunate product of precisely that habit of risk-taking against which Susette warns here. “The translation of Sophocles fully expresses his ruined mental condition,” a concerned Schelling wrote to Hegel in July 1804 (FA 16: 20), introducing a bias in reading these translations that would extend well into the twentieth century.² Yet starting from this point of departure, however

¹. “Dich selbst darfst Du auf’s Spiel nicht setzen, Deine edle Natur, der Spiegel alles Schönen darf nicht zerbrechen in Dir, Du bist der Welt auch schuldig zu geben, was Dir verklärt in höherer Gestalt erscheint . . . Wenige sind wie Du!” Letter from Susette Gontard to Friedrich Hölderlin (June 1799), StA VII: 80. There are several highly usable editions of Hölderlin’s collected works, the Stuttgarter edition (StA) and the other, more recent and arguably more definitive edition, the “Frankfurter Ausgabe” (FA). Although I refer primarily to the FA in my discussion of the Sophocles translations, at certain points the StA is more clearly organized, in which case I have elected to refer to the StA.

². Many commentators do strive to locate Hölderlin’s tragedy project within its Idealist context,
tempting it may be, shifts our attention from the possibility that strange-
ness can itself mark out a path, even if the one less traveled by. If Hegel’s
and Schelling’s attempts to define the tragic have come to represent the
beginnings of a philosophical debate concerned with ethics and modern
subjectivity—a debate that spans centuries and continents and still has not
ended—then Hölderlin’s engagement with Greek tragedy may have begun
as a somewhat bizarre digression within that debate. Yet it proves to be a
digression of almost uncanny fortitude, one that does not exhaust itself in
its own incongruity but maintains a voice of its own. That likewise spans
centuries and continents, and likewise has not ended.

While Hölderlin’s confrontation with the tragic may appear as an anom-
aly in the tradition of reading and translating the Greeks, it also initiates
a progression that has had a significant impact on concepts of tragedy and
translation in the twentieth century. For readers at several different stages in
the twentieth century, this translation project is not an isolated instance but
the reflection of another way of thinking about the tragic within modernity.
This other way raises questions that confront above all the problem of the
work’s place in history and thus make possible a more nuanced relationship
to the past. How do we represent a past that eludes our comprehension?
What is the responsibility of the translator or reader of ancient text vis-à-vis
her “original”? Can the fundamental distinctiveness of an ancient source text
be preserved in any meaningful way in the transition to a modern frame of
reference?

Hölderlin began to reflect on such questions at a time when “the tragic”
represented something else, namely, a retrieval of ancient themes in the ser-
vice of modern aesthetics and epistemology. If this debate considered at all
the gap between ancient and modern tragic experience, it was in the form of
a question—how are we to understand the relevance of ancient tragedy for
us today?—that had always already been answered, in the very intentional-
ity of posing the question. However, such logic forecloses the possibility
of preserving that which is not understood, that which cannot be made
relevant—of allowing comprehension to slip its moorings in a manner that
unsettles the solid ground on which the modern subject aims to stand. If
Hölderlin’s theoretical reflections on the tragic stand alone in any sense, it is
here: while his contemporaries in Romantic and Idealist circles were largely

if only to demonstrate how it unsettles that context from within; see, for example, the seminal essays
and Lacoue-Labarthe (“The Caesura of the Speculative”). See also Nägele, “Ancient Sports and Mod-
ern Transports,” in The Solid Letter: Readings of Friedrich Hölderlin, ed. Aris Fioretos (Stanford: Stan-
concerned with grounding experience in a self-recognition that would eradicate the epistemological gap embodied by the Kantian subject, Hölderlin’s most salient contribution to the thinking of the tragic lies in his exposure of the instability at the heart of speculative thought, the ruptures underlying the conciliatory aims of both Romantic and Idealist philosophies in the wake of Kantian critique. Ultimately, it is this naked instability that allows Hölderlin’s Sophocles to appear so profoundly anomalous in its time—to appear, in fact, touched by madness—and yet also compel such passionate response in its wake.

In the larger context of Hölderlin’s work on tragedy and the idea of the tragic, which spans most of his productive life, these translations represent both culmination and resignation. After failing three times between 1797 and 1800 to complete an original tragedy, The Death of Empedocles, Hölderlin turned to the translation project in earnest around 1801 with the probable intention of eventually translating all of Sophocles’s works (Beissner 107f.). Idealist in initial conception if not in execution, the translations of Oedipus and Antigone with their accompanying remarks achieve a marriage of philosophy and poetic performance that eluded him in the Empedocles drafts. As his last published works, they represent his final accounting of the Idealist program and reveal, in place of that program’s presumption of totality in the concept of intellectual intuition, the impossibility of conceiving totality. Nevertheless, they do not represent mere failure. While his three incomplete versions of Empedocles may anticipate the collapse of speculative thought into irreducible difference (both thematically and in practice), his Sophocles project introduces another trajectory of mediation, an “askew perspective” (linkischer Gesichtspunkt) through which the process of translation itself becomes the vehicle for a different conception of what tragedy can effect within modernity.

3. See Lacoue-Labarthe, “The Caesura of the Speculative,” 61f.: “If . . . the culmination of philosophy is the stop-gap measure attempting to close the wound (re)opened, in extremis, by Kant in the thinking of the Same . . . —if, in short, it is this patching-over of the Kantian crisis . . . then Hölderlin . . . will have represented . . . the impossibility of overlaying this crisis, this wound still open in the tissue of philosophy, where the hand which attempts to close the wound only succeeds in reopening it.”

4. Silke-Maria Weineck offers a rich discussion of Hölderlin’s theory of tragedy in relation to (his) madness: she argues that the madness of the tragic hero, in contrast to the fantasy of poetic inspiration or “mania” that surrounded Hölderlin in his lifetime, is primarily an anti-poetic, philosophical construct “that must be contained by the counterforce of poetry.” The Abyss Above: Philosophy and Poetic Madness in Plato, Hölderlin and Nietzsche (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 50ff.

5. His publisher Friedrich Wilmans claimed that the translations were the result of ten years’ work, an accurate representation if one goes back to Hölderlin’s earliest attempts to translate Antigone in 1794. See D. E. Sattler’s timeline in FA 16: 13–18.
As we have already seen, readings of the ethical dilemma played out in Greek tragedy have long shaped the construction of the modern subject in a profound sense; but Hölderlin’s writings suggest another ethics, in which not only thematic details but also the dynamics of translation itself engender a specific effect. As the translations and notoriously difficult remarks will show, it is precisely as figures in translation that Oedipus and Antigone both mark and efface their own mythic status. Unlike the tragic heroes of classicism and Idealism, they present to modern culture neither an unattainable ideal, nor a mimetic challenge, nor a mere ethical prototype. Instead, their particularity produces an effect that is more alienating and yet resonates more powerfully than these more conventional frameworks. While, as Karl Reinhardt has argued, a pattern of isolation is already set into motion in Sophoclean tragedy by a hero who stands alone, for whom “the race is run,” Hölderlin’s logic expands this definition to encompass modern tragic experience as such, striving to make palpable an alienation that affects the hero but also implicates the subject who encounters him in another age and another mode of representation (what Hölderlin calls Vorstellungsart). Not only do Oedipus and Antigone stand defiantly apart from the mise en scène, but poetic language itself undergoes a process of insistent distancing from and disruption of the subject who aims to comprehend its message.

This hinge between ancient text and modern experience is made most evident through Hölderlin’s often disorienting practice of translation. Wedded to a syntax neither German nor Greek, his rendering of Sophocles evokes, as the translator and critic Susan Bernofsky has noted, “a space between

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7. For Reinhardt, the “Sophoclean situation” involves above all the hero’s recognition of his own radical solitude: “so erfaßt er sich als Mensch doch erst in seinem Preisgegeben- und Verlassen-Sein.” Reinhardt, Sophokles (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1947), 10.

8. Jacques Lacan invokes this phrase with reference to Sophoclean heroes in general, appropriating an observation by the Reinhardt. According to Lacan, Reinhardt is alone in pointing out the “special solitude” of Sophoclean heroes “... for in the end tragic heroes are always isolated, they are always beyond established limits, always in an exposed position and, as a result, separated in one way or another from the structure.” This point has bearing on the solitude of Hölderlin’s Oedipus as well. Jacques Lacan, Seminar Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992): 271.

9. Schmidt discusses this modern dilemma of the alienated subject in relation to Plato’s claims about the dangers of tragic art for political life: “tragic art fosters a sense of the apartness of people thereby weakening, if not destroying, the sense of the common that is needed for a community to thrive” (Schmidt 2001, 43). This concern for the “anarchic potential” of language to isolate the individual at the expense of the community will certainly haunt Hegel’s reading of the ethical conundrum of the Antigone. For Hölderlin, however, the isolation of the tragic hero—which is also always a confinement within language—is essential for tragedy to engender its most powerful effect.
languages” that can leave the reader at some distance from comprehension in any conventional sense. Rather than attempting to adapt the tragic model to a modern setting or modify classical characters to make them recognizable to their new audience, his project disavows the prevailing perception in his time of tragic experience as a process of identification that evokes fear and pity for the hero onstage, offering the pleasurable relief of catharsis. If we can speak of catharsis at all in Hölderlin’s reading of *Oedipus*, we will see it defined not as a mode of identificatory reconciliation between spectator and hero but as a gesture of severance, of a paradoxically purifying disruption of identification. Moreover, that disruption finally comes to inhabit a figure—that of Antigone—in a manner that magnifies a strangeness inherent to the modern subject itself.

Along with his general theory of tragedy, Hölderlin’s model of translation in the Sophocles project diverges in significant ways from his contemporaries’ views on the subject. Novalis, A. W. Schlegel, and Friedrich Schleiermacher all delineate the Romantic conception of translation as a fundamental element of apprehension itself, maintaining that translation should enact the expansion or *Bildung* of the self via the experience of the foreign, a “positing oneself beyond oneself” that is literally an Über-setzung, a crossing-over. Hölderlin’s model appears similar, at least at first glance; even if much of what constitutes the foreign text is necessarily “lost in translation,” both theories aim to reveal what is gained at the same time. However, while both Hölderlin and the Romantics wish to potentiate the original by enabling it to say something other than what it had said in the source language, Hölderlin’s project and the figure at its center do not replicate the Romantic dynamics of expansion into the unknown and reappropriation into a more perfect self. Indeed, as evidenced in a letter to his publisher Wilmans in April 1804, his efforts aim in quite another direction:

> Ich hoffe, die griechische Kunst, die uns fremd ist, durch Nationalkonvenienz und Fehler, mit denen sie sich immer herum beholfen hat, dadurch lebendiger, als gewöhnlich dem Publikum darzustellen, dass ich das Ori-

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11. See Berman’s discussion of the Romantics’ view of translation as critical movement: “Its scope is not merely the original in its crude being. . . . The original itself, in what the Romantics call its ‘tendency,’ possesses an *a priori* scope: the Idea of the Work which the work tends towards . . . but empirically never is. In this respect, the original is only the copy—the translation, if you want—of this a priori figure which presides over its being and gives it its necessity.” Translation, by contrast, distances the work from this initial empirical layer that separated it from the Idea, hence bringing it closer to its truth” (Berman 107).
Hölderlin’s desire to render the Greek text “more alive than usual” does not reflect the Romantic subject’s attempt to come to individual terms with the foreign, since for Hölderlin it is the conformity to “national” forms of expression that has siphoned the life out of Greek art. Rather, he aims to bring to light a secondary alterity, the “Oriental,” that not only mobilizes the experience of the foreign in modern translation but undermines the stability of the original as well, by highlighting an element of Greek identity (the “Oriental”) that remains inaccessible to itself. What previous modern renderings of Greek tragedy lack is thus a subversive facet of the text that is silent in the language of the original but makes itself heard in another register, namely, in the manner in which the tragedy, through its disclosure of that previously imperceptible alterity, becomes “alive” to its audience: in simpler words, in its dramatic effect. If tragedy has always implicitly borne the impression of that source of “life,” Hölderlin aims to grant it a voice through his translation. Neither reinforcing the Romantics’ expansionist logic nor attempting to recover a unified, idealized identity of Greek art, for Hölderlin the dynamics of translation retrace and even intensify the disappropriating process by which tragedy produces its most unsettling effects. And it is precisely within this logic of (tragedy in) translation that the defiant solitude of his principal characters will eventually come to represent an ethical stance like no other.

The translation project is the central pillar of Hölderlin’s confrontation with Greek tragedy, but the roots of this project extend deeply and broadly within his poetic and philosophical writings. As Charlie Louth has shown, structures of translation infiltrate his poetry to a considerable extent, and even a cursory examination of Hölderlin’s writings both previous to and contemporary with his translation work indicates that classical tragic figures are central to his theoretical reflections. An understanding of the context

12. See in particular Louth’s Chapters 5 and 6, which examine Hölderlin’s later writings, including the Sophocles translations.
13. For a detailed discussion of Hölderlin’s use of mythic figures in the service of messianic thought, see Robert Charlier, *Heros und Messias: Hölderlins messianische Mythogenese und das jüdische*
in which Hölderlin undertook these translations can not only help to illuminate their more obscure elements but also underscore their crucial status within his overall body of work.

**In the excerpt** from Susette Gontard’s letter at the start of this chapter, the mirror maintains a corrective role, not just reflecting the world as it appears to the poet but also altering what it means to reflect by presenting it in a higher form. By contrast, Hölderlin’s own representation of the mirror image, composed some years later, assumes a less familiar, even monstrous cast. In the disputed text “In lieblicher Bläue . . .” (*In lovely blueness*), a late but undated piece whose origins remain murky, we find a mirror image that both resonates with the stabilizing gesture of Gontard’s description and alludes to its potential disruption:  

Wenn einer in den Spiegel sieht, ein Mann, und sieht darin sein Bild, wie abgemalt; es gleicht dem Manne, Augen hat des Menschen Bild, hingegen Licht der Mond. Der König Ödipus hat ein Auge zu viel vielleicht. Diese Leiden dieses Mannes, sie scheinen unbeschreiblich, unaussprechlich, unausdrücklich. (StA II: 1, 372)

When someone looks into a mirror, a man, and sees in it his image, as if painted; it resembles the man, the human image has eyes, whereas the moon has light. King Oedipus has one eye too many, perhaps. The sufferings of this man, they seem indescribable, unspeakable, inexpressible. (Schmidt 2001, 170; trans. modified)

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14. The poem was first published in prose form by Hölderlin’s biographer F. W. Waiblinger in his 1823 novel *Phaëton*; however, Waiblinger contended that the original text was written by Hölderlin in a Pindaric style of verse (“nach Pindarischer Weise”). Norbert von Hellingrath, editor of an early version of Hölderlin’s collected works, was the first to attempt reconstruction of that poetic structure (*Hölderlins Sämtliche Werke, Sechster Band*, eds. Hellingrath, Friedrich Seebass and Ludwig Pigenot [Berlin: Propyläen, 1923]: 26 [*Lesarten 490ff.*]). Heidegger also employs the version in verse in his body of work on this text (“Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung,” “. . . dichterisch wohnt der Mensch . . .”), while Beissner reproduces the text as prose (StA II:1, 372). Though Beissner maintained that the text may have been written by Waiblinger himself in a somewhat “Hölderlinian” style, the image of Oedipus in particular resonates so strikingly with Hölderlin’s other writings that Waiblinger’s claims about the text’s authenticity seem convincing. More recently scholars have attempted to make a case for the poem’s authenticity. See A. den Besten, “Ein Auge zuviel vielleicht: Bemerkungen zu einem als apokryph geltenden Hölderlin-Gedicht,” in *Poesie und Philosophie in einer tragischen Kultur*, ed. Heinz Kimmerle (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1995), 87–122.
Compared with the “mirror of all that is beautiful” in Gontard’s letter, this passage represents both an echo and a distancing, a reinforcement and a disruption. The image of the mirror does approximate a man closely enough that he may recognize it as “his image,” but without apprehending the particular beauty that this image reflected for Gontard; eyes see the image that both resembles and equals (gleicht). But what on earth does it equal? If for Susette the gleam of the mirror reflects all of the beauty that the poet’s soul has to offer, here that light projects something far less remarkable—something even marked by a reduction, “as if painted” (wie abgemalt)—with eyes lacking luminescence when compared with the moon. If the reflected image does equal something here, that something remains remote from the intuition of plenitude that the “mirror of all that is beautiful” initially calls to mind.

Moreover, any semblance of complementarity between subject and image is overturned in the very next moment with the emergence of a figure that, as the text suggests, cannot possibly become “equal.” In an abrupt turn of phrase that fractures the elongated prosaic flow of the sentence before it, a tragic figure interrupts. “King Oedipus has one eye too many, perhaps”: the familiar image in the mirror shatters and comes tumbling down. Far from being an exemplary figure, Oedipus is the jarring exception to the universality of the mirror scene. But what does it mean to say that he has “one eye too many”? What does having “too many” eyes have to do with the ability to see, and what does that have to do with the suffering of the tragic hero, not to mention its troubled representation in poetic language? For after all, if the mythic Oedipus has a figurative excess in eyes, that factor does little more for him in the end than to force him to see too much—and then quite literally not to see at all, only to suffer. It is this “one eye too many” that marks Oedipus with an excess of suffering; it introduces a difference that is marred by deformity, that shatters the glass and the Gleichnis of the mirror with its resistance to the dialectical equation that generated the human image.

This resistance is timely, emerging just as German intellectuals seek to come to terms with a rift in the possibility of grounding knowledge in self-consciousness. Indeed, it begins to expose Fichte’s statement “Ich bin ich,” his fundamental conception of a subject’s potential for absolute self-intuition, as riven by a difference that exceeds that equation.\textsuperscript{15} In the\textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, Kant had introduced a division not only characteristic

\textsuperscript{15}Thomas Pfau locates the backdrop for the Idealist project in precisely this dilemma, introduced by the thought of Kant and Fichte. Pfau,\textit{Idealism and the Endgame of Theory} (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 26.
but constitutive of the subject. Proclaiming in the preface the equivalent of a Copernican revolution in philosophy, he reversed the conventional view that knowledge must conform to objects, proposing instead the principle of objects’ necessary submission to the subject. Yet this “revolution” bears other consequences, for insofar as it distinguishes the subject’s apprehension and understanding of phenomena from the Ding an sich, which cannot be known, it also sets limits for the subject an sich; the Kantian subject is unable to present itself to itself, absolutely. By asserting, in the section on the Transcendental Aesthetic, that the “I” cannot assume its own unity or autonomy beyond internal intuition, Kant revealed that the subject can only ever presuppose its own identity.

If the faculty of coming to consciousness of oneself is to seek out (to apprehend) that which lies in the mind, it must affect the mind, and only in this way can it give rise to an intuition of itself. But the form of this intuition, which exists antecedently in the mind, determines, in the representation of time, the mode in which the manifold is together in the mind, since it then intuits itself not as it would represent itself if immediately self-active, but as it is affected by itself, and therefore as it appears to itself, not as it is. (my emphasis)

With this axiom Kant constructs the subject’s potential for self-recognition in the inescapable terms of reflexivity rather than immediacy; the “I,” just like the objects it apprehends and which affect it, can only ever appear as representation. The imposition of this limit on knowledge was devastating to the notion of an enlightened autonomous and self-present subject—

16. See Deleuze’s discussion of Kant’s reversal here, its consequences, and its difference from the subjective idealism that follows it in Kant’s Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties, trans Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone Press, 1984), 13f.


18. Deleuze illustrates Kant’s position with a citation from Rimbaud, “I is another.” The form of the inner sense as time is one that is only thought in spatial (thus distant, mediated) terms, while the receptive experience of changes in time (Ego, moi) remains separated from an active synthesis of time (I, je): “The I and the Ego are thus separated by the line of time which relates them to each other, but under the condition of a fundamental difference. . . . ‘Form of interiority’ means not only that time is internal to us, but that our interiority constantly divides us from ourselves, splits us in two: a splitting in two which never runs its course, since time has no end.” Kant’s Critical Philosophy, ix.
such as the subject Lessing hoped to condition through a new approach to theater—and the turmoil that ensued would continue to ripple through discourses of philosophy and literature for decades to come. While Idealists endeavored, through the labor of the concept, to reclaim the subject’s self-presence in the face of division, Romanticism aimed for the subject’s auto-production in the work of art, within the experience of beauty. What both these attempts present above all is the desire that triggered their movement, what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy have called the will to System (la volonté du Système). The aims of both speculative Idealism and Romanticism form an exigency announced in the future, an overcoming of dissonance, not yet there but “to do;” as Schelling writes in a letter to Hegel, “We must continue with philosophy!—Kant has swept everything away” (Wir müssen noch weiter it der Philosophie!—Kant hat alles weggeräumt).

Given the convergence of this crisis in philosophy with the attempt, after Lessing and Winckelmann, to reinvent tragedy in the spirit of enlightened humanism, it is perhaps no surprise that the Greeks are very soon placed into the service of this “to do” as the exemplary text of post-Kantian philosophy. A philosophical inquiry into the essence of the tragic is initiated in the same moment that German Idealism gives birth to itself in the throes of a crisis; thus while Lessing remained within the sphere of poetics, Friedrich Schelling represents for Szondi the first philosopher of the tragic.

19. See also Walter Benjamin’s Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism (Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik), in which he discusses the Romantic conception of reflection as capable of bearing the absolute; despite its infinite character, thought (including the concept of the “Ich”) is “substantial and fulfilled in itself;” (in sich selbst substanziell und erfüllt). Gesammelte Schriften, Band 1:1, ed. Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974): 31.

20. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 33. To be sure, their heavy privileging of philosophy as the precursor to Romanticism has not gone unchallenged; Jean-Pierre Mileur argues that their “philosocentrism” neglects the equivocity of Romantic literary practice, reducing it to a mere effect of theory (“The Return of the Romantic,” in Rajan and Clark, Intersections: 19th-Century Philosophy and Theory [Albany: SUNY Press, 1995], 325–48). While Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, according to Mileur, suggest that literature “lacks propriety” and thus requires a “properly philosophical” orientation, he invokes the “possibility that literature’s impropriety, even if or even because it encourages a proliferation of approaches to criticism, might be a positive advantage, its main advantage in contrast to philosophy . . . .” (337)

21. Letter from Friedrich Schelling to G. W. F. Hegel, 6 January 1795. In Briefe von und an Hegel, Band I: 1785–1812, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1952), 14. As the youthful triumvirate of Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel posited in their collaborative fragment Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus (1796), that aspiration also marks the culmination of humankind: “A higher spirit, sent from heaven, will found this new religion among us; it will be the last great work of humankind” (Ein höherer Geist, vom Himmel gesandt, muss diese neue Religion unter uns stiften, sie wird das letzte große Werk der Menschheit sein). In FA 14: 17 (trans. Schmidt 85). The Systemprogramm is included in the collected works of all three of its purported authors.

ference emerges in their disparate accounts of what tragedy can and must represent in their day and age; while Lessing, following tradition as well as attempting to establish his own, regards tragic art as a means to edify the self, for Schelling tragedy, as the highest form of art, has the potential to take over where philosophy reaches its conceptual limits (Schmidt 74). Where speculative reason can no longer account for contradiction, the tragic aesthetic both highlights that contradiction and makes it bearable to the viewing subject.

The contrast between Hölderlin’s monstrous image of Oedipus and that of his close collaborator Schelling is intriguing enough to warrant a brief elaboration. Schelling’s discussion of the tragic in the tenth of the Philosophische Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritizismus (1795–96) is framed by his efforts to differentiate between two poles of philosophical inquiry with respect to (as Peter Fenves writes) “the nature of the unconditioned, the absolute, or to use a misleading term, God.”

Dogmatism, represented by Spinoza and Leibniz, and criticism, represented by Fichte and Kant, were for Schelling the only valid ways to conceive of the absolute and thereby found a philosophical system. The former is based on a conception of the absolute object or Not-I, the latter on the absolute subject or I, and the task that remains of philosophy is to determine by which path the unconditioned might be reached. For Schelling, this task can only be addressed insofar as poetics, ancient and modern, offer a strictly empirical approach to the tragedy, not its “idea”; its concern is specific dramatic effect, whereas Idealist philosophy placed emphasis on determining what, if fact, is tragic. Historically speaking, Szondi, citing Hegel, finds it logical that tragic theory can only ever follow its praxis with considerable delay: “To understand the historical relation prevailing between nineteenth-century theory and seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century practice, one must assume that the flight of Minerva’s owl over this landscape also begins only with the onset of dusk” (Szondi 2002, 2) (Vielmehr wäre zum Verständnis des historischen Bezugs, der zwischen der Theorie des neunzehnten und der Praxis des siebzehnten Jahrhunderts waltet, anzunehmen, dass die Eule der Minerva ihren Flug auch über dieser Landschaft erst mit der einbrechenden Dämmerung beginnt [Szondi 1961, 8]).


24. To a certain extent, however, Kant does not ideally represent the standpoint of criticism for Schelling, because his Critique of Pure Reason is not just a philosophical system among others but the point of departure for all philosophical systems, whether informed by criticism or dogmatism. See the “Editorischer Bericht” written by Annemarie Pieper in Schelling, Werke 3, ed. Hartmut Buchner, Wilhelm G. Jacobs, and Annemarie Pieper (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1982): 23.

in a practical sense, through the idea of freedom: “For me the highest principle of all philosophy is the pure, absolute I, that is, the I insofar as it is simply I, not yet conditioned by objects at all, but rather posited through freedom” (Schelling to Hegel, 4 February 1795 [my emphasis]). Endowed with a freedom that is both point of departure and ultimate goal, the human subject obtains the possibility of moving beyond the limitations of a world conditioned by objects and attaining the infinite, the “supersensual” (über-sinnliche) world.

It is with respect to this question of freedom that Schelling turns to tragedy in the tenth letter of the series; underscoring his claim that great art can represent what reason can no longer conceive theoretically, Schelling maintains that tragedy illustrates the extent to which freedom contends with necessity. Opposing human freedom with an “objective power” bent on disrupting that freedom, he manages to argue that even man’s submission to the machinations of fate can affirm the force of freedom.

You are right, one thing remains—to know that there is an objective power which threatens to annihilate our freedom, and with this firm and certain conviction in our hearts, to fight against it, to summon up the whole of one’s freedom, and thus to go down (Schmidt 2001, 86).

This scenario, Schelling asserts, is thematized in the tragic situation: by allowing the hero both to struggle against the superior power of the objective world and to expiate his crime willingly, Greek tragedy affirms human freedom. It is this affirmation, in fact, that makes tragedy tolerable to its audience.

The reason for this contradiction, that which made it bearable, lay deeper than the level at which it has been sought: it lay in the conflict of human freedom with the power of the objective world, a conflict in which the mortal necessarily had to succumb when that power was a superior power—a fatum; and yet, since he did not succumb without a struggle, he had to be punished for this very defeat. The fact that the criminal succumbed only to the superior force of fate and yet was punished all the same—this was the recognition of human freedom, an honor owed to freedom. (Schmidt 2001, 86)

26. Briefe, 22: “Mir ist das höchste Prinzip aller Philosophie das reine, absolute Ich, d.h. das Ich, inwiefern es bloßes Ich, noch gar nicht durch Objekte bedingt, sondern durch Freiheit gesetzt ist.”
27. “Sie haben Recht, noch Eines bleibt übrig—zu wissen, dass es eine objective Macht giebt, die unsrer Freiheit Vernichtung droht, und mit dieser festen und gewissen Ueberzeugung im Herzen—gegen sie zu kämpfen, seiner ganzen Freiheit aufzubieten, und so unterzugehen” (Werke 106).
28. “Der Grund dieses Widerspruchs, das, was ihn erträglich machte, lag tiefer, als man ihn such-
With this logic, the tragic universe becomes recognizable from within the framework of Idealism. It is not merely the fact that the tragic hero is subject to fate that ensures his downfall; he is punished because he exerts his freedom by fighting against necessity. His punishment is thus a (negative) recognition of freedom: only a subject who possesses freedom—and exercises it—can be deprived of it by fate. This represents tragedy’s great insight for Schelling: where philosophy exhausts itself, the “highest in art”—tragedy—allows us to “think” beyond the limits placed on freedom by a higher power.

It was a great thought to willingly bear punishment even for an inevitable crime; in this way he was able to demonstrate his freedom precisely through the loss of this freedom, and still to go under with a declaration of free will. (Schmidt 2001, 86; trans. modified)

Schelling’s invocation of the hero’s freedom here is clearly marked by the dialectical force of its time, as Lacoue-Labarthe has argued: insofar as the tragic subject invokes his freedom in the very moment of losing it, a negative is transformed into a positive, and the struggle, however futile it has appeared, proves productive. The tragic conflict, by itself intolerable for Schelling, thus offers through this force of negativity the possibility of a resolution, and the “‘idealist’ interpretation . . . of tragedy” is born (Lacoue-Labarthe 217).

By virtue of this opening towards resolution, however, Schelling’s interpretation runs counter to the notion that tragic art has the potential to exceed the limits of philosophy; in fact, this model embeds tragedy deeply within philosophy. As Szondi has discussed, the tragic comes into play here as a “third way” between dogmatism and criticism, representing the space in which those two poles come into conflict with one another. But precisely by making tragedy recognizable within this intellectual context, Schelling...
clips its wings. While in Schelling’s view the tragic spectacle allows contradiction to become tolerable (if not entirely reconcilable), the performative dissonances endemic to tragedy—the divisions and tensions on which Hölderlin will soon train his eye—remain unconsidered.\textsuperscript{32}

While Schelling places Oedipus’ plight in the service of the Idealist project, then, for Hölderlin the central question of the tragedy is rather how Oedipus reflects—or rather attempts and fails to reflect—the Idealist “will to system.” If Oedipus’ suffering remains for Hölderlin “indescribable, unspeakable, inexpressible,” its semblance in language necessarily involves the containment, within the limits of reflection, of a confrontation that cannot be wholly absorbed. However, Hölderlin also opens up another path by evoking an image that exceeds its own representational form. By disrupting the subject’s relation to the mirror with his “one eye too many”—a human form that suggests its own unrecognizability—Oedipus presents the negative side of the post-Kantian problem of the unmistakable, yet unknowable difference that shatters the mirror of speculation.\textsuperscript{33} In the figure of Oedipus, Hölderlin gives form to a difficult suspension within the subject between the grounding of self-consciousness in reflection and a negativity that cannot be contained by that ground. His conception of the tragic hero thus implies that this negativity reveals itself as an other that can never be known.\textsuperscript{34}

In this respect, it is appropriate that Oedipus appears as disfigured in a text written near the end of Hölderlin’s productive life, a point at which tragedy had already for some time been the focal point of a protest and a shift with respect to attempts to contain subjectivity within a model of reflection. While the development of a philosophy of the tragic in speculative Idealism


\textsuperscript{33} For a thorough discussion of the significance of the mirror and the trope of reflection in post-Enlightenment philosophy, see Gasché, The Tain of the Mirror. See also Mark Taylor’s substantive review, “Foiling Reflection,” Diacritics 18:2 (Spring 1988): 60.

\textsuperscript{34} Schelling’s later work can also be read in the context of this countermovement, which David L. Clark names as the “tropic of negativity”: “to engage rather than sublate that which resists all pretensions to wholly systematic thought.” Schelling’s recognition that the structure of reflection always bears something irreducible to a self-present origin marks the entrance into a phase of self-critique that already approaches the radical thinking of “the unprescribable” characteristic of Derrida’s concept of \textit{différance} and De Man’s materiality of the letter. Clark, “‘The Necessary Heritage of Darkness’: Tropics of Negativity in Schelling, Derrida, and de Man,” in Rajan and Clark 82ff. Pfau develops a similar argument with regard to Schelling’s contribution to contemporary theory in his critical introduction to a translation of three late essays by the philosopher (Pfau 1994, 1–57). See also Andrew Bowie’s article in Rajan and Clark, “Non-Identity: The German Romantics, Schelling, and Adorno,” 243–60.
bears witness to the rise and fall of the attempt to build a system around
the subject, Hölderlin’s tragic figures—Oedipus and Antigone as well as
Empedocles before them—suffer precisely the untenability of the “will to
system.” For Hölderlin it is this suffering, voiced in a solitary lament, which
situates the tragic hero with respect to the modern subject who encounters
him. Insofar as our view of Oedipus’ fate is defined by the margins of what
can be known, the representation of suffering itself becomes another kind of
suffering, one instigated—also parallel to Oedipus—by a reluctant recogni-
tion of limits. The effect that the structure of tragedy engenders, however,
unlike the inexpressible suffering of Oedipus, must not necessarily bring on
despair. That strange rupture, once acknowledged, in fact becomes some-
thing of a fascination, a momentary encounter with the outer reaches of
comprehensibility, otherwise enveloped and disguised by the rush of signifi-
cation: “that soon it is no longer the change of representation (\textit{der Wechsel
der Vorstellung}) that appears but the representation itself” (FA 16: 250). At
the same time, language also comes up against an uncrossable horizon of
difference from itself and expresses itself finally—and logically, even appro-
priately—by translation rather than figuration.\footnote{\textit{\textit{T}he structure of
tragedy engenders, however, unlike the inexpressible suffering of Oedipus, must not necessarily bring on
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priately—by translation rather than figuration.}}

This is the point at which Hölderlin’s Empedocles, standing at the edge
of Mt. Etna, reaches the limits of his usefulness as a figure of speculative
thought and where Oedipus, perhaps, becomes necessary.\footnote{\textit{\textit{T}he structure of
tragedy engenders, however, unlike the inexpressible suffering of Oedipus, must not necessarily bring on
despair. That strange rupture, once acknowledged, in fact becomes some-
thing of a fascination, a momentary encounter with the outer reaches of
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cation: “that soon it is no longer the change of representation (\textit{der Wechsel
der Vorstellung}) that appears but the representation itself” (FA 16: 250). At
the same time, language also comes up against an uncrossable horizon of
difference from itself and expresses itself finally—and logically, even appro-
priately—by translation rather than figuration.}} While Empedo-
cles suffers from the impossibility of union with the gods—in other words,
the limits of self-recognition and representation from which essentially all
German Idealists suffered—Hölderlin’s \textit{Oedipus} reflects the consequences
of that monstrous union. Moreover, the translation allows that problem to be
reframed as an exposure to the alienation that sets in with the transfer from
ancient text to modern context. The conflict, then, is not merely represented
in the character of the tragic hero but interwoven into the modern subject’s
experience of the translated text as well.

\footnote{\textit{\textit{35. Hölderlin often expresses despair at the limitations of poetic language to achieve the kind of
revelation he sought in aesthetics, so that a final turn to translation makes perfect sense. From a letter
to his friend Neuffer from 12 November 1798: ” . . . und es ergreift mich oft, daß ich weinen muß,
wie ein Kind, wenn ich um und um fühle, wie es meinen Darstellungen an einem und dem andern
fehlt, und ich doch aus den poetischen Irren, in denen ich herumwandele, mich nicht herauswinden
cann” (StA VI:1, 289 (and it often seizes me, so that I must weep like a child, when I feel all around me
how my representations lack this and that, and yet that I cannot extricate myself out of the poetic drift in
which I wander about)).

36. See David Ferrell Krell, \textit{The Tragic Absolute} (University of Nebraska Press, 2005), where he
claims that both \textit{Hyperion} and \textit{Empedokles} should be understood as "steps toward Sophoclean tragedy,
not departures from or progressions beyond it" (281).}}
HÖLDERLIN’S OEDIPUS is above all a figure that shuns limits, transgressing with the force that only his feverish desire to know his past and his parentage can produce, regardless of the consequences. Andrzej Warminski has this specifically Hölderlinian valence in mind when he describes Oedipus’s dilemma as an “Empedocles complex”: the imperative to know, to draw connections, that too often leads to the tragedy of misread signs. Although Jocasta, his mother and wife, implores him to halt at a limit that keeps him at a remove from his past, to accept ignorance of his identity as a safeguard against self-destruction, he presses on; the tamer of the Sphinx will not be denied access to absolute knowledge. And thus in Hölderlin’s remarks on the tragedy it is not only Oedipus’s knowledge that proves to exceed certain ethical limits—the discovery that, contrary to his previous assumptions, he has fulfilled the words of the oracle at Delphi by murdering his father and marrying his mother—but also that desire for knowledge itself: “because knowledge, when it has torn through its barriers, spurs itself on to know more than it can bear or grasp” (weil das Wissen, wenn es seine Schranke durchrissen hat . . . sich selbst reizt, mehr zu wissen, als es tragen oder fassen kann [FA 16: 253]). What he sees with his one eye too many—and, in effect, what we see him seeing—is therefore perhaps nothing more than the existence of that same, excess eye, insofar as that eye both brings a trace of the abyss into focus and names that trace as too much to bear. Hence it will be the fate of Oedipus to destroy his other eyes in the eternally futile attempt to shut this one, as if to say that, after having witnessed the return of this unspeakable excess—as we shall soon hear it called in Hölderlin’s texts, the monstrous, “das Ungeheure”—no eye will ever see anything else again.

Die goldnen Nadeln riß er vom Gewand,  
Mit denen sie geschmückt war, das es auf,  
Und stach ins Helle seiner Augen sich und sprach,  
So ungefähr, es sei, damit er sie nicht säh  
Und was er leid’ und was er schlimm gethan,  
Damit in Finsterniß er anderer in Zukunft,  
Die er nicht sehen dürft,’ ansichtig werden mög’  
Und denen er bekannt sei, unbekannt. (FA 16, 221)

The golden needles ornamenting her  
He tore them from her dress and opened them

And stabbed into the bright of his eyes and said
This thereabouts: so that he would not see them
And not what he was suffering and what bad he had done
So that in darkness in the future that would be
How he saw others whom he must not see
And those that he was known to, unbeknownst. (Constantine 55; trans. modified)\textsuperscript{38}

While a more correct rendering of the Greek would have Oedipus piercing his own eyes so that they would not see him in his misery, Hölderlin radically mistranslates the passage here, placing Oedipus into the subjective position of seeing (or more precisely, of not seeing) his own eyes and thus situating the view of the eyes themselves on a level with what those eyes have seen: “And stabbed into the bright of his eyes and said this thereabouts: so that he would not see them (damit er sie nicht säh) and what he was suffering and what bad he had done.\textsuperscript{39} As we will see throughout our discussion of Hölderlin’s translations, his choice here is a telling “mistake.” Sophocles unmistakably places Oedipus in the objective position (\textit{oth’ ounek’ ouk opsointo nin}), but Hölderlin’s use of the nominative masculine pronoun \textit{er} leaves no doubt that Oedipus is the subject, \textit{sie} (referring to the eyes in accusative plural) the object. If Oedipus no longer wishes to see his own eyes (“damit \textit{er} \textit{sie} nicht säh,” so that he should not see \textit{them}), and if seeing with one’s own eyes is analogous to knowing, then it is not only the knowing that is dangerous but also the awareness of that knowledge. What Oedipus suffers retroactively is rooted both in his will to delve too deeply into his own past and in the realization that this will confronts him finally with the simple knowledge that he has advanced too far. With the knowledge that he has propelled himself into a place of solitude, of darkness from which his eyes can no longer recognize any other, at all.

Whether it is deliberate or not, this moment of mistranslation reflects

\textsuperscript{38} Constantine translates the accusative object “\textit{sie}” in Hölderlin’s translation as “her” rather than “them,” extending the reference to Jocasta rather than Oedipus’s own eyes. In this case, the implication would not be that Oedipus should never see his own eyes but rather that he should not see Jocasta before him.

\textsuperscript{39} The Greek line reads “\textit{oth’ ounek’ ouk opsointo nin}” (that they should not see him). Most modern translators get this pronoun pair right, including Solger, a near-contemporary of Hölderlin: “Denn aus der Frau Gewändern goldgetriebene / Brustspangen reißend, ihre Schmuckbefestigung, / Erhob er die, und traf der Augenkreise Paar, / Mit solchem Laut: nie sollten ihn sie wiederschaun, / Noch was er duldet, oder was er Böses that . . . ” [57] (Tearing the golden clasps from the woman’s robes, he raised the jeweled fastenings and struck his pair of eyes while saying this: never should they see him again, nor what he endured, nor the evil he has done).
something considerably larger than itself, for Hölderlin’s interest in the contours and limits of knowledge—and the consequences of transgressing those limits—colors his work on tragedy from the start. Sophocles underscores the distinction between mere sight and insight, using the verb *eidon/oida*, which suggests both seeing and knowing, for Tiresias, while Oedipus is connected primarily with verbs implying discovery or a superficial kind of sight, *heurisko* and *blepo*. For Hölderlin, however, Oedipus emerges as a counterpart to Empedocles, as the hero in dogged pursuit of an insight, a theoretical instance greater than the human subject can bear. This Oedipus, Hölderlin’s Oedipus of 1804, is thus a product of both the poet’s method of translation and a post-Idealist thinking inspired by his lengthy and intensive engagement with tragedy.

Hölderlin’s earliest musings on the subject, from around 1794, already evince a struggle between the attempt to “unite ourselves with nature in an infinite whole” in an aesthetic realm and the theoretical awareness, gained from intensive study of Kant and Fichte at the university in Jena, that the subject is necessarily split from itself in the moment of consciousness. This is Empedocles’ conflict, not to mention the probable source of Hölderlin’s frustration at his own inability to be “done” with the death of Empedocles (see Warminski xx). Indeed, his struggle to finish this text seems to have taken on the cast of what he calls “infinite approximation” (*unendliche Annäherung*), replicating Empedocles’ distaste at existing in a world which cannot support the ultimate speculative solution in any other form than that of suicide—or, in the author’s case, the killing of representation.

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41. The clearest articulation of his theoretical doubts about achieving a unified self comes in his 1794 fragment *Urteil und Sein*, which directs itself in particular against Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* and its conception of intellectual intuition; for Hölderlin here, the “Urteilung” of the self-conscious subject constitutes a limit that speculative thought cannot exceed. The relationship between self and self-same image remains theoretically intact only until another view (“eine andere Rücksicht”) recalls the forgotten distance that separates them. Could this “andere Rücksicht” not represent an earlier manifestation of the third eye of Oedipus? Warinski offers a thorough and excellent reading of the text, particularly of this idea of the “andere Rücksicht” in *Readings in Interpretation: Hölderlin, Hegel, Heidegger*. See also Dieter Henrich’s essay “Hölderlin über Urteil und Sein: Eine Studie zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Idealismus” (*Hölderlin-Jahrbuch* 1965/66: 73–96), in which the author accords Hölderlin’s fragment a nearly seminal position in the development of Idealism from Fichte to Hegel. For a contrary argument that situates Hölderlin’s essay more closely in relation to Fichte, see Helmut Bachmaier, “Theoretische Aporie und tragische Negativität. Zur Genesis der tragişchen Reflexion bei Hölderlin,” in Bachmaier, Horst, and Reisinger, *Hölderlin: Transzendente Reflexion der Poesie* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1979), 105–8.

42. Corngold describes the development, in the course of the three versions, of Empedocles’ self-reflexive autonomy as an isolation from the possibility of representation as image. “Disowning Contingencies in Hölderlin’s *Empedocles*,” in Fioretos 233.
problem is already reflected in the earliest outline of the tragedy of Empedocles, the so-called Frankfurter Plan of 1797, in which the hero, dissatisfied with and contemptuous of the “one-sided existence” and “particular relations” among humans that fall short of the “great harmony with all living things” enjoyed by the gods, decides to end his life by plunging headlong into Mt. Etna. Empedocles needs a death that represents a total disappearance from the mortal world, that precludes the possibility of mourning. If his contact with the despised “particular relations” is to dissipate as well, Empedocles must depart from the world without a physical trace, must be commemorated in no other form than signification through name and legend.

But already in this earliest sketch of the tragedy of Empedocles’ death, the necessity of that pure disappearance for closure of the gap between god and man is undermined by the very human problem of a remainder that can (and thus must) be mourned.

Soon afterward Empedocles hurls himself into the flames of Etna. His favorite disciple, who wanders about restlessly and anxiously nearby, finds soon thereafter the iron shoes of the master that the fiery emission had flung out of the abyss, recognizes them, presents them to the family of Empedocles, to his disciples among the people, and gathers with them at the volcano to mourn and celebrate the great man’s death.

43. It is in part for this drive for completion or “Ergänzung” that Hölderlin chooses the figure of Empedocles as protagonist after considering Socrates for a time. Empedocles, a pre-Socratic philosopher and physician who will also become a favorite of Nietzsche’s, suffers the burden of communicating a union between god and man that humanity is in fact incapable of grasping, at least not with the tools of reflection. Thus Hoffmeister emphasizes the parallels between the communicative crisis of the poet and that of his hero, who assumes the task of conveying the presence of the divine in human existence. Johannes Hoffmeister, Hölderlin’s Empedokles (Bonn: Bouvier, 1963), 96. In this context see also Klaus-Rüdiger Wöhrmann, who reads the attempts to write an Empedocles tragedy as expressive of “the monstrous striving to be All” and its ultimate failure: Hölderlin’s Wille zur Tragödie (Munich: Fink, 1967), 162.

44. See Hoffmeister’s still-relevant account, 38: “What is immortal cannot be seen as dying, having died; it cannot leave behind a mortal hull. It must simply disappear from the earth, so to speak, in a bodily ascent to heaven. . . . But Empedocles—according to the legendary reproach against him—attempted to exploit this belief in order to reach the whiff [Geruch] of immortality.”

With the discovery of the iron shoes belonging to the master, capable of resisting the intensity of volcanic heat for long enough to be spat out of the abyss, the disciples of Empedocles can mourn his death, thus claiming him as one of their own. Echoing the funerary traditions of ancient Greece, their ceremonial mourning, made possible with the discovery of an object of permanence, permits them to transform his death into “something done” (in Hegel’s words, *ein Getanes*) and thereby preserve the memory, the name of their leader both as member of the community and as individual. Had Empedocles succeeded in his quest to disappear without a trace, without even the physical remains that would signify his death to others, his legacy might have taken on mythic form, thus unifying him with the gods as he had wished; as it stands, however, his very real death, cast for eternity in the iron of his own sandals, is painfully, only human. Hölderlin’s three unsuccessful attempts to write the death of Empedocles may also pay homage to this misfortune of being only human, even as his quest, like his Empedocles in suicide, was to achieve something more.

Although the determined search for an unreflected access to union clearly contributes strongly to the shape of Hölderlin’s early poetic intent, then, it is often undermined, even at the start, by his own theoretical and formal considerations. An insistent question imposes itself, therefore, upon that framework of aspiration and failure that literary criticism has often assigned to Hölderlin’s dramatic texts, a question that more recent scholarship addresses: what if, at least by the time he decides to formulate a second version of the *Death of Empedocles*, his attempt is not at all to represent the vicissitudes of the speculative system in tragedy, at which he clearly fails? What if, rather, his translations perform in deliberate fashion another failure, namely, the impossibility of precisely that system? What could that failure,
then, represent? It may be that it cannot represent at all, nor can it be represented, except as disruption. The failure of representation in Empedocles leads Hölderlin to translation as an experimental mode of expression, to Oedipus as the tragic figure that Empedocles could not successfully embody. Yet the distance between Empedocles and his Greek other—the failed reconciliation between ancient and modern modes of representation—must itself remain part of the performance. After the unfulfilling death of Empedocles, Hölderlin needs Oedipus—his Oedipus.

Lacoue-Labarthe called this performance the “caesura of the speculative,” referring to a famous trope of Hölderlin’s that we will have to examine shortly; however, it is also more than that. Hölderlin’s exploration of the dynamics of difference within tragedy and in translation should not be seen to offer, as Lacoue-Labarthe’s argument implies, the inadvertent interruption of the speculative dialectic.49 Rather, they introduce and track a movement that describes both the literal crossing-over inherent in the word “über-setzen” and the trajectory of the subject itself in time, the difference that translated words continually trace and the disquieting effect of that trace on the subject who is exposed to it. In both cases, it is a difference that will be, as Bettina von Arnim sensed astutely upon reading Hölderlin’s Oedipus, “borne with pain.”50

IN “IN LOVELY BLUENESS,” the suffering of Oedipus remained beyond description, speech, expression. The modern subject cannot see through the excess eye of Oedipus, let alone identify with his plight, and yet our view of that eye is directed toward an unrecognizable element that refuses capture within the act of seeing. This drive to comprehend that the spectator faces in confronting a figure so wholly other contains within it an element of danger that the tragedy of Oedipus itself, particularly as Hölderlin reads it, does not leave unexamined. For as he states in the remarks on Oedipus, this desire to see and thus to know with specificity, as irresistible as it may seem, is also what brings on the hero’s tragic fall.

49. Although he does argue that Hölderlin’s project of translation dislocates the speculative from within, Lacoue-Labarthe does not concede that it has any aim other than the speculative closure of the Kantian rift: “It is not that Hölderlin wanted it that way—he wanted, if he wanted anything at all (and for some time he did want something), the resolution of the crisis . . . ” (213). Later: “Once again, I am not saying this with a view toward extricating Hölderlin from the speculative and making him, if you will, the “positive hero” of this adventure. The theory put forward by Hölderlin is speculative through and through” (224).

Presented with the opportunity to recognize the direction of his fate, Oedipus interprets the enigmatic words of the oracle with a gesture that advances too far into specific knowledge, thereby edging too closely toward divine privilege and crossing into the space that Hölderlin deems “too infinite.”

Die Verständlichkeit des Ganzen beruht vorzüglich darauf, daß man die Scene ins Auge faßt, wo Oedipus den Orakelspruch zu unendlich deutet, zum nefas versucht wird.

Nemlich der Orakelspruch heißt:

*Geboten hat uns Phöbus klar, der König,*  
*Man soll des Landes Schmach, auf diesem Grund genährt,*  
*Verfolgen, nicht Unheilbares ernähren.*

Das könnte heißen: Richtet, allgemein, ein streng und rein Gericht, haltet gute bürgerliche Ordnung. Oedipus aber spricht gleich darauf priesterlich:

*Durch welche Reinigung, etc.*

Und gehet ins besondere,

*Und welchem Mann bedeutet er diß Schicksal?*

Und bringet so die Gedanken des Kreon auf das furchtbare Wort:

*Uns war, o König, Lajos vormals Herr*  
*In diesem Land,’ eh du die Stadt gelenket.*

So wird der Orakelspruch und die nicht nothwendig darunter gehörige Geschichte von Lajos’ Tod zusammengebracht. (FA 16: 251)

To understand the whole we must above all look closely at the scene in which Oedipus interprets the oracle too infinitely, is tempted into nefas.

For the oracle says:

*Phoebus has bidden us, the King has, clearly,*  
*We must hunt down the shame our country’s ground*  
*Has nourished, not nurture the incurable.*
That could mean: Judge, in a general way, with strict and pure judgments, keep good civic order. But Oedipus at once responds in priestly language:

Through what cleansing, . . . etc.

And goes into the particular,

And to which man does he pronounce this fate?

And so brings Creon’s thoughts to the terrible utterance:

Lord of us formerly, O King, was Laius
Here in the land before you led the city.

In this way the words of the oracle are brought into a connection they do not necessarily have with the story of Laius’ death. (Constantine 64f.; trans. modified)

Hölderlin’s observation here suggests that the oracle’s bearing on Oedipus’ crime is arbitrary, thus defining the tragic conflict as a problem with the “insane” quest for knowledge and not with the cruel irony of fate.\(^{51}\) In this sense it poses an intriguing contrast to Schelling’s interpretation of Oedipus’ fall, in which the hero, doomed by fate, is still allowed to struggle against that superior power, thereby affirming human freedom even in defeat and rendering the contradictions of fate tolerable. For Hölderlin, the hero’s hubris amounts to a refusal to allow fate to take its course at all, to the desire for a forbidden choice—made without permission and subject to punishment—that makes tragedy quite intolerable.

In der gleich darauf folgenden Scene spricht aber, in zorniger Ahnung, der Geist des Oedipus, alles wissend, das nefas eigentlich aus, indem er das allgemeine Gebot argwöhnisch ins Besondere deutet, und auf einen Mörder des Lajos anwendet, und dann auch die Sünde als unendlich nimmt. (FA 16: 252)

\(^{51}\) See Horst Türk, “Das Beispiel Hölderlins,” Hölderlin-Jahrbuch 1988–89: 261. Beissner offers as well that Hölderlin’s translation of the oracle is indeed given in more general language than the usual versions, indicating also that it could be interpreted as having less directly to do with the outcome of the tragedy (Hölderlins Übersetzungen aus dem Griechischen). Bernofsky expands on this idea, claiming that Hölderlin, in translating miasma (literally “stain,” “defilement”) with the relatively vague term Schmach (“disgrace”), transforms the specific into the general in order to emphasize the extent to which Oedipus “goes into the particular” (gehet ins besondere) with his interpretation (217).
[ . . . ] Daher, im nachfolgenden Gespräche mit Tiresias, die wunderbare zornige Neugier, weil das Wissen, wenn es seine Schranke durchrissen hat, wie trunken in seiner herrlichen harmonischen Form, vorerst, sich selbst reizt, mehr zu wissen, als es tragen oder fassen kann . . . (FA 16: 253)

Then in the very next scene the spirit of Oedipus, all-knowing, actually utters the nefas in furious presentiment, by mistrustfully interpreting the general commandment into the particular and applying it to a murderer of Laius, and then taking the sin as infinite.

[ . . . ] Hence, in the conversation that follows with Tiresias, the wondrously furious curiosity of a knowledge that it has torn through its barriers and now, as though drunk in its lordly harmonious form . . . first of all incites itself to know more than it can bear or grasp. (Constantine 65; trans. modified)

Provoking itself to know too much, knowledge spirals into excess, tearing through its own barriers, while the individual is swept along by the formidable force of this desire. As Bernofsky points out, by invoking the Latin term nefas Hölderlin already gives voice to the particular transgression of which Oedipus is guilty: the negation of fas, a Latin term for the divine law which derives from fari (to speak), is a negation of the divine word itself, a presumptuous readiness to interpret or “translate” the words of the oracle and thereby claim the status of a god (217ff.). For Hölderlin the recognition of this transgression is central to the understanding of the tragedy as a whole. Yet the aims of this knowledge remain obscure, as does the motor of choice: if knowledge provokes itself to know more than it can bear, and if the subject must necessarily succumb to a “wondrously furious curiosity,” how can an individual choice also bring on the hero’s downfall, as the first part of the passage would suggest? More specifically, what does it mean for Oedipus to interpret “into the particular,” and through what sort of limit or barrier does this particularity tear?

As the passage indicates, the limit is integrally related to speech; not only knowledge itself but the articulation of that knowledge set Oedipus’ demise into motion (“the spirit of Oedipus, all-knowing, articulates the nefas”). This prospect of a limit to what may be said bears significance for Hölderlin’s work in more than one sense. For Empedocles it is linked to the naming of gods, to the privileged status that allows some mortals to touch the divine—representing, in other words, an articulation of the problem of logos. As enunciated in the second draft of Empedocles, the naming of gods
is depicted as the worst possible crime, not because human beings do not dwell in proximity to those gods but rather because that relationship must remain unspoken. As the priest Hermokrates explains, to give voice to that link is tantamount to the betrayal of a terrible secret:

> Verderblicher denn Schwerd und Feuer ist
> Der Menschengeist, der götterähnliche,
> Wenn er nicht schweigen kann, und sein Geheimnis
> Unaufgedeckt bewahren . . .
> Hinweg mit ihm, der seine Seele blos

More ruinous than sword or fire is the human spirit, the god-like, if he cannot be silent and preserve his secret unrevealed. . . . Cursed be he who bares his soul and its gods . . .

Is this critique of professed knowledge a protest to the aims of speculative Idealism itself, to a will which might be described, like that of Oedipus, as the desire to “know more than it can bear or grasp”? Although the parallel is certainly present, the problem as Hölderlin formulates it is also more complex, requiring an accounting of the wide temporal gap between the ancient model and its modern reflection. Hölderlin was interested in the implications of this gap well before he settled on the Sophocles project. In a footnote to the first version of Empedocles (ca. 1798), he insists that ancient and modern conceptions of a tragic figure’s hubris emerge from fundamentally different attitudes about the nature of “crime.” Even if there is a correspondence between these two “sins,” that relation reveals little more than another insurmountable difference:

For us, something like this is more a sin against knowledge, while for the ancients it was more excusable from this aspect, because it was more comprehensible to them. For them is was not <merely> inconsistency <but> crime. But they do not forgive it, because their sense of freedom would not bear such a statement. Precisely because they honored and understood it more, they were also more fearful of the hubris of the genius. To us it is not dangerous, because we are not affected by it.52

The hubris of the genius is not a source of dread for us as it was for the ancients, he argues, because we see only a strange inconsistency, a lack of judgment, perhaps, where they saw unequivocal crime. But even if we do not regard Oedipus’s actions as the grave misstep that they were for the ancient Greeks, we cannot help but be struck by our own distance from him. We cannot entirely grasp the magnitude of his transgressions for the Greeks, just as we cannot entirely conceive of the unwritten law that drives Antigone to bury her brother Polynices beneath a thin layer of dust. The modern reader or spectator thus encounters a limit of her own, marked out by the immensity of the gap between Sophocles and Hölderlin (and in turn with respect to the reader herself), a limit through which she may strive to tear but ultimately must find another way to address.

This pattern of persistent limitation to what can and should be known and articulated seems to run counter to Hölderlin’s earlier sentiment of revelatory potential in aesthetic representation—but does it, actually? In effect, something is named here, even if the gods are not. Although he attempts unsuccessfully to formulate the tragedy of Empedocles’ death no less than four times, with respect to the work on Sophocles Hölderlin does not concede failure. This much we know from his correspondence, that he did consider his translations to be at least a qualified success and above all believed that success to be contingent upon his having communicated something that no previous translator had. He addresses that aim when he writes to his publisher Wilmans in September 1803 that he wishes to represent Greek art as “more alive than usual” in a modern context by emphasizing the “Oriental” and correcting its “artistic errors.” Seven months later, the manuscript printed, he writes again to Wilmans: “I believe to have written in the direction of eccentric enthusiasm and thus achieved Greek simplicity” (FA 16: 19).

Much has been said about these passages, especially in relation to Hölderlin’s earlier letter to his friend Böhlendorff from December 1801, in which he delineates his idiosyncratic but quite complex view of the differences between ancient and modern modes of representation. In that letter, the great potential of artistic representation lies in the capacity to recognize one’s “nature,” which is for Hölderlin the most difficult task of all. Hölderlin provides an example of this idea with a comparison of Greek and

ten sie auch mehr den Übermut des Genies. Uns ist es nicht gefährlich, weil wir nicht berührbar sind dafür.”

53. “Ich glaube durchaus gegen die exzentrische Begeisterung geschrieben zu haben und so die griechische Einfalt erreicht.” Beissner pointed out the likelihood that “gegen” refers to “toward” rather than “against” here.
“Hesperian” modes of representation that underscores the importance of Greek art in a modern age. While the Greeks’ “nature” was “fire from heaven,” their culture contributed “Darstellungsgaabe,” a talent for form-giving; on the other hand, the duality of nature and culture in the Hesperian mode of representation is precisely opposite: the “Junonian sobriety” that is our nature corresponds to the Greeks’ culture of representation, while our culture ought to provide the “fire.” The death of the modern subject, for example, is dry and soulless compared with the deaths depicted by the Greeks: “For this is the tragic to us: that, packed up in any container, we very quietly move away from the realm of the living, [and] not that—consumed in flames—we expiate the flames which we could not tame” (Pfau 1988, 150).

In the end, the Greeks are useful to us not insofar as they reflect to us our own nature—indeed, that would be impossible, since one’s own nature cannot be assimilated from another source—but rather as an example of a process: just as Homer imposed sobriety on the “fire from heaven,” form on chaos, thereby reconciling “nature” with acquired culture, we can learn to bring chaos into form.

However, a distinction should be drawn between the letter to Böhlendorff, written as Hölderlin was beginning to translate Sophocles in earnest after years of toying with the idea, and the letters to Wilmans that reflect on the finished product. To be sure, his interest in the possibility of achieving “Greek simplicity” by writing “in the direction of eccentric enthusiasm” carries echoes of that earlier model. However, Hölderlin has moved beyond the chiasmic structure of the Böhlendorff letter, in which each side acquires from the other the aspect of representation that it lacks. In his explanation of how he aims to render Greek art as “more alive than usual” by tracing the mistakenly repudiated “Oriental,” the crossing is no longer a closed system, for the Greeks now have their own inaccessible other, the traces of which remain within tragic representation. The status of the other with respect to the self thus transforms into a relationship of slippage rather than of opposition. Even if the Greeks are “our” other, the Oriental sphere represents the other of the Greeks; thus no specular relation is possible, and no original can become present at all.

Achieving Greek “simplicity,” then, requires a shift in emphasis from the problem of representing tragedy’s modern resonance solely within a thematic register. If the suffering borne on the body of Oedipus is unreadable, if the violence it implies is too monstrous to represent in familiar terms, then those terms themselves must be reframed through dramatic text and rhythm. As his cryptic remarks on the tragedy begin to suggest, translation itself—

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55. See Warminski, in particular the section “Caesura: Hölderlin and the Egyptians,” in Readings in Interpretation, 17–22.
translation, that is, as a mode of transmission that emphatically does not erase its own traces—will bear responsibility for marking that otherwise unspeakable excess.

In the opening paragraph of the remarks on *Oedipus*, Hölderlin immediately distances himself from modern readers who would seek tragedy’s beauty in material impressions or characterizations; here, the notable characteristic of tragedy emerges from a meticulousness that has less to do with the classical-Romantic idea of genius, with the Idealist attainment of a harmonious whole, or with the impressions that either gesture might leave on the spectator, than with an almost plodding exactitude of structure:

> Auch andern Kunstwerken fehlt, mit den griechischen verglichen, die Zuverlässigkeit; wenigstens sind sie bis ihn mehr nach Eindrüken beurtheilt worden, die sie machen, als nach ihrem gesetzlichen Kalkul und sonstiger Verfahrungsort, wodurch das Schöne hervorgebracht wird. Der modernen Poesie fehlt es aber besonders an der Schule und am Handwerksmäßigen, daß nemlich ihre Verfahrungsart berechnet und gelehrt, und wenn sie gelernt ist, in der Ausübung immer zuverlässig wiederholt werden kann. (FA 16: 249)

Other works of art, too, compared with the Greek, lack reliability; at least, until now they have always been judged according to the impressions they make rather than according to their calculable laws and their other procedures by which beauty is brought into being. But modern poetry is especially lacking in schooling and craft which would enable its procedures to be calculated and taught and once learned be always reliably repeated in practice. (Constantine 63; trans. modified)

In a post-Idealist, post-tragic age, the possibility of a repetition that is “reliable” depends for Hölderlin on the skill of the poet, more artisan than artist, to follow the “lawful calculation” of form and adhere to the “mechane of the ancients.”

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56. Norbert von Hellingrath emphasized for the first time the importance of Hölderlin’s interest in this notion of *mechane*; by doing so Hellingrath is able to situate that interest within a progression that leads from its origins in Greek rhetoric all the way to Symbolist poetry and finally to the school of Stefan George. In this way, Hölderlin’s poetry offers a crucial space of correspondence and transition between the legacy of antiquity and modern poetics. See Alessandro Pellegrini, *Friedrich Hölderlin: Sein Bild in der Forschung* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1965), 60.
runs precisely counter to the textual material, which we cannot grasp and
certainly should not attempt to repeat. Repetition takes place on a purely
mechanical level and not a thematic one. While content is brought into
“relation” with form in the body of text, the “living sense” remains incalcul-
able even when projected into a familiar shape.

Dann hat man darauf zu sehen, wie der Inhalt sich von diesem unter-
scheidet, durch welche Verfahrensart, und wie im unendlichen, aber
durchgängig bestimmten Zusammenhange der besonderen Inhalt sich
zum allgemeinen Kalkul verhält, und der Gang und das Vestzusetzende,
der lebendige Sinn, der nicht berechnet werden kann, mit dem kalkulablen
Gesetz in Beziehung gebracht wird. (FA 16: 249f.)

We have to see then in what way the content of a work differs from this law,
through what procedure, and how in an infinite but thoroughly determined
interconnection the particular content relates to the general calculation, and
how the onward march of the work, the things it has to bring into shape,
the living sense which cannot be achieved by calculation, how all that is
related to the calculable law. (Constantine 63)

The relationship between classical art and its modern framework is twofold:
not only does it demand a mechanical repetition of classical form, it also
highlights a difference that the content of art must aim to reflect. In this
respect Hölderlin echoes Herder’s admonition to “steal the art of imitation”
rather than merely imitating the classics; while form may not change over
time, content must change, insofar as its relation to form is “infinite yet
continuously determined.” Content can neither be calculated nor naively
repeated, since its effects can only be determined within a given historical
context. Producing art after the Greeks thus requires the synthesis of cal-
culable and incalculable elements, not in order to sublate their difference
but rather to allow that difference itself to unsettle the work of art; as a
result the work is always recognizable and at the same time hints at its own
unfathomable depth.

This strict sameness of form differs significantly from the rigid applica-
tion of Aristotelian unities of time, space, and plot upon which the Ger-
man literary establishment insisted before the breakthrough of Lessing’s
dramaturgy. Notably, however, Hölderlin’s model does return to another
key aspect of the Poetics, echoing Aristotle’s conception of mimesis, in which
the activity of making and responding to likenesses involves the pleasurable
process of “work[ing] out what each thing is,” thus coming to appreciate its
intrinsic rationale and the craft (techne) underlying its creation. As Christopher Fynsk notes, Hölderlin does cite the Poetics (in Greek) in the third section of these remarks on Oedipus; could it be that Hölderlin hews more closely to the Greek model than his rather more pedantic predecessors ever did? To be sure, he has grasped a different element of Aristotle’s argument and incorporated it into his methodology as a translator. What is repeated here—far more insightfully than the rigidity of “unities” of space, time, and plot—is a form that itself has an effect, and not because of its absorption into the dramatic momentum of plot but precisely in spite of it. The stuff of tragedy yields power for Hölderlin largely because it is recognizable in its representative form, its “Erscheinung”: “Most important for humankind is to see with respect to everything that it is Something, in other words that it is knowable in the medium of its appearance” (Constantine 63: Man hat, unter Menschen, bei jedem Dinge, vor allem darauf zu sehen, daß es Etwas ist, d.h. daß es in dem Mittel (moyen) seiner Erscheinung erkennbar ist . . . [FA 16: 249]). To be “Something” a tragic work must expose itself entirely to the light of day; not only the materiality of plot, but also the bare structure of performance, the nature of dialogic exchange, even the rhythm of language contribute to the intensity of tragic experience.

For Hölderlin, this framework from which modern tragedy can emerge is about nothing at all: “For the transport in tragedy is of itself empty, and the most unbounded” (Constantine 65: Der tragische Transport ist nemlich eigentlich leer, und der ungebundenste [FA 16: 250]). Unconstrained by what Schiller called the “category of causality,” tragic transport can be defined only by its relation to absence. Moreover, this movement through absence traces its trajectory not by any discernible progress toward its own completion but rather only in terms of a restoration of structural balance between two sides.

Das Gesetz, der Kalkul, die Art, wie, ein Empfindungssystem, der ganze Mensch, als unter dem Einflüsse des Elements sich entwickelt, und Vor-

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59. As Fynsk points out, Hölderlin’s emphasis on the role of rhythm in his model of tragic effect also resembles aspects of Aristotle’s (admittedly sparse) comments on catharsis. See Fynsk 243–45.

60. Beissner, Erläuterungen zu Oedipus Tyrannus, StA V, 483 (letter from Schiller to Goethe, 25 April 1797): “. . . daß der dramatische Dichter unter der Kategorie der Kausalität, der Epiker unter der der Substantialität steht.”
stellung und Empfindung und Räsonnement, in verschiedenen Successionen, aber immer nach einer sichern Regel nacheinander hervorgehn, ist im Tragischen mehr Gleichgewicht, als reine Aufeinanderfolge. (FA 16: 250)

The law, the calculation, the way in which a sensuous system, the whole person, under an elemental influence develops, and representation, sensation and reason, in different sequences, but always according to a sure and certain rule, is in tragedy more a matter of weighting and balance than of pure sequence. (Constantine 63; trans. modified)

To calculate the precise point of “balance” in this model, however, is a tricky matter. Like the flow of poetic language, the events represented in the tragic form possess a rhythm for Hölderlin that resonates more rapidly and thus generates more dramatic urgency at a particular point. Hölderlin’s assertion is thus that a caesura, a rupture in the rhythm of language, allows the parts of the tragedy to balance as a whole but must be placed asymmetrically, as a counterweight to the “heavier,” more insistently active part of dramatic action. In Oedipus, the greater weight comes at the end, so that the caesura must be placed closer to the beginning, while for Antigone, the opposite is true. In both cases, the caesura arrests action in its path, opening a perspective to the viewing eye that would otherwise have been incommensurate with the progression of scenes on the stage: “that soon it is no longer the change of representation that appears but the representation itself” (250). What does it mean to obtain access to “the representation itself” in this arrested form? Representation, rather than effacing distance by upholding itself as the vehicle of tragic effect, is momentarily revealed as a pivotal part of the illusion, leaving the form of tragic transport to gape open in its emptiness.

Expressed in concrete terms, the words of the seer Tiresias represent for Hölderlin this doubly crucial slash in the movement of action, which both stops the tragic transport, the movement of language and form, in its path and propels the individual character, be it Oedipus or Antigone, into a solitary confrontation with death.

Er tritt in den Gang des Schiksaals, als Aufseher über die Naturmacht, die tragisch, den Menschen seiner Lebenssphäre, dem Mittelpuncte seines inneren Lebens in eine andere Welt entrükt und in die exzentrische Sphäre der Todten reißt. (FA 16: 251)

He enters the course of fate as overseer of the natural order which, in a tragic
manner, removes man from his own sphere of life, from the midpoint of his inner life into another world and carries him into the eccentric sphere of the dead. (Constantine 64; trans. modified)

Rainer Nägele has described the manner in which Hölderlin’s texts in general are marked by topological orders, both vertical and horizontal. The clearest analogy is the vertical relation of the mortal world to that of the gods, while the horizontal current of the river leaves its unmistakable inscription in Hölderlin’s later lyric poetry (see Nägele 1988 and Binder 1981). Here, in the discussion of the caesura that interrupts the horizontal flow of rhythmic language and the march of fate, the image of the sphere introduces another topography, that of interior and exterior. The words of the seer tear one violently from one’s path, revealing not the inscription of the hero as king of the text but rather his unexpected abduction from a position of centrality; the caesura orchestrates the tragic figure’s bitter expulsion from internal center (Mittelpunkt) to ex-centric outcast. Revealing to Oedipus the inevitability of this expulsion, Hölderlin’s Tiresias appeals to those senses that do not yet heed the suffering which will soon confront them:

Tiresias: You, having seen, don’t see what you are at
In evil, where you live, with what you house.
Do you know where you are from? . . .
Do you feel the marriage as you landed
Voyaging well, along the bankless shore.
Nor do you feel the multitude of other evils
That strike you with your children equally.
But scold at Creon still and also
Into my face for worse than you there is
No mortal man who ever will be fathered. (Constantine 28)
Hölderlin’s progression of verbs describing modes of perception and knowledge (sehen, wissen, fühlen) at first hews closely to the Greek blépo (to see, to have sight) and oida (to know), but then he collapses kataisthanomai and epaisthanomai (both: to perceive, to understand) into the more physical fühlen, to feel. This shift introduces physicality as a hinge between key concepts in Hölderlin’s language, perception as feeling and understanding as grasping, greifen or begreifen. If Oedipus does not feel “the multitude of other evils,” he cannot grasp their significance; yet if he grasps at too much, he will feel the consequences as physical suffering. The concealment, even the foreclosure of “the multitude of other evils” in an unseen, unknown, unfelt register may therefore allow Oedipus to enjoy a certain perception of centrality or mastery, but continuing to pursue that “multitude” threatens, in the damning words of the Chorus, to unleash the force of something previously untouched and strictly speaking untouchable.

Wenn aber überschauend einer mit Händen wandelt, oder
Mit Worten, und fürchtet das Recht nicht, und
Die Thronen nicht der Dämonen verehrt,
Den hab ein böses Schicksal,
Unschicklichen Prangens wegen,
Wenn nicht Gewinn er gewinnet recht,
Und offenbares verschleußt

But if a man lives carelessly and wanders with hands or
With words and does not fear what is right and
Does not honor the thrones of the daimons
Let a bad fate have him
For his unseemly showing
If his winnings are not won right
If he shuts up what is manifest,
And seizes what is untouchable, the fool. (Constantine 43; trans. modified)

And seizes what is untouchable . . . : whether with words or with hands, it is possible to grasp at too much. And as in the example of Empedocles, there are consequences. If it is a reckless misstep on the part of the hero, a failure to maintain the enigma of the gods that brings this contact with the untouchable, then the only possible outcome—a radical, purifying separation from that contact—is also the impulse for tragedy’s denouement. For Hölderlin this rupture, the doubled caesura which exposes both the hero’s inherent ex-centricity and “the representation itself,” becomes most neces-
sary in the moment of his greatest hubris, when the representation has taken on its most dreadful cast.

Die Darstellung des Tragischen beruht vorzüglich darauf, daß das Ungeheure, wie der Gott und Mensch sich paart, und grenzenlos die Naturmacht und des Menschen innerstes im Zorn Eins wird, dadurch sich begreift, daß das grenzenlose Eineswerden durch grenzenloses Scheiden sich reinigt. (FA 16: 257)

The presentation of the tragic rests chiefly in this: that the monstrousness of the pairing of God and Man, and the boundless coming together in fury of the powers of nature and man’s innermost, grasps itself in the purification of that boundless union through boundless separation. (Constantine 67; trans. modified)

In the words of Tiresias, this inhuman coupling emerges most powerfully as an effect of revelation either through speech or handiwork, and Hölderlin also formulates Oedipus’s self-imposed will to knowledge in terms of a burden both physical and conceptual, “to know more than it can bear or grasp.” The accumulation of that burden in the text ends tragically, in the words that Oedipus has no choice but to hear, even though the words themselves, in being uttered for the first time, also initiate his downfall.

**DER DIENER:** Oh! Oh! das Schrölkliche selbst zu sagen bin ich dran.

**SERVANT:** Oh! Oh! I am about to say the terrible itself.
**OEDIPUS:** And I to hear it. Yet hear I must.

“Das Schrölkliche selbst” (*the terrible itself*) here stands in for the Greek *deinon*, a term that will take on greater significance in Hölderlin’s *Antigone*, where he translates it as “Ungeheuer,” the monstrous. Here, *deinon* refers more obliquely to the coupling of god and man, the grand monstrosity that tragedy exposes in the words of its characters. And while Oedipus recognizes here that he has no other choice but to perceive that monstrosity when it is revealed to him, Antigone’s chorus will face a similar dilemma—conveyed, however, by sight rather than hearing—in its confrontation with a heroine that is in many ways equally monstrous.
Jezt aber komm ich, eben, selber, aus
Dem Geseze. Denn ansehen muß ich die, und halten kann ich
Nicht mehr die Quelle der Tränen,
Da in das alles schwaigende Bett
Ich seh’ Antigone wandeln. (FA 16: 349: 830–34; my emphasis)

But now even I myself am brought outside of
The law. For I must look at this, and I can hold back
The spring of tears no longer,
As into the all-silent bed
I see Antigone wander.

One is unable to close one’s ears or one’s eyes to the monstrosity, and
yet for Hölderlin there is recourse, at least at this point; with monstrosity
already realized literally in the listening and speaking figure of Oedipus, and
soon to be inspired by the very sight of Antigone, the purification from a
proximity to the excess he embodies depends on the ability of tragic form
to generate distance.61 This saving attitude of rupture is already inscribed in
form; a permanent division between the words of the Chorus and those of
the hero concretizes the painful remedy for a pronouncement from which
no one could possibly turn, for a relationship to the divine that could not
keep its distance.

Darum der immerwiederstreitende Dialog, darum der Chor als Gegensaz
gegen diesen. Darum das allzukeusche, allzumechanische und factisch endi-
gende Ineinandergreifen zwischen den verschiedenen Theilen, im Dialog,
und zwischen dem Chor und Dialog und den großen Parthien oder Dra-
maten, welche aus Chor und Dialog bestehen. (FA 16: 257)

Hence the constant to and fro of the dialogue, hence the chorus as its antith-
esis. Hence the all too chaste, all too mechanical interplay (ending in facts)
of the different parts, in the dialogue, and between chorus and dialogue
and the large passages made up of chorus and dialogue. (Constantine 67)

If Hölderlin portrays this process as dialectical in spirit—“Everything
is speech against speech, one sublating the other”—it is a dialectic without

61. Quite plausibly, Fynsk describes this dynamics of separation as a form of catharsis, expanding
on Aristotle’s model to suggest that “tragic catharsis is effected at least in part through participation in
a rhythmic movement” (Fynsk 245).
the possibility of synthetic closure, as the pattern of splitting through speech becomes the defining condition for both the hero and the representation of tragedy (the nearly untranslatable participial phrase *immerwiederstreitend* ironically lending unified form to that condition of rupture). This division represents a loss for the individual, insofar as the speaker who dares to utter the true names of the gods loses the former innocence of a tacit relation to the divine. Hölderlin compels Empedocles, like Oedipus after him, to bear the crushing burden of mourning this ephemeral object, once heard, once seen, now disappeared forever:

. . . er achtets nicht, er trauert nur,  
Und sieht seinen Fall, er sucht  
Rückkehrend das verlorne Leben  
Den Gott, den er aus sich  
Hinweggeschwätzt. (FA 13: 823,1. 218–21)

. . . he does not heed it, he only mourns, and sees only his dilemma; turning back, he seeks his lost life, the god that he banished from himself with his chatter.

Similarly, just as he was doomed by Tiresias’ words to perceive with every sense the multitude of evils he embodies, Oedipus suffers and commemorates the depth of his own loss with every piercing blow to the eyes he destroys.

o mir! o mir!  
Wie fährt in mich zugleich  
Mit diesen Stacheln  
Ein Treiben und Erinnerung der Übel! (FA 16: 225: 1347–50)

oh me, oh me  
How with these stabs  
There enters into me  
At once a working and a memory of these evils. (Constantine 56)

Like Empedocles, who dared convey the monstrous god-human coupling directly in speech, Oedipus crosses a limit by articulating his own transgression, only discovering too late that the act of interpreting the oracle had initiated a process of thought that was “too infinite.” In both cases, once that coupling has been put into words, it can only be taken away; only as a
lost remnant of a painful but necessary split can the former aspiration to the
untouchable be known. And in the interminably conflictual form of trag-
edy as Hölderlin understands it, it becomes possible to enact an otherwise
unspoken mourning, that mourning for something of which one cannot
possibly speak; so that in a final state of suffering, there is nothing left but
the pure possibility of differentiation in empty space and empty time: “For
at the outermost limit of suffering nothing else stands but the conditions
of time and space” (258). In a Kantian framework of space and time, this
“nothing else” would be impossible; although temporal and spatial condi-
tions indeed represent the pure forms of intuition a priori, they are literally
nothing without the sensual experience to which they lend form. The suf-
fering here, however, which will resemble Antigone’s suffering in the empty
tomb as the space between life and death, represents precisely the pain of
nothing but difference, without the solace of a positive concept to ground
opposition.

Yet in this place where nothing exists other than pure differentiation, we
are nowhere if not in language. There can be little doubt that for Hölderlin
one goal of these translations was to locate the space in which that “nowhere”
of pure distancing might be most immediately felt. Comprehending words
in logical relationships to one another becomes impossible when the most
fundamental sense slips away from language, as it does so frequently in
these translations. What emerges in the absence of “sense” in its customary
form, however, is an impression of the obscurity contained in-between—
between ancient and modern, source text and translation, subject and other.
Hölderlin’s task as translator is to surround that obscurity and preserve it
in the dynamics of translation. The remarks on Antigone will demonstrate

62. “In der äußersten Grenze des Leidens bestehet nämlich nichts mehr, als die Bedingungen der
Zeit und des Raums” (FA 16: 258).
63. See Kritik der reinen Vernunft, Transzendental Ästhetik, 1. Abschnitt: Vom Raume and 2.
Abschnitt: Von der Zeit, especially B42 and B51.
64. This formulation recalls Ferdinand de Saussure’s contribution to the conception of language
in contemporary theory, including both Lacanian psychoanalysis and deconstruction; the difference
he posits in language, like Hölderlin’s figuration of suffering here, undermines the possibility of op-
position: “. . . in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally
implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differ-
ences without positive terms.” Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, trans. Wade Baskin (New York:
Philosophical Library, 1959), 120.
65. In his 1921 essay “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin follows a trajectory similar to
Hölderlin’s formal movement of differentiation, describing that task as the conveyance of something
incommunicable (“Nicht-Mittelbares”), namely a complicated relation to a “pure language” (reine
Sprache) that emerges not from the representative potential of language but from a sense of its “be-
coming” in the spaces between languages. At its best, translation leaves those spaces intact, like “royal
even more explicitly the potential effects of this preservation of obscurity in translation. As we will see next, the effects of an even more peculiar translation—a text that, in key moments, forecloses its own translatability—are inseparable from the experience of tragedy as Hölderlin conceives it from a modern standpoint.

Perhaps this obscurity, at once begotten and borne by language, ultimately resembles what Hölderlin himself perceived while examining the final proofs of the Oedipus translation. As he attempts to explain in a very curious letter to Wilmans just prior to publication in April 1804, he senses a strange interference with the solidity of the letters on the page—an interference which might not only undermine the ground of the text but already, as he contends with perhaps uncanny foresight, contribute to a perception of instability in the “creator” himself.

In the very next sentence he essentially dismisses what he has just written about the mysteriously “modifying” typeface: “Incidentally, the typography in this case has lost more in appearance than in reality.” But the concern for the “solid” remains on the page here, as if removing it now would itself constitute a lack of “gallantry”: “I say this in order to demonstrate to you the extent to which I comprehend this excellent notion.”66 What could this mean for his view of poetic language, if he “comprehends” here that words cannot even be grounded reliably on a page?


Given the timing of the letter, the problem that appears to consume Hölderlin’s thoughts could easily be attributed to the onset of his mental deterioration. However, in light of his insights into the empty movement of differentiation that inscribes “tragic transport,” that concern suddenly appears very much justified. The permanence of letters becomes untenable after the disruptive force of these translations. Perhaps because of this struggle with the instability of letters, Hölderlin will return to problems of signification and difference in the remarks on Antigone. Within that same space, however, he will introduce the degree to which the unstable ground of translation not only describes the relation between subject and world but also demarcates the subject as such.

67. A powerful expression of the poetic will to maintain the solidity of letters appears in Hölderlin’s hymn “Patmos,” written around 1803:

Wir haben gedienet der Mutter Erd
Und haben jüngst dem Sonnenlichte gedient,
Unwissend, der Vater aber liebt,
Der über allen waltet,
Am meisten, daß gepfleget werde
Der feste Buchstab, und Bestehendes gut
Gedeutet. Dem folgt deutscher Gesang.

We have served Mother Earth.
And lately have served the sunlight,
Unwittingly, but what the father
Who reigns over all loves most
Is that the solid letter
Be given scrupulous care, and the existing
Be well interpreted. This German song observes. (Hamburger 477)